

Eastern Religions – Reforms and Renovations (part 2)

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ABSTRACT: The author attempts to speak of the different ideological movements in Eastern religions. In this part, he introduces the renewal process of Eastern Religions in: Rites; the Concept of the Supreme Being and Saints; Concepts on the Way of Life in Religious Life; Concepts in an Ideology; and Concepts on Castes, Equality and Social Equity.

3. The Renewal Process of Eastern Religions

The Renewal of Religious Rites

The change of *exterior* religious feelings by *interior* ones was expressed in each religion by their own means, by taking into account the religious peculiarity and the church's organization. The common tendency in democratizing rituals had appeared in Hinduism. People asked to abandon offerings, the collecting of money for divinities, to abstain from reading prayers and going on pilgrimages to the places of the saint, etc.

One of the promoters of reform in Hinduism was Rammohan Roi (1774-1883). While translating and annotating the Upanishad into English he strayed too far from the original text, only stressing its aspect against rites. When comparing R. Rammohan's translation with of S. Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) on a same passage in the Upanisad, R. B. Rubakov, a Russian Orientalist, remarked that R. Rammohan "had simplified and concretized the language of the Upanisad (in which the concretization was clearly on purpose) he had somewhat exaggerated the anti- ritual tendency of the sutra."¹¹

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Members of the religious reform association "Brahmo Samaj" lead by Debenbranath Tagor (1817-1905) took an oath that they were not compelled to participate in idolatrous rituals and they respected divinities only by love and suitable acts. Keshobtrondro Sen (1848-1884), the leader of the radical association "Bharatvarshia Samaj" had "democratized" Hinduism through the use of the typically popular cult of the opposite movement Bhati in the Middle Ages. He transferred the cult to streets, organized festival processions with popular music and song.

Anagarik Oharmapala (born in 1864), the founder of the reform movement "Association of the great Bodhi Tree" in Sri Lanka, protested against the cult of Buddha in pagodas of remote places, far from the general population. He appealed to the Sinhalese to worship Buddha on the familial altar called "Buduge".

The religious sect Tensio Kotai dzingu Kio, was a new religious phenomenon appearing in Japan in 1945. The doctrine of this sect publicly protested against existing religious institutions in Japan. Religious syncretism was a peculiarity of Japanese religions. During many centuries, Shintoism and Buddhism have coexisted and have been considered as traditional religions of Japan. All "New religions" appearing there combined Buddhist and Shintoist elements, without excluding some phenomena of Christianity.

Tensio Kotai is not a big religion (it numbers but 200-300 thousand believers). But its striking feature is democratism. Its believers are mainly agricultural workers. Its founder is Kitamura Saio, a peasant woman. She spoke out against pagodas and the priesthood. This prophetess said: "Let us look at the past... the priests, pagodas, sacred images and gorgeous sanctuaries have appropriated the wealth and property of the believers... They preached about life in the other-world. How can anybody follow these priests when they do not bring anybody anything except illusions and vain hopes?"¹²

Believers of this sect cite only two prayers compiled by Kitamura Saito and replace Shintoist and Buddhist rituals by collective "dances" in crowded places. That is why sometimes Tensio Kotai is called Oduro Siuko - a dancing religion. Those who perform these dances reach a high degree of enthusiasm which liberates them from evil spirits, transforming them into angels "used to establish their own kingdom on earth."¹³

The cult of Islam is much simpler than of Buddhism and Hinduism. But here, religious reform was also expressed by abandoning superfluous rituals. Even so the

people still maintain the necessity of performing the five daily prayers pertaining to one of the main Islamic doctrines. According to Said Ahmad Jam, man should not hope in the supernatural, in the realization of their prayers and in their desires when reciting prayers. Prayers only brought consolation. Nobody, even saints could change natural and moral laws.

It was therefore useless to ask for something, everything followed given laws, independent from the laws of nature.

We also remark on the tendency of abandoning two imposed conditions of Islam: to trust in the month of Ramadan and to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, in the Holy Land. An example: The Head of Islamic Tunisian State, President Habib Burgiba, had initiated an official campaign against fasting and going on the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In a message read in February 1960 on the cancellation of the fast, he proclaimed: "if a religious activity goes against the solving of important problems of life we should give up it... As the Head of a Islamic State, I may speak in the name of this religion... Because even young people cannot combine work with fasting... let them transgress this requirement with a pure soul."¹⁴

Regarding the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, H. Burgiba also publicly opposed it. He declared: "In the name of the Head of this Islamic State, I declare that anybody among you will do a worthy deed when they using the money that would be spent for the pilgrimage to develop society, to invest in industrial enterprises. You should fully think of this custom: out of date religious rituals are disadvantageous to health, and useless to our account balance."¹⁵

Another proof of democratization in Islam was the translation of the Koran into different national languages and the recognition of the right to pray in these languages. This act could not be accepted from the viewpoint of the conservatism. The latter thought that one did not have the right to change the words of Saint Allah and had to transmit them only in the sacred Arabian language.

Behind the common tendency of simplifying rituals was the will to abolish the role the priests played as mediators. Though Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam lacked the power concentration of the church, these religions still maintained their own rank system (especially in Buddhism). The mechanism for conquering believers through "intermediary activities" between divinities and believers still persisted. Opposition against the control of the priests and the organized church therefore was a characteristic feature of religious reforms.

In Islam there does not exist a class of men belonging to priests or who have been officially prepared beforehand to become priests. Functions pertaining to priests are assumed by mullas, muezinas, kadis, etc. (Arabian names of dignitaries in the Islamic church). The head should be ulemas-theological lawyers, those having the right to explain the laws and words of the Saint. Protesting against what was called by theologians the blind belief in dogmas, Muhammad Abdo wrote: "A belief lacking reason in authority... is the characteristic of people without a belief, because one becomes a believer only when the dogma has been acknowledged by reason."¹⁶ This truth is found in the Koran: "Whoever follows the example of his parents and ancestors without thinking is a person who is mute, deaf and blind (2:17)."¹⁷

In short, the reasons for renovating religious rituals proposed by reformers were (simplification and democratization of the cult) aimed at abolishing the role of mediator by the church, at liberating believers from the power of priests, drawing them near to the saints, actively deploying individual freedoms, and to fill the needs found in contemporary life.

Renovating the Concept of the Supreme Being and Saints

The explanation on the Supreme Being (Brahman) by reformists in Hinduism was expressed first and foremost in the abolition of polytheism, in the anthropomorphic classification of divinities, in abolishing idolatry considered as a "slavish" form of a religious cult. An author of the reformist tendency wrote: "The idolatry that our compatriots are still following... should be viewed with common sense and with the utmost fear because it is leading to immorality and social destruction."¹⁸ Continuing the reform line of precursors, Daianada Sarasvati resolutely rejected idolatry. He said: "Divinities have no form and exist everywhere. Therefore one cannot describe divinities. Idols were not created by man, but by nature - earth, water, mountains, fire, air, plants and animals reminding men of the existence of nature."¹⁹

Beginning from the criticism of idolatry, it led to the liberation of man from superstitions in out-of-date conceptions. As K. Marx said: "the crude cult of nature" leads to the situation in which, "the master of nature has to respectfully kneel before the monkey Hanuman and the cow Saphala."²⁰ Then reformists stressed the peculiar role of man in the universe. When explaining Veda in the new concept, Swami Vivekananda asserted that man was the greatest being of all beings, because his soul was a little part of the divinities. Man therefore had "the potential ability of the

divinities". This religious reformer even identified divinity with man. He wrote: "Why do we search for divinities? Is it because without divinities everybody will be poor, unhappy and weak? Why don't we seek after divinities from the beginning?"²¹ Probably the philosophical conception of Swami Vivekananda led to the thesis: "The surface of the earth is higher than the sky."²² Therefore "man first and foremost should have confidence in himself then in divinities, because whoever does not have confidence in himself cannot have confidence in divinities."²³

The concept on the Supreme Being and on man was also interpreted by Islamic reformers according to the above humanist thought. A divinity was "Ego" (in capital letters), therefore there existed many "egos" of different degrees. Each "ego" in this number was an expression of this "Ego" in capital letters. "The world in all its expressions - from the mechanical movement of what we called the material atom to the free movement of thought in the "Ego" was an expression of the "great Ego". The ego reached in man its highest degree. M. Iqbal wrote: "That is why the Koran taught that the ultimate 'Ego' is nearer to man than the arterial cervical". He wrote: "Man has a higher degree of realism than every object around him. In every creature of the Saint only man has the ability to participate in the creative activity of his Creator."²⁴

Religious reformers acknowledged that the Supreme Being had created the world, but they resolutely did not acknowledge the supernatural determinism of the conservatives in religions and replaced the absolute fatalism by a more flexible variant - providentialism. All objects and phenomena were bound to one another by a chain of causal relations; at the end of this chain was the cause of all causes - the first cause - God. Once the mechanism was complete, the intervention of the worker was not necessary. The Islamic Koran said: "The good you attained to was from Saint Allah, the bad you met was from yourself."²⁵ This sentence meant that the good came from the Saint and the bad from man. Islamic reformers held that the Saint created both good and evil. Man chose by himself between good and evil. Rewards and punishments did not depend on the will of the Creator but depended on real and false laws.

This explanation of religious reformers' conception of the Supreme Being created the basis to explain the role and place of man in the world in a compatible way with the spirit of the times. It contributed to deploy man's activity in the struggle for transforming man's earthly life.

A Review of Concepts on the Way of Life in Religious Life

When we study the concepts of life in Buddhism and Hinduism we meet concepts like karma, overcoming desires and sufferings, awakening, Nirvana etc. Indian religious reformers like Rammohan Roi and Debendranath Tagor did not accept them and thought that they did not have a logical basis. Others, among them, Mamakrshna Parmahansa (1836-1886) found that individual "awakening" was a necessary step on the way to "awaken" others (like coaches coming to a place only aner being drawn by the locomotive).

Religious reformers of Myanmar like U. Otama. U. Lun, and U. Timisara held that we could attain Nirvana only after being "liberated" from this world. "Nirvana is the liberation of man from the slavish yoke after death, from samsara, but how might we go there when freedom does not exist on this earth? The Pounji pled to go to Nirvana, but as we know, slaves may not go to Nirvana, therefore they begged to be liberated from slavery in this life."²⁶

Those following the tendency for radical religious reform held that the worry about individual liberation was a sin. Swami Vivekanda said: "If you are seeking for your individual liberation, the way will lead you to hell! Liberate others if you want to reach the Highest. Kill within yourself the desire for individual liberation!"²⁷

Attitudes toward a religiously ascetic life, and a monastic life also changed in adaptation to the times. If in the past, beggars living an ascetic life. Wandering from one place to another were considered as saints because they were quite foreign to terrestrial affairs, now in the interpretation of Anagarik Dharmapala, they held a place between seculars and those monks who not only observed the teachings in Buddhist sutras but also devoted a great deal of time and effort to social activities. According to tradition Buddhist priests were forbidden to participate in political activities, in the present they have been acknowledged to have the right to participate in social life. In the 60s - 70s of the 20th century, Buddhist reformers in Cambodia firmly upheld the idea that "if political activity contributed to the equality, progress and welfare of the Khmer people, it is quite adapted to Buddhist principles because Buddha taught to do good for every body. Bonzes have to live for the nation therefore they have to help the nation in socio-political activities, only then can they carry out the teaching of their great teacher."²⁸

Those who followed the sect for radical religious reform opposed an ascetic life and replaced it by their activity in secular life as a higher form than that of serving

religions. They asserted that "it is quite irrational to assert that a person who forsook the earth is greater than a person living on the earth. Living on the earth and respecting the Greatest Being is much more difficult than abandoning everything and living a life devoid of daily cares."²⁹

Renewing Religious Concepts in an Ideology

In the first stage of the religious reform movement in Eastern countries, the participation of national movements was considered to be the greatest spiritual obligation. First and foremost religious reformers expressed the interest of the national bourgeoisie in its development. For them an end to medieval laws in order to pave the way for social progress was a natural aspiration. This social progress was opposite to the traditional way of life and colonialism.

Nationalism - the article of faith of the bourgeois ideology often wore a religious cover. Here as in Europe in the Middle Ages, "to create a movement as strong as a typhoon. One should provide the masses whose feelings had only been nurtured by religions, with the things they urgently needed under the guise of religion."³⁰ This situation had led to an identification of nationalism with religions, asking every believer to serve the cause of national liberation. Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) wrote: "Nationalism - is the religion given by the Creator."³¹

In order to facilitate the comprehension of bourgeois nationalism among the masses "nurtured solely by religion", religious reformers in Eastern countries "deformed" traditional religious concepts. One of the most important concepts was non-violence from Buddhism and Hinduism. According to the interpretation by Swami Vivekananda, though non-violence was an excellent ideal but it was very airy-fairy. To reach it one had to possess a resolute opposition to the evil one was facing. This religious reformer called upon his compatriots not to follow non-violence but to struggle to "severely punish" both spiritual and physical evil. "Only when we have enough force to oppose then do we have the occasion for real non-violence."³² U. Otama, a religious reformer of Myanmar said "if the national interest asks for violence one must not condemn this violence."³³ Afterwards, Premier U Nu mentioned that Buddha himself in his previous lives had resorted to force to save his friends from suffering and to defend them from their enemies.³⁴ Also Abal Kalam Azad, the first minister of education of independent India, declared that "Answering violence with violence is quite adapted to the natural law of god."³⁵

In Islamic countries, the moral basis for the struggle against colonialism had been examined by religious reformers through the concept of a "Saint War". This was the slogan of many series of sectarian movements lead by religious reformers.

Under the slogan of "the Saint War" Islamic carried out a war against feudality and foreign invaders. The Babist movement in the 40s-50s of the 19th century was carried out under this slogan. Ideologues of the Islamic reform movement made use of the concept "Saint War" to unite the masses against the enslavement of colonialism.

When colonial people had recovered political independence, and put an end to the domination of colonialism, the orientation of the reform current also changed. The main aim put forth was to struggle against obstacles on the way to building a "pubic welfare society". At present, pre-capitalist means of production, traditional institutions and customs were considered as representing the evil in society.

Religious reformers supported the struggle against the social order which brought about this evil.

Renewing Concepts on Castes, Equality and Social Equity

In the new stage in the development of Eastern countries, religious reformers put forth the goal of building "a kingdom of God on the earth". The idea of a welfare society was bound to a new awareness on equality and social equity. Buddha, the prophet Muhammad and divinities such as Rama and Krishna in indian legends had ideas on social equity. They did not recognize race, religion, caste separation, or even class division. U. Otama, the religious reformer of Myanmar wrote: "The doctrine of Buddha taught that everybody is equal, differences come from human thinking."³⁶ In this spirit, the Indian religious reformer Rammohan Roi said that there existed but a unique Supreme Being and "there do not exist differences in castes, degrees, or properties among creatures which are dependent on Him."³⁷

In this spirit, religious reformers attacked the most conservative institutions of social inequality. In India it is the system of castes, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) – *the great Soul of India* unceasingly struggled against the caste system. He wrote: "The caste system should disappear so as India and Hinduism may live and develop."³⁸ The class system has had a very deep origin in India. The struggle against the caste system constantly met with the concern of Indian religious reformers, even

aner the Republic of India had been established. Negating the superior stratum and the interior stratum in Indian society. Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982), the leader of the religious movement "Bhudan" voluntarily raised money to buy land for poor landless and without rights peasants in Indian society. He held that the distribution of land to poor peasants was the sacred obligation of Hindu believers. Now the cast system is prohibited by the law but a greater effort should be made to completely annihilate it.

In Islamic society polygamy is one of the most anti-democratic rights "enjoyed" by the men. Even since the birth of the reform movement, reformers have debated sharply with the conservatists that are in Islam. But the conservatist forces has been so strong that even reformers have had to recognize that it is impossible to directly condemn polygamy and the Islamic laws on marriage (Shariat law). However, the defence of women still resounds in the Islamic world. According to a Islamic thinker of Turkey, Zia Gekalp (1876-1927), the problem of women was intimately bound up with the problem of social development in general. "Until now, as long as the dignity of women is not respected, the life of the nation does not yet have full value. As long as a woman is considered as a half of a man in the right of succession and his one fourth in marriage, no country can resuscitate."³⁹

Those who followed religious reform tried to re-interpret a number of chapters, and articles in the Koran (examples 4:4, 4:123, 4:36 etc.) to demonstrate that equality of women had been proposed in Islamic society. Hussein Alatas, professor at the University of Singapore tried to argue that "women in Islam are not considered as inferior. Their obligation and right in society are like that of men."⁴⁰

From different points of view on equality and social equity, religious reformers in Eastern countries have proposed different social models such as: The Society of Common Welfare (Hinduism concept), Buddhist Socialism (Buddhist concept), Islamic Socialism (Islamic concept), the Third Civilization (Soka Gakkai Religion in Japan), etc.

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