

A RELIGIOUS PERSON
Dharmavidya 2019

A religious person is one who has faith in and tries to live a holy life. Conceptions of what kind of life might be holy vary somewhat, but we can distinguish some broad features: equanimity, compassion, contemplation, prayer and aspiration, faith, and a concern for a more universal love than is found in ordinary human relations.

These all contribute to a deepening of life and an enhanced sense of meaning in existence. This, in turn, cultivates an ability to accept the vicissitudes of fortune as well as fortitude in confronting difficulties and righting the woes of the world - war, slavery, oppression and so on. Religion should strengthen people in withstanding evil, both the psychological troubles that we are all prey to and the gross cruelties, exploitation and strife in the world at large.

A truly religious person is reflective. S/he thinks deeply about things, does not just jump onto the latest popular fashionable idea, and is not seduced by vacuous ad hominem arguments. S/he has a faith that gives the courage to question and to think things through. When faith is well established it does not fear facts. Faith enables us to face whatever truth is really available to us, yet, at the same time, enables one to bear with the uncertainties and lack of solid ground that ordinary human existence is inevitably mired in. A religious person is one who worships something more sacred than self. There are many different metaphysical ideas, but the point is not really which of these is accurate, as if we were discussing science, the point is to have something at the centre of one's moral universe that is worthy of adoration. Self is flimsy; emotions come and go; bodies let us down; mind is unreliable. In whatever way we conceive of self, it is not firm ground. To raise one's life above the mundane one needs to have some greater light to reflect.

Thus, a religious person holds some things sacred. A relationship to sacred things characterises a religious life. There may be sacred beings, sacred times, sacred places, or sacred activities, and these will be reinforced by the use of symbols. Thus, a religious person has a life filled with things that facilitate, strengthen and sustain their commitment to the holy life.

Being religious is not all or nothing. Life can become more holy or less so. The religious person has an aspiration toward living a more holy life, while recognising human limitations. Thus humility and modesty are essential components. Thus arises the seeming paradox that the most saintly people tend to see themselves as sinners while the most worldly are endlessly boasting of their virtue.

A religious life is thus characterised by certain dualisms, especially between the sacred and mundane. However, this divide itself creates a dynamic such that the religious person is always longing and striving to bridge the gap or even to resolve it totally by rendering even the most mundane things holy. Thus, a religious person is constantly extending the domain of the sacred while the worldly person is busy disenchanting the world. The religious way of thought, therefore, is the opposite of reductionism.

A religious life is not for oneself alone. The religious person is an "unsurpassed field of merit for the world" and consequently is worthy of support and respect. A religious person, therefore, is not just one who tries to live the holy life, but also one who supports and reveres others who do so, so that love, peace, truth and beauty may spread far and wide.