

Paulo Coelho's Concept of Religion and Spirituality

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Abstract - Religion involves a system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols that lead to the realization of the sacred namely God or the ultimate reality. On the other hand, spirituality totally differs from religion and is a personal quest for the self –realization. Thus, religion belongs to a group whereas spirituality has a personal dimension. Paulo Coelho's novels talk about the side of spirituality which encompasses the whole universe. Spirituality can never be an individual concern as it is built on the interconnectedness of human beings. It can be realized through love, sympathy, compassion, and forgiveness. And more importantly Paulo's novel is a reminder to anyone feeling numbed by day-to-day drudgery that one's spiritual side can be awakened. This paper aims at analyzing Paulo Coelho's concept of religion and spirituality with special reference to his novel 'The Winner Stands Alone.'

Index Terms - religion, spirituality, sympathy, interconnectedness

INTRODUCTION

Paulo Coelho's novels talk about the side of spirituality which encompasses the whole universe. Spirituality can never be an individual concern as it is built on the interconnectedness of human beings. It can be realized through love, sympathy, compassion, and forgiveness. And more importantly Paulo's novel is a reminder to anyone feeling numbed by day-to-day drudgery that one's spiritual side can be awakened.

During his first-ever interview to air on American television, Coelho talks to Oprah about the enduring themes in his book and explains that you do not even have to hold a belief in God to be spiritual. All you must possess, he says, is courage.

"Courage is the first spiritual quality that you need to have," Coelho tells Oprah.

Regardless of one's background, upbringing, religion, ethnicity, gender or experiences, courage is a quality that anyone, anywhere can not only understand, but also embody. As Coelho writes in *The Alchemist*,

courage "is the quality most essential to understanding the language of the world."

The Encyclopaedia of World Spirituality describes spirituality as "that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions-the spirit, this spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person experiences ultimate reality." The spirit which rhymes with the Latin spiritus is the vital principle and also it interprets meaning, direction, and purpose of human life. Spirit, in fact, is a "presence" that can be felt in the effects of wind or breeze. Sometimes the "spirit imparts a "personality" as in the persona of "The Holy Spirit" in the Christian spirit or the spirit of the age. The word 'spiritual' is derived from the Greek 'pneumatikos' which is related to inspiration. Being inspirational is committing oneself to what one regards as the truth for the term spiritual "spotlights the unity of the self" and emphasizes that it draws upon the human capacities or powers which include transcendence, reflection, a moral sense and a religious urge to search for the ultimate meaning, purpose and deliverance. Apart from the etymological roots, spirituality means faith, a complete surrender or a belief in a power that goes by the Great Spirit, a Higher power, God, Goodness etc. (Shivpriya p 151)

Commenting on the present civilization in an interview with Anupama Bhattacharya, Paulo says:

"We are at a crossroad. Since spirituality is going to play an important role during the next century, we have two choices: either we go towards fundamentalism or towards tolerance. I am preaching tolerance, but this is a long fight, and it depends how people behave here and now."

For Coelho spirituality and religion are two different things. Etymologically "religion" is derived from "to bind." So, religion tends to be the formal expression of faith. It is understood to empty the sacred, the holy, and the ultimate concern. It is also used to refer to a belief in or worship of God or Gods. For Coelho religion refers to a group of people who find a

collective way to worship. This group of people could worship Buddha, Allah, Jesus or any other God. For him what matters is that, at the moment we connect with mystery, we feel more united, more open to life and we realize we're not alone in the world, that we don't live in isolation. Religion is a way of communing with the mystery and this way can be any prescribed by the number of religions throughout the world. Thus, he does not relate spiritualism with religion. The formal act of believing or not believing in God changes nothing. For him God is an experience of Faith. There cannot be a God suitable for everyone because it is something very personal.

He believes that a spiritual quest does not require religion. In an interview with Juan Arias, he explains: "You have to be very careful when you join a Church to not let them try to take over what is your responsibility. What I believe is that religion itself, not what is sometimes made out of religion, is not in contradiction with a personal spiritual quest. The important thing is to create a large empty space within yourself, get rid of the superfluous, know how to live the essential, always be on the way."

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of the sacred namely God or the ultimate reality. On the other hand, spirituality totally differs from religion and is a personal quest for the self –realization. Thus, religion belongs to a group whereas Spirituality has a personal dimension.

Margaret Dempsey in her book *Journey to self* too makes a distinction between religious and spiritual:

"By spiritual I mean that deep inner searching, the feeling that there is something and not knowing what it is. It is about the journey that this inner search engages in. The spiritual journey is all about the journey to self, which we arrive at by becoming self-aware. Socrates said 'know thyself' and this is as important today as it was in the time of the great philosopher. To know others is to be intelligent, but to know yourself is to be enlightened and to live in an enlightened state. (9)

Today Humanity is at crossroads. On one side there is religion as a legal system of conduct and on the other side the search for questions that could still have answers, the acceptance of life as an adventure of spirit. Many a time people get tangled in the dogmas prescribed by the religion deviate from their spiritual

quest. Spirituality for Coelho refers to the understanding of the interconnected of the universe and this understanding can be realized with or without religion.

As Jyoti Mishra has pointed out in her book entitled 'Paulo Coelho's Fiction Existential and Spiritual Preoccupation':

The development of an individual's spirituality depends upon questioning the way one related to the taken-for-granted concepts or meanings which are disclosed to the self. These meanings and purposes accepted as 'given' never require questioning until an existential crisis makes one aware of their existence. So, the development of spirituality requires such awareness of realizing various possibilities of meaning. (94)

We find examples of Coelho's perception of spirituality in his novels, 'The Winner Stands Alone' and "Aleph" respectively. Both Igor in 'The Winner Stands Alone' and Paulo in 'Aleph', fill emptiness within at some point of their lives. Both of them have wealth and fame and everything that one dreams of. They are rich in the material world. However, this material success does not give them peace of mind. They try to resolve their problems in their own ways and their ways stand in sharp contrast with each other. Paulo believes that humanity's greatest sin is non-communication, unwanted and unloved solitude, forgetting that we were created to find each other's mirror. And everything that makes it easier to find each other and communicate, definitely contributes to our becoming less inhuman and more sympathetic. However, Igor in his novel 'The Winner Stands Alone' stands in strong contrast with this ideology. His love for his wife Ewa loses its color and passion when his materialistic pursuits occupy the most important place in his life. He is never satisfied. He wants to go further. His obsession for the materialistic gains is so great that it darkens the spiritual side of his soul the events that follow Ewa's departure from his life show that the process of getting rich and famous contributed nothing for being a true human being. Rather a man, who was once compassionate, starts losing his empathy in the race of getting what he wants.

Paulo very subtly presents Igor's transformation from a down to earth, hardworking, and kind man to a cool-headed criminal. A point comes when he realizes that he needs to come back from the road he was walking

on. However, the glimmer of the material world is so dazzling, that it blinds his spiritual vision.

Igor even goes to a psychiatrist who makes him aware of the reason behind his restlessness.

Being afraid of losing everything he has achieved, he keeps on running and doesn't understand how and when to quit. He ends up destroying his marriage and himself.

Paulo cites a parable in the novel that shows how man fails to understand the small god given gifts that make human life happy. The parable is about a seagull and a mouse. One day a sea gull sees a mouse on the ground. Not able to communicate as they speak in different languages, the sea gull takes pity on the creature that has lost its wings. So, the sea gull takes the mouse on its back, takes flight to the sky thinking that the mouse must have been missing what it was like flying in the air. The mouse has a time of its life. It is brought back to the ground. When it sees the sea gull taking off and disappearing, the mouse begins to feel sad, not being able to experience that form of freedom again. One often fails to acknowledge the little miracles in life.

Ewa's presence in Igor's life is a miracle that he fails to recognize. He fails to preserve it due to his misinterpretation of God's message. In the end of the novel, Paulo shows how he loses his humanity as he does not know the meaning of true love. The lack of a feeling of empathy for a person he once loved, turns him away from humanity. The worst thing is inability to understand that he is wrong.

Unlike the mouse in the parable mentioned above, Igor could have retained the miracle he had forever. But he never understands it. On the other hand, even when he realizes that he has lost his wife, the way he acquires to get her back takes him far away from path of humanity. He tries to snatch her away from the world instead of winning her heart.

Thus, Coelho urges "the need for the great quest, the quest for the unknown, the new instead of the familiar course of conservatism, and calls for spirituality as the need of the hour he asserts that the spiritual quest is an individual responsibility" (Mishra 96).

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