

ALL RELIGIONS ARE TRUE

By

M. K. GANDHI

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By

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PREFACE

THIS collection deals with Gandhiji's views on the fundamental unity and equality of religions, the brotherhood of man, and the true nature and purpose of religion. According to Gandhiji, all the great religions of the world – Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, etc. – are true more or less. "More or less" because religion, as conceived by man, can never be perfect even as man, being man, can never be perfect, perfection being the exclusive attribute of God alone. And so, says Gandhiji, "if all faiths outlined by man are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise. All faiths constitute a revelation of Truth, but all are imperfect and liable to error."

No one, however, has a monopoly of Truth. As Henry Polak has observed, "it is inherently unlikely that any people has received at any one time or through any one Teacher all the Truth. Truth is like the fire at the heart of a many-faced jewel. Each angle shows a different aspect and a different colour." Imperfect humans that we are, we can see Truth only in fragments and act according to our limited lights. The reality is known only to God. As such, Gandhiji enjoins upon us the duty of being humble and tolerant. "We must not," he says, "like the frog in the well, who imagines that the universe ends with the walls surrounding his well, think that our religion alone represents the whole Truth, and all the others are false. A reverent study of the other religions of the world would show that they are equally true as our own, though all are necessarily imperfect." One must, therefore, he urges, "entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as one accords to one's own. When such tolerance becomes a law of life, conflict between different faiths

becomes impossible, and so does all effort to convert other people to one's faith."

Gandhiji held strong views on the matter of conversion. Conversion he regarded as essentially a matter of heart and reason, to which an appeal could be made only through one's conduct and character, and never through force or fraud or material inducement. "What is the use of crossing from one compartment to another," he asks, "if it does not mean a moral rise?" Religion for him is purely a personal matter and certainly not something which can admit of a change like one's clothes. He simply cannot imagine that "a man will become good or attain salvation only if he embraces a particular religion — Hinduism, Christianity or Islam." For, purity of character and salvation depend, according to him, entirely upon the purity of one's heart.

Gandhiji looked upon different religions as so many beautiful flowers from the same garden or branches of the same majestic tree. "Just as a tree has many branches but one root, similarly the various religions are the leaves and branches of the same tree. Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism are the main branches; but as for varieties of religion, they are as numerous as mankind." Again, using the same simile, he says: "Just as a tree has a million leaves, similarly though God is one, there are as many religions as there are men and women though they are rooted in one God.... Each mind has a different conception of God from that of the other." He, however, did not aim at any fusion of religions, for each religion, he felt, had a special contribution to make to human evolution. Each religion, in his view, was distinct from the other though having the same source. And because all religions are one at source that he invariably emphasiz-

ed the need^o of synthesizing them, and in his own person presented the wonderful synthesis of natural and revealed Truth.

Though he believed in the absolute oneness of God and, therefore, of humanity, nevertheless, he did not envisage a time when there would be one religion in practice though, he said, it was possible to conceive of one religion in theory since there is one God. True religion he regarded as a universal belief in the one and only God. And this belief in one God, he held to be the corner-stone of all religions. "We are all children of the same Father whom the Hindu, the Mussalman and the Christian know by different names.... The *Allah* of the Islam is the same as the God of Christians and the *Ishwara* of Hindus.... The names do not indicate individuality, but attributes, and little man has tried in his humble way to describe Mighty God by giving Him attributes, though He is above all attributes, Indescribable, Inconceivable, Immeasurable. Living faith in this God means acceptance of the brotherhood of mankind. It also means equal respect for all religions."

Gandhiji, however, clearly saw the time coming "when people belonging to different faiths will have the same regard for other faiths that they have for their own." It was merely a question of finding unity in diversity. Just as in Nature there is a fundamental unity running through all the seeming diversity, so also in religions there is a fundamental unity which one has to recognize and realize. In order to discover this underlying unity among all religions, Gandhiji had with him a master-key — the master-key of Truth and Non-violence. "When I unlock the chest of religion with this master-key", he says, "I do not find it difficult to discover its likeness with other religions. When you look at these religions as so many

leaves of a tree they seem so different, but at the trunk they are one." A close student of all the principal religions of the world that he was, his synthetic study had revealed to him their inner basic unity. This unity he not only preached by word of mouth or by pen, but he actually lived it in all its fullness in his own personal life. He believed that inherently we are all equal, members of one family under Heaven as it were. He also believed that the differences of race and skin, of mind and body, and of climate and nation are transitory. In the same way he believed that essentially all religions and their prophets are equal, and that all occupy a horizontal plane.

To him Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism etc., were as much inspired religions as, for instance, Hinduism was. And though he claimed to be "a staunch Hindu", he, nevertheless, found room in his faith for Christian and Islamic and Zoroastrian teachings. His was a faith based on broadest possible toleration. "Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling?" It was his constant endeavour to instil in his fellowmen this spirit of broad toleration which he considered to be the essence of all religions. "Live and let live or mutual forbearance or toleration is the law of life" — was the lesson that he said he learnt from the *Quran*, the *Bible*, the *Zend Avesta* and the *Gita*. In the divided and distracted world of today, he stood as a firm rock against the surging tide of exclusiveness and intolerance. He found so much common between man and man that it was indeed a marvel to him that there could be any quarrel on the ground of religion. "Why should we blaspheme God by fighting one another because we see Him through different media —

the *Quran*, the *Bible*, the *Talmud*, the *Avesta* or the *Gita*? The same Sun beats on the Himalayas as on the plains. Should the men of plains quarrel with the men of the snows because of the different feel of the Sun?"

It was Gandhiji's long cherished ambition to see India of his dream stand for perfect toleration of all religions. In a picture that he depicted of such an India, he said: "I should love all men — not only in India but in the world, — belonging to different faiths, to become better people by contact with one another, and if that happens the world will be a much better place to live in than it is today. I plead for broadest toleration. I ask people to examine every religion from the point of the religionists themselves. I do not expect the India of my dream to develop one religion, i.e., to be wholly Hindu, or wholly Christian, or wholly Mussalman; but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another."

India has given birth to a long line of illustrious saints and seers who have taught love and tolerance for all. Indeed, India is the one country in the world which has been the nursery of religions down all the ages. The spiritual heritage that has thus been handed down to us from generation to generation is matchless in its magnificence and breadth of vision. It is one of universal peace, brotherhood and reverence for all life. As members of one vast human family we have not only to claim, but actually feel, kinship with all the world. We as men have the same feelings. We all die and are mingled with the dust. The same Mother Earth sustains us all. We breathe the same air. The sun, the moon and the stars are the same for all of us. The rivers give their refreshing waters to us all alike, and so do the clouds shower their rain

upon us without any discrimination. The seasons of the year also bring joys and sorrows in their wake to us all in a common measure. Above all, the same Life Spirit pervades us all. This only proves that the whole of humanity is one and that it cannot be differentiated. That being so, may we not justly shout with joy and say that just as all men are brothers, so are all religions true?

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CHAPTER I EQUALITY OF RELIGIONS

Necessity of Equimindedness

WHEN I was turning over the pages of the sacred books of different faiths for my own satisfaction, I became sufficiently familiar for my purpose with Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Hinduism. In reading these texts, I can say, I was equiminded towards all these faiths, although perhaps I was not then conscious of it. Refreshing my memory of those days, I do not find I ever had the slightest desire to criticize any of those religions merely because they were not my own, but read each sacred book in a spirit of reverence and found the same fundamental morality in each. Some things I did not understand then, and do not understand even now, but experience has taught me that it is a mistake hastily to imagine that anything that we cannot understand is necessarily wrong. Some things, which I did not understand first, have since become as clear as daylight. Equimindedness helps us to solve many difficulties and even when we criticize anything, we express ourselves with a humility and a courtesy which leave no sting behind them.

The acceptance of the doctrine of Equality of Religions does not abolish the distinction between religion and irreligion. We do not propose to cultivate toleration for irreligion. That being so, some people might object that there would be no room left for equimindedness, if everyone took his own decision as to what was religion and what was irreligion. If we follow the Law of Love, we shall not bear any hatred towards the irreligious brother. On the contrary, we shall love him, and, therefore, either we shall bring him to see the

error of his ways, or he will point out our error, or each will tolerate the other's difference of opinion. If the other party does not observe the Law of Love, he may be violent to us. If, however, we cherish real love for him, it will overcome his bitterness in the end. All obstacles in our path will vanish, if only we observe the golden rule that we must not be impatient with those whom we may consider to be in error, but must be prepared, if need be, to suffer in our own person.¹

Revelation of Truth

AHIMSA teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as we accord to our own, thus admitting the imperfection of the latter. This admission will be readily made by a seeker of Truth, who follows the Law of Love. If we had attained the full vision of Truth, we would no longer be mere seekers, but would have become one with God, for Truth is God. But being only seekers, we prosecute our quest, and are conscious of our imperfection. And if we are imperfect ourselves, religion as conceived by us must also be imperfect. We have not realized religion in its perfection, even as we have not realized God. Religion of our conception, being thus imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and re-interpretation. Progress towards Truth, towards God, is possible only because of such evolution. And, if all faiths outlined by men are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise. All faiths constitute a revelation of Truth, but all are imperfect and liable to error. Reverence for other faiths need not blind us to their faults. We must be keenly alive to the defects of our own faiths also, yet not leave it on that account, but try to overcome those defects. Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we

would not only hesitate, but would think it our duty, to blend into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths.²

As a matter of fact, while we adhere to our own faith, we have every right to adopt acceptable features from any other faith. It is not only a right; it is a duty we must discharge. It is fanaticism to imagine that you cannot accept anything from other faiths.³

The question then arises: Why should there be so many different faiths? The Soul is one, but the bodies which She animates are many. We cannot reduce the number of bodies: yet we recognize the unity of the Soul. Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so is there one true and perfect Religion, but it becomes many as it passes through the human medium. The one Religion is beyond all speech. Imperfect men put it into such language as they can command, and their words are interpreted by other men equally imperfect. Whose interpretation is to be held to be the right one? Everybody is right from his own stand-point, but it is not impossible that everybody is wrong. Hence the necessity for tolerance, which does not mean indifference towards one's own faith, but a more intelligent and purer love for it. Tolerance gives us spiritual insight, which is as far from fanaticism as the North Pole from the South. True knowledge of religion breaks down the barriers between faith and faith. Cultivation of tolerance for other faiths will impart to us a truer understanding of our own.

Tolerance obviously does not disturb the distinction between right and wrong or good and evil. The reference here throughout is naturally to the principal faiths of the world. They are all based on common fundamentals. They have all produced great saints.⁴

All Religions Are True

THE principal faiths of the world constitute a revelation of Truth; but as they have all been outlined by imperfect man, they have been affected by imperfections and alloyed with untruth. One must, therefore, entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as one accords to one's own. Where such tolerance becomes a law of life, conflict between different faiths becomes impossible, and so does all effort to convert other people to one's own faith. One can only pray that the defects in the various faiths may be overcome, and that they may advance, side by side, towards perfection.⁵

For me, all the principle religions are equal in the sense that they are all true. They are supplying a felt want in the spiritual progress of humanity.⁶

I believe that all the great religions of the world are true, more or less. I say 'more or less' because I believe that everything that the human hand touches, by reason of the very fact that human beings are imperfect, becomes imperfect. Perfection is the exclusive attribute of God and it is indescribable, untranslatable. I do believe that it is possible for every human being to become perfect even as God is perfect. It is necessary for us all to aspire after perfection, but when that blessed state is attained, it becomes indescribable, indefinable. And I, therefore, admit, in all humility, that even the *Vedas*, the *Quran* and the *Bible* are the imperfect word of God; and imperfect beings that we are, swayed to and fro by a multitude of passions, it is impossible for us even to understand this word of God in its fulness.

I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they are all God-given, and I believe that they were necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed. And I believe that,

if only we could all of us read the scriptures of the different faiths from the stand-point of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at bottom all one and were all helpful to one another.

Since my youth upward, it has been a humble but persistent effort on my part to understand the truth of all the religions of the world, and adopt and assimilate in my own thought, word, and deed all that I have found to be best in those religions. The faith that I profess not only permits me to do so, but renders it obligatory for me to take the best from whatsoever source it may come.⁷

True Religion is One

PROF. KRIZENSKI: Catholicism, according to me, is the only true religion, and the only spiritual force. As a professor of philosophy, I have studied all the religious systems of the world and have come to this deliberate conclusion.

Gandhiji: Do you, therefore, say that other religions are untrue?

Prof. Krizenski: If others are convinced that their religions are true, they are saved.

Gandhiji: Therefore, you will say that everyone would be saved even through untruth. For, you say that if a man really and sincerely believes in what is, as a matter of fact, untruth, he is saved. Would you not also hold, therefore, that your own way may be untrue but that you are convinced that it is true and, therefore, you will be saved?

Prof. Krizenski: But I have studied all religions and have found that mine is the only true religion.

Gandhiji: But so have others studied other religions. What about them? Well, I go further and tell you that

Religion is one and it has several branches which are all equal.

Prof. Krizenski: I accept that no religion lacks Divine inspiration, but all have not the same truth because all have not the same light.

Gandhiji: It is an essentially untrue position to take for a seeker after Truth, that he alone is in absolute possession of Truth. What is happening to the poor astronomers today? They are changing their position every day, and there are scientists who impeach even Einstein's latest theory.

Prof. Krizenski: No. But I have examined the arguments in favour of other religions.

Gandhiji: But it is an intellectual examination. You require different scales to weigh spiritual truths. Either we are all untrue—quite a logical position to take,—but since Truth does not come out of untruth, it is better to say that we all have truth but not the complete Truth. For, God reveals His truth to instruments that are imperfect. Rain-drops of purest distilled water become diluted or polluted as soon as they come in contact with Mother Earth. My submission is that your position is arrogant. But I suggest to you a better position. Accept all religions as equal, for all have the same root and the same laws of growth.

Prof. Krizenski: It is necessary to examine every religion philosophically and find out which is more harmonious, more perfect.

Gandhiji: That presupposes that all religions are in watertight compartments. That is wrong. They are always growing. Let us not limit God's function. He may reveal Himself in a thousand ways and a thousand times.

Prof. Krizenski: But I have a great respect for your religion.

Gandhiji: Not enough. I had that feeling myself one day, but I found that it was not enough. Unless I accept the position that all religions are equal, and I have as much regard for other religions as I have for my own, I would not be able to live in the boiling war around me. Any make-believe combination of spiritual forces is doomed to failure if this fundamental position is not accepted. I read and get all my inspiration from the *Gita*. But I also read the *Bible* and the *Quran* to enrich my own religion. I incorporate all that is good in other religions.

Prof. Krizenski: That is your goodwill.

Gandhiji: That is not enough.

Prof. Krizenski: But I have great respect for you.

Gandhiji: Not enough. If I were to join the Catholic Church, you would have greater respect for me.

Prof. Krizenski: Oh yes. If you become a Catholic, you would be as great as St. Francis.

Gandhiji: But not otherwise? A Hindu cannot be a St. Francis? Poor Hindu.⁸

Branches of the Same Tree

I BELIEVE in *Sarvadharmasamanatva*—having equal regard for all faiths and creeds.... Equal regard does not mean that you should adopt the other view, as my equal respect for Islam or Christianity does not mean that I would adopt either of the two. My equal regard compels me to understand their viewpoint, to appreciate the light in which they look upon their religion. It means that we should emphasize points of agreement and not make much of the points of difference.⁹

I do maintain that mutual respect for one another's

religions is inherent in a peaceful society. Free impact of ideas is impossible on any other condition. Religions are meant to tame our savage nature, not to let it loose. God is only one, though He has countless names. Don't you expect me to respect your faith? If you do, may I not expect the same respect from you for mine? In spite of separatism, the world is moving towards Universal Brotherhood when mankind will be one nation. Neither you nor I can stop the march towards our common destiny.¹⁰

For me, the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree. Therefore, they are equally true, though being received and interpreted through human instruments equally imperfect.¹¹

It is a travesty of true religion to consider one's own religion as superior and other's as inferior. All religions enjoin worship of the One God who is all-pervasive. He is present even in a droplet of water or in a tiny speck of dust. Even those who worship idols, worship not the stone of which they are made; they try to see God who resides in them. Various religions are like the leaves on a tree. No two leaves are alike, yet there is no antagonism between them or between the branches on which they grow. Even so, there is an underlying unity in the variety which we see in God's creation.¹²

Just as a tree has many branches but one root, similarly the various religions are the leaves and branches of the same tree. Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism are the main branches; but as for varieties of religion, they are as numerous as mankind.¹³

I do not aim at any fusion. Each religion has its own contribution to make to human evolution. I regard the great faiths of the world as so many branches of a tree,

each distinct from the other though having the same source.¹⁴

If all religions are one at source, we have to synthesize them. Today, they are looked upon as separate and that is why we kill each other. When we are tired of religion, we become atheists and then, apart from the little self, nothing, not even God, exists. But when we acquire true understanding, the little self perishes and God becomes all in all.¹⁵

Children of the Same God

WE are all children of the same Father—whom the Hindu and the Mussalman and the Christian know by different names. What if Shankara declared his faith in one God in his formula *Ekamevadvityam*, or Ramanuja in his dual doctrine or Mohammed in his *La Ilaha Illallah*? All meant one and the same thing.¹⁶

True religion is a universal belief in the one and only God. The world is fast growing out of dogmas and creeds, which have so sickened it that it has become confused and has begun to deny the very existence of the Maker. Happily, that stage of negation is quickly passing and enlightened faith in the Supreme Maker of the Universe is taking its place.¹⁷

Q. If there is only one God, should there not be only one religion?

A. This is a strange question. Just as a tree has a million leaves, similarly though God is one, there are as many religions as there are men and women though they are rooted in one God. We do not see this plain truth because we are followers of different prophets and claim as many religions as there are prophets. As a matter of fact, whilst I believe myself to be a Hindu, I know that I do not worship God in the same manner as one or all of them.

Religion is purely a personal matter. There are in reality as many religions as minds. Each mind has a different conception of God from that of the other.¹⁸

Belief in one God is the corner-stone of all religions. But I do not foresee a time when there would be only one religion on earth in practice. In theory, since there is one God, there can be only one religion. But in practice, no two persons I have known have had the same and identical conception of God. Therefore, there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to different temperaments and climatic conditions. But I can clearly see the time coming when people belonging to different faiths will have the same regard for other faiths that they have for their own. I think that we have to find unity in diversity. We are all children of one and the same God and, therefore, absolutely equal.¹⁹

In Nature, there is a fundamental unity running through all the diversity we see about us. Religions are no exception to the natural law. They are given to mankind so as to accelerate the process of realization of fundamental unity.²⁰

I claim that all religions are equal. We ought to cultivate the same regard for other religions that we have for our own. Not to do so is to belittle one's own faith and expose it to attacks from without.²¹

All Religions Are Equal

MR. KEITHAN: I would say it is no use comparing religions. They are different ways. Do you think we can explain the thing in different terms?

Gandhiji: You are right when you say that it is impossible to compare them. But the deduction from it is that they are equal. All men are born free and equal, but one is much stronger or weaker than another physi-

cally and mentally. Therefore, superficially, there is no equality between the two. But there is an essential equality. In our nakedness, God is not going to think of me as Gandhi and you as Keithan. And what are we in this mighty Universe? We are less than atoms, and as between atoms there is no use asking which is smaller and which is higher. Inherently, we are equal. The differences of race and skin and of mind and body and of climate and nation are transitory. In the same way, essentially all religions are equal. If you read the *Quran*, you must read it with the eye of the Muslim; if you read the *Bible*, you must read it with the eye of the Christian; if you read the *Gita*, you must read it with the eye of a Hindu. Where is the use of scanning details and then holding up a religion to ridicule? Take the very first chapter of *Genesis* or of *Matthew*. We read a long pedigree and then at the end we are told Jesus was born of a virgin. You come up against a blind wall. But I must read it all with the eye of a Christian.

Mr. Keithan: Then, even in our *Bible*, there is the question of Moses and Jesus. We must hold them to be equal?

Gandhiji: Yes. All prophets are equal. It is a horizontal plain.

Mr. Keithan: If we think in terms of Einstein's Relativity, all are equal. But I cannot happily express the equality.

Gandhiji: That is why I say they are equally true and equally imperfect. The finer the line you draw, the nearer it approaches Euclid's true straight line, but it never is the true straight line. The tree of Religion is the same, there is not that physical equality between the branches. They are all growing, and the person who belongs to the growing branches must not gloat over it and say: 'Mine

is the superior one.' None is superior, none is inferior to the other.²²

Plea for Mutual Toleration

I HAVE begun to believe in toleration which I would call the equality of all religions. Jesus Christ may be looked upon as belonging to Christians only, but he really does not belong to any community, inasmuch as the lessons that Jesus Christ gave belong to the whole world.²³

Truth is the same in all religions, though through refraction it appears for the time being variegated even as light does through a prism.²⁴

This Truth resolves itself into its component parts Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc. For, Truth will appear to most sincere and conscientious Hindus, Mussalmans and Christians as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity respectively as they believe them.

The golden rule of conduct, therefore, is mutual toleration, seeing that we will never all think alike and that we shall always see *Truth* in fragment and from different angles of vision. Conscience is not the same thing for all. Whilst, therefore, it is a good guide for individual conduct, imposition of that conduct upon all will be an insufferable interference with everybody else's freedom of conscience. It is a much abused term. Have all people a conscience? Has a cannibal a conscience? Must he be allowed to act according to the dictates of his conscience, which tells him that it is his duty to kill and eat his fellows? Now, the etymological meaning of conscience is 'true knowledge'. The dictionary meaning is 'faculty distinguishing between right and wrong and influencing conduct accordingly'. Possession of such a faculty is possible only for a trained person, that is, one who has undergone discipline and learnt to listen to the inner voice.

But even amongst the most conscientious persons, there will be room enough for honest differences of opinion. The only possible rule of conduct in any civilized society is, therefore, mutual toleration. It can be inculcated among and practised by all irrespective of their status and training.²⁵

Why Quarrel?

THIS means that for God-fearing men, all religions are good and equal; only the followers of different religions quarrel against one another and thereby deny their respective religions.²⁶

The key to the solution of the tangle lies in everyone following the best in his own religion, and entertaining equal regard for the other religions and their followers.²⁷

Do people become enemies because they change their religion? Is the God of the Mohammedan different from the God of the Hindu? Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling? . . . The more we advance in true knowledge, the better we shall understand that we need not be at war with those whose religion we may not follow. . . . If everyone will try to understand the core of his own religion and adhere to it, and will not allow false teachers to dictate to him, there will be no room left for quarrelling.²⁸

Why should we blaspheme God by fighting one another because we see Him through different media — the *Quran*, the *Bible*, the *Talmud*, the *Avesta* or the *Gita*? The same Sun beats on the Himalayas as on the plains. Should the men of plains quarrel with the men of the snows because of the different feel of the Sun? Why should we make of books and formulas so many fetters to

enslave us, rather than use them as aids to our deliverance and union of hearts?²⁹

To revile one another's religion, to make reckless statements, to utter untruth, to break the heads of innocent men, to desecrate temples or mosques, is a denial of God. We have listened to Satan. Religion — call it by what name you like — is made of sterner stuff.³⁰

It is enough to know that some of us are blaspheming a patient God and doing inhuman deeds in the sacred name of religion. I know, too, that neither assassination, nor fratricidal acts can possibly save religion. Religion worth the name can only be saved by purity, humility and fearlessness of the uttermost type among its professors.³¹

No religion in the world can live without self-suffering. A faith gains in strength only when people are willing to lay down their lives for it. The tree of life has to be watered with the blood of martyrs, who lay down their lives without killing their opponents or intending any harm to them. That is the root of Hinduism and of all other religions.³²

Religion is sustained never by the sword, but always by men of God. But we should be so not merely in name, but by our conduct. Only Rama (God, *Allah* or by whatever name one might call Him) is the true object of worship. He is not won over by offerings, except the offering of noble conduct. Universal love becomes incumbent on Rama's devotees. That is the only way in which Hinduism or, for that matter, any religion can survive. Hinduism or any religion that departs from this straight path is doomed to destruction.³³

CHAPTER II

SCRIPTURES OF THE WORLD

A Sacred Duty

I HOLD that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty. We need not dread upon our grown up children the influence of scriptures other than our own. We liberalize their outlook upon life by encouraging them to study freely all that is clean. Fear there would be when someone reads his own scriptures to young people with the intention, secretly or openly, of converting them. He must then be biased in favour of his own scriptures. For myself, I regard my study of and reverence for the *Bible*, the *Quran*, and the other scriptures to be wholly consistent with my claim to be a staunch *Sanatani* Hindu. He is no *Sanatani* Hindu who is narrow, bigoted, and considers evil to be good if it has the sanction of antiquity and is to be found supported in any Sanskrit book. I claim to be a staunch *Sanatani* Hindu because, though I reject all that offends my moral sense, I find the Hindu scriptures do satisfy the needs of the soul. My respectful study of other religions has not abated my reverence for or my faith in the Hindu scriptures. They have, indeed, left their deep mark upon my understanding of the Hindu scriptures. They have broadened my view of life. They have enabled me to understand more clearly many an obscure passage in the Hindu scriptures.

Let me own this. If I could call myself, say, a Christian, or a Mussalman, with my own interpretation

of the *Bible* or the *Quran*, I should not hesitate to call myself either. For, then, Hindu, Christian and Mussalman would be synonymous terms. I do believe that in the other world there are neither Hindus, nor Christians nor Mussalmans. There all are judged not according to their labels or professions, but according to their actions irrespective of their professions. During our earthly existence, there will always be these labels. I, therefore, prefer to retain the label of my forefathers so long as it does not cramp my growth, and does not debar me from assimilating all that is good anywhere else.¹

I call myself a *Sanatani* Hindu, because I believe in the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* and the writings left by the holy reformers. This belief does not require me to accept as authentic everything that passes as *Shastras*. I reject everything that contradicts the fundamental principles of morality. I am not required to accept the *ipse dixit* or the interpretations of *Pandits*. Above all, I call myself a *Sanatani* Hindu, so long as the Hindu society in general accepts me as such. In a concrete manner, he is a Hindu who believes in God, immortality of the soul, transmigration, the Law of *Karma* and *Moksha*, and who tries to practise Truth and *Ahimsa* in daily life, and, therefore, practises cow-protection in its widest sense and understands and tries to act according to the Law of *Varnashrama*.²

Fundamentals of Religion

I DO not believe in the exclusive divinity of the *Vedas*. I believe the *Bible*, the *Quran*, and the *Zend Avesta* to be as much divinely inspired as the *Vedas*. My belief in the Hindu scriptures does not require me to accept every word and every verse as divinely inspired. Nor do I claim to have any first-hand knowledge of these wonderful

books. But I do claim to know and feel the truths of the essential teaching of the scriptures. I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense. I do not emphatically repudiate the claim (if they advance any such) of the present Shankaracharyas and *Shastris* to give a correct interpretation of the Hindu scriptures. On the contrary, I believe that our present knowledge of these books is in a most chaotic state. I believe implicitly in the Hindu aphorism, that no one truly knows the *Shastras* who has not attained perfection in Innocence (*Ahimsa*), Truth (*Satya*) and Self-control (*Brahmacharya*) and who has not renounced all acquisition or possession of wealth. I believe in the institution of *Gurus*, but in this age millions must go without a *Guru*, because it is a rare thing to find a combination of perfect purity and perfect learning. But one need not despair of ever knowing the truth of one's religion, because the fundamentals of Hinduism as of every great religion are unchangeable, and easily understood.³

The Sermon and the Gita

I HAVE not been able to see any difference between the *Sermon on the Mount* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. What the *Sermon* describes in a graphic manner, the *Bhagavad Gita* reduces to a scientific formula. It may not be a scientific book in the accepted sense of the term, but it has argued out the Law of Love—the Law of Abandon, as I would call it,—in a scientific manner. The *Sermon on the Mount* gives the same law in wonderful language. The *New Testament* gave me comfort and boundless joy, as it came after the repulsion that parts of the *Old* had given me. Today, supposing I was deprived of the *Gita* and forgot all its contents but had a copy of the *Sermon*,

I should derive the same joy from it as I do from the *Gita*.

There is one thing in me, and that is that I love to see the bright side of things and not the seamy side, and so I can derive comfort and inspiration from any great book of any great religion. I may not be able to reproduce a single verse from the *Gita* or the *New Testament*, a Hindu child or Christian child may be able to repeat the verses better, but those clever children cannot deprive me of the assimilation that is in me today of the spirit of the two books.⁴

There have been many times when I did not know which way to turn. But I have gone to the *Bible*, and particularly the *New Testament*, and have drawn strength from its message.⁵

Q. You like the *Sermon on the Mount*?

A. Oh yes. Even my declaration that I like it is exploited by Christian friends. But let that be.

Q. I would like you to tell me one passage which has given you more satisfaction than any other.

A. I do not know. But I shall give you a passage that I have often quoted to those who came to convert me to Christianity: 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness, and every thing will be added unto you.' I saw this emphasized in one of Tolstoy's beautiful stories. It gripped me, and also what he wrote underneath it.⁶

"The Letter Killeth"

"THE letter killeth, the spirit giveth life". My very first reading of the *Bible* showed me that I would be repelled by many things in it, if I gave their literal meaning to many texts or even took every passage in it as the word of God. I found, as I proceeded with my study of the scriptures of the various religions, that every

scripture had to be treated likewise, not excepting the *Vedas* or the *Upanishads*. Therefore, the story of the Immaculate Conception, when I interpret it mystically, does not repel me. I should find it hard to believe in the literal meaning of the verses relating to the immaculate conception of Jesus. Nor would it deepen my regard for Jesus if I gave those verses their literal meaning. This does not mean that the writers of the *Gospels* were untruthful persons. They wrote in a mood of exaltation. From my youth upward, I learnt the art of estimating the value of scriptures on the basis of their ethical teaching. Miracles, therefore, had no interest for me. The miracles said to have been performed by Jesus, even if I had believed them literally, would not have reconciled me to any teaching that did not satisfy universal ethics. Somehow or other, words of religious teachers have for me, as I presume for millions, a living force which the same words uttered by ordinary mortals do not possess.

The *Gita* has become for me the key to the scriptures of the world. It unravels for me the deepest mysteries to be found in them. I regard them with the same reverence that I pay to the Hindu scriptures. Hindus, Mussalmans, Christians, Parsis, Jews are convenient labels. But when I tear them down, I do not know which is which. We are all children of the same God. "Verily, verily I say unto you, not everyone that sayeth unto me 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in Heaven shall enter the Kingdom," was said, though in different words, by all great teachers of the world.⁷

The Final Guide

I DO believe in the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Smritis* and the *Puranas*. But, to me, the *Gita* is the key to a

knowledge of the *Shastras*. It enunciates the principles on which all conduct must be based. It sums up the whole of the *Shastras* and, therefore, absolves laymen from having to explore the other books. But I go a step further. The *Vedas* are not the four books known as such. They contain only fragments of the originals. Eternal Truth cannot be buried in or confined to printed books. The *Vedas* are, therefore, indefinable and unwritten. They reside in one's heart. And, our *Shastras* tell us what discipline and study are necessary for opening out the heart for receiving the Truth. One's experience, therefore, must be the final guide. The written word undoubtedly helps, but even that has to be interpreted; and when there are conflicting interpretations, the seeker is the final arbiter.⁸

No Question of Selection

I BELIEVE in the equality of all religions. I derive the greatest consolation from my reading of Tulsidas's *Ramayana*. I have also derived solace from the *New Testament* and the *Quran*. I don't approach them with a critical mind. They are to me as important as the *Bhagavad Gita*, though everything in the former may not appeal to me—everything in the *Epistles* of Paul for instance,—nor everything in Tulsidas. The *Gita* is a pure religious discourse given without any embellishment. It simply describes the progress of the pilgrim soul towards the Supreme Goal. Therefore, there is no question of selection.

I exercise my judgment about every scripture, including the *Gita*. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet; and then

through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly. Matthew may give one version of one text and John may give another. I cannot surrender my reason whilst I subscribe to Divine revelation. And, above all, 'the letter killeth, the spirit giveth life'. I believe in Faith also, in things where Reason has no place, e.g., the existence of God. No argument can move me from that faith, and like that little girl who repeated against all reason: 'Yet we are seven', I would like to repeat, on being baffled in argument by a very superior intellect: 'Yet there is God'.⁹

Religious Scriptures

I BELIEVE in the *Bible* as I believe in the *Gita*. I regard all the great faiths of the world as equally true with my own. It hurts me to see any one of them caricatured as they are today by their own followers.¹⁰

I hold *Granth Sahib* in high reverence. Several parts of it have passed into our daily speech. So far as my reading of it goes, it inculcates faith, valour and an invincible belief in the ultimate triumph of right and justice.¹¹

The *Vedas* are from time immemorial. So are the *Upanishads*. But they are imperfectly known. Any impurities that have crept in any of the scriptures are due to the fact that they were written many years later. The Hindu religion is a great religion and has infinite toleration in it and powers of absorption. God is everywhere, as the Harijan woman saint told her young questioner. He is the ruler of men's hearts. He only wants single-minded worship in whatsoever form it be and whatsoever language.¹²

It is the duty of everyone to study the scriptures of religions other than his own. This enables people to keep

their religion pure and rid it of blemishes. Moreover, we have Christians, Muslims, Parsis and followers of other religions amongst us. It behoves the Hindus to study their religious books if they regard them as their brothers.¹³

Every work labelled as scripture is not necessarily so. Moreover, a scripture to be scientific lends itself to emendations as the times may really require. They must progress with the times, if they are to live in the lives of the people. The changeless and universal fundamentals are always very few. They do not require learned treatises to be described. The treatises are built upon these immovable rocks.¹⁴

How to Study Great Religions

THERE is one rule, however, which should always be kept in mind while studying all great religions, and that is that one should study them only through the writings of known votaries of the respective religions. For instance, if one wants to study the *Bhagavat*, one should do so not through a translation of it made by a hostile critic, but one prepared by a lover of the *Bhagavat*. Similarly, to study the *Bible*, one should study it through the commentaries of devoted Christians. This study of other religions, besides one's own, will give one a grasp of the rock-bottom unity of all religions and afford a glimpse also of that Universal and Absolute Truth which lies beyond the 'dust of creeds and faiths'.

Let no one, even for a moment, entertain the fear that a reverent study of other religions is likely to weaken or shake one's faith in one's own. The Hindu system of philosophy regards all religions as containing the elements of Truth in them, and enjoins an attitude of respect and reverence towards them all. This, of course, presupposes

regards for one's own religion. Study and appreciation of other religions need not cause a weakening of that regard; it should mean extension of that regard to other religions.

In this respect, religion stands on the same footing as culture. Just as preservation of one's own culture does not mean contempt for that of others, but requires assimilation of the best that there may be in all the other cultures, even so should be the case with religion.¹⁵

Who is the Best Interpreter?

THE *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Smritis* and *Puranas*, including *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, are the Hindu Scriptures. Nor is this a finite list. Every age, or even generation, has added to the list. It follows, therefore, that everything printed or even found handwritten is not scripture. The *Smritis*, for instance, contain much that can never be accepted as the word of God. The scriptures, properly so called, can only be concerned with eternal verities and must appeal to any conscience, i.e., any heart whose eyes of understanding are opened. Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be tested by reason or be capable of being spiritually experienced. And, even when you have an expurgated edition of the scriptures, you will need their interpretation. Who is the best interpreter? Not learned men, surely. Learning there must be. But religion does not live by it. It lives in the experiences of its saints and seers, in their lives and sayings. When all the most learned commentators of the scriptures are utterly forgotten, the accumulated experience of the sages and saints will abide and be an inspiration for ages to come.¹⁶

Need for Tolerance

IT IS no business of mine to criticize the scriptures of

other faiths, or to point out their defects. It is, and should be, however, my privilege to proclaim and practise the truths that there may be in them. I may not, therefore, criticize or condemn things in the *Quran* or the life of the Prophet that I cannot understand. But I welcome every opportunity to express my admiration for such aspects of his life as I have been able to appreciate and understand. As for things that present difficulties, I am content to see them through the eyes of devout Mussalman friends, while I try to understand them with the help of the writings of eminent Muslim expounders of Islam. It is only through such a reverential approach to faiths other than mine that I can realize the principle of equality of all religions. But it is both my right and duty to point out the defects of Hinduism in order to purify it and to keep it pure. But when non-Hindu critics set about criticizing Hinduism and cataloguing its faults, they only blazon their own ignorance of Hinduism and their incapacity to regard it from the Hindu viewpoint. It distorts their vision and vitiates their judgment. Thus, my own experience of the non-Hindu critics of Hinduism brings home to me my limitations and teaches me to be wary of launching on a criticism of Islam or Christianity and their founders.¹⁷

God Is One

"WHO can name Him, and knowing what he says,

Say: 'I believe in Him?' and who can feel,

And, with self-violence, to conscious wrong

Hardening his heart, say: 'I believe Him not!'

The All-Embracing, All-Sustaining One,

Say: does He not embrace, sustain, include

Thee?—Me—Himself? Bends not the sky above?

And earth, on which we are, is it not firm?

And over us, with constant kindly smile,

The sleepless stars keep everlasting watch!

Am I not here gazing into thine eyes?

And does not All, that is,

—Seen and unseen—mysterious All—

Around thee, and within,

Untiring agency,

Press on thy heart and mind?

—Fill thy whole heart with it—and, when thou art

Lost in the consciousness of happiness,

Then call it what thou wilt

Happiness!—Heart!—Love!—God!

I have no name for it!

Feeling is all in all!

Name is but sound and reek

A mist around the glow of Heaven."

—GOETHE'S *Faust*

God is certainly One. He has no second. He is unfathomable, unknowable and unknown to the vast majority of mankind. He is everywhere. He sees without eyes, and hears without ears. He is formless and indivisible. He is uncreate, has no father, mother or child; and yet He allows Himself to be worshipped as father, mother, wife and child. He allows himself even to be worshipped as stock and stone, although He is none of these things. He is the most elusive. He is the nearest to us, if we would but know the fact. But He is farthest from us when we do not want to realize His omnipresence. There are many gods in the *Vedas*. Other scriptures call them angels. But the *Vedas* sing of only one God.

I have no hesitation in regarding the *Quran* as revealed, as I have none in regarding the *Bible*, the *Zend Avesta*, the *Granth Saheb* and any other clean scriptures as revealed. Revelation is the exclusive property of no nation, no tribe. If I know Hinduism at all, it is essentially inclusive and ever-growing, ever-responsive. It gives the freest scope to imagination,

CHAPTER III

TEMPLES AND TEMPLE-WORSHIP

The Temples

TEMPLES are so many bridges between the Unseen, Invisible and Indefinable God and ourselves who are infinitesimal drops in the Infinite Ocean. We, the human family, are not all philosophers. We are of the earth very earthy, and we are not satisfied with contemplating the Invisible God. Somehow or other, we want something which we can touch, something which we can see, something before which we can kneel down. It does not matter whether it is a book, or an empty stone building, or a stone building inhabited by numerous figures. A book will satisfy some, an empty building will satisfy some others, and many others will not be satisfied unless they see something inhabiting these empty buildings. Then, I ask you to approach these temples not as if they represented a body of superstitions. If you will approach these temples with faith in them, you will know that each time you visit them you will come away from them purified, and with your faith more and more in the living God.¹

Temples are to Hindus what churches are to Christians. In my opinion, we are all idolators; that in Hinduism we have images of stone or metal inside temples makes to me no difference. Thousands of Hindus who visit temples in simple faith derive precisely the same spiritual benefit that Christians visiting churches in simple faith do. Deprive a Hindu of his temple, and you deprive him of the thing he generally prizes most in life. That superstition and even evil have grown round many Hindu temples is but too true. That, however,

is an argument for temple reform, not for lowering their value for Harijans or any Hindu. It is my certain conviction that temples are an integral part of Hinduism.²

Places of Worship

PLACES of worship to me are not merely brick and mortar. They are but a shadow of Reality. Against every church and every mosque and every temple destroyed, hundreds have risen in their places. There is something in them which appeals to the heart and which transforms those who go there, not for show, not out of shame or fear, but out of simple devotion. It defies analysis. Nevertheless, the fact stands that pure-minded people going to the present places of pilgrimage, which have become hot-beds of error, superstition, and even immorality, return from them purer for the act of worship. Hence, the significant assurance in the *Bhagavad Gita*: 'I make return according to the spirit in which men worship Me.'³

Churches, mosques and temples, which cover so much hypocrisy and humbug and shut the poorest out of them, seem but a mockery of God and His worship, when one sees the eternally renewed temple of worship under the vast blue canopy inviting every one of us to real worship, instead of abusing His name by quarrelling in the name of religion.⁴

Temples, churches and mosques very often show corruption, more often deterioration. Nevertheless, it would be impossible to prove that all priests are bad or have been bad and that all churches, temples and mosques are hot-beds of corruption and superstition. Nor does the argument take note of this fundamental fact that no faith has done without a habitation; and I go further that in the very nature of things it cannot exist,

so long as man remains as he is constituted. His very body has been rightly called the Temple of the Holy Ghost, though innumerable such temples belie the fact and are hot-beds of corruption used for dissoluteness. And, I presume that it will be accepted as a conclusive answer to a sweeping suggestion that all bodies should be destroyed for the corruption of many, if it can be shown, as it can be, that there are some bodies which are proper temples of the Holy Ghost. The cause for the corruption of many bodies will have to be sought elsewhere. Temples of stone and mortar are nothing else than a natural extension of these human temples, and though they were in their conception undoubtedly habitations of God like human temples, they have been subject to the same law of decay as the latter.

I know of no religion or sect that has done or is doing without its House of God, variously described as a temple, mosque, church, synagogue or *agiar*. Nor is it certain that any of the great reformers, including Jesus, destroyed or discarded temples altogether. All of them sought to banish corruption from temples as well as from society. Some of them, if not all, appear to have preached from temples. I have ceased to visit temples for years, but I do not regard myself on that account as a better person than before. My mother never missed going to the temple when she was in a fit state to go there. Probably, her faith was far greater than mine, though I do not visit temples. There are millions whose faith is sustained through these temples, churches and mosques. They are not all blind followers of a superstition, nor are they fanatics. Superstition and fanaticism are not their monopoly. These vices have their root in our hearts and minds.

That temples and temple-worship are in need of

radical reform must be admitted. But to reject the necessity of temples is to reject the necessity of God, religion and earthly existence.⁵

Temple Worship

WHEN I bow to a living person and he returns it, it is a mutual exchange of courtesy and there is no particular merit about it. It may be a sign of good breeding. Temple-going is for the purification of the soul. The worshipper draws the best out of himself. In greeting a living being, he may draw the best out of the person greeted, if the greeting is selfless. A living being is, more or less, fallible like oneself. But in the temple, one worships the living God, perfect beyond imagination. Letters written to living persons often end in heart-breaking, even when they are answered, and there is no guarantee of their being always answered. Letters to God who, according to the devotee's imagination, resides in temples, require neither pen nor ink nor paper, not even speech. Mere mute worship constitutes the letter which brings its own unfailing answer. The whole function is a beautiful exercise of faith. Here there is no waste of effort, no heart-breaking, no danger of being misunderstood. The writer must try to understand the simple philosophy lying behind the worship in temples or mosques or churches. He will understand my meaning better, if he will realize that I make no distinction between these different abodes of God. They are what faith has made them. They are an answer to man's craving somehow to reach the UNSEEN.

For the faithful Hindu, his Incarnation is without blemish. Krishna of the Hindu devotee is a perfect being. He is unconcerned with the harsh judgment of the critics. Millions of devotees of Krishna and Rama

have had their lives transformed through their contemplation of God by these names. How this phenomenon happens, I do not know. It is a mystery. I have not attempted to prove it. Though my reason and heart long ago realized the highest attribute and name of God as Truth, I recognize Truth by the name of Rama. In the darkest hour of my trial, that one name has saved me and is still saving me. It may be the association of childhood, it may be the fascination that Tulsidas has wrought on me. But the potent fact is there, and as I write these lines, my memory revives the scenes of my childhood when I used daily to visit the *Ramji Mandir* adjacent to my ancestral home. My Rama then resided there. He saved me from many fears and sins. It was no superstition for me. The custodian of the idol may have been a bad man. I know nothing against him. Misdeeds might have gone on in the temple. Again I know nothing of them. Therefore, they would not affect me. What was and is true of me is true of millions of Hindus.⁶

Idol-Worship

I DO not regard the existence of a temple as a sin or superstition. Some form of common worship, and a common place of worship appear to be a human necessity. Whether the temples should contain images or not is a matter of temperament and taste. I do not regard a Hindu or a Roman Catholic place of worship containing images as necessarily bad or superstitious, and a mosque or a Protestant place of worship as good or free of superstition merely because of their exclusion of images. A symbol such as a Cross or a book may easily become idolatrous, and, therefore, superstitious. And the worship of the image of Child Krishna or Virgin Mary may become ennobling and free of all superstition. It

depends upon the attitude of the heart of the worshipper.⁷

I do not disbelieve in idol-worship. An idol does not excite any feeling of veneration in me. But I think that idol-worship is part of human nature. We hanker after symbolism. Why should one be more composed in a church than elsewhere? Images are an aid to worship. No Hindu considers an image to be God. I do not consider idol-worship a sin.⁸

I am both an idolator and an iconoclast in what I conceive to be the true senses of the terms. I value the spirit behind idol-worship. It plays a most important part in the uplift of the human race. And I would like to possess the ability to defend with my life the thousands of holy temples which sanctify this land of ours.

I am an iconoclast in the sense that I break down the subtle form of idolatry in the shape of fanaticism that refuses to see any virtue in any other form of worshipping the Deity save one's own. This form of idolatry is more deadly for being more fine and evasive than the tangible and gross form of worship that identifies the Deity with a little bit of a stone or a golden image.⁹

I would worship an idol even made of clay, if thereby my mind becomes lighter. If my life becomes fruitful, then only the worship of young Krishna's idol has meaning. The stone is no God; but God resides in the stone. If I besmear the idol with sandalwood paste, make an offering of rice, and pray to it for strength to cut off so many heads, one of you should throw the idol into a deep well, or break it into pieces.¹⁰

Tree-Worship

I AM both a supporter and opponent of image-worship.

When image-worship degenerates into idolatry and becomes encrusted with false beliefs and doctrines, it becomes a necessity to combat it as a gross social evil. On the other hand, image-worship, in the sense of investing one's ideal with a concrete shape, is inherent in man's nature and even valuable as an aid to devotion. Thus, we worship an image when we offer homage to a book which we regard as holy or sacred. We worship an image when we visit a temple or a mosque with a feeling of sanctity or reverence. Nor do I see any harm in all this. On the contrary, endowed as man is with a finite, limited understanding, he can hardly do otherwise. Even so, far from seeing anything inherently evil or harmful in tree-worship, I find in it a thing instinct with a deep pathos and poetic beauty. It symbolizes true reverence for the entire vegetable kingdom which, with its endless panorama of beautiful shapes and forms, declares to us as it were with a million tongues the greatness and glory of God. Without vegetation, our planet would not be able to support life even for a moment. In such a country especially, therefore, in which there is a scarcity of trees, tree-worship assumes a profound economic significance.

I, therefore, see no necessity for leading a crusade against tree-worship. It is true, that the poor simple-minded women who offer worship to trees have no reasoned understanding of the implications of their act. Possibly, they would not be able to give any explanation as to why they perform it. They act in the purity and utter simplicity of their faith. Such faith is not a thing to be despised; it is a great and powerful force that we should treasure.

Far different, however, is the case of vows and prayers which votaries offer before trees. The offering of

vows and prayers for selfish ends, whether offered in churches, mosques, temples or before trees and shrines, is a thing not to be encouraged. Making of selfish requests or offering of vows is not related to image-worship as effect and cause. A personal selfish prayer is bad whether made before an image or an unseen God.

Let no one, however, from this understand me to mean that I advocate tree-worship in general. I do not defend tree-worship because I consider it to be a necessary aid to devotion, but only because I recognize that God manifests Himself in innumerable forms in this universe, and every such manifestation commands my spontaneous reverence.¹¹

Personally, I am as much an idol-worshipper as an idol-breaker, and I suggest that all — whether Hindu, Muslim or any other — are also so, whether they admit it or not. I know that mankind thirsts for symbolism. Are not *Masjids* or churches in reality the same as *Mandirs*? God resides everywhere, no less in stock or stone than in a single hair on the body of man. But men associate sacredness with particular places and things more than with others. Such sentiment is worthy of respect when it does not mean restrictions on similar freedom for others.¹²

Idolatry is implanted in the human heart. There is idol-worship in the *Quran*. What is a mosque? It is a species of idol-worship. The word 'idol' does not apply only to a human figure. Anything that the eye can see is an idol. The belief that *Allah* resides in the mosque, and the custom to turn the face to Mecca during prayers, are a species of idolatry. But the Muslims would retort: 'Maybe, it is idolatry; but your idolatry is of an altogether different variety.' The rock-bottom truth is that we are all idolaters.¹³

A Model Temple

THE modern Hindu temple is a hot-bed of superstition, as are more or less other 'Houses of God'. But I have not been able to subscribe to their corollary that the remedy for the abuse lies in the destruction of temples.

But by far the largest number of persons believe in the reform, not destruction of temples. There is no doubt that temple reform is necessary. But here, again, there is need for caution. Some of them think that it is possible to replace all the existing temples with new ones. I do not share that view. All temples will never be alike. They will always vary, as they have done in the past, with the varying human needs. What a reformer should be concerned with is a radical change more in the inward spirit than in the outward form. If the first is changed, the second will take care of itself. If the first remains unchanged, the second, no matter how radically changed, will be like a whited sepulchre. A mausoleum, however beautiful, is a tomb and not a mosque, and a bare plot of consecrated ground may be a real Temple of God.

Therefore, the first desideratum is the priest. My ideal priest must be a man of God. He must be a true servant of the people. He should have the qualifications of a guide, friend and philosopher to those among whom he is officiating. He must be a whole-timer with the least possible needs and personal ties. He should be versed in the *Shastras*. His whole concern will be to look after the welfare of his people. I have not drawn a fanciful picture. It is almost true to life. It is based on the recollections of my childhood. The priest I am recalling was looked up to by the prince and the people. They flocked round him for advice and guidance in the time of their need.

If the sceptic says such a priest is hard to find

nowadays, he would be partly right. But I would ask the reformer to wait for building the temple of his ideal till he finds his priest.

Meanwhile, let him cultivate in himself the virtues he will have in the priest of his imagination. Let him expect these from the priests of existing temples. In other words, by his gentle and correct conduct, let him infect his immediate surroundings with the need of the times and let him have faith that his thought, surcharged with his own correct conduct, will act more powerfully than the mightiest dynamo. Let him not be impatient to see the result in a day. A thought may take years of conduct to evolve the requisite power. What are years or generations in the life of a great reform?

Now, perhaps, the reader will follow my view of a model temple. I can present him with no architect's plan and specification. Time is not ripe for it. But that does not baffle me and it need not baffle the reformer. He can choose the site for his future temple. It must be as extensive as he can get it. It need not be in the heart of a village or a city. It should be easily accessible to the Harijans and the other poor, and yet it must not be in insanitary surroundings. In any case, I would aim at making the plinth of the actual temple as high as possible. And on this site I should select my plot for daily worship. Round this will come into being a school, a dispensary, a library, secular and religious. The school may serve also as a meeting or debating hall. I should have a *dharmashala* or guest-house connected with the temple. Each one of these will be a separate institution and yet subordinate to the temple and may be built simultaneously or one after another as circumstances and funds may permit. The buildings may or may not be substantial. If labour is voluntary, as it well may be, with mud and

straw, a beginning may be made at once. But the temple is not yet built. The foundation was laid when the site was procured, the plot for the temple was selected and the first prayer was offered. For the *Bhagavat* says:

*'Wherever people meet and utter His name
from their hearts,*

There God dwells, there is His temple.'

The building, the deity, the consecration, is the province of the priest. When he is found, he will set about his task, but the temple began its existence from the time of the first prayer. And if it was the prayer of true men and women, its continuous progress was assured.

But we must also deal with the existing temples. They can become real Houses of God today, if the worshippers will insist on the priests conforming to the ideal presented by me.¹⁴

Temple Reform

WHAT we need most is the restoration of the temples to their pristine purity and sanctity. The ideal lying behind temples is most holy. In the temples of ancient India resided great *Rishis*, who imparted divine wisdom. Today, the priest sits there barring the way to those who need instruction and help to solve the problems of life. Alas! the priests of all religions are more in need of instruction than the poor masses.

These words are true. Never was the need for temple reform more urgent than today. Temples supply a felt want. If the priests had better education and would be custodians of the spirituality of the people, the temples would be houses both of worship and spiritual instruction as they were before.¹⁵

CHAPTER IV CONVERSIONS

'Physician, Heal Thyself!'

IN my opinion, there is no such thing as proselytism in Hinduism as it is understood in Christianity or, to a lesser extent, in Islam. The modern method does not appeal to me. It has done more harm than good. Though regarded as a matter of the heart purely and one between the Maker and oneself, it has degenerated into an appeal to the selfish instinct. My Hindu instinct tells me that all religions are, more or less, true. All proceed from the same God but all are imperfect, because they have come down to us through imperfect human instrumentality. The real *Shuddhi* movement should consist in each one trying to arrive at perfection in his or her own faith. In such a plan, character would be the only test. What is the use of crossing from one compartment to another, if it does not mean a moral rise? What is the meaning of my trying to convert to the service of God (for, that must be the implication of *Shuddhi* or *Tabligh*) when those who are in my fold are every day denying God by their actions? "Physician, heal thyself!" is more true in matters religious than mundane.¹

I would personally like the stopping of all conversions and *Shuddhis*. One's faith is a personal matter with oneself. It is open to any person of mature age to change his or her faith, when and as often as he or she wishes. But if I could do so, I would stop all propaganda except through one's conduct. Conversion is a matter of heart and reason. An appeal to heart and reason can only be made through conduct.²

It is idle to talk of winning souls for God. Is God so

helpless that He cannot win souls for Himself? Everyone's religion is a personal matter with himself. I cannot preach Hinduism; I can but practise it.³

Work of God

I DO not believe in conversion by human agency. Seekers after Truth are in the same position as the blind men in the Indian parable who went to see an elephant, or rather in a worse position. For, if the physically blind lacked in sight, they were compensated for it to some extent by the enhanced power of other organs of sense. But seekers after Truth can only see as through a glass darkly, so far as inward sight is concerned. It would, therefore, be sheer presumption on their part to seek to 'convert' others to their own faith. God has as many ways of approaching Him as there are human beings.⁴

If conversion is the work of God, why should that work be taken away from Him? And who is man to take away anything from God? He may become humble instrument in the hands of God. Even so, he cannot be judge of men's hearts. I often wonder whether we are always true judges of our own hearts. 'Man, know thyself' must have been wrung out of a desperate heart. And if we know so little of ourselves, how much less must we know of our neighbours and remote strangers who may differ from us in a multitude of things, some of which are of the highest moment.⁵

It is unthinkable that a man will become good or attain salvation only if he embraces a particular religion, — Hinduism, Christianity or Islam. Purity of character and salvation depend on the purity of heart.⁶

No Sanction for Conversions

THE *Gita* and the *Tulsi Ramayana* teach me to resort to self-purification whenever I am, or my religion is in

danger. And what is true for me is true for all. That process of self-purification I am going through all the twenty-four hours of my days. Parvati, Narada had foretold, would have an ominous-looking husband. She knew that only Shiva was as blissful as he was ominous-looking, and she performed penance for winning Shiva and won him. So, the lesson of penance and self-purification is writ large everywhere in our scriptures and the Himalayas are the living witness to it—the Himalayas where countless *Rishis* ground their bodies to dust for self-purification. The *Vedas*, to me, are not the texts writ on paper, but my very conscience and the Indweller. They tell me to observe *Yama* and *Niyama** (the cardinal and the casual virtues) and trust everything to Lord Krishna.⁷

After much prayerful study of the Hindu *Shastras*, I have come to the conclusion that there is no room in them for conversions such as they have in Islam and Christianity. I am also certain, on a prayerful reading of the *Quran*, that there is no warrant for the *Tabligh* that is being promoted today. It is possible that I may be mistaken. Let God correct me in that case. I, for myself, would love to protect my religion with *tapashcharya*—the way of prayerful suffering which is the royal road to success in any noble object. I must be free to read the *Gita* or the *Quran* of my own accord. Why should a Hindu compel me to read the one, or a Mussalman to read the

* *Yamas*, the cardinal virtues, according to *Yogashastra*, are *Ahimsa* (Non-violence), *Satya* (Truth), *Asteya* (Non-stealing) *Brahmacharya* (Celibacy), *Aparigraha* (Non-possession); and the *Niyamas* or the casual virtues are, according to the same authority, *Shaucha* (Bodily purity) *Santosha* (Contentment), *Tapa* (Forebearance), *Swadhyaya* (Study of Scriptures), *Ishwarapranidhana* (Resignation to the Will of God).

other? Why should I need a Christian to compel me to read the *Bible*? No one may stand between a man and his religion or God. He who has no inkling of religion, whose heart is arid and unpurified—how dare he purify (by proselytizing) others?⁸

What Religion Means

If a change of religion could be justified for worldly betterment, I would advise it without hesitation. But religion is a matter of the heart. No physical inconvenience can warrant abandonment of one's own religion.

Religion is not a matter of convenience or of bettering one's social or material condition. People have been known to cling to their religion although they have had to face social ostracism, material ruin and much worse. One's religion keeps one true in the face of the greatest adversity. It is the sheet-anchor of one's hope in this world and even after. It binds one to one's God, to Truth, as to nothing else.⁹

One's religion ought to be totally independent of the conduct of other people towards us. Our religion has its source from God within. And if we will be true to our God, we will never forsake the faith we derive from Him. With God as our Guide, Master, Ruler, in everything that we may do, we can defy the whole world's opposition and stick to our faith.¹⁰

I have no use for people who can change their religion like their clothes. They would not be an asset to any religion.¹¹

Religion must be a very poor stuff, if it admits of change like one's clothes. Religion (binding faith) is made of sterner stuff; it is a deep personal matter, more personal than honour. To be true, it must be able to defy coercion of the extremest type.¹²

Religion is an essentially personal matter. It is one between oneself and one's God. It should never be made a matter of bargain.¹³

Religion is not a matter of barter. It is a matter for every individual to decide for himself to which faith he will belong. It does not lend itself to purchase in any shape or form. Or, if such an expression can be used in connection with things of the spirit, religion can only be purchased with one's own blood.¹⁴

Conversion under the stress of physical discomfort is no spiritual conversion.¹⁵

Religion is a matter of life and death. A man does not change religion as he changes his garments. He takes it with him beyond the grave. Nor does a man profess his religion to oblige others. He professes a religion because he cannot do otherwise. A faithful husband loves his wife as he would love no other woman. Even her faithlessness would not wean him from his faith. The bond is more than blood-relationship. So is the religious bond, if it is worth anything. It is a matter of the heart.¹⁶

A Heart Process

PROGRESS of liberal study of religions of the world is bound to revolutionize the existing clumsy method of proselytizing which looks to the form rather than the substance. It is the transference of allegiance from one fold to another and the mutual decrying of rival faiths which gives rise to mutual hatred.

I am against conversion, whether it is known as *Shuddhi* by Hindus, *Tabligh* by Mussalmans or proselytizing by Christians. Conversion is a heart-process known only to and by God. It must be left to itself... Those who believe in it have a perfect right to follow their own course without let or hindrance, so long as it is kept within proper limits, *i.e.*, so long as there is no force nor fraud nor

material inducement and so long as the parties are free agents and of mature age and understanding.¹⁷

I have, of course, always believed in the principle of religious tolerance. But I have even gone further. I have advanced from tolerance to equal respect for all religions. All religions are branches of the same mighty tree, but I must not change over from one branch to another for the sake of expediency. By doing so, I cut the branch on which I am sitting. Therefore, I always feel the change-over from one religion to another very keenly, unless it is a case of spontaneous urge, a result of inner growth. Such conversions by their very nature cannot be on a mass scale and never to save one's life or property or for temporal gain.¹⁸

It is impossible for me to reconcile myself to the idea of conversion after the style that goes on in India and elsewhere today. It is an error which is perhaps the greatest impediment to the world's progress towards peace. 'Warring creeds' is a blasphemous expression. And it fitly describes the state of things in India, the Mother as I believe her to be of Religion or religions. If she is truly the Mother, the motherhood is on trial. Why should a Christian want to convert a Hindu to Christianity and *vice versa*? Why should he not be satisfied if the Hindu is a good or godly man? If the morals of a man is a matter of no concern, the form of worship in a particular manner in a church, a mosque or a temple is an empty formula; it may even be a hindrance to individual or social growth, and insistence on a particular form or repetition of a credo may be a potent cause of violent quarrels leading to bloodshed and ending in utter disbelief in Religion *i.e.* God Himself.¹⁹

CHAPTER V

CHRISTIANITY

My Reaction to Christianity

EVEN when I was 18, I came in touch with good Christians in London. Before that I had come in touch with what I used then to call 'beef and beer-bottle Christianity', for these were regarded as the indispensable criteria of a man becoming a Christian, with also a third thing, namely, adoption of a European style of dress. Those Christians were parodying St. Paul's teaching 'Call thou nothing unclean'. I went to London, therefore, with that prejudice against Christianity. I came across good Christians there who placed the *Bible* in my hands. Then I met numerous Christians in South Africa, and I have since grown to this belief that Christianity is as good and as true a religion as my own. For a time, I struggled with the question: 'Which was the true religion out of those I knew?' But, ultimately, I came to the deliberate conviction that there was no such thing as only one true religion and every other false. There is no religion that is absolutely perfect. All are equally imperfect or, more or less, perfect. Hence, the conclusion that Christianity is as good and true as my own religion. But so also about Islam or Zoroastrianism or Judaism.

I, therefore, do not take literally true the text that Jesus is the only begotten son of God. God cannot be the exclusive Father and I cannot ascribe exclusive divinity to Jesus. He is as divine as Krishna or Rama or Mohammed or Zoroaster. Similarly, I do not regard every word of the *Bible* as the inspired word of God, even as I do not regard every word of the *Vedas* or the *Quran* as inspired. The SUM TOTAL of each of these books is