



**Tattva**

JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

# CONCEPT OF RELIGION IN WHITEHEAD AND BASAVESHWARA: – A COMPARISON

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## Abstract:

*It may seem anachronistic to compare 12<sup>th</sup> century saint and thinker Basaveshwara of Karnataka, India and the 20<sup>th</sup> century mathematical physicist and metaphysician of England, Whitehead. This topic is chosen for the striking similarities in the unending quest for true religion. According to Whitehead religion is "force of belief cleansing the inward parts of the soul." This aspect of religion is elaborately explained by Basaveshwara in the actual experience of the bhakta, who struggles with the distractions of the mind and body with a view to overcome them and be pitch-forked into the higher ranges of spiritual attainments, like lingasamarasya (moksa). Religion is an unquestioned factor in the life of mankind and its civilization, which exhibits four factors, namely, ritual, emotion, belief and truth of doctrine. Whitehead and Basaveshwara hold that religion, per se, is art and theory of the internal life of man.*

Men trapped by the sophistications and trivialities of the artificial life of comforts tend to explain away, distort and bury the true spirit of religion. The ethos of materialistic considerations has eclipsed the voice of religion in the life of man lost

in its trappings. Religion, says Whitehead, is not a research after comfort. It is not the pleasure of the dogma. As Whitehead says, "Religions commit suicide when they find their inspirations in their dogmas."<sup>1</sup> It is not a form of words as held by Ben Kimpel: "[...] an entire reappraisal of a linguistic analysis of religion which presumes that what is essential to religion can be reduced to language and that the meaning of such language is exhausted within the scope of principles of language – grammar and logic."<sup>2</sup> According to Whitehead, we have in religion a general force, which influences men in shaping their individual character as men. The force of our religious intuitions transforming the individual and the society is a permanent element in human nature.

For Whitehead and Basaveshwara "experience is primary". Basaveshwara says:

Devotion severed from experience  
Escapes our reach; Linga unrealized  
In Experience, escapes the joy  
Of consubstantial union;  
Prasada without experience confers  
No peace; by, nothing can be known  
Without experience. So, could you say,  
What need has one of Siva-Saranas  
If one has lodgment in oneself?  
O Kudala Sangama Lord, could it be said  
That your experience is no more  
Than word clashing with word,  
O Prabhu?<sup>3</sup>

It is becoming a mere decent formula for pleasing social manners. But in its historical perspective, religion exhibits four factors – ritual, emotion, belief and truth or doctrine. Depending upon the predominance of ritual and emotion Whitehead holds any religion is characterized as social or communal and inferior in so far as importance is attached to material benefits and externals of life. But man's age-old quest for the truth of religious experience has been motivated to search for the truly real religion per se. For both religions is a spiritual search without boundaries. According to

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<sup>1</sup> Whitehead, A. N, *Religion in the Making*, New York: Fordham University Press, 5<sup>th</sup> printing, 2007, 144.

<sup>2</sup> J.C.Feaver & W.Horosz, Editors, *Religion in Philosophical and Cultural Perspective*, New Delhi: East West Press, 1972, 241.

<sup>3</sup> Menezes, L M A & Angadi S M (Translators), *Vacanas of Basavanna*. Sirigere (Karnataka, India): Annana Balaga, 1967, 34, Appendices, 343.

Whitehead, in such a religion there is the predominance of the solitariness of human spirit where the individual is alone in facing himself and his God. Religion is concerned with "the awful ultimate fact, which is the human being, consciously alone with itself, for its own sake."<sup>4</sup>

Basaveshwara says: "Whatever you will you can attain; But you, Sir, must attain another thing likewise; You cannot get that which you are unless you have Lord Kudala Sangama's grace!" (Yenanadareyu Sadhisbahudu [...])<sup>5</sup> It is also called advanced or rational religion. The permanent significance of this religion is that it provides us with the know-how of character building.

Whitehead holds that unless we have already abandoned ourselves to an a priori doctrine of sensationalism and this sense-experience as the only definite avenue of communication with the external world, it is impossible to rule out the evidential force of religious intuitions, in so far as a complete existence (fact) is an interweaving of qualitative and quantitative factors. Value data is as much data as sense data. This is so because an influential school of positivist thinkers omits "aspects of the Universe as experienced, and of our modes of experiencing, which jointly lead to the more penetrating ways of understanding."<sup>6</sup> Religion is one fundamental mode of experiencing the world in its value aspect. Therefore we must recognize and respect the intimations of every variety of experience, including the minor transactions of daily life as giving evidence of facts. It is an illegitimate and unwarranted restriction on the sources of evidence governed by the assumption of a dogmatic criterion. Also, in Whitehead's view, religion cannot be reduced to a mere form of words. Accordingly religion "consists of a certain widespread direct apprehension of a character exemplified in the actual universe."<sup>7</sup> He says, "This intuition is not the discernment of a form of words, but of a type of character. It is characteristic of the learned minds to exalt words. Yet mothers can ponder many things in their hearts, which their lips cannot express. These many things, which are thus known, constitute the ultimate religious evidence, beyond which there is no appeal."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Whitehead, A. N, *Religion in the Making*, New York: Fordham University Press, 5<sup>th</sup> printing, 2007, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Menezes, L M A & Angadi S M (Translators), *Vacanas of Basavanna*, Sirigere (Karnataka, India): Annana Balaga, 1967, No.925.

<sup>6</sup> Whitehead, A. N, *Modes of Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 1956, 185.

<sup>7</sup> Whitehead, A. N, *Religion in the Making*, New York: Fordham University Press, 5<sup>th</sup> printing, 2007, 86.

<sup>8</sup> Whitehead, A. N, *Religion in the Making*, New York: Fordham University Press, 5<sup>th</sup> printing, 2007, 67.

At the base of our life and existence there is a sense of worth, importance or value. Religion is an inner concern and integrity in the achievement of dynamic perfections of values. Only the man of serene mind can realize the spiritual meaning of life. Honesty with oneself is the condition of spiritual integrity. Without this sense of value, life would relapse into the passivity of its lower types. If man is lured and possessed by that impulse towards the best he becomes undaunted in the face of incredible labours, which it imposes. The central concern and the focal point of religion is the individual's experience. In every occasion of man's existence there is a realization of worth in accordance with the unity of purpose, which the universe exhibits. It is the dynamic force of religious intuition that can maximize importance in every activity of his growing experience.

As Galloway puts it: "In individualizing religion we are at the same time universalizing it. For by individualizing is here meant construing religion as something inward and personally realized; and as men have the same spiritual nature they can partake of the same religious experience."<sup>9</sup> It is open to all irrespective of race, caste, and nation. Religions, which have claim to belief in one book, one prophet or founder or one ecclesiastical organization claiming loyalty to one head and infallibility and superiority over all other religions, never believe in the plurality of religions. It is open only to those who believe in the dogmatic creed and not open to general humanity. According to Whitehead religion is a matter of dynamic realization, internal to the individual in question. Such realization introduces a note of solitariness as the fundamental nature of religious experience. Accordingly Whitehead defines religion as "the art and theory of the internal life of man, so far as it depends on the man himself and on what is permanent in the nature of things; and again, religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness."<sup>10</sup> True religion must touch and spiritualize the awful ultimate fact, which the human being consciously alone with itself for its own sake. "Religion is force of belief cleansing the inward parts."<sup>11</sup> "For this reason the primary religious virtue is sincerity, a penetrating sincerity.... Your character is developed according to your faith. This is the primary religious truth from which no one can escape."<sup>12</sup> According to my understanding, this is the succinct account of religion as given by Whitehead.

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<sup>9</sup> Galloway, *The Philosophy of Religion*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1951, 183.

<sup>10</sup> Whitehead, A N, *Religion in the Making*, New York: Fordham University Press, 5<sup>th</sup> printing, 2007, 58.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Basaveshwara gives an elaborate exposition of this account of religion in a large number of sayings (vacanas) devoted to the cleansing and purifying the inward parts of the soul. Basaveshwara says:

Greed, lust, sloth, lies, Infirmary of sense, Roguery and fraud,  
Anger and meanness and untruth - Tear these away from off my  
tongue!  
Why? For they bar my way to thee. Therefore, erase all these  
And sanctify the fivefold sense, O Lord Kudala Sangama!"  
(Ashe Aamish, Tamas, Hushi Vishaya ...) <sup>13</sup>

The embryonic religious consciousness is born, according to Basaveshwara, when the soul turns its attention to x-ray the inward drama of the soul. The aspirant is expected to go into himself, become aware of the struggle of the spiritual with the physical and the sensual, and rises step by step into higher orders of religious experience, finally culminating in the *samarasa* experience or *aikyasthala*. He also never fails to preserve the balance between the internal and the external, the material and the spiritual life, always centering his attention on the fullest possibilities of man's existence. Here sincerity, loyalty, depth of devotional commitment are the heart and soul for the religious sense of the fulfillment of life.

In its heart-searching self-examination the raw individual, with the dawn of religious consciousness, comes to recognize its own helplessness in the face of inner temptations as tricky robbers, residing in the secret places of man's heart, are ever on the watch to invade and capture man's soul whenever it slips into unguarded moments and lack of firmness. Thus the soul becomes a victim of its own internal enemies and is sidetracked from its real goal. Consequently the soul comes to suffer *bhavaroga* – misplaced or disproportionate emphasis of attention to things of the so-called worldly pleasures and birth and death. As said earlier, the embryonic religious consciousness is born when the soul turns its attention to x-ray this inward drama of the soul. Of course it is beyond our imagination to conceive the infinite nuances of this struggling endeavor of the germ of the spiritual in man to have glimpses of the infinitude of things, which we can enjoy and be in possession at a spiritually higher level. Basaveshwara gives a vivid description of this internal life of man, each struggling his way through the internal forest of obstacles waylaying him. The progress in reaching the real goal is a matter for actualization or self-realization of man's highest spiritual possibility. It is not a matter of a garland of words in so far as we can only think in generalities and live in details. It is here that

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<sup>13</sup> Menezes, L M A & Angadi S M (Translators), *Vacanas of Basavanna*, Sirigere (Karnataka, India): Annana Balaga, 1967, No. 46.

Basaveshwara's description of religion as a living phenomenon manifests not as a bare skeleton but in all its full-blooded growth of flesh and other elements. It is a religious experience in all its nakedness – each individual facing his own struggle, becoming aware of his weaknesses and strengths and seeking help from right quarters in mastering the evils that beset him and come to possess the final good, the peace and harmony of life or *lingangasamarasya*.

The cleansing and purifying of the inward parts of the soul involves the recognition of an internal struggle between the forces of man's animal nature hijacking of his spiritual forces and the ideal possibilities luring him to heights of which he is capable. Thus, being in the thick of such struggles the aspirant can rise to realize the final goal of his life if only his nascent spiritual appetite and creativity can be touched to quickness by the lure of the ideal or the symbolic utterances or teachings of the mystic saints and the intuitive adventure is put on the verge of a forward thrust of effort to undertake a voyage towards higher perfections of spiritual greatness. The diligent aspirant is always aware of the disgusting but avoidable inclinations, temptations, evil thoughts, secret desires for such illegitimate things which one ought to be ashamed of! He confesses his wrongful mistaken decisions, which are fatally tragic in so far as he is thwarted from his true goal of immortal life in God. As soon as Basaveshwara, the religious aspirant, awakens to his present plight he feels helplessness in overcoming the devilish designs of evil impulses and comes to confess his faults in the presence of God by calling in the aid of God's guidance and strength.

In all this, Basaveshwara's concept of religion invokes a critical heart-searching self-examination of the inner and outer life, mind and heart, so as to be capable of spying out internal enemies hiding in secrecy far below the gaze of conscious attention and restore the straight-forward innocence of visceral, intellectual and spiritual feelings and their commitment to open out into the greatness and union with God.

Basaveshwara depicts religion as the saga of the human spirit in its epic endeavor to lift humanity from the abyss of raw passions of its animal nature, in each individual, into the heights of spiritual experience, which each man is capable of. This religion is the spirit's hymn of battle and victory as it discovers and climbs to planes of spiritual experiences ordinarily inaccessible to the raw individual animal man. Basaveshwara is the living embodiment of this firsthand religion. He dived deep into the labyrinthine layers of internal or spiritual life of man with a measure of intimacy proper to his own nature and profession or *kayaka*. This inward grace expresses itself in the external conduct of relating to others. Basaveshwara expresses it as follows:

What sort of religion can it be?  
Without compassion?  
Compassion needs must be  
Towards all living things;  
Compassion is the root  
Of all religious faiths: Lord Kudala Sanga does not care  
For what is not like this."<sup>14</sup>

This corresponds to Whitehead's "religion as world loyalty," as the second characteristic.

This conception of religion means a sense of fulfillment ever shifting its vision from peak spiritual experiences to peaks beyond which block our vision, in terms of actual self-realization in and through the *sarana's* (aspirant's) *kayakas*. This is the meaning of the religious utterance (sayings) of the self-observing intuition of Basaveshwara:

This mortal world is but the Makers mint;  
Those who earn merit here, earn also there,  
And those who earn not here; earn neither there;  
O Kudala Sangama Lord!"<sup>15</sup>

This concept of religion is an answer to the question: what in the way of spiritual value can be the achievement of each individual's life or existence? In it the ideal aim of life is an ever-widening and ever-deepening spiritual consciousness of infinitude of ideal ends as ever-present possibilities realizable in the self-realization of existence. It gives us a spiritual technology for the self-development of mankind in general and every individual in particular. Basaveshwara says:

The man who slays is a pariah  
The man who eats the carrion is a low-caste person  
Where is the caste here – where?  
Our Kudala Sanga's Sarana  
Who loves all living things,  
He is the well-born one!"<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Menezes, L M A & Angadi S M (Translators), *Vacanas of Basavanna*, Sirigere (Karnataka, India): Annana Balaga, 1967, No.247.

<sup>15</sup> Menezes, L M A & Angadi S M (Translators), *Vacanas of Basavanna*, Sirigere (Karnataka, India): Annana Balaga, 1967, No.155.

<sup>16</sup> Menezes, L M A & Angadi S M (Translators), *Vacanas of Basavanna*, Sirigere (Karnataka, India): Annana Balaga, 1967, No.590.

Man should spy out external and internal enemies – the dark forces symbolized as lust, anger, infatuation, etc. They hide in secrecy in him, within and without himself, and shoot deadly arrows at him and mar his self-development.

The infinite nuances cannot easily be traced unless the aspirants have allowed themselves to become fit to receive them through cleansing and developing the inner life. It is difficult if not impossible to bring to our minds the most complex many-sidedness of the self-expression of Basaveshwara's concept of religion itself. It is a concretely lived and living experience to be had personally. This religion, as lived in the best of *saranas'* religious life, forces us to recognize the soul's wrestle in the struggle to conquer the forces of evil obstacles all along the path of spiritual progress by calling in the aid and strength of Godly forces of light and discipline. In this struggling effort of man, the contribution of every source, *saranas'* fellowship of inspiration and commitment to the fullest and highest possibilities of self-development must be recognized and given its due place in the final consummation, peace or dynamic perfection of self. Whitehead describes it as "[...] so the higher intellectual feelings are haunted by the vague insistence of another order, where there is no unrest, no travel, no shipwreck: 'there shall be no more sea'<sup>17</sup> "peace which passeth understanding"<sup>18</sup>

Having gained an insight into the machinations of waylaying internal and external forces and overcoming his helplessness appeals to God's grace and the community of saints or *saranas*. With such guidance he is enabled to see the internal life as it were under a glass case with transparent clarity. This is self-knowledge, which is not achievable ordinarily by the force of his own powers. Unless every cell of the religious aspirant's personality and endeavor – physical, aesthetic, moral, religious, philosophical – bubbles with this self-knowledge of what he is and what he can become, religion cannot rise to its highest potential or pinnacle of achievement. But continuous progress in this spiritual progress is difficult in so far as man's bodily and fickle tendencies of his mind relapse into old habits ("As a dog riding a palanquin, My mind, on seeing a thing, Reverts to its natural bent. A plague on't! It hunts for Sense! It does not let me, O my Lord, Remember Thee from day to day... O Lord Kudala Sangama, Have pity on me, so I may love Thy feet! Oh, grant me grace!" and "My life is like a dog. Licking a sword's sharp edge for ghee! My mind will not forsake the bother of this world! O Lord Kudala Sangama, Out of thy mercy, rid Me of this doggish life!" – Vacanas of Basavanna, 34 & 35). This is

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<sup>17</sup> *Process and Reality*, 516.

<sup>18</sup> Whitehead, A. N, *Religion in the Making*, New York: Fordham University Press, 5<sup>th</sup> printing, 2007, 97.



so because the mind is volatile and undependable. It rebels against any discipline and regulation. So every step in the forward progress is always haunted by a fatal slip imminent, as is a case while walking on a slippery stone submerged in water (*havasegallu*). This awareness tends to make him, in all the depths of humility, pray his God Kudala Sangama to take pity on him and be merciful in making him think and absorb in the feet of the God. The aspirant is convinced that the purity and intensity of his efforts and conduct would get a positive response from God so that God will endow all things. The lifeblood of this spiritual development is thorough sincerity in its inner and outer conduct and the development of pure character (V.B. 96). Once the aspirant takes up the path of religion he must hold tenaciously to it until the end in firm faith if the object of religion is to be achieved. Since here feelings of loving devotion ever rising to new level of freshness and harmony can lure God to show the devotee actively merciful in his response, as Basaveshwara says:

What sort of religion can it be  
Without compassion?  
Compassion needs must be  
Towards all living things;  
Compassion is the root  
Of all religious faiths:  
Lord Kudala Sangama does not care  
For what is not like this."<sup>19</sup>

Basaveshwara, in asking a rhetorical question, what sort of religion can it be without compassion? Implies that a truly real religion must have as its warp and woof, compassion, which is the very root of the religion. This conception of religion is a concrescent theory of religion in Whitehead and Basaveshwara, transcends particular religions. "This requires the common Dharma of human nature, which is to seek the eternal, not to place people under restrictive religious identities....Cultivation of Dharma ...means developing awareness that is clear enough to perceive things as they are. If we emphasize Dharma rather than religion, there will be no more religious conflicts in the world."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Menezes, L M A & Angadi S M (Translators), *Vacanas of Basavanna*, Sirigere (Karnataka, India): Annana Balaga, 1967, No. 247.

<sup>20</sup> David Frawley, *Hinduism – Sanatana Dharma*, New Delhi: Voice of India, 1997, 51, 45.