

Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance

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"They call Him by a multitude of names, Who is but One"; "A single Fire that burns on many altars"; "Even as He sheweth, so is He named"; these are affirmations taken from the sacrificial hymns of the Rg Veda. "As He is approached, so He becomes"; "it is because of His great abundance-.or because He can be so variously participated in-that they call Him by so many names." By way of comment, we cite St. Thomas Aquinas, "The many aspects of these names are not empty and vain, for there corresponds to all of them one single reality represented by them in a manifold and imperfect manner" (*Sum. Theol.* 1.1.3.4 and a). Nothing, perhaps, so strangely impresses or bewilders a Christian student of Saint Ramakrishna's life as the fact that this Hindu of the Hindus, without in any way repudiating his Hinduism, but for the moment forgetting it, about 1866 completely surrendered himself to the Islamic way, repeated the name of Allah, wore the costume, and ate the food of a Muslim. This self-surrender to what we should call in India the waters of another current of the single river of truth resulted only in a direct experience of the beatific vision, not less authentic than before. Seven years later, Ramakrishna in the same way proved experimentally the truth of Christianity. He was now for a time completely absorbed in the idea of Christ, and had no room for any other thought. You might have supposed him a convert. What really resulted was that he could now affirm on the basis of personal experience, "I have also practiced all religions, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects . . . The lake has many shores. At one the Hindu draws water in a pitcher, and calls it jala, at another the Muslim in leather bottles, and calls it pani, at a third the Christian and what he calls 'water.' "

Such an understanding may be rare, but is absolutely normal in the East: as the *Bhagavad Gita* expresses it, « There is no deity that I am not, and in case any man be truly the worshipper of any deity whatever, it is I that am the cause of his devotion and its fruit ... However men approach Me, even so do I welcome them, for the path men take from every side is Mine."

Similarly the Bhaktamâla (cf. G. A. Grierson, ed, London, 1909): « No one is ignorant of the doctrines of his own religion . . . Therefore let every man, so far as in him lieth, help the reading of the Scriptures, whether those of his own church, or those of another-" And similarly also in Islam, "My heart has become capable of every form . . . it is a convent for Christian monks, a temple for idols, the place of pilgrimage at Mecca, the tables of the Torah, the book of the Koran: I follow the religion of Love, whichever way his camels take."»

Such an understanding is rarer still, and one may say abnormal to the Western type of humanity. If the modern Christian does not quite endorse the conduct of Charlemagne's heroes at Saragossa- « The synagogues they enter and the mosques, whose every wall with mallet and axes they shatter: they break in pieces small the idols . . . the heathen folk in crowds to the font baptismal are driven, to take Christ's yoke upon them . . . Thus out of heathen darkness have five-score thousand been redeemed, and be now true Christians," it is at least quite certain that for every man that has died by religious persecution in India, ten thousand have died in Europe, and equally certain that the activity of Christian missions still quite frankly endorses a program of conversion by force-the force of money, not indeed paid out in cash, but expended on education and medical aid bestowed with ulterior motives. "Force," as Lafcadio Hearn once wrote, « the principal instrument of Christian propagandist in the past, is still the force behind our missions." No greater offenders are to be found than missionaries against the commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." I do not, however, at all wish to dwell upon this point of view, but rather to point out that although religious tolerance in Europe has never, as in Asia, been founded upon the belief that all religions are true, but rather founded on a growing indifference to all religious doctrines, an intellectual basis for a willing tolerance of other forms of belief is by no means wanting in Christianity. John, indeed, speaks of the "True Light that lightens every man"; Even St. Thomas admits that some of the Gentiles who lived before Christ's temporal birth may have been saved. For as Clement of Alexandria had long since said, "there was always a natural manifestation of the one Almighty God, amongst all right-thinking men." Eckhart speaks of affine of our most ancient philosophers who found the truth long, long before God's birth, ere ever there was Christian faith at all as it is now," and again much more boldly, "He to whom God is different in one thing from another and to whom God is dearer in one thing than another, that man is a barbarian, still in the wilds, a child."

Note that "Merlyn made the round table in tokening of the roundness of the world for by the round table is the world sygnefied by rights. For all the world cryogen and hethen repaired unto the round table . . . (that) by them which should be felloes of the round table the truth of the Sancgreal should be well knowen." (Malory, *Morte Darthur*, xlv.2). The truth is with Blake when he says, "The religions of all nations are derived from each nation's different reception of the poetic genius³ which is everywhere called the spirit of prophecy . . . As all men are alike (though infinitely various), so all religions, and as all seminars have one source." The Vedic and Christian traditions are never tired of employing "Truth" "Being," and "Beauty," as preeminently fitting, essential names of God. Now we are well aware that in this human world there cannot be a conceptual knowledge or expression of truth except in some way; just as there can be no perceptible beauty except of some kind. What is true in all truths, or what is beautiful in all beauties, cannot itself be any one of these truths or beauties. As Dionysius says, "If anyone in seeing God understood what he saw, he saw not God himself, but one of those things that are His." Belief in Revelation or Audition does not mean that the very words in which the truth is expressed in any case contain the truth, but rather that they point to it, for as St. Thomas says, "Everything has truth of nature according to the degree in which it imitates the knowledge of God"; "our intellect considers God according to the mode derived from creatures"; and finally, "the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower." All concepts of God, even the most nearly adequate, are thus man-made; as we say in India, "He takes the forms that are imagined by His worshippers." Very surely He is not to be thought of as confined by or fully expressed by any of these forms, Who is Himself the single form of every form, and transcendent with respect to each and every form; it is from this point of view that many a Christian teacher has affirmed that "Nothing true can be said of God." The value of concepts, of any expression verbal or visible, *jeer vellum in intellects conceptum*, is one of use; the concept is of value not as a thing in itself, but as dispositive to an essential vision, not in any likeness. The beauty of the formula, the verbal or visual icon, poignant as it may be in Christian gospel or Vedic liturgy, is not an end in itself but, referred to him who uses it, is an invitation. The purpose of any art, and no less of that highest art of theology, in which all other arts, whether literary or plastic, subsist *per excellentiam*, is to teach, to delight, and above all to move (Augustine's *docere, delectare,*

³ vedic *kavitva*.

movere). An exclusive attachment to any one dogma, any one group of verbal or visual symbols, however pertinent, is an act of idolatry; the Truth itself is inexpressible.

If the image is His whose image it is, the colors and the art are ours. Whoever claims that his own manner of understanding and statement is the only true one is moved not by the vision of God, but by spiritual pride. Such a believer, as Ibn 'Arabi says, "praises none but himself, for his God is made by himself, and to praise the work is to praise the maker of it: its excellence or imperfection belongs to the maker. For this reason he blames the beliefs of others, which he would not do if he were just . . . If he understood the saying of Junayd, "The color of the water is the color of the vessel containing it,' he would not interfere with others, but would perceive God in every form and every belief. He has opinion, not knowledge: therefore God said, "I am in my servant's opinion of Me," that is, "I do not manifest myself to him save in the form of his belief." God is absolute or unrestricted as He pleases; and the God of religious belief is subject to limitations, for He is the God who is contained in the heart of His servant." The Oriental Gnostic has no fault to find with any Catholic doctrine; judged by Vedic standards, one can say that Christianity is true and lovely, true so far as any formulation can be true, lovely in so far as any thing, as distinguished from One who is no thing, can be lovely.

Moreover, it can be positively alarmed that every notable Christian doctrine is also explicitly propounded in every other dialect of the primordial tradition: I refer to such doctrines as those of the eternal and temporal births, that of the single essence and two natures, that of the Father's impassibility, that of the significance of sacrifice, that of transubstantiation, that of the nature of the distinction between the contemplative and active lives and of 170th from the life of pleasure, that of eternity from aeviternity and time, and so forth. Literally hundreds of texts could be cited from Christian and Islamic, Vedic, Taoist, and other scriptures and their patristic expositions, in close and sometimes literally verbal agreement. To cite a trio of instances at random, whereas Damascene has to say that "He Who Is, is the principal of all names applied to God," in the *Kalpa Upanisad* we have "He is, by that alone is He to be apprehended": whereas St. Thomas says, "These things are said to be under the sun which are generated and corrupted," the *Satapatha Brahmana* affirms that "Everything under the sun is in the power of death"; and whereas Dionysius speaks of That "which not to see or know is really to see and know" the *Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahmana* has it that "The thought of God is his by whom it is unthought, or if he thinks the thought he does not understand." All traditional teaching employs side by side

the *via affirmativa* and the *via remotionis* and in this sense is in agreement with Boethius that "Faith is a mean between contrary heresies." Sin is denned by the Thomist and in India in one and the same way as a "departure from the order to the end." All tradition is agreed that the last end of man is happiness.

On the other hand, while there can be only one metaphysics, there must be not merely a variety of religions, but a hierarchy of religions, in which the truth is more or less adequately expressed, according to the intellectual capacities of those whose religions they are. Nor do I mean to deny that there can be heterodox doctrines, properly to be condemned as heresies, but only that any and every belief is a heresy if it be regarded as the truth, and not merely as a signpost of the truth. Pantheism, for example, is equally a heresy from Christian, Islamic, and Hindu points of view; a confusion of things as they are in themselves with things as they are in God, of the essence of the participant with the participated Essence, is an egregious error, and yet not so great an error as to assume that the being of things as they are in themselves is altogether their own being. The distinction of essence from nature of the Samkhya system is true from a certain point of view, and yet false when regarded from the standpoint of a higher synthesis, as in the Vedanta, and similarly in Christianity, where from one point of view essence and nature are the universe apart, and yet in the simplicity of the First Cause are one impartial substance.

It is perfectly legitimate to feel that a given religion is more adequately true than another ; to hold, for example, that Catholicism is more adequately true than Protestantism, or Hinduism than Buddhism. Real distinctions can be drawn: Christianity maintains, for example, that metaphysics, though the highest of the other sciences, is inferior to the sacred science of theology; Hinduism is primarily metaphysical, and only secondarily religious, hence the controversies as to the true significance of "deification" and hence it is that however much a Hindu may find himself in enthusiastic agreement with the angelic and celestial doctors (Thomas and Bonaventure), he is more at home with certain giants of Christian thought whose orthodoxy is suspect, I mean Eriugena, Eckhart, Boehme, Blake, and more at home with Plotinus than with the representatives of exoteric Christian orthodoxy; more at home with St. John than with St. James, more in sympathy with Christian Platonism than with Christian Aristotelianism, scarcely at all in sympathy with Protestant theologies, and far more in sympathy with Qabbalistic interpretations of Genesis and Exodus than with any historical approach. So that we do not for a moment mean to maintain the impropriety of all dogmatic controversy. We must bear in mind

that even within the framework of a presumably homogeneous faith it is taken for granted that one and the same truths must be presented in various ways suited to the audience, and that this is not a matter of contradictory statement, but of "convenient means." What we do maintain is that all paths converge; that the Wayfarer, having already trodden a given path, will under all normal circumstances sooner reach that point at which all progress ends- "On reaching God, all progress ends"-than if he retrace his steps and start afresh.

What we must not forget is that no one can anally pronounce upon the truth of a given religion who has not lived it, as Ramakrishna lived both Christianity and Islam, as well as Hinduism; and that once convinced that only one's own truth is true, "It is," as Professor C. A. Briggs of Drew University lately remarked, ("the easiest thing imaginable to take the concepts of other faiths, abstract them from their contexts, and demolish them." For example, how easily the Islamic definition of Christianity as a polytheistic religion could be deduced from the considered statement of St. Thomas, that "We do not say the only God, because deity is common to several" (*Sum. Theol.* I.31.2c). In the same way, a pantheistic definition of Christianity could easily be deduced from St. Thomas's "A thing has being by participation . . . We must consider . . . the emanation of all being from the universal cause, which is God" (*Sum. Theol.* 1.44.I ad I and 45 ic).

What is then, in the last analysis, the value of comparative religion? Certainly not to convince us that one mode of belief is the preparation for another, or to lead to a decision as to which is "best." One might as well regard ancient or exotic styles of art as preparations for and aspirations towards one's own. Nor can the value of this discipline be thought of as one conducing to the development of a single universally acceptable synthetic faith embodying all that is "best" in every faith; such a "faith" as this would be a mechanical and lifeless monstrosity, by no means a stream of living water, but a sort of religious Esperanto. Comparative religion can demonstrate that all religions spring from a common source are, as Jeremias says, the "dialects of a single spiritual speech." We cannot, therefore, take the formulae of one religion and insert them in another without incongruity. One can recognize that many formulae are identical in different religions; confront, for example, St. Thomas, "Creation, which is the emanation of all being from the not-being, which is no thing" (*Sum Theol.* 1.45.Ic) with the Vedic "Being is engendered from nonbeing" (*asatah sad ajâyata*, RV x.72.3), and such comparisons can be validly employed

(even by the most orthodox) as what St. Thomas calls "extrinsic and probable proofs" of the validity of a given dogma.

But of greater value than this is the clarification that results when the formulae of one tradition are collated with those of another. For, as we have already seen, every tradition is necessarily a partial representation of the truth intended by tradition universally considered; in each tradition something is suppressed, or reserved, or obscure which in another may be found more extensively, more logically, or more brilliantly developed. What then is clear and full in one tradition can be used to develop the meaning of what may be hardly more than alluded to in another. Or even if in one tradition a given doctrine has been definitely named, a realization of the significance of this definition may lead to the recognition and correlation of a whole series of affirmations in another tradition, in all of which the same doctrine is implicit, but which had previously been overlooked in their relation to one another. It is thus a great advantage to be able to make use of the expression *Vedic exemplarism* ; or conversely, to speak of Christian yoga immediately brings out the analogy between St. Bernard's considerable, contemplated, and *rattus* with Sanskrit *dhârana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*.

To many Christians, no doubt, Sri Ramakrishna's primary attachment to the cult of the Great Mother gives offense. Nothing is, indeed, more usual than to consider that Christianity, whether for better or worse, adheres to purely masculine interpretations of divine being; the Christian speaks of a Father, but not of a Mother in Heaven, whereas in India the ancient love of the Magna Mater maintains itself at the present day on equal terms with that of the Propator. And yet the doctrine of the maternity of the divine nature is repeatedly, however reservedly, affirmed in Christian theology, fundamentally in that of the "two natures," more explicitly in that of the temporal and eternal nativities, and in that of the Generation of the Son as a vital operation from conjoint principles - "*Processio Verbi in divines dicitur generatia . . . quae est operatic vitae . . . et propter hoc prairie dicitur genital et Filius*" (*Sum. Theol.* 1.27.2; cf. I.198.2c, "in every act of generation there is an active and a passive principle."). It is inasmuch as "eternal foliation does not depend on a temporal mother" (*ibid.* 111.,35.5 ad a) that Eckhart can speak of the "act of fecundation latent in eternity" and say that "it is God who has the treasure and the bride in Him" that the "Godhead wantons with the Word," and that "his birth in *Mary ghostly* was to God better pleasing than His nativity of her in the pasha" One sees that when St. Thomas speaks of "that Nature by which the Father begets" (*Sum. Theol.* I.41.5), the reference is really to the Magna

Mater, the Vedic Aditi, not to mention other names of the One Madonna, and sees what is really meant by the otherwise obscure assertion that notwithstanding primary matter "recedes from likeness to God, yet . . . it retains a certain likeness to the divine being" (ibid. 1.14.11 ad 3). *Natura Naturata* indeed "retains" a certain likeness to "*Natura Naturans, Creatrix, Deus*": Mother Earth to Mother Nature, Mary in the flesh to Mary ghostly. One need only consider Genesis I:27, "To the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" in connection with Galatians 3:28, "according to the image of Him that created him, where there is neither male nor female," to realize that whereas Essence and Nature in divines are one simple substance without composition, the very fact that the conjoint principles can be separately exemplified is proof that the Supreme Identity can be truly spoken of either as Father or as Mother, or as Father-Mother, just as in the Vedas the Divine "parents" are indifferently "Fathers" (*pitara*) or "Mothers" (*matarâ*), or as "That One, spirited, despirited" (*tad ekam anit avatam*, RV x.z29.a, where no gender is implied; cf. Eckhart's "Where these two abysses hang, equally spirited, dispirited, there is the Supreme Being").

Thus we may go so far as to assert on behalf of a true "comparative religion" that however a religion may be self-sufficient if it be followed to the very end to which it is directed, there can hardly be supposed a way so plain that it could not here and there be better illuminated by other lights than that of the pilgrim's private lantern, the light of any lantern being only a refraction of the Light of lights. A diversity of routes is not merely appropriate to a diversity of travelers, who are neither all alike, nor start from one and the same point, but may be of incalculable aid to any traveler who can rightly read the map; for where all roads converge, there can be none of them that does not help to clarify the true position of the center of the maze, "short of which we are still in a duality." Hence we say that the very implications of the phrase "religious tolerance" are to be avoided: diversity of faith is not a matter for unwilling "toleration" out of divine appointment. And this will hold good even if we sincerely believe that other faiths are inferior to our own, and in this sense relatively "evil": for as Augustine says, "The admirable beauty of the universe is made up of all things. In which even what is called evil, well-ordered and in its place, is the eminent commendation of what is good" (*Enchiridion* xiii), whom St. Thomas quotes with approval, adding that "The universe, the present creation being supposed, cannot be better, be-cause of the most beautiful order given to things by God" (*Sum. Theol.* 1.48.1 and 1.25.6 ad 3). As Augustine also says, "There is no evil in things, lout only in the sinner's

misuse of them" (*De doctrine christiana* III.12). As to the sinner's "misuse," who can assure us of that, with respect to which it has been said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged"?

In the matter of direction towards the Kingdom of Heaven "within you,"⁴ the modern world is far more lacking in the will to seek, than likely to be led astray by false direction. From the Satanic point of view there could hardly be imagined a better activity than to be engaged in the "conversion of the heathen" from one to another body of dogmas: that, surely, was not what was meant by the injunction, "Go thou and preach the Kingdom of God"-or was He mistaken, when He said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you"?

⁴ sanskrit *hrdayakàse, antarbhutasya khe.*