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Essays on Vedanta and Western Philosophies

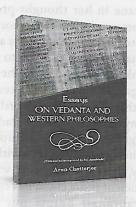
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RELIGIONS REFLECT man's desire to link himself with a Power or powers that he believes to be present beyond the phenomenal world, which is the world that we observe and experience with our senses and by scientific means. The origin of religions can be traced to thousands of years BCE. Religion started in different forms such as animism, fetishism, and the deification of natural forces. [Animism believes in innumerable spiritual beings that are concerned with human affairs and capable of helping or harming human interests. Fetishism involves the religious worship of material objects alleged to be endowed with supernatural powers.]

These approaches now are considered to be crude, but they reveal man's curiosity about something beyond the world. As time passed more refined concepts of God (and gods) gradually emerged, and different religions as we know them today originated in different parts of the world. Each of these religions is represented by certain beliefs about God and His relation with the universe and individual persons. These beliefs usually are found in certain books, which are considered to be sacred and used for guidance as to how a man is supposed to act in the world. These books also present concepts of how a person's actions in his present life would affect his life after death.

Most religions developed a hierarchy of



organizations and clergies who have considerable influence on the followers as to how the respective religions are to be practised. In some cases the clergy of a religion became dictatorial. The beliefs were imposed on the followers, and questions and discussions were not encouraged. In some cases the followers also became dogmatic and narrow minded instead of developing respect and tolerance for the views of other religions. The dogmas often make one think that only his religion contains truth and others do not. This kind of attitude helped develop animosity among different religions and led to atrocities and even many wars. However, it will be wrong to point out only the pitfalls of religions since they also have had considerable beneficial impact on societies. Even if a religion cannot do everything that it claims to be able to do, it can at least help a person uplift himself and develop higher morality and values. Faith in God also can help a person go through difficult circumstances of life.

Parallel with the development of religions, other types of views emerged, and there was the beginning of philosophies. Whereas the religious beliefs are based more on faith and less on intellectual analysis, philosophies relied more on intellectual analysis and less on faith. Philosophies seek knowledge based on rational thinking.