

**An exploration of the ideas of ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ in
Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Religion of Man* and *Gitanjali***

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Abstract

The main functions of religions are often undermined in today's mainstream discourse. It falls under the shadow of epistemological questions of whether God is real, or met with violent intolerance just as it is used to further extremist ideologies. Either it is dismissed completely or is adhered to in the strictest of ways. What we fail to talk about is how religion serves as a platform for one to realise one's faith, while nurturing a system of universally moral values and providing a kind of guidance. This dissertation aims to explore and re-examine Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of religion as it developed consciously through *The Religion of Man* and *Gitanjali*. I aim to show how Tagore's "poet's religion" is universal, and can be made relevant in today's world as a way of understanding faith. Tagore's exploration of faith runs through the notions of reason, love and deed. Tagore's philosophy allows for inner questioning and doubt as opposed to blind adherence, encourages forming meaningful relationships with an underlying love for oneself and others, and motivates one to immerse in meaningful work to understand both life and death. His humanism and mysticism complement each other in creating a religious awareness that can be felt by anyone who is willing to listen.

Introduction

In my paper, I aim to explore the concepts of religion and faith through in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore. I will primarily focus on the English version of *Gitanjali*, and *The Religion of Man*, exploring the idea of a universally accessible and inclusive understanding of faith. Tagore's notions of religion, and its expression through his poetry, speaks of an inner God present within us all and connected to all through life and consciousness. His is a "poet's religion", as he states in *Religion of Man*, which is realised through one's relationship with other human beings, nature and one's own art. Tagore's relationship with God is multifaceted; it can be as devotional as a creation to its creator, as nurturing as a mother to her child, and as intimate as lovers. His expression of faith also ties together the hope for human progress and perfection under the umbrella of universal virtues, while emphasising on the integrity of one's work and art as a way to show devotion.

The theme of faith runs along, quite deeply, through all of Tagore's works. It is therefore impossible to truly go into a comprehensive reading of all his works to identify and analyse every aspect of this theme. However, though his works vary in shapes and sizes, there are specific elements to this theme that remain constant. By exploring the theme of faith in *The Religion of Man* and *Gitanjali*, I aim to show how understanding Tagore's philosophy allows one to rediscover faith in a time where religion falls under ideological scrutiny. It can help create a bridge that connects the individual to his faith, bypassing the rigidities of doctrine as ordained by institutionalised religions. This focuses on the intrinsic universal system of values we

live by as human beings, the underlying essence of all religions, rather than dividing and categorising by institutionalised ideas of divinity and faith. In this Introduction, I aim explore the personal and theoretical grounds of this thesis, discussing the role of religion and the individual's development of the consciousness of faith.

Much of Tagore's international acclaim was founded upon the basis of *Gitanjali*, which captured the hearts of English writers in 1913, and was soon translated in all major languages of the world. However, his humanist philosophy which permeated through all his works was gravely undercut due to the Western perspective that deemed him a mere mystic. Furthermore, the First World War, which broke out soon after *Gitanjali* had gained momentum, had drastically changed global sentiments. People were plagued with anxiety and despair, pulling away from traditionally romantic notions that Tagore exhibited. His philosophy on religion and his humanism was swept away with time and under the shadow of dominant Western figures under the eurocentric gaze. Tagore was well ahead of his time, and this is precisely why we should re-examine his works today and take from his words the ideas that are so necessary in today's time.

Throughout cultures and religions, the fundamental idea of God essentially exists in one's faith in a higher "power", be it through the praise of one god or many. This faith in something or someone greater than ourselves allows us to live our lives with meaning. This is not necessarily divinely ordained and absolute, rather a creation of hundreds of years of religious evolution of our minds. Religion, like culture, may, or will have to, adapt in order to stay relevant.

For ages, humanity has constantly contemplated the meaning of life. We plunge into consciousness at birth, in a physical entity that help us navigate through a world we never fully understand. One of the ways man has made sense of the existence of life and consciousness is through the concept of religion.

My earliest memories of what religion meant centres around stories my grandmother would tell me as a child. I was given seemingly fantastical accounts of prophets and their journeys; of Moses parting the Red Sea and Noah's ark full of animals. My Arabic tutor would also tell me similar stories as I half-heartedly learnt a language that was meant to make me a true Muslim. I learnt surahs which I was told would protect me from evil, even though I did not know what the words meant or what evil even was. I was told to not waste a single grain of rice lest each grain find me in the depths of hell to make me atone for not eating them. I can safely say the image remains with me to this day, and I always clean out my plate.

I grew up with the idea of God as Allah in my mind. It was instilled in my mind that there is an all-knowing ubiquitous entity that witnesses us all. He is everywhere. He has no beginning and no end. Even throughout my teenage years, I would find peace on a prayer mat, reciting three surahs I knew by heart but could not translate in my own language. I felt in my thoughts that I was slowly making a distinction between what I felt on the prayer mat, and what I was taught through texts and stories. The concept of religion is introduced to us from a very early age, especially in the context of present day Bangladesh. It becomes instilled in us through words regarded as truism. There is very little space for questions and doubt.

Stumbling into adulthood, I grew disinterested in the stories that held my imagination as a child. I also forgot the Arabic alphabets. What remained in me was an underlying and inexplicable feeling and awareness that even in the confines of my mind and my incommunicable anxieties, I was not alone. This was difficult to communicate in debates about religion; some argued vehemently that religion meant nothing, that there is no god and no absolute divine truth to life. Some argued with equal enthusiasm and an unfaltering belief in the holy texts about the existence of god and the afterlife. However, the essence of religions is overshadowed by epistemological queries about whether or not God exists. We fail to ask ourselves about the real purpose that all religions aim to serve.

With the growth of terrorism across the globe, the concept of religion is becoming associated with violence. What is more concerning is the growing number of individuals that fall prey to extremist religious ideologies and perpetrate violence in the name of their god. On the night of 1 July 2016, Dhaka was shaken by the attack at Holey Artisan Bakery, a restaurant situated in the diplomatic zone of the city. Aside from extra security measures, what followed was an air of suspicion. Strangers entering coffee shops would exchange suspicious stares between each other. Suddenly, it dawned upon us that these terrorists, who so brutally murdered innocent people, could be anyone. Anyone and everyone was suddenly under the microscope; who are these lost individuals succumbing to such extremely violent ideologies? More importantly, how do we save them?

The underlying message of all religions essentially remains the same, but through categorical differentiations, it is lost and/or distorted by the time it reaches the individual. The main message is of faith; a belief in a higher power or entity, and a system of values to guide the individual throughout his/her life. This is essentially what individuals, especially those who are lost, have actually lost sight of and so desperately seek to replace. Growing up in a religious family does not necessarily facilitate this; neither does the absolute rejection of religion itself.

When Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, declared the death of God and that we have killed him, he was not referring to a belief in an absolute God (120). The death of God represented the death of a concept, universal and moral, of a value system that human beings should ideally live by. Nietzsche suggested that a departure occurs from these two elements in religion due to the hollowness of ritual and dogma. With the age of enlightenment came the reign of reason, and with that the spiritual inexplicable aspect of faith was deemed irrational. It introduced the possibility of god no longer being a conclusive source of truth. The idea of morality experienced a shift from faith-based explanations of god to more rational investigative facts. Morality was so interlinked with the underlying moral themes of organised religion, that the defacement of one sect would also weaken the belief in its moral values. The loss of faith through the circumstance of association. This is not to say that organised religion, the institutions themselves, have lost the faith of its followers. The divisiveness of specific and powerful cultural, social, traditional factors have shaped masses of believers who believed in different images of god. While some placed their faith in

rigid and sure material norms and traditions which dictated the truth, others were separated by it. The rigidity of doctrine trumps inclusiveness.

Friedrich Max Müller makes this distinction in *The Introduction to the Science of Religion*:

“There, are thousands of people whose faith is such that it could move mountains, and who yet, if they were asked what religion really is, would remain silent, or would speak of outward tokens rather than of the inward nature, or of the faculty of faith.” (13)

According to Müller, the concept of religion can be understood in two very different ways:

When we speak of the Jewish, or the Christian, or the Hindu religion, we mean a body of doctrines handed down by tradition, or in canonical books, and containing All that constitutes the faith of Jew, Christian, or Hindu. (13)

The belief is undertaken by the individual by the influence of his surrounding, culture and upbringing, among various other factors. One believes in its law, order and the sound of certainty in crisp words and objects. Müller’s definition of the other sense of religion introduces the more intrinsic and indefinable element of faith:

If we say that it is religion which distinguishes man from the animal, we do not mean the Christian or Jewish religion; we do not mean any special religion; but we mean a mental faculty or disposition, which, independent of, nay in spite of sense and reason enables man to

apprehend the Infinite under different names, and under varying disguises. (14)

Faith, being an intangible presence in the human consciousness, is not so easily defined or measured. Though there are various cultural and social understandings of faith, it is important to explore the idea of how it comes to being in an individual's mind. According to James W Fowler, in his book *The Stages of Faith*, an individual undergoes six stages of developing the awareness of human faith. He argues that the individual, throughout his life, will form different notions of faith, consciously and unconsciously, depending on his/her age, surroundings, experiences, etc.

Stage 0 refers to the first stage of the individual's mind, till the age of two, identified as primal or undifferentiated faith. This is dependent on the child's early exposure to immediate surroundings. If the child experiences hostility, neglect, violence, or any kind of negative influences, he/she will develop a mentality of disbelief and wariness towards the world. This may be like a defense mechanism in the inner consciousness. The child may be too young to comprehend or even grasp at the meaning of divinity and the universe, but he/she will begin to construct a negative image of the world around. On the other hand, if the child is exposed to love and care, he/she will develop a more positive perception of the world, making it simpler to accept a more benevolent idea of the universe.

When a child is three to seven years of age, he/she will develop an "intuitive-projective" faith at stage 1. At this age, the child's mind is forming an understanding of his consciousness and unconscious through a relatively

underdeveloped and unconscious grasp of thought processes. He/she begins to create an understanding of religion through the images, stories and the people who he/she is exposed to. It is important to note here how religion acts as specific observable symbol for faith; it attaches a measurable understanding to the immeasurable notion of faith.

Stage 2 occurs when the child is in school and this understanding of faith is characterised as “mythic-literal”. At this stage, a child’s imagination is active and colourful, forming beliefs in literal and mythical representations of faith. With the exposure to religious stories and figures, the child forms an understanding of god, or gods, which is human-centric. The idea of god will be identified through human traits, tendencies and physicalities.

From the time an individual enters adolescence and till adulthood, faith can be identified as “synthetic-conventional” at stage 3. This is characterised through the presence of figures of authority and complying to them, and the incorporation of the inherited religion into one’s forming of identity. The fear of authority or law shapes how the individual addresses their faith. Conformity equals acceptance, while doubts and questions are naturally neglected.

Stage 4 entails when an individual reaches their mid-twenties and till their late thirties, and forms a “individuated-reflective” faith. This is when he/she is exposed to certain struggles and conflicts, experiencing a range of relatively negative emotions, like anger and confusion. This is driven by growing self-awareness, questioning one’s previously established beliefs, and becoming more receptive of the intricacies

associated with faith. This can also mean that the individual begins to subtly distinguish between the feeling of faith and the reason and law of religion.

Stage 5 exhibits “conjunctive” faith which sees a more substantial manner of differentiating between faith and symbolic traditions, norms and language of religious institutions. One begins to disassociate and negotiate with the conflicts that arises from reflecting on one’s beliefs.

The individual in his/her final stage, stage 6, may experience “universalising” faith. This is not as much a certainty as it is an assumed and ideal finality. In this stage, an individual will ideally come to terms with the differences in beliefs, having formed a universal understanding of faith.

Though these stages help us imagine a structure of how one negotiates with religion and faith, it can vary from person to person, depending heavily on factors that shape their lives, including the information one is exposed to. However, it goes to show how any individual, in the earlier stages in their lives, is so deeply influenced by their surroundings. The inheritance of one’s religious beliefs is dictated by the place in which one is born and raised and by the people around them who denote authority. It does not begin as a choice, but more of an arbitrarily determined aspect of one’s life. Faith, on the other hand, becomes realised as one’s cerebral faculties develop, and it occurs quite inherently from within. The “underlying ambition of religions” is an attempt to “locate the tenets of a good life, of a wise life, of a kind life”, while realising that “human life is quite difficult” and that we “need a lot of assistance”

(Botton). Thus, by understanding the purpose of religions and an individual's coming of faith, one can begin to explore Tagore's "poet's religion".

Chapter 1: Tagore's religious experience through *The Religion of Man*

In this chapter, I will analyse Tagore's philosophy of religion in the book *The Religion of Man*, which comprises of the Hibbert Lectures he delivered at Manchester College in 1930. Edited by Tagore himself, the book allows one to explore the conscious account of his spiritual journey through reason and faith.

He claims that the book had been developing in his thoughts and emotions as a "religious experience", rather than "merely as a philosophical subject"; and has consistently manifested throughout his works, carrying "an almost continuous trace of the history of growth" that was "linked by a unity of inspiration." (Tagore 7) This inspiration he speaks of, he says, "remain unrevealed" to him. One can interpret the unrevealed description of his motivation as an example of the undefinable nature of faith which he connects to. Tagore's faith is in feeling and expressing, not defining. This is revealed in a poem in *Gitanjali*:

They come and ask me, "Who is he?"

I know not how to answer them. I say.

"Indeed, I cannot tell. (253)

Tagore explores his concept of faith through these lectures as a "religious experience". If he approached this as a philosophical subject, perhaps there would exist a sense of a detachment that would distance itself from feeling. A true

exploration of faith entails honest reflection, and a deep-rooted understanding of oneself.

On 14 July 1930, Tagore, in conversation with Albert Einstein, made a distinction between religion and science. According to Tagore, science deals with the “impersonal human world of Truths” which religion “realizes” and “links” with our “deeper” human needs. Such truths remain universally significant, and religion “applies values” to those truths (22).

Tagore’s spirituality is not detached from the real world. It takes into account a scientific perception of life, and extends with it the indefinable element of faith and the need for religion. In his reflections of his conversation with Einstein, he states that his idea of religion serves the function of bringing “the individual into harmony in reason, in love, in deed, with the Supreme Man, the Universal being” (19). In reason, implies that one, through inner questioning and gaining knowledge, will seek truth in the path of religion. In love, through human relationship, one will find goodness and beauty. In deed, through one’s work in life, one finds a way to contribute to the world around them in a positive way. This notion of religion essentially emphasises on the importance of reason, love and deed.

In Kaiser Haq’s essay, titled ‘*Tagore’s Humanism: A Philosophical Quest*’, he explores some of the criticism Tagore faces for his use of language and his image as a mystic. These criticisms surround the abstract nature of how Tagore addresses spirituality. Haq addresses Bertrand Russel’s view that Tagore’s “talk about the infinite is vague nonsense” (51). Tagore’s words on faith and religion may border on

vagueness with words like “Supreme Being” and “Universal being”, and Haq further mentions that Tagore “often seems to live happily beyond the bounds of common sense” (53).

Perhaps this can be better understood by analysing WB Yeats’ reception of Tagore’s poetry. Upon meeting Tagore for the first time in 1913, the Irish poet met his works with praises. Tagore had “fired the imagination of the western world” and fit into the western ideal of “all stereotypes oriental” that embodied “Eastern spiritual guidance” (Sen 20). Starting from Tagore’s physical appearance, with his beard and robes, to the nature of his poetry which was “religious and devotional” with the “ability to read beyond national and class distinctions”, he had fallen into the stereotype that has continually been romanticized in British colonial perspectives on Eastern philosophical ideologies (Sen 21).

Yeats’ obsession with Tagore would ultimately wear out. What began as a fascination over the mystical element of Tagore and the notion that he embodied where “poetry and religion were the same thing”, would soon turn into distaste. Yeats began to dislike the “vagueness of such references” and that he found “an absence of tragedy in Indian poetry” (Sen 22).

Mustafa Zaman Abbasi, in his book *Kazi Nazrul Islam Man and Poet*, writes that this vein of mysticism running through Tagore’s writings is an “integral part of Bengali psyche” (262). Tagore, consciously or unconsciously, had taken inspiration from Lalon Shah, the Bengali Baul saint who exhibited the same “age old Vedic hymns” and “the monotheistic Sufi thoughts which pervaded” both the poetry of

Tagore and Lalou; giving the Bengali “a fresh breeze of God consciousness” (251).

This same mysticism also ran through Kazi Nazrul Islam, who had his “spiritual aspirations in all his rebellious emotions” (272). Nazrul had also “blended his mode of thinking into mysticism”, in an effort to “make sense of the mystery in their devotional or spiritual songs” (273).

Tagore’s image in the Western eye as the stereotypical Eastern mystic gravely undercuts his actual message. His understandings and expressions of faith permeated throughout all his works, from his songs, poems, novels, art and plays, as a solid groundwork of inspiration. He was an “intellectual polymath” who pushed “astute political and cultural criticism” concerning caste politics in India fueled by the “problematic intermingling of religion and politics” (Sen 22). Tagore actively practiced what he preached without actually ever preaching. Once again, it was all a religious experience for him, not an abstract philosophical subject. He did not simply entertain his “spiritual outpourings”, but took them “seriously” (Haq 52).

Tagore also confesses that his is a “poet’s religion” (91). This is important to note because he does not intend to preach, and accepts his views as his own. Haq describes this as “undogmatic” and “fluid”. Haq also stresses the importance of two aspects: mysticism and humanism. He explains that humanism has two meanings. The first refers to history, and the re-examining of Greek and Roman ideas during the Renaissance, from which rose the “modern concepts of human freedom, religious tolerance, naturalism, etc.” (Haq 55).

The second meaning, according to the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, branches out to contemporary variants such as “communism, pragmatism, personalism and existentialism”. Personalism is what runs parallel with Tagore’s notion of God. Haq states the definition of personalism as defined by the *Dictionary of Philosophy* as largely of “20th-century American origin”, that is “generally theistic in regarding God as the primary manifestation of personality” (Haq 56).

In his lectures, Tagore delves into how he has come to realise his faith and spirituality, by explaining his conceptual understanding of life and consciousness, his own influences, upbringing, and his moments of spiritual revelations. He admits that he grew up in an environment of “freedom from the dominance of any creed” that was made concrete through holy scripture and organised bodies of worship (90). He does not devalue any religion in his explanations, neither does he believe that his words should hold more weight than that of holy texts which have been venerated for years:

And, therefore, the man who questions me has every right to distrust my vision and reject my testimony. In such a case, the authority of some particular book venerated by a large number of men may have greater weight than the assertion of an individual, and therefore I never claim any right to preach. (90)

This also goes to show what an integral role doubt plays in one’s experience and exploration of religion. Tagore welcomes doubt because it is essential. Furthermore, he does not take it upon himself to preach. He devotes his energy into

exploring and expressing, as opposed to defining and imposing. Just as he denounces dogmatic religious forces of tradition, he does not take the liberty to preach.

Tagore first explores the conceptual basis of his beliefs. He sheds light on the notion of life and consciousness. He explains this on the basis of his understanding on the evolution of life and the emergence of humanity. From the joining of multicellular organisms to the complete manifestation of human beings, Tagore explains the “miracle of creation”, which evolved from the force of life that challenged “the ponderous enormity of things”. The idea of consciousness is defined and explored through the “multitude of cells” which were “bound together into a larger unit, not through aggregation, but through a marvelous quality of complex inter-relationship maintaining a perfect co-ordination of functions” (1).

Tagore’s notion of religion centers around our consciousness which transcends our physical presence in the world. With our capacity for rationality and imagination, our knowledge and understanding of reality evolves through time. The very notion of collective “progress” through civilizations stands testament to this constantly growing sense of awareness of ourselves (21). The plateau of knowledge on which humanity stands upon is an accumulation of hundreds of years of seeking knowledge. Thus our minds expand in collective unity with a greater consciousness. Furthermore, our power of perception defines the universe around us. Through our ability to think, feel, imagine and understand, we realise the universe in which we exist. The needs of humans have evolved beyond our hands just as our capacities of creating. The faculty of our minds allow us to imagine and create endless possibilities.

Although, biologically and physically, we are all composed as specifically structured entities, we present ourselves in full form. Furthermore, we have the mental faculty of imagination and ability of express. He delves into the structures of atoms, molecules and compounds, stressing that all minute particles together make up the complete living breathing picture of life. His analogy of a rose binds together the physical intricacies of nature, and the human perception and feeling. He explains that the rose is like “the human sentiment of goodness, or ideal of beauty, belongs to the realm of creation, in which all its rebellious elements are reconciled in a perfect harmony” (123). This implies that the elements of nature, biological and physical, manifests itself in the embodiment of beauty, a rose. As human beings, we perceive this rose as it is in its final physical manifestation of beauty, and find joy in it. Similarly, our perception of the people in our lives, like family and friends, is not confined to the awareness of their physical and biological structuring. This can be considered measurable knowledge, or truth. Through our interactions, we connect more deeply, even with first impressions, to their mental faculty; their ability of expression and love, and the beauty of it. Put in simpler terms, it echoes John Keats’ expression of beauty is truth and truth is beauty.

This idea of consciousness bases itself on the harmonious coming together of individual entities. This provides a solid biological ground for the manifestation of a human being. Furthermore, he explores the faculty of the mind; the ability of the mind as a perfected extension of a human being, distinguishing the human being as a creature different from animals in intellect and faith:

But what is most important of all is the fact that man has also attained its realisation in a more subtle body outside his physical system. He misses himself when isolated; he finds his own larger and truer self in wide human relationship. His multicellular body is born and it dies; his multi-personal humanity is immortal. In this ideal of unity he realizes the eternal in his life and the boundless in his love. The unity becomes not a mere subjective idea, but an energizing truth. Whatever name may be given to it, and whatever form it symbolizes, the consciousness of this unity is spiritual, and our effort to be true to it is our religion. (13)

In the above excerpt, one can identify a few key elements that serve as the underlying basis for most of Tagore's works. First, the importance of human relationship. This relationship is within the individual and beyond him. One's "larger" and "truer" self is founded through one's relationships with other people. It is also founded through this realisation of unity among all things; the "most significant way of realising the divine" is through "developing a perception of unity" with others based on the premise of "love" (Dubey 29). Secondly, the "multi-personal humanity", the sense and expression of self, is what transcends our physical entity and is "immortal". Our physical presence in the world is dated, confined by the eroding nature of time. However, our personality, in its expression through our work and in our relationships with others, is what survives the erosion of time; it creates an impact, through love, in big and small ways. This leads to this awareness being an "energizing truth"; a realisation of a reality that motivates the individual to pursue a path led by love and

the need to contribute to this unity. Tagore seamlessly ties this understanding with the indefinable idea of faith. It manifests in many ways and in many names and symbols, but the “effort” to find and remain in that path is religion.

Tagore underlines his belief in religion, or the common meaning among all religions, heavily influenced by the Baüls of Bengal:

I have mentioned in connection with my personal experience some songs which I had often heard from the wandering village singers, belonging to a popular sect of Bengal, called Baüls, who have no images, temples, scriptures, or ceremonials, who declare in their songs the divinity of Man, and express for him an intense feeling of love. Coming from men who are unsophisticated, living a simple life in obscurity, it gives us a clue to the inner meaning of all religions. For it suggests that these religions are never about a God of cosmic force, but rather about the God of human personality. (16)

The Baüls, who practice and live the ideals that transcendentalist writers and thinkers believe in, reject material religious traditions and norms, and express spirituality through art and in the everyday world. The Baüls were “drawn from the lower orders of both the Hindu and Muslim communities of Bengal” and led a “wandering minstrel’s existence” away from society (Haq 58). The Bauls greatly tied into his philosophy of exploring and realising religion through art. They tied in with his ideas of exploring the inner god, the combination of devotional art and music, and the rejection of rigid religious traditions. He advocates here for the realisation of faith

and spirituality through music and art. Music and art have the ability to liberate the individual and those around, through the expression of human imagination and the faculty of faith.

Furthermore, he emphasises on the human personality of God, an idea that ties in with personalism under the umbrella of humanism. One might argue that he may not have created the most rational basis for exploring the idea of spirituality, but often in the dialogue between the East and West, Tagore is painted as a mystic. The reasons behind this is initially rooted from the colonial standpoint which, by default, otherises and exoticises the East. As mentioned above, it goes above and beyond due to his use of language and his overall poetic perception. Furthermore, the original inspiration behind western transcendentalists have been Eastern religious ideologies. Thus Tagore's writings rang truer to it, due to his overall influences and upbringing. However, taking into account the elements of humanism and mysticism, Haq stresses:

Tagore's philosophical vision is very much in consonance with this. In talking of Tagore's "combined mysticism and humanism," therefore, we should not find any opposition between the two terms; rather, his mysticism is integral to his humanism. It is relevant here to mention Tagore's conception of the *jivan-debata* ("the god in an individual's life"). William Radice comments that "just as God governed and penetrated and harmonised Tagore's own varied creative activities. (56)

It is safe to say, then, that when reading Tagore's works, one may embrace both the mystic and humanist in him to fully comprehend his real message. Tagore's

“humanist credo” aligns with that of the “essential humanism of the Upanishads” (Dhar 148). His humanist philosophy was influenced greatly by the Upanishads, rooted in Vedantic philosophy; the fundamental philosophic notions of Hinduism. Tagore’s understanding of religion was deeply rooted in both Upanishadic concepts and the diverse entirety of the Indian culture as a whole. The “diversity” that was woven together with an “element of unity” which is integral in humanism, in “tolerance”, catholicity” and “liberalism” which rejects “regimentation and uniformity” (Dhar 148). Thus, in his activities, and not only in his creations of art, he was deeply motivated by such humanist values:

Inspired by his unflinching faith in liberal and humanistic principles, Tagore raised his voice against caste distinctions, threw his weight on the side of those who worked for the abolition of untouchability, advocated equality of the sexes and widow marriage. (Dhar 150)

This side of Tagore, which advocated for social justice, rejected narrow nationalistic sentiments, and worked towards a global humanist future, had been casually cast aside in the Western perception due to his “mysticism”. Though much of the credit he received by English writers were sincerely professed with a truthful appreciation for his art, it did not fully capture the true essence of Tagore which seeped into every other aspect in his life. In a broader sense, it is quite ironic. The very cultural diversity of Bengal that nurtured principles of tolerance and liberalism would be ousted by the value system that the British would enforce on the region; standards of heteronormative ideas that lacked the fluidity that Bengal had already maintained

for decades. In modern day, the idea of Bengal and India has dissipated into nations that are deemed underdeveloped in the eyes of the West. The irony lies in the fact that now the West preaches ideals of tolerance, liberalism and “forward-thinking” onto the East; ideals which were the original cultural building blocks of the region of Bengal.

Tagore was 18 when he felt his first spiritual epiphany which he reflects on in

Religion of Man:

...a sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time came to my life and passed away leaving in my memory a direct message of spiritual reality. One day while I stood watching at early dawn the sun sending out its rays from behind the trees, I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight, and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy. The invisible screen of the commonplace was removed from all things and all men, and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind and this is the definition of beauty. That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in the super-personal world of man. (91)

This revelation was not a hallucination; nor was he experiencing some otherworldly vision that spoke to him in words that unlocked the mystery of the universe. It was a feeling of revelation, of peace and unity. Most importantly, it was very down-to-earth, and thus, all the more accessible.

Sudhir Kakar, in his book *The Analyst and the Mystic: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Religion and Mysticism*, explains that this was a “mild” mystical experience. Haq explores this further:

This is what Kakar would call a “mild” mystical experience of “contact with a ‘sense of Beyond,” which many “completely normal people” have (35% of Americans in one study). Extreme mystical experiences - and the distinction is one of degree - are characterised by “visions and trances,” “expansion of the inner world,” “heightened intrapsychic and bodily sensations,” all-absorbing joy and the sense that the world has become transparent. (57)

Such spiritual experiences, therefore, are not entirely absurd or impossible occurrences. Tagore only expresses in his poetic language, and rationalises our experience in nature. One of the key reasons to why I have approached this topic for my thesis is because of my own “mild” epiphany in nature. Tagore’s account of his epiphany resounded with that of my own, at least some shade of it. Unlike his, mine was in the urban landscape, on a Dhaka roof when I was 17 as the *kaalboishakhi* clouds gathered overhead in dark grey swirls. Having gone through a particularly difficult morning, I had gone to my roof for some air. In doing so, I found myself lost as I stared at the clouds gathering and looked over the city before me. It was in that moment I felt that undefinable and immeasurable sense of peace and unity; as if a veil had lifted, I felt myself at one with all that I saw before me.

Tagore's spirituality is concretely yet fluidly based in nature; a very down-to-earth philosophy that gives one further validation in seeking connections with the world around us. It centers around the aspect of fluidity, and throughout his works, it vehemently defies rigid materialistic demands. It realises itself in the everyday world, and it is this everydayness that allows for its universality and accessibility. The underlying fire of Tagore's religious experience is love; it seeks what humans naturally seek and find fulfillment in. Thus, it is based on the unquantifiable goodness of love, truth and beauty.

One can bring into light Aristotle's golden mean, on the topic of virtue ethics, in connection with Tagore's philosophy. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle described his golden mean; the balance, the golden midway, between excess and deficiency. An excess or deficiency in any of the virtues, negates the virtue itself. Similarly, Tagore also aims to strike a balance. He speaks of "seekers of truth", and a "life of purity" but not "puritanism", a "simple life" but not a life of "self-mortification" (165).

It is evident he vouches for moderation; to enjoy life in all its glory but not give into excess. This philosophy "calls for right living, righteousness of conduct, catholicity of views and modicum of abstinence", but most importantly, "love" (Dubey 30). Tagore's philosophy includes that common element that exists within all religion; that underlying moral value system that guides the individual in his daily life. The element of faith functions as motivation behind the practice of such values. It ventures not into expectations of rewards in the afterlife, but fluidly places such motivations within the realm of the real world.

Chapter 2: The theme of faith in *Gitanjali*

In this chapter, I will explore how Rabindranath Tagore's understanding of religion plays out through *Gitanjali*. Tagore first published his collection of poems in 1910 in Bengali, which he later translated himself to English and published two years later. I will be reading the English version of the *Gitanjali* to explore how Tagore's philosophy, or religious experience, manifests in his work. I aim to explore some key elements through which the theme of faith plays out, and how his words carry forward the element of fluidity in his philosophy.

I decided to use *Gitanjali* as my primary text for analysis because the poems are specifically "song offerings" that are meant to be devotional. Furthermore, its international acclaim stands testament to the universality of Tagore's sentiments and expression and how it has appealed to a broader audience beyond geographical and cultural boundaries. *Gitanjali* also "bears traces" of Tagore's "human appeal for harmony and emancipation", his voice against "inequalities inherent in society", and one's "search for roots, identity and freedom", with "devotion" being the "prominent strand" running throughout (Saha 286).

However, it is important to note that even though Tagore himself has translated the poems of *Gitanjali*, the English translations do not align accurately to sentiments that ring truer in Bengali. Much of the subtlety and linguistic lyrical nuances of Bengali are impossible to translate to English because "every language has some irreducible cultural terms that do not transfer across linguistic boundaries" (Chakravarty 298). Many endearing and affectionate expressions in Bengali translate

less intimately in the English language. A distinct characteristic of Bengali is that it is blind to gender, and thus pronouns are often translated in gendered terms in English, taking away from its original fluidity when describing an entity that is often of no gender when described in Bengali. For example, in the 19th poem, Tagore refers to God as “thou” in his English translation. In his original Bengali version of the poem, he begins the poem with “*oh go moni*”; an expression reserved for a very specific and intimate space of interaction. It is quite impossible to find an English equivalent for such an affectionate term, which in Bengali is often used to lovingly address a child or someone extremely close. This intimate space between Tagore and God is dissolved through its translation in English, even though it is his own translation. He “expressed the name of the Absolute in many different ways; some of which are unique in Bengal” (Abbasi 251).

In W.B Yeats’ introduction to *Gitanjali*, he acknowledges that Tagore’s verses in its original Bengali version, as told by his Indian friends, are “full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention” (263). Similarly, May Sinclair compares between Western and Eastern subtleties; that “the East is subtler than the West, and as of all Eastern races the Bengali is the subtlest”, and that “the subtlety of feeling and of rhythm is the first quality that strikes you in the songs this Bengali poet” (662). It is important to note here that both Yeats’ and Sinclair’s words are an echo of how the West had exoticised Tagore by virtue of his Eastern origin and philosophy; those which satiated Western writers’ exoticised reverence of Eastern concepts of spirituality.

Compared to this, the reception of the *Gitanjali* in Bengal was quite underwhelming with only “4,000 buyers” as opposed to a “million copies” sold by Macmillan, the English publishing house, soon after Tagore won the Nobel Prize in 1913 (Saha 284). This is largely due to the fact that Tagore had already attained success and fame in Bengal. Many deemed that the *Gitanjali* paled in comparison to his previous vast body of work in “which he had the freedom to express in abundance and with no structural limitations” (Saha 281). *Gitanjali*, on the other hand, was more “precise in expression”, with “deeply intense” verses with “an intellectual density” that could not be always understood “even by the more discerning readers” (Saha 281). Furthermore, the tradition of devotional poetry and music was already strong and prominent in Bengal, and thus its “literary excellence” was undercut in a broader sense among Bengali readers (Saha 281). Prominent critics like Pramathanath Banshi dismissed *Gitanjali* for its overtones of escapism, where Tagore exhibited a “preoccupation with an ethereal passion that pines for sacred unknown” (Saha 282). Nihar Ranjan Ray appreciated it for its expression of separation and unity with God; the pain in such separation was, however, not resonant with people experiencing “hardship and uncertainties in the social, economic and political spheres” of the time (Saha 282).

In a letter addressed to his niece in 1913 about the English version of *Gitanjali*, Tagore confesses that he was not “able to imagine to this day how people came to like it so much”, and that he “cannot write English is such a patent fact”. He explains that his motive behind the translations was that he “simply felt an urge to recapture through

the medium of another language the feelings and sentiments which creates such a feast of joy within” (3).

Given these shortcomings that come with the difficulty of translating Bengali to English and the poet’s own insecurities over the grasp of a different language, *Gitanjali* still remains a universal expression of spirituality. It encompasses the depth and width of humanity and our struggle to find meaning. Tagore does so by exploring human relationships, romantic notions of nature, childhood and the everyday man, and the separation from and longing for God. While exploring these, he acknowledges human flaws, hoping for collective progress and perfection while upholding universal virtues. He emphasises on the importance of one’s work and art as a medium of devotion, as opposed to materialistic expressions as ordained by religious doctrines.

Tagore’s emphasis on human relationships when exploring his relationship with his God can be analysed through the manner in which he addresses his God. He uses a wide variation of terms from “master” and “king” to “friend” and “brother”. The “life force” he often ponders upon is expressed through both feminine and masculine personalities. Ultimately, this fluidity of reference stands testament to his multi-dimensional relationship to God; one that is as devotional as a creation is to one’s creator, as nurturing as a mother to her child, as equal as it is in friendship, and as intimate as the space between two lovers. In a poem in *Gitanjali*, the verses give off a tone of intimacy. It begins with:

I ask for a moment's indulgence to sit by thy side. The works
that I have in hand I will finish afterwards. (11)

The verses end as Tagore envisions himself sitting “face to face with thee”, his God. How he addresses his God here is how one might address a friend or a lover, anyone who is seen and felt as an equal, looking eye to eye in closeness. Here, God is in the quiet leisurely moments one shares with someone close to them. This kind of devotion is less of a duty and more of a supportive and necessary interaction amidst the work of daily life. In another poem, he writes:

If thou speakest not I will fill my heart
with thy silence and endure it. I will keep still and wait
like the night with starry vigil and its head bent low
with patience. (39)

It is important to make two observations here concerning the terms “thou” and “patience”. In the original Bengali verses, it begins with “*oh go moni*”, which, as I mentioned earlier, is a more endearing and affectionate term than what “thou” comes off in English. This affection coupled with the “patience” he speaks of may serve as evidence for the intimate dimension of his relationship with God. Tagore is patient and understanding of his God, as he would be to child, a friend, or even a lover. Similarly, he writes:

Art thou abroad in this stormy night on thy journey of love, my friend?
(47)

Where dost thou stand behind them all, my lover, hiding thyself in the
shadows? (41)

The devotional creation-creator relationship plays out through many of the poems where his servitude towards his God is more explicit; using more conventional terms like “lord” or referring to God as a king:

Time is endless in thy hands, my lord. (213)

You came down from your throne and stood at my cottage door. (115)

Thy face is bent from above, thy eyes

Look down on my eyes, and my heart

Has touched thy feet. (151)

Aside from how the many personal ways Tagore addresses God, his emphasis on human relationships bears stark evidence in the following poem:

I know thee as my God and stand apart—

I do not know thee as my own and come closer.

I know thee as my father and bow before thy feet—

I do not grasp thy hand as my friend's.

I stand not where thou comest down

and ownest thyself as mine,

there to clasp thee to my heart

and take thee as my comrade.

Thou art the Brother amongst my brothers,

but I heed them not, I divide not

my earnings with them,
 thus sharing my all with thee.

In pleasure and in pain I stand not
 by the side of men, and thus stand by thee.

I shrink to give up my life,
 and thus do not plunge into the great waters of life. (77)

Tagore embraces his God as a father, a brother, and a comrade, yet he makes a distinction in where his allegiance ultimately lies. He feels an equality amongst all men, but does not indulge in the worship of any one person or institution. His relationship with God is ultimately based on relationships we share with the people in our lives. This is one such element that contributes to the universality of his works. This relationship with a human God, or inner God, does not exist in one extreme region of complete devotion, but permeates through a whole spectrum of human relationships that give our lives meaning.

Tagore's writings, especially *Gitanjali*, can be categorised as romantic poetry which explores themes that have traditionally used by English romantic poets. He shared a "bond" with the early 19th century English romantics, "shared many values of the mid-Victorians" (Saha 2013). The themes of childhood, nature, and the completeness of the everyday man are those that also echo in romantic ideals demonstrated by English poets. Tagore, having grown up under the influence of Victorian mannerisms, and his education abroad in England, has naturally absorbed many works of literature produced by key Western poets. One can both conclude that

his works may unconsciously or consciously emanate such Western romantic ideals, and/or that he further gave them more universality through the inspiration of his own context. Furthermore, he also encapsulates a shift in religious sentiments that focused more inner sentiments and realisations of faith, which was prevalent amongst early English romantics (Goldberg 2001).

One of the most prevalent visuals that remain a constant throughout *Gitanjali* is the vivid presence of nature. His verses are an intricate combination of natural imageries; subtle occurrences in nature and striking symbolism, against a general backdrop for his spiritual revelations. The presence of nature in Tagore's poetry serves as a primal catalyst for the senses. The imagery is "chiefly functional", for "illustrative, decorative, evocative and emotive purposes", through which Tagore "attains clarity and concreteness" (Varshney 88).

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, Tagore's religious experience has intimately developed in tune with his natural surroundings, from his first spiritual revelation and throughout his life. His faith is constantly realised through being amidst nature, where the force of life manifests in the form of beauty. The movement of clouds, the sound of winds, the blooming of flowers, all symbolise his own joys and sorrows. When speaking of his "last song", he epitomises "joy" as that which "makes the earth flow over in the riotous excess of the grass", and that which "sits still with its tears in the open red lotus of pain" (149). Nature is also where Tagore feels his God's love. He feels this in the "golden light that dances upon the leaves" and "idle clouds

sailing across the sky” (151). Natural elements serve as a primal source of inspiration for Tagore. It is what ties him to the universe as he realises his own inner being:

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day
runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth
in numberless blades of grass

and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth
and of death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life.

And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this
moment. (181)

This “life-throb of ages” is both a source of pride and humbleness for Tagore. He is at one with nature, as he is with the rest of humanity in its accumulation of knowledge and collective consciousness throughout the ages. Nature serves as the ultimate constant.

Tagore also explores faith in the presence of children. Children, and childhood, has been a constant source of romantic inspiration. Children symbolise the untainted and pure imaginative aspect of humanity. Tagore finds inspiration time and time again in the acts of children. They represent the endless possibilities of imagination. In his eyes, “on the seashore of endless worlds” is where “the children meet with shouts and dances”. They “play with empty shells”, “build their houses with sand” and make

boats out of “withered leaves” (153). Tagore realises beauty in the imaginations of children:

When I sing to make you dance
I truly now why there is music in leaves,
and why waves send their chorus of voices to the heart of the listening
earth
---when I sing to make you dance. (163)

Another romantic element in his poetry is his interpretation of the everyday man and the everyday experience. This also further strengthens the humanism in his words. He holds the virtues of the simple life in high esteem. Tagore’s God is out in the world where people are carrying on with their work, big or small, in the dust and toils:

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground
and where the
pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them
in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust.
Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on
the dusty soil! (23)

By “He”, Tagore alludes to God, who is present everywhere and with every man. The “holy mantle”, in a direct sense, refers to places of worship, but in a broader sense, it represents the idea of specific religious demands that one aims to fulfill. God cannot only and simply exist in the confines of holy spaces, or in the solitude of one’s

room, or any rigid and physical construction of space. He is there, Tagore writes, in the dust and sun with those carrying on with their daily lives in their labour and in their mirth. This also resonates with his broader humanist concerns that are “explicitly committed to the cause of the downtrodden and the multitude”, which renders Pramathanath Bishi’s “accusation of escapism” as an argument “without substance” (Saha 287).

For Tagore, religious experiences are not to be confined within closed doors and dark rooms. Rather, one’s religious experience goes hand in hand with the worldly experience. Tagore’s words bridges the gap that is so commonly created by religious doctrines; the gap between connecting to God and abstaining from the experiences of the world. He says that what he has witnessed in the world is “unsurpassable” and that he “has tasted of the hidden honey of this lotus that expands on the ocean of light”, and in the “playhouse of infinite forms” where he “caught sight of him that is formless” (241). I believe that Tagore best encapsulates his sentiment in the following poem:

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation,

I feel the embrace of freedom

in a thousand bonds of delight.

Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of

thy wine of various colours and fragrance,

filling this earthen vessel to the brim.

My world will light its hundred different lamps

with thy flame and place them before
the altar of thy temple.

No, I will never shut the doors of my senses.

The delights of sight and hearing
and touch will bear thy delight.

Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy,
and all my desires ripen into fruits of love. (191)

In immersing oneself with the world around, one connects with faith. These “bonds of delight”, “colours and fragrance” and “delights of sight and hearing” is how we experience the magic of the world and the divinity within. This is not to say that Tagore’s philosophy advocates for gluttony, greed, or a life of excess. In fact, he optimistically holds strong to the nurturing and maintenance of virtues. In a broader sense, this seeps into his opinion that humanity should constantly strive towards progress and perfection; where one is constantly inspired by the presence of God within them and dedicates oneself to giving, in art or any other form of work. Furthermore, he acknowledges human flaws, giving voice to his own frustrations and shortcomings.

Tagore’s prayer to God asks for him to “strike at the root of penury” in his heart, asking for the “strength” to “lightly bear” his “joys and sorrows”, or to never “disown the poor” or bow down before “insolent might” (77). These virtues are what keeps Tagore’s philosophy grounded in the world. Moreover, he constantly denounces the obsession with materialism:

The child who is decked with prince's robes
and who has jewelled chains round his neck
loses all pleasure in his play; his dress hampers him at every step.

In fear that it may be frayed, or stained with dust
he keeps himself from the world, and is afraid even to move.

Mother, it is no gain, thy bondage of finery, if it keeps one shut off
from the healthful dust of the earth, if it rob one
of the right of entrance to the great fair of common human life. (17)

These materialistic possessions are what confines one to a small world devoid of worldly experience. Pleasure and beauty is to be sought out in the “common human life”. In a more elaborate poem, Tagore personifies a prisoner who confesses that his “master” was his own blinding pursuit of “wealth and power” (65). He further admits that it was he himself who “forged this chain” which held him “in its grip” (67). This prisoner alludes to all those who are on the path of greed and worldly materialistic wealth, thus constructing their own prisons that isolates them from the common human life.

Tagore advocates for a pursuit, but not for power, but for perfection and work as a medium for devotion and for the greater benefit of the world; what essentially remains in substance and impact after one dies. So many of his poems in *Gitanjali* speak of creating and giving till there is nothing left of him to give. In one of his

poems, he equates himself to a beggar before a king, his God, who asks, “What hast thou to give me?” to which the beggar responds:

Ah, what a kingly jest was it to open
thy palm to a beggar to beg! (119)

To his king, the beggar gives him, quite apprehensively, “the least little grain of corn”. The metaphor comes into a full circle as Tagore concludes:

But how great my surprise when at the day’s end
I emptied my bag on the floor to find a least
Little grain of gold among the poor heap.
I bitterly wept and wished that I had had
The heart to give thee my all. (121)

In Tagore’s philosophy, in giving is where the greatest rewards lie, and his devotion is carried out through his work in life. In giving, he dissolves his ego and pride, growing closer to his God. It is in this “artistic process” or the “disclosure of this experience of the ultimate mystery of the universe” is where “the romantic poets’ service... to humanity lies” (Goldberg 177). Tagore writes:

Let only that little be left of me whereby
I may never hide thee. (73)

Tagore’s devotion in his art and work is heavily influenced by his view of death. Death is a continual presence throughout his poems, just as it is an ever-looming and hovering shadow in our lives. However, it is never seen as an antagonistic force or the end of the life. Tagore does not fear death. On the contrary,

he sees it as a natural bridge to the eternal, and looks forward to it. He calls out for death, “my death, come and whisper to me!” (91) He goes as far as to deem life and death as “twin brothers”, as two sides of the same reality (58).

He envisions no illusions of heaven or hell existing beyond death. A recurrent symbol for death in his poems is a boat. This boat represents the vessel that will carry him to his next natural phase; a peaceful passing after his work is done:

I know not if I shall come back home.
 I know not whom I shall chance to meet.
 There at the fording in the little boat
 The unknown man plays upon his lute. (193)

Tagore feels a certainty in this passing as natural, and an uncertainty of what may come. However, this is how he retains his faith, both in certainty and uncertainty:

Even so, in death the same unknown will appear
 As ever known to me. And because I love this life,
 I know I shall love death as well. (239)

Life and death are like mirror images to Tagore; everything that he immerses himself in his life, and all that he gives, and his entire perception of life, are what equates to death. His denunciation of material wealth reflects his philosophy of death as well. Tagore acknowledges the wealth of knowledge and art accumulated over the centuries as what still remains, and always will, after one passes away. Material wealth, on the other hand, is meaningless in the face of death. Thus one’s contribution, be it through art or science, is what will remain as the human personality.

Conclusion

In my thesis, I aimed to re-examine Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of religion and shed light on its importance in today's world. His image as a mystic in Western eyes, along with the change in sentiments among people after the First World War, has led his humanist philosophies to slowly become irrelevant. However, Tagore was well ahead of his time in how he perceived the world. He was a universalist and a preacher of peace. Tagore simply encourages one to form meaningful relationships with those around and engage in imaginative work to contribute to the world. He encourages one to immerse in the everyday world, gain inspiration from nature, and nurture values that help us be better human beings. I believe that nurturing Tagore's simple ideas will allow us, those who feel especially lost and impatient for meaning, to reconnect with faith whether one follows a religion, or no religion at all.

Tagore's words inspire the belief in a universal philosophy which is deeply personal, relatable and fluid, and at times, vague – but enough to be compatible with all religions and faiths, allowing one to explore such concepts in their own terms. The meaning within Tagore's religious experience in *The Religion of Man* and *Gitanjali* may prove helpful in the world today. Perhaps this poet's religion, in a sense, is the religion for the 21st century, for the post-postmodern age; a time of materialism and environmental crises, with increasing particularism against universal humanism, where the self is individualised and isolated, and religion is either at a loss of spirituality or in intense adherence to strict creeds.

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