

# RELIGIO - PERFECTUS AS THE ONLY PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS

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Philosophia Perennis (or perennial philosophy) is defined as one with qualities which assures its survival through time and change, and, therefore, by generalization, a permanently significant philosophy. It must be universal and inclusive, internally coherent, fruitful of new insights and applications, and reasoned so conclusively that attacks cannot refute, and written and presented so convincingly that reasonable minds cannot resist it. It offers a unity which relates the total plurality, in particular the theoretical and practical concerns of knowledge, wisdom, and piety. It must present a theory so comprehensive as to apply not only to the entire work of human reason but also fulfils the demands of his emotional, volitional and spiritual life. Though based on certain basic and simple concepts it must have the potential of supplying new visions not only to the natural and social sciences, but to every aspect of human life and endeavour. It aims to work out a universal metaphysics of eternal truths which, in Kantian terminology, leads man to an apodeictic certainty in all sphere of life. Theoretically it should be so complete and of such sufficient detail as to guide all future, generations of mankind to successful action in the world and in the life hereafter; if such a one exists.

In this context a glance at the history of human thought would reveal that almost all great world thinkers and philosophers from antiquity down to our own times have, in one form or the other, expressed commitment to this supreme ideal of the philosophia perennis by attempting finality in their philosophical task. The towering metaphysical systems of philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant and Hegel have all aimed to work for this ideal. By an exclusive reliance on the powers of reason they attempted to justify beliefs about the most universal and fundamental features of ultimate reality viz., truth, beauty and goodness, and explicated the ultimate meaning and purpose of all existence. All their endeavours testify that the human mind or reason has always aspired to transcend this world and moved towards an ultimate through a process of unification of the plurality of all

things. In their search for truth each, in his own way, has attempted to interpret the Universe, history and society in the light of this Absolute principle for the definitive resolution of man's problems. When, by employment of allegedly true principles, they have arrived at valuable conclusions, these conclusions have been looked on as belonging to the *philosophia perennis*. Thus the history of man's intellectual life is the history of his orientation towards this time transcendent absolute which has served as a regulative ideal to direct him in all spheres of his life.

A question may now be raised whether philosophers, from the times of Thales down to our own days, have actually succeeded in achieving this coveted ideal of the *philosophia perennis*. Unfortunately the history of man's philosophic endeavour is the history of his failure to give to the world a coherent, comprehensive and 'practical system of knowledge possessing the quality of unity, adequacy and time-transcendence. Almost each one of them failed to give answer to the existentialists' question of the why and wherefore of all things. Nor could they bring peace and repose to the world-weary soul of man. It is perhaps because of this reason that almost none of the leading world philosophers could make any significant impact on the society of his times nor could he win any large adherents to his views.

But this was not something quite unexpected and surprising. Because the limitations placed on the philosophers by virtue of the restricted horizon of their spatio-temporal existence, and the natural bounds of their knowledge, have served as the greatest stumbling block to any objective search for the *philosophia perennis* wherewith they could not only analyze the phenomenal world but could peep into noumena to bring order, peace and harmony to man's earthly existence. They could hardly present any comprehensive system of thought and action which could provide guidelines for practical morality and a coherent social order. The ultimate goal of the *philosophia perennis* to bring meaning into things, or rather to reveal the meaning which underlies all things eluded their grasp. The existentialists' problems of man's radical insecurity, the problems of life and death, man's redemption and eternal felicity, remained unresolved at their hands. No wonder, therefore, the philosophers having failed in their prime pursuit to lay bare the fundamental ontological structure of all things, of late, adopted the role of a philologist whose sole concern is clarification of the meaning of terms and

propositions, and dissipation of linguistic confusions. The original status of the philosopher as the spectator of all times and existence, for which Socrates and Plato laboured all their life, thus suffered a serious setback.

But it was bound to happen like that, for the simple reason that no man including the philosopher can ever claim to be an external spectator of all times and existence. Philosophers do not think in a void. They too are the outcome of their own milieu and an integral part of the life of the community in which they live. Each one of them thinks within the context of a definite historical situation. He is only the interpreter of the time and place in which he lives, and his thought an expression of the scientific, moral, religious and social outlook of his age. Even his private life and personality exercises a potential influence on his philosophy. He projects his own nature into it and fashions reality after his own temperament. Each of these philosophers tackled his subject matter from his particular angle and made up his frame of reference accordingly. According to Bergson a true philosopher says only one thing in his lifetime, because he enjoys one point of contact with the real. Whatever variegation and richness a philosophic mind may possess, however extensive its interests and research, there is ultimately one cardinal insight that it achieves, one decisive illumination on which everything turns and which is the philosopher's claim to truth.

As a matter of fact to view things from a particular vantage point is a general feature of our lives. The ancient Greek philosophers were, no doubt, courageous seekers after truth, ready to follow an argument to its logical conclusions wherever they might lead, but their complete faith in order, beauty and harmony largely determined the direction of their thinking. Values for them were likely to determine facts. Only if the individual himself were outside existence then alone he could perhaps find an absolute point of view. The impossibility of any metaphysical system is entirely on account of our immersion in existence, and due to this immersion we may be confusing our own conditioned point of view with the transcendental Infinite. The root of the trouble is that we have here entered into a non-sensuous realm where we do not belong, and where in the nature of the case, truth is not to be attained by logic. "Both parties beat the air and fight with their own shadow, because they go beyond the limits of nature where there is nothing they can lay hold of with their dogmatically grasp". Thus any attempt to use

understanding in a transcendent way outside the bounds of sensibility or beyond our experience is doomed to futility, since in such a situation understanding would have no object and there would be nothing to understand.

But if we are interested in seeing things as they actually are we had to take a neutral stance, distance ourselves from all preconceptions and suspend all judgment.

One may here be tempted to believe that if the problems of ultimate reality and human existence transcend human faculties, would it not be better to confine ourselves to things not too high for us. However in view of the existentialist situation of man the questions themselves are very much real and are of vital concern to mankind. The human mind, at any rate, feels the urge to find an answer to them not simply for want of any intellectual satisfaction, but due to the practical exigencies of his given human situation. Were man purely an intellectual being, he would perhaps content himself with the fragments of knowledge which scientific research gathers together. But he is not merely an understanding but also a willing and feeling being. The questions of the ultimate destiny of man and the why and wherefore of all things always lurk within his soul.

Now, though man's own conscience and Nature do provide an intuitive evidence of a Supreme being as creator of this Universe, sheer examination of these phenomena cannot lead us to a knowledge of the transcendental Absolute, its nature and attributes, what He wills us to do, what is the ultimate destiny of man, and wherein lies man's eternal felicity. The Absolute may be self-revealing in Nature, and in man's conscience, but in none of these phenomena His intentions and purposes are overwhelmingly manifest and unmistakable. He has therefore willy-nilly to rely on the powers of his reason.

But man being a finite creature is obviously nothing in comparison to an Eternal and Infinite Being. To conceive of an Infinite, Transcendental and Eternal Being, one must have experienced a consciousness outside of time. But how can man comprehend by reason, which by its unaided effort, is unable to attain even the simplest knowledge of the natural world, the most incomprehensible mysteries of this Infinite Being. In the twelfth century al-

Ghazali demonstrated most remarkably the inconsistency of all philosophic views about the nature of ultimate reality. Kant also finds rationalism profoundly wrong in supposing that knowledge, if it has any content, can be deduced straightaway from the laws of logic and other self evident truths alone, and proves that any attempt to construct a metaphysical system is bound to dissolve into antinomies.

Such great philosophers as Parmenides, Plato and Leibniz have succumbed to this difficulty and fallen into contradictions. Kant emphasized on the universal and necessary and the architectonic which underlies his critique no doubt, supposes the ideal of a *philosophia perennis*. But as an honest and straightforward thinker he too professed complete ignorance when he came to discuss the nature of the noumenal world. As a consequence he could not work out any eschatology, nor could he speak with certainty about the ultimate nature and destiny of man. And lastly the existentialists have forcefully demonstrated that the Absolute of reason as enshrined in their philosophical systems can have no relevance to existence. That is a figment or dream of their own making; it is indeed a deed, empty idol that has nothing to do with a true God, a shadow deity that displaces the true God whom men usually fear and adore, and which alone is the foundain-source of the *philosophia perennis*.

Can the problem of human knowledge and existence be broached from a different angle is there any other avenue, over and above reason and intellect, for our knowledge of God and Ultimate Reality. We have to examine whether mysticism can offer a clue to the knowledge of God and. the understanding of human situation as claimed by the mystics. Does there exist in the human mind any direct faculty of religious knowledge which can form the foundation of a *philosophia perennis*, by which we are enabled to decide independently of any Revelation from God as to what is His true nature, and wherein lies the ultimate solution of man's situation. It is sometimes argued that knowledge of divine matters and ultimate truths is intuitive and immediate and the organ of communication with God is one which transcends the methods and processes of logic and grasps 'reality in its totality and true perspective. A characteristic common to all mysticism is the identification of the personal self with the transcendent reality. The mystic,

we are told, lives in the full light of the vision; what others dimly seek he knows with a knowledge which is sure, immediate and in its pristine form.

Now it is obvious that much wisdom is to be learnt from the mystic way of life, and it may be commended as a pious and dignified attitude towards life. The reality and power of mysticism, which alerts us to the presently unknown depths of human consciousness, cannot be doubted. The mystic may grasp vividly in a sudden flash of insight what is laboriously sought and dimly seen by lesser mortals. The sense of union, sacredness and ineffable peace characterize all mystic experience. This is the gift which the mystic receives after long and austere exercises aimed towards the purification of the soul.

Having said this much we can now examine the claims of mystic experience as a genuine source of knowledge of the Ultimate Reality. Unfortunately the mystic inspirations and experiences are too various, too uncertain, and sometimes too bizarre in content, to form ground for our knowledge of reality. Again the mystic emphasis on the rare moments of religious exaltation tore religion out of the fabric of every day life of man. We may grant that mystic experience is a unique experience and some men are either gifted or can acquire special aptitude or susceptibility for religious intuitions, but it would be suicidal to grant mystic experience an evidential status for its account of transcendental reality and its objective values. It can offer no solution to our problems of life and death import, and least of all, serve as basis for a *philosophia perennis*. Mystic experience, at its best, is coloured by the religious and cultural orientation of the individual mystic (who usually makes use of a vocabulary and imagery of his own particular tradition), and at its worst is the result of a pathological state of mind resulting in all sorts of aberrations and hallucinations. Being uncertain, available only to few and sporadic its claims cannot be checked in a way we usually check possible cases of illusory experiences, and there is hardly any criterion left between veridical and non-veridical experiences. Truth here is not a publicly verifiable property. Therefore, in the frantic search for truth the individual has still to be assisted by some other source of knowledge which may provide him with a criterion of certitude. Without such a criterion he may legitimately entertain grave doubts with regard to any experience or activity of life. And among these faculties, reason has to remain as one of the most important universal

factor. Devoid of reason the individual's own inwardness and caprice become the lone focus of truth and all objective content tends to vanish, communication between man and man becomes impossible, and all social dimensions of life seem to be violently excluded. Reason being an unbiased search for truth, the demand for reason is the demand for coherence and consistency. The unthinking person is more vulnerable to uncertainties, confusion and mistake. Reason should therefore continue as the surest guide of our life in the phenomenal world. One can play false with reason only at his own peril.

We should however, be clear in our minds that reason is of two kinds (i) Scientific reason and (ii) Transcendental reason. Since the tools and methodology of scientific reason are analysis, observation, logical consistency inference and prediction, it is most suited in its application to the phenomenal world. Transcendental reason, on the other hand, is that faculty of the' apprehension of truth where the whole personality of man, not only his perceptual, intellectual, emotional and E., volitional, but also his entire spiritual faculties (which Pascal called the reason of the heart) are inextricably involved. It is a tool for our understanding of transcendental and noumenal realities. But it is the methodological requirement of the human mind that scientific reason and transcendental reason instead of being mutually exclusive should jointly work in the search for Truth. And though our scientific reason might have closed all doors leading towards the noumenal world at least the door to the phenomenal order is still wide open to us. And history is one of the most important feature of this phenomenal order. It is history which can perhaps provide a guide to the ultimate questions of human concern. It would therefore, be a grave omission, not to say a dereliction of duty, if nothing whatever is said about t the philosophical problems raised by so remarkable a claim. History should rather be regarded as the completion of philosophy, and philosophical speculation may be thought profitable only so far as it becomes a historical insight. The study of history, however, should not simply be devoted to the life of kings and their dynasties but should accord primacy to the analysis and comprehension of human ideals and institutions, and the undercurrents of the long enduring spiritual life of man. Once studied with this frame of mind we find in history a succession of wonderful men (generally known as the prophets) who delivered to mankind -,a message which we feel to be self - consistent,

involving lofty principles about God, His nature, and about the nature and destiny of man - a message which they declare to be derived not from their own reasoning or speculation but from the Infinite Himself speaking to them through the intermediary of creatures of celestial realm so intensely and so clearly that there could be no possibility of any, mistake about it. These great luminaries are clearly conscious of two distinct currents or forces working within them - the current of their personal feelings and thoughts at the human level, and the overmastering effulgence of divine revelation possessing their minds through the intermediaries of celestial realm in such a way that they become the mouthpiece and spokesmen of the Infinite - His character and attributes, His will and purpose. The revelations of these prophets removed the veil which due to the finitude of human intellect, as we have already seen, had precluded all possibility of any communication from a finite intelligence to an Infinite Mind. Therefore this initiative for communication from the Infinite towards the finite was not only logically conceivable but also essential which, instead of violating, augments and supplements the light of reason and supplies satisfaction and response to its urgent questions. It would have really been a tragedy if man's salvation depended on the knowledge of God and what He wills us to do, and truth of God would have been conditioned by the higher intellectual power of scholars and philosophical experts. It would therefore be the most urgent demand of reason to examine objectively the credentials of this group of men and the veracity of the messages that they convey. But once the veracity of a prophet and his Revelation has been firmly established, his teaching alone can serve as the superstructure of any viable system of philosophy or the *philosophia perennis*. This unbiased search of a perfect religion would really be a major human enterprise. However, not all claims to prophethood or revelation can be accepted as true because there have been true and false prophets as there have been true and false revelations in world history. Since subjective certainty can never become a criterion of the truth of any religion, the credential of all authorities to prophethood and his revelation should be critically examined.

We now propose to show that *religio-perfectus* (a perfect religion) alone can stand the rigours of the test of a *philosophia perennis* on the basis of our incontrovertible criteria of scientific and transcendental reason. A complete philosophy which goes beyond the traditional fields of knowledge



metaphysics, physics, ethics, political theory, to embrace all possible knowledge, and which can do it by a unitary and certain method of combining empirical content with logical order, can alone be presented by a perfect religion alone coming as it supposedly does from an Infinite source itself through a process of divine Revelation. In such a religion eternity and time come to a close contact, and there is no time/eternity antithesis. This ends all compartmentalization between the temporal and the eternal, the secular and the religions. Here the material world serves as a channel for communication with the spiritual. God and the world are not rivals, the world rather becomes a "vale for soul - making. In a perfect religion God should not be the God of soul but also of body, of science as well as of faith. Its ideal for the individual should not be a retreat from the world but to play a forceful moral part in it. Religious and moral behaviour forms a vital unity. Kierkegaard wrongly assumed that the religious and ethical move in different directions. Soren broke off his engagement with Regina Oslen because he felt the necessity of surrendering the life of the world in order to dedicate himself to the life divine. In the religio perfectus on the other hand, God wants the individual to come to Him by means of the Reginas He Himself has created, and not by means of any renunciation. Its religious ideal is no retreat from the world. The world according to it, is not a Maya or an illusion, and life is not a dream. Its laws are the universal laws of God and the whole world is filled with his glory.

If religion makes such impractical demands on our life and environment which the majority of mankind cannot stand, and feel a burden, there is something wrong with that religion itself. The laws of a true religion should be akin to the laws of nature which the human mind is prone to accept 'a priori'.

The religion-perfectus presents a coherent and comprehensive system pervading both the mundane and the transcendental with elaborate doctrines about God, man, nature, creation, redemption, in such a way that solves all the enigmas of the phenomenal and the noumenal existence without involving itself in the so called antinomies of reason. A true faith must be clear and satisfying and its metaphysical doctrines should teach that Truth and Reality are one and the same.

One great criterion of a religio - perfectus is that it should be a powerful motivating force for action. Religion should not only be an individual affair but a serious call to social duty. A community is, therefore, a must for the religious development of man. Whitehead's view that the essence of religion is what the individual does with his solitariness, entirely ignores this social and corporate dimension of religion. A perfect religion engenders in man what is noblest and best in him, leading him to a strengthening and cohesion of society at all levels. It should have an elaborate system of casuistry in which the right way of acting or serving is defined for every conceivable situation. It is a complete code and way of life where religious, political and social factors are bound together in an organic unity, capable of meeting all challenges of the advancing civilizations.

In the ethical realm a vital religion, such as we are talking about, is one which is a great standard-bearer of human freedom. For it is absurd to make anybody responsible for any act for which honestly he cannot assume any responsibility. Further, it tells us that not our overt actions but our motives and intentions are the axis of all moral life. Mankind is here considered as one community because they all owe allegiance to one Supreme Being. It demolishes all distinctions of caste, colour, creed or nationhood. Humanity being one spiritual brotherhood, the nation of patriotism is totally transformed in the religio perfectus.

In the spiritual sphere God is not treated as an elan vital or a blind force without knowledge and purpose. Unlike the Absolute of the philosophers who is simply a disinterested spectator of the drama of existence and who on occasions is simply introduced as a *deus ex machina* to save the existence of the physical world, a perfect religion envisages a direct relationship between man, and God who at every moment is concerned with the Supreme happiness of mankind. This divine human encounter provides man serenity, peace, courage and consolation in the face of grim realities of life.

Now, can there be a criterion to discover this religio - perfectus of this religio - perennis. It would not only be a travesty of the fundamental notion of God as the most just and veritable Being, but also disparaging to human reason, to suppose that God should either be conveying self-contradictory truths to mankind, or should arrange for the guidance of only a cross-section of humanity leaving the rest of mankind to grope in the dark. God, in order to

be just should leave no part of the world without his witness. Again, the need for guidance being a perennial one the institution of prophethood should go back to the very beginning of human life upon this earth.

This search of a religio - perfectus should not however be thought as a barren intellectual pursuit. In matters of such momentous import on which depends the eternal felicity or damnation of mankind we can fiddle with academic pastimes at our own peril. Consequently, once convinced of the truth of this religio-perfecus after a thorough, unbiased and objective examination, it would be the most urgent demand of reason that we should be committed to it with all our soul and heart.

We therefore, conclude, that religio - perfectus being that sole public criterion of knowledge and the only perennial body of eternal truths and wisdom \*which visualizes a complete unity of science, philosophy and revelation, where reason and faith are co-extensive, and where the theoretical and practical concerns of life are so resolved as to unite all peoples and all times in a universal vision, is the only philosophic perennis.