Spirituality, Religion and Man: Kulothungan’s Critique in Verse

P. Marudanayagam

The conversion of philosophy into poetry is a mighty challenge faced by poets down the ages. In T.S. Eliot’s view, the achievement of Dante in this kind of poetry is exemplary. The three sections of Dante’s The Divine Comedy follow three different strategies. In the first section “The Inferno”, we come across great poetry written with the greatest economy of words and with the greatest austerity in the use of metaphor, simile, verbal beauty and elegance. The second section “The Purgatorio” demonstrates that great poetry may consist in a straightforward and philosophical statement. The third section “The Paradiso” shows that even rarefied and remote states of beatitude can become the material for great poetry. Those who are well-acquainted with the Bhakti poems in Tamil, especially, Manickavasagar’s Thiruvaachagam, know that all the aforesaid types are not unknown to the Tamil tradition. The sections on spirituality and religion in Kulothungan’s Maanuda Yaatthirai witness to the fact that Kulothungan has immensely benefited from the classic corpus of poetry in Tamil.

The third part of the book which deals with man’s search for the ultimate truth about the bond between man and the universe in which he finds himself for reasons unknown to him appropriately begins with an invocation to what the poet calls Shakti.

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He stood shocked and terribly confused when the moon that had gone appeared again and regained its full luminous circle.
In order to drive home the idea that because of fear mankind has faced untold miseries and that it will continue to do so if fear is not got rid of, the poet makes use of a series of striking images. Fear is the world’s king of kings who is incapable of touching those who do not care a straw for fear. It is a terrible disease that will cripple those who are weak enough to let it occupy their hearts. It is an enemy to man’s grit. It will have its temple in the heart of a man who mistakes his own shadow for a ghost. It will live in the eyes that see a demon in the raging storm and in the eyes that see a snake in a long rope that lies on the ground coiled. Like the growing termites in a tree, fear gradually destroys the strength of a human heart. Like the poison that gets mixed with milk, fear annihilates the spirit of determination that resides in a mind. Self-confidence is like a diamond to be cherished in one’s life; but fear is like a shapeless thing that will file it away to nothing. It is said to be a God’s curse. There is no lamp other than the intellect which can dispel the dense darkness of fear. Though fear is as small as a banyan seed, if it is planted in the heart, it will grow into monstrous proportions and lead to disastrous consequences. Even before you take the first step, fear will warn you that there is a moat in front of you; it will tell you stories of those who, trying to reach the summit, failed and came to a tragic end. There is no cure to the disease of fear. The mind that is drowned in fear is softer than a sponge.

Having described all the harms fear may cause, the poet, echoing the words of Valluvar, says that it would be foolish not to fear what is to be feared and that the wise will be able to discriminate between what to fear and what not to fear. The poet has a couple of metaphors to reinforce this idea. A root that is more dangerous than poison may serve as a medicine when it falls into the hands of a native doctor. Even a snake’s poison may be properly treated and used as a medicine. Fear, on the right occasions, may save one’s life. Fear and foolishness go hand in hand and together they have led to the emergence of religions. But religion may not always prove harmful, may at times come to man’s help.
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The lengthy disquisition on religion and spirituality appropriately begins with a brief account of the Sanskrit Upanishads, which discuss, among other things, the relationship between what are called the atman and the Brahmam. Besides dwelling at length on the relationship between Brahman and Atman, they have a lot to say about our life here on earth. They assert that truth alone will finally triumph and that faith in God is essential for our journey from appearance to reality, from darkness to light and from death to deathlessness. But the poet makes it clear that the message of the Upanishads to mankind is not free from limitations. There is no clarity or certainty or finality about many of the recommendations they make. Even among these who accepted the ancient Vedas, there were some who denied the existence of God. There have been interpretations and interpretations of the scriptures and the confusion about the ultimate aim of life continues. Though voluminous Bashyas continued to be written, not a little of the mystery of life has been unravelled.

One full section of fifty-two stanzas is devoted to a close study of the Bhagavad Gita, reported to have been the advice given by Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra when the latter refused to fight on the contention that the opposing army consisted of his own kith and kin and his acharyas whom he respected. Kulothungan is not interested in the controversial issues relating to the integrity of the text of Bhagavad Gita: Was it really the word of God? Was it written by a single author, or were several hands involved in it? Was
it an interpolation or an integral part of Mahabharata? But he repeats in a series of splendid stanzas the major ideas for which the Gita is internationally acclaimed.

Concluding the summary of the contents of the Bhagavad Gita, the poet says that though it is believed by a large group to be God’s word, a few charges have been levelled against it by certain men of intellect, according to whom it is a strange scripture which asks a prince to kill when he is reluctant to do so, which bears the blame of speaking against the glorious tradition of love for fellow human beings, which claims that it was God who divided mankind into four groups not on the basis of profession but on the basis of birth, which condemns certain sections of humanity including women as sinful creatures born of the woman’s womb and which came into being just to justify the accursed varna system.

Lokayatam is the philosophy of the group known as the Charwagas, who, even during the Vedic days, contended that there is no heaven, no God, no atman and that nothing that is unseen can exist. The Charwagas were of the view that there is no point in looking for a heaven when there is none and that life with all its joys and sorrows has to be faced squarely. They have denied the existence of God, ridiculed the belief in a heaven, and rejected the faith in an atman. The poet says that even if we accept all these for the sake of argument, they have to tell us how men differ from animals. And what is their contribution to the welfare of mankind in any of the vital areas of human life? And the poet regrets that since all the original writings of the Charwagas have disappeared, we are unable to find out their real contentions. But they have to be complimented on their role in the intellectual awakening of humanity.

The section on Jainism describes the salient features of a religious philosophy propounded two thousand five hundred years ago by a prince turned spiritual leader. The Jains believed in the atomistic theory of the universe. They didn’t accept the common concept of God. To them, the atman, though shapeless, changes its nature according to the body it joins. All the creatures including the ant, the beetle and the elephant are endowed with an atman of their own. They contended that the upper part of the world, a land of delight, called alokaakaayam is meant for the divine beings while the lower part, called ulokaakaayam is occupied by the earthly beings. The two dharmas, the life of the family man and the life of the ascetic, are acceptable to the Jains. They stressed the value of virtues, love and non-violence. They won’t cultivate the land lest ploughing should harm insects. Trading in weapons of violence is forbidden to them. The Jain philosophers never claimed that they had found out the ultimate truth. The dimensions of truth are many. To the question
if there is an atman or not, there can be seven different answers. The poet praises the Jains for having an open mind on such baffling issues.

The section on Buddhism begins with a breath-taking narration of the important events in the life of the Buddha eventuating in his attainment of wisdom. Though Siddhartha was born a prince and brought up in great luxury, a series of scenes from real life, the sight of a miserable old man, the sight of one afflicted by a deadly disease and the sight of a dead body, forces him to leave the palace in search of a remedy for all the ills of humanity. Long years of learning, suffering, tapas and meditation lead to wisdom and Siddhartha becomes the Buddha. It is unfortunate that there are no authentic records of his life and teachings in the language he spoke. The poet has to depend on secondary sources full of interpolations by vested interests. But he lists the cardinal principles attributed to the Buddha in a characteristically succinct manner and concludes that Buddhism is nothing but a search for the removal of human misery and that the heaven the Buddha looked for was the same.

Tirukkural has a pride of place in the intellectual background of Kulothungan who has soaked himself in the greatest of the masterpieces on the art of living. The quintessence of Valluvar’s philosophy of life finds its exquisite poetic expression in the section called Valluvam. Coming as it does from the heart of Kulothungan, the homage to Valluvar constitutes one of the most masterly chapters in this modern epic. Dismissing the numerous legends about the life of Valluvar as they don’t deserve to be considered authentic historical accounts, Kulothungan focuses his attention on Valluvar’s message to posterity, which is of permanent value.
There are six small sections on the six widely known schools of Indian philosophy testifying to the ancient Indian wisdom which equally excelled in both hair-splitting arguments and cosmic visions. Though a rationalist to the core, Kulothungan does full justice to each of these while explaining their tenets. Neither the subtlety of the thought expressed nor the Sanskrit terms for which proper Tamil equivalents have to be coined can dampen his poetic spirit or interrupt the free flow of his verse. The merits of each school are liberally acknowledged but the limitations are not glossed over. He cannot help being harsh when there is compelling evidence against the validity of a claim.

At the end of the section on every religion, Kulothungan gives his own assessment of it. To him, there is nothing beyond criticism and there is no religion which is absolutely free from blemishes. In the penultimate section of the book called “Endless Search”, he points out how we haven’t yet arrived at the ultimate truth, despite the claims made by generations of philosophers and religious leaders. Has God conveyed any of his messages in any human language? No language can adequately translate even the human mind’s ideas into words.

Is it true that there are periodical incarnations of God as claimed by the scriptures and puranas of some religions?
What about time? Did it come into being before or after God? Does it have any form? Does it have any power? Does it have any meaning apart from its association with the universe? Isn’t it another puzzle like God? Is it beyond change?

Who created this vast universe? Has the final word been said on the subject by science or by religion?

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What about the present scientific finding that the already incredibly vast universe keeps expanding? Where is it going? Does it have a destination to reach? There are religionists who say that what is beyond comprehension, what is beyond the reach of our five senses has to be believed. Will there ever come a day when truth will dawn on mankind? Should man yield to frustration and give up his search?

Kulothungan’s assertion that mankind is not going to be cowed down by the repeated defeats or by the enormity of the task undertaken reminds us of what the twentieth century American novelist and Nobel laureate, Hemingway has famously said, “Man can be destroyed, but not defeated.”
Though we have been able to split the atom, we do not yet know the nature of what is called life. If life has no form and if it can’t function without the support of a body, what about the existence of God? If he can be totally independent and doesn’t need a physical frame, as claimed by religionists, has any saint been able to find a trace of that formless thing? If we probe the past, we have to conclude that all the achievements are ultimately due to the ceaseless efforts of mankind.

References


pmarudanayagam@yahoo.com