

# The Poet's Religion of Rabindranath Tagore

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I cannot write about Tagore without writing about what he has meant to me as a poet during the course of more than forty years of reading him. In the early 1970s he became for me a model and mentor, an example of the poet's life, one which resonated deeply with my own experience, especially in spiritual terms, which I eventually learned was taboo even to mention in the learned halls of American universities, where God was and is usually dead, and no one desiring intellectual respectability had better utter the slightest syllable otherwise. To write about Tagore also requires that I mention Robert Frost, for they came together in my mind, however incongruous it may seem, to represent a tradition of independent and spiritual search for truth and knowledge that only a poet of genuine calling can exemplify. Having read in high school in a world religion class *The World Bible*, a collection of religious scriptures from all the great faiths, including Hinduism, with extracts from the Upanishads, I was open to what Tagore had to teach. The American tradition that Robert Frost represented, of the poet going off on his own to find himself and write, spoke deeply to me, as did his words that "it might be necessary...to stay away from school or at least play hooky a good deal to season slowly out of doors." That had already been my life and experience. In Tagore's address in Calcutta regarding the Nobel Prize, I found essentially the idea of what I was doing though with Frost primarily in mind. Tagore's early years on his houseboat tending to his family's estate, left largely alone, as he relates, to reflect and develop as a poet, spoke deeply to me as did his poems in his book *Gitanjali*. Reading Tagore, Hafiz, and Rumi, living on an old farm in Oakland Township, Michigan, near where I had grown up in Rochester, I knew it was right to trust the Muse, the promptings of my heart that told me that I would not find what I needed as a poet in the university but only through independent struggle and search, by study of the masters of the art. Whether East or West, the poets I admired set the arduous example. I couldn't explain it to my family and friends, but I couldn't deny what I felt inside. Tagore helped give me the strength to follow the Man of my Heart.

It was in Tagore's *Reminiscences* that I found early on the confirmation of my own experience of transcendence. Writing of his "awakening" at a house rented by his brother on Sudder Street in Calcutta, Tagore relates that "a momentous revolution of some kind came about within me." Pacing the balcony at sunset, he experienced an overwhelming sense of the obliteration of self, filling him with "beauty and joy," "seeing the world in its own true aspect." Then for a second time he experienced it during sunrise, "all of a sudden a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side." I had had similar experiences of transcendence and joy, in my early twenties, once standing in a line

in a mundane supermarket, an ordinary setting, during which I was suddenly swept up into a feeling of love and unity with all the diverse people around me, housewives and children, people of various races and backgrounds, attending to the simple necessities of life. Love for all humanity rolled over me lifting me into a state of indescribable bliss. No one around me knew what I had just experienced but it changed my life forever. Not all the nihilism and cynicism of modernity could gainsay the authenticity of what I had been allowed to experience. Tagore further strengthened and fortified my trust and understanding in what I had been through, what it meant, helping me to find a way forward on my solitary journey.

To understand Tagore, it is necessary to make an effort, at least to some degree, to understand the social and family background that produced him. Tagore often acknowledged he was indebted to Rammohan Roy, often called the father of modern India, an early reformer of Hinduism in the late 18th and 19th centuries. As a young boy, Roy had had an excellent education in Arabic and Persian, along with study of Islam, and then Sanskrit and the traditional texts of the Upanishads, followed later by time in Tibet studying Buddhism, all of which led to his realizing the essential unity of the great religions, that they all taught the oneness of the Supreme Being and the unity of humanity, emphasizing basic moral and ethical virtue. He repeatedly created space for people of similar mind and persuasion to meet to discuss and worship together, among whom was Tagore's grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore. As early as 1823, Rammohan Roy was in communication with Christian Unitarian missionaries in Calcutta, frequently attending their services. Simplifying a complicated history, in 1830 he was the founder of the Brahma Sabha for the Worship of the One True God, a trust which increasingly became a reform movement in the next generation. Often alone in his struggle to help his fellow Brahmins and countrymen, Roy argued that the Upanishads had a highly monotheistic conception of deity and asserted that many innovations and corrupt teachings had crept into the everyday practice of Brahminism.

The next generation produced a gifted new leader in the person of Tagore's own father, Debendranath Tagore, a man noted for his genuine spiritual qualities, referred to as Maharshi or saint, and who eventually transformed Roy's group of mostly friends into the Brahma Samaj, making it a widespread national movement in 1843 with a number of houses of worship scattered around the country. The poet, Rabindranath Tagore, was born in 1861, at a time when the Brahma Samaj was transitioning partly to new leadership and was himself eventually appointed by his father as a secretary to the organization as a young man in 1884, leading to his writing about Rammohan Roy on a number of occasions. There occasionally continued to be contact and exchange between some Unitarians and members of the Brahma Samaj; one of its leaders visited the United States and spoke at Unitarian meetings in the 1880s. Rabindranath was born and raised under the close guidance of his father and this spiritual tradition suffused the Tagore home and family, instilling in him a lasting respect and love for the teachings of the Upanishads.

Recalling his father in his *Reminiscences*, which was written in 1912, Tagore mentions being awakened to recite Sanskrit prayers with him and visiting the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar, chanting with devotees songs of devotion on the island in the lake. He also relates singing songs in the streets with itinerant religious singers while visiting the Himalayas with his father in 1884. By 1910 he had already written many books in several genres and had spent much of the years since 1905 involved in public and political controversies. Since his wife's death in 1902, he had also lost his father and two of his children. Yet as a poet he had struggled and written his way through pain and suffering, writing many of the poems that were to become part of his book *Gitanjali*, which was to win him worldwide recognition through the Nobel Prize for Literature. At this point in his life, in 1910, he wrote an essay entitled "My Religion," a piece perhaps now relatively obscure in the West, judging by the fact that I had to have a copy taken out of storage to get my hands on it. The essay foreshadows the various collections that were to come that muse and meditate on the meaning of life in his unique blend of the teachings of the Upanishads, the Brahmo Samaj, Baul poets and other religious singers and seers of India, all of which undergird his poetry and literary writing. Right at the outset Tagore makes it clear that he is not talking about a doctrinal, organized religion of tight little creeds and dogmas, sweeping aside outward "religion":

Man possesses an extra awareness that is greater than his material sense—this is his manhood. It is this deep-abiding creative force which is his religion. So that in my language the word 'religion' has a profound meaning. The 'wateriness' of water is essentially its religion, in the spark of the flame lies the religion of fire. Likewise, Man's religion is his innermost truth.

In man—in every human being—truth abides in its universal form, and alongside it has also its individual aspect. Herein lies one's own special religion. It is here that man recognises the variedness of the universe. From the standpoint of creation this variedness is a valuable thing. That is why we are not endowed with a power that can totally destroy it (*A Tagore Testament*, 1953).

Most people regard a "communal term" as religion, "Christian," "Mohammedan," "Vaishnava," and so on, such boxes mistaken for the inner reality of the "universal form." In actuality, the "inner heart knows" a distinctive relationship "reigns supreme," giving a "special delight" or joy, which it alone experiences and expresses through its individual personality, both on the mundane and higher levels, far beyond ordinary "religion." As Tagore says, "Man's religion is his innermost truth." Exterior religion by definition has got it wrong. In his own way, to essentialize, admittedly, in a sense, Tagore struggled and wrote against the tide of orthodox Hinduism, its rites, rituals, and multiplicity of idols and gods. For Tagore, God was One, the Brahma of the Upanishads, the Supreme Person, the Infinite Being beyond all human conceptions, redolent of the mystics and seers of the ancient forest hermitages and Mughal India.

Focusing on a crucial part of all this, Tagore writes that if man's "achievement in the outer world" fails to coincide with "his inner truth," "it creates a rupture in his very existence." The "inner truth" must also find its place or articulation in the outer world. There must be an appropriate resonance. Man does not exist "only within himself." Insightfully, Tagore continues, "he also exists a great deal through others by the way he is known to them," "a vital necessity." The "inner awareness" of man must find expression and reflection in and through the social milieu, through connection with fellow human beings. The "true nature" of one's "own religion" does not constitute solipsism or narcissism, for it is not "totally confined within me." Its "creative force" finds outlets in "various ways," consciously and unconsciously, making its presence felt. This has been my life-long battle as a poet and writer, having in my early twenties, forty years ago, become a member of an outer religion that I thought was congruent with my inner religion. I have had to take a long journey, even to the moon, to realize the truth of what Tagore meant and to realize that in its most universal form faith transcends its own exterior self and definitions in favor of the inner one. Tagore often suggested the mystics in all the great traditions made such a journey.

In the years before writing "My Religion," Tagore had given it form in his poetry, as in this poem, translated by Tagore himself, from *Naivedya*, "Offering" (1901):

Far as I gaze at the depth of Thy immensity  
 I find no trace there of sorrow or death or separation.  
 Death assumes its aspect of terror  
 and sorrow its pain  
 only when, away from Thee,  
 I turn my face toward my own dark self.  
 Thou All Perfect,  
 everything abides at Thy feet  
 for all time.  
 The fear of loss only clings to me  
 with its ceaseless grief,  
 but the shame of my penury  
 and my life's burden  
 vanish in a moment  
 when I feel Thy presence  
 in the center of my being.

The speaker finds "inner truth" "in the center of my being," feeling "Thy presence" in the deepest recesses of the heart, where no traces of "sorrow or death or separation" can reach, the "All Perfect" resolving such travails and disruptions of one's "own dark self." A number of the poems in *Naivedya* appear in the English *Gitanjali* and significantly shape the perception of Tagore as a mystic poet and writer, although in his stories and other writing he has also had other social concerns, largely unknown to many readers in the

West. I believe it is fair to say, though, that the West did not create such an image of Tagore. It is clearly his own self-definition and conception of who and what he was and remains evinced in his books and writings. Always an immensely prolific writer, his many books after *Gitanjali* continue predominantly in this vein. The revisionist notion that the West created "Hinduism" is just as false when applied to Tagore.

In October of 1912, Tagore visited the United States where his son was completing a graduate degree in agriculture at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. While there for some months, Tagore was invited by Albert Vail, a Unitarian minister, to speak a few times at his church. As the scholar Krishna Kripalani states in his excellent biography of Tagore, he eventually wrote several lectures and "later delivered them at Harvard University and other places," publishing them in 1913 as *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*. In it Tagore mentions that he was "brought up in a family where texts of the Upanishads are used in daily worship" and that "Western readers will have the opportunity of coming into touch with the ancient spirit of India." He states all the great religious traditions "have to be judged not by the letter but by the spirit" and are of "living importance," not dead artifacts in a museum. In the ancient forest hermitages, India had evolved "the early ideal of strenuous self-realisation," putting all her emphasis on "the harmony that exists between the individual and the universe." Highlighting an important tenet and practice, Tagore states,

Thus the text of our everyday meditation is the Gayatri, a verse which is considered to be the epitome of all the Vedas. By its help we try to realise the essential unity of the world with the conscious soul of man; we learn to perceive the unity held together by the one Eternal Spirit, whose power creates the earth, the sky, and the stars, and at the same time irradiates our minds with the light of a consciousness that moves and exists in unbroken continuity with the outer world.

Krishna Kripalani explains that "the Gayatri remained his lifelong companion for Tagore and he continued to find in it a source of strength and joy long after he had discarded the sacred thread" (47). As a young boy Tagore had learnt and meditated on the Gayatri, and, judging by his own comments, it suffused his outlook and conception of life. While Tagore inevitably evolved with modern Indian culture away from the more rigid forms of Brahminism, as instanced by his relinquishing the sacred thread which he was entitled to wear by birth as a member of the Brahmin class, the integrity of his interior spiritual beliefs appear very consistent across the length of his lifetime. The rest of *Sadhana* traces the "realisation" of "the essential unity of the world with the conscious soul of man" through various levels of consciousness and in terms of action, beauty, and the infinite. Yet Tagore draws on not only the Upanishads in his discussion but also Buddhism and Christianity, and includes a surprisingly wide-ranging engagement with modern science for a writer of the time, East or West. Tagore's consciousness embraces much that is beyond the confines of traditional Brahminism, and however one might choose to define Sanatana Dharma, the "Eternal Law." He's clearly moving into ever-increasing

universality, even more than he may have realized.

I find particularly striking his reflections on dharma, defining it as “the ultimate purpose that is working in our self,” like a seed bearing a tree within. “Only when the tree begins to take shape do you come to see its dharma.” Elaborating, Tagore writes,

When we know the highest ideal of freedom [perhaps *mukti*] which a man has, we know his dharma, the essence of his nature, the real meaning of his self. At first sight it seems that man counts that as freedom by which he gets unbounded opportunities of self-gratification and self-aggrandisement. But surely this is not borne out by history. Our revelatory men have always been those who have lived the life of self-sacrifice. The higher nature in man always seeks for something which transcends itself and yet is its deepest truth; which claims all its sacrifice, yet makes this sacrifice its own recompense. This is man's dharma, man's religion, and man's self is the vessel which is to carry this sacrifice to the altar.

He further suggests about sacrifice, by analogy, that the lamp must give up its oil to produce its light, for the good of others, out of love, as Buddha had taught. Thereby, the lamp finds the purpose and meaning of its existence, through selfless service finding joy. Tagore expands on all this in terms of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*, exploring the fact that sacrifice is one of the great truths and mysteries of human existence. The personal sacrifice that Tagore must have constantly been called upon to accept in order to write the flood of works that he unrelentingly poured out must have been of almost inconceivable proportions. It may very well have been that only through daily prayer and meditation was it possible to find the necessary peace of mind, composure, and submission to carry on.

While Tagore wrote and delivered the chapters of *Sadhana* as sermons or addresses, the *Gitanjali* was in press in London, coming out in November of 1912.

Ever in my life have I sought thee with my songs. It was they who led me from door to door, and with them have I felt about me, searching and touching my world.

It was my songs that taught me all the lessons I ever learnt; they showed me secret paths, they brought before my sight many a star on the horizon of my heart.

They guided me all the daylong to the mysteries of the country of pleasure and pain, and, at last, to what palace gate have they brought me in the evening at the end of my journey?

The dharma of the poet manifests itself through his poems, their unfolding guidance taking him as by the hand, leading a little boy homeward, “searching and touching” his

world, carrying his sacrifice to the altar, through "pleasure and pain." Like a night watchman fortuitously chasing one to his beloved, they have brought him to an unknown "palace gate," wonder of wonders, joy of joys, "in the evening at the end of my journey." Dharma blossoms from the fullness of the tree. Such was the course of Tagore's own dharma, as that of many poets, East or West.

In *Creative Unity* in 1922, Tagore sets down in the introduction the terms of discussion as his basic synthesis of values drawn from the Upanishads. He finds unity within his own person of the "immense mass of multitude to a single point," all united in himself, whether "mental, physical, chemical." "The One in me knows the universe of the many." Setting the focus of the whole book, he states, "This One in me is creative" and expresses itself through endless forms of poetry, painting, and music, "endless variety" of life. The One "seeks itself in others." "The One is infinite," "the One is Love":

To give perfect expression to the One, the Infinite, through the harmony of the many; to the One, the Love, through the sacrifice of self, is the object alike of our individual life and our society.

This passage might very well be the most succinct expression Tagore ever made about his entire conception of what he saw himself seeking to accomplish as a human being and a poet and what should be the goal of society.

In the first chapter of *Creative Unity*, "The Poet's Religion," Tagore probes the connection between his thinking and the English Romantic poets William Wordsworth, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and others, speaking especially of Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn," finding that "truth reveals itself in beauty." True to his own youthful study of English literature, both in India and England, Tagore continues, "This is the poet's religion." Yet he excoriates,

Those who are habituated to the rigid framework of sectarian creeds will find such a religion as this too indefinite and elastic. No doubt it is so, but only because its ambition is not to shackle the Infinite and tame it for domestic use; but rather to help our consciousness to emancipate itself from materialism. It is as indefinite as the morning, and yet as luminous; it calls our thoughts, feelings, and actions into freedom, and feeds them with light. In the poet's religion we find no doctrine or injunction, but rather the attitude of our entire being towards a truth which is ever to be revealed in its own endless creation.

It would be a misreading to think of Tagore as merely repeating the Romantics. It is the expression of the Infinite through beauty that he emphasizes, through all the forms of existence. It is not that poets create their own religion, as the orthodox might decry, but find and experience the Infinite in the Book of Creation, realizing the Infinite is not ultimately an organization or an exterior form, but significantly an "attitude" about life.

Tagore himself feels how vague his “poet’s religion” may sound and attempts to defend it against charges of “too indefinite and elastic.” It could be argued that what he does is reminiscent of many Western poets, such as Emerson who chose to leave the Unitarian Church in 1832 “to make his own,” shortly after Rammohan Roy had extensively associated with Unitarians and had even published through their missionary press in Calcutta in the 1820s. East and West have had over a hundred years of such attempts, ending in failure and futility. Tagore’s own reputation in India has suffered a decline and diminution over the last three decades or more for precisely the same reason, while those filled with misplaced nostalgia and longing misread him seeking to enlist him in their desire for a return to an Ayodhya that never existed. In most ways Tagore’s sensibility was highly liberal and progressive. He wanted society to move forward, not backward. Such criticism is not uniquely applicable to Tagore but applies to modernity, East and West, for all have been drawn into its vortex. The traditional religions have long been in decline, and Tagore’s idealism was but one instance among many, though a particularly brilliant and beautiful variety, an exquisite Eastern blossom growing towards fullness.

Answering those of ordinary mind, against the universal carnage of World War I, Tagore at the end of the chapter in *Creative Unity* writes,

Men of great faith have always called us to wake up to great expectations, and the prudent have always laughed at them and said that these did not belong to reality. But the poet in man knows that reality is a creation, and human reality has to be called forth from its obscure depth by man’s faith which is creative. There was a day when the human reality was the brutal reality. That was the only capital we had with which to begin our career. But age after age there has come to us the call of faith, which said against all the evidence of fact: “You are more than you appear to be, more than your circumstances seem to warrant. You are to attain the impossible, you are immortal.” The unbelievers had laughed and tried to kill the faith. But faith grew stronger with the strength of martyrdom and at her bidding higher realities have been created over the strata of the lower. Has not a new age come to-day, borne by thunder-clouds, ushered in by a universal agony of suffering? Are we not waiting to-day for a great call of faith, which will say to us: “Come out of your present limitations. You are to attain the impossible, you are immortal.”

I would argue that, unlike “the poet’s religion” or Romanticism, East or West, Tagore expresses here a very deep insight into the creation of personal and social unity and order. It doesn’t just come out of thin air. It is a creation, not merely by poets, but by man, all of us, an act of faith against the “brutal reality” of our animal past and current situation, an affirmation of what is the deepest and most true in human nature, an “attitude” about what in fact makes us uniquely human, our consciousness, and its ineffable link with immortality and the infinite. Tagore sounds much of this clarion call



again in 1941, against the second collapse of the world into brutal horror, in “The Crisis in Civilization,” which I discuss further in my book *The Grove of the Eumenides: Essays on Literature, Criticism, and Culture*.

Rammohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore, the entire complicated movement from the Brahmo Sabha and Brahmo Samaj forward to Rabindranath was right to try to recover what was the most universal in the Upanishads and Sanskrit scriptures. The tempest of modernity, as in the West, with similar projects of recovery and renewal, resulted in a similar outcome, none of which gainsay the veracity of the underlying realities, which is why Tagore's appeal to a “new age come today” rings true to me, beyond even his own idealism, strikes a note that rises above the “brutal reality” of “wealth and power” to affirm “the call of faith,” of immortality, “ushered in by a universal agony of suffering,” again standing as he did just at the end of World War I. To this extent, I continue to believe Tagore forges forward into universality, not backwards into fantasy. For me, this is why Tagore is one of the most important global voices and examples, in literature and culture, along with Tolstoy, who worked on a highly parallel track seeking the universal, much more than Tagore perhaps ever understood, since Tolstoy's *Calendar of Wisdom*, a collection of excerpts drawing from all the great religions, never really found its way to an international readership and then was suppressed by the Soviets for decades until their demise.

After discussing the hermitages of the forest, the Upanishads, Vaishnava and Baul poetry, Rammohan Roy and Emperor Akbar, Tagore touches on what is for our time still the major problem and necessity confronting mankind:

In the present age, with its facility of communication, geographical barriers have almost lost their reality, and the great federation of men, which is waiting either to find its true scope or to break asunder in a final catastrophe, is not a meeting of individuals, but of various human races. Now the problem before us is of one single country, which is this earth, where the races as individuals must find both their freedom of self-expression and their bond of federation. Mankind must realise a unity, wider in range, deeper in sentiment, stronger in power than ever before. Now that the problem is large, we have to solve it on a bigger scale, to realise the God in man by a larger faith and to build the temple of our faith on a sure and world-wide basis.

Tagore's insightful 1916 *Nationalism*, lectures in the United States and Japan, laid much of the foundation of his thinking regarding international federation. Not only had World War I recently ended with the destruction of much of Europe, revealing its spiritual and moral bankruptcy, but Woodrow Wilson, to whom Tagore had unsuccessfully tried to dedicate the book, had failed in his attempt to have the United States join the League of Nations after creating it through the Treaty of Versailles. There may also be an allusion in this passage to Alfred Tennyson's own reference in his poem “Locksley Hall” to “the

Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.” Nevertheless, Tagore is right that “the problem before us is of one single country, which is the earth.” His call for mankind to achieve a higher unity than the nation state remains our quandary and our only hope subsequent to the even worse destruction of World War II, the Cold War, and the vastly devastating nuclear arsenal that is still endangering our planet. His almost instinctual call to “a bigger scale,” essentially global, “to realise the God in man by a larger faith” represents a compelling appeal, both when he wrote it, and now, basically ninety years later. The destabilizing forces in our own time are so complex and volatile, from terrorism to the environment, evoking visions of degradation and collapse on a massive scale, that I believe the world must not only remember and honor such voices as Tagore’s but actually follow them by truly working in a serious and concerted way to develop and expand the United Nations into a fully functioning, globally representative, democratic system that gives expression to the will of the peoples of planet earth beyond the lethal rivalries, worldwide economic crisis, international corporate greed, and extreme nationalism that now threatens our survival. Tagore demonstrates in this passage he was not a dreamy, out-of-touch poet wandering in the ancient forests of India but very much had his finger on the pulse of the modern patient and prescribed the essential, salutary medicine. Before it is too late, we human beings must choose our God-given unity as a species and ban together for our common welfare, safety, and dignity.

In 1927 Tagore wrote a poem, here in his own translation from *Poems* (1942), that perfectly expresses much of his thinking in *Creative Unity*:

The world today is wild with the delirium of hatred,  
 the conflicts are cruel and unceasing in anguish,  
 crooked are its paths, tangled its bonds of greed.  
 All creatures are crying for a new birth of thine,  
 O Thou of boundless life,  
 save them, rouse thine eternal voice of hope,  
 let Love’s lotus with its inexhaustible treasure of honey  
 open its petals in thy light.  
 O Serene, O Free,  
 in thine immeasurable mercy and goodness  
 wipe away all dark stains from the heart of this earth.

Thou giver of immortal gifts  
 give us the power of renunciation  
 and claim from us our pride.  
 In the splendor of a new sunrise of wisdom  
 let the blind gain their sight  
 and let life come to the souls that are dead.  
 O Serene, O Free,  
 in thine immeasurable mercy and goodness

wipe away all dark stains from the heart of this earth.

Man's heart is anguished with the fever of unrest,  
 with the poison of self-seeking,  
 with a thirst that knows no end.  
 Countries far and wide flaunt on their foreheads  
 the blood-red mark of hatred.  
 Touch them with thy right hand,  
 make them one in spirit,  
 bring harmony into their life,  
 bring rhythm of beauty.  
 O Serene, O Free,  
 in thine immeasurable mercy and goodness  
 wipe away all dark stains from the heart of this earth.

After the apocalypse of World War I and the utter obstinacy of the world community to learn anything from the experience, whether in Europe, the United States of America, or the East, as in China, Tagore accurately describes the world as “wild with the delirium of hatred.” Cruel conflicts follow one another, exploitation of the masses, tangled in “bonds of greed.” “All creatures” seem to cry out for “a new birth,” while the stanza turns into a prayer, addressing “O thou of boundless life,” “O Serene, O Free,” appealing for the cleansing and renovation of “the heart of this earth.” The speaker places his hope in “a new sunrise of wisdom,” the blind regaining “their sight.” Man is wracked with “the poison of self-seeking,” “countries far and wide” bear the marks of bloodlust. The poet-seer appeals to the Divine Being, on behalf of suffering humanity, to “make them one in spirit, bring harmony into their life,” seeking a way forward to build, as it were, “the temple of our faith on a sure and world-wide basis.”

In his book *The Religion of Man* in 1930, delivered as the Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College, Oxford, Tagore further meditates on the need of what he had called for in *Creative Unity*, “to realise the God in man in a larger faith.” Trying perhaps to spell out its details, Tagore writes that “in this idea of unity” man “realizes the eternal in his life” and “consciousness of this unity is spiritual, and our effort to be true to it is our religion.” Like the Bauls, Tagore has dispensed with all images, temples, and ceremonies, declaring in his songs “the divinity of man” expressing love for the Supreme Person. Tagore often quotes in his books, “*Advaitam* is *anandam*; the infinite One is Infinite Love.” Expanding on the Upanishads, he explains, “The truth that is infinite dwells in the ideal of unity which we find in the deeper relatedness. This truth of realization is not in space, it can only be realized in one's own inner spirit,” which is to say what all the great religions and religious teachers have said, that when one experiences the realization and presence of God, a dramatic change of consciousness and action takes place. Faith based on the exterior things of the earth falls short of the very nature of what's involved in worship of the Divine Presence.

Along with discussing in *The Religion of Man* Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, the Bhagavad Gita, and Taoism, Tagore gives the reader his own beautiful translation of the Gayatri: “Let me contemplate the adorable splendour of Him who created the earth, the air and the starry spheres, and sends the power of comprehension within our minds.” Perhaps analogous to the Jewish *Shema*, in its importance to the religious tradition of the Upanishads, Tagore writes that the Gayatri “produced a sense of serene exaltation in me,” which he daily meditated on, uniting “in one stream of creation my mind and the outer world.” He continues by conceding that “It is evident that my religion is a poet’s religion, and neither that of an orthodox man of piety nor that of a theologian,” that it “comes to me through the same unseen and trackless channel as does the inspiration of my songs. Somehow they were wedded to each other.” As with the Romantics, there is a mysterious source for Tagore’s sense of transcendence, though more grounded in what can appear to Westerners as fairly orthodox texts and traditions, yet the Bauls were not part of mainstream Brahmanism whatsoever, nor was the entire history of his family’s involvement with the Brahmo Samaj and what it represented. All of this provided Tagore with a rich experience and personal tradition of spiritual seeking beyond the confines of the more orthodox pathways of conventional Hinduism.

Tagore relates in *The Religion of Man* how all these strands in his biography and background culminated in his mystical experience, mentioned earlier, on Sudder Street, and his poem of 1883, “The Awakening.” Similarly, I found myself compelled to write my poem “Dawn of a New Day,” in my chapbook *Crow Hunting*, in an attempt to understand and express the nature of the experience. Tagore recounts how “I felt that I had found my religion at last, the religion of Man, in which the infinite became defined in humanity and came close to me so as to need my love and cooperation.” The same ardor often found expression in his recurring theme of “Jivan Devata, the Lord of my life”:

Thou who art the innermost Spirit of my being, art thou pleased,  
 Lord of my life? For I gave to thee my cup filled with all the pain and delight that  
 the crushed grapes of my heart had surrendered, I wove with the rhythm of  
 colours and songs the cover for thy bed,  
 and with the molten gold of my desires I fashioned playthings for thy passing  
 hours.  
 I know not why thou chocest me for thy partner,  
 Lord of my life!  
 Didst thou store my days and nights, my deeds and dreams for the alchemy of thy  
 art, and string in the chain of thy music my songs of autumn  
 and spring, and gather the flowers from my mature moments for thy  
 crown?

I see thine eyes gazing at the dark of my heart,

Lord of my life,

I wonder if my failures and wrongs are forgiven. For many were my days without service and nights of forgetfulness; futile were the flowers that faded in the shade not

offered to thee.

Often the tired strings of my lute slackened at the strain of thy tunes. And often at the ruin of wasted hours my desolate evenings were filled with tears.

But have my days come to their end at last,

Lord of my life,

while my arms round thee grow limp, my kisses losing their truth? Then break up the meeting of this languid day. Renew the old in me in fresh forms of delight; and let the wedding come once again in a new ceremony of life.

Tagore is the W. B. Yeats of India, the Irish poet he didn't really know much about after receiving the Nobel Prize. In 1912, when he had met Yeats in London, the latter was still absorbed with Irish Celtic myth, his *A Vision* and the poems it made possible lay years ahead of him. Equally opaque to Yeats was Tagore's own long journey on his way to London. They were each in the hands of their inner spirit more than either knew about the other. Also, neither Yeats's introduction to the *Gitanjali*, nor Tagore's 1912 essay on Yeats, goes much beyond generalities. Tagore's myth had already become as multifarious as what Yeats would eventually achieve. The Lord of Life was in control of the poets' religion, all the clearer in retrospect. Krishna Kripalani, who truly merits the title of scholar, approaches this understanding when he observes,

Though by birth a Brahmin and the son of a great Hindu reformer, Tagore's feeling for Hinduism was strictly eclectic and was more or less confined to his admiration of the philosophic wisdom of the *Upanishads* and the literary heritage of Sanskrit. For Brahminism as such, for its priestly authority and the tyranny of its regimented social organization, he had nothing but contempt (175-76).

"Jivan Devata," a theme on which Tagore wrote many variations, evokes his "poet's religion," "strictly eclectic," drawing loyally from the *Upanishads* and the broad mystic traditions that he found capable of sustaining his universal vision of spirituality. He found it preferable to the rigid convolutions of Brahminism and more conducive to a productive social order for India in the modern world, though it should be remembered late in life in an introduction to a collection of scriptures Tagore acknowledged about the *Upanishads* that "their emphasis was too intellectual, and did not sufficiently explore the approach to Reality through love and devotion [perhaps bhakti] (Krishna Dutta 30). His addresses on education, agriculture, and Indian history in the 1920s and '30s demonstrate that while

his literary muse could fly with the intoxicated mystics and Jivan Devata, yet his feet were firmly planted, down to earth, in the good rich soil of India, more so at times than Gandhi's bare feet.

Tagore's poetry is not all petitioning Jivan Devata. He does understand the pressure and arguments of modernity, observing in *The Religion of Man* that

We find in modern literature that something like a chuckle of an exultant disillusionment is becoming contagious, and the knights-errant of the cult of arson are abroad, setting fire to our time-honoured altars of worship, proclaiming that the images enshrined on them, even if beautiful, are made of mud. They say that it has been found out that the appearances in human idealism are deceptive, that the underlying mud is real. From such a point of view, the whole of creation may be said to be a gigantic deception, and the billions of revolving electric specks that have the appearance of "you" or "me" should be condemned as bearers of false evidence.

It's not that Tagore ignores modernity and just blithely sails off into mysticism out of mindless nostalgia. He understands the reasons for disillusionment and is himself disillusioned with Western civilization and its failure to live up to its highest claims, as articulated in Christianity, and which, as we've seen, he repeatedly stated after World War I. It's that Tagore believes the surest response is "the inborn criterion of the real," "the rose must be more satisfactory than its constituent gases," existing truly in a "perfect harmony" of its parts. He emphasizes "wholeness" over the clever ability to deconstruct. "The animal in the savage has been transferred into higher stages in the civilized man" by "a magical grouping" of the unruly and disillusioning materials of the human being, "curbing and stressing in proper places," creating "a unique value to our personality in all its completeness." This is Tagore's answer to the nihilism of modernity: "To keep alive our faith in the reality of the ideal perfection is the function of civilization." Rather than surrendering to the "realism" of modern literature, Tagore argues it contains a limited portion of human experience and truth. At their best, poetry, literature, and all the arts affirm the fullness of the human being, strengthening the foundation of civilization at the deepest level.

As with his thought on the rose, many of his writings reflect on the nature of science and its relation to religion and poetry. His thinking is often refreshing since it comes from a cultural viewpoint other than Christian and Western, both of which have done so much to muddy the waters during recent centuries. For instance, in *Sadhana* (1913) he writes, already arguing against a secular, dehumanizing science, what I would call Scientism, that the world is more than rocks and water and "the play of forces." The man of "spiritual vision" sees deeper into creation, appreciating the wholeness of "natural phenomenon," that the One manifests "its living presence" in nature and in the human being. Tagore's spirituality is often akin to that of more primordial religions, such as

American Indians, that God imbues nature with transcendence and oneness. "Science collects facts" and statistics, creating "mental pictures" which are not stable and are in fact "evanescent." The picture of the struggle for existence leaves out reciprocity, love for others, and the sacrifice of self, inspired by love, "the positive element in life," none of which gainsays the laws of science, for the laws are "not something apart from us." They are "our own." Tagore argues again that the "universal law is one with our own power." Through science "we come to know more of the laws of nature" and "tend to attain a universal body," "worldwide." Science expands "our physical strength" and abilities through locomotion, steam, electricity, and other forces. In an incredible statement, especially for 1913, he says, "there is no limit to our powers, for we are not outside the universal power which is the expression of universal law." Many of the maladies and limitations of human existence "are not absolute."

Returning to the flower analogy, Tagore details its many constituent parts and biological functions in leading to the fruit of a plant. Science argues a flower has no relation to "the heart of men," nor is the notion that it is the emblem of something else anything but imaginary. "Beauty," responds Tagore, "becomes its only qualification." Why do modern human beings choose to believe in a flower's practical nature and yet reject its human influence? The outer truth but not the inner? In *Sadhana*, the Upanishads provide his text: "Verily from the everlasting joy do all objects have their birth." There is a natural function and a spiritual one, the latter "like a messenger from the King," "from our great lover," "a message from the other shore":

Through our progress in science the wholeness of the world and our oneness with it is becoming clearer to our mind. When this perception of the perfection of unity is not merely intellectual, when it opens out our whole being into a luminous consciousness of the all, then it becomes a radiant joy, an overspreading love. Our spirit finds its larger self in the whole world, and is filled with an absolute certainty that it is immortal. It dies a hundred times in its enclosures of self; for separateness is doomed to die, it cannot be made eternal. But it never can die where it is one with the all, for there is its truth, its joy.

In *Personality*, another set of lectures delivered in the United States in 1916, several times at Unitarian Churches, Tagore further explains, "A flower is nothing when we analyse it, but it is positively a flower when we enjoy it." Again, his point highlights the wholeness of our personal experience of a flower and the joy it gives. I believe Tagore's emphasis on unity and the role of science in expanding man's awe before its discoveries and results are all the more insightful as we have progressed further along in our scientific advancement in understanding creation and the cosmos. Yet Tagore rightly criticized the West for being mainly concerned with the extension "outwards," to the neglect of "inner consciousness which is the field of fulfillment." His interest and dialogue with science runs throughout his books, unexpectedly resulting in a textbook, in 1937, *Our Universe*, surveying scientific knowledge from the world of atoms to the world of stars, asking Jivan

Devata, before “the plants, stars and the sun, / Are you not as real as they are?”

I cannot write about Tagore without reflecting on his visit to the Soviet Union in 1930. Tagore has often been criticized for a failure to appreciate the extent to which he was deceived and duped by Mussolini and then by the communist state. I have often shared that opinion and still do, but now think that it is fair to say in Tagore’s defense that such criticism also reflects a Cold War mentality that neglects to understand Tagore’s reasons for making the trip to the USSR, relating to bettering education and agriculture in India, and fails to listen carefully to the words he chooses while a guest in a foreign land. Tagore is much more critical of the “grievous mistakes” than he is often given credit for. His last interview with a reporter of the state newspaper *Izvestia* in Moscow reveals clearly how aware Tagore was of, as he diplomatically phrased it, “certain contradictions to the great mission which you have undertaken.” He was so candid that the interview was never published in *Izvestia* until after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, though it did appear at the time in England:

Are you doing your ideas a service by arousing in the minds of those under your training, anger, class hatred and revengefulness against those not sharing your ideal, against those whom you consider to be your enemies? ...does not humanity include those who do not agree with your aim? Just as you try to help the peasants who have other ideas than yours about religion, economics, and social life... should you not have the same mission to those other people who have other ideals than your own? ...There must be disagreement where minds are allowed to be free. If you have a mission which includes all humanity, you must, for the sake of that living humanity, acknowledge the existence of differences of opinion. ...Violence begets violence and blind stupidity. Freedom of mind is needed for the reception of truth; terror hopelessly kills it. ...for the sake of humanity I hope that you may never create a vicious force of violence which will go on weaving an interminable chain of violence and cruelty. Already you have inherited much of this legacy from the Tsarist regime. It is the worst legacy you possibly could have. ...Why not try to destroy this one also?

It is an interview that perhaps some people in India today who in desperation feel Marxism offers hope might kindly be encouraged to read and seriously reflect on. Too many Asian nations have already fallen into the abyss and gulag of Marxism, with uniformly traumatic and tragic results. How terrible for India if it were ever to happen to her, ignoring the voice of its greatest poet-seer. Nevertheless, given his description of the USSR in “The Crisis in Civilization,” it is a valid question to what extent Tagore influenced events in West Bengal and elsewhere, contributed to unfortunate developments.

It is difficult sometimes for people to understand why the West does not respond more to Tagore. He can, like Gandhi, be considered almost an infallible god. Some think



of him as universal, as, in a sense, I do, indeed, one of the most universal poets of the 20th Century. No poet in the West can compare with Tagore. American poets have come to pride themselves on how small they actually are, vying with one another for the dubious honor. The truth is that for Westerners, even some Asians, Tagore is not universal enough. For we need a whole new vision of what it means to be human, a new vision of life, its spiritual, which is to say, human, humane nature, *jen* in the Chinese meaning. Yet it is still possible, despite how bleak and nihilistic the local and international scene may appear, for we live in a time of spiritual decline when even a church with the history of the Unitarians announces that it has moved away from all forms of transcendence. It is certainly the best poets and writers, artists in all forms, like Tagore, who have the spiritual sensitivity to sense and detect and articulate the vision needed. Not politics, but *vision*. For man is his thought, as the Upanishads rightly understood and taught, as did Tagore. When our understanding of life becomes decadent, it is precisely the spiritual imagination, the most characteristically human capacity distinguishing us from the animals that can aid us in our plight, now global, for ourselves and our children, our children's children's children, all succeeding generations of this spinning planet earth. I have carefully traced and suggested how far more universal Tagore is than many poets in the West, well into the 20th Century, but ultimately that we all live still in a world when universality lies beyond, as it did for Tagore. Marking a tremendous stride in the right direction, Tagore has encouraged the world to follow him, remembering and honoring our spiritual heritage, beyond materialism, so blatantly bankrupt now all around the globe, toward the Divine Unity we so dearly need to recover, trusting the Transcendent One to guide us, as only He can, working through the lives of men and women, including His gift of science, into that Promised Time of peace and joy.

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