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**(Abstract)**

Human beings as a self-conscious, aesthetic, sympathetic and empathetic being develop various ways to live in this world. They continue to aspire for a better version of themselves and their lives. In this process, they developed certain ethical norms, social practices, and ways to perceive and understand this world. These qualities become the basis for proactive steps of spirituality which in turn become the foundation of religion. In human history, religion has helped individuals to fulfill various human needs irrespective of their culture. Despite differences in the content of various religious philosophies, mythological structures and religious ceremonies, it gave a sense of meaning and purpose to human beings. Because of its omnipresence, many philosophers along with biological and cultural evolutionary researchers have suggested to come up with a universal explanation for religion.

Nevertheless, religion was also employed as a means of exploitation by the powerful elites in various societies. Thus, many times, it worked as an orthodox, deceptive and enslaving force for humanity. Modern thought emphasized on the later effects of religion and found it less emancipatory. Hence, enlightenment philosophy focused on rationality as a significant aspect of human beings. Besides, development of science has unfolded various hidden and hitherto mysterious natural phenomena to mankind. This change has brought rationality to the forefront of human existence every institution began to build around this notion of human being. Even the death of God was announced by Nietzsche with grief in 1985.

Was it really the death of God? Can human beings live without religion sanely? These questions become very relevant particularly in recent times when we see resurgence of religious identities in the political and social discourses. However, consumer mythology and consumer culture remain at the forefront while taking decisions in our daily lives across the cultures. Even sometimes, religious identities are absorbed by the powerful market forces; how to understand this contradictory phenomenon?

Between both these understandings, this paper sets three objectives for itself – first, to analyze human need for religion from a psychological and existential perspective. Second, it critically evaluates secular thesis as put forward by European enlightenment thinkers in the light of contemporary consumerist mythology. The third objective involves a brief description of universal religion and its relevance in this time.

**Key words:** Human Existence, Universal Religion, Consumerist Mythology, Secularism

**Introduction**

Human beings as a self-conscious, aesthetic, sympathetic and empathetic being develop various ways to live in this world. They continue to aspire for a better version of themselves and their lives. In this process, they developed certain norms, ways to perceive and understand this world. These qualities become the basis for proactive steps of spirituality which in turn become the foundation of religion. In human history, religion has helped an individual to fulfill various human needs irrespective of their culture. Despite differences in the content of various religious philosophies, mythological structures and religious ceremonies, it gave a sense of meaning and purpose to the life of a human being. Because of its omnipresence, many philosophers such as M.K. Gandhi, Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore along with biological and cultural evolutionary researchers have suggested coming up with a universal

explanation for religion. Nevertheless, religion was also employed as a means of exploitation by the powerful elites in various societies. Thus, many times, it worked as an orthodox, deceptive and enslaving force for humanity.

Modern thought emphasized on the later effects of religion and found it less/non emancipatory. Hence, enlightenment philosophy focused on rationality as a significant aspect of human beings. Philosophers such as Descartes, Hegel, Kant and Marx etc. have identified humans as a conscious rational being. These philosophies had put forward two famous dictums - Cogito ergo sum and real is rational and rational is real. Besides, development of science has unfolded various hidden and hitherto mysterious natural phenomena to mankind. This change has brought rationality to the forefront of human existence every institution began to build around this notion of human being. Even the death of God was announced by Nietzsche with grief in 1985. Was it really the death of God? Can human beings live without religion sanely? These questions become very relevant particularly in recent times as we can see a significant shift towards religious identity in the political and social discourses. However, consumer mythology and consumer culture remain at the forefront while taking decisions in our daily lives across the cultures. Even sometimes, religious identities are incorporated by the powerful market forces; how to understand this contradictory phenomenon?

In this background, this paper sets three objectives for itself – first, to analyze human need for religion from a psychological and existential perspective. Second, it critically evaluates secular thesis as put forward by European enlightenment thinkers in the light of contemporary consumerist mythology. The third objective involves a brief description of universal religion and its relevance in this time.

### **Analyzing Psychological and Existential Aspects of Religion**

While, revolutionary discovery of the unconscious mind by Freud has displayed the flaws in modern assumption that humans should be defined by their conscious aspect. With the help of his practical observations, Freud demonstrated that human behavior is heavily influenced and determined by unconscious forces. And very few actions or decisions are taken at the conscious level. Rather than being driven by rational thinking, humans are driven by their emotional matrix dynamically (Freud: (1938) 2012)<sup>1</sup>. According to Freud, religion is an instrument that an individual follows to run away from his/ her fears. As he sees, the idea of God is formed on the basis of infantile helplessness and the father-child relationship. Though Freud regards religious ideas as illusions, he accepts that they constitute the fulfillment of the deepest and most powerful wishes of humanity. He wonders, why the idea of God, the creator, a God of providence, of a moral order in the universe, and of a future life, coincides not only with our own wishes but also with those of our primal ancestors (Quinodoz & Weller: 2017)<sup>2</sup>.

There are two points that we can draw from Freudian theory which are relevant for our discussion here. One, human beings are not identical to the conscious being; rather much is at unconscious level, because various irrational aspects are hidden within human beings. The second point is that humans invent religion for fulfilling certain emotional needs which are part of their existence. However, Freud finds religion neurotic and instrumental but he still finds its need for human beings.

Now let's examine what other important thinkers have to say on this issue! In his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, sociologist Durkheim, has defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (Dawson: 2004)<sup>3</sup>. In this definition, “unified system” and “sacred things”, are suggestive aspects and their significance will be explored as our analysis unfolds.

Rudolf Otto has emphasized on the non-rational nature of religion and developed the notion of “numinous”. For him, the numinous is to be understood as the experience of a mysterious terror, awe and majesty in the presence of something that is “entirely other” (Gooch: 2000)<sup>4</sup>. It therefore cannot be expressed through human language directly or any other media. Because of the inexpressibility and non-

discursive nature of religious sentiments, he emphasized on the direct knowledge of it through experience. In his later works, he has developed ways to compare the concept of numinous in the cross-cultural mystical experiences such as Hinduism and Buddhism (Sarbacker: 2022)<sup>5</sup>. This description of Otto shows the non-rational element of the human psyche and its connection to religious experience. In this description, non-rationality and non-expressivity are important aspects for religion which again emphasizes its beyond rational nature.

Further, if we look at religion from evolutionary psychology perspective, it postulates that religion is an outgrowth of brain architecture, especially neocortex and it reached a peak value around five hundred thousand years ago. Consequently, cognitive senses in the human mind become more sensitive caused by spirituality. The new spiritual experiences motivated humans to express them with others that developed speech and group-living. It also helped people to unify as a community and form a certain set of beliefs and follow a certain set of rituals. These thinkers connect religion with the evolution of mental development. Based upon their presupposition, they try to map how religion and human cognition both have evolved, each influenced by the other. John Lubbock later argued that *“races in a similar state of mental development, however distinct their origins may be, and however distinct the regions they inhabit, have very similar religious concepts.”* (Cited, Bowman: 1995)<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, He proposed an evolution of religion in six stages: atheism, fetishism, totemism, shamanism, anthropomorphism and ethical monotheism (Lubbock 1882)<sup>7</sup>.

On this line, Erich Fromm explains religion in a historical and existential manner. He suggests that religion fulfills human existential *“need for a frame of orientation and devotion”* that is the basic need for human existence (Fromm: (1955) 2008)<sup>1</sup>. The fact that humans have the capacity to reason and imagination necessitates them to orient themselves in the world intellectually and make sense of it. This existential need for orientation situates religion in human nature and existence. Unlike Freud, he does consider the tremendous energy which produces religion, arts or mental illness as the *“outcome of frustrated or sublimated physiological needs”* rather various attempts to solve *“the problem of human existence”* that is given to an individual by being born as a human (Fromm: (1955) 2008)<sup>8</sup>. He argues that because of the *“relative absence of instinctive regulation”*, human finds (Fromm: 1947)<sup>9</sup> himself in disharmony with nature. It generates a need frame of orientation to oneself *“he stands and what he ought to do.”* and to regain the unity between himself and nature (Fromm: 1947). As an embodied intellect, humans not only need a thought system or ideology that satisfies our intellect rather, we need a system that can satisfy our whole living which includes feelings and action. Further, Fromm argues that a *“Devotion to an aim, or an idea, or a power transcending man such as God, is an expression of this need for completeness in the process of living.”* (Fromm: 1947)<sup>10</sup>. Here it is crucial to understand that Fromm blurs the hard line between the secular objects of devotion and the so-called religious one. For him, religion (is) an attempt to solve the problem of human existence. The aim of both is to satisfy this need and provide an object of devotion. It does not make a difference whether the object of the devotion is God or love or money or power or prestige<sup>2</sup>. Since every religion is a response to the need for orientation and object of devotion, it is associated with the question of meaning of life and corresponding object of devotion. Fromm further argues that there is no choice between having a religion or not having, but only what kind of religion we have. Therefore, to situate oneself in this world an individual needs specific aims, identity and rootedness and religion is one of the significant elements which satisfies these human needs.

<sup>1</sup> He also explained other four existential needs are – Relatedness, Transcendence, Rootedness, and Sense of Identity. For detailed discussion, see Sane society, (1955) 2008, pp21-61 (Routledge Classics)

<sup>2</sup> Though, he suggests the difference between the frames of orientation and objects of devotion on the basis of their rational and irrational or progressive and regressive impact on human beings.

Thinkers like Tagore and Gandhi suggest that religion cannot be dismissed easily from the human mind. It is inherent in the constitution of the human being. It belongs to the psychology of human beings. It is a passion, a craving, a desire for something universal. It is a longing for the infinite which will explain the mystery of the infinite, a striving towards reaching something which will solve the riddle of having the idea of the infinite in a finite frame (Tagore: (1931) 2015)<sup>11</sup>.

In this section, we have analyzed various dimensions of religion and its necessity & relevance for the human existence from various aspects. Now, in the next section we will be analyzing the assumptions and argumentation for secularism and will explore its connection to consumerism in recent times.

### **Thesis of Secularism**

Influenced by unimaginable scientific innovations, Enlightenment era philosophy moved towards the doctrine of secularism. In essence, it is a way of thinking derived from the material world without recourse to religion. The focus shifted away from religion and onto the material and temporal concerns. There were various fundamental changes that took place in the world order influenced by the European Enlightenment. The separation of religion and state is the foundation of secularism. It ensures that religious groups don't interfere in affairs of state, and the state doesn't interfere in religious affairs. It has resulted in the 'structural' absence or marginalization or privatization of religion in the policy making and goals formation. Consequently, religious concerns of human beings become repressed and underground.

### **Indian Secularism**

1. Though Indian secularism accepts the significance of religion in public life, it has aimed at the Uniform Civil Code to form a common national identity.
2. On the practical levels, Indian politics has used religious and caste identities to gain votes but at the policy level they have ignored its significance because of western influence. It has created a kind of hypocrisy in public life in every sphere.

### **Secularism and Consumerism**

The hedonistic consumer culture frequently clashes with religious ideals and ethics. As a result, the global market strives to liberate individuals from religious constraints in order to promote the demand-supply rule. In turn, the global economy and consumer, culture in today's society, have become the most active forces for secularization. As previously said, secularism is linked to modernization and the separation of religion and state in order to foster democracy and liberal principles. Market forces, on the other hand, may not be tied to the ideals of secularism in practice; instead, they may employ religious symbols for their objectives if necessary.

Guy Ben-Porat and Yariv Fertiger (2009) use the example of Israel to demonstrate the intricacy of the secularization process through global markets. Israel portrays a society where religion has played a significant role in public life until recently. In their paper, they claim that, as an effect of market forces in the last two decades, religion has gradually weakened its hold on public life. It can be seen in the opening of non-kosher (forbidden food by Talmud) restaurants, LGBT parades, and commercial activities on Saturdays (Jewish Sabbath, or day of rest), among other things. Regardless of these changes in daily life, the pertinent question is whether Israelis in becoming more liberal. To answer this question, their study distinguishes between two types of secularism: "principled secularism," which is based on liberal values, and "secularism of everyday life," that is reflected in socioeconomic developments influenced by globalization and consumer culture (Ben-Porat and Yariv Fertiger: 2009)<sup>12</sup>.

Ben-Porat and Yariv Fertiger undertook an empirical study based on this conceptual distinction and came up with two outcomes. One, people can co-opt secular and religious beliefs and practices at the same time. Second, secularism in everyday life is not always linked to liberalism's core values. We can further draw upon the findings of their empirical survey that commercialization of the public sphere does not guarantee liberal values and deeper secularism; rather, it may assist people in moving toward apathy about religion and liberal principles, and individuals continue to live with both to strengthen their ego-identity rather than emancipation.

This case study is important for Indian society because religion had a big impact on social imagination prior to globalization and commercialization. So far, we've looked at the relationship between secularization and commercialization and consumer culture. Now, in the next section, we'll analyze consumer culture's mythology-creation power and its impact on the human psyche.

### **Contemporary Mythology of Consumerism**

Mythology is an umbrella term that has been used in a variety of forms and interpretations. It has been used to describe various phenomena from science to journalism to advance theoretical and cultural discourses. In the twentieth century, its meaning has expanded to refer anything that relates to the background of unconscious ideas. Barthes considers myth as a mode of signification, a language that takes over reality. He analyzed sociology of signs and their collective representations in the popular culture to uncover their symbolic meanings. Moreover, for him, myth is a type of speech defined more by its intention rather than its literal sense. He suggests that it deforms and de-historicizes the original connection between the signifier and the signified and naturalizes the history. Thus, for Barthes, bourgeoisie ideas and interpretations takes the form of national or universal ideas. Even though, consumer research is rich in mythology research, myths also have a profound impact on other social sciences (Thompson: 2004)<sup>13</sup>.

Mead also looked at myth from a symbolic standpoint, demonstrating how symbols are endowed with meaning that influence social interaction. He highlighted people's behavior in everyday situations and expressed mythology in narrative form in the framework of socio-historical structure and ideology (Mead: 1964)<sup>14</sup>. Market's overriding myth is that consumption is a terrific way to happiness and a fulfilled life. This myth, in the hands of free market, leads to environmental degradation, as well as an unhealthy and meaningless existence. This myth has evolved into a tremendous force for the actions of modern humans. Although various thinkers such as Blumer, Campbell, and Lévi-Strauss hold differing perspectives on the genesis of symbolism, but they agree on the point that mythology is embodied through human interaction with the symbolic.

In the contemporary world, on the one hand, we see the emphasis on the rational part of human beings while on the other hand; irrational market myths have become significant force for human behavior. We can understand this dichotomy in Max Weber's argument that modern bureaucratization and intellectualization contributed significantly to the disenchantment of the world. Weber argues that modern experience is split between rationalization and mythological mysticism (Weber: [1924] 1948)<sup>15</sup>. Inversion of modern disenchantment into one of monistic mythical enchantment is philosophically, environmentally, and academically irresponsible (Curry: 2012)<sup>16</sup>. The market remains firmly in charge of all myths about consumption and its rewards and consequences. Marketplace mythology has evolved into a comprehensive construct that includes the sacred, extraordinary, symbolic and transcendental. Similarly, in the early days of the cultural turn in consumer research, Levy shows a connection between consumption and myth: *"if we take the idea that myths are ways of organizing perceptions of realities, of indirectly expressing paradoxical human concerns, they have consumer relevance because these realities and concerns affect people's daily lives"* (Levy: 1981, 52)<sup>17</sup>.

In case of ignorance of the greater meaning behind the religious symbols which helps one to go beyond the narrow identity of ego, capitalist powers are utilizing these symbols for profit making. They are creating new versions of deities as per their needs and ultimately religious symbols become the tools for attaining their goals. Political parties are also using the religious identities for strengthening ego and the feeling of possession through the deep-rooted images of a particular religion. Consumerist mythology in the absence of greater meaning of life fails to satisfy human being. It results in the feeling of indifference, environment issues, lost sense of self and growth in narcissism. This condition is visible in the most of the societies in the contemporary world, most prominently in economically developed areas. Therefore, to regain the meaning of life, religion can become instrumental again, but in this globalized world religion cannot work in the narrow sense of religious identity rather it needs its universal form.

### **Relevance of Universal Religion**

Essentially, universal religion encompasses all the world religions as well as transcends all of them. As a way of elucidating the unity of all religions in the world, universal religion focuses on two important aspects. In the first place, we must respect each religion in the world, and in the second place, we must respect the diversity of religions in the world. Vivekananda stressed on these differences as he said, *“Islam for example, lays emphasis on universal brotherhood, Hinduism on spirituality, Christianity on self-purification for entering into the kingdom of God. It is difficult to compare these and, therefore, the tenants of universal religion would not be the common character of different religions”* (Kumar: 1978)<sup>18</sup>.

Vivekanand suggests that Man has been deeply rooted in religion since the time immemorial. It runs through his veins. It has been a major influence on man's behavior and way of thinking. Religion has played a central role in mankind's lives in many ways. Vivekananda, proposed a unique explanation for the concept of religion. In his view, religion is more than just doctrines and theories, it is not confined to sects and societies as well. In his opinion, religion is the realization of one's true nature. He claimed that man is already divine by nature. However, this divinity is hidden. Thus, realizing divinity is the essence of religion and the purpose of life (Vivekananda: 2006)<sup>19</sup>. In his book, Green analyzed the religious ideas of Vivekananda and Max Muller to show how they have reconciled religion in modern times with the help of Vedantic interpretation of reality (Green :2016)<sup>20</sup>.

Further, to attain peaceful coexistence within global society, he argues that the acceptance of true religion is essential. As he realized the nature of man, mankind has been looking beyond in search of its ultimate destiny or God throughout the history of the world. As a result, the entire world community expects a religion that can be accepted by all. One of the finest examples of grace in intellectual culture is Vivekananda's view on the universality of religion. Vivekananda understood *"religion"* to be synonymous with *"universalism"* (Medda: 2016)<sup>21</sup>. For Vivekananda, religion should be universal in spirit and it should be maintained. There was a time when religion was limited to priests, temples, churches, rituals, and dogmas, but this is not true religion. Religion should be free from these shackles in order to be true and universal. Religion is only true and living when it permeates our nature, our life, and our society (Gautam: 2012, 2)<sup>22</sup>. Thus, religion in its universal form loses the narrowness and dogmas attached to it which made it an enslaving forces. Universal religion becomes the vehicle to the emancipation and meaningful life in this time when consumerist mythology and market culture making shallow identities. Moreover, religion in its universal form doesn't promote communal intolerance rather it encompasses different religion as various forms of religion which is very important to live peacefully in the globalized era.

**Conclusion**

In our analysis we have seen that secularism in the hands of consumerism has not been able to give deeper meaning to life. Thus, the market forces have become more powerful to shape human behavior in contemporary society. Further, we also observe that despite various secular efforts from state, religion has reemerged as a sense of identity. It shows the failure and shallowness of secularism in everyday life and deeper need for religion in human psyche. Hence, it motivates us to look for a religious form that is not orthodox & ego-orientated and yet fulfills human need for expansion. With the help of following points, we can understand the need for universal religion in the contemporary era of consumerist culture. First, universal religion recognizes the search for the ultimate reality and eternal truth and satisfies human quest for spirituality. It further helps one to recognize all the three parts of a religion i.e., philosophy, mythology and rituals without emphasizing only one of them which on the hand broaden human thought not to be limited by the rituals and fight for them. On the other hand, it satisfies human emotional need for devotion & surrender that a mere philosophical system fails to satisfy. The understanding of universal religion highlights various religions as the partial expressions of one ultimate truth/ God without losing the sense of belonging to one's own religion. It makes the way for diversity of opinion and tolerance in the social sphere. Thoughts of universal religion by Vivekananda focused on the view that different religions are supplementary to one another not contradictory. It focuses on the spirit of a religion rather than their manifestation. It promotes the acceptance of other religions and opens the way for recognizing the welfare potential of religion in the secular age. It provides a way to meaningful alternative to the consumerist mythology of acquiring more and more products as means to attain happiness in life.

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