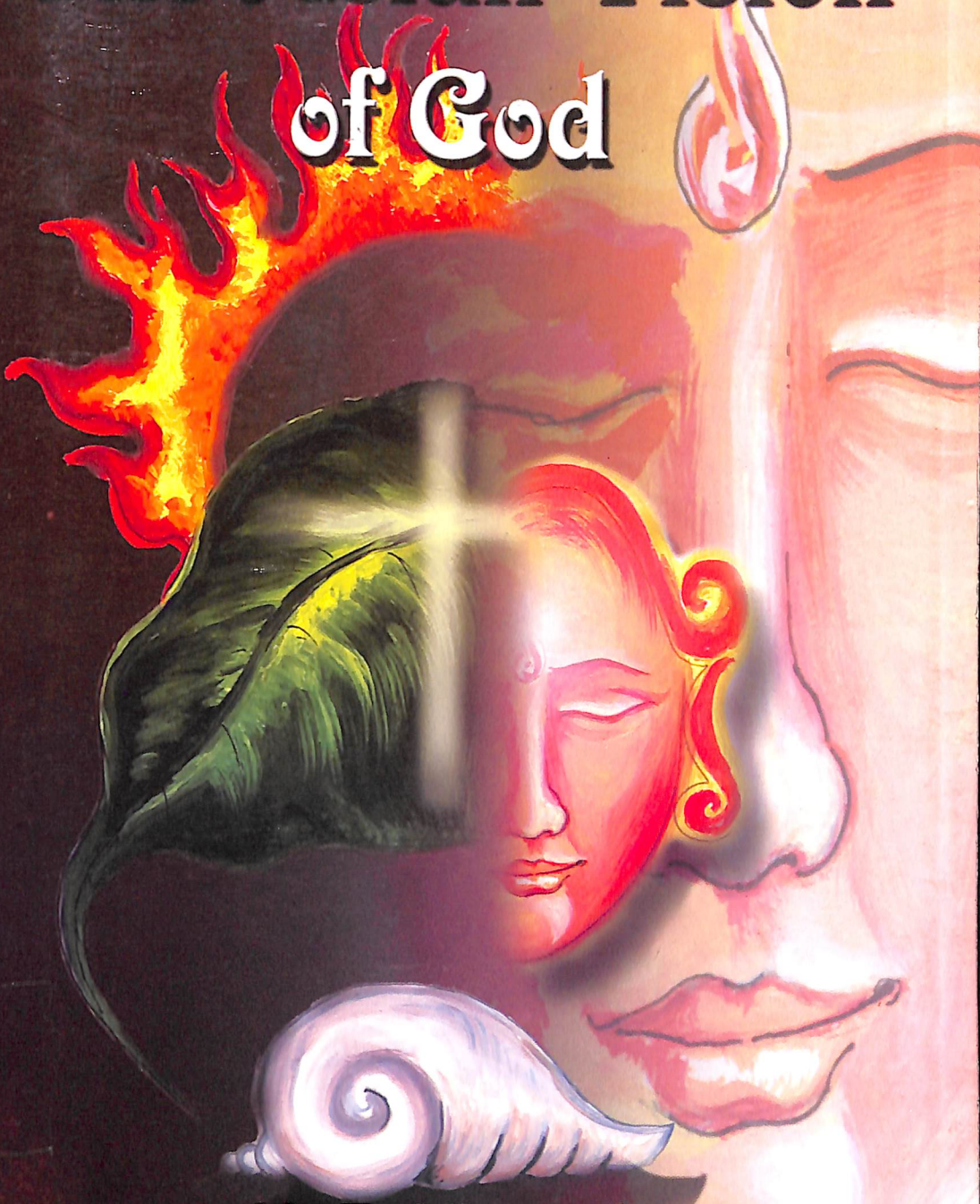
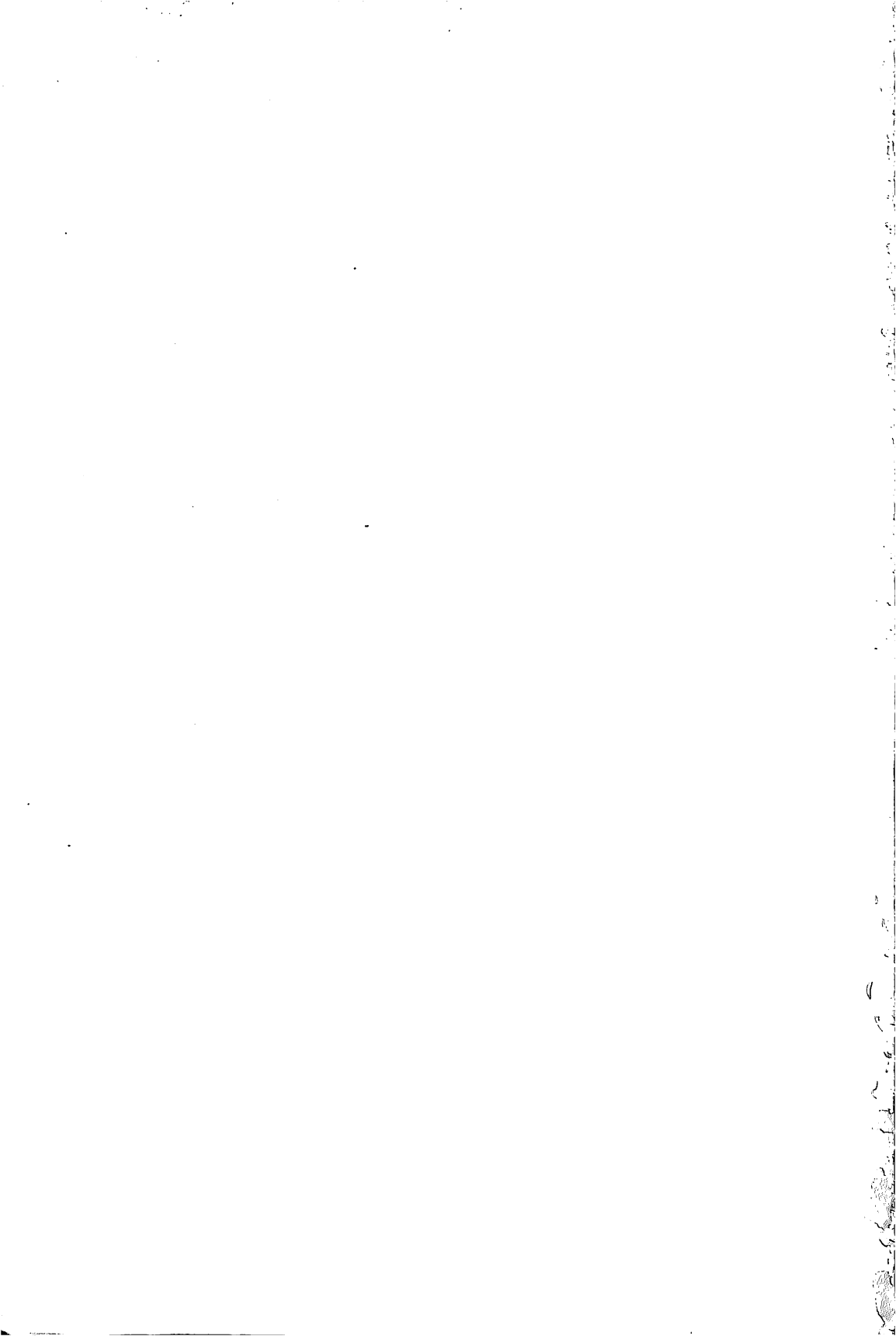


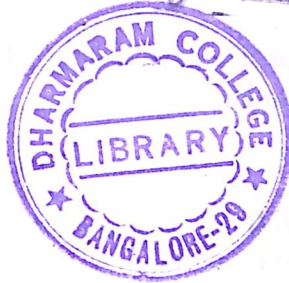
The Asian Vision of God



V. F. Vineeth



ASIAN VISION OF GOD



V. F. VINEETH CMI

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About the Cover

Asian Vision of God depends on the Asian way of seeing God and listening to His voice. The contemplative face and the conch represent these two experiences. Fire is a symbol of God acclaimed by most of the Asian religions, including those without scriptures. The green leaf represents the love for nature cherished by the prime settlers of the land and the cross speaks of the birth of Christianity from Asia.

PREFACE

From the very beginning human beings have groped in darkness, having no way to see the invisible God in some visible form. They sought him in the form of cosmic rays and elements, of luminous globes and galaxies, of mighty mountains, roaring rivers and amazing water falls. But His face ever remained hidden beneath all of them. The meditation on elements were enrapturing and on rays enlightening, but they all told the humans that they are only visible symbols of the invisible face of God. "I am who am Being," the Lord of the universe said through nature. The humans admired nature, seeing the reflection of God in them and elevated many of them to the pedestal of nature-gods. In course of time the nature gods vanished, leaving behind them a holy lesson that the whole nature is sacred and divine, because they symbolize the divine. Through them God revealed his face as if through a veil.

Who is beneath this veil? Reason came forward to see God through the prism of ideas. Through ideas God was internalized and has become an object of human intelligence. A lot of philosophy was articulated on everything on earth or under the sun, but above all on the source of all, the primal cause (*karana-brahman*) of the East or the unmoved mover (*motor immobilis*) of the West. However sharp and pointed was the human ingenuity and thought, God remained elusive and refused to identify himself with any caricatures of God, which the human thought had created.

The search for the vision of God now turned to another realm, namely "experience." Of course, experience was there when the humans saw his veiled face in nature, and as arid idea in the mind; but, all of them lacked immediacy, the warmth and depth of a direct encounter. So the human being prayed "remove the golden veil from your face, let me see your face directly." Then, what

about the ideas about God? They were considered fantastic and automatically accepted. But later it dawned upon mankind that they, though cogently and coherently worked out, are only the human ingenuity on the essence and existence of God, a creativity rising from and resting in the realm of reason. We get only glimpses of the real face of God through reason. The real God is still to be sought after, who is beyond the level of reason. Here comes the realm of faith, which religions propose and promote.¹ Faith, as St. John of the Cross rightly says, is a confused and dark way of knowing God. But that is the only way to know God directly. Faith is a submissive acceptance of the Truth which says, "I am the source of all light" and as such greatly surpasses the realm of human reason.

This *Atman* (Divine Self) is not attained by instruction, or by intelligence or by learning. On the contrary, it is given to those who are well disposed and therefore well chosen by the Spirit itself.² And Jesus said, "No one knows the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal."³ When this knowledge is revealed, the human beings accept it unconditionally, with a sense of surrendering, and instead of knowing by reason (although it is not completely ruled out) one disposes oneself for realizing the Known in one's own self. Knowing, as ancient Indian Seers joyfully maintained, is becoming.⁴ And faith is the wisdom *par excellence* through which this becoming process takes place. Faith gets enlightened and emboldened by the light and delight, flowing from God directly to the inner depth of the soul.

This book is not a work on mysticism, but a search to see different aspects of the face of God, which Asians see, through their reason but much more through their faith. The book has two parts and eleven chapters in all. They are knit together with certain coherence, though they were written in different phases of my inward journey. They are not ordered chronologically, but thematically. For the

integrity of each chapter, certain ideas already mentioned are either repeated briefly or elaborated further, if it is the proper place for it.

The first part has four chapters dealing with the Hindu and Buddhist ways of seeing reality or God. The first chapter is on "The Upanishadic Search for the Realizational Knowledge of God." Thus, the book starts with a typical Indian vision of God, where knowing is realization (*sakshatkara*). It is in striking contrast to the rationalist or idealist understanding where reality or God is too much objectified and reduced to an idea of the mind or a power governing from afar. The Upanishads called God the inner Self, the ultimate subject already in us. Yet, it is up to us to give ourselves to a fuller realization of what we secretly possess and are vaguely aware of. This upanishadic approach of immanence is balanced by an approach to the transcendent God in the second chapter, where we make a search into the vision and experience of God according to the *Bhagavad Gita*, a classical and probably the most influential book among the Hindus, scholars and the ordinary people alike. A deeply theistic and devotional approach to God is seen here and the transcendence is well emphasized, though he is also seen as the "inner controller."

In the third chapter we go to the varieties of God experience in Hinduism, beginning from the pre-Arian civilization passing through many of the important phases of its development. It is in this chapter we discuss the contributions of the Indian philosophical schools on the vision and nature of God and God-realization in us. In the fourth chapter we turn to Buddhism, a religion from India, but rapidly spread all over the East. What strikes me most is that here is a highly disciplined and ascetic religion with perfect silence on what we call God. Maybe Buddhism thinks, what we call God is not the ultimate reality, but our idea about it. Silence on God does not mean that

Buddhism has nothing to say on reality and the predicamental situation of the mankind. It is a spiritual path, a "godless search" for what we call God, the core of which lies in the negation of all negations. It is a search to overcome negation which we experience everyday in our life of finitude.

In the second part we are dealing with certain traditional Asian approaches to God, relating them with Christian experience. An inter and intra-religious dialogue is in the offing, paving way to the development of an Indian Christian theology and mysticism. Thus, chapter five begins with an intense search to our own interior depth as outlined in the Upanishads and complemented by a similar, but distinct, approach to interiority as developed in the Eastern Christianity in the first centuries of Christian era. This search for interiority is well complimented in the sixth chapter, which provides us a comparative look into theism in Hinduism and Christianity. God who is transcendent and immanent at the same time can be approached from either side. However, India had developed a taste to see God as the ultimate subject within the subjectivity of the human individual. This, however, is not alien to Christianity, because Jesus presents himself as the ultimate and unavoidable subject of our innermost actions. "I am the Vine and you are the branches... without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). In the seventh chapter the search for interiority is further developed with a glimpse into the advaitic experience of God in Hinduism vis a`vis the Christian approach to the centrality of Jesus in religious experience as the basic *Namarupa* (name and form) of the Logos and the final, resistless and unifying rhythm of the divine in our human nature. Religions tend to shed their differences, though not giving up their identity, in their onward march to the Absolute, who is free from all restrictions and to him we offer our homage and worship. In the eighth chapter we make a penetrating search into the Absolute who is beyond all articulations, drawing inspirations from Sankara and Dionysius,

two champions of apophatism from the East. Chapter nine outlines an Asian image of Christ, once again drawing our inspirations and resources from the Eastern heritage of Christianity. The sad reality in the East is that the dominant Church, privileged with the ecclesiastical power, is still the colonial Church of the West, whereas the Eastern Catholic Church, especially in India, is neglected and her rights of equality are trodden under foot by the powerful Western Church.

From the earlier stage of my philosophical search onwards, I was deeply interested in inculturation and dialogue. As my thoughts developed, along with the promptings and teachings of the Church, and challenges from other religions, clearer articulations seemed to be necessary. This was an attempt to look at the theology of dialogue and inculturation as the story of my life, which is the content of the tenth chapter. Here I make a distinction between religious pluralism as a historical fact and as a theological act. Finally, in chapter eleven we make a concluding search into the prospect of peace and problems of conflicts among religions. Peace is what every religion proposes and promotes. But unfortunately conflicts arise. The divisive or dia-bolical (falling apart) tendency of conflicts among religions are to be overcome by a counter effort of a unitive or sym-bolic (falling together) tendency of mutual acceptance in graceful respect for all and sincere fidelity to one's own religion.

Some of the materials of these chapters were written many years ago, when I was a research student of a strict academic rigour, such as the "Varieties of God-Experience in Hinduism" (ch. 3), written in Oxford in 1972 under the title "The Hindu Concept of God" for a book on "God in Religions" by Double Day Publishers. Though I revere such academic pursuits even now, my mind has changed very much. Now learning has become devotion to the truth and understanding, surrender to its light.

The style and flow of language is then different, as theology becomes the searching commitment to God's words working in each one of us.

I gratefully remember all those who have generously helped me to make the idea of this book a reality. My sincere and heartfelt thanks are specially due to Mrs. Molly Jose whose patient and pains-taking work on the manuscript is a precious gift I have received from God, and of course, from her intense commitment to her job. I joyfully remember also the valuable and insightful suggestions and corrections of the manuscript given by Fr. Saju Chackalackal CMI, whose unselfish commitment to serve others is something wonderful, which I appreciate very much. To convert idea into the visual image is a wonderful task. I am happy that I met Sebeesh, a young artist, at the right moment. Sebeesh has enriched this book with a meaningful cover design and thought-provoking symbols for each chapter titles. My sincere appreciation for his work.

To the readers of this book I wish grace of God to see the invisible face of God and to listen to His silent voice, which will make our minds serene and hearts blissful.

V. F. Vineeth CMI

1st January, 2004
Vidyavanam Ashram

Notes:

- 1 Ref. Pope John Paul II, *The Encyclical: Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason), Rome: Vatican, 1997, Nos. 36-44.
- 2 *Katha Up.* II.23
- 3 *Mundaka Up.* III.2.9
- 4 *Lk.* 10:22

CHAPTER 1

THE REALIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

A Journey through Upanishadic Spirituality



Upa-ni-shad: sit on the ground near the Master

I Introduction

The Upanishads are one of the world's profound writings. They take us to the absolute, transcendent Brahman, beyond all comprehension, as well as to the immanent Atman residing in the cave of every human heart. The way to know this Brahman-Atman is meditation through which one gives oneself to a realizational process of knowing and becoming. Here study becomes relentless search and studentship becomes a sacrifice. The Upanishads

present a spirituality of divine rhythm reflected in cosmic harmony, which is open to all. As an eye of Indian culture the Upanishadic vision can provide us with several sane and salutary lessons on the path of inculturation of our Christian faith in this land of Rishies.

If I were asked ... under what sky the human mind has mostly developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which will deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant – I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature we, here in Europe, we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thought of Greeks and Romans, and of the Semetic race, the Jewish, may draw that corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact, more truly human life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life – again I should point to India.

These prophetic words of Prof. Max Mueller are being realized now. The Western interest for Asian spirituality is ever growing. What did Max Mueller, a renowned professor of Oxford University almost hundred years ago, discover in India? Perhaps Max Mueller would have noticed a marked difference in the Indian approach to God, which, he thought, could be a corrective to the then Western thinking.

India is the only country which called God and the human being by the same word *Atman*, the self. This gives us a clue that God is to be approached and understood, not simply as the object of our mind, but also as the subject of our being. The human being is a subject, a self. Self here means a being in whom awareness is centered in consciousness. God is the supreme Self whose all-pervading awareness is centered in supreme consciousness which makes him also supremely personal. As the source and the inner

sense of all what is, he is in every being, though the being does not know him. In a unique manner this supreme Self dwells within the human self. God is the ultimate Self, the *Atman* within us and this Self is to be experienced and realized. This is spirituality. Today people from all over the world, especially from the West, fed up with scientific research, objective studies, abstract ideas are turning to their own selves to see the unseen wealth hidden in the depth of their own selves. This is to be experienced, to be brought out, to be awakened. The Upanishadic seekers have made a deep search into this abiding Self, not however abandoning His character of supreme transcendence. In fact, the transcendent God is discovered inside, as immanent, as the Ultimate Self. Knowing him is realizing him within us. Thus knowledge becomes realizational.

The Upanishads are brilliant examples of *knowing by becoming*. The classical text runs as follows:

Sa yo ha vai tat paramam brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati

He who knows the Supreme Brahman, becomes Brahman himself (*Mund.Up.* III. 2.9).²

Knowing is becoming. This also reminds us of the ancient Christian dictum: "Every Christian is another Christ." However, this does not mean that neither the Upanishads nor the Christian realization of Christ gives up intellectual search into the heights and depths of divinity, into human realities of life, need of discipleship, love for nature and well being of all.

II What is Upanishad?

The word upanishad is derived from *upa + ni + shad*, meaning: to sit on the ground near the master. In ancient days students who were seekers of divine wisdom sat at the feet of the master. This

expressed a humble attitude of the seekers as well as their veneration for the *Guru* whom they looked at as a realized person, that is, a person awakened to divine wisdom and following its holy path. The word '*upanishad*' also suggests that the upanishadic wisdom is handed over by the master to the disciple in a very personal manner. It is not a method of imparting wisdom by class lectures but by living together in a place more in touch with nature, where every aspect of life and occasional comments from the master become instructional and exhortative. Of course discussions were often held with the master and his disciples. This way of life very strongly reminds us of the disciples of Jesus sitting around their master, Jesus. As to the contents of the upanisads, *Paingala upanishad* says:

These knowers of Brahman, with their passions cast away, their inner senses alert, expound clearly that higher state of *Vishnu*. This is truth, this is the *upanishad* (IV, 24).

Though *Paingala*, a later upanishad, belonging to *sukla-yajur veda*, refers to *Vishnu* as the Ultimate, what is to be noted here is that the upanishads present before us the supreme knowledge about God, Brahman or *Atman*, which the seers who were pure in mind and alert in Spirit have obtained.

III Journey through Upanishadic Spirituality

We summarize our journey through upanishadic spirituality under the following captions:

1. Studentship of sacred wisdom as search and sacrifice
2. Search into the subtler than the subtle and greater than the great
3. In search of the mystery of the Absolute
4. Inner depth as the abode of the deathless *Atman*

5. Women in search of divine wisdom
6. Nature, the great teacher in our pursuit of wisdom
7. Spirituality as a search through the divine rhythm and cosmic harmony
8. The upanishadic spirituality and its Christian resonance

1. Studentship of Sacred Wisdom as Search and Sacrifice

Now, what people call sacrifice is really the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge. Only by the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge does he who knows obtain that (world). Now what people call 'What has been sacrificed', is really the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge, for only by sacrificing with the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge does one obtain the Self (*Chand. Up.*, VIII. 5.1).

The student of sacred wisdom is a *brahmacharin*, one whose attention is fixed on Brahman. Student-life is a 'walk' to the goal of brahman-realization (*Brahma-sakshatkara*). Everything else is secondary. Hence the virtues of discipleship (*brahmacharya*) included the following: *asteya* (non-possessiveness), *aparigraha* (freedom in what one possesses), *tapas* (inner ardour) etc. If goal of formation is the realization of *Brahman*, life is a constant search and striving (*tapas*) to reach this goal. Hence every understanding is realizational. Mere knowing does not make us holy or great. Commitment to the ideal or goal chosen makes a human being more authentic and spiritual. Holiness is there where knowledge and existence coincide or coalesce. In God, the supreme abode of holiness, existence and consciousness are identified. This is a clue to our becoming like God. Knowledge and existence should embrace each other. In human beings absolute identity of these will never take place. However, it should always be a process of

becoming more and more intensely one. In other words, our existence should get more and more characterized by our consciousness and our consciousness should reflect in what we are and what we do. This is innocence, sincerity, simplicity which is opposed to duplicity. That is why we love children. And our Lord said that unless we become like children, we would not enter the kingdom of God (Lk. 18:16-17).

The upanisadic study emphasizes this aspect of becoming like God, as we know him. The study becomes a sacrifice because all selfish attachments and entanglements, which will stand in the way of one's march to becoming like *Brahman*, are to be abandoned. *Kaivalya Upanishad* says:

Making one's body the lower fire-stick and the syllable *aum* the upper fire-stick, by the effort of kindling the flame of knowledge, the knower burns the bond of ignorance (*Kaivalya Up.* 11).

Tapas, inner ardour and austerity, is the effort of kindling the flame of knowledge. True wisdom is self-purifying. Body and speech are surrendered as if in a holocaust for the awakening of this divine wisdom. The way of this realization is meditation. Meditation is not mere argumentation, but a deep pondering, a 'holding' of the truth in faith and giving in of one's own self for the realization of what one contemplates. There is calm and stillness in the senses and in the mind which are disposed in silence to receive the divine light and energy and move to self-transformation. Strongly reminding us of the Eastern Fathers' emphasis on meditation of Jesus abiding in the cave of our heart, *Kaivalya Upanishad* continues:

Meditating on the lotus of the heart, which is pure and passionless, in the center of which is, the immaculate, the inconceivable, the sorrowless, the unmanifest of infinite form, the blissful, the tranquil, the immortal, the source

of *brahma*. Him who is without beginning, middle or end, who is one, all pervading, who is wisdom and bliss, who is formless, wonderful, who has Uma as his companion, the highest Lord... By meditating on him the sage reaches the source of beings, the witness of all who is beyond all darkness (*Kaivalya Up.* 6-7).

2. Search into the Subtler than the Subtle and the Greater than the Great

Subtler than the subtle, greater than the great is the Self that is set in the cave of the (heart) of the creature. One beholds Him as being actionless and becomes freed from sorrow, when through the grace of the Creator he sees the Lord and His majesty (*Svetasvatara Up.* III. 20).

Here is outlined a search of a human soul for the transcendent and the immanent God who is greater than the great and subtler than the subtle. He is to be sought in the highest heavens and at the same time in the cave of one's own heart. The realizational knowledge of him, which is a kind of beholding rather than knowing, liberates us from sorrow and for this purpose grace of the same Lord is necessary. In a way various upanishads highlight different aspects of this text. The great transcendent God to be meditated upon in the stilled silence of the senses and sharp concentration of the mind is one who abides within one's own heart as the Ultimate Self. The Supreme Self within the human self is the core of the mystery of human existence. One who discovers this through *tapas* and fervor crosses over to life immortal. Our life is a journey to this immortality. Joyful yet austere formation, disciplined mind, committed life are necessary for this realization. In exploring into the mystery of this *atman-brahman* reality upanishads bring to light different aspects of the Ultimate Self as the one supremely transcendent, profoundly immanent, universally present, infinitely powerful and so on.

3. In Search of the Mystery of the Absolute

Uddalaka Aruni, the father of Svetakethu, instructs the boy about the ultimate truth and self of everything as follows:

Just as, my dear, by one clod of clay all that is made of clay becomes known, the modification be only a name arising from speech while the truth is that it is just clay... Thus is that teaching (*Chand. Up.* VI. 4, 6).

Here the clay stands for brahman and all that is made of clay stands for the vast universe. The implication is that knowing brahman we know everything that is in the universe because they are made of a combination of name and form, both of which have their origin from Brahman himself. *Namarupa*, name and form, is the central key to the upanishadic theory of creation. Everything has proceeded from the infinite source of being assuming name and form, *nama* and *rupa*. *Nama* stands for the essential content of the being and *rupa* for its particular form. Every being is a combination of these two. Because both of them proceed from the Supreme Being, this Supreme is the one to be sought after, to be understood, to be realized. Hence, Uthalaka said:

In the beginning, my dear, this was being alone, one only without a second (*Chand. Up.* VI. 2, 1).

With this sentence we are invited to move towards the beginningless beginning of everything which is pure Being. Everything that exists here have their origin from this. The process of this One 'becoming many by assuming name and form' is described in detail with a mixture of mythical and philosophical thinking. The salient point that runs through this art of thinking is that the One who was in the beginning is the sole source of all beings, material and spiritual. Mystery surrounds Him, because as the Infinite One He

is ever incomprehensible and ineffable. *Katha Upanishad* describes this unfathomable mystery as follows:

(The Self) without sound, without touch and without form, undecaying, is likewise, without taste, eternal, without smell, without beginning, without end, beyond the great, abiding, by discerning that, one is freed from the face of death (*Katha Up.* I.3,15).

The Supreme Self is not an object of our thinking or of any sort of knowing. He is by nature the subject. The great question is how to know the knower. If we know him by making him an object of our knowing, the knower is known not as subject but as object. A real knowledge of knower is only possible by participating in the knowledge of the knower, i.e., by getting characterized by the very knowing of the knower himself. This means that while knowing him we put on the characteristics of the supreme Self, the Spirit, and know him as subject operating in us. This knowledge is realizational and not purely rational. As Paul in his epistle to Romans says: "God's very Spirit unites with our Spirit to declare that we are God's children" (Rom. 8:16).

The supreme Self is to be sought not through senses, not through mind, but through the very consciousness of the supreme imparted to us through faith. Mind and senses do play their role. But faith, as God's own light shining within us, is the real guide which takes us to the ultimate subject of all our actions. The Lord said "I am the vine and you are the branches... Without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). The branch exists in the vine and the vine operates through the branches. For Christians this text can be a clue to the understanding of the supreme Self as an abiding Self within us.

4. Inner Depth as the Abode of the Deathless Atman

The transcendent God is beyond our reach. All our attempts of knowing him will be in vain, unless God himself reveals him to us. But the transcendent one, though he is absolutely incomprehensible and unapproachable, has deigned to condescend and dwell in our human hearts. He is therefore profoundly immanent. Hence, we are asked to discover him in our own selves.

He who dwells in all beings, yet is other than all beings, whom no beings know, whose body is all beings, who controls all beings from within, he is your Self, the inner controller, the immortal (*Brah. Up.* III.7.15).

The Supreme Self abides within us as our inner controller and the ultimate Self. It is this Self that is to be experienced and realized. I have already said that the symbol of the Vine and the branches used by Jesus is a clue for a Christian understanding of this abiding Self. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* illustrates this through the story of a faithful seeker called Brgu who made this journey through several layers of awareness such as, of food, life, mind, pure consciousness and bliss. Each time his master told him: "Seek *Brahman* through inner ardour (*tapas*)" (*Tait. Up.* III.1-6). In this story food stands for the awareness of the object or of the world, life for the beginning of the awareness of the self, mind for a higher awareness in mental level, consciousness for the beginning of divine awareness and bliss for the participation of the self in divine nature. Finally he reached *Atman*. We too have to make this journey. As awareness deepens our values change and we become more and more liberated. True wisdom is liberating and the wise leave behind both pain and pleasure alike.

Realizing through self-contemplation that primal God, difficult to be seen, deeply hidden, set in the cave of the

heart, dwelling in the deep, the wise leave behind both pain and pleasure (*Katha Up.* I. 2.12).

Search into this *Atman* needs constant effort, undying spirit of *tapas* and sacrifice. *Katha Upanishad* says:

As oil in sesame seed, as butter in cream, as water in hidden springs, as fire in fire sticks, so is the *Atman* grasped in one's self when one searches for him in truth and with fervor (*Surya Up.* I, 15).

Tapas, the ascetic fervour, was one of the necessary virtues students of sacred knowledge had to cultivate. *Atman* is obtained only by those who are purified in heart, well disciplined, and determined to reach the inner cave where *Atman* abides. Even if the student is determined and devoted yet the *Atman* realization is finally a gift of the self-revealing *Atman* himself.

This *Atman* is not attained by instruction or by intelligence or by learning. By him whom he chooses is the *atman* attained. To him the *atman* reveals his own being (*Katha Up.* II, 23).

Holiness is a necessary condition to obtain this *atman*. Hence the text continues:

The one who has not turned away from wickedness, who has no peace, who is not concentrated, whose mind is restless – he cannot realize the *Atman*, who is known by wisdom (*Katha Up.* II, 24).

Divine wisdom is a gift of the Spirit and not the result of human thinking or argumentation. Reason can help us to make this way to divine wisdom. But reason has its own limitations. Hence, reason gives way to faith. Faith is a response to a light from within, which forces me to accept the self-revealing God in history as well in the depth of my own being. Therefore, disposition of mind, a

submissive mentality devoid of pride and egoism, is necessary to receive this divine wisdom. We do find the same principle declared by Jesus to the Jews who were questioning him and refusing to believe in him, when he said that only those who want to do the will of God will understand the meaning and veracity of his teaching (Jn. 7:17).

5. Women in Search of Divine Wisdom

The Upanishadic wisdom and spirituality was open to all. The ancient Upanishads bear testimony for that. What draws our special attention is the magnificent roles certain women played in the upanishadic search for truth and divine wisdom. The presence and active involvement of women in discussions and ongoing search shows that women were welcome to pursue truth and follow the path of wisdom just like men. This freedom granted to all from such ancient times is to be appreciated.

Maitreyi was one of such highly noble women. Her heart set on Brahman, she was a great seeker of the divine wisdom. She was not interested in worldly wealth and comforts. Hence, when her husband, leaving for *sannyasa* (the life of a wandering monk), wanted to settle all matters of wealth with her, she said: "What shall I do with this enormous wealth which cannot earn immortality, the sole desire of my soul?" Yanjavalkya was deeply impressed by her quest for knowledge and immortality. So he explained to her how love of husband and wife, children and wealth, is ultimately rooted in the one who is all in all. This is the *Atman* who is to be seen, to be listened to, to be thought about and deeply meditated upon. He concluded "it is only by seeing, hearing, thinking about, and deeply meditating upon the *Atman* that all this is known" (Brah. Up. II. 4.5). Maitreyi left her possessions and went in search of the *Atman*, the inner controller,

the immortal. Maitreyi has now become an icon of the upanishadic search for the *Atman*.

Another great woman appears in the same Upanishad as an earnest seeker with powerful rhetoric. She is Gargi, a great philosopher. In an assembly of seekers and philosophers gathered around the great teacher Yajnavalkya she raises her questions as follows:

As a warrior son of the Kashys or the Vithehas might rise up against you, having strung his unstrung bow and having taken in his hand two pointed foe-piercing arrows, even so, O' Yajnavalkya, do I face you with two questions. Answer me these (*Brah. Up.* III. 8.2).

Then she put her question to Yajnavalkya:

That, O' Yajnavalkya, of which they say it is above the heaven, it is beneath the earth, that which is between these two, the heaven and earth, that which people call the past, the present and the future, across what is that woven, like warp and woof? (*Brah. Up.* III.8.3)

See, how eloquently she has worded her question and how powerfully introduced with the simile of bow and arrow. The courage she has, the rhetoric she used with ease and the persistence with which she presses her point to the end is simply marvellous.

To this question Yajnavalkya answered: "Across space is that woven like warp and woof." But Gargi continued her question: "Across what is space woven like warp and woof?" Yajnavalkya answered again:

That, O Gargi, the knowers of *Brahman*, call the Imperishable. It is neither gross nor fine, neither short nor long, neither glowing red (like fire) nor adhesive (like water), attached, without taste, without smell, without eyes, without ears, without voice, without mind, without

radiance, without breath, without a mouth, without measure, having no within and no without. It eats nothing and no one eats it (*Brah. Up.* III.8.8).

Verily, that Imperishable, O Gargi, is unseen but is the seer, is unheard but is the hearer, unthought but is the thinker, unknown but is the knower. There is no other seer but this, there is no other hearer but this, there is no other thinker but this, there is no other knower but this. By this Imperishable, O Gargi, is space woven like warp and woof (*Brah. Up.* III. 8.11).

What impresses me is that at a time, at least one millenium before Christ, when philosophy and sacred wisdom was handed over only to a selected few and that too secretly, the Upanishadic seekers enjoyed such freedom and admitted every true seeker to the assembly, irrespective of sex or caste. As Radhakrishnan rightly observes "The later subjection of women and their exclusion from vedic studies do not have the support of the Upanishads" (1969:201).

6. Nature, the Great Teacher in our Pursuit of Wisdom

Though the search into Atman was outlined largely by Brahmanas, we see also Kshatriyas, such as, King Varuna and other great leaders in pursuit of this knowledge. We also see the doors of wisdom open to a boy whose ancestral heritage was not known at all. This is the beautiful story of a boy called Satyakama Jabala who was enlightened by the teaching he received from nature.

Upanishadic teaching took place quiet often in the forest, in *gurukulas* of ashram setting. Hence, they were always in the heart of nature. Nature was *the* big library they had. And nature can take us to the profoundest mysteries of the Invisible. Unpolluted nature itself is the visible expression of the invisible. With its

peaceful silence, undisturbed serenity and natural beauty it elevates human hearts to that One who is the source and architect of all what we see. When Satyakama approached his master, as the usual custom demanded, he was asked to tend and take care of the master's cows for a stipulated period of time. This was his *gurudakshina*. Satyakama faithfully did his duty. On his way back he was instructed by a bull, a flame of fire, a swan, and a diver-bird (*Chand. Up. IV.4.1-9.1*). Satyakama accepted their teachings with great reverence. When he reached his master's home, the master found him already shining like one knowing *Brahman* and asked him: "who has taught you?" Satyakama replied: "Others than human beings. But I wish, revered Sir, that you teach me" (*Chand. Up. IV. 9.2*).

The really enlightened one is not aware that he/she is enlightened and humbly seeks wisdom from a human master. Satyakama was enlightened not by the teachings of a human guru but by creatures God had provided on his way to the house of the master. Nature and the various creatures in it can provoke our thinking and lead us to the deep mysteries of reality. This is wisdom. The story of Satyakama tells us that divine wisdom can be imparted also through meditation on nature. It reminds us of what St. Bernard said: "what I know of the divine sciences and Holy Scripture, I learned in woods and fields. I have no other masters than the beaches and oaks."³

7. Spirituality as a Search through the Divine Rhythm and Cosmic Harmony

The Upanishads give us a beautiful picture of the human beings integrated into the cosmos and into the divine Self within. The relentless search for the divine is in perfect rhythm and harmony of the universe. The human being is not an isolated entity in this world. He is the bearer of divine consciousness and the tremendous

power and light proceeding from it. But he is placed in this world, and through his body, is well integrated into the universe. This harmony and rhythm between all beings are to be maintained. It is the duty of the human self to safeguard and foster this harmony.

This earth is (like) honey for all beings, and all beings are (like) honey for this earth. This shining, immortal person who is in this earth and with reference to oneself, this shining, immortal person who is in the body, he, indeed, is just this self. This is immortal, this is *Brahman*, this is all (*Brah. Up. II. 5,1*).

What we see here is a pre-established harmony between earth and all creatures and the marvelous indwelling presence of the divine person in this earth and in our body, which is formed from the earth. The divine person who dwells in this earth is declared to be the Immortal, the *Brahman* who contains everything in Himself. This section of the Upanishad continues to describe the harmonial inter-penetration of all beings in this universe and their relation to the humans and to the supreme Self abiding in the human being.

The sun is (like) honey for all beings and all beings are (like) honey for this sun. This shining, immortal person who is in this sun and with reference to oneself, this shining, immortal person who is in the eye, he is just this Self, this is immortal, this is *Brahman*, this is all (*Brah. Up. II.5.5*).

Already in the *Rgveda* the external sun represented the invisible sun. The *Gayatrimantra*, a prayer uttered to the rising sun, is also a prayer uttered for the rise of divine consciousness in our heart. In the text quoted above the visible sun is introduced. This sun enters into us through our eyes, which is sensitive to and receptive of the light of the sun. The one who dwells in the sun dwells in our eyes and becomes our inner eye or the third eye by which we read the mysteries of God revealed to us. The passage continues, stating that every being in the cosmos is some how related to the

human being. They are constantly in touch with us so much so, he who dwells in that being dwells within us, particularly in that part of the body through which that element of cosmos is received into us. Thus the one who resides in the air resides in our breath; the one who resides in the sound resides in our ear; the one who resides in the moon resides in our mind and so on. Though the *Atman* is not divided into all these beings, *Atman* who abides in them, abides also in us. The harmony between all beings and the humans is ultimately based in this indwelling presence of the divine in creatures and in the humans. It looks like that the human being is placed in between the divine and the cosmos. The cosmos is the outermost layer. The divine the innermost. In between is the individual human being with a fragile, perishable body, containing the immortal shining divine person and deeply integrated into the vast universe and all its elements and creatures.

This Self, verily, is the lord of all beings, the kind of all beings. As all the spokes are held together in the hub and felly of a wheel, just so, in this self, all brings, all gods, all worlds, all breathing creatures, all these selves are held together (*Brah. Up.* II.5.15).

I am not developing a doctrine of the identification of the divine Self with the human self. I am more concerned about the characterization of the human self by the divine Self, so much so, the divine Self can say: "I am the Vine and your are the branches" (Jn. 15:5) and the human self can say: "For me to live is Christ" (Phil. I:21).

IV The Upanishadic Spirituality and Its Christian Resonance

The Christian resonance to the upanishadic approach can be appallingly different if Christ is looked upon just as an object of our study and research. Long years of seminary formation make

Christ too much an object of study, a theme of research, a matter of discussion. As far as academics is concerned, hardly any attempt is made to make study realizational. An intellectual genius may write a Ph.D. thesis on the divinity of Christ, and secure a creditable degree from a Catholic university. But it is not necessary that Christ lives in his/her heart. Holiness demands a becoming process, and in Christian sense, a becoming of another Christ. If we look with this eye into the upanishadic search for divine wisdom, it will make greater sense to us and pave a path of spiritual realization. I do not mean that the upanishadic wisdom is the same as the Christian faith and vision. Hindu faith is a search through revelation called *sruti*. *Upanishadic* texts were part of the *struti* literature. Sankara's option for Scripture as a valid means (*pramana*) for divine wisdom, depends entirely on faith (*shraddha*). This could be compared with John of the Cross who says that only faith and therefore Scripture is the ultimate valid source for divine experience and wisdom.⁴ The faith content of these religions is different and consequently several steps in the actualization of one's faith will also be different. However, I believe, we can draw a lot of very useful inspirations from this great and ancient tradition which the whole world admires. Holy Father Pope John Paul II, in his recent Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, says that philosophy is "moreover the mirror which reflects the culture of the people" (No. 103) and encourages all of us to have a deep understanding of philosophy. In India philosophy and religion are so deeply integrated and Upanishads are brilliant examples of the same. As a mirror of our Indian culture the Upanishads may give us valuable insights to understand and interpret our Christian mysteries.

This becomes clearer if we look into the teaching methodology of Jesus. He called his disciples "to be with him" (Mk. 3:13)) The imparting of sacred wisdom was through life. Each and every life situation unveiled new and deep mysteries of the kingdom Jesus was preaching. In the process of inculturation what we are really

concerned about is not to swallow any thinking from any other sources, but to absorb into us the basic pattern which is not incompatible with our Christian faith. Jesus also breathed his spirit into his disciples, suggesting that it is his very Spirit, consciousness, that should guide our life. It is a learning by becoming, as Jesus becomes the ultimate subject, the Supreme Self within our own individual selves. Jesus says this when he says: "I am the vine and you are the branches... Without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5).

The same insight can be drawn from Mary's '*fiat*' to the angel's words. The message of the angel about incarnation was something beyond the rational understanding of Mary. But Mary gives in to the realization of that in her own self. We can perhaps imagine what it would have been if Mary wrote a doctoral thesis on "understanding the incarnational reality of the Word." What would have been the line of arguments and the nature of conclusion she arrives at. But the real Mary did nothing of the sort. She simply said; "Let it happen in me." Mary learned by becoming. Her understanding of Jesus was not rational but fully realizational.

With appropriate changes, what happened in Mary should happen in each one of us. The word of God, the infinite wisdom transcending all human understandings, should get enfleshed in our being. This means that the Word, as the Vine in the branches, becomes the ultimate Self, the supreme Agent in all our actions. The Upanishads are emphasizing such an approach to the understanding of God who is the greater than the great and subtler than the subtle, who transcends all knowledge, yet resides in the inner depth of our own being. Let us know him by realizing.

Notes:

- 1 Max Mueller, *India, What can it Teach Us?* Bombay: Longmans and Green Co., 1905, p. 6.
- 2 All texts from the Upanishads are from S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1969.
- 3 Quoted by S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, p. 411-412, mentioned above.
- 4 Ref. *The Colected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD, Trivandrum: Carmel Publishing Centre, 1996, p. 15ff.

CHAPTER 2

GOD AS MY PERSONAL LORD

God in the *Bhagavad Gita*



man mana bhava: be of my mind (Gita 18:65)

I Introducing the Bhagavad Gita

Acknowledged to be one of the best classical presentations of devotion (*bhakti*), the *Gita* is primarily a *bhakti* literature, and presents the picture of a personal God. But the *Gita* is not simply a devotional literature. It has great theological depth, and deals with several other aspects of God.

Composed between the period of Buddha and Christ, the author of the *Gita* tries to combine the spiritual traditions that were prevalent in his time. They were the absolutism of the Upanisads,

the philosophical apophatism of Buddhism, the personal God of the *Bhakti* tradition, developed by the Alvars and Adiards of the South, and the dualistic and the metaphysical insights of the time-old *sankya* philosophy. The *Gita*, is not a systematic attempt to present the picture of God, intellectually integrating all these concepts into one. Rather, it is a spiritual experience of a person devoted to the Lord Krishna, whom he sees as the incarnation (*avatar*) of God, and the reconciliation of various existing traditions dealing with the Ultimate Reality. Hence, in the *Gita* the Ultimate is also presented in the Hindu Buddhist term of *Brahma-nirvana*, as the *bhakta's* Beloved, the *jnani's* wisdom and the unitary source of the *sankya* dualism. *Sankya*, though in itself dualistic, is no more ultimately dualistic in the *Gita* because it is from the Lord of the devotee, that the devotee (*bhakta*), the cosmic nature (*prakrti*) and the individual selves (*purushas*) proceed. In this chapter I am not trying to make a synthesis of all these concepts, which are presented in the *Gita*. Such an attempt may take away the spiritual sense, the contemplative flavour and the devotional enthusiasm, with which this poem is written. What I am presenting here are certain characteristic notes of the God in the *Gita*. This God is a personal friend, the author of all beings and the abiding power within each one of us, guiding our life and actions.

Being primarily a devotional literature, God is to be seen in the *Gita* from the perspective of a devotee (*bhakta*). Though absolute and all-transcendent by nature, this God comes down in a very personal way, takes his delight in the nearness of the human being, whom he loves, with whom he dialogues and to whom he manifests his own inner nature and abiding power. Hence, in the *Gita*, God is quiet often addressed as a Thou, the Supreme Thou, at whose feet the devotee surrenders his/her life. The lovely dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, in the whole book running through eighteen chapters, is symbolic of a deep communication between the Lord and the human soul. It is neither an emotionally over

charged nor an intellectually abstract dialogue. Profound insights of human life, deep mysteries hidden in the heart of God, practical instructions to go about one's own life, are communicated through this dialogue. It is very realistic, in the sense that, it has a beautiful blend of emotion and intellectuality, and a call for depth and deeper realization of that, which one admires as ideal. The *Gita* looks at God as the origin and source, master and guide, of the three fold yoga. Yoga is the golden means (*sadhana*) for God-realization, and is understood as the yoga of action, devotion and wisdom. The seeker (*sadhaka*) should develop a spirit of detachment in action, steadiness in wisdom, and intimacy in devotion.

The God of the *Gita*, thus emerges as a God who demands a spirit of perfect and unconditional renunciation in your actions. He is not simply a God who asks you to sing his *Namjapa*, or say prayers of the Lord, but a God who asks you to fight for justice and order in this Universe. He is also a God who demands a high degree of wisdom in you, which is steady and serene and keeps you ever in a state of perfect balance. Above all, he is a God who intimately loves you, is concerned about you and will lead you to salvation.

II God in the Bhagavad Gita

1. God as the Inner Controller of One's Actions

In the *Gita* dialogue between God and the soul begins in the context of a war. Arjuna is called to wage a war for justice. Arjuna does not comply with this request. Instead, he opts a life of a wandering monk (*sannyasin*), and proposes to live on alms. Krishna, instead of approving this seemingly pious desire, encourages him to go forward with the spirit of selflessness to restore order and righteousness (*dharma*) in this world, to bring out welfare for all. To Arjuna's question, whether action or meditation, which is better for gaining one's salvation, Krishna

says, it is neither action nor meditation but renunciation in action. Action with a spirit of perfect detachment, selflessness is highly recommended. This is a difficult call to be fulfilled. But Krishna does not leave Arjuna free. To the question whether such a selfless action is possible at all, Krishna give the following answer:

Surrendering all actions to Me, with your thoughts resting on the Self, freed from desire and selfishness, as also from the fever of anxiety or excitement, you engage yourself in this battle for justice (BG 3:30).

In this passage what Krishna suggests is that, he himself is the ultimate agent of all actions. By saying 'surrender all actions to me', Krishna says: 'deposit all actions on me and allow me to act in and through you'. The condition for right action is selflessness. Action performed without desire for the fruit of the action is pure, liberating and ultimately wins one's salvation. In other words, Krishna is also suggesting a new way of *sannyas*, for the warrior Arjuna, who should not flee from battle, but face the enemy and fight for justice. The word used in the text to surrender is actually *sam+nyas* which literally means, deposit or place well. Ramanuja gives the following comment:

Therefore, make over to me who am the Supreme Person, all activities regarding them as being done by Me, by meditating on the form of self as to be set into activity by Me only, on account of its being My body. And perform them, looking upon them merely as acts of worship to Me. Becoming free from hope in regard to their fruits and hence, free from any thought that they are yours, perform actions like fighting in the war without the fever (of anxiety) (*Gitabhasiya* 3:30).

The God of the *Gita* is a God of action. He acts in and through us. For this we must be free of selfishness. Krishna further exhorts that one's duty is to act, not to seek the fruit of the action.

Treating alike pain and pleasure, gain and loss, victory and defeat, engage yourself in the battle. Thus you will incur no sin (BG 2:38).

The agent of the action has to remain the same in all situations of life. unagitated, self-controlled and divinely motivated, he should act for the welfare of all. The Lord himself will abide in this hero of action, guiding him from within.

Christians may be reminded of what Lord Jesus said to his disciples. "I am the vine and you are the branches... Cut off from me you can do nothing" (15:5). Here the Lord says that, he is the inner agent of all our actions. It is he who provides us power and life. We should remain steady and serene, rooted in him and moved by him. The God of the Gospel, revealed in Jesus, in spite of its specific differences from the God of the *Gita*, is also a God of action who operates in and through us.

2. God as the Sole Foundation of Our Wisdom

The God of the *Gita* is a God who demands high degree of wisdom in his devotee. Devotion and action are good. But all these should be characterized by divine wisdom. The devotee must be enlightened. It is the enlightened soul, who is capable of performing action with the spirit of renunciation. Enlightenment in the Indian tradition is the opening of the third eye. In its essence it is an inner vision characterized by faith. The Sanskrit word for faith is *sraddha*, which literally points to one's unconditional attention to what the Lord says and commitment to the same. Krishna says:

The man of *sraddha*, the devoted, the master of his senses, obtains wisdom (*jnanam*). Having obtained wisdom he goes promptly to the Peace Supreme (BG 4:39).

It is faith that leads one to enlightenment. Light, delight and peace go together. Enlightenment by which, one arrives at stable wisdom, demands transcendence over one's own desires, and a high degree of focusing on the Divine Self within:

When a man abandons all the desires of the heart and is satisfied in the Self by the Self, then is he said to be one stable in wisdom (BG 2:55).

The source of stable wisdom is within. Wisdom is not mere knowledge. Our knowledge is from outside. As St. Thomas Aquinas says there is nothing in the mind, that is not in the senses. Hence, all knowledge that has its origin from outside is not the true and lasting wisdom. When the individual self finds its rootedness in the divine Self within, and rests there with delight, the true wisdom begins. True wisdom is steady wisdom. This could be compared to the gift of wisdom which Christian's attribute to the Holy Spirit. There is a knowledge that comes from outside, and a wisdom that comes from within.

When this wisdom emerges the soul remains in steady wisdom.

He whose mind is not perturbed by adversity, who does not crave for happiness, who is free from attachment, anxiety and anger, is the sage of constant wisdom (BG 2:56).

We have three sources of 'unfreedom' within our own selves. They are the three 'A's: Attachment, Anxiety and Anger. They are closely interrelated. Attachment stems from desire. Desire leads to anxiety and anxiety turns out to be anger or despair, when desire is frustrated. Hence, the God of the *Gita* asks us to rise above likes and dislikes, friend and foe, praise and blame and remain the same in true wisdom.

He who is unattached everywhere, who is not delighted at receiving good, nor vexed at evil, is poised in wisdom (*BG* 2:57).

The God of the *Gita* is the Lord of the universe: but he is also the Supreme Self abiding within. The wise should cast off all doubts about this indwelling presence. Hence, Krishna says:

Therefore, severing with the sword of wisdom this ignorance-born doubt about the Self, dwelling in your heart, be established in yoga. Stand up O' Bharata (*BG* 4:42).

God is the seat of wisdom. The abiding God, the Atman, is to be realized by true wisdom (*jnana*), which is faith, whereas the transcendent God, the Lord, is to be worshipped with devotion (*bhakti*).

3 God as the Intimate and Personal Friend and the Lord

Hinduism makes a distinction between Brahman and *Ishwara*. God in his supreme transcendence and absoluteness is said to be Brahman. The Brahman, when revealed and made accessible to the human mind is known as *Ishwara*. The transcendent Brahman is also abiding in one's own heart as Atman. The Brahman who is also Atman is realized by *jnana*; but Brahman who manifests himself as *Ishwara* is worshipped by *bhakti*. The *Gita* fosters both *bhakti* and *jnana*. However, it is largely a *bhakti* text and the whole conversation is between Arjuna, the devotee, and Krishna, the Lord (*Ishwara*). Krishna calls Arjuna to be totally devoted to him, to be his *bhakta*:

Fix your mind on me alone, let your thoughts dwell in me. You will hereafter live in me alone. Of this there is no doubt (*BG* 12:8).

Those who have fixed their mind on Krishna, and worship him with supreme faith, Krishna considers as perfect in yoga (BG 12:2). And he saves them from the ocean of *samsara* (births and deaths) (BG 12:7). The idea is that the *bhakta* should ever live attached to the Lord with a whole-hearted love and dedication to him. If he is dedicated in this manner, then he will be saved by the power of the Lord. The chapter on *bhakti* is concluded by the following text:

All those who follow this immortal *dharma* described above, endowed with *sraddha* (faith), looking upon me as the supreme goal, and devoted, they are exceedingly dear to me (BG 12:20).

In the last chapter of the *Gita* Krishna gives his final advice to his devotee:

Fix your mind on me; be devoted to me; sacrifice to me; prostrate before me; so shall you come to me. This is my pledge to you, for you are dear to me (BG 18:65).

The God of the *Gita* is very personal, and demands that the *bhakta* also remains personally attached to him. To the personally surrendered *bhakta* the Lord promises his blessing and salvation. The *Gita* concludes with this challenging text uttered in perfect confidence in the *bhakta*.

Renounce all *dharmas* and take refuge in me alone. I shall liberate you from all sins; grieve not (BG 18:66).

III The Nature and Attributes of God in the *Gita*

The *Gita* is not a treatise about God. There is no philosophical attempt to discuss about the essence and existence of God. In a religious text the existence of God is not something to be proved.

He is always taken for granted. It is from the experience of God one starts his theological journey, and interprets this world in the light of that. However, God's nature and attributes will be unveiled spontaneously, during the dialogue that runs between Krishna and Arjuna.

1 A God Who Comes Down to Save Humanity Again and Again

Unlike the Christian theology of incarnation, the *Gita* presents a God of many *avatara* (Literally descends to this world). The purpose of this coming is to restore righteousness (*dharma*). God loves his people, and will not allow them to be totally perished.

Whenever there is a decay of righteousness (*dharma*), rise of unrighteousness (*adharma*), then I embody my self O' Bharata. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of *dharma* I am born age after age (BG 4:7-8).

Here we face a question of historicity of this coming down. Extended to millions of years, the *avatars* are to be approached from a different perspective, not exactly with the mind and factuality of historicity according to the Christian understanding of history. Myth has an important role to play in these *avatara*-stories. The 'coming down', is actually to empower the humans to overcome evil. This can be done through a historically real 'incarnation' or through 'descents' of the power and grace of God, communicated through a myth-symbol, the tradition of which becomes historical and functions as a means of correcting and directing the people of an age or place. Many *avatars* which the *Gita* speaks about are to be looked at from this perspective.

2 A God Who is the Transcendent Foundation of the Whole World

When Krishna manifested his cosmic form, Arjuna was amazed because “he saw him without beginning, middle or end, infinite in power, with many arms, the Sun and the Moon being his eyes, the burning fire being his mouth, and illumining the whole universe with his radiance” (BG 11:19). In wonder and awe, Arjuna had already made his adoring acknowledgement of the divine reality that was being communicated to him. He felt that, the God who is now manifesting his supreme form is really the most transcendent foundation of the whole universe. He alone is imperishable and eternal. Hence, he said:

You are the imperishable, the Supreme Being to be realized.
You are the great treasure house of this universe; you are
the everlasting guardian of eternal *dharma*. You are the
ancient divine person (*purusha*), I deem (BG 11:18).

In this text Arjuna is presenting to us several attributes of God. But they are presented as coming from his heart in response to the magnificent vision of God he enjoyed. God’s true nature is communicated to the devotee, not through abstract but through personal, experiential journey into the mysteries of divinity. This is made possible through the grace of God, who communicates most intimately to his devotee and worshipper.

3 A God Who is Intimately Immanent

Though absolutely transcendent and unapproachable to human reason, this God is also near at hand as the dearest friend dwelling in one’s own heart. In chapter 13 the *Gita* makes a distinction between the body, and the one who knows the body. It also presents Krishna as the knower of the body who dwells within.

This body is called *kshetra*, the field; he who knows it is called *ksetrajna* by the sages. And know me as the *kshetrajna* in all *kshetras*. The knowledge of *kshetra kshetrajna* is considered by me as the true knowledge (BG 13:1-2).

The Lord who is the foundation of the whole universe, (the larger field) and of the human body, (the field) is also the knower and designer of the universe and of our human body. As everything has proceeded from him, he is also in everything. This means that the Lord is omnipresent and omnipotent. He is everywhere, but nowhere, always active, yet ever the same. To illustrate this the *Gita* indulges in the paradoxical use of divine attributes.

Shining by the functions of all the senses, yet without the senses, the Absolute, freed from all, yet sustaining all; devoid of *gunas*, yet he experiencing them. Without and within all beings; the unmoving and also the moving; the subtle and therefore incomprehensible; He is very far, though intimately near (BG 13:14,15).

The real God is always beyond our comprehension. But God has placed his very image in the innermost center of our own being. The true knowledge of God emerges from this depth, where God abides. You may call it illumination by divine grace, awakening through divine light, the opening of the third eye etc. God is within and without. The *Gita* is presenting to us an experiential knowledge of God, communicated to humanity through the symbols of Krishna and Arjuna. It has touched many a human hearts and was a powerful instrument in guiding the spiritual life of many people, especially in India. The *Gita* is certainly a great contribution of India to the world at large.

The *Gita* is a wonderful religious poem, unique in its nature and thus a great contribution of Hinduism to the world. It is well studied in the greatest universities of the world. It deals with many topics, as the Lord of the *Gita* instructs Arjuna, his disciple.

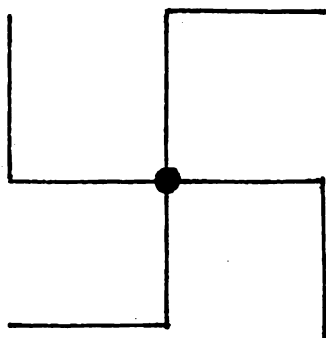
The three ancient ways (*margas*) of spirituality known as the way of action (*karma*), wisdom (*jnana*) and devotion (*bhakti*) are treated in different chapters of the *Gita*. In the first three sections of this chapter we have tried to look at the God of the *Gita* from these perspectives. In the fourth section we look at the same God from three other important aspects of his being. They are his transcendence, immanence and repeated descent (*avatara*) into the Universe.

This is a very brief summary of the *Gita*. The *Gita* is to be relished as it is in the text. It is composed in metric style with wonderful poetic flow. Philosophy melts into poetry when one is imbued with the tenour of what one thinks and lives.

CHAPTER 3

VARIETIES OF GOD EXPERIENCE IN HINDUISM

A Bird's Eye View



ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti:
the One Being seers call by many names (Rg Veda 1.16.6, 46)

I Introduction

It is not easy to define the Hindu experience of God just as it is not easy to state what Hinduism is. Hinduism is not a dogmatic religion with precise formulas to be believed in and prescriptions to be followed. It is rather a way of life with different religious beliefs and their philosophical explanations. The marvelous character of Hinduism, capable of absorbing into itself any new

thought, keeps it ever growing. Widening the range of its beliefs and practices, Hinduism renders itself all the more difficult to be defined by any standard of philosophical rigour.

This complexity of the nature of the Hindu religion certainly and most profoundly affects the concept of God, because religion in the last analysis is the encounter of the finite with the Infinite, humans with God. Both God and the humans are explained and understood in a religion in accordance with the basic assumptions it has. Every religion, therefore, presents its own interpretations of God and the human being. To a certain extent varieties of interpretations do exist in all religions, because religion that curtails the freedom of thinking and nips off the philosophical growth of the world is no authentic religion at all. But the traditional Hinduism, with its great emphasis on the Universal over the particular, has always cherished an overwhelming sense of tolerance. Therefore, it could always keep its gates open to any religious thought blossoming in the country and call it 'Hindu'. Thus we find in the great Hindu body of beliefs schools and systems of contrary positions, and that too on such cardinal issues as the nature of Brahman, the existence of the world and so on. This is not because Hinduism is less philosophical but because in its approach to and evaluation of the ultimate reality it has a different norm. In explaining the ineffable, nobody can ever claim to have expressed everything. To express it differently, simultaneously as well as successively, is the need of any finite intelligence. And this is what the humans are called for. Their feeble knowledge about God is shrouded in mystery and even in misunderstanding. Hinduism takes into account this fact as it really is.

This does not, however, mean that nothing could be said about the Hindu concept of God. We have only to bear in mind that the Hindu concept of God is not a rigid one, but a very loose one, to be fit into different systems of thought, all of which have given

their own interpretations about God, world, human being and their interrelationship.

This chapter is divided into five parts. In the first part we try to trace the sources from which the Hindu concept of God has drawn its main inspirations. The second part treats the Hindu epistemology, according to *Nyaya*, *Yoga* and *Vedanta* with special reference to the knowledge of God. In this part, in connection with *Nyaya* epistemology, we will also see Udayana's arguments for the existence of God. The third part is a brief exposition of the main philosophical systems dealing with the concept of God. We have chosen three main systems of *Vedanta*. Non-dualism of Sankara, qualified Non-dualism of Ramanuja and Dualism of Madhva. Since all the post-Sankara vedantic systems are avowedly theistic and stand for a personal God, in the fourth part we try to trace back the tendencies and developments of the personal concept of God in Hinduism. In this part once again we deal with the theology of the *Bhagavadgita* as one among many systems, the *Bhakti* movement, and the theistic philosophy of *Saiva Siddhanta*. In the fifth and the last part we hope to round up all the converging points of different schools and systems so as to present the essential elements of a Hindu concept of God.

II The Sources of the Hindu Concept of God

As in every religion, in Hinduism too the concept of God is a matter of evolution. It has grown from the infantile gropings of mankind to the full-fledged philosophical systems. Up to the recent times the historian of the Hindu religion who wishes to trace back the sources of the Hindu concept of God had to be content with the Vedic literature. As regards the pre-Aryan sources, *Vedas* gave only very scanty references and that too in a tone of contempt as to be naturally expected from a victorious people talking about the religion of the vanquished. Therefore, the reason for the

striking difference of the Indian branch of the Indo-Iranian and Indo-European people in the development of their religious worship was a matter of guesswork for scholars. The remnants of the pre-Aryan civilization unearthed in Harappa and Mohenjodaro have thrown much light on this guesswork. The discoveries of the Indus civilization show us that the Aryans came to a land of high civilization and met people who had their own gods and had even developed their own script.¹ They had mother-goddesses which remind us of the later resurgence of the female Hindu goddesses like Kali, Durga, etc. and a *yogin* who though, ithyphallic is lost in meditation and is seated in 'asana', the favoured posture of prayer all through India. Later on a God *Siva* will come to prominence in the Indian scene whose favoured posture of prayer is *patmasana* or a posture similar to it, and his accepted emblem in worship is *linga*, which though despised in the *Rig Veda*, emerges once again as symbol of the creative power of God. So also the *pasupati* (Lord of beasts), an epithet of *Siva*, which assumes highly developed spiritual meaning in later *Saiva Siddhanta*, may have had drawn its original inspiration from the Harappa culture. Among other archeological finds of this ancient city we see also a seal representing a two-horned *yogin* surrounded by animals. All this shows, as R. C. Zaehner concludes "that the religion of the conquered people had once again emerged into the light of day and, as so frequently happens, transformed the religion of the conqueror into something that was not recognizably his at all."²

But apart from a few stone-inscriptions, which are not yet deciphered, the Indus civilization has left behind no literature. The most ancient piece of literature we have is still the *Rig Veda*, an explicitly Aryan composition, which, according to R. C. Zaehner, a distinguished scholar both in Indian and Iranian religions, "still looks back to its Indo-Iranian past"³ and contains none of the key concepts of the classical Hinduism. This suggests that in developing the key concepts of the classical Hinduism India

was certainly influenced by the religion of the non-Aryans and hints at the same time the receptive nature of Hinduism from its very origin.

Hindus divide their religious literature into two main classes called *Sruti* and *Smrti*. *Sruti* means 'what is heard' and is roughly parallel to the western notion of 'the revealed word of God', and *Smrti* meaning 'what is remembered', indicates the secondary sources for understanding the truth expressed in *Sruti*. The four *Vedas*⁴ with their four parts⁵ *mantras*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas* and *Upanisads*, constitute the *Sruti* literature, whereas the *Dharma-sastras* (Law books), *Itihasas* (Epics), *Puranas* (long mythological works), *Sutras* (Philosophical aphorisms) and *Agamas* (sacred books of the Saivites), etc. belong to *Smrti*.

The *Rig Veda* consists of 1017 hymns and speaks of 33 gods. As a rule the gods of *Rig Veda* are the personifications of the natural forces at work in the universe. Even the great gods like Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Visnu, Rudra, etc. whose names are no longer so transparent, were originally related to natural phenomena.⁶ Though the *Rig Veda* admitted the plurality of God, one was free to adore the god he liked and to consider him as supreme. Max Muller called it Henotheism by which he understood the belief in individual gods alternatively regarded as the supreme.⁷ In fact, this was a practical solution to the problem of the plurality of gods. But the search for a unifying principle went further on and some verses of the *Rig Veda* clearly show a tendency for monism.⁸ The hymn of creation is a typical example for this:

Whence this emanation hath arisen, Whether (God)
disposed it, or whether he did not.⁹

The hymn of the 'Golden Embryo' (*Hiranyagarbha*) gave a practical answer:

In the beginning the Golden Embryo (Stirred and) evolved:
Once born he was the one Lord of (every) being.¹⁰

But the question still remained:

What God shall we revere with the oblation?¹¹

The groping for the ultimate reality was yet to find its answer in the subsequent thinking of the *Upanisads*.

Leaving behind the *Brahmanas* which are the elaboration of the sacrificial rituals outlined in the *Vedas* and the *Aranyakas* which are the interpretations of the sacrificial ceremonies, we come to *Upanisads*.¹² According to S. Dasgupta, "the passage of the Indian mind from the Brahmanic to the Upanishadic thought is probably the most remarkable event in the history of philosophic thought."¹³ The *Upanishads* are also called the *Vedanta* (end of the *Vedas*), because they were the concluding part of the *Vedas*, though later the term *Vedanta* meant the philosophical school which developed the doctrines contained in the *Upanishads*.

The *Upanishads* developed the quest for reality already found in the *Rig Veda* and set the path of the future philosophical thinking of India. The ultimate Reality was called *Brahman*, a word which originally meant only 'the spell', the word uttered in sacrificial formula.¹⁴ It is also called *Atman* and is said to abide in the innermost recess of every being. According to Sankara, the great commentator of the *Upanishads*, the following four texts are the great utterances (*Mahavakyani*) of all the *Upanishads*. "Thou art that,"¹⁵ "I am Brahman,"¹⁶ "This self is Brahman,"¹⁷ "Brahman is consciousness."¹⁸ The great philosophers of the *Vedanta* school were very keen to base their teachings on some upanishadic texts.

Along with the monistic doctrine which is stressed in many *Upanisads* we find also a theistic tendency taking shape, of which the *Svetasvatara*, one of the later *Upanisads*, is the best example.

Than whom there is naught else higher, than whom there is naught smaller, naught greater, (the) one stands like a tree established in heaven, by Him, the Person, is the whole universe filled.¹⁹

This is a prayer addressed to the great Vedic God Rudra, who is also called Siva, the 'auspicious.' This theistic tendency found in the *Svetasvatara* finds its further development in the *Bhagavadgita*,²⁰ the Song of the Divine, and later in the *Bhakti* movement of the Vaisnavites and Saivites.

The various doctrines of the *Upanishads* were summarized in a philosophical poem of 555 *sutras*²¹ and became the basic text for the *Vedanta* school of philosophy. All the great teachers of *Vedanta* develop their distinctive views commenting upon this fundamental work. The *Brahma-sutra*,²² the *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavadgita* are considered to be the three basic authorities of *Vedanta* and *Vaisnavism*, the two great movements that swept across the whole of India.

III Hindu Epistemology and Possibility of the Knowledge of God

The logical school of *Nyaya*,²³ one of the six *Darsanas*²⁴ of the Indian philosophy, has contributed most to the Indian epistemology. In developing an epistemology of their own the influence of *Nyaya* on other schools is of paramount importance. As Dr. Radhakrishnan points out, "its methodology is accepted by other systems, though with slight modifications due to their metaphysical conceptions."²⁵ *Nyaya* presents four valid means

(*pramana*) of right knowledge. They are: 1. Perception (*pratyaksa*), 2. Inference (*anumana*), 3. Comparison (*upamana*) and 4. testimony (*abda*). *Nyaya Sutra*, the basic work of the school, defines all these four means of right knowledge.

Perception is the immediate apprehension of an object with or without sense-contact.²⁶ It must be determinate and non-erratic. Commenting upon the erroneous character of perception Vatsyayana develops the classical notion of truth similar to that in the West as "agreement of the intellect with the thing."²⁷ "That cognition is erroneous," says Vatsyayana, "in which the thing is apprehended as what it is not; while when a thing is perceived as what it is, the perception is not erroneous."²⁸ Every other type of knowledge is based on perception and Gautama's insistence on sense-contact in perception reminds us of what Aquinas later said that "the proper object of human intellect, which is united to a body, is a quiddity or nature existing in corporeal matter."²⁹ Perception is followed by inference (*anumana*),³⁰ which is the Indian syllogism. It is very closely parallel to the western syllogism except that the Indian syllogism has five parts. They are: 1. *Pratijna* or the proposition to be established (the hill is on fire); 2. *Hetu* or the reason (because it smokes); 3. *Udaharana* or the example (whatever has smoke has fire); 4. *Upanayana* or the application (so does this hill); and 5. *Nigamana* or the statement of the conclusion (therefore the hill is on fire). Inference thus develops method of argumentation and traces out the casual connections. Later, *Udayana* extended the *nyaya* reasoning to arguments to prove the existence of God.

Comparison is the knowledge of a thing through its similarity to another thing previously well known.³¹ In spite of its striking similarity to the western notion of analogy it did not gain momentum in the Indian way of knowing God. This was because

of the Indian insistence on the direct experience of God rather than any mediate knowledge about God.

That is why *śabda* or the verbal testimony, the fourth of the valid means of right knowledge, became more important in the Indian way of knowing God. For the verbal testimony is, as Gautama defines it “the instructive assertion of a reliable person.”³² That person is reliable to communicate the knowledge of God who has the direct experience of God. The philosophers of *Vedānta* school base their thinking on the *Vedas*, because the *Vedas* possess the verbal testimonies of those sages who had the direct experience of God.

Though *Nyāya* presented all the four means of knowledge it was beyond the intention of Gautama to make use of them for the knowledge of God. Supreme felicity was proposed as the ultimate goal to be obtained through the right knowledge of the categories.³³ But among the 12 objects proposed as the objects of the right knowledge³⁴ God does not come in. It was Udayana who presented God as the supreme object (*prameya*) of knowledge. In his *Nyāyakusumanjali* he presents God as the supreme *prameya* and proposed several arguments for the existence of God.³⁵ M. Hiriyana in his *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* summarizes Udayana’s arguments for the existence of God as follows:

1. The world is an effect and like all other effects points, among other causes to an efficient cause or agent who is by knowledge as well as power equal to the task of creating it.
2. There is observed in the created world physical order which indicates a controller or a law-giver; and
3. The moral government of the world implies a governor who dispenses justice in accordance with the ‘unseen’ (*adrsta*) merit and demerit of our actions.³⁶

Udayana who lived about three centuries before Thomas Aquinas in some way anticipated the 'five ways' of St. Thomas. Contingency of the created being and the order of the universe were the basic arguments also in St. Thomas.

According to the *Yoga* school, "truth of things as they are can be gained only through the practice of *Yoga*."³⁷ *Yoga*, as Patañjali, the founder of the school sees it, is concentration (*samadhi*)³⁸ by which one discriminates the subject from the object, *purusa* from *prakrti*, and attains his true and eternal self.³⁹ Among the objects of concentration Patañjali presents also God who is a "distinct *purusa* untouched by the vehicles of affliction."⁴⁰ By means of physical exercises such as *asanas* and breath control *Yoga* prepares the aspirant for contemplating God. However, in presenting God and his omnipresence as an object of concentration, *Yoga* does not aim at a theistic form of religious worship. The goal of concentration is not union with God, but the liberation of *purusa* from *prakrti*, self from nature.⁴¹ In holding this, *Yoga* follows *Samkhya* metaphysics according to which the involution of *purusa* into *prakrti* causes the evolution of the universe. *Yoga* aims at the reversal of this process.⁴² Later on *Bhagavad Gita* takes up the same line of thought and presents union with God as the supreme goal of yogic *samadhi*.⁴³

The Vedantins accept the *pramanas*, especially *pratyaksa*, *anumana* and *śabda* but denounce all empirical knowledge as inadequate to know the real. Sankara holds that all empirical knowledge involves distinctions and, therefore, is incapable of reaching Brahman which is beyond all distinctions. The real never becomes the object of our perception.⁴⁴ But the real is sought after in every act of knowing. Because of this impossibility of attaining the real as the object of our knowledge, we feel a sense of beyond in all our knowledge. What we can say about the real is that it is 'not this' 'not this'.⁴⁵ We can also say that the real is real. To say anything

more about the real will be an error or superimposition (*adhyasa*),⁴⁶ because it is attributing to one what it is not. Therefore, the only way to know God is *anubhava* (integral experience), by which one realizes the supreme in oneself.⁴⁷ Because it is a process of realization (*saksatkara*) rather than objectivization, it transcends all subject-object distinctions proper to all other forms of knowledge. This realization takes place when the misapprehension of reality (*avidya*) is destroyed. *Avidya* is the false identification of the self with something that it is not.⁴⁸ *Avidya* and *adhyasa* are thus very closely related. *Saksatkara* is not the consciousness of this or that object but is realizing in oneself the truth of all, the ground of all. This is the way to know Brahman, the ultimate reality. If we have not yet experienced it we have to depend on the teachings of those who had the fortune of experiencing it. It is here that we find the importance of *sruti*.⁴⁹ *Sruti* becomes the most important source of right knowledge about God, because it contains the eternal wisdom transmitted to humanity through the sages who had experienced God in themselves. *Vedas* are testimonies of divine experience on earth. However, *Vedas* are to be interpreted. Thus the certitude of the intuitional experience is supplemented by conceptual clarity. Argumentation or inference plays an important role in this interpretation.⁵⁰ But interpretation is only to understand the experience of the sages. Ultimately the knowledge of God is gained only through experience or intuitional consciousness. In other words, what happened in sages and saints should happen in us.

Other systems of *Vedanta* school, though they do not accept Sankara's theory that reality is beyond all distinctions,⁵¹ hold that reality is to be known by way of integral experience. In the place of Sankara's *Jnanamarga* (the path of knowledge) by which the individual self tries to regain its lost identity with Brahman, they propose *Bhaktimarga*, the path of devotion, by which the individual self strives after its union with Brahman. The Indian religious

literature proposes also *Karmamarga*, the path of action, where action is understood as detached activity,⁵² as a means of attaining Brahman. Whatever be the path one chooses, God is known only by way of intuitional experience which transforms the self of the human individual.

IV Philosophical Evolution of the Concept of God

As we have already seen the Hindu philosophy is not the development of one single thought. There had been different thought currents and complexities. Afterwards some of the predominant thoughts developed into particular systems. Six of them are generally known as *darsanas*.

The Brahmanic period was predominantly ritualistic. When this ritualism came to its zenith naturally there arose reactions. The morality of killing the animals and the certainty of salvation through sacrifice were questioned. The three major 'schisms' such as Buddhism, Jainism and the Materialism of Charvaka were threats to Hinduism which seemed to be devoured by these new trends of thought. At the end, however, all these movements helped only for the revival of Hinduism. The Hindu thinkers questioned the validity of Buddha's teachings and went back to the *Vedas*, the religious patrimony of the country, the '*Samhitas*' (collections) that preserved the quintessence of the religious experience of so many sages and saints. But the return to the *Vedas* had to be in a different level. Buddhism had already developed a high level of thinking and its emergence had a lasting impact on the intelligentsia of India.⁵³ Hence it was a necessity that the orthodox Indian thought be generally known as six orthodox systems. These are the logical realism of the *Nyaya*, the atomistic pluralism of the *Vaisesika*, the metaphysics of the *Samkhya*, the asceticism of the *Yoga*, the

ritualism of the *Mimamsa* and the theology (*Brahmajijnasa*) of the *Vedanta*. We have already referred to some of them in our discussion on the Hindu epistemology and the possibility of the knowledge of God. Of all these systems, *Vedanta* has contributed very considerably to the evolution of the Hindu concept of God. Hence here we treat three main systems of *Vedanta*.

1. God in the Non-dualism of Sankara (*Advaita*)

The non-dualism of Sankara is definitely one of the most important schools of *Vedanta* which has gained wide acceptance all over India. It draws its inspiration from the monistic trend of the Upanishads and as we have already seen Sankara summarizes the whole of his philosophy in the four great utterances of the Upanishads.

Advaita unconditionally asserts the oneness of reality. Reality is one and undivided.⁵⁴ It is beyond all possible distinctions. It is existence in its purity and by its very nature absolutely transcendent. This reality is Brahman. By its very nature it is omnipresent, yet not confined to any particular space. Its true nature, however, is beyond grasp, and surpasses all attempts of human understanding.⁵⁵ We cannot attribute to it qualities of beings we see here, because all of them involve in distinction. The reality, on the other hand, is the 'wholly other' and, therefore, is to be designated as 'not this'. Hence it is called '*nirguna*', indeterminate or beyond all qualities.⁵⁶ This negative designation, however, does not mean that Brahman is a mere blank devoid of all perfections. In fact, what is denied is the negations involved in all finite perfections. Brahman is the Supreme Being and all perfections belonging to pure being belong to it, though we cannot attribute anything to it, because our notions are derived from things that are different from Brahman. As the supreme existence (*sat*), it is the most real (*paramarthikasatya*), by nature self-luminous (*svayamprakastvam*) and, therefore, subsisting consciousness (*cit*)

and bliss (*ananda*).⁵⁷ It is beyond all change⁵⁸ and its nature is a uniform eternal melody (*ekarasa*).⁵⁹ But this Absolute is beyond all human grasp. The moment we think about it, it becomes a part of the world of our experience.

The Absolute thus understood by the humans is called *Ishvara*. It is Brahman itself, but Brahman as manifested in the universe.⁶⁰ *Ishvara* is, then, not a product of mere imagination. He is the real, the Absolute, not as in itself, but as understood by the humans. *Ishvara* is the determinate Brahman (*saguna Brahman*), Brahman understood as the creator and the preserver of the universe. *Ishvara* is the God of religion and the object of worship. Insofar as *Ishvara* does not have an existence of its own apart from that of the real Brahman *Ishvara* could be considered as a postulate.⁶¹ But it is a true and reliable postulate and is supported by *sruti*, because *sruti* presents Brahman as the cause of the origin and the dissolution of the universe.⁶²

Though Brahman is absolutely transcendent, it is also profoundly immanent in the heart of every being.⁶³ In fact, it is the *Atman*, the ultimate Self, of every being⁶⁴ and the individual soul (*jiva*), in whom the eternal consciousness of Brahman reflects in a special way, is bound to discover it by way of introspective meditation.⁶⁵ But *jiva*, on account of the physical adjuncts with which it is united, thinks itself to be something different from the Self. This is *avidya* or ignorance. This false sense of the identity of the self with its external name and form must be removed by true knowledge. Then the individual self will experience itself to be the Self, the Brahman. Thus the upanishadic saying "I am Brahman" will turn out meaningful. So also the saying "That thou art" (*tat tvam asi*): thou thyself art that Brahman, the ultimate Self of everything.⁶⁶

To answer the question how does Brahman manifest himself in the universe Sankara brings in the idea of *Maya*. The Brahman

understood as *Isvara* or *Saguna* Brahman is a Brahman with an infinite power of self-manifestation. This manifestative power of *Isvara* is what he calls *Maya*.⁶⁷ *Maya* is, therefore, both the power of *Isvara* and the manifestation of Brahman as the universe. As every revelation of God is at the same time revealing and concealing, so also *Maya*, though it reveals Brahman, works also as the veil (*avarana*) of the real Brahman. Since reality is Brahman, which is one and non-dual, the universe cannot be said real (*sat*), because Brahman alone is ultimately real. Nor can it be said unreal (*asat*), because it does exist. It is both real and unreal (*sat-asat*) and, therefore, something indefinable (*anirvacaniya*). Though it is not real as Brahman is real, for all practical purposes it could be taken as real. It enjoys transactional reality (*vyavaharika satya*).

Brahman, world and the individual self are the three cardinal points in the non-dualism of Sankara. Of these three, Brahman is real, the world is illusion or *maya* and the individual self is not different from Brahman: *Brahma-satyam, jagat-mythya jivo naa-apara*.

The *advaita* of Sankara is certainly one of the most dominating systems about the Indian concept of God. Its influence is great. The Indian mind still feels a great yearning for the philosophical acumen of Sankara in spite of its intricate subtleties.

2. God in the Qualified Non-dualism of Ramanuja (*Visistadvaita*)

Ramanuja, the great philosopher of the *Vaisnavite* movement, attacks Sankara's absolute monism and in his commentary of *Vedanta-sutras* Ramanuja presents Sankara's view as that of the adversary against whom he has to defend his thesis. The thesis defended, however, is non-dualism itself, but a different sort of non-dualism. Reality is one for Ramanuja too; but this one reality is not without distinctions. It is a complex reality. Reality includes

God, souls (*jiva*) and matter (*acit*). They are, however, inseparably united to form one Absolute which is Brahman. Souls and matter, though part of the reality, entirely depend on God for their existence. They are the attributes or qualifications (*visesana*) of God and God is the qualifiable (*visesya*). Reality is the complex whole which is, therefore, qualified (*visista*). Hence the name qualified non-dualism (*visistadvaita*).

The God of Ramanuja is a personal God and possesses all good qualities to a supreme degree.⁶⁸ He is not very keen on the distinction between *nirguna* and *saguna* Brahman. *Isvara*, the Lord of the universe is himself the ultimate reality,⁶⁹ whose modes are the souls and the world. The relation between the universe and *Isvara* is compared to that of a human body to its soul.⁷⁰ The world together with the innumerable souls constitutes the 'body' of Brahman. "The sentient and non-sentient beings in all their states constitutes the body of the Lord while he constitutes their Self."⁷¹ By body Ramanuja means that which a soul controls, supports and utilizes for its own end.⁷² Therefore, God controls the universe and everything in it, including the human individuals, according to his plans and purposes.

The Lord of the universe is all-perfect. He is "the divine supreme person, all whose wishes are eternally fulfilled, who is all knowing and the ruler of all, whose every purpose is immediately realized"⁷³. Though souls and matter are his attributes or modes of his being, he himself undergoes no change. He is the eternal changeless *visesya* whereas, all around him is in change due to his attribute that is matter. *Isvara* is thus, the unchanging center of the changing universe, the inspiring principle of every thing that is. As the support and substratum of every being he is the indweller (*antaryamin*) and inner self (*antaratman*) of every thing, whether spirit or matter.

Ramanuja distinguishes between Brahman in causal state and Brahman in effected state. When Brahman is in his causal state the sentient and the non-sentient beings abide in Brahman in so subtle a condition as to be incapable of receiving designations different from that of Brahman itself.⁷⁴ When, on the other hand, Brahman is in effected condition "its body is constituted by all those beings in their gross state"⁷⁵ and assumes distinct names and forms. The universe is not illusion (*mithya*) as in the philosophy of Sankara, and *maya* means only "God's mode of operation in it."⁷⁶ It is the abode of *Jiva*, the soul, and God, the *Isvara*.

Jiva, though essentially finite and dependent of God is spiritual and of the same nature of God, a particle of pure consciousness. Only in release (*moksa*) it understands its true nature which is 'unlimited knowledge',⁷⁷ whereas in *samsara* (the circle of birth and rebirth) "it is obscured by ignorance, i.e., the influence of the beginningless chain of works."⁷⁸ This ignorance is to be removed by the true devotion (*bhakti*) to the Lord who is kind and loving and mercifully guides and governs his devotees, and punishes and rewards them according to their actions.⁷⁹ When at last the ignorance is removed, the soul enjoys the intuition of the supreme Self "which is the natural state of the individual selves."⁸⁰ Consequently, the upanisadic saying '*tat tvam asi*' received an interpretation different from that of Sankara. By no means it stands for an absolute identity of the individual with the Absolute. It means only that God who is the cause of the universe is also "having the individual selves for its body" and thus becomes the Self of every finite self (*jiva*).⁸¹

The influence of Ramanuja's philosophy was remarkably felt in the *bhakti* movements that followed him. Because it recommends theistic devotion and worship, it finds numerous followers all over India, especially from among the common people.

3. God in the Dualism of Madhva (*Dvaita*)

We find an extreme reaction to the *advaita* philosophy of Sankara in the philosophy of Madhva's concept of reality. It is very similar to that of Ramanuja, but differs from it very considerably in some respects. With Ramanuja, Madhva takes into account God, souls and the world. But, as in Ramanuja they do not constitute one reality. Reality is essentially dualistic. God is the only independent reality (*svatantra*). Every thing else is dependent on God (*paratantra*). Reality is thus *svatantra* and *paratantra*, two eternal principles, though the latter depends on the former. Hence the name dualism (*dvaita*). Of the dependent reality we have conscious and unconscious beings. The conscious beings are souls and the unconscious being is the universe and every thing that is in it.

Dualism is not a new theory in the history of India. The *Smkhya* school had already proposed it presenting *purusa* and *prakrti*, Self and matter, as two independent but mutually co-operating sources of cosmic evolution. Madhva is a Vaisnavite version of the *Samkhya* dualism.

The independent reality which is Brahman is the creator of the universe and is identified with Visnu.⁸² Brahman is not the material cause of the universe, because universe is different from him and is formed out of *prakrti*⁸³ by Lakshmi, the personification of God's creative energy.⁸⁴

The curious thing about Madhva's concept of God is his introduction of *Vayu* as the son of Visnu who "is the mediator"⁸⁵ between God and man. Man is saved only through the grace of Visnu and Visnu is free to elect souls for salvation or damnation, as he likes. However, the divine decision is not merely arbitrary. It is also proportionate to the intensity of one's devotion. Devotion enriched by meditation⁸⁶ is the way to obtain release (*moksa*), and

release consists in the restoration of one's pure spiritual existence which is fellowship with God and not identification with him. The upanisadic dictum '*tat tvam asi*' (That thou art) is, therefore, to be understood only as expressing the similar qualities of both God and soul.⁸⁷

Madhva's school is also known as *Sad-vaisnavism* (true Vaisnavism) in contradiction to the *Srivaisnavism* of Ramanuja. The dualist system of Madhva, however, did not appeal to the Indian mind as that of Sankara and Ramanuja and, consequently, did not succeed in gaining followers except a few devotees of Visnu.

V The Quest for a Personal God in Hinduism

The tendency to search for a personal God could be traced back to the beginnings of the Indian Philosophy. Perhaps the human mind was never satisfied with the impersonal Brahman of the *Upanisads*. That is why already in the *Upanisads*, along with the monistic trends, we find also growing tendency for theism.⁸⁸ As we have already seen this tendency which had its pronounced appearance in the *Svetasvatara Upanisad* evolved further and found its high expression in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a professedly theistic poem, which though not a part of the *Sruti* literature, has secured a very high position in the religious literature of India. Composed in the form of dialogical aphorisms, and placed against the background of an imminent war representing the eternal struggle between good and evil and presenting the most enrapturing doctrines of love, grace and devotion, The *Gita* captured the heart of India in a very special way and transformed her religion profoundly.

God of the *Gita* is the Lord Kirshna, incarnation (*avatar*) of Visnu who appears as the charioteer of Arjuna in the great Epic of *Mahabharata* of which *Gita* is a part. Visnu, who was a minor

god in Vedic times, has by now turned out to be a supreme deity. The Vaisnavites, as the name signifies, have always considered Visnu as their supreme God. This Visnu is supposed to incarnate himself in the world "whenever *Dharma* (righteousness) fails and *adharma* prevails."⁸⁹ Ten of such incarnations or divine descents are commonly accepted.⁹⁰ Among whom Sri Rama of the *Ramayana* and Krishna of the *Mahabharata* are most important. Krishna became all the more important because of the doctrines of the *Gita* of which, he is the author.

In the *Gita*, Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna as the supreme God, whose different forms are all other gods.⁹¹ He is also the Lord of the universe and everything in it, moving or unmoving, is unified in his body⁹² or forms his lower nature. But his higher and real nature by which this world is upheld is different.⁹³ He is the Infinite Being, the Lord of gods, the refuge of the universe, the exalted one who is greater than Brahma.⁹⁴ As R. Zaehner rightly points out Brahma here means only "the timeless state of Being which characterizes *moksha* and the source and origin of all that has its being in space and time."⁹⁵ Thus the God of the *Gita* transcends both time and timeless eternity and is supremely personal. He superintends the universe⁹⁶ and guides his devotees to final release.⁹⁷ We cannot see Him by our human eyes⁹⁸ nor approach Him by our own power.⁹⁹ But the Lord will give us His grace provided we worship him in true and loving devotion.¹⁰⁰

This highly developed theism of the *Bhagavad Gita* was later revived by two groups of Tamil saints who spearheaded the *Bhakti* movement in India from seventh to ninth centuries. They were Alvars and Adiyars devoted to Visnu and Siva, respectively. Already Buddhism and Jainism had spread all over India and there was little room left for theistic cult in these highly philosophical religions. The Tamil reaction to it, which is supposedly of Dravidian origin, once again marks the resurgence of the non-

Aryan element in shaping the religious destiny of India. The Alvars and Adiyars cherished a concept of God that is supremely personal. The hymns they sang, the devotion they preached, were so influential that they found their way all over India and changed the face of Hinduism very considerably.

Of the twelve Alvars canonically recognized by the Tamil Vaisnavites, Nam Alvar was the most important. The famous *Nalayira-prabandham* (four thousand verses) collected by Nathamuni is attributed to him. The movement had its greatest philosopher in Ramanuja whose philosophical contributions we have already seen.

Among the Saivite saints¹⁰¹ Manikya Vashakar, who composed the loveliest hymns of the love of God, is considered to be the greatest. The theology of the movement found in the Saivite sacred books called *Agamas* was later systematized by Maykandar Karulturai in the thirteenth century in his work *Sivananapotam* (*Sivajnanabodham*). The system came to be known as *Saiva Siddhanta*.

The *Saiva Siddhanata*¹⁰² considers Siva as the supreme God. He is a personal God who loves and cares for his people. He is the *pati*, the Lord, who lovingly takes care of his cattle (*pasu*) who are bound with fetters (*pasa*). *Pati*, *pasu* and *pasa* are the three words that summarize the doctrines of *Saiva Siddhanta*.¹⁰³ The word *Pāsupati* reminds us of the pre-Aryan *Yogin* surrounded by animals found in the harappa seal. Siva, the Lord (*pati*) is wholly transcendent. His cattle, (*pasu*), the souls, are bound by three kinds of fetters (*pasa*). They are: 1. *Anava*, the principle of individuation which separates them from the Lord, 2. *Karma*, actions based on the individuation, and 3. *Maya* the world in which they act.¹⁰⁴ But the Lord will give his grace to his devotees and lead them to final release. The devotees, on the other hand, will consider the

love of God as their supreme virtue and obedience to the divine command, their highest *Dharma* (duty).

The creative power of the Lord is *Sakti*, the eternal consort of Siva. As Siva and *Sakti*, though separated are eternally united, so will the soul, once released, be united with God forever. In this blissful state of divine union he can say '*soham*'¹⁰⁵ (I am He), which, though reminds us of the upanisadic *Tat tvam asi* (Thou art that), does not in any way mean the identity of the soul with God. However, the soul keeping its identity, enters into the fullness of God and, thanks to the divine transformation that takes place in it, becomes all in all.

The *Bhakti* movement of the Tamil saints with its stress on vernacular literature, swept across the whole of India. From fourteenth century onwards several saints appeared in the North, all singing devotion to a personal God in their respective language.¹⁰⁶ Thus the religion that was more ritualistic and philosophical assumed a new devotional flavour all over India, appealing much more profoundly to the heart of the common people.

But deep in the Indian mind the conviction still remains that the question of the personal God, such as Visnu or Siva, is only a matter of choice, which really does not exclude the possibility of having other forms of God for other people, because the Hindu believes that his/her religion, whatever it be, is but one of the manifold forms of religious expressions. This may be the reason the *advaita* of Sankara still appeals to the Indian mind, even after the great wave of the *Bhakti* movement and its nation-wide influence.

VI The Essential Elements in the Hindu Concept of God

Having seen the different systems and movements centering around the Hindu concept of God in the preceding parts, now we are trying to trace the converging points of all these systems, as far as they could be brought together. It is impossible to give a uniform concept of God as the typical Hindu concept of God. Even in tracing the common elements we have to make some distinctions. There are two main trends in Hinduism, monistic and theistic. But since both of them stem from the same sources and to a large extent share the same backgrounds they really have much in common. These common elements are to be pooled together along with the characteristic notes of each trend. This may give a fair picture of the Hindu concept of God. But even this should not be taken in a rigid sense, because it contradicts the very nature of the Hindu concept of God, which is highly adaptive and very extensive.

Though with differences in details, the following may be said the main trends running through the different systems of the Hindu concept of God. God is the Absolute, independent, ultimate reality which is called Brahman, when impersonally conceived, and *Isvara*, Visnu or Siva, when personally conceived. At any rate this reality is subsisting existence, pure consciousness and bliss. World is dependent on God who sustains, controls and guides it. Whether the world is only appearance, or reality is a matter of dispute among the schools. But except the *advaitic* school of Sankara all stand for the reality of the world. Even Sankara, according to some modern interpreters,¹⁰⁷ did not really deny the reality of the world, but denied only its equality with Brahman which alone is really real.

Being the center and substratum of the whole universe, God is intimately present in every being. This is all the more true with regard to the human souls, who, created or uncreated, being pure consciousness are of the same nature of God, which could be explained as identical with or similar to God, the one ultimate reality.

Under the present conditions, however, the soul is in a strange existential predicament, where it is united with matter. In this condition it is under the spell of ignorance (*avidya*) and fails to know its real nature and falsely thinks to be something else. This ignorance is to be removed and the true nature of the soul is to be realized either by way of knowledge (*jnanamarga*), or by way of devotion (*bhaktimarga*), or by both. Thus the intuitive meditations (*dhyana, upasana*) and integral experience (*anubhava*) are the recommended means to attain this goal.

The removal of *avidya* is itself the release (*moksa*), which is attaining the ultimate reality, the goal of one's life. But as the understanding of the nature of the ultimate reality differs, the release could be understood either as a merging of the individual into the Absolute, where the individual realizes its identity with Brahman, or an intimate union with God, where the individual, keeping its self-identity, enters into the fullness of God and becomes all in all, in the all pervading splendour of the divine love.

Notes:

- 1 For a detailed account of the archeological finds of the Indus civilization see John Marshall, ed., *Mohan Jo-Daro and Indus Civilization*, London: Arthur Probsthian, 1931, 3 volumes. For a brief account of the same see Madho Sarup Vats, "The Indus Valley Civilization" in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. I, Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission, 1958, pp. 110-128. A strenuous attempt of re-writing history of India is now going on, questioning the hypothesis of Arian migration to India. But historians should remember that, however loud one says something, it would not be historical, unless reliable evidence for that is provided. Nobody is interested in a view as such, unless there are arguments in favour.
- 2 R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 15.

- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 4 The word *Veda* is derived from the root *vid*, to know, and is related to the Latin *vid-ere*, to see and the German *Wissen*, to know. The four *Vedas* are: The *Rgveda*, the *Yajur Veda*, the *Sama-veda* and the *Atharva Veda*.
- 5 These four parts correspond to the four stages of life. "While the student (*Brahmacharin*) reads the hymns, the householder (*grhastha*) attends to the Brahmanas, which speak of the daily duties and sacrificial ceremonies, the hermits, the man of the forest (*vanaprastha*), discusses the *Aranyakas*, the monk who has renounced worldly attachment (*samnyasin*), studies the Upanishads, which specialize in philosophical speculations." S. Radhakrishnan, ed., *The Principal Upanishads*, p. 48.
- 6 S. Radhakrishnan and C. A. Moore, ed., *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 4.
- 7 Max Mueller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*, London: Longmans Green, 1899, p. 53.
- 8 *Rgveda* I.164.46, X.121.1, X.129.1-7.
- 9 *Rgveda* I.129.7. Eng. trans. from *Hindu Scriptures*, ed. by R. C. Zaehner, London: Dent, 1968.
- 10 *Rgveda*, X.21.1.
- 11 *Ibid.*, X.21.2.
- 12 The word *Upanishad* is derived from *upa*, near + *ni*, down + *sad*, to sit. *Upanishads* speak of the high wisdom that ancient *Gurus* (masters) imparted to their pupils who sat near them. There are over 200 *Upanishads*, although the traditional number is 108. Sankara wrote commentaries on 11 of them and they are generally considered to be the principal *Upanishads*. They are *Isa*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Taittiriya*, *Aitareya*, *Chandogya*, *Brhadaranyaka* and *Svetasvatara*. The *Kausitaki* and *Mahanarayana Upanishads* both of which had been referred to by Sankara and the *Maitri Upanishad* are also considered to be of great importance.
- 13 S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1, Cambridge: University Press, 1922, p. 31.
- 14 R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, p. 37.
- 15 *Tat-tvam-asi*, *Chandogya Up.*, VI.9.4
- 16 *Aham brahmasmi*, *Brhadaranyaka Up.* I.4.10.
- 17 *Ayam atma brahma*, *Mandukya Up.* 2.
- 18 *Prajnanam Brahma*, *Aitareya Up.* III.1.3. All references to the *Upanishads* in this chapter are according to the *Principal Upanishads* edited with introduction, texts, translation and notes by S. Radhakrishnan, London: George Allen Unwin, 1969, first published in 1953.
- 19 ... *Tene'dam purnam purushena sarvam*, *Svetasvatara Up.* III. 9.
- 20 *Bhagavad Gita*, which has become a classic in religious literature and the

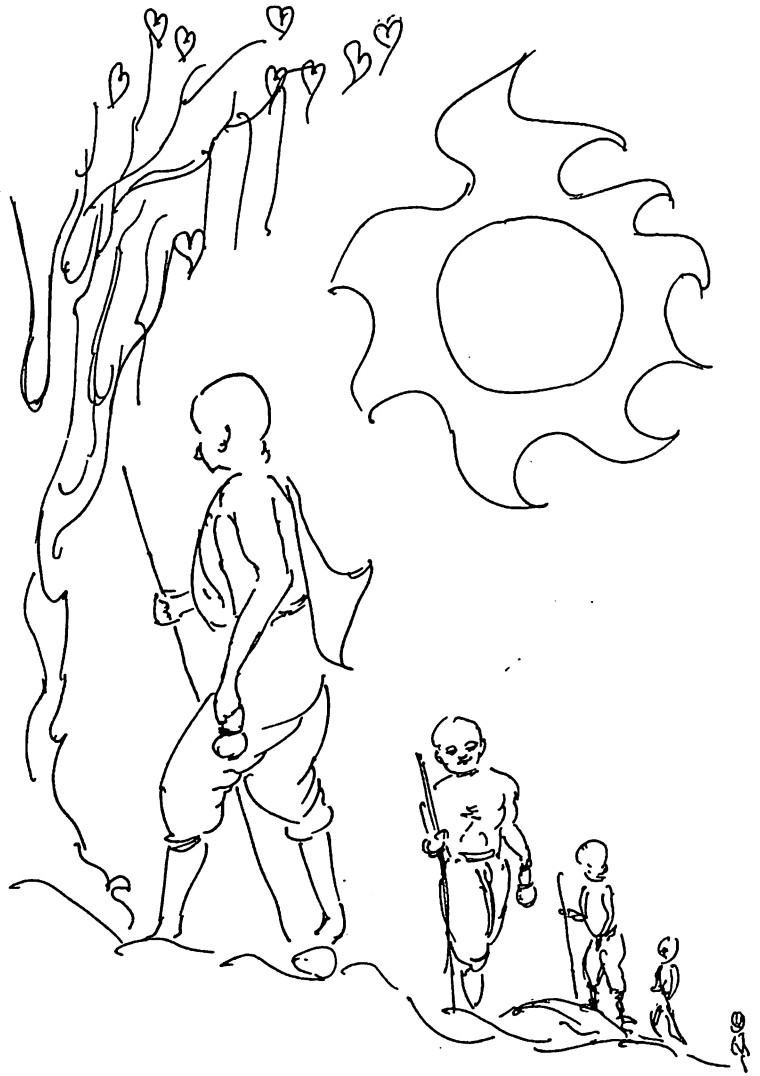
most influential of the Hindu Scriptures, is an aphoristic dialogue between Sri Krishna, the *avatar* of Vishnu, and Arjuna, the hero of the Pandavas at the point of waging war against Kauravas, their kinsmen. (The poem may be a later interpolation in the great epic *Mahabharatha*.) As to its dates, it is definitely post-buddhistic and, at least, with regard to its essence pre-Christian.

- 21 "A *Sutra* is so called because it suggests wide meaning. It should be concise, indicative of its purport, composed of few letters and words, in every way meaningful. Such are what the wise one calls *Sutras* or aphorisms." S. Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma-sutra*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960, p. 23.
- 22 *Brahma-sutra* because "it deals with the doctrine of Brahman". "It is also known as *Saririka-sutra*" since it deals with the embodiment of the unconditional self and *Vedanta-sutra* "since it deals with *Vedanta* or the final aim of the *Veda*" and is supposedly composed between 500 to 200 BC. Cf. S. Radhakrishnan and C. A. Moore, *op.cit.*, p. 506.
- 23 The word *nyaya* is derived from *ni*, into + *aya* (from the root *i*) to go, and literally means that by which the mind "goes into" the meaning of things and thereby lead to conclusions. *Niyate anena iti nyaya*. As a philosophical system it deals with the four factors of right knowledge such as the means of right knowledge (*pramana*), the object (*prameya*), the state of cognition (*pramiti*) and the subject of right knowledge (*pramatri*).
- 24 Indian Philosophy acknowledges six orthodox systems. They are called *Darsanas*. The word *darsana* means "vision or view" and roughly corresponds to the German word *Weltanschauung*. The six systems are *nyaya*, *vaisesika*, *samkhya*, *yoga*, *mimamsa* and *Vedanta*.
- 25 S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. II, *op.cit.*, p. 173.
- 26 *Nyaya-sutra*, I.1.4. *Pratyaksha* originally meant sense perception. But it soon came to include all immediate apprehension with or without sense contact. Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 48.
- 27 Cf. *Summa Theologica*, 1.Q.16.1c and 2c.
- 28 Vatsyayana on *Nyaya-sutra*, 1.1.4, Eng. trans. Ganganatha Jha, ed., *Gautama's Nyaya-sutra* with Vatsyayana's *Bhasya*, Poona: Oriental Book Agency, 1939.
- 29 *Summa Theologica*, 1.84.7c.
- 30 *Nyaya-sutra*, 1.1.5.
- 31 *Nyaya-sutra*, 1.1.6.
- 32 *Nyaya-sutra*, 1.1.7.
- 33 *Nyaya-sutra*, 1.1.1.
- 34 *Nyaya-sutra*, 1.1.9.
- 35 *Nyaya-kusumanjali*, I.4; cf. also V.1.

- 36 M. Hiriyana, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970 (first published 1932), p. 243.
- 37 S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. II, p. 351.
- 38 *Yogasutra*, 1.1.
- 39 *Yogasutra*, 2.2.5, 26; 4.34.
- 40 *Yogasutra*, 1.23.
- 41 *Yogasutra*, 1.24. Eng. trans. Ramaprasada, *Sacred Books of the Hindus*, IV, Allahabad: The Panini Office, 3rd ed., 1924, p. 39.
- 42 *Yogasutra*, 4.34.
- 43 *Bhagavad Gita*, 12.2, 14.
- 44 *Sankara-bhasya* on *Vedanta-sutra*, II.i.6. Eng. trans. George Thibaut, *The Vedanta Sutras with the Commentary by Sankaracharya*, Sacred Books of the East, vol. XXXIV and XXXVIII, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890, 1896.
- 45 *Sankara-bhasya*, III.ii.22.
- 46 *Sankara-bhasya*, Introduction.
- 47 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.i.2; II.i.4; III.iv.15. Cf. also S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. II, pp. 510-520.
- 48 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.iii.19.
- 49 *Sankara-bhasya*, II.i.11.
- 50 *Sankara-bhasya*, II.i.6.
- 51 For example cf. *Sri-bhasya*, Ramanuja's commentary on *Vedanta-sutra*, I.i.1. Eng. trans. George Thibaut, *The Vedanata Sutras with the Commentary of Ramanuja*, Sacred Books of the East, vol. XLVIII, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904.
- 52 *Bhagavad Gita*, 12.10; 18.23,49.
- 53 This influence is specially manifested in the non-dualism (*Advaita*) of Sankara.
- 54 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.iv.22.
- 55 *Sankara-bhasya*, III.ii.23.
- 56 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.i.11.
- 57 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.i.4.
- 58 *Sankara-bhasya*, II.i.27.
- 59 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.iii.1.
- 60 *Sankara-bhasya*, II.i.14.
- 61 S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. II, p. 545.
- 62 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.i.2.
- 63 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.ii.8.
- 64 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.iii.19.
- 65 The recommended way for meditation is that of *sravana*, *manana* and *nididhyasana*. *Sravana* "the study and discussion of the Upanishads with assistance of a *Guru* that has realized the truth they teach"; *manana* is

- “arguing within oneself, after knowing definitely what the Upanishads teach, how and why that teaching alone is true” and *nididhyasana* is “meditation upon the identity between the individual self and Brahman.” M. Hiriyana, *Outlines of Hinduism*, pp. 379-380.
- 66 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.iii.19; *Sankra-bhasya* on *Chandogya Up.* VI.9.4; on *Brhadaranyaka Up.* I.4.10.
- 67 *Sankara-bhasya*, I.iv.3.
- 68 Ramanuja on *Bhagavad Gita*, 6.47; cf. also R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, pp. 98-99.
- 69 This ultimate reality is identified with Visnu whose *avatar* (incarnation) is Lord Krishna. Ramanuja conceived him as “an ocean of boundless compassion, moral excellence, tenderness, generosity and sovereignty, the refuge of the whole world without distinction of persons” (*Gita-bhasya*, 6.47). R. C. Zaehner gives the following comment: “Ramanuja’s Krishna is not the Krishna of *Mahabharata* nor even of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He is the Krishna of the *bhagavad* who had the sweet sound of his flute” (concordant discord, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 158).
- 70 *Sri-bhasya*, I.ii.12.
- 71 *Sri-bhasya*, II.iii.18.
- 72 *Sri-bhasya*, II.i.9.
- 73 *Sri-bhasya*, II.ii.3.
- 74 *Sri-bhasya*, II.iii.18.
- 75 *Ibid.*
- 76 R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, p. 98.
- 77 *Sri-bhasya*, I.ii.12.
- 78 *Ibid.*
- 79 *Sri-bhasya*, II.ii.3.
- 80 *Sri-bhasya*, I.ii.12.
- 81 *Sri-bhasya*, I.i.1.
- 82 *Madhava-bhasya* on *Vedanta Sutras*, I.iii.13. Eng. trans. S. Subha Rao, *Vedanta-sutra with the Commentary of Sri-Madhvaacharya*, Tirupati: Sri Vyasa Press, 2nd ed. rev., 1936.
- 83 *Madhva-bhasya*, I.iv.27.
- 84 S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. II, p. 742.
- 85 *Ibid.*, p 747.
- 86 *Madhava-bhasya*, IV.i.3.
- 87 *Madhava-bhasya*, I.i.17; II.iii.27, 28.
- 88 For a comparative study of theism and monism in Hinduism and in other religions cf. R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, Oxford: University Press, 1967, first published 1957, chs. VIII & IX, pp. 153-197.

- 89 *Bhagavad Gita*, 4.7.
- 90 They are: a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a man-lion, a dwarf, Parasurama, who exterminated the *Ksatriyas*, Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*, Krishna, one of the heroes of the *Mahabharata*, the Buddha and the Kalkin who is yet to come.
- 91 *Bhagavad Gita*, II.5-6
- 92 *Bhagavad Gita*, II.7.
- 93 *Bhagavad Gita*, 7.4-5.
- 94 *Bhagavad Gita*, II.37.
- 95 R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, p. 93; cf. also his *Bhagavad-Gita with a Commentary based on Original Sources*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, pp. 313-315.
- 96 *Bhagavad Gita*, 9.10.
- 97 *Bhagavad Gita*, 18.66.
- 98 *Bhagavad Gita*, 11.8.
- 99 *Bhagavad Gita*, 11.48.
- 100 *Bhagavad Gita*, 11.55.
- 101 For a critical study of the mystical and theological writings of the Saivite saints cf. M. Dhavamony, *Love of God according to Saiva Siddhanta*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
- 102 Contemporary to *Saiva Siddhanta*, there appeared in Kashmir, the extreme north of India, a Saivite movement which came to be known as Kashmir Saivism. Though both accepted Siva as the supreme God, in its philosophical explanations Kashmir Saivism tends to the Non-dualism (*Advaita*) of Sankara.
- 103 S. Dhavamony, *Op.cit.*, p. 347.
- 104 R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, p. 88.
- 105 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 106 These are some big names who led the movement in the respective language. Hindi: Ramanad, Kabir, Nanak and Tulsi Das; Marati: Jnanesvar, Namdev, Ekanath and Tukaram; Bengali: Caitanya, Ramprasad Sen.
- 107 S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II. pp. 561-574. Cf. also S. Radhakrishnan and C. A. Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, pp. 610-611. "According to Radhakrishnan, *maya* has not meant to Indian Philosophers, even to Sankara, that the world is illusion." *Ibid.*, p. 610.



*Buddham sharanam gachami
Dharmam sharanam gachami
Sangham sharanam gachami*

CHAPTER 4

TOWARDS A GODLESS CONCEPT OF GOD

Search for the Ultimate in Buddhism



Buddham sharanam gachami:
I take refuge in Buddha (Buddhist chant)

I Introduction

Buddha's life was a journey to the meaning of life. The name given to the baby was Siddhartha (siddha+artha), one who has accomplished the meaning in his life. This prophecy was fulfilled when Siddhartha turned out to be Buddha, the enlightened one.

What was the "meaning" discovered? It was the discovery that, reality is *sunya* (void) and human life's ultimate goal is *nirvana*

(extinction of existence). Does this make any sense to you? This may sound nonsense to many or at least too negative a reading of life. Yes, but it is not that simple.

Reality is or must be very simple. But its multifarious appearances make it very complex. Hence, denial of multiplicity and counting down of manifoldness becomes a necessity for the understanding of the really real, which is too simple to be articulated in any manner. All articulations are therefore, ultimately to be denied, because every articulation is a denial of the original. The original is simple, non-dual, the unarticulatable. Thus it is empty of any expression. Therefore, it is called *sunya*, the Void.

When we were little children studying in the primary classes, we used to carry only a slate, and of course a stone-pencil to write with. It was good, gold old days, when we enjoyed life. Compared with the heavy pack of books our children are loaded with today, it was really golden days. During classes or semester exams some children used to get zero '0'. The naughty ones managed to put a '1' on the left side of the zero and told their parents that they got ten out of ten. But the honest ones simply carried the zero '0' on their slate, which meant that they are empty of any mark. This raises the question to all of us: what is this strange thing zero? What is its inner content, emptiness or wholeness, or both at the same time? If you can understand the meaning of zero, you are perhaps on the threshold of a Buddhist understanding of reality as *sunya*, the Void.

Reality is simply what it is. Yes, but this simplicity is too much for our human understanding, which is used to multiplicity. Hence, continuously confronted with multiplicity and finitude, we have to deny them of their existence, in order to arrive at the simplicity of the Beyond and the Boundless. In other words, reality is to be understood by denying what it is not. We have to deny the

articulated forms of reality in order to arrive at the unarticulatable. This is *sunya*.

II Towards Understanding *Sunya*

1. *Sunya* as Emptiness and Wholeness

Sunya is like a zero. It is nothing, yet not anything on the face of it, but it is everything. Anything you point to, it is not that. Yet it cannot be there without That. That One, the great One, the ineffable One, is not this not that, it is the other than all these what we see. One may say that the ultimate is that which is totally the other. Tillich defines God like that. But, unfortunately, God is not totally the 'Other' from us. He is equally immanent. He is within us, as the unseen Seer and the unthought Thinker. Yet we are not aware of it. He remains a *sunya*, emptiness, as far as our awareness is concerned. Reality as *sunya* means, that the reality or God we speak about is potentially everything, but not to be identified with anything. Hence, we deny everything, every human-made concept of him. It is a call to the ineffable mystery, which God is, for which silence is the supreme medium of understanding.

Buddha has not spoken anything about God. I understand this as his preferential option for silence about God, who is unarticulatable. Even if we articulate, it will be a structure of limitation with which, we adorn the godhead, which is really unlimited. Hence, sages and saints often prefer silence. They are even led through dark nights, where all human understanding and articulation fail to conceive or to communicate the Divine. Yes, Reality, God, has such a phase in its revelatory process, which is very well accepted in Christian theology.

This does not mean that we cannot have any expression of Reality. Even the original Buddhism abounded in philosophical discussions on the Real and the Ultimate. They created systems such as, *nairatmya-vada*, the theory of non-soul, *kshana-bhanga-vada*, theory of momentariness etc. But they are human discussions on reality. Unaffected by any of such expressions, Reality remains *sunya*, when we experience the silence of our senses, mind and all layers of awareness. The more we are in silence; the deeper is our awareness of That. Its form is simply Thatness, *tathata*. The more we speak about it, the more we are outside of it, because we are moving into the "other realities" which proceed from That One, than we remain in That One. *Sunya* is therefore, simultaneously a symbol of nothing, and everything, emptiness and wholeness, and is something to be experienced in silence, rather than to be articulated in the logical precision of human thinking. However, we, the humans need sounds and symbols.

2. Om and O (*Aum and Sunya*)

Here we can see the Hindu *aum* (*om*), *vis a vis* the Buddhist *sunya* (O). Hindus chose the symbol *aum*, whereas the Buddhist chose the symbol 'O' and named it *sunya*. *Sunya* here meant Void, i.e., de-void of all particularities, conceptualities. Does this make any sense to you? Yes, *sunya* is just like a zero (0). It is nothing, with a great potential of adding value as it unfolds itself into the great marvelous possibility of multiples, like 20, 30, 200, 300, etc. *Sunya* is an abode of innumerable value concepts, which will be unfolded one by one in due course of time; but it will ever remain *sunya*, the ever ineffable and unarticulatable.

While *aum* is the minimum sound with maximum meaning, *sunya* is no sound with a preferred silence of all meanings. Both are great contributions, which India has made to the religions of the world. The symbol zero, representing *sunya*, is also a contribution

to science. With the invention of zero numbering became so easy and ever repeatable. Zero, because of its inner possibility of being emptiness and wholeness, could very well be integrated into the numerical system of Arithmetic, with or without adding value-concepts into the systems. It is typical of India, which produced Buddha and the concept of *sunya*, that is, it gave to the world the symbol zero, which made tremendous change in the world of maths and science.

Om is a short form of *Aum*, which is made of three vowels of the Sanskrit alphabet, namely the beginning, middle and end. The symbol therefore, speaks about the origin of all things, its sustenance and final consummation. It is perhaps a shortest symbol with minimum sound, expressing maximum meaning. For believers, *aum* means creation, redemption and eschatology. Since the eternal Word originating from God is soundless, the more articulations we make, the more we are distanced from that ineffable Word. Hence, that minimum sound symbol is the most appropriate symbol for that primal Word, from whom everything arose, in whom everything rests, and to whom everything returns. The Buddhist *sunya*, on the contrary, refuses to articulate even that much, and want to remain in pure silence symbolized by '0'. It says that all negations are to be negated. All particularities are negations of the Absolute. Hence, in order to reach the Absolute in itself, the negations of the negativity in the particularities are to be denied. This is *sunya*, a symbol for negation of the negation. As negation of negation implies positivity, beneath this twofold negation, being is certainly there, which reveals itself to us through mystery and silence.

I think the great duty of all religious leaders, is to uphold the sacrosanct mystery of the ineffable, than to define the unarticulatable. Of course, safeguarding this mystery, and leaving it's blossoming to the work of the Spirit, who alone reveals the

truth about God (Jn. 14:17), religions may articulate their faith in human language, in a historical situation, in answer to a question raised. The believers accept it as the expression of the inexpressible, articulated for them. They abide by it. But too many minutest articulations of the ineffable may not be a boom or blessing for any religion. Religion should raise the human heart to the highest and profoundest mystery of God, in whom they rest and find their solace and salvation.

3. *Sunyata* and *Pleroma* (Emptiness and Fullness)

The approach through *sunyata* can be counter balanced, by an approach through *pleroma*, fullness. Negation of negation is the art of the approach through *sunyata*. As long as we focus our attention on the particular, in contrast to the absolute, which is incomprehensible, our attention is diverted from the Infinite to the finite, from Eternal to the temporal. What is negated is this all pervading finitude and temporality with which we exist and are surrounded. *Nirvana*, which means the 'extinction' of the last flame of desire arising from the individual, is a must. Is it possible? As long as the individual is there, awareness is there, and inherent tendency is there, it will be a botheration for the individual heading for final realization. It becomes craving, *trisna*, intense longing leading to unfreedom. Any articulation, or word, such as, God/Brahman is only a halo of limitation with which we adorn God. Hence all expressions are withheld. We too are called to pass through a similar way as far as our individuality is concerned. This is 'to kill the individual', that is, allow the individual to be ceased.

Individual is the negation of the absolute. Hence, the individual is denied. Negation of negation is an indirect way of assertion. In common parlance we say that two minus make a plus. We find this teaching well explained in later Buddhism. That, which is *sunya*, was later understood as the abode of all wisdom (*alaya-*

vijnana). All apophatism has a concealed assertion of the ineffable, which actually guides our life.

Another way, in contrast with the apophatic method, is to assert what one sees. Of course, what one sees, is finite, full of imperfection. It is a blend of being and non-being. It is something, but just because it is limited, in many aspects it is not. For example, if it is red, by that very fact, it is not green, so it does not participate in the perfection of greenness. It is something, yet it is not another thing. It essentially lacks what many other beings have. Even then it is a being, though characterized by non-being. Instead of focusing our attention on non-being, fix it on being, on what it is. We have then a different approach, an approach from limited perfection of being to the unlimited perfection of the Supreme Being. Every finite being speaks to us about some kind of perfection. It is there as something. It speaks of some sort of an existence. Yes, being is there. This little bit of existence, covered up by a form of particularity, and thus limited, ever changing and slowly perishing, has a tremendous power to call our attention to witness, to acknowledge its claim as existence (*sat*). We have to be loyal and truthful to this claim. Truth or *satya* is our response to this claim originating from being (*sat*).

If we follow up this path, it will lead us to further and further claims of truth, which the finite being is capable of revealing to us. The infinite is now seen, not as the negation of all negations (i.e., as *sunya*), but as the fullness of all perfection. In this perspective, God will be the most perfect being devoid of any imperfection. We know that this concept of God, because it is a creation of our own mind, is still characterized by inevitable limitation. However, we use the concept of God to represent that abode of all perfection, which is infinite and ineffable by nature. Buddhism on the contrary, prefers to remain on the other way of experiencing the ineffable through speechless silence, which would

lead us to the abyss of mystery and selflessness. God finally is not the object of our mental work, but the one who illumines his divine light within us, as the light of our faith.

4. *Nibbana*, the Path to Perfect Desirelessness

Desire is the root cause of pain, Buddha thought. Hence, the whole emphasis is to root out desire from our hearts. Whenever we think of God, speak of him we put something of our own into our God-concept. This something may emerge from our cultural, familial or educational background and characterize or even vitiate our mental picture of God. This is not what we have to desire, when we really desire God. We have to desire that Absolute, ineffable Mystery beyond all comprehension, the "wisdom which no eyes have ever seen, no ears have ever heard..." (1 Cor. 2:9). For this mysterious experience, a Buddhist may argue, we have to renounce all desires, all concepts, including that of a conceptual God cherished by most of us.

The challenge of *nibbana* is therefore, a corrective look into our own God-concept. For Christians, Buddhism is a religion neither to be swallowed nor to be condemned. Let it be there, a religion with its own identity and realization. A nearby presence of a challenger can also be salutary, at least by giving a corrective look into the proud claim of certain Christians, that we have grasped the essence of God and our knowledge is certain and absolute. Unfortunately, this claim is not the claim of faith, but the claim of reason, which has caricatured our understanding of God. Reason, as Pope John Paul II recently speaks in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* has to give way to faith, which is an admiring acceptance of the divine light, overflowing the limits of reason (*Fides et Ratio*, Nos. 42-44, 73, 79). There is more silence than speech about God in this way of approach. Of course, speech is possible and volumes of theological literature are a fact even in Buddhism. Theological

language and discussion, and its aggressive verbosity do not mean mystical or spiritual realization. This does not also mean theological discussions are the futile attempts, leading us nowhere. I do not mean that. Yet it is always salutary to think over what is beyond theology, what is really lasting and is capable of beatifying our finite and fragile mode of existence.

Nibbana points to that abyss of silence, to the negation of all negations, that is, negation of all finite articulation, about which total silence is preferred than the misleading articulations. There is an abyss of mystery in God, a domain of eternal silence. A Christian may ask: "Is it not what was revealed to us in Jesus Christ?" Yes. But a Christian should also think that finite means, which God employs, however supreme it be, couldn't exhaustively articulate the divine incomprehensibility. Jesus was very clear about it. He said: "No one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him" (Lk. 10:22). This revelation in Jesus is an answer to a faith, not to the reasoning mind. Faith is an illumined vision, never ending. In other words, faith is an ongoing experience, never completely over, and hence not subject to a rational 'grasping' in the real sense of the word. The experience is more in silence as far as reason is concerned. Reason and its caricatured understanding and willing (desire arising from this understanding) is silenced or extinguished. This is *nibbana*, as far as seen from the perspective of a Christian in order to make some sense and receive a challenge for one's own self.

III The Ethical Teachings

Thought Buddhism keeps silence with regard to the ultimate, it dares speak out its teachings on our empirical life, which is experienced by all of us. It has its own views and even doctrines on life. It is interesting to note that how one, who refuses to talk about reality, opens up one's lips to speak about life. The answer

may be simple. Reality is beyond our grasp, all what we say about it, is our guesswork. On the contrary, life is what we experience here and now. What do we experience here: a life of misery and pain, whether it be periodical moments of pain or pleasure, love or hatred, fortune or misery. Life as we experience here, is nothing but fleeting moments. At its best, Buddhists think that it can be an aggregate of transitory 'sensations', including that of mind, which give us the impression of a subsisting subject beneath it. Even if something is there, as later Buddhism tried to develop, we have no time to dwell upon it. Our immediate duty is to quench the wind of desire, that pulls our life hither and thither, to put down the flame of passions, which steal from our heart all possibility of peace and serenity, however short our life be. Because of the radical unreliability of our life, filled with desires, passions and cravings, life has become an experience of suffering, due to the very desires, which we ignorantly cherish. Therefore, there is a reason for suffering, namely desire. Why can't we remove this reason, in order to remove this suffering all together? Yes, Buddha said, this is possible. Do not do your actions with greed or cravings. Think only what is right, do what is right. Accordingly Buddha developed the four noble truths, and eight noble paths.

The four noble truths are:

1. There is suffering
2. There is a reason for suffering
3. Suffering can be removed by removing the reason of it
4. There are means for removing the suffering

The means for removing the suffering are the eight-fold noble path, which Buddha proposed and propagated. These noble paths are proposed to set us free from suffering. For this we need true wisdom, which includes right understanding and right intention; true moral conduct which includes right speech, right action and

right livelihood and true mind-set, which includes right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Therefore, the eight noble paths are:

1. Right understanding
2. Right intention
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

A perfectly balanced life, free from the craving and boosting of ego, which alone will bring us peace on earth and ultimate freedom from rebirth and suffering, is the target. To develop true mind-set one has to give oneself to concentration and a contemplative look at one's self and everything. Buddhist serenity is famous and is well symbolized by the meditating statue of Buddha.

Have a meditative mind. Have a deeper dialogue with all beings. Let no action be done by the force of our own selfish motives. Be pure, passionless in thought, word and deed. Be compassionate and friendly to all. This is the sum and substance of the Buddhist moral vision.

IV Conclusion: Buddhism and Christianity

The famous Buddhist chant, expresses the inner dynamics of a religious or ideological movement. The chant runs as follows:

Buddham saranam gacchami: I take refuge in Buddha, the awakened one

Dharmam saranam gacchami: I take refuge in the teachings of Buddha

Sangham saranam gacchami: I take refuge in the community of Buddha

A movement starts with someone who is awakened, who is full of a new consciousness. People look at him as an embodiment of this new awareness; sit at his feet to become disciples. They take refuge in the Buddha, the awakened one. Hence, they dispose themselves to be enlightened by Master's teachings. They take refuge in *dharma*.

Finally, they welcome all those who come to be enlightened by the teaching of the awakened one. A community arises. The disciples take refuge in the community (*sangha*) of the awakened one.

I think this is the inner dynamics of any community, whether religious or ideological. We can see a parallel movement of this dynamics, which is a human need, in the Christ-experience of the disciples all over the world. In Jesus Christ they found an all-together new experience of God, which came to be known as "the *Abba* experience of Jesus." God, the ultimate and ineffable reality, was no more a distant, unrelated absolute, to be vaguely contemplated on. God, as communicated by Jesus, is a loving Father, very near to us and much more very dear to us. The disciples took refuge in Jesus, the son of the Father. They were enchanted by this experience and sat at his feet to be instructed and illumined by his teachings. They took refuge in the Gospel of Jesus. They too welcomed all those who came to participate in this Gospel experience communicated by Jesus. A community of believers, known as the Church, arose around Jesus. Basically, the inner human drive of these three dynamics namely, the person, the teaching and the community can be traced here also. As in

Buddhism, Buddha, *dharma* and *Sangha*, so we see in Christianity Christ, his Gospel and the Church. This does not mean they are same in faith and doctrines. But it means only that, the human dynamics of spiritual realization, which includes the search for the awakened one or the incarnate one, his teachings and community around him is seen in both these great movements, which swept the East and the West respectively.

From the ethical point of view, Buddhism preached a doctrine of detachment and equanimity to all; including one's own self. You are called to be gentle, passionless and non-aggressive in your thoughts, words and deeds. This is demanded that we be free of our own vile and wild desires and cravings. Effectively it becomes love. *Karuna* (compassion) and *maitri* (friendliness) are its associates.

Christianity on the other hand, is very positive in it's preaching a doctrine of unconditional love to all creatures, including one's own enemies. This is chosen as an ideal, because Jesus, in whom Christians have faith, has done it and showed us the most brilliant example of love, sacrificing and offering his own life for the very people, who persecuted and killed him. Praying for his murderers he died on the cross. He asked us to follow his example.

However, we should not forget the fact that, the so-called Christian nations - though not Christianity itself - have fought the worst and most bloody wars on earth, and have deprived many nations of their fundamental rights of human dignity and equality. Even today, it is the Christian nations who have produced the deadliest and diabolic weapons, and keep the rest of the world in silent obedience, demanding a vow from all, not to try to be their equals by making similar weapons.

Christianity is not an empty claim in the name of Jesus, who had been an embodiment of unconditional love to all. Christianity is there only where Christ lives in the Christians, when his Spirit characterizes their words and deeds.

In similar vein, we find that the beautiful Buddhist doctrine of *Karuna* and *maitri* (compassion and friendliness), detachment and equanimity, was blown to the winds, when the struggle between the Tamils and Singalees broke out in Sri Lanka. When the Tamil minority aggressively demanded and fought for self-rule, the Singalees majority was practically forced to suppress them. Religions, in the process of their realization, have often failed in history. Only if the power of the Spirit, the divine in religion, can overcome the divisive tendencies of the matter-bound human beings, religion can bring peace to our hearts and harmony in the universe.

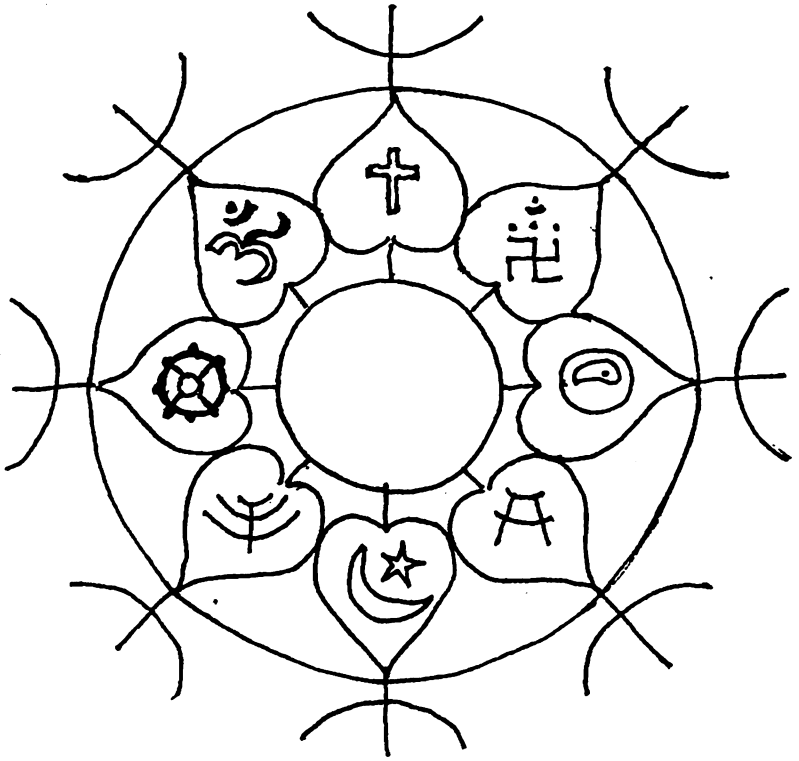
Buddhism is a product of the East and is a typical example of eastern apophatism. In apophatic approach religion is largely sought by way of negation. This is not unknown to Christianity. The famous theologian, Thomas Aquinas, asks us to purify our thoughts and concepts, before we apply them to God. Christianity, instead of remaining in the mysterious vacuum of the negation of negations, gladly holds on to the positive, implied in two consecutive negations, and articulate it far more positively. It can happen that such clear-cut articulations sometimes tend to evaporate the mystery, which is the real life behind all articulations.

God can be looked at in two ways: as a negation of all negativities, that is, the negative qualities of being, or as the infinite and immeasurable fullness of all positive qualities. Buddhism has chosen the first approach, while Christianity the second. Both have the other approach either implied or expressed. Christianity, especially in the East, is very much at home with an apophatic

approach to the Ultimate. Beginning from Dionysus, the Areopagite, the Christian East has given to the Church a long array of apophatic theologians. Later, apophatism reflected well also in the West, in the negative way developed by St. Thomas Aquinas, in the dark night of the soul well described by the great Spanish mystic John of the Cross. Similarly the positive content of reality implied in the negation of negations of the early Buddhism, was much more articulated in later school of *Mahayana* Buddhism.

Nibbana and *pleroma*, emptiness and fullness, are two poles of the same reality. But they should not exclude each other. Negations are ultimately overcome by the power of Being, which alone is real and everlasting. Being, as infinite and ineffable, always calls for an experience of negation of all what we know and are surrounded with. The synthesis of these two is not a matter of theory, but of realization in each one of us. It is something to be experienced and relished in contemplative silence.

Christians believe that in the person of Jesus Christ, this synthesis has taken place and he can lead us to the incomprehensible Father. Here the Ultimate Reality becomes much more personal and approachable to all and is no more just a matter of high intellectual pursuit. Buddhism believes that in Buddha true awakening has taken place, and he is a model for all of us. Faith, and not reason, is the key to salvation in both systems. I am not a Buddhist, though I try to understand it as far as possible, and I look at it with reverence. I am well aware of my own limitations in understanding, and articulating what Buddhism stands for. I have drawn inspiration from Buddhism and it has enhanced my understanding of Christian apophatism and my unswerving commitment to Christ who has combined in himself the absolute transcendence and earthly human existence.



PART II

INTER-RELIGIOUS APPROACHES



**“Remove the sandals from your feet,
for the place on which you are standing
is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5)**

CHAPTER 5

YOGA AND INTERIORITY

A Hindu-Christian Search



One should meditate on Atman which consists of Spirit
(Shatapatha Brahmana X.6.3.2.)

1 Introduction

One dominant aspect of the Indian classical spirituality is the journey to one's own interiority, where one finds God as one's own innermost Self. The Christian Orient from the beginning of Christianity has done a similar search and found the abiding Spirit of Christ as the "uncreated energy of God operating in us." They understood the human beings as pneumatifer, the bearer of the Holy Spirit, and did not hesitate to call the process of sanctification by the name theosis or divinization.

Yoga and interiority are intimately inter-related. Yoga is the golden means (*sadhana*) to reach our own interior depth and interiority is the goal (*sadhya*) that is searched for. Spirituality is a journey to our own interiority. What is interiority? It is the depth dimension of our own being and is of the nature of consciousness. In fact a search for interiority is a search into our own consciousness. We have several layers of consciousness. We are aware of the world around us, of our senses and body. We are also aware of our thoughts and all what goes through our mind. Beyond the thinking mind our consciousness can penetrate into the divine that is within us. God abides in our hearts in the form of consciousness. This we call Spirit. For Christians, this is the Spirit, proceeding from the Father and the Son, abiding within them as the Spirit of God, the life giver. Our search for interiority should finally reach this inner depth of our being where we meet God not as the object of our thinking but as the very inner life giver, an innermost agent who transforms us, divinises us and glorifies us. In other words, the innermost interiority is God's very consciousness within us, which should be experienced as an ultimate subject, a spiritual or divine principle of life, active and operative within us. We have to experience him as he really is and not always convert him into the object of our mind, which is a lower level of understanding.

In this chapter I am trying to present how to enter into the deeper levels of our consciousness and come in touch with the Spirit and experience him as subject rather than object of our mind. India is one of the countries in the world, which has made a deep search into this abiding Spirit. India has also proposed a theory of yoga which in its various ways can help us to make this journey. So in the first part of this chapter I will try to present some of the Indian insights on yoga and the abiding Spirit. In the second part I will try to understand this from a Christian perspective and see how it has been realized by the saints in the Church and can be realized by us now. The Indian insights are brought, not just to follow

them blindly, but to draw profound inspirations from them and realize the Spirit within us with Christian faith. In Christian faith also the Spirit is the abiding depth in our consciousness and the supreme agent of the process of our divinization. This divinization however, is not to be understood as deification.

II. Yoga and Interiority from Indian Perspective

1. What is Yoga?

The word *yoga* comes from the root *yug-yog* which means to unite. Yoga is a kind of union, union between senses and mind, mind and spirit (soul), and finally the union between the human self and the divine Self. Apart from the threefold yoga as *karma*, *bhakti* and *jnana*, all of which are *margas*, paths to spiritual realization, the *Gita* explains yoga also in the following way. The wisdom of yoga consists in the practice of a theory or a vision-statement that is explained to you (2:39); yoga, when practiced, brings about equanimity (*samatvam yoga uchyate*: 2:48); it is an art of doing work without being attached to its own material results (*karmasu kausalam*: 2:50); and above all it is understood as concentration in perfect equilibrium (2:53); and by which one finds one's delight in the Self by the Self (*atmani-eva atmana tushtah*: 2:55). That is, the human consciousness, enlightened by and residing in the divine consciousness, remains peacefully happy. This is the result of yoga.

Is it a doctrine of passivity? In the *Gita*, certainly it is not. After saying this doctrine of equanimity, Krishna urges Arjuna to go and fight in the real battle field, but, being fixed in yoga (*yogasthah*), remaining the same in success and failure (2:47).

The *Gita* also speaks about *karma*, *bhakti* and *jnana yoga*. *Karma yoga* is the yoga of action which is essentially selfless action for the betterment of the world. *Bhakti yoga* is one's own self surrender

to the divine master and Lord whom the *bhakta*, devotee, loves and adores as the only Lord of his/her heart. *Jnana yoga* is the realization of the divine within us. Meditation is considered to be the royal path for this realization process.

In short, we have to understand these three *yogas* as three dimensions or aspects which could characterize our mind and life-style. Thus the *karma yoga* points to our ability to perform actions as pure, selfless sacrifices offered to the Lord with a power of transcendence over everything that is not God and without any undue attachment. *Bhakti* is intense and deeply affectionate love with which the individual self, the soul, seeks her beloved whom she considers the only Lord of her life and performs an unconditional surrender of her whole life and aspirations to him and through him to everyone. *Jnana* in *jnana yoga* is to be understood not as academic knowledge or erudition, but as divine wisdom originating from God, enlightening and transforming the depth of human consciousness and consequently the mind and all realms of our knowledge.¹

Pathanjali's *yoga sutra* presents also a way to reach the inner depth of our own self through its eight steps. The first two steps are remote preparations for freeing the mind from inordinate tendencies (five *yamas*) and strengthening it on good patterns of behaviour (five *niyamas*). Then Pathanjali proposes the necessary steps of meditation. He starts with assuming a comfortable posture, proceeds to restoring the rhythm of the flow of life in our body (*pranayama*) and moves to silencing the senses (*pratyahara*) and mind (*dharana*) and entering into meditation and finally remaining one with what you meditate (*dhyana*). One slowly becomes identified with the object of meditation and enters into unruffled serenity which is the real nature of genuine depth where now the soul rests. For believers it is God's very consciousness which is divinely serene, where the soul rests (*samadhi*). In stead of ecstasy,

the Indian sage speaks of equanimity (*sama-dhi*) which is the result of reaching the depth.

2. Towards Understanding Interiority

The following classical text from *Brahadarnyaka Upanisad* gives us a clue towards the understanding of our journey to interiority:

In truth, this is the great, unborn Atman who is the spiritual element among the life powers. He dwells in that space within the heart, the Ordainer of all, the Lord of all, the ruler of all. He does not become greater by good works or less great by bad works. He is the Lord of all, the Ruler of all beings, the protector of all beings. He is the bridge that holds these worlds apart. It he whom Brahmins desire to know through the study of the Veda, through sacrifice and alms giving, through ascetic fervor and fasting (*Brah. Up. IV, 4, 22*).

The great insight of our Indian seers is that there is a Self within our self, within our bodily self, and still deeper within our mental self and still deep down within our spiritual self or soul. And this Self or *Atman* is our divine Self whom we should know, not by senses, nor by mind, nor even by our finer consciousness, but by faith, that is, through the very eye of God hidden within us. A journey through interiority is made to discover this *Atman*, the ultimate Self within the different layers of our self-hood. In our journey to this *Atman* we can really get stuck at any stage of our journey depending on the fervor by which we are led through the layers of our sense, mind or deeper consciousness. Everything, every finite dimension of our knowledge, is accepted and yet is to be transcended, if we really want to come in touch with the divine Self within us. "In truth, this is great unborn *atman* who is the spiritual element among the life powers." Our Oriental Fathers of the Church went in search of the "uncreated energy" that moves our life and thought from within. A striking parallelism is seen

here in this Indian text, obviously a tradition much more ancient than that of the Christian Orient, namely, a search into the 'unborn *atman*' of every human being. This unborn *atman* is the real Spirit. Here the search into the unborn is in fact the search into the uncreated. "He is the ordainer of all, the Lord of all, the ruler of all."

What we people call God is really sought here. The main difference in the Indian accent is that God is sought in the depth of one's own self and not as the object of one's own mind. Hence, the way of objectification is finally given up. Rather a way of search, submission and experience is sought after.

This *Atman* is not attained by instruction or by intelligence or by learning. By him whom he chooses is the *atman* attained. To him the *atman* reveals his own being (*Katha Up.* II, 23).

Intelligence and learning is certainly good, and even praise worthy in the realm of study and research. But research cannot bring us nearer to God; it can bring us to a caricature of God projected by our mind. For real knowledge of God we have to silence the mind, submit ourselves with utter humility and wait for the dawn of divine light. Divine light should be given by God himself. Hence the abiding *atman* who is in reality the divine eye within our consciousness has to choose us, shed his light on us, draw us into himself and enlighten us from within and guide our life. We receive this light through faith, when our 'third eye' is open. St. Ephrem, an Asian theologian of 4th century, calls this the 'luminous eye'. Our inner eye becomes luminous with the light of revelation, which we believe that we have in abundance in and through Jesus Christ. It is the Spirit of Christ, breathed into us by the Lord, who awakens us when we listen to his words. "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn.15:5).

Inner awakening is a great gift given to us by the Lord. One condition for this is proper disposition of mind. Already in the Gospel according to St. John, Jesus says: "If any man's will is to do His will, he shall know whether this teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority" (Jn. 7:17). This means that, without proper disposition, none of us will understand what the Lord speaks to us, through words, symbols, or parables. The *Katha Upanisad* continues:

The one who has not turned away from wickedness, who has no peace, who is not concentrated, whose mind is restless – he cannot realize the *atman*, who is known by wisdom (*Katha Up.* II, 24).

To know the *atman* is to realize him. Real knowledge is becoming. There is no higher knowledge than that you become what you know. To this kind of realizational knowledge faith is the royal path. Faith is a deep inner response to the divine life given to us, which always contains our self-surrender along with it.

As oil in sesame seed, as butter in cream, as water in hidden springs, as fire in fire sticks, so is the *atman* grasped in one's own self when one searches for him in truth and with fervor (*Surya Up.* I,15).

Ascetic fervor, *tapas*, starts with the initial rays of awakening which the disciples who went to Emmaus felt as they were listening to the words of Jesus: "Were not our hearts burning when he was explaining Scriptures to us?" (Lk. 24:32). *Tapas* then proceeds to deeper enlightenment and guides us to commitment and determination to peruse the path shown, renounce everything else because the true treasure has been found and ends up in complete surrender and transformation.

The seeker (*sadhaka*) keeps the awakened consciousness as a precious jewel in his/her heart and continuously meditate, lest the

splendour of the divine light get dimmer and dimmer in the daily worries of our life. Hence, the text says:

One should meditate on the *atman* which consists of spirit, whose embodiment is life, whose form is light, whose essence is space, which changes its form at will, swift as thought, of true resolve and true stability; which contains all odors, all tastes, pervades all regions and encompasses the whole world, speechless and indifferent. Like a grain of rice or barley or millet, like a tiny grain of millet, so is the golden Person within the *atman*. Like smokeless flame, greater than heaven, greater than the atmosphere, greater than the earth, greater than all beings, he is the *atman* of life, my own *atman*. On departing (from this world) I shall become that *atman*. He who has this confidence, he shall not waver. This was spoken by Sandilya and it is truly so (*Shatpatha Brahmana X, 6,3, 2*).

Meditation is said to be the royal path to divine wisdom and is known as *Brahma-vijnana-sadhana*. The golden means for divine wisdom is meditation, because what you meditate that you become. Here what is to be noted is the Spirit that is known is experienced as an ultimate subject, who really guides our life from within. This does not mean that the divine Spirit is continuously changing as my bodily or mental activities are changing. But as spokes of a wheel are all held together in a hub, all layers of my life and their activities are finally propelled from this unmoving center of my life which is smaller than the smallest (cannot be deciphered by size) and bigger than the biggest (nor can it be measured by any creature). The text refers to the subtlety and immensity of the divine Spirit abiding within us, as the "uncreated energy, source" of all my activities. It is something like the action of the Word, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, in the humanity of Christ, with a great difference that in ordinary human beings the Word operates through our human person, where as in Jesus Christ actions proceed from the Word, the divine person in Christ and

terminates in the human nature of Christ, with no medium of a human person in between. With this cardinal difference, the text really points to a super human experience, where God really becomes operative in us through his Spirit, sanctifying, transforming and divinizing us.

III A Christian Search into the Holy Spirit Abiding Within Us

The Holy Spirit was spoken of in the Bible as breath (*ruah*). The symbol of breath and wind as life principle and moving power of God in the universe where originally used to express the Spirit. This corresponds also to the words used in other languages such as, *atman* in Sanskrit or *spiritus* in Latin. The idea was as the bodily breath is the sign and principle of bodily life, so a spiritual breath, which is consciousness or participation in divine consciousness is the life-giving principle of spiritual life. Though, according to Christian theology, all operations of God *ad extra* are considered to be the common work of all the three persons of the Trinity, by way of appropriation, our sanctification which includes our transformation to divine likeness is attributed to the Holy Spirit abiding within us.

1. The Human Being is a *Pneumatophor*: the Bearer of the Holy Spirit

In the life of Christ we see expressions such as “the Holy Spirit led him to the desert” (Mt.4:1) or “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Lk. 4:18). Jesus Christ is certainly the *pneumatophor par excellence*. He breathed his Spirit into his disciples whom he qualified as the life-giver, the consoler, the advocate, the one who reveals all truths and condemns the world for its sinfulness. In all the expressions of Jesus we find this spirit is to be understood not as an object of

our mind but as a subject, an agent who operates in and through us all his divine actions. Therefore, the Oriental theology from the ancient days of Christianity called the human beings as the bearer of the Holy Spirit. The Indian use of the word *Atman*, the Self, is a pointer to us how the Holy Spirit is to be understood as our own inner most Self who breaths his spirit in and through us, demanding co-operation from our mind, senses and from all our being. To illustrate this vision let us see a text from St. Basil (c. 330 – 379 A.D.) who is perhaps one of the ancient and the greatest exponent on the theme of the Holy Spirit in Christian faith.

Now the Spirit is not brought into intimate association with the soul by local approximation. How indeed could there be a corporeal approach to the incorporeal. The association results from the withdrawal of the passions, which, coming afterwards gradually on the soul from its friendship to the flesh, have alienated it from its close relationship with God. Only then, after a man is purified from the shame whose stain he took through his wickedness, and has come back again to his natural beauty, and as it were cleaning the Royal Image and restoring its ancient form, only thus is it possible for him to draw near to the Paraclete. And He, like the sun, will, by the aid of thy purified eye, show thee in Himself the image of the invisible, and in the blessed spectacle of the image thou shalt behold the unspeakable beauty of the archetype.

Through His aid hearts are lifted up, the weak are held by the hand, and they who are advancing are brought to perfection. Shining upon those that are cleansed from every spot, He makes them spiritual by fellowship with Himself. *Just as when a sunbeam falls on bright and transparent bodies, they themselves become brilliant too, and shed forth a fresh brightness from themselves, so souls wherein the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves become spiritual, and send forth their grace to others.* Hence comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries,

apprehension of what is hidden, distribution of good gifts, the heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, *abiding in God, the being made like to God, and highest of all, the being made God*. Such, then, to instance a few of many, are the conceptions concerning the Holy Spirit, which we have been taught to hold concerning His greatness, His dignity, and His operations, by the oracles of the Spirit themselves.² (Italics added)

2. Spirit is the Spirit of Christ

The Cyril of Alexandria (Bishop 412 – 444) writes in his book *De Trinitate*:

The Saviour says: “The Holy Spirit” and it is this Spirit who introduces Him and makes Him inhabit our souls. Through Him and in Him, He leads our nature back to its primitive state, that is to say, refashions us to His own proper likeness through sanctification... The Spirit is the perfect and natural image of the Son. *Having been formed according to this Spirit through sanctification, we put on the form of God*. It is this that the Apostle (Paul) tells us: “My children for whom I am in labour until Christ be formed in you.” Christ is formed in us through the Holy Spirit who refashions us according to God... The Holy Spirit is then God who remakes in us the image of God; *not through any instrumental grace, but in giving Himself as a participation of the divine nature to those who are worthy*.³ (Italics added)

The recalling of the image of God from within us, in whose likeness we were created, may be understood as the beginning of an inner awakening. All human beings are created in the image of God. By sin it was distorted and covered up by darkness. But it is still there. The Spirit of God breathed into us re-awakens this image, enlightens and beautifies it.

The Byzantine liturgy glorifies Holy Spirit as Sanctifier on Monday of Pentecost:

The Holy Spirit is Light and Life, a living fountain of all spiritual reality; He is the Essence of Wisdom, the Spirit of knowledge; He is Goodness and Understanding, the Leader of Righteousness; He cleanses us from sin; He is divine and makes us so; He is Fire proceeding from Fire; his word is action, the distribution of gifts. Through Him⁴ God witnesses, prophets and apostles were crowned.

3. Holy Spirit is the Life Giving Principle of any Spiritual Activity

Prof. Petro Bilaniuk, a veteran in Oriental theology sees a moment of *epiclesis* in any spiritual activity of a Christian:

In fact, each supernatural activity of the Church, or of a particular Christian, carries within itself a moment of *epiclesis*, for it is being realized with the help of the Holy Spirit or in Him for the glory of God the Father. Thus the Holy Spirit is the life-giving principle of any supernatural activity. Consequently, the Church, each Christian, each supernatural act or activity and each consecrated thing carry upon themselves an invisible and spiritual seal of the Holy Spirit, and through Him a seal of the Most Holy Trinity; this is being actualized by a more or less explicit *epiclesis* and a more or less intense coming and activity of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, a denial of the necessity of the *epiclesis* is a serious dogmatic error emanating from a lack of understanding of the fundamental mysteries of the Christian faith.

4. Divinization

One favourite term the Oriental Fathers have used in reference to the activity of Holy Spirit, is divinization (*theosis*). This reminds

us of the Indian expression: *brahma-sakhatkara*, realizing Brahman within us. Human nature, by virtue of its consciousness, though finite and far away from the infinite divinity, is called to participate in the divinity of God. This is not done by showering some good gifts on it, but by the very presence of the divine Spirit within the soul and by its operation through its own “uncreated energy” by which it transforms the human soul and consequently the entire human being to the likeness of Christ.

Therefore, *theosis* can be described as the omnipotent and sanctifying, divine and Triadic activity which, because of the indwelling of the Trinity and grace and because of the inborn and natural capacity of the creature for transfiguration, introduces a process of assimilation to God the Father of the whole human person, of mankind and of the visible and invisible universe in its totality, through the mediation of the inhumanized Logos, Christ the Pantocrator, and in the holy Spirit.

St. Athanasius (295-373 A.D.) confirms the theory of divinisation by saying: “For he (the Word of God) became man, that we might become gods.”⁷ Later in the 7th century Athanasius of Sinai explained the doctrine of Theosis further:

Theosis consists in the elevation (of the human nature) to the higher, and by no means in the suppression or change of the nature.” This statement he defends in the following terms; ‘Divinized’ means that something has been elevated to a higher splendor, and not that it was emptied of its nature.

Dr. Bilaniuk explains this text as follows:

Translated into our modern terminology, this means that in the process of *theosis* the human person is divinized, that is, assumed into the higher and internal life of God, and by no means de-humanized or bereft of its human

qualities and properties. On the contrary, concomitant to divinization in the Holy Spirit is the process of true humanization, because the human being comes closer to God the *Omega*, God the Fulfiller, the ground of being and perfection, and therefore comes closer to the glorified and real self.⁹

IV The World Dimension of the Spirit

1. The Complementary Nature of Active and Contemplative Forms of Life (*Karma-Jnana-sannyasa*)

The *Sannyasopanishad* speaks of two kinds of religious life: *karma* and *jnana sannyasa*. Each one is free to opt what he/she is inclined to. These both had been great traditions in the Church as well as in many other religions. I think that they are complementary. I too think that the contemplatives have an extra obligation to pray and offer sacrifices for their confreres in the field working for the kingdom, because the contemplatives may have more time at their disposal while the activists are much more engaged in the world outside. Though the activists will take their struggles for establishing justice in the world to the Lord, still it must be the wish and prayer of the contemplatives to join them in spirit and offer their prayers in a spirit of identity with the activists. I am inspired to think so by reading the *Last Conversation of Little Flower*, who, though never went out of her enclosure, was always burning with incessant zeal for the missionaries in the field, and was always offering her prayers and sacrifices for their work. A similar relation can be established between contemplatives and activists. This is to be done with affection and concern for each other and is perfectly acceptable in the faith of the mystical body of Christ.

2. Sharing of Spiritual Wealth

Our sharing depends on what we have to share. In one of the quotations cited above, St. Basil makes it very clear how the working of the Holy Spirit within us is not a grace we receive just for individual persons, but is meant to “send forth their grace to others.” No divine experience of any individual is meant to remain in one’s own self. By its very nature the Spirit is self-transcending and this is all the more so when the divine Spirit operates in a human individual. Characterized by the divine Spirit, the human self, devoid of its egocentricity, easily reaches out to others. Here others do not mean people far away from us, but are always understood as neighbours next to us. Divinely characterized love will always place oneself at the disposal of the other next to him/her. St. Basil says: “Of necessity in the community life the working of the Holy Spirit in one man passes over to all the rest at once...When a number (of people) live together a man enjoys his own gift, multiply it by imparting to others, and reaps the fruits of the other men’s gifts as if they were his own.”

The wandering monks walk around as an instructor, consoler and a peace emanating person to the villagers. India is even now famous for this tradition of wandering monks. I am speaking here only about the genuine monks who have fixed their eyes on God and see their treasure in him. These monks share a lot with the people whom they meet. They are like the apostles whom Jesus sent, having no wealth to share, but only their consciousness and holiness attached to that. Therefore, people look at them with reverence and are happy to come to them and relish their presence. The previous Vicar General of the Diocese of Palghat, Msgr. Joseph Veliyathil, told us in one of his conferences: How did India keep the religiosity of the country down through the centuries, though 300 years it was under the Mugal empire and then 300 years under the British (Christian). It was through the tradition of wandering

monks and unassuming ashrams in the forests who enlightened the people who approached them with the divine wisdom which they possessed and this tradition continued for centuries.

3. Holy Spirit Removing the Afflictions of the Oppressed

There are different kinds of afflictions to which people are subjected. The affliction of poverty, injustice is one among them. When Jesus said the Gospel is preached to the poor and freedom is proclaimed to prisoners it was both real and symbolic (Lk. 4:18 ff). Symbolically it meant freedom from oppression of manifold afflictions and torments of the soul some of which are self-created. It is the Spirit who liberates from these kinds of afflictions of the soul by a process of purification and enlightenment. Those who have the Spirit and experience the Spirit and its operation in one's own depth can also help others showing the way how they should subject themselves to the operations of the same Spirit to get liberated. I think people of all walks of life flock around the great Benedictine abbeys in the West and Hindu ashrams in the East, largely not for any material advantage, but for spiritual nourishment and liberation. This is a great service done to the society as well as to one's own community members. St. John of the cross also speaks of afflictions of the soul in the beginning of the *Ascent to Mount Carmel*. The souls seeking advance on the road to interiority need liberation from these internal torments and afflictions, which is achieved by the work of the Spirit and are often guided by the masters who have experienced it.

V Conclusion

May I conclude this chapter with a few points in summary.

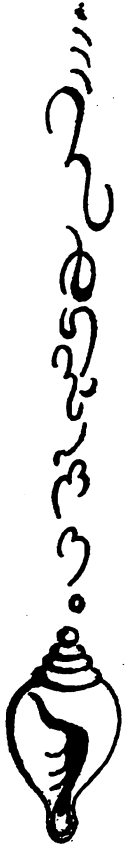
1. India has developed a profound search into the reality of God abiding in us, which deserves our attention and can give us inspiration.
2. God abides in us in the form of consciousness which can be covered by many other layers of consciousness such as, the mental layer, the sense layer, the world layer etc.
3. Only through faith we really come in touch with God. Faith is seeing everything through the eye of God. This eye is the Holy Spirit abiding in us, who with his "uncreated energy" inspires us from within, awakens us to the divine, enlightens us, transforms us and divinises us. Because faith is seeing things through the eye of God, through the mind and heart of Jesus (Phil. 2:5), faith is always a gift and it demands from our part a complete surrender, and at times even that of reason.
4. As we surrender to the acts of the Holy Spirit, he infuses his very divine consciousness into us, which first purifies, then transforms and divinises us to such a degree that we look exactly like God/Christ. Thus the dictum "knowing is becoming" is acceptable also to us. So also the expression, divinisation or God-realization can be seen from a Christian perspective.
5. Theosis is not the extinction of the human individual but the elevation of the same to the divine likeness. In true Christian interiority our consciousness is to be completely charged by Christ-consciousness, which is not to be understood as consciousness about Christ in the rational level (as in our theology), but the very consciousness of Christ now operating in you and me as subject.

6. Seen from this perspective, the Spirit which is God's own life, light and love in us, is not an object of our mind, but the ultimate subject beneath all our actions, as the Vine in the branches: "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). Thus the Spirit is to be understood as the ultimate Self within our individual selves. This kind of a Christian understanding will bring us very close to the Indian thinking but certainly not identical with it.
7. Long years of our theological formation, with its academic rigour and research orientation, makes God too much an object of our mind. Theology largely moves in the level of reason, though its inception is from a doctrine of faith. For growing in faith, the soul has to delve deep into the mysteries of the Spirit, which is done by making an inward journey along with the Holy Spirit, till it reaches its unfathomable depth, with a lot of experience and agony of realization. This must be a journey in the light of faith and not in the realm of reason. The Indian and Eastern experience of the Spirit can give us a lot of light in making this journey.

Notes:

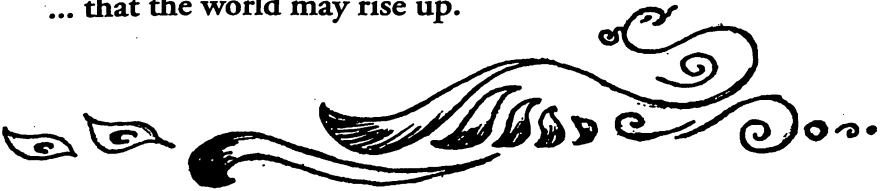
- 1 For further details see V. F. Vineeth, *Yoga of Spirituality*, Bangalore: Vidyavanam Publications, 1995, pp. 169-212.
- 2 "Booklet on the Holy Spirit", tr. B. Jackson; *Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. VIII, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, n.d., p. 25.
- 3 PG 75, 1088; translated and quoted by George Maloney, *Man the Divine Icon*, Pecos: Dove Publications, 1973, pp. 180-181. Cf. A. M. Bermejo, *The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit According to Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, Ona: Facultad de Teologia, 1963.
- 4 Byzantine Daily Worsh , tr. and ed. by most Rev. Joseph Raya and Baron Jose de Vink, Alleluia Press, 1969.
- 5 Petro B.T. Bilaniuk, *Theology and the Economy of the Holy Spirit: An Eastern Approach*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1980, p. 184.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

- 7 *De Incarnatione* 2, 54, PG 25, 192.
- 8 PG 84, 77.
- 9 *Bilaniuk, Op.cit.*, pp. 188-89.



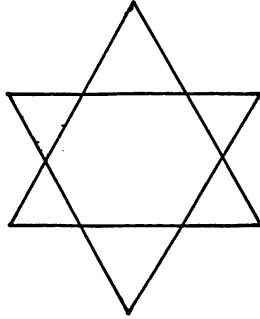
The Word
came down...

... that the world may rise up.



CHAPTER 6

SEARCH FOR MONISTIC AND THEISTIC APPROACHES IN HINDUISM AND CHRISTIANITY



Though he was in the form of God, He emptied himself taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:6-7)

I Introduction

This (personality of God), then, is an essential truth; one is all the more struck by the fact that most philosophers have overlooked or misunderstood it. The Ancient seem hardly to have reached it. This is certainly true of Indian Philosophy, which has never been able to bear the idea of divine transcendence, and if Plato or Plotinus glimpsed something of divine personality, they never expressed it clearly.¹

I do not know whether Danielou betrays his knowledge, or ignorance of Indian philosophy in the above cited passage. Who is the God we know, we adore, or to be more exact, we experience? Is this God the ultimate subject of all subjects or the object, of a thinking mind? This is the great question the *Upanishads* asked: Is God the subject or object? If God is subject, then he is the Ultimate Self of all selves (*Atman*). If God is the object of our knowledge, then, he is to be looked at as the Other, the wholly Other, the all-transcendent Being.

As I try to outline the philosophical foundations of theism in Christianity and Hinduism, what strikes me most is the difference in approach to God, a difference that is very notably seen in the Western and Eastern search for the Ultimate. Theism is often contrasted to monism or Absolutism. In this simplistic contrast the term 'theism' refers to the assertion of a Personal God and the term 'Absolutism' to the assertion of an impersonal Absolute. Ultimately it is a question of personal or impersonal God.

There had been a widespread feeling in the West that India stands for an impersonal God. This may be because of the Advaitic stress on *Brahman*, beyond all names and forms. But India has a very strong *bhakti* tradition, which demands a personal God to whom, the devotee relates with personal attachment and love. But even in the most classical form of *bhakti*, as developed by Ramanuja, the personal God is to be seen as the inner core, the ultimate agent, of one's own self.² Theistic tradition in India does not give up the idea of *Atman*, and seeing God as the *Paramatman* of the universe. Danielou finds it perhaps hard to combine the idea of the ultimate Self with the absolute transcendence of God. Then, what about the Christian theism, which has its most illustrative expression and justification in Jesus Christ who said: "I am the Vine and you are the branches."³ Is not the Vine the ultimate Self of all branches? Of course Christians believe in a personal God,

who is very clearly articulated in the revelations of Yahweh, and lately in that of Jesus Christ. But this does not take away the reality of God, being the inner depth and ultimate subject of our own self. The Holy Spirit is the innermost agent of our self-transformation and sanctification.

Theism in the West in its concern for a personal God has always faced the danger of reducing God to an object of our knowledge. Whereas theism in India, in its stress on the abiding presence of the divine in us and in everything, has sometimes risked the idea of the personal God in favour of his immanence.

II Theism in Hinduism

Can you know *Brahman*? This is the basic question raised by the *Upanisads*. The upanisadic answer to the question is that, you cannot know *Brahman*, because *Brahman* is not an object of the thinking mind. This negative answer however, does not lead the Vedic seers to pessimism, agnosticism or atheism. In the Western tradition, Jean Paul Sartre starts with a similar question: "Can consciousness know itself?" Consciousness is awareness, so cannot catch itself unless objectified. Hence Sartre gives up the attempt of capturing consciousness, leaving it aside as torn and tortured by nothingness, which consciousness contains. This mood of pessimism, which pervades Sartrian thinking, is partly caused by his approach to the problem, to objectify consciousness, which is essentially unobjectifiable experience of the subject. India, in her approach to the problem of knowing *Brahman*, which is consciousness, takes a different direction. This way of approach can be summarized as follows: "That which I cannot know objectively I can realize subjectively." Hence India concluded: the best way to know *Brahman* is not knowing *Brahman*, but becoming *Brahman*. Knowing is becoming: *Saksatkara*.

This approach of realization is not because the Vedic seers failed to conceive God theistically. The *Rgveda* knew a number of gods. Many of them were nature gods such as *Agny* (Fire), *Varuna* (Water), *Surya* (Sun), etc. But the Vedic seekers saw one supreme godhead beyond all manifoldness. This Ultimate Supreme he called that which is One.

Ekam Sat viprah abudha vadanti. That which is One the seers call in many ways.⁴

Thus, from the very beginning the idea of a monistic concept of God was already insinuated in the mind of the Vedic seers. This 'One Being' laid the foundation of theism in Hinduism.

By the time of the *Upanishads* this one was further conceived as the Self (*Atman*), the Absolute (*Brahman*) and the Person (*purusa*). Thus we read:

Sadeva, saumya, idam agra asit: In the beginning, my dear, this was being alone.⁵

Atmaivedam agra asit purusavidhah: In the beginning this (world) was only the Self in the shape of a person.

Brahma va idam agra asit: Brahman, indeed, was this in the beginning.⁷

Thus the *Upanishads* present the One as Being, *Brahman*, Self and Person. It is from this starting point India's search for God takes a theistic or monistic trend. Both have their justification in the *upanishadic* sources.

1. The *Brahman-Isvara* Dynamics in Godhead

The One in his Absolute Transcendence is known as *Brahman*; whereas in his abiding immanence he is called *Atman*, the Self. In either way he is the Absolute, beyond all speculation and

comprehension. He is the depth of mystery that is God. He is formless and nameless. The right way to designate him is, according to the *Upanishads*, *neti, neti* (not this, not this) because he refuses to be pointed to, to be an object of our vision or thought. Yet he is an undeniable reality in our life, an all-pervading presence in our consciousness. We live and move in him, and it is our constant endeavour to know him.

But the moment we articulate him in any form, he inevitably gets anthropomorphized. Yet it is within his dynamics that he assumes such names and forms for our sake. Thus the *Brahman*, though Absolute, is also an *Isvara*. It means that, the manifestative aspect of *Brahman*, that divine seed of self-communication, gets articulated in different personal forms. The personal form is, on the one hand, an answer to the exigency of human mind and, on the other hand, a condescension of the divine towards mankind. Thus the infinite and the ineffable becomes personal and definite, laying the foundation for a theistic trend of religious faith and worship.

As such, it has nothing to do with the question, whether God in his absoluteness contains in himself the perfections of what we understand as a person. The idea of a personal God is found unacceptable to certain schools within Hinduism. This has been so, not because these sects do not acknowledge God as all perfect, but because our concept of a person, as it is intimately related to our experience of finite human persons, is bound to be anthropomorphic and hence contaminated by structures of limitation. Hinduism acknowledges a God who is the Beyond and the Boundless, and yet, who assumes names and forms, who is then known as *Isvara*.

2. A Descending Theism

Theism demands personified forms of God. In answer to this need of the humans, the Absolute of Hinduism comes down to this world in several ways, and in several forms. This descent of the divine is known as *avatara*, in Indian religious tradition. *Isvara* as the manifestative dynamics in *Brahman* contains within himself the seed of all *avatara*. The *avatara* principle in the divine, more precisely in the *Isvara*, is the real foundation for the theistic religions of India. The divine can assume the name and form of many creatures, especially of the human. According to the *Bhagavadgita*, whenever the world is in a crisis of *adharma* (injustice or immorality) the Divine descends, the Absolute becomes God; *Brahman* manifests itself as *Isvara*.

*Yada yada hi dharmasya glanir-bhavati Bharata
abhyutthanam adharmasy tadatmamam srijamyaham:*

Whenever there is decay of *dharmā* (righteousness), and rise of *adharma* (unrighteousness) then I embody myself (in some form), O, *Bharata*.

*Paritranaya sadhunam vinasaya ca duskrtam dharmā-
samsthpanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge:*

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of *dharmā*, I am born age after age.⁸

The Indian theism is essentially a descending theism. This God who is now with name and form is not originally created by speculation; rather he is experienced in the depth of one's own being, as the One and the Supreme as we have already seen in Chapter 3. Of all the valid *pramansa* (means of knowledge), such as *pratyaksa* (perfection), *anumana* (inference), *upamana* (comparison) and *sabda* (testimony), Hinduism acknowledges only *sabda* as the ultimately reliable source of the knowledge of God.

Pratyaksa is unacceptable, because God does not become the object of our vision. *Anumana* is equally unacceptable, because God is not a concluded concept of our argumentation. Nor is *upamana* welcomed for the purpose, because God is beyond all comparisons. Only *sabda* is the reliable source of our knowledge of God. *Sabda* contains the testimonies of the divine experience the seers and sages had. This is the purport of all the *Vedas*, namely to convey the message of their experience as an inspiration for ours. Therefore, every Hindu, irrespective of the school he belongs to, is asked to listen to these words, ponder over them, and interiorize the same (*srotavya*, *mantavya*, and *nitidhyasatavya*). God, whether he is understood as the Absolute of monism or as the personal God of theism, is to be experienced in one's own personal life through the meditation of the Vedic texts. Knowledge is primarily a process of *anubhava* (experience), and *saksatkara* (realization).

The famous *Brahmasutrabhāṣya* in which the aspirant is invited to the knowledge of *Brahman* begins as follows:

Athato Brahmajijnasa janmadyasya yatah Now,
therefore, the inquiry into *Brahman* from which is the
origin etc., of this (world).⁹

In this famous philosophical aphorism, the Indian mind in search of *Brahman* is not articulating arguments to arrive at a God as the cause of the universe. *Brahman* is a reality already experienced and confirmed especially through the testimonies of the Vedic sages. Since *Brahman* is already experienced and acknowledged, the enigma of this finite world can be explained. In other words, because there is a *Brahman*, this world is understandable. This approach to theism is very different, from the classical Christian approach of reaching God as from effects to their cause, from creatures to their Creator. Later, in the *nyaya* philosophy, Udayana, the Logician, developed arguments in order to prove the existence of God,¹⁰ some of which are similar to those proposed by St.

Thomas Aquinas. But as a whole, the Indian foundation of theism does not rest on such arguments, but on the Vedic experience of the divine as *Brahman* and *atman*, the transcendent and immanent at the same time, and also as *Brahman* and *Isvara*, the Absolute and the Personal.

III Theism in Christianity

A philosophical search for God in Christianity is certainly influenced, by its faith in Christ as well as in Yahweh, the God of Israel. The God of Israel spoke from above mountains and clouds in a very personal way. He was all-transcendent, but at the same time a highly personalized God speaking a human language. This God, known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was a covenant partner of Israel. He was a real Thou, of course the Absolute Thou. As the Absolute Thou he was the wholly other, the great immortal, almighty, Lord of the Universe. Since this Yahweh is the One, who is constantly encountered in the events of history, the objective approach to God, which Christianity later developed in philosophy, was already insinuated there. God is the one who is encountered, who intervenes in history, who enters into our life from above. God is the other, the wholly other. As a covenant partner, he always stands apart, though attached and committed to his people. He is the deliverer, as well as the chastiser of Israel. Israel is called to worship him, adore him and surrender themselves to this Lord of hosts.

Covenant, however, pointed to a relationship of intimacy between God and his people. The covenant of the Old Testament was fulfilled in incarnation, the Supreme Covenant of the New Testament. The essence of incarnation is the great mystery that the infinite expresses itself in finitude, namely in finite name and form. Hence in the ultimate human expression of God, God

becomes the subjectivity of the human subject. This is the reality of Jesus in whom, the Word who is infinite, is the ultimate subject of all activities of the human flesh of Jesus. As every human being participates in this flesh of Christ, which is the expression of the Word, the Word is bound to be present in every human person, as its ultimate subject and agent. Jesus himself symbolically expressed this aspect of reality when he said: "I am the Vine and you are the branches" (Jn. 15:5). Though this principle of ultimate divine subjectivity was already there, the Christian philosophy of the West developed a more objective approach to God. As far as philosophy is concerned, the Christian God was, still one who is encountered rather than experienced.

1. Ascending Theism

In contrast to the descending theism of Hinduism, Christianity proposes an ascending approach to God. This approach is philosophically stabilized, by gathering arguments to prove the existence of God, from the contingency of the creatures encountered here below, and by trying to understand the Creator, through a method of comparison with his creatures, traditionally known as analogy. In this approach, it is the effect that takes man to the First Cause; it is this world that takes him to the Lord of the Universe. It is change and movement of this world that takes him to an Unmoved Mover. It is encounter with the creature that raises him up to the Creator. God is the one who is finally encountered. He is always the Other, the Supreme and the Independent, but inevitably the object of my encounter.

As God, the Supreme, he is certainly declared Absolute. Christian theism conscientiously purifies this God from all possible imperfections, by a method, which came to be known as a method of affirmation, negation and super-eminence. Accordingly every simple perfection that is seen in a creature is affirmed also in the

Creator. Its imperfections are denied and consequently a super-eminent state of its existence is asserted. Though it is accepted that this God transcends all our understanding, he is however, presented as the ultimate object of human creative speculation. Philosophically he is given a name, such as the Supreme Being or Subsisting Existence. Thus theism in Christianity is strongly founded on a philosophical concept of God, which is very much objective in approach.

This central trend in the thinking of the mediaeval Church was later reacted against by certain schools of Protestantism, and still later by movements such as modernism and existentialism. All these movements, in one way or other, wanted to stress once again the subjective dimension of the philosophical experience of mankind. This was rather eclipsed in classical philosophical thinking. However, the main stream of Christian theism is still objective in approach, especially so, because in Christianity the separation between theology and philosophy is still very strong. As long as this distinction lasts or is held to be of great value, the God of philosophy is destined to be an object of philosophical speculation, rather than a subject of awareness experienced in the depth of one's own being. Clarity of vision and definiteness of doctrine are the advantages of an objective approach. But extreme stress on objectivity and accuracy in articulation will take away all sense of mystery, and bliss of mysticism from the God-experience of humanity. The Pre-Socratics in their approach to reality experienced mystery, and they named truth *aletheia*, a word that literally means 'unveiling'. *Aletheia* was a never-ending process. Truth was a glimpse of reality that was being unveiled. Mystery pervaded everywhere. This experience of truth was totally changed, when in the Middle Ages truth was philosophically defined as 'agreement of the intellect with the thing outside'. The shift of accent from *aletheia* to agreement was a revolution in thinking and actually meant a change from the experience of the ineffable

to the objective articulation of truth. Deploring this development in the Western philosophical tradition Martin Heidegger writes:

By appealing to the meaning of the word *aletheia* we are doing nothing special, nor are we achieving anything useful. The question remains unanswered, whether that which is treated as 'truth', 'objectivity' and 'reality' has to do anything with that, to which the unveiling illumination of thinking points. Probably, what is more relevant in our thinking, which follows such a direction, is something higher than the mere ascertainment of the objective truth in the sense of valid statements. Then why is it that people time and again makes haste to forget the subjectivity, which invariably belongs to every objectivity?¹¹

2. A Distinct God: A Personal God

Two great values, for which the Christian search for God has perseveringly fought, are God's transcendence from all creatures, and nearness to humans as a person. Transcendence kept God distinct from all creation. Personhood made him an object of love, worship, and interpersonal relationship. Though the omnipresence of God was philosophically agreeable, the idea of divine immanence was comparatively less emphasized. Mystics like St. Teresa of Avila have developed the doctrine of divine immanence. But they are considered more a product of theological mysticism, than philosophical experience of God. Philosophical theism in the West, very much depends on a framework of objective thinking. This may be perhaps, due to the undue influence, other sciences are having in deciding the method of theologizing. Theology as a science has to be objective. A more fundamental question is, whether this scientific talk about God is going to be an authentic experience of God. Is God to be known as object or experienced as subject?

IV Incarnation versus *Brahman-Isvara* Dynamics in God

Theism, whether in Christianity or in Hinduism, inevitably demands a God, to whom human beings can relate personally. Even Sankara's absolute *advaita* (monism), makes provision for this religion of devotion, and personal relation to one's God.¹² Originally it was myths that provided personal forms of God, somehow culled out of the Absolute by human ingenuity. However, they were not mere fictions or fairy tales. Myths answered a basic quest of humanity to see the invisible in visible form, the unutterable in attractive articulations. God thus presented in a visible form was known as *Isvara*. However, the penetrating question remains, what is the objectivity of *Isvara*? Apart from the undeniable foundation of *Isvara* in *Brahman*, does *Isvara* possess a real form in which it is actually personified and worshipped? Thus, the enigma of Hindu theism still remains unanswered, as various god-forms of one *Brahman* are called for, communicated and also conveniently forgotten. To answer this tension between *Brahman* and *Isvara*, monism and theism, two ways of classical solutions are traditionally proposed. The first way, advocated by Sankara, unconditionally asserts the supremacy of *Brahman* over *Isvara*, of absolutism over all forms of theism. Theism is ultimately for the less enlightened human being, who cannot experience *Brahman* in his absolute subjectivity. However, since the human being is an embodied consciousness and remains in finitude, and God is God and ever so in his absoluteness, a *Brahman* accommodated as *Isvara*, is relevant both from the part of God and the humans. Sankara himself wrote the famous hymn *Bhagavadgita*, a tribute to Govinda, the *Isvara*.

In the second way, which is led by great *bhakti* theologians such as Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallaba, etc., *Brahman* is identified with *Isvara*

with no distinction or subordination. The very Absolute is the personal God, *Isvara*. He himself is the Krishna of the *Gita*, the Siva of the *Saivasiddhanta*, or even the fierce Kali of Calcutta and Parvati of Kailasa. Every form is the form of the Absolute, though the absolute is formless and nameless. However strongly the identification of *Brahman* and *Isvara* is asserted in these theistic systems, for reflecting minds the objectivity of these forms still remains as an unsolved problem. Hence, even in the followers of theistic cult there lurks the temptation to go beyond all forms of God in search of the formless one. Thus in the ultimate search for theism, the form and the formless are one. This paradox is not nonsense but a mystery of faith, which in one way or other all-theistic religions uphold and acknowledge.

1. *Brahman, Isvara* and Christ

It is in this context of the tension between the form and the formless, between theism and monism, that Christianity presents the doctrine of Incarnation. Incarnation proclaims the mystery of a form assumed by the formless. The Word became flesh. The Formless took form. The Christian theism, in spite of its claim for philosophical independence, cannot be Christian, unless in some way influenced by Christ-event. Jesus Christ is thus, the form of the formless. St. Paul rightly describes it as follows:

Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:6-7).

The form, which the Formless One received, was the form of a servant, namely the form of a human being. Humanity was the original name and form (*namarupa*), in which the divine expressed itself. Incarnation does not provide us with a philosophical solution

for the tension between *Brahman* and *Isvara*. Instead it brings us in touch with a reality, where the problem is at once encountered and overcome. But this is definitely a faith-claim, rather than a philosophical conclusion. The difference of incarnational theism, from various forms of Hindu theism, perhaps lies in its unconditional assertion of factuality, historicity and singularity. The Hindu theism does not necessarily demand the historical factuality of the form, which the absolute assumes, as the inner content of its very faith. Christian theism on the contrary lays emphasis on the fact of Christ, as a historical event. Though Christian faith does not deny God's salvific operation in the other forms of theistic cults, Christians consider the Christ event as a singular event, as an event occurred in history for all times. The question of the objectivity of the form of *Isvara* does not arise here, because the absolute is understood as inseparably attached to a human form once and for all times. In Christian theology, this union is known as hypostatic union, the eternal union of human nature in the divine person of Christ. Thus, the Absolute is declared personal, *Brahman as Isvara*. Yet, this is not a result of human ingenuity, but of divine self-creativity and expression. It seems to me that the humans, thrown in between the absolute and personal dimensions of God, find their ultimate way out only in faith, which is beyond all philosophy. It is faith which allows the advaitins to call God by many names. The theist also is led by faith, by which he/she identifies the finite form of God with the Infinite. Hence, Soren Kierkegaard rightly said that faith is a real paradox, and the paradox of the all paradoxes is Incarnation itself.

All forms of theism, irrespective of religion, accept this union of the Absolute with a particular name and form, though they differ in the mode and content of their faith. The most important question, however, in all theism is that of knowing the Absolute, who has assumed name and form. Theism ultimately rests on this knowledge of God. Any amount of objective analysis will not

take us to the real knowledge of this Absolute, nor of its form. It is only through faith we come in touch with the Absolute in human form. If the Absolute has taken the human form, the best way to know him is to seek him in one's own self. He is within us as the Vine in the branches. He is to be experienced rather than to be known. Though supremely transcendent and objectively real as subsisting existence, in becoming a human being, the Absolute has condescended to be the subjectivity of the subject. You too participate in that reality. *Tat tvam asi* (Thou art that).

Notes:

- 1 Jean Danielou, *God and US*, London and New York: 1957, p. 58.
- 2 Thus commenting on the versicle 3.30 of the *Bhagavadgita*, 'cast all your works on me...', Ramanuja writes: "Therefore make over to me whom am the Supreme person, all activities, regarding them as being done by Me, meditating on the form of self as to beset into activity by Me only, on account of its being My body. And perform them, looking upon them merely as acts of worship to Me. Becoming free from hope in regard to their fruits, and hence free from any thought that they are yours, perform actions like fighting in the war without the fever (of anxiety)" (*Gitabhasya*, 3.30: Eng. Trans. M. R. Sampathkumaran, Madras: 1969).
- 3 Jn. 15:5 Though symbolic in expression, it does point to a reality, as the rest of the text obviously says; "He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."
- 4 *RgVeda*, 1.164,46.
- 5 *Chandogya Upanishad*, VI.2.1.
- 6 *Brahadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.4.1
- 7 *Ibid.*, 1.4.10.
- 8 The *Bhagavad Gita*, 4.7-8.
- 9 *Brahmasutra*, 1.1.1-2.
- 10 Udayana, *Nyayakusumanjali*, 1.4:V.1.
- 11 Martin Heidegger, *Vortrage und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen 1954, p. 258: Mit der Berufung auf die Bedeutung des Wortes *aletheia* ist nichts getan und wird Erspiessliches nie gewonnen. Auch muss offen bleiben, ob das, was man unter den Titeln "Wahrheit", "Gewissheit", "Objektivitat", "Wirklichkeit"

verhandelt, das Geringste mit dem zu tun hat, wohin die Entbergung und die Lichtung des Denkens weisen. Vermutlich steht für das Denken, das solcher weisung folgt, Hotes im Frage als die Sicherstellung der objektiven Wahrheit in Sinne gultiger Aussagen. Woran liegt es, dass man sich immer wieder beeilt, die Subjektivität zu ergessen, die zu jeder Objektivität gehört?

12 Sankara, *Brahmasutrabhasya*, III.2.1.5.

13 Philippians, 2.6-7.

CHAPTER 7

SEARCH FOR AN ADVAITIC EXPERIENCE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH



Tat ekam evam advadiyam: that One alone and non-dual
(Chand. Up. VI.ii.1)

I Introduction

The fundamental problem that lay behind the Vedantic thinking was the identity of the self. Authentic sense of the self was ambiguous. An inquiry into the authenticity of the self is the theme of *Vedanta* and it is especially so in one of Vedanta's most important branches, the *advaita*.

This quest for the meaning of self was already there in the *Upanishads*, the source book of Vedantic thinking. The ambiguity with regard to the meaning of the self which characterized the *Upanishadic* thinking developed into complex systems in Vedanta

school of philosophy. Thus we have *advaita* (Non-dualism) where all differences are ultimately reduced to pure identity; *Visistadvaita* (qualified non-dualism) where differences are maintained with a sort of identity, *dvaita* (dualism) where differences are eternally real, etc. These systems are generally known as theistic or monistic as stress is laid on the idea of a transcendent God or an immanent Absolute.

As a rule Christianity has shown a greater leaning towards, and readiness to accommodate the theistic systems, especially that of Ramanuja. This is partly because of the idea of a transcendent God prevailing in the system, which guarantees the distinction between the supreme and individual selves. Christianity is used to such a pattern of thinking because Christians believe in a God who spoke to their forefathers, promised them salvation, gave them commandments and directed their history. The entry of God in the history of mankind made the Christian concept of God highly anthropomorphic. Theologically, however, Christianity favoured the idea of a transcendent God who is also immanent.

With the belief in the incarnate Word the Christian theology readily became theological anthropology, and it is rightly so. But here the anthropomorphism gave way to true and authentic anthropology where, once again, the truly transcendent became intimately immanent.

A quest for divine immanence can be seen today all over the world. A God who gives commandments from above, who judges and condemns, seems to be less attractive. On the contrary, a God who is within me, who is the center of my consciousness, who in some way is myself, is less repugnant. These are only two aspects of discovering the same God. *Advaita* is perhaps the system, which has accepted the principle of divine immanency to the greatest

extent, the pure identity of the individual self with the Supreme Self.

Theologies are always limited by the angle of vision they cherish with regard to reality. This limitation characterizes their inner thinking. Christian theology is thus limited by its angle of vision, as any other theology by theirs. Hence, a glance from a different standpoint is always good to understand in depth the very truths we believe. There may be many tenets in our own faith, which are not yet developed because the current of the then theological thinking, characterized by the limitation of the past, did not favour such a development. Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* turns his attention to India and encourages us to give an articulation of Indian Christian theology for which study of philosophy is necessary (). In this chapter we are trying to see Christian theology from an *advaitic* standpoint. We hope that *advaita* can make its own contribution towards an Indian understanding of our Christian faith.

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part we will briefly examine the main tenets of the *advaita* philosophy. The second part will deal with a few insights, which Christianity can develop in the light of the *advaitic* philosophy.

II The Main Tenets of the Advaita

A very brief account of *advaita* was already given in the third chapter along with other vedantic systems. Here we are focussing specially on *advaita*.

1. The Analysis of Consciousness

In the introduction to his *Vedanta-sutra-bhasya*, Sankara proposes a serious inquiry into the true nature of our knowledge.¹ At present

our knowledge is superimposed on us by our senses. But by examining the various states of consciousness we have to find out its true nature. This true nature is that which is permanent in all states of consciousness. Consciousness is Self-illumination (*Svayamprakasatva*). All determinations of time and space, which we notice in various states of consciousness, do not pertain to the true nature (*svabhava*) of consciousness. They are superimposed on consciousness.² But we always understand ourselves along with this super-imposition.³ Hence, in ordinary experience I am conscious about myself as something, as a student, lecturer, etc. Thus our consciousness is bound up with the determinations of time and space. Therefore our consciousness is not the real knowledge, the pure identity of our own self; on the contrary, it is a knowledge on which certain determinations are super-imposed. This is called *adhyasa*. *Adhyasa* is super-imposing the characteristics of time and space on knowledge, i.e., attributing the *visaya* (object) on what is *citmatra* (pure intelligence) by nature. Real consciousness is simply *citmatra*.

The pure consciousness, associated as it is with the *adhyasas*, super-impositions, is now operating in us. Let us call this the human consciousness, or the psychosomatic organism called *jiva*. According to *Advaita*, *Jiva* is made up of two principles: *saksin* and *antahkarana*. *Saksin*, which means witness, is the element of steady consciousness in us. It never becomes object, nor does it undergo any change. *Antahkarana* is the complex of internal organs in which the mind dominates. *Antahkarana*, which undergoes change known as *vrtti*, takes the form of the object in the understanding. In reality *saksin* only witnesses this process of change that takes place in the self. But often the *vrtti* (object transformation) is attributed to the *saksin*, as the human self (*Jiva*) practically fails to make the sharp distinction between *saksin* and *antahkarana*. *Jiva* is in a state of confusion. It identifies itself with the *antahkarana* and forgets the true nature of *saksin*. This is

ignorance (*avidya*). When true knowledge dawns the *antakarana* vanishes in the *maya* from which it ultimately emerged and the *saksin*, completely freed from the limiting superstructures of *antahkarana*, realizes itself as Brahman.

2. Brahman, *Maya* and the Universe

i. Reality is the Absolute Brahman

According to Sankara, the ultimate reality is the absolute Brahman, which is pure Being.⁴ This alone is really real (*paramarthika satya*) in the sense that this alone is eternal and absolutely unchanging.⁵ This Brahman is infinite, transcendent, incomprehensible, and ineffable. It is the ultimate ground of all affirmations and denials. No human intellect can comprehend it nor can it be properly qualified by any attribute. As the Absolute and ultimate Reality, Brahman is to be understood as *nirguna*, which means beyond all attributes. Hence, the only way we can designate this Brahman is 'neti, neti', which means 'not this, not this.'⁶ This however, does not mean Brahman is an empty concept. It is the highest realization of Being, and the highest Being the humans can ever conceive. But not even the highest human thought can express it as it is in itself. As pure Being it is also at the same time, pure consciousness. Absolute identity of Being and Consciousness in one is Reality according to *advaita*. Reality is one and non-dual (*ekam-eva advitiyam*).⁷ This reality we call *Brahman*.

ii. Brahman and *Maya*

Brahman is incomprehensible. But assuming name and form, Brahman has given rise to a world of plurality. This happens through *maya* which, as the manifestative power of Brahman, is inseparable from him. The entire universe is the manifestation of Brahman through *maya*. The true nature of *maya* is indefinable: it is neither real nor unreal. But since it does not have any reality

apart from the reality of Brahman and no reality outside Brahman should add anything to the absolute reality of Brahman, which alone is real, *maya* must be mere appearance and ultimately unreal (*asat*). *Maya* is, therefore, a composite of being and non-being and, hence, indefinable (*sat asat anirvacaniya*).⁸

Maya, however, has a twofold function described as *avarana viksepa*: projecting – veiling or revealing – concealing. On the one hand it projects (reveals) Brahman in manifoldness. But since, once revealed, what we see is no more Brahman in itself, but its external manifestation, *maya* really conceals Brahman from us. *Maya* thus points to the essential nature of any divine revelation, which is, inevitably both revealing and concealing. Since *maya* has the negative characteristic of concealing Brahman from us, and projecting him in non-Brahman forms, *maya* confounds human intellect and gives rise to a radical misapprehension of Reality. Hence *maya* is also known as *mulavidya*: radical ignorance. Ignorance is associated with *maya*, and *maya* with revelation, since a kind of ‘otherness’, i.e., Brahman appearing in names and forms, is inevitably involved in any revelation of the Absolute.

Advaita also uses many other terms to describe *maya*. It is called *vivarta* (appearance) because the whole *maya* is only a phenomenal appearance of Brahman. This trend of thought is called *vivarta vada*, the school of phenomenalism. It is called *adhyasa* (superimposition), because ultimately *maya* is super-imposition on pure consciousness, which is the real essence of Brahman. It is even called *bhramanti* (error) because one who misunderstands the projection of Brahman as the Brahman is really in error. However, *maya* enjoys empirical reality (*Vyavaharika-satya*) in contrast to absolute reality (*Paramarthika-satya*), which is Brahman’s alone. Being empirically real, it is true for all practical purposes. Its locus (*asraya*) as well as object (*visaya*) is Brahman itself, yet Brahman remains untouched by it.

iii. *Maya* and the Reality of this World

The reality of this world is exactly the reality of *maya*. Hence, everything that has been said about *maya*, can also be said about this world. This world is not absolutely unreal. In *advaita* unreal means absolutely unreal. What is absolutely unreal is that which never comes into existence in any form, such as a hare's horn or a barren woman's son. But the world is not so. It is empirically real. It does exist for all practical purpose. Only compared to Brahman, which is Being itself, is the world said to be unreal, because its being is composed of being and non-being (*sat-asat*). Hence, what is denied is 'reality for all time' as in the case of Brahman. In fact, the unreality of the universe means the 'non-eternality' of it. Just as the unreal appearances in dreams are real as long as the dream lasts, so also the world is real for us, as long as the state of ignorance lasts. When enlightenment dawns upon us we understand that Brahman alone is really real. To illustrate this, Sankara uses the simile of the rope and the snake. Suppose that a person sees a rope on the doorstep in twilight of dawn and thinks it to be a snake. He/she may even be frightened by it. The snake, though in fact unreal, is real for the frightened person. Only true light will free this person from fear. Similarly, only true knowledge of Brahman will make us realize the inferior form of reality of this world. There are three kinds of reality: (1) *Pratibhasika*, the realities of the dream-world, (2) the *vyavaharika* the empirical realities of the waking stage, and (3) *Paramarthika*, the reality of the Absolute. Through right knowledge we have to move from *pratibhasika* to *vyavaharika* and from *vyavaharika* to *paramarthika* and see everything from the Absolute's point of view. As Chandradhar Sharma rightly remarks: "None can condemn this world as unreal; he who does it is not qualified to do so, and he who is qualified to do, will not do so, for he would have risen above language and finite thought."⁹

3. Brahman, *Isvara* and *Atman*

Brahman is all transcendent, inconceivable and ineffable. This does not mean that He is sheer negation. Brahman is all-Reality. This Reality is manifested through *maya*. Through *maya* we can grasp Brahman and the Brahman thus grasped by us is called *Isvara* or *Sagunabrahman*, Brahman with attributes.

Isvara is a multi-faceted understanding of Brahman, as far as man's everyday life is concerned. But certainly *Isvara* is not the presentation of Brahman as such. Brahman is pure subject, and is never the object of any intellect. The moment we try to understand him in terms of the categories of our intellect and thus make him the object of our mind, we lose his essential nature. He is no more the unconditional consciousness; rather he becomes anthropomorphized or *maya*-bound. This Brahman is *Isvara*. *Isvara* is, thus, the Brahman reflected in *maya*. The Lord whom we come to know through the universe is *Isvara*. *Isvara* is the Lord of the universe, and as such the Lord of *maya* as well.¹⁰

This God, known by the categories of our human knowledge, is personal. We can be devoted to Him. We consider Him as King, Father, and the Lord of the universe. *Isvara* is the personal presentation of the absolute Brahman.

Isvara is *sat-cit-ananda*. He is both transcendent and immanent. Though he transcends the whole universe, he is also immanent in it, and controls it from within. As the immanent ruler he is the *antaryamin* (inner controller). He is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the universe. He is the source of everything and the goal of everything.

Generally, our whole religion is centered on *Isvara*. Thus *Isvara* is an important concept in *Advaita*. It is not a non-entity. *Isvara* is

Brahman himself, now manifested, and thus made available to the humans.

But since *Isvara* is Brahman manifested and grasped by the human intellect, according to strict *Advaita*, *Isvara* is not the Absolute as such (*parabrahman*). *Isvara* is *aparabrahman* or lower Brahman. It reminds us of *paravidya* and *aparavidya*. Knowing Brahman as He is in Himself (that is, knowing Him as subject and not as an object and which is possible only by way of becoming Brahman) is supreme wisdom (*paravidya*). Knowing him through his manifestations and reflections in the world is a lower grade of wisdom (*aparavidya*).

The unobjectified Brahman who is ever the subject of consciousness is *Atman*. Brahman is, therefore, *Atman*, the Supreme Self, the only Self. It is the Self, which is self-luminous (*Svayamprakasatva*). Ultimately Reality is this simple Self.

This Self cannot be denied, because denial presupposes it. The one who denies is a self already existing. All our mental operations rest on the self, which ultimately is the Self. This Self alone is real and non-relative. Everything else is relative and is understood as the object of our intellect. And in becoming the object of our intellect they become relative. The Self alone refuses to become an object, because by nature it is the subject. And to be subject is its very essence. It is the ultimate subject in every self-hood.

As subject, the self is pure consciousness. No distinction exists between the knower, knowledge and the known. They all are one in the Self. Existence and consciousness are one. "The Real is consciousness and the consciousness is the Real."¹¹

4. Brahman, *Jiva* and Liberation

Brahman who is pure consciousness is also *Atman*. But consciousness experienced, as something individualized, is *Jiva*. Hence the distinction between *paramatman* (absolute self) and *jivatman* (individual self). Hinduism uses the same word to designate God and the humans. Both are *atman*.

Brahman delimited by nescience or ignorance is *jivatman*. But why nescience or ignorance? This is the inevitable accompaniment of the individualization of consciousness. This individualization takes place through *prakrti* with which consciousness becomes related. *Prakrti* provides the receptacle for consciousness to participate in *antahkarana* (mind), *lingasarira* (subtle body) and *sthula-sarira* (gross body). They are evolutes of *prakrti* itself. Brahman as individualized consciousness is *jiva*. Both *Isvara* and *jiva* are similar and related to Brahman. In fact, they are Brahman itself. *Isvara* is the product of *maya*, which is said to be *mulavidya*, the radical ignorance contained in the production of something that is 'non-Brahman.' *Jiva* is said to be the product of *avidya*, because what is rooted in *mulavidya* is now made concrete in the particularized form of consciousness. In *jiva* consciousness gets particularized because of its relation to *prakrti* in a concrete and an individualized form. Enveloped by a mind-body structure its consciousness now becomes limited. It identifies itself with the mind-body structure. Thus the real consciousness now becomes a composite of consciousness and *avidya*. Ignorance keeps it in bondage.

From the state of this ignorance (*avidya*) the individual self is to be liberated. This is known as *moksa*. Liberation is obtained through knowledge. When true knowledge shines forth the darkness of ignorance just vanishes.¹²

Though there are three *yogas* namely, *karma yoga*, *bhaktiyoga* and *jnanayoga*, *karma* and *bhakti* are subsidiary to *jnana*. That is, the way of action (*karma*) and devotion (*bhakti*) cannot bring the self to its realization as Brahman without the way of wisdom (*jnana*). But these ways may prepare the self for *jnana* which will lead it to final liberation.

The way of *jnana* is a way of intuitive realization of the self. Though *Advaita* holds that Brahman can never be made an object of our intellect, *Isvara*, which is Brahman in some form, can be made the object of our intellect. The reality as it is in itself can also be known, but not by objectifying it as in the case of other knowledge. Reality, which is the ultimate subject or self of all, is to be known by subjective intuition. It is experiencing rather than knowing, and this experiencing itself is becoming or realizing its true nature of pure self-hood or consciousness. The real knowledge of Brahman is, therefore, becoming Brahman or Brahman-realization (*Brahmasaksatkara*) of the individual self.

Drawing on the *Upanishads*, Sankara proposes the following steps to accelerate the process of Brahman realization: *Sravana*, *Manana* and *Nididhyasana*. *Sravana* (hearing) is the study of the *Upanishads* with the assistance of a *Guru*. It means that truth is ultimately to be 'heard'. The revealed texts (*sruti* which originally meant what is heard), as well as the teachings of the *Guru* are important for an aspirant of Brahman realization. Once he has heard the 'word' or revelation, he has to think over it. *Manana*, means arguing or admiring within himself. The aspirant has already received the truth from the Scriptures and from the lips of the *Guru*, who expounds the Scriptures to him. Now he has to make it his personal conviction. *Manana* is meant for this. By constantly thinking over this noble truth within himself/herself, he/she removes from his/her mind all doubts against this truth.

Manana gradually gives way to *Nididhyasana*, which is intense meditation on the truth of *Advaita* already received; namely, the identity of the individual self with Brahman. The aspirant keeps on meditating until this truth becomes an immediate (*aparoksa*) experience. Then the self sees itself as the Self, the pure consciousness, the Brahman. This is liberation.

He/she is no more bound by the ignorance of the misapprehension of the self. Thus, the ultimate philosophical truth, derived from the *upanishads*, "*aham brahmasmi*"¹³ (I am Brahman) is finally realized. This realization can happen while the self is still with the body. Then it is known as *Jivan-mukta*. The liberated self may remain with the body for a few days more, for the sake of others. But no action can bind such a person any more. Finally the liberated one will be released from the body also. Thus the self acquires the status of *videha-mukta*, the final state of liberation. It is actually the realization of self as the Self, the *Atman*, the Brahman.

III Christian Insights into Advaitic Experience

Religion has always tried to express the ineffable. The true nature of the ultimate Reality in which everything is finally united transcends the power of human thinking. However, this meaning is grasped by the saints, experienced by the mystics. They have tried to articulate their experiences. *Aham brahmasmi* is a classical expression of it. "It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Phil.1:21) is another Christian expression. I do not say that these two expressions mean the same. However, a tendency towards a higher unitary experience is seen in both. The difference is also due to the tools they have used to articulate their respective experiences. By tools I mean, the language and expressions with their philosophical traditions, angles of vision, inner orientations, etc. It may be said that tools, to a large extent, are intrinsic to the experience and hence inseparable from it. However, it is also true

that a person of very high super-human experience may choose a form of language which is at a lower level than the experience itself, provided it makes some sense to his hearers. Biblical language is often so. It has never claimed to convey the content of the whole truth in one sentence. Rather it has tried to provide us with glimpses of truth through parables, similes, narratives, etc. Because of their non-dogmatic character, which has often been dogmatized in the Church later, they can always bring to us new insights, since the experience has not yet been exhausted by the expression.

1. Humanity of Christ as the Basic Namarupa of the *Logos*

In the prologue of his Gospel St. John introduces the *Logos* as the ultimate cause of everything. "In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God and the Word was God...all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (Jn. 1:1-3). The *Logos* which is the very consciousness of the Father is the ultimate source of every being. Tillich calls this the ground of being.¹⁴ *Logos* is the ground of being, because being begins to be according to the design given to it by the *Logos*. As the exemplar cause the *Logos* becomes the inner design in everything. The Indian equivalent for this inner design is *namarupa* (name and form). Being or entity arises from the infinite resourcefulness of the Father (*sat*) according to the design (*namarupa*) given by the Son (*cit*). The *Logos* is the heart and soul of this new being. Creation is to be seen from this point of view.

What is the function of this *namarupa*? Why should the *Logos* assume the limitation of a design? Christianity has an answer to this question, an '*a posteriori*' answer. I call *a posteriori*, because it is ultimately based on the faith in Jesus Christ whom I encountered in history as God made man, the Word made flesh, and hence

posterior to the fact of Christ. In other words, my approach to the problem is thoroughly history-bound (a point generally considered to be different from the Hindu way of thinking), but at the same time transcending all history (a point of agreement with the Hindu way of thinking) as it tries to analyse the original "movement" in the Divine Essence beyond all time and space.

Christianity believes that the Word was made flesh. This is Christ. Christ is the expression of the Father as the Word is the consciousness of the Father. In Christ the content of the Word was made visible and this was done through the medium of Christ's humanity. Humanity is, therefore, not something the Word has assumed from outside, though this expression is rightly used in Christian theology from an historical point of view; rather it is the medium of the Word's own self-expression, the very outpouring of the Word which is born of the Father. The *Logos* is the very reflection of the Father and is now made visible through the humanity of Christ. Hence Christ could say, "He who sees me sees the Father" (Jn. 14:9). This seeing is made possible through the humanity of Christ. Humanity is, therefore, nothing but the visibility of the invisible God. The original 'movement' in the essence of God was to express himself in a possible 'otherness' – and this 'otherness' was the humanity of Christ. Humanity was the basic *namarupa* the Word could think of for his own self-expression.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name (Phil. 2:5-9).

Though humanity was the medium of divine self-expression coming from the interiority of the Logos – if it does not come from the interiority of the Logos, we cannot say Christ is the revelation of the Father, or the Word made flesh, - humanity is a limited form assumed by the Word, to make the Word Christ. In the strict *Advaitic* terminology the humanity is a “super-imposition” (*adhyasa*) on the Logos which alone is pure consciousness. *Adhyasa* is an unfortunate term, because of its negative connotation. What is really meant by *adhyasa* is what has been superadded on pure consciousness, and as superadded it does not enjoy the same degree of reality as that of pure consciousness, which alone was and is eternally real. It is true that according to Christian faith, the ‘superimposed’ form of humanity will never be separated from the Word (Hypostatic union). However, it is a limited form expressing the inner content of the Word: “The Word became flesh” (Jn. 1:14).

Since humanity, as it is originally conceived in terms of Christ, is the visibility of the Logos, and since every human being shares the same human nature of Christ, the Logos itself must be the inner center of every human consciousness. Logos is not to be seen as a ‘thing’ in a human being, rather it is the foundation or the ultimate content of human consciousness. This ultimate content, around which the changing ego-consciousness has been formed as its own expression, does not change, but is always there, witnessing the functions of the ego-consciousness (*ahamkara*). The human consciousness contains the Logos as any expression should contain what has been expressed. This witnessing element of the Logos in our changing consciousness make ‘conscience’ possible, which is a radical reference of finite consciousness to the original consciousness of the Logos present in one’s own consciousness. In *advaitic* terminology this unchanging witness is called *saksin* and the changing consciousness the *antakarana*. *Advaita* maintains that in true enlightenment the *antakarana* will vanish and the

saksin will realize itself as Brahman. I do not hold on to this point, as it is not yet clear to me. Why should all forms of existence be finally reduced to the pure identity of Being? In that case, what is the meaning of the whole process of Divine self-expression? To my mind these questions are not satisfactorily answered in Advaita. But one thing is certain. In the final liberation the disharmony between the *saksin* (Logos) and the *antakarana* (human consciousness) will completely vanish and the *saksin* or Logos will be the sole governing principle of the entire human consciousness. It is so in Christ and it will be so in every liberated human being. "Out of his fullness we have received." A glimpse of this harmony we see in the book of Revelation:

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the almighty and the lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it and its gates shall never be shut by day – and there shall be no night there (Rev. 21:22-25).

The problem of disharmony between the witnessing Logos and the changing human consciousness is the problem of sin, which is a radical misapprehension of human consciousness about itself. It forgets the inner content of its own consciousness which is the Logos. It forgets what has been expressed (namely the Logos) and remains only in expression (in human/world consciousness). This is a fundamental ignorance (*avidya*) with which we are born. In its essence the Christian concept of the original sin is more or less the same: the deviation of human consciousness from its own divine center, the consequences of which are, as Tillich puts it, unfaith (deviation), *hubris* (pride or remaining in human consciousness as if it is all) and concupiscence (turning to the world).¹⁵

The disrupted human consciousness can however be re-integrated into its own divine content, the Logos, and this is done primarily, through the self-sacrifice of Jesus for all (*yajna*) and could be appropriated into each one through yoga or *sadhana* (means for realization), especially through *jnana yoga* (meditation). Meditation is a process of integration through which the disrupted consciousness is brought back to its origin, the Logos, which is in itself the witness within (*saksin*). Intense concentration helps the human consciousness to 'identify' itself with the Logos, assuming the power and characteristics of the Logos into itself. Gradually, the *Logos* becomes clearer and clearer, emerges as the sole life principle of the individual self to which human consciousness is absorbingly subordinated. In this state no one is living for oneself but for Christ. As Paul says:

None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.
If we live, we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the
Lord; so then; whether we live or whether we die, we are
the Lord's (Rom. 14:7-8).

Now the self would say: "Now it is not I who live, but it is Christ, the *Logos*, who lives in me." The ultimate identity of human consciousness, therefore, rests in the consciousness of the *Logos*.

The formation of humanity around the Word has an even wider dimension. The original movement of becoming flesh was not an 'instant movement'; rather it was a process. In order to become flesh in the person of Christ, the Word had to become humanity in every human being. Flesh contained Jesus and Jesus contained the entire humanity. There is no other humanity designed. We all participate in the humanity of Christ. Hence the becoming flesh was the great process of becoming humanity in general, and since humanity included also the universe, the becoming flesh in its wider sense included also the creation of the universe. There was only one movement in the divine essence, that of becoming

flesh (visible) which included the whole of humanity and the universe in which humanity is situated. "Christ existed before all things and in union with him all things have their proper place" (Col. 1:17).

The Logos is, therefore, intimately present in every being, as everything is the extension of the Logos made flesh.¹⁶ "I am the way, the truth and the life" of everything. Logos is the divine indweller (*antaryamin*) of all, the meeting point of the entire universe. Everything returns to it and everything is gathered up in it. The intensity of the presence of the Logos differs in Christ, in the humans and in creatures. This is understandable because Christ was the primal goal of the original movement, and humans was an extension of the same and the universe a further extension.

2. Humanity of Christ as the Revealing-Concealing Sacrament (*Avarana-vikhsepa*)

We have already seen that humanity is the medium of the Word's self expression. As a medium of the Word's own self-expression, humanity is a 'projection' of the word from within to outside. In *Advaitic* term it is *vikhsepa* (what is projected). But since what has been projected outside is not the Word as it is in itself, but the interiority of the Word in a possible otherness, the very projection becomes its own concealment. In *Advaitic* terms this is *avarana* (veil). The inevitable nature of divine revelation is that it cannot reveal without concealing itself at the same time. Revelation is always a process of *avarana-vikhsepa*: God cannot reveal himself except in a possible 'otherness' and since the 'otherness' is not God as He is in Himself, all divine revelation is necessarily its own concealment. The Humanity of Christ is, therefore, both the revelation and the concealment of the Logos. That is why there was the radical possibility of not accepting Christ as God. What is seen is 'man' in whom the *Logos* is concealingly revealed. The

Jews saw the humanity of Christ, but they did not see the *Logos*. They were in a radical ignorance (*avidya*), in a misapprehension of the true self of Jesus. This misapprehension was made possible because of the revealing-concealing nature of the self-manifestation of the *Logos*. Every sacrament has this character of revealing and concealing, since it is a visible sign of an invisible grace. Being visible sign of the invisible *Logos*, Christ is the primordial sacrament of God, the source of all grace.

Since every human being shares the same humanity of Christ what has been said about the humanity of Christ can, with necessary alteration be applied to one's own humanity. In every human being the human nature is a principle or medium of revelation and concealment of the *Logos*. He/she is another Christ receiving his/her greatness, fullness and likeness from Christ himself. Since the manifestation of the *Logos* necessarily involves the *namarupa*, and hence the limitation of form, the manifested *Logos*, though it expresses the inner content of the *Logos*, is still in a limited form. However supreme this form might be, it is not the *Logos* as it is in itself. This accounts for the distinction between *nirguna* and *saguna* Brahman in the *Advaita*. Christ is not just the *Logos*, but the manifestation of the *Logos* in human form and as such points to *Ishvara* or the *Saguna Brahman* in the *Advaita*. According to Hinduism *Ishvara* is Brahman in some conceivable or manifested form. Many of the stories centred around *Ishvara* is mythological. Hinduism freely accepts any number of such *avatars*, descent of God with a salvific mission. Myth can evoke genuine faith and commitment in the heart of the believer. The story of the myth may even have a history of many centuries. This does not guarantee that the characters in the myth is really historical.¹⁷ *Ishvara* according to the Hindu faith, is not necessarily a historical person, but certainly points to God's operation in history. Christianity on the other hand brings in the historicity of Jesus to the inner content of its faith and looks at Jesus as the incarnation of the Word in

time and history. By becoming man the Word assumes a name and form, son of man and the form of a servant respectively. Humanity is thus the basic *namarupa* (name and form) Jesus assumes. If you look at *Ishvara*, not as the protagonists of the salvation stories narrated, but as a divine dynamics in the self-manifestation process in the God-head, this principle is valid also for Jesus, who is "the visible face of the invisible Father" (Col. 1:15). In this sense Jesus is *Ishvara*, the *saguna* Brahman, namely God manifested in human form. As far as God is concerned, we know nothing about him, unless Jesus reveals him to us. This God Sankara calls *nirguna* Brahman, that is, in itself incomprehensible, yet understood through his manifested forms. Jesus is a point of revelation and concealment of the Father. Only through faith, if our inner eye is open, we see the Father operating in Jesus. The Jewish people who heavily depended on their reason and claim of special revelation, could not see God in Jesus. They saw only the humanity of Jesus, which was actually conceived by God as the medium of his own divine self-expression. Revealing and concealing is the inner nature of God's revelation, which keeps mystery alive and forever in all revelations. Faith, not reason, is the valid means to come in touch with God thus revealed.

The humanity of Christ, as Christians believe, is permanently united to the Word and is actuated by it (*Actatio creata per Actum Increatum*). Hence the humanity, which is hypostatically united to the Word, is not at all a matter of human conjunction, but a historical as well as a trans historical event with everlasting value and reality. *Advaita*, with its radical assertion of the absolute over all particular forms of revelation, reminds us of the inexhaustibility of the content of the Logos which is pure consciousness or consciousness of the Father and will ever provide the room for divine mysteries to be wondered, to be relished and to be united with. However, in Christian theology, this aphorism, though

accepted, is also balanced by the mystery of Christ in whom we see the visible face of the invisible God.

Notes:

- 1 Sankaracharya, *Vedantasutra Bhasya*, Introduction.
- 2 Sankaracharya, *Atmabodha*, 10, 11.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 15, 16.
- 4 Sankaracharya, *Vedantasutra Bhasya*, 1.iv.22. Eng. trans. George Thibaut, Sacred Books of the East, Vol. XXXIV and XXXVIII Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890, 1895.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 1.i.4.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 1.i.11. Compare this with the *Nada* (not this) of St. John of the Cross in the Diagram of his *Ascent to Mount Carmel*.
- 7 *Chand. Up.* VI. ii.1.
- 8 V. F. Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, pp. 64-65; cf. also Chandradar Sharma, *Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, pp. 274-275.
- 9 Chandradar Sharma, *Op.cit.*, p. 279.
- 10 Sankaracharya, *Vedantasutra Bhasya*, II. 1.14; confr. also S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, London: George Allen Unwin, 1962, p. 545.
- 11 "Sattaiva Bodha, Bodha eva ca satta," Sankaracharya, *Vedantasutra Bhasya*, III.2.21.
- 12 Sankaracharya, *Vendatasutra Bhasya*, I.i.4.
- 13 Sankaracharya on *Brahadaranyaka Up.* I.iv.10.
- 14 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1., p. 175.
- 15 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 69.
- 16 V. F. Vineeth, *Call to Integration*, Bangalore: ATC, 1980, pp. 77-90: ch. 1: "The Word and the Centre of Integration in Man."
- 17 V. F. Vineeth, "Religious Festivals," *Journal of Dharma*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 3 (2003), pp. 306-322.



sarvam samarpayami: I surrender all

CHAPTER 8

SEARCH FOR THE ABSOLUTE: A POINT OF CONVERGENCE IN RELIGIOUS WORSHIP

(A Study based on Sankara and Dionysus)



I am who am (Jn 13:29)

I Introduction

The human experience is characterized by finitude. All around us we see finite beings. Body-bound and earth-bound as we are, we are plunged into a world of finitude. Signs of limitations surround us. Everything that begins comes to an end. The day dawns and ends in the dusk of the evening; the seasons cease and the year slowly vanishes, inaugurating the next one. Thus the wheel of

time rolls on and on reminding us of the beginning and end of things that are finite. Human beings also move from their childhood to adulthood and then to old age and death. Of all these signs of structural limitation of being, perhaps death speaks to us very conspicuously the inner nature of our own being. Characterized by an inevitable tendency to decomposition, the humans are called to confront the inherent finitude of their nature. At the same time, a search for deeper meaning is spontaneous to every human being. This search forces them to rise above all signs and structures of limitation. Therefore the humans tend to move to that which is free from all possibilities of negations and structures of limitation, the Beyond and the Boundless, namely, to the Absolute. Is this not what we call prayer in the most radical and genuine sense of the word? Prayer and worship are expressions of human desire to transcend the limitations mankind is surrounded by and tend to the limitless one, the Absolute.

II The Search for the Absolute in Indian Tradition

Strictly speaking, the Absolute is un-understandable. It is the infinite, incomprehensible fullness of reality about which humans can never form an adequate idea, or any form of representation. That is why the Absolute was very often described in negative terms. The Upanishads prefer to speak of the Absolute as *neti, neti*,¹ "not this, not this," since what it really is, is beyond all expression. Buddhism designated the ultimate as *sunya* because it refused to give any name to the ultimate. In the Christian tradition also we see an approach to the Absolute in a negative way. The Oriental apophatism in general, *the Cloud of the Unknowing*, the medieval mystical classic from the West, *the Dark Night of the Soul* described by John of the Cross, etc., point to the absoluteness of the Absolute which is not understood by the logic of a thinking mind. The Absolute is better known by the contemplative gaze of

the inner eye which is beyond logic and is perhaps experienced in the depth of one's own being in an abounding sense of mystery and faith, rather than in the conceptualized thinking of one's own mind. But since mankind is in need of prayer and worship the Absolute is often expressed in names and forms. Both Hindu and Christian traditions speak about the names of the Absolute, though both these religions acknowledge the Absolute as ultimately nameless.

1. The Absolute and its *Namarupa*

In the *Chandokya Upanishad*, we read the following story of a student called Narada who approached his master Sanatkumar for instruction on reality.

“Let me know what you already know,” said his teacher Sanatkumar. Narada said, “I know all the *Vedas*, all ancient stories, all the rituals of ancestors, philosophies, sciences, astrology, philology and the science of stars and celestial beings.” Narada was really proud of his vast knowledge. But Sanatkumar said to him, “All that you have been saying is nothing but name. Reality is not contained in any name but is that which is beyond all names.”²

This story gives us a clue to the understanding of the manifoldness of creation, which expresses in names and forms that which is nameless and formless. The Absolute is that nameless and formless one about whom we use various names:

Not understanding, and yet desirous to do so, I ask the wise who know, myself not understanding Who may be he, the One in the form of the unborn Who probs in their place, the six universal regions? They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni or the Sunbird Garutmat, the seers call in many ways that Which is one; they speak of Agni, Yama, Matarisvan.³

The Absolute is that One beyond all names and forms. He is the ultimate substratum of all names, ever present in everything, yet transcends all their limitations. Prayer and worship inevitably employs names of the Absolute. Since names are particular, worship is often addressed to a particularly manifested form of the Absolute. Only with a spirit of transcendence of its own particularity we reach the real Absolute that is addressed in the very same prayer.

2. The *Saguna-Niguna* Dynamics in Knowing and Worshipping the Absolute

Only through names and forms we reach the Absolute who is nameless and formless. The Absolute understood by us in name and form is called by Sankara, the *saguna*-Brahman; namely Brahman with qualities.

Though Brahman is without name and form such things are seen ascribed to him. And it has been said that though Brahman is without qualities, still for the sake of meditation it is presented in these places as a qualified entity, possessed of the characteristics associated with names and forms.⁴

In the advaitic system of Sankara, worship is offered to this *Saguna Brahman* who is considered to be a personal God, the creator, the Lord of the Universe, the *Isvara*. Sankara writes:

That omniscient and omnipotent source must be Brahman from which occur the birth, continuance, and dissolution of this universe. That is manifested through name and form, that is associated with diverse agents and experience, that provides the support for action and results, having well-regulated space, time and causation and that defies all thoughts about the real nature of its creation.⁵

The Absolute is declared as omniscient and omnipotent and also as the creator of the universe. We attribute these qualities to the Absolute. We come to know the Absolute as the wisdom, power,

and cause from which this universe had its origin; this *Saguna-Brahman* is understandable only with the help of attributes we ascribe to Him. But Reality in itself is far beyond all of them. We cannot rightly attribute any name to it. This attributeless Absolute, Sankara calls the *Nirguna-Brahman*, the ultimate, incomprehensible Fullness of being. *Saguna-Brahman* or personal God is worshipped in manifold ways whereas the *Nirguna-Brahman* or the ultimate Absolute is to be realized more and more in the depth of one's own being. Sankara comes to *bhakti* as a means to worship the *Saguna-Brahman*. Though the knowledge of *Saguna-Brahman* is lower, Sankara admits that it can lead one to the higher knowledge of the Absolute. Commenting on devotion to the Lord presented in the *Gita*, Sankara writes:

By the undistracted devotion it is possible not only to know me as declared in the *sastras*, but also to intuitively realize me as I am and enter into me.⁶

Worship and devotion are possible to the manifest Brahman and would rightly lead one to the Absolute Brahman who is beyond all forms of manifestation and hence transcends all forms of worship. Brahman, who is thus all-transcendent is often spoken of as possessing auspicious, earthly qualities for the sake of human worship and adoration.⁷ This is quite understandable because worship needs singing of names and praising the Lord for his wonderful works. Names are not mere human projections but real attributes with a foundation on the manifestative dimension of Brahman which is classically known as *Maya*. In worship we praise the Lord who manifests himself with his *Maya*-power and are expected to rise above it in our orientation to the Absolute who is beyond all manifestative play (*lila*) of reality.

III The Search for the Absolute in Christian Tradition

1. The Israel's Search for the Absolute

Israel believed in an absolute God who is all powerful. In a world of numerous gods, Israel kept their faith in the one God who is matched by none. Because this God was beyond all forms, no image of God was ever allowed in Israel. Image worship was condemned as pagan and abominable. Time and again the Prophets waged their uncompromising fight for the absoluteness of the Absolute. As Paul Tillich puts it, "Monotheism does not mean that one God is better than many; it means one is Absolute, the Unconditional, the Ultimate. It was for this absolute, unconditional, ultimate One that the idolatric struggle was carried on."⁸

But Israel had a name for the Absolute, Yahweh, which is often translated as the Lord. It is suggested that the name Yahweh means "he brings into being whatever comes into being."⁹ Thus understood, Yahweh is the Lord of all creation and points to the difference between the creator and the creatures he has brought into being. The name Yahweh was considered sacred and not to be used in vain or invoked in oaths (Exodus 20:7, 23:10; Deut. 5:11; Lev. 19:12).

The Absolute of Israel with the name Lord, seen from the Indian perspective, is more or less equivalent to *Isvara* or in Sankara's terminology *Sagunabrahman*. The real Absolute, the unnamable and the unfathomable, still remains beyond our grasp. This is not because the Lord has not revealed himself to his people but because the human conceptualization is always characterized by finitude. Yet, for a believing one, the vision of the Absolute through this modality of revelation can be central to his life. So it was for

Israel. The God of Israel, though Absolute, was anthropomorphic as well. This made him very personal and involved in human history. As regards the justification of an anthropomorphic God Rahner writes:

Any attempt to justify the use of anthropomorphism on the basis of our necessary dependence upon perception should take into account God's own intervention in history. If we are to bear witness to this historical intervention, we make necessary use of concepts derived from historical experience and it is precisely this latter kind of testimony that constitutes a more exalted justification for the use of anthropomorphisms.¹⁰

The anthropomorphic names of God are certainly valid and richly used in worship. The question is whether we have to seek the Absolute beyond these names and forms.

2. The Absolute in Human Flesh

In the fullness of time when the Word became flesh, according to Christian faith, the Absolute has received a name and a form. According to Paul, the Word, though he was in the form of God, emptied himself taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man (Phil. 2:6-7). Though the human flesh is designed as the medium of God's self-expression, as the incarnational theory of creation would like to put it, yet it is certain that no finite form, however spotless and supreme, can limit the absolute to its own limitedness. The Absolute is that which transcends all forms and yet is the center of every form. The most Immanent is the most Transcendent. The Word which was from eternity and which becoming flesh, laid the foundation for all creation is seen by Christian faith as the One who is all Transcendent and all Immanent and thus the Absolute. Yet Christian Theology also developed positive and negative approaches towards understanding the Absolute. St. Thomas spoke of a negative way of eliminating

all imperfections along with a positive way of acknowledging all perfections and a way of super eminence in which what is thus acknowledged is elevated to infinity, in understanding God. I find Dionysius, the Areopagite with his celebrated works *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology* representing these negative and positive methods of approach.

3. The Dionysian Approach to the Absolute

Inspired by the neo-Platonic mysticism of Plotinus and his followers, Dionysius outlines a path of mysticism. His book *The Divine Names* reminds us of the *Namarupa* of Brahman in Indian tradition. Dionysius begins his speculation speaking about the names of God in three categories.

- i) Names taken from the Sacred scriptures such as "I am that I am (Ex. 3:14), "I am the Life (Jn. 14:6), "The Light" (Jn. 8:12), etc.¹¹
- ii) Names drawn from the whole created universe such as "Good" (Mt. 19:27), "Fair" (Ps. 26:4), "Wise" (Rom. 14:27). These names presuppose that God is the creator of the universe and attribute to God perfections of the creatures.¹²
- iii) Names drawn from the manners of acts and function performed by God in human form. Thus scriptures speak of the "eyes" of God (Ps. 10:5), "ears" (James 5:4) and "hair" of God (Daniel 7:9).¹³

Though Dionysius speaks about the names of God, he is very conscious that God, the Absolute, is ultimately nameless. But we need names to worship Him, to sing his praises. We can only celebrate him as the giver of our being, life, and wisdom to us.¹⁴ But we cannot name him in the ultimate sense. All attributes are affirmed to him, and yet he is no-thing, the nameless.¹⁵ This takes us to the threefold path of Dionysius to the Absolute.

IV The Threefold Path of Dionysius

Dionysius says that our knowledge of God can be symbolic, positive or catephatic, negative or apophatic. Since we are dealing with the problem of the Absolute in the form of worship, these three ways are of significant importance. Worship is mainly done with the help of symbolic and catephatic knowledge of God. But the transcendence of the worship patterns and convergence to the Absolute is only possible with an apophatic approach to the divine depth and transcendence.

1. The Symbolic Way of Knowing God

According to Dionysius the symbolic theology corresponds to the divine procession and emanation. Since everything created has proceeded or emanated from God, anything in creation can be seen as pointing to the creator. What is thus seen in the realm of senses is converted to the service of the divine.¹⁶ This is especially done in sacramental worship where natural symbols are always selected and employed in order to signify the events that take place in the inner depth of soul. But a symbol is always a pointer and is empty, if it does not contain what it symbolizes. Therefore a symbol by its very nature asks us to go beyond the symbol. The Absolute is in the symbol and beyond the symbol.

2. The Catephatic Way of Knowing God

Dionysius considered this as a theology of return. That is to say we return our concepts to God which we have formed from the world of God. We ascribe to him what He has revealed about him. In this way we celebrate the nature of God that has been revealed in his movement towards us in creation and redemption.¹⁷ The Eucharistic Celebration as an *anamnesis* is mainly the celebration of the great deeds of God for his people. Dionysius'

famous book *The Divine Names* is devoted to this purpose. But he constantly reminds us that our affirmation falls short of God, the Absolute. None of our concepts reaches him, who is the Unknowable and this leads to the realization that Divine knowledge of God is that he is known as if covered by a cloud of unknowing,¹⁸ “when the mind, turning away from all things and then leaving even itself behind, is united to the dazzling rays, being from them and in them, is illumined by the unsearchable depth of wisdom.”¹⁹

3. The Apophatic Way of Knowing God

Both symbolic and cataphatic ways of knowing God point to that which is beyond all symbols and concepts. The worshipper of God who makes use of symbols and concepts is therefore called to reach a state where the symbols and concepts are ultimately transcended and God is known in the unknowing. This is the core of apophatic theology of dark knowledge beyond the active and conceptualized knowledge of the mind. This state of utter passivity is sometimes expressed by speaking of pure and absolute ecstasy in which the intellect goes out of itself and is united with “the Ray of that Divine darkness”²⁰ that is beyond all beings. It is however to be noticed that Dionysius stresses also the positive side of ecstasy as love, union and deification.

This apophatic theology is not rational but intuitive or ‘hidden’. Dionysius does not deny the power of discursive reason, but asserts only the superiority of mystical knowledge. Only with such a mystical knowledge of the Absolute, can we actually transcend the limitation of our worship patterns which are well-characterized by the words of symbolic and cataphatic theology. Dionysius advises us as follows:

Such be my prayer; and thee, dear Timothy, I counsel that, in the earnest exercise of mystic contemplation, thou leave the senses and the activities of the intellect and all things

that the senses or the intellect can perceive, and all things in this world of nothingness, or in that world of being, and that, thine understanding being laid to rest, thou strain (so far as thou mayest) towards an union with Him whom neither being nor understanding can contain. For, by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself, and all things, thou shalt in pureness cast all things aside, and be released from all, and so shalt be led upwards to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence.²¹

The symbols and concepts should ultimately give away to a silent understanding of the mystery of the ineffable, to a mystic silence leading to a climax that is union and vision of Him as he is in Himself. Our worship pattern is full of symbols and concepts taken from our Sacred Scriptures and the created universe. Search for the Absolute means a quest for transcendence beyond all names and forms used in worship in our openness to the nameless.

V Absolute as the Point of convergence in Worship

Our worship is directed to the Absolute. Yet worship is done to a God known in name and form. A worship to the Absolute as Absolute is perhaps practically impossible. However the Absolute, though all-transcendent, is available for us in manifold forms. Religions bring their claims of understanding the Absolute. These claims vary. Accordingly the worship forms also vary. They use names and forms of the Absolute they are acquainted with. Thus the Absolute is in all patterns of worship, and yet not exhausted by any of them. This takes us to the dual nature of the Absolute in religion such as the Absolute in a particular form of religious worship and the Absolute beyond all forms of religious worship.

1. The Absolute in a Particular form of Religious Worship

Religions as we have known them are based on the particular experience of the Absolute by a group of people. They have their history of the encounter with the Absolute, their Sacred Scriptures, their traditions and rituals. Their worship-forms will naturally use a language (names) flowing from their own particular traditions. In the words of Paul Tillich, "such a community expresses the particular character of its experience of the Holy in its special rule that determines its social and ethical life."²² Here the Absolute is brought into the realm of particularity. This particularity is its wealth and limitation. There is a tension in every religion to rise above this particularity, but not abandoning it. This tension is often ignored in order to make an easy identification of the Absolute with the particular form. This is dangerous because self-transcendence in its orientation to the Absolute is a must for all religions and all forms of religious worships.

Yet it could be asked, if the Absolute itself has revealed in a particular and decisive way in a religion, how would it fit into this general pattern. Here we are confronted with the problem of the Absolute's own intervention in history. If the Absolute decides to manifest himself historically with a definite name and form, then what is the nature of the absoluteness of that form. Since Christians see Jesus Christ as the manifest form of the Absolute once and for all times, this question is all the more relevant here.

Christianity absolutizes neither the finite, the conditional, nor the relative in anything human – even in religion. But since in Jesus Christ God has absolutely accepted the finite and communicated himself to it in an absolute manner, Christianity lays claim to being unique among religions, their final fulfillment which in the course of history will in no way ever be superseded.²³

This is obviously a faith-claim and is not to be imposed on others, since faith-claim is relevant only to the group of people characterized by the same faith. Even though this claim is accepted as true from the Christian perspective of faith, it points to a deep mystery of the Absolute accepting the limitations of a name and form (*nama-rupa*) which the Christian traditional theology understood as "the created activity of the uncreated act." Of course not a name and form feigned by the human ingenuity or drawn from the world of names and forms, but a real human form hypostatically united to the Word. Yet it is a name and form characterized by the structures of limitation in and through which the Absolute is made available to us, that we may love and worship him and be blessed and saved by him. In worship we are remembering and praising the Absolute communicated to us in this particular form. But we are also called to move to the Absolute itself transcending the form. This makes our worship always a celebration of mystery, an acceptance and transcendence of all names and symbols in worship.

2. The Absolute Beyond All Forms of Religious Worship

The awareness of the Absolute as Absolute beyond all forms, yet fully in every form is a corrective principle for all religions and their patterns of worship. Absolute as absolutely holy, just and true, will judge, transform and even reject any form of religion and its worship when they are away from holiness, justice and truth. Thus the prophets rejected the ritual of fasting when it was devoid of the spirit of which it was only a symbol. Jesus warns us not to proceed to the altar with offering in our hands, when the law of love laid down by the Absolute calls us back for reconciliation with our brothers and sisters on this earth. The Absolute refuses to identify itself with any form of religion or any form of worship but judges and directs them. Referring to God's rejection of Judaism in the beginning of Christianity, Paul Tillich writes:

The rejection of that nation which represents the Absoluteness of the Absolute, by the Absolute itself, is the greatest inner religious manifestation of Absolute.²⁴

It is to this Absolute, the ultimate convergence is to be made by all religions and in all their worship. This convergence to the Ineffable makes us humble, less self-assertive and far less aggressive, because whatever be the claims of the genuineness of our worship, we know that we are using only finite symbols for expressing the Infinite and the Ineffable, the veracity of which needs to be judged by the Absolute itself. By going beyond the impression of the senses, images, forms, thoughts and concepts of the mind, we have to move upwards to the ray of that divine darkness which exceeds all forms of existence.²⁵ May I conclude this paper with quotes from Dionysius and Sankara.

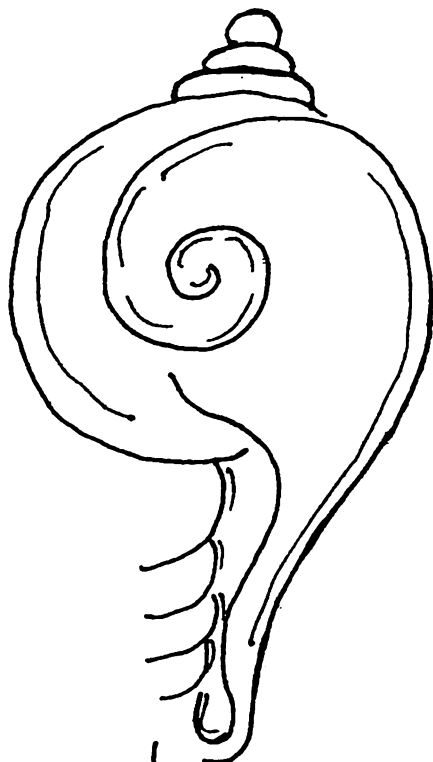
Now we must wholly distinguish this negative method from that of positive statements. For when we were making positive statements we began with the most universal statements, and then through intermediate terms we came at last to particular titles: but now ascending upwards from particular to universal conceptions we strip off all qualities in order that we may attain a naked knowledge of that Unknowing which in all existent things is enwrapped by all objects of knowledge, and that we may begin to see that super-essential Darkness which is hidden by all the light that is in existent things.²⁶

Moreover, Brahman is known through name and form. As rivers flowing down become indistinguishable reaching the sea by giving up their names and forms, so also the illumined soul; having become free from name and form, reaches the self-effulgent *purusa* that is higher than the higher.²⁷

Let us remember the words spoken by Jesus to the Samaritan woman: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him should worship in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:23, 24).

Notes:

- 1 *Bṛhadaranyaka Up.*, III.9.26; Referring to the Absolute S. Radhakrishnan writes: "Absolute being is not an existing quality to be found in the things. It is not an object of thought or the result of production. It forms an absolute contrast to, and is fundamentally different from, things that are, as is in its way to nothingness. It can be expressed only negatively or analogically. It is that from which our speech turns back along with the mind, being unable to comprehend its fullness. It is that which the tongue of man cannot truly express nor human intelligence conceive." (*The Principal Upanishads*, p. 67).
- 2 Chand. Up., VII.v.1.1-3; cfr. also V. F. Vineeth, *Foundations of World Vision*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1985, pp. 78-80.
- 3 *Rgveda*, I.16.6, 46.
- 4 Sankaracharya, *Brahma-Sutra-Bhasya* I.2.14, Eng. trans. by Gambhiranda, Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1911, p. 178.
- 5 *Ibid.*, I.1.2.
- 6 Sankaracharya, *Gita-Bhasya*, XI.5.4.
- 7 Sankaracharya, *Brahma-Sutra-Bhasya*, I.1.21.
- 8 Paul Tillich, *My Search for Absolute*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969, p. 139.
- 9 John L. McKenzie, *The Two-Edged Sword: An Interpretation of the Old Testament*, New York: Image Books, 1966, p. 154.
- 10 Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, New York: Herder, 1965, p. 28.
- 11 Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, Eng. trans. by C. E. Rolt, London: SPCK, 1977, p. 61.
- 12 *Divine Names*, p. 62.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- 16 Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology*, Eng. trans. by C. E. Rolt, London: SPCK, 1977, pp. 196-199.
- 17 Cheslyn Jones, *The Study of Spirituality*, Cambridge: SPCK, 1986, p. 188.
- 18 *The Cloud of Unknowing* is the title of an English Medieval Classic on Christian Mysticism.
- 19 *Divine Names*, p. 152.
- 20 *Mystical Theology*, p. 192.
- 21 *Mystical Theology*, pp. 191-192.
- 22 Paul Tillich, *op.cit.*, p. 131.
- 23 Karl Rahner, *Theological Dictionary*, p. 111.
- 24 Paul Tillich, *op.cit.*, p. 139.
- 25 *Mystical Theology*, pp. 193-194.
- 26 *Mystical Theology*, pp. 195-196.
- 27 Sankaracharya, *Commentary on Mundaka Up.*, III.2.8. Eng. trans. by Gambhirananda, *Upanishads*, Vol. II, pp. 168-169.



The Word assumed name and form

CHAPTER 9

SEARCH FOR THE ASIAN IMAGE OF GOD IN CHRIST



And was not Jesus Christ an Asiatic? (Keshub Chunder Sen)

I. Introduction

Is the Jesus we know really Asian? Or is he already made western by the time we come to know him? This chapter is an attempt to look at some aspects of the Asian genius, which will guide us to an Asian image of God in Christ. Keshub Chunder Sen is an Indian author who earnestly longed to see in Jesus Christ an Asian image of God. He says:

And was not Jesus Christ an Asiatic? Yes, and his disciples were Asiatics, and all the agencies primarily employed for

the propagation of the Gospel were Asiatic. In fact, Christianity was founded and developed by Asiatics, and in Asia. When I recollect on this, my love for Jesus becomes hundred-fold intensified; I feel him nearer to my heart, and deeper in my national sympathies. Why should I then feel ashamed to acknowledge that nationality which he acknowledged? Shall I not rather say he is more congenial and akin to my Oriental nature, more agreeable to my Oriental habit of thought and feeling? And is not true that an Asiatic can read the imageries and allegories of the Gospel, and its descriptions of natural sceneries, of customs and manners, with greater interest, and a fuller perception of their force and beauty, than Europeans? In Christ we see not only the exaltedness of humanity; but also the grandeur of which Asiatic nature is susceptible. And thus in Christ, Europe and Asia, the East and the West, may learn to find harmony and unity.

Today in the whole world we see a spiritual awakening. There is a real interest in the Asian masters of spirituality. This is a worldwide phenomenon. Asian mysticism, Asian meditations, Asian spiritual masters: this has become a trend of the day. There are many living movements from India flooding the world. Transcendental meditation, Hare Krishna movement, movement of Swamy Chinmaya, Chinmoy, Bhagavan Rajneesh, Mata Amruthanandamayi and so on. All of them have many disciples in the West. In this context, let us present an Asian Jesus to the world. This Jesus from Asia, though He was the Word Incarnate, was very simple. Unassuming and unarmed, He preached God's love in a very simple and lucid language. This is the sum and substance of the Good News preached by Jesus: God's love is not an idea, but a reality. You can experience it here and now. We have to be preachers of this love. Unfortunately, what is happening today is very sad. We are not in touch with this Asian Jesus. We are more in touch with the European Christ. When the Asian Jesus was brought to Europe, in course of time, a lot of European

and western elements entered into the profile of Jesus Christ. And, after the success of Constantine, the Emperor, who declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, a sense of domination also entered into the image of Christ. The Church became the religion of the Empire and the Emperor himself became a great power within the Church. A sense of worldly superiority also entered into the Church, which was not there in its origin. Later, missionaries came from that Church to India. The Church they built in India also came to possess that kind of characteristics: more western in culture and analytic in thinking.

II The Reality of the Asian Christ

Certain characteristics of Asian spirituality and theological orientation are presented here. They are drawn from the pre-Christian religious culture and ethos that were prevalent in Asia before Christianity and also from the traditions of the original eastern Churches, which are models for developing Christian Churches in the East. The idea is to discern and dispose the culture and the rich religious heritage of the East for the sake of receiving and expressing our Christian faith. In fact, Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in his recent Encyclical: *Fides et Ratio*, calls the Asian nations, especially India, to articulate their own theologies, making their own masterly synthesis of the genuine philosophies and spiritual values of their countries with our Christian faith²

1. An Experiential and Realizational Approach

Knowing is becoming. This small sentence speaks to us a great *sutra* of theological knowledge, which is not an exercise of the mind, but a deep realization of what the mind has received. Here thinking and being coincide. "You become what you meditate." This is the way Asia, especially India, thought of divine knowledge. This knowledge India called *vidya* or wisdom. St. Thomas Aquinas

says that all what is in our mind comes from the senses. And naturally all that is in the senses comes from the world. The mind is full of knowledge it has received from the world. This is not *vidya* or divine wisdom; at its best, it can be termed as *sastra*, scientific knowledge. Realizational knowledge is far different from this. This knowledge is finally worked out by the Holy Spirit in the depth of one's own being which St. Thomas Aquinas will qualify as divine wisdom the gift of the Holy Spirit.³ The Asian mind yearns for this wisdom which is at the same time a deep experience of God's Spirit abiding within us. Hence the approach is to realize the Spirit within us. As for Christians, Jesus has breathed this Spirit, the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, into each one of us. True wisdom proceeds from this abiding Spirit.

No amount of rational knowledge is a substitute for this experience. The mind, though a powerful instrument at our disposal to penetrate into the mysteries of God, yet is incapable of understanding the profoundness of divine revelation. Hence, it surrenders itself in obedience to the self-revealing God, disposing itself to be characterized by this divine light. In this sense the first Christians said that every Christian is another Christ. Christ is best known by becoming another Christ, participating in the very consciousness of Christ, which, in the course of time, resistlessly flows from him/her to the whole universe.

2. A Contemplative Rather than Analytical Approach to Wisdom

Martin Heidegger, the famous German philosopher makes a distinction between meditative and calculative thinking. He also deplores that the West has given up the meditative thinking and thus has lost the serenity of mind.⁴ People are after calculative thinking because it brings immediate results, though in the long run it also brings strain and disharmony.

The rational approach to reality is an approach of "grasping" and "abstracting." It reduces reality to our pattern of understanding and develops an "idea" about it. This is a wonderful process and we all need this. But the ultimate reality can never be known in this manner because it never becomes a proper object of our mind and really transcends all our attempts at grasping it.

India acknowledges four ways of knowing. They are: perception (*pratyaksha*), inference (*anumana*), comparison (*upamana*) and testimony (*shabda*). The only way to know God is *shabda*, Scriptures, which have recorded the experience of the great sages and saints. They are to be read meditatively so that similar experience may be revived in us. Look at the Gospels and see what they are for us. They are the recorded texts of the experiences of the disciples of Jesus. We read them meditatively and they become part of our own experience. The way to understand is not reason alone, but faith and commitment. Mary heard the words of the angel. She did not understand much, but accepted the mystery and gave herself to the realization of the great mystery of incarnation in herself. There is an understanding higher than the understanding of the mind, namely, the understanding by becoming or realizing. The Jesus we present to Asia must not be a sheer product of high academics and erudition, but a Jesus who has become 'flesh' in our being, a Jesus whom we have seen with our own eyes and touched by our own hands (1 Jn. 1:1).

3. An Apophatic and Mystic Approach

Asia has an apophatic approach to God. What is apophatism? It is a symbolic talking of God by way of negation, saying what God is not. When we say what God is, we are in the danger of replacing him with something else or, at least, characterizing Him with our human limitation. But when we say: 'this is not God,' there is an indirect suggestion to the infinity and incomprehensibility of God.

The *Upanishads* will say about *Brahman*, 'neti neti, not this not this.' This is apophatism, a negative way of speaking of God. But this does not mean, the whole theology is negation alone. Negation means that what we are talking about is really ineffable and therefore needs a room for mystery. This mystery is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. This sense of apophatism is seen also in Buddhism. Buddhism maintained: "Reality is *sunya*." It is not really the *nihilism* of the West. Reality is beyond description. Therefore, silence. This is another way of apophatism.

Apophatism is an essential consequence of knowing by experience. The Reality or, in our case, the divine communication from God, is never exhausted. The "unsaid," the-not-yet communicated is ever more than the already communicated. Hence the emergence of mystery in every genuine God experience is just natural. Apophatism is an art of understanding by negation, by keeping our mind open to the experience of the further dimensions of the ineffable.

The Reader's Digest Dictionary gives the following definition for apophatism: "A mentioning of something by denying that it will be mentioned." Example: "I will not remind you of his heroism." The Oriental Fathers are rich in the use of apophatism in explaining the ineffable mystery contained in all God's self-communication to humankind. Participating in the general Asian ethos, eastern Christianity also developed an apophatic approach to God. So the *Desert Fathers*, and many who lived in the first centuries of Christianity, spoke of God in an apophatic language. In short, all the religions of the East, including Christianity, participate in the Asian mind and naturally, as a result, we find the Asian mind more contemplative, more silent and more mystical. Contemplation, meditation and all necessary steps for meditation are developed very much in Asia. If we are serious about an Asian image of Christ, the way to this Christ should emphasize the

contemplative and apophatic approach to the mysteries of Revelation which baffles reason and its logic.

4. The Hermitage and Ashram Spirituality

If we want to discover the Asian Jesus, we should have an affinity to the Asian mind. But, sadly enough, this mind is largely spoilt by the Western religious formation. This is our problem today. Almost all the seminaries in India and other religious formation houses follow the Western method of theological or spiritual formation. That is why we Christians in India are unable to give spirituality to Asia as well as to Europe. This spoiling has affected not only the international congregations but also other indigenous congregations. Of course, all cultures always have something nice to offer. Thus we have all received something unique from the West. But the resulting loss of mysticism is also to be taken note of. Hence, a truly Christian and Asian genius of spirituality has to be developed in order to participate in the Asian spirit of mysticism. Perhaps the spirit and life style of the ancient hermitages and ashrams give us a clue for doing this.

The Eastern Christianity produced the *Desert Fathers* in the beginning of Christianity. Thus an ancient tradition of hermitage was outlined. In India too we have from ancient times the tradition of *sanyasa*, a tradition of abandoning everything and going to forests. Our ancient Hindu theology was developed in the forests, not in the universities. To certain extent this tradition is continued in Ashrams. Among the *Upanishads* we have a famous one: the *Brahadaranyaka Upanisad*. Yajnavalkya, Maitreyi and many great seekers lived in a large forest. Our masters and teachers developed their thoughts living in forests. The professor here is a guru or in the eastern Christian language 'an elder.' In India quite often these masters sat under a tree and transmitted lessons of great wisdom in utter simplicity of life, whereas a professor in a university,

where theology is taught, will have a completely different look. One is communicating directly what one existentially is and the other is lecturing on what one has intellectually mastered. In the university, one will be sitting and looking at the master, studying something, not necessarily experiencing what is studied. On the contrary, sitting at the feet of the master, one will be imbibing the spirit of the master. This is the crucial difference between our teaching of theology in the seminaries and learning the same, sitting by the side of a guru. Jesus was such a guru. Disciples sat around him. A guru does not teach the disciple by taking them into abstract ideas. Instead, he invites them to be like himself. Here a high degree of genuineness and transparency are natural. The Asian method of teaching is really handing over from the abundance of one's heart, what one is. I think this was Jesus' method. Jesus set a great example when he said: "If your Lord and Teacher have just washed your feet, you, then, should wash one another's feet" (Jn. 14:14). Great saints and masters followed this spirit of Jesus.

Blessed Chavara, the founder of the congregation of Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) in India had an Asian mind. After his ordination he wanted to go for hermitage (*vanavasa*). But his Bishop, a Spanish Carmelite, did not allow him. Instead, he encouraged him to found a monastery, so that he and his companions could retire to silence and also be available to their people. It literally happened. The first monastery of the religious community founded by Chavara was built like an ashram on a hill where they spent long hours in silence and prayer. In the evening, as Jesus did, they climbed up the hill, to be alone with God. But, early morning, like Jesus, they climbed down the mountain to meet the people. The communication, which Bl. Chavara made, was very personal, not abstract as given through a lecture, or a rational discourse. People called him: "a holy man filled with Divine Spirit." Let the theologians in Asia speak about Jesus from the level of their heart, from existence level. Why do

so many young men and women from Europe come to Asia today? This is because the level of communication is different. They do not want to miss it.

5. The Method of *Sutras*, *Mantras* and *Madrashas*

The Indian word *sutra* is attached to many famous treatises on theology, such as the *brahma-sutra*, *bhakti-sutra*, *yoga-sutra* and so on. *Sutra* is a short aphorism with a great meaning. In Sanskrit it is described as *lakhu*, *alpakharam*, *saram-sutram*. It means that the *sutra* is short, consisting of a few words and with profound meaning. These short aphorisms were explained by great commentators which in course of time became marvelous textbooks for theology, spirituality etc.

The Christian East also has developed a similar method in presenting theology and spirituality to its followers. The sayings of the *Desert Fathers* are a collection of ancient wisdom on Christian asceticism and mysticism. Like Indian treatises they too are presented in aphorisms, a literary genre for which the East showed a distinct preference. The advantage of this art of writing is this. They are easy to remember, clear and contains great meaning and mystery. In India and in the Christian East they were studied by heart by young students of theology and spirituality and were remembered and interpreted. Thus a spiritual tradition was formed. In the universal Church we have a number of traditions, just like Hinduism contains a host of different traditions under its great generic name. Saint Ephrem's aphorisms are very famous in the prayer life of the Christian East especially in the East Syrian Church. The *madrashas* he wrote were in reality theology in poetry with rich symbolism. They remind us of the prolific flow of symbolism in the *Sakuntalam* of Kalidasa (one of the world's most beautiful love stories from India) and the *Atmabodha* (Self-awareness, a theological poem with great depth) of Sankara.

When *sutras* and aphorisms had a theological bend, *mantras* and ejaculatory prayers were invented as a means for meditation and realization. The word *mantra* is formed combining two Sanskrit roots such as *man* = to think and *tra* = to save. *Mantra* is that by the recitation of which one is saved: *mananena trayati iti mantra*. The devotees use *mantras* of their preferred god or goddess in order to keep up their attention in meditation. *Om namo sivaya*, *Om namo christaya* are examples.

In the Christian East, the Fathers of the Desert invented ejaculatory prayers to avoid distraction. The distinguishing mark of this prayer is their brevity, simplicity and continued rumination (*mananam*). One or other versicle of psalm was chosen as a *mantra*. The famous Jesus prayer chosen from the Gospel became a unique *mantra* that was used in the whole of Christian East for meditation and Jesus-realization. Many from the Western youth are now very much interested in the Asian form of mysticism; books such as *Philokalia*, *The Way of the Pilgrim* are on demand in the market. But these books hardly find entry into Asian seminarians. They still look to the West, both for amenities of life and theological ways of thinking.

6. The Breathing Rhythm as an Aid for Meditation

Asia also developed breathing meditation, awareness meditation, and several other meditation methods. India has perhaps played the greatest role in this. Yoga, as a method of self-control and meditation is India's contribution to the world. The world at large still looks to India to develop its spirituality and self-realization. India is second to none in these matters. This is our Asia and we should think that we have an Asian Christ. Asian Christ means that culturally he was an Asian; he was a Jew and Judaism is also part of our Asian culture. What I am aiming at is this: there is a typical Asian mind and that mind is now westernized. That mind,

if not westernized, will be of more value in recapturing the Asian image of Christ.

Along with *mantra* the rhythm of breathing was also integrated into the art of meditation practiced by the religions in the East. Thus we have the *pranayama* tradition of India which integrates the rhythm of breath with a chosen *mantra*, which varies according to the taste of the devotee. Similarly we find in the Christian East, the tradition of Jesus prayer known as the Hesychast tradition. The famous book *The Way of the Pilgrim* from the Russian Orthodox Church is a practical manual of this method of meditation. Swamy Abhishiktananda is of the opinion that if, instead of the Western missionaries, Russian missionaries had come to India, India would have found the Christianity preached in her land much more congenial and natural to her taste and cultural ethos. This shows that the East in general, irrespective of religion, has developed for the religious realization methods and patterns, which are similar and related to each other.

As proof for this, one can cite as an example the Malayalam translation of the famous book *The Way of the Pilgrim*, which introduces breathing meditation along with Jesus prayer. This breathing meditation was developed on Mount Athos in the Christian East, then was carried over to Russia and from Russia comes the famous book *The Way of the Pilgrim*. This is just a method of meditation using Jesus prayer. The so-called Jesus prayer is this: "Jesus, son of David have mercy on me." This prayer as a *mantra* is synchronized to one's breathing rhythm. But breathing meditation was already developed in India before Christianity. Both Buddhism and Hinduism had developed it and still maintain it. In Pathanjali's *Yogasutra*, *pranayama*, regulating the breath of the life force within us, appears as a step in *rajayoga*. Pathanjali has written it definitely after Buddhism. Already in the excavations of Harappa and Mohanjadaro we find proofs for the practice of

yoga in pre-Aryan India. This shows that *yoga* is prior to Aryans who supposedly came to India many centuries before Christ. Now the West has taken keen interest in yoga and breathing meditation etc. This book *The Way of the Pilgrim*, was translated into Malayalam by a Ramakrishna missionary. The book is translated without any change or adaptation to Hinduism. It is exactly the same Jesus prayer translated and integrated into one's own breathing rhythm and meditation. The author says that he translated this book because it is very Indian. On the book cover he writes: "You may ask me, why I, being a Hindu monk, translated this Christian book." Then he himself answers: "You read the book and then you will understand the reason, because this book is very much Indian." This is a book from the eastern Christianity.

He also translated the *Philokalia*. The pilgrim has only one book in his hand, not the Bible but the *Philokalia*. *Philokalia* means 'the love of God.' *Philosophia* means love of wisdom. *Sophia* gives greater importance to mind and *kalia* gives more importance to heart. One can find these two tendencies in Christian theology. Augustine, Augustinians, Bonaventure and Franciscans in general follow this heart appeal. Aristotle, Aquinas and many Jesuit and Dominican theologians follow the mind line. Asian appeal is more for the heart than for the mind. Of course we need both. But in the matter of spirituality, heart, representing 'option' is very important. By a mere intellectual understanding, nobody becomes holy. It is the option that matters. We should imbibe the Asian genius of spirituality before we go out as missionaries in Asia. Today, because the West also longs for an Asian spirituality, this is all the more imperative. This opens up the way for the Indian Christianity to make its contributions to the West. But unfortunately we keep on imitating the West. The Holy Mass that is largely celebrated in India (except in the Oriental Church of Kerala) and the breviary prayed practically all over India, are exactly the same as in Europe and USA. This sad state of spirituality

in Asia should be corrected for a right and genuinely *Catholic* approach to Jesus and his universal Church.

7. Inner Serenity: The Goal of Contemplation

Patanjali, the great master of contemplative wisdom, has outlined the way to interior depth. He mentions eight steps for this meditative path to interiority. The last one is called *samadhi*, the divine serenity in which the self rests. This *samadhi* is an equivalent of the inner peace in which the Christian souls rest after their anxious and agonizing journey through the desert. The oasis that is in the center of the desert is a peaceful rest house into which the soul, devoid of all worries and anxieties, enters in the serenity and joy of her master. Peace or divine serenity is a result of the divine rhythm that now reigns in the life of the soul as it follows the way of the Lord communicated to it through his Spirit.

The monks of the Mount Athos developed the method of Jesus Prayer about which we have already mentioned, as a means to reach the inner divine serenity, which they called *hesychia*, meaning serenity. Peace or serenity is what everybody longs for. Prayer, when it unites the soul with God, gives the soul a resting-place in God. It gives her a sense of security and freedom, serenity and joy.

Jesus himself has blessed his disciples with his parting gift of peace. Peace, which Jesus promised is not something that we can produce from outside: but is the result of an abiding presence of the divine harmony in the life of the soul which has found its inner most center in God. It is the life of the divine rhythm centered on God and abiding in the inner soul. It becomes an unending source of peace and joy in which the soul rests in spite of all the pains and problems of life. The vision of Asian Jesus will lead us to Jesus abiding in our heart. He is the same Jesus revealed in history. We

look at the historical Jesus as a model for us to live in the world in which he also lived. We look at him residing in our heart to realize him in our own selves.

8. The Asian Jesus and the Poor of Asia

Asia is a land of massive poverty. Teeming millions still live in Asia below the poverty line. Disparity between the rich and the poor is enormous. Extravaganza of the rich and the grinding poverty of the poor are a still living, poignant scenario in Asia. We cannot simply blame the non-Christian religions of Asia for this. Things are not better in South America which is totally Christian. The reason for the welfare of the West is to be sought also in many socio-political and secular humanist movements.

The Asian Jesus was a revolutionary in his approach to poverty. He did not consider the opted material poverty as a disgrace to human existence. But he strongly condemned structures, which forcefully kept people poor. Being born in a manger, among animals, he identified himself with the poorest of the poor and showed his tender love for all the simple and beautiful creatures of the world. His wealth was the excellence of his being. He lived as a person of being and not of having. He sent his disciples in the same way as men of being, who were not allowed to possess anything, except the power of God with which He embellished them (Mk. 6:6-11). This reminds us of the age-old Indian principle of *asteya* (non-possessiveness) and *aparigraha* (not holding on to anything). Wealth was not a big issue; rather, unfaltering trust in God and the power of the Spirit were the driving force in the great missionary enterprise inaugurated by Jesus in Asia.

Wealth and money are certainly important factors in our human life in this world. But none of the characteristics of the Asian genius we described directly depend on wealthy amenities or

commodities. Rather the Asian hermitages and the Indian way of theological reflection in forest-based ashrams invite us for simple structures of living. High thinking and simple living are the great ideals Jesus followed. It is a fallacy of our thought, that huge seminary structures and formation houses will produce great theological thinking. It is the great mind that produces great thinking. To achieve this we should live more in touch with nature, which is more at home with the simplicity of our life.

The Asian Church has to listen to the cry of Jesus in the poor. As he said to Paul on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:5), Jesus in Asia tells us: "It is me you have looked down upon, treated as an outcaste." No true religion can tolerate this. The way to amend this situation is also shown by the nascent Asian Church: sharing the resources (Acts 2:45). We have to share our intellectual as well as material resources with all the members of the human family. This is the only sign Jesus has approved as a norm for his final judgment (Mt. 25:35ff.). It is the Western Church that shows greater interest in this life of Christian sharing. Sharing is by nature divine. Creation begins with the primordial sharing of God. And what he created keeps on sharing with us what they have. Look at the sun, the moon, the stars and all the trees. They all keep sharing and reflect the divine so marvelously. Let us share with others what we have. Let the Asian Church be a Church of sharing. Let everyone be happy, be equal and dignified. Let us remove all the man-made structures impeding others to rise up to their human dignity.

III Conclusion

Holy Father Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical: *Fides et Ratio*, is very strongly encouraging the study of philosophy (*Passim*). Philosophy, which is the eye of the culture of a nation, is the central thread in the garland of inculturation. It is the vision that matters.

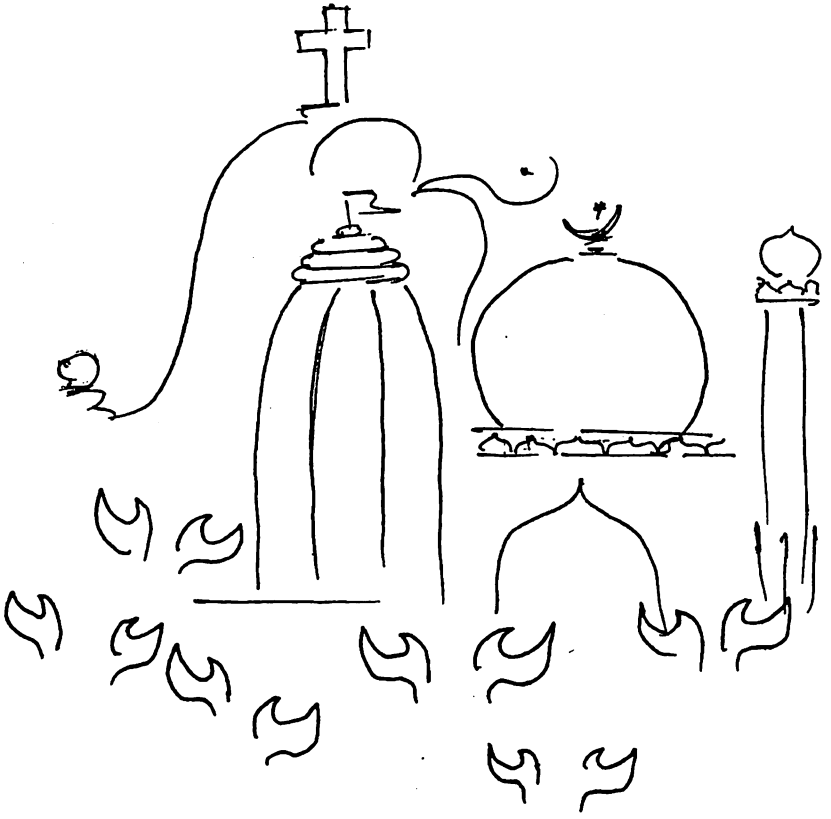
Into this vision, faith must be received. Whatever is incompatible with the Christian faith should undergo transformation.

The re-capturing of the Asian Jesus, with its emphasis on contemplative and apophatic theology, is by no means meant for leaving philosophy and speculative theology behind. As the Encyclical says: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth"⁵ Revelation in Jesus has challenged reason and its logic, and has given it a safe resting-place in faith. Many of the Asian thinkers like Nagarjuna, Sankara and Ramanuja were great philosophers who have developed high metaphysical thinking. But they were also great mystics, knowing reality by "touch" rather than by "mind" alone. The West, in general has emphasized the work of reason, arguing for objectivity and universality, whereas the East has an inherent appeal for faith, which is beyond reason, awaiting the light from revelation. Hence, the Asian quest for silence of the mind, knowledge as realization than rationalization is well known. We need both and they are complementary.

Many of the insights given above are drawn from the Asian religions, which were there before Christianity, and also from the Eastern Churches, which made the synthesis of faith and philosophy in the first centuries of Christianity. Our attention is called to an experiential and realizational way of knowing God, which fosters a contemplative and apophatic approach to reality. This we see in the ancient hermitages and the Ashram spirituality of the East which are being revived today. The East also developed a method of *sutras*, *mantras*, *madrashas* and breathing meditation as aids to theologizing and realizing God within. While the West emphasized reason and objectivity, the East emphasized faith and experience. We need both.

Notes:

- 1 ed. David Scott, Chunder Sen: *A Selection*, Bangalore: United Theological College, 1979, p. 138.
- 2 John Paul II , *Fides et Ratio*, Rome: Vatican, 1997, No. 72.
- 3 *Summa Theologiae*, 1.1.6
- 4 Martin Heidegger, *Discourse Through Thinking*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966, p. 46-47
- 5 John Paul II , *Fides et Ratio*, No. 1.



CHAPTER 10

COMMITTED TO CHRIST AND OPEN TO ALL RELIGIONS

Theology as a Story of My Life



"Affirmation of the one is not the negation of the other"
(ancient Latin dictum)

I Introduction

Born and bred in a land of many religions, religious pluralism is not anything new to us, believers in India. We accepted it as a historical fact and also developed a way of life of mutual understanding and co-operation. This in no way hampered our commitment to Christ. Groomed in Christian faith in the family and constantly encountering comrades belonging to other faiths all around the family,

we grew up with unswerving commitment to Christ and unprejudiced openness to other religions. Religious pluralism is to be looked at both as a historical fact and as a theological act. One does not exclude the other. Here theology becomes the story of one's life.

Two factors, which I have to combine in my life, were my Christian identity in a world of religious pluralism. This chapter is a search into the meaning and relevance of these two in my life and a happy synthesis of both of them, which I summarize in the expression 'Committed to Christ and Open to all Religions'.

II Christian Grooming in an Asian Context

Born in a Catholic family of very ancient tradition, amidst several Hindu families of different denominations, I had a happy childhood of playing with many children from many families belonging to different religions or sects. We all accepted each other as brothers and sisters, envisaged our own games, participated in different aspects of life, except worship, which each one did in his/her family or temple/Church. We just accepted the fact of different religions in the world without any critical look at it. None of us thought that because we belong to different religions some will be saved and others condemned. Such a thought was unthinkable. Perhaps we thought that all the good people will be saved because they are in union with God whom we considered as our common Father and those who do evil will not be pleasing to this God, our Father. Religious pluralism was a given fact and was accepted as such by all children, including the children from believing Christian families. Looking back to those joyful days of early childhood I think it was a period of mingling with believers of other religions and also of getting groomed in my own Christian faith.

1. A Spirituality of Participation without Domination

Religions for us children at that time were simply a way to God. Of course, born and bred in a land of many religions, we might have taken it for granted that there are many ways to God. A theological look at this phenomenon was not the concern or the capacity of our age. Religion however had two basic dimensions of expression. One was very internal where the individual faith has to play a great role. We children did not participate in the internal life of the believers of other religion, which was always left to each one's faith, tradition and worship pattern. But nobody questioned the validity of others prayer or worship pattern. The other was the social and cultural aspect. We were participating in the social and cultural aspects of the religious festivals which our comrades celebrated. Thus, we went to see the colourful procession (*pradikshana*) taking place near our families, and also participated in many of cultural programmes such as singing, dancing organized during the period of festivals, either in special halls or on a special ground destined for that among the cluster of houses. For us children, belonging to different faiths, these festivals of other religions were more of a social celebration. This was also accompanied by exchange of sweets and home made delicacies which were regularly brought from the family which celebrates the festival to the neighbouring families irrespective of their religions. Thus we grew up with a spirit of certain degree of participation in the joy and celebration of every other religious festival. But a participation in the worship was totally banned for the Christian believers whereas we have found our Hindu brethren taking part, at least externally, in certain programmes of our Christian worship. None of us entered into the inner core of the other religion. We simply accepted the fact of otherness in religion and lived in harmony and love with a spirit of mutual acceptance. The underlying, unarticulated faith was that God in his loving kindness and providence has provided means of salvation to all.

We perhaps did not think anything more than that. But an atmosphere was set that we can live in harmony in spite of our religious difference. Variety is not a disgrace but a beauty in the religious realization of mankind.

This was strikingly different from the attitude with which many missionaries from the West came to India from 16th century onwards. Coming from a Christendom, uniformity of religion in the West, every association, even in the external and social aspects, with another religion was unacceptable to most of them. Hence they forbade the participation in these festivals even in its external and social aspects. This was very painful for the community of St. Thomas Christians at that time. They strongly protested against such regulations. Four centuries later Fr. Mathias Mundadan, a theologian and a veteran historian of the Church in India, looks back to the pre-Diamper era of St. Thomas Christians and articulates their underlying theology of religions as follows:

Another important point to be mentioned in this connection is the attitude of the Christians towards the Hindu community in Kerala and their relations with it. The synod of Diamper of 1599 forbade a number of customs and practices which the Portuguese considered 'pagan' (Hindu). These prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the synod are a witness to the communal harmony and cordial relations that existed between Christians and the Hindus. This communal harmony and spirit of tolerance should be considered a typical Indian contribution to the Christian vision. The synod of Diamper mentions among others one particular 'error' the St. Thomas Christians are said to have held: "Each one can be saved in his own law, all laws are right." The synod is right in attributing this 'error' to the contacts the St. Thomas Christians maintained with their Hindu neighbours. It would be centuries before the Europeans would acquire a life-experience of non-Christian religions

of the world which would give due respect to the positive elements in those religions and their providential salvific role for millions of people. But the Indian Christians had been already living for centuries in a positive encounter with the high-caste Hindus and had developed a theological vision of the Hindu religion which was more positive and liberal. Today in the light of modern theological approaches to non-Christian religions one must admit that the vision of the Indian Christians was a more enlightened one than that of their European contemporaries.

Another aspect by which we children were influenced by the values, which other religions catered, was the study of mythical stories from the Hindu scriptures which appeared in our text books. Beautiful stories with great moral lessons of love, non-violence, truthfulness were culled out from non-Christian scriptures and presented as short lessons for children which has left a lasting impression on our young minds. The love for Indian religious stories was very clearly shown by our people including the Christians, when *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, two great epics of India, recently appeared as TV serials. To my knowledge many Christian families for whom a TV was available, either in their own house or in the vicinity, were eagerly waiting to watch these episodes which they did not want to miss. The surprising paradox is that many of them did not show that much eagerness to watch the Bible serial, not because they are not good Christians nor they do not love the Bible, but because the episodes on the screen appeared to be too much culturally alienated and thus failed to communicate relevant messages to their lives. Hardly did these episodes taken from the Old Testament suggest any vivid relation to Jesus Christ which could have made it much more enhancing and appealing even to the Hindu population. This survey of childhood memories brings us to one truth. The plurality of religions was an accepted fact for all of us. It is a different question

to make it a theological act with full Christian theological awareness.

2. Religious Pluralism as a Historical Fact

What has been said so far really shows that for us Asians religious pluralism is an accepted fact. It is a reality into which we are born, in which we are brought up, with which we continue to live. Encounter with other religions is not a matter of surprise, but a mode of living for us. It helps us to develop in our hearts a vision of God, as a loving Father, whose children we all are, irrespective of our religions. We all are pilgrims in this world, moving in time, setting our eyes on a goal which is beyond time. Religion is very important and even central to our lives, but is something which gives us a guidance in time as we move to the further shore of timelessness where God alone shines. An ancient Upanishadic text describes that shore as follows:

The sun shines not there, nor the moon and the stars,
these lightings shine not, where then could this fire be?
Everything shines only after that shining light. His shining
illuminates all this world (*Katha Up.* II.2.15).

This does not mean a radical apophatism in which this search terminates. It means only that beyond the varieties of forms of religions, there is the reality of God, the ultimate incomprehensible one, to whom we move with forms of religious worships and patterns. This is an uncritical acceptance of religious pluralism in which Christians in Asia are born. The growing, young religious mind is not very critical at that time but certainly groomed in one definite religion and for me, and like me to many of us, it was the Christian religion. A right understanding of my own religion along with other religions, takes me, in course of time, to the question of religious pluralism as a theological act.

3. Religious Pluralism as a Theological Act

Though deeply inter related, for me religious pluralism as a historical fact and theological act is not one and the same. From the point of view of time, religious pluralism as a historical fact anticipates that of religious pluralism as a theological act. Acceptance of religious pluralism as a fact is done by reason; acceptance of religious pluralism as a theological act is not simply a product of reason. It is an act of faith into which reason is subsumed. Accordingly an element of faith enters into the assertion which characterizes the inner content of the assertion on religious pluralism. For me it is not simply an assertion of the phenomenon of religions seen in the world just as many ways to God. If theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith-inquiring reason, the faith dimension of our awakened consciousness is the central core of our theology. This means that a theological statement on the fact of religious pluralism will be characterized by my faith in Jesus Christ. Here comes the question about the ultimate commitment to Christ.

A theological act on religious pluralism therefore demands to place my Christ experience vis-à-vis my experience of religious pluralism as a given fact. The relevance of Christ, according to my faith, to me and to all, is a vital issue in this judgement. The emerging judgment is not merely a logical conclusion derived from the fact of religious pluralism I have encountered from my childhood. On the contrary, as a theological act, it heavily depends on my theological reflection over the given fact. My Christian grooming, my Christian awareness and my living faith in Christ are central factors in forming this decisive judgement.

From the point of view of faith Jesus is seen as all in all. He is not merely a historical person who gave us a religion. Christian faith does say that Jesus is genuinely historical. Historiography will say

that Buddha is historical, Nabi is historical. Hence historicity of Christ alone is not the decisive factor in Christian faith. It has other dimensions as well: where Christ comes from, how he operates and where does he lead us to. Gospels clearly say about his pre-existence as the Word, emergence from the Father and the Spirit he breathed into his disciples. Jesus cannot be understood separated from the Father and the Spirit. Holy Trinity, God as the eternal source of all mystery and being, of consciousness and speech and of abiding presence in us, is inseparable from the Gospel-based understanding of Christ. Born and brought up in a Christian family, relation to Jesus has already become a matter of commitment in me, though a profound theological understanding of it and an actual awareness of the depth of sacrifice it demands may still be lacking in the early years of one's growth. This is a question of growth and maturing in our Christian commitment to Jesus.

Christian commitment is largely a matter of faith, of course the reason and the entire being of my person is surrendered to that (*tat arpitam akhila acharatha*). But the commitment is made possible only because of faith. Faith is the awakening of our consciousness by the light from God. It is the opening of the third eye, the luminous eye that is within us, but needs enlightenment. This enlightenment is the beginning of divine wisdom compared to all forms of knowledge, valid and scientific, which we gather from the world. India calls the latter *avidya* (non-wisdom) and the former *vidya* or *paravidya* (supreme wisdom). St. Thomas Aquinas also makes such a distinction when he speaks about the wisdom of the reason and the wisdom of the Spirit.² It is with this enlightened eye, I look at Jesus, who is much more than a historical person. He is God in human form (Phil. 2-6 ff), Word made flesh (Jn.1: 14), a sacrifice offered to God for all (Heb.10: 12), in and through whom we all are redeemed (Rom. 5:11). My commitment to Jesus now becomes commitment to

his historical mediation in our salvation and his all-embracing redemptive role.

Religious pluralism as a theological act depends heavily on this faith commitment to Christ. Now it is through the eye of Christ, which is the spirit of Christ abiding in me, I look at other religions. As Christ is the Word who became flesh, through whom everything was conceived and created, through my eye of Christian faith, I see the touch of Christ in all creation and the Spirit of Christ operating every where. Religious pluralism is not the reduction of the content of religions to the bare minimum, a common factor of all religions, negatively expressed as desire for transcendence. Such a narrowing down of the content of each religion does not do justice to the inner experience of that very religion. All other factors cannot be reduced as mere wrapping or forms of articulation. The experience of God and his ways of communication really belong to the content of the specificity of any religion. Christ-experience as the eternal Word of the Father, who lived on earth, died for us, breathed his spirit into us is certainly part and parcel of the content of the Christian faith. If such an experience is deprived of from the content of Christianity there is nothing specifically Christian in it. There is nothing also to share with other religions.

I do not deny that other religions also have their own specific experience which belongs to the content of their faith. For Mira Bai, her experience of Krishna as a divine lover to whom her life is totally surrendered, is very central to her faith. Religious pluralism as a theological act is therefore not the reduction of religion to its minimum and that too in a negative form, namely, thirst for liberation. It is on the contrary, the acceptance of the fact of plurality of religions, trying to understand them from the perspective of each one's religious experience, however not separated from the perspective of one's own faith. Through the eye of faith

an evaluative judgment will slowly be developed in the believer. This takes us to the next point.

III Commitment and Openness

An experience of Jesus as the redeemer of mankind, as operating in all of us through his Spirit, side by side an experience of many religions, all walking towards the ultimate goal, take place in the same person: Now it is up to me to make a meaningful synthesis of both these dimensions of my experience and from this should emerge my judgement on religious pluralism as a theological act. Should they exclude each other? Or can my personal commitment to Jesus as a unique and universal saviour go along with my reasonable acceptance of the fact of religious pluralism in the world? One is a fact which I have experienced from my childhood and is accepted as such; the other is a commitment I have made as I grew up and is an act of faith than of reason. I do not find any contradiction in these. Are they sound, can they go together? If my Christ is not only unique but also universal, all can be certainly saved, if they follow the dictates of their conscience, because the universal Christ can operate everywhere. Christ has found ways and means for that in a better way than we can imagine. Of course, faith questioning the mind (*Fides Quaerens Intellectum*) can ask questions and find out answers. If Christ is Alpha and Omega, he comprises everyone and everything. Christian faith says that in Christ we all are conceived (Col. 1:15) and all are called to the banquet in heaven (Lk. 14:16-24). At one point Jesus emphasizes that those who think to be saved and presume to be specially elected, may really be not there in the final destination (Lk. 13:29-30; 18:14), though they have received the privilege of special revelation and put forward a lot of claims in the name of God. This means that our intellectual claims are not the decisive factor in salvation, but commitment to the reality of God communicating to us. All consciousness which remains united with God's

consciousness will be saved, all that are separated from it would be thrown out (Mt. 26:41). And for Christians this union has taken place in and through Jesus Christ. Christians also see the universal significance of Jesus for all; but his operative dynamism varies. A special articulation of his operation, as in the case of Christianity, do not exclude other ways of operations. This is precisely the reason we say he is God; God by nature should be all-pervasive, all embracing, all abiding, all saving. He can also enter into history in a special and decisive way, without excluding other ways which proceeds from his very nature of communicating mystery and meaning to humanity. This vision may suggest a sort of inclusivism. This is not an inclusivism for boosting one's own religion. As we saw before, those who boast about their superior claims may not even enter into the kingdom (Lk. 13:26-27). True God, by nature, is all-inclusive. For every genuine believer who believes in any religion, his/her God must be all-inclusive. This is a necessity from the point of view of the true nature of God. The true God operates everywhere, and is in everyone, and certainly guides everyone from within. One may call it natural revelation. But God is certainly present. Inclusivism for me is not an intellectual claim of one religion over others, saying: "Whatever good in your religion is in my religion." On the contrary, it is a deep penetration into the great mysterious way God operates in all human hearts, and especially through the religions of mankind.

After sin, distortion, the human consciousness got weakened, super imposed by other layers of consciousness, in such a way that a special awakening becomes necessary. Religions one after another, propose the ways and means for this special awakening. Different kinds of divine interventions are called for. The belief in the Hindu *avataras* is one example for it. God sent prophets and reformers into different parts of the world. Buddha appeared as the enlightened one. As Paul witnesses and Christians believe, "in these last days he has spoken to us through his own son" (Heb.

1:2), that is God's very consciousness got enfleshed and lived among us. The Word, the first born of the Father, becomes flesh. In this flesh we believe that all human nature is originally conceived and therefore it has become the medium of divine self-expression on earth. Humanity of Christ thus is a sign of God's immediate presence, the sacrament par-excellence. Conceived in him, every human nature virtually contains what Christ is and is called to participate in his perfection and grace. Religions in their own way have contributed to this process of divinisation of the world. That is why we have good people in the world. A Christian believer, because he sees through faith, may see this process of divinisation of the world, happening through Christ whose presence is seen everywhere (cosmic Christ and his universal saving mission). This vision is not a conclusion of rational arguments; but is totally depended on his/her personal faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is both a vision and a commitment, a listening and answering, *sruti* and *sraddha*. It totally depends on the call from above, the revelation communicated to the humans in history and in their own hearts. Christian faith is a commitment to the Christ-event. Christian vision, seeing Christ everywhere and as the universal saviour of all, is totally valid for Christians, that is those characterized by Christian faith. But this need not be an acceptable doctrine to those who are not awakened to Christian faith. Faith language is not a language of reason and logic alone. Though the Christian believer sees that 'what he sees' is valid for all (a true Christian position), he should not forget that he sees it only through his eye of Christian faith. Assertion of that as a sheer logical/doctrinal tenet, to be imposed on those who do not share the same faith, may look too aggressive and even arrogant. The reason is that the listener, a follower of a different faith, does not participate in this vision and is rightly entitled to hold on to his own. Does this mean relativism? I do not think so. It is not individual relativism. It is a matter of difference of the faith-content of each religion. Religions have their own faith and each faith is validly accepted

only by the believer of that faith. It cannot function otherwise. The Christian faith is not an individual faith of a single believer. It is the faith of the Church, of a community enlightened by the revelatory event that took place in Jesus Christ. Even then it is a faith of a community and not the faith of the whole humanity. The objective validity of one's faith for all is true from that person's faith-vision and hence totally depends on that faith. Hence, a confessional character is necessary in communicating faith-vision. The easy shifting of faith to doctrine for all, for believers as well as non-believers, though logically correct for believers of that faith, makes the assertion too unsympathetic and gives it a ring of arrogance, and perhaps from the other believers' perspective, of ignorance as well. This does not however mean that what one sees should not be preached or communicated. The apostles preached Jesus Christ not to believers but to non-believers. But preacher must be aware that he is confessing his faith-vision to the world which is not necessarily acceptable by the force of human logic. On the contrary, it may even sound ill-logical and sheer foolishness. St. Paul was very much aware of this fact when he said:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For, Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (I Cor. 1:21-25).

This means that the preacher must be extremely humble without any shade of human assertiveness and superiority complex which would tarnish the entire beauty of the message preached. In the Indian context we should also be aware that the Hindu position of accepting God's manifestations in different forms in different

ages for different cultures and people sounds as a humanly acceptable doctrine, because it clearly spells out God's concern for all, for all cultures and traditions at all times. Hence, a Hindu finds it very easy to accept any form of God and integrates it into the basic frame of his faith. It is a completely different doctrine when one says that God has become flesh in a particular piece of land accepting that particular culture and that too once for all and for all people in the world. Reason may ask a question here: why should God do so if he is the Father of all nations, lover of all cultures and saviour of all people? Why should we limit God's power of self-communication and universal salvific mission to a particular event in history? This question is answered by the believing Christians not by reason but by faith. Christian faith is thus a challenging commitment to a revelatory event that took place in a particular place and time. The intellectual sacrifice of committing oneself to Christ-event which is considered central to God's self-manifestative process in history and time is great, and that lies beneath the Christian assertion of faith. Hence, the need of humility, prayer for the illumination of the Spirit which alone will make the preachers' words sensible to the listener. Otherwise it can become counter productive.

1. Commitment to Christ in a World of Many Religions

I began these reflections pondering on my childhood days, when I grew up playing with the children belonging to other religions. The fact of religious pluralism was obvious and taken for granted. But I had another dimension also in my growth. This also has a factual dimension, such as I was born in a Christian family with an ancient tradition, stemming from the beginning of Christianity. Apart from this, the life at home, in the primary school run by sisters, and especially in the Church, continually made me aware of my Christian identity which was very much loved and esteemed

by me and all of us in the family. The Church was very much the center of our lives. Family prayers, daily mass, the catechism classes, the constant contact with the Church and the associations of boys in the Church and other programmes continuously breathed the spirit of genuine Christian faith into our young hearts. So we grew up with a Christian consciousness, with a Christian identity of our own, though back at home, we are surrounded by families of other faiths and kept a cordial relation with all of them, with exchange of ideas, things and commodities and participation in the social aspects of festivals of all religions. I also remember the days I served as an altar boy, studying very long Cyriac prayers by heart and reciting them with perfect flow and accent, though I did not understand the meaning word by word. It was something like *mantras* chanted by my Hindu brethren in the neighbourhood, the sense of which also I did not understand very much at that time. The parish school and library really played a great role in forming, taming and grooming a steady Christian consciousness within us. Of course, the family was the core centre of this formation. An uncritical commitment to Christ, more by the force of love than of wisdom, was the character of this initial formation. But this commitment never excluded the possibility of other religions operating in front of us. May be we, as children, had a simple uncritical and natural acceptance of the universal salvific will of God who is the Father of all of us. Side by side the given fact of religious pluralism, a Christian consciousness is also being formed which slowly evolves into a Christian commitment.

2. The Characteristics of an Authentic Commitment

i. Total and Unconditional

Commitment is a fundamental option. To be authentic it must be total and unconditional. Commitment is thus a surrender of one's own self to the realization of what one has opted for. Very often our option remains vague and a matter of tradition. Born in

a Christian family my option for Christian existence is part of my growing up. But at a given moment the traditional option has to be made a conscious, personal option. Challenges like unfriendly circumstances, suffering for the sake of continuing in the same community etc. make us sharply conscious about our own situation and options we have made. An option by tradition now becomes a conscious option and a commitment. The disciples of Jesus had to make such an option, especially after the death of Christ when their community were looked down upon as traitors of Judaism and therefore unwanted and discriminated people. The disciples, placed in such a situation, had to make their Christian option consciously, even against the threat of death. Commitment has this character of total surrender against all odds of life. But such a commitment is beautiful and makes one's life totally meaningful. This meaning shines forth more and more as we come closer and closer to Jesus.

ii. The Interpersonal Dimension in Religious Commitment

Religious commitment is not simply a commitment to an abstract idea or ideal. It has an interpersonal character. It is covenantal by nature. God made a covenant with Abraham and Israel kept renewing the covenant by the sacrifice of flesh and blood on the altar. The surrender of life in its concrete form of agonizing realization was part of the renewal of the covenant. Commitment, personal surrender, interpenetration of consciousness proceeding to identity of interest of both parties, are constituent parts of any genuine commitment. Commitment to an ideology is possible. Here also the suffering of an individual or ideologue is part and parcel of the commitment. However, the lack of personal dimension is very often substituted by the hero worship done to the original ideologist who brought forward such a vision of ideology. Leaders of the movements become heroes to whom the community turns for direction, inspiration and enlightenment. In true religious commitment God who reveals himself as a person

becomes the centre of commitment. In the Christian commitment this is done to the person of Jesus Christ and thus the Jesus reality remains the centre and the driving force in the commitment the believer makes. The personal character of this commitment is very dear as well as important, because placed in situations of contradictory experiences and manifold challenges from all sides, the person of Jesus alone remains the unshakable foundation of the commitment I make. Devoid of this personal dimension the commitment may fade to powerlessness. Personal nature of commitment makes it the union of two consciousnesses into one. Christian commitment is thus a way to getting characterized by Christ consciousness and the person who makes the commitment is well disposed for this characterization process or transformation into Jesus himself. Christian commitment makes every Christian in reality another Christ for the people around him.

iii. Commitment and Fidelity

Commitment demands unconditional fidelity. Fidelity is the perpetuation of the commitment one has made. This means that the covenant I have made with Jesus remains alive in my heart and is not taken away from me at any moment of my life. My words, my actions and my life are the expressions of this presence in me. Fidelity is my attestation to the commitment I have made and my readiness to sacrifice everything for that sake. Fidelity becomes creative, especially in the moment of new challenges facing me. A challenge can be a temptation to give up the commitment I have already made. To stick on to my commitment in spite of contrary challenges and temptations, I have to renew my commitment creatively again and again, overcoming the forces of contrary movements outside and inside me. This makes my commitment ever creative and keeps it always alive. Selfless sacrifice is the bloodstream of any commitment. This is what we see in the life and death of Jesus. This must be seen also in the life and death of his disciples.

IV Conclusion: Committed to Christ and Open to All Religions

My commitment to Christ does not wither away by the fact of religious pluralism which I find around me. Nor do I try to deny the fact of religious pluralism which I encounter as a historical fact. Mine is an attempt to synthesize these two dimensions of my experience. It is here that I move from the fact of religious pluralism to a theological act on the same. In making this theological act, my faith in Christ and my vision of all religions embrace each other, in such a way that my commitment remains totally unshaken and my openness to all religions gets a Christ dimension.

Religious pluralism demands us to be humble and deeply prayerful in our religious assertions. They should proceed from the depth of one's heart, a heart transformed into Christ and characterized by his consciousness. Then only a Christian can share his true identity. Religious pluralism also asks us to approach other religions with deep respect, wondering at the mysterious way God guides his people all over the world. Many of these religions, as ancient traditions of the country, have worked out a welcome synthesis of their profound faith with the culture of the place, and thus can give us a clue to walk along the path of inculturation.

Hardly did Jesus criticize or condemn other religions. Instead, he has quiet often criticized his own religion. He always appreciated deep and genuine faith. Let us also do the same. Jesus was always opposed to sin whether it is in his own religion or in other religions and remained on the side of love, truth, justice and peace. Let us also be like him.

Notes:

- 1 A. M. Mundadan CMI, *Indian Christians: Search for Identity and Struggle for Autonomy*, pp. 27-28.
- 2 *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 45, 1 ad 2; Cf. also *Fides et Ratio*, No.44

CHAPTER 11

SEARCH FOR PEACE IN WORLD RELIGIONS



My peace I give to you (Jn. 14:27)

Wish of Peace

*Peaceful be heaven, peaceful the earth.
Peaceful the broad space between.
Peaceful for us be the running waters,
Peaceful the plants and herbs!
Peaceful to us be the signs of the future,
Peaceful what is done and undergone,
Peaceful to us be what is and what will be.
May all to us be gracious!
This supreme Goddess, Word, inspired by Brahman,
By which the awe-inspiring is created,*

*Through her to us be peace!
This supreme Spirit, inspired by Brahman
By which the awe-inspiring is created,
Through it to us be peace!*

(Atharva-veda XIX 9.1-4)

I Peace, the Promise of Every Religion

The parting gift of Jesus is peace. The risen Lord when he appeared to the disciples said: "Peace be with you" (Jn. 20:19). After conquering death by his own suffering, death and resurrection the Lord now promises peace as a share in the divine serenity that has been established in himself and through him for all humanity. Peace is the result of order, justice and truth. When God created the universe there was a divine rhythm pervading everywhere. Rhythm as cosmic order and harmony in all our relations with God, other humans and the world, brings peace to us. This is what was originally symbolized by paradise. Paradise was a place of human life where divine harmony and cosmic order flourished. Peace filled the hearts of the first parents which were aflame with love for God and concern for all creatures. When sin entered the paradise, the rhythm was destroyed; disorder spread through the paradise and mankind lost peace. Now the risen Lord, having established the divine rhythm once again, promises us peace.

The Hindus conclude their meditation singing a *mantra* of peace (*shanthi mantra*): *Om shanthi shanthi shanthi*. The word *shanthi* originates from the Sanskrit root *sham* which means to pacify, to quell. Once our passions are pacified, the desires of our senses and mind are silenced, we experience serenity in our body and in our mind. Peace begins here. But *shanthi* should not be understood just as a negative state of absence of disturbance. It is also a positive entry into the eternal serenity of God who abides in the innermost centre of our being. Our spirituality is a journey to

our own interiority. The journey ends when we reach the innermost depth. The depth is always serene and peaceful. God himself is the unfathomable depth of our being. So when we come in touch with God abiding within us we also participate in his divine peace. The *Gita* says:

As into the ocean, brimful and still, flow the waters, even so the *muni* (the silent ascetic) into whom enter all desires, he, and not the desirer of desires, attains to peace (*Gita* II.70).

The suggested idea is that, though several rivers flow into the ocean and a lot of movement including that of powerful waves cover the upper levels of the waters of the ocean, its depth is ever serene. In the same way a *yogi*, who have controlled his passions and desires, enters into the divine serenity of the abiding depth within him. This depth is ever peaceful.

Buddhism, when it preaches *nirvana* as an envisaged state of absolute selflessness, even to the extent of the extinction of the individual self, somehow points to a state of perfect peace undisturbed by the narrowest flickering of the flame of desire.

The great prayer; *samasth lokah sukhino bhavanti* (let all beings be happy) a wish of peace to all beings which includes the humans, animals, birds, insects, trees and all creatures.

The Muslims greet one another saying *Assalam-O-alaikum*: peace be with you. The Islamic expression of this greeting is a wish of peace to all.

In short, what we have seen here is the quest for peace of mankind and how our religions are answering this quest by providing some ways of its realization. Thus all religions promise peace. But do they fail to give it to their followers?

II What is Religion? Why Many Religions?

Religion can be so naïve and even crude as a blind worship of an object, an idol, which is somehow related to Divinity. Religion can also be so subtle and elevated as a refined faith-commitment to Transcendence, beyond the flux of time which influences one's thought and way of life. Oscillating between these two extreme positions, religion is usually presented to us as a historical reality with a belief system and worship patterns, with a communitarian consciousness and as a set of behavioural laws. The above mentioned definition takes us to both dimension of human reality, namely the secular and the religious.

Buddha preferred to keep silence on God. Even the most refined thought on God has a dimension of limitation. Because God is ineffable and incomprehensible, all articulation on God falls short of his infinite eminence. Hence, many spiritual persons prefer to keep silence on God. This silence is not nihilism, but a quest for transcendence.

In any case religion becomes an ultimate concern of one's life. For a religious minded person, religion is the ultimate value based on which his/her decisions are made. Religion is thus an all-pervading reality of our lives.

Why many religions? The basic reason of religious pluralism is because religion is not the ultimate end of one's life. It is God. However religion is an established way to God. Hence, people accept religion and walk through the path which religion provides. The human quest for God-experience, answered by revelation, and/or by an experience transmitted through centuries, belongs to the inner core of many religions. As the inner core-experience differs, the articulation and the life-style also differ. If we make a

general survey of some of the world religions, we can find certain basic differences in the emphasis they lay on their God-experience.

1. Thus in Buddhism we find an experience of *sunya* and *nirvana* (emptiness and extinction of the flame of desire), silence, meditation pointing to the ineffability of the divine beyond all articulations.
2. In Islam the emphasis is on the One, all powerful and merciful God, the Lord of all to whom our obedience, prayers prostrations are due.
3. Hinduism will gladly accept the ineffability of the divine and the supremacy of the One Brahman; but is ready to see him both as immanent and transcendent and ever manifesting in variety of names and forms. Hence, a Hindu will joyfully sing; *Iso vasyam idam sarvam* (God dwells in all these beings) (*Isa Up.* I. 1).
4. Christianity, while accepting the ineffability of God who is one, immanent, transcendent and omnipresent, believes that this God has been historically manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. Hence, Christianity gives great importance to the *Abba* experience of Jesus and our participation in it.

Since religions move towards an ultimate goal in unison and harmony, as such conflicts are not necessary between these experiences. All are expected to remain faithful to their own religion, yet open to the God-experience of other people.

III Conflicts Between Religion and the Need of Reconciliation

In our human nature we have two kinds of tendencies. One is a tendency towards greater union; the other is a tendency towards division, disintegration. These tendencies are visible in all forms

of life on earth. For example, a tree keeps up its tendency of growth, unifying all its diverse operations, as long as the principle of life is strong in it. With the power of this tendency it overcomes all injuries, cuts and breaks, by a process of healing or sprouting new branches. In the same way the tendency of unification and separation can be seen in human beings. The unifying tendency builds up harmony, mutual understanding and communitarian feeling. The divisive tendency indulges in fighting, separation and finally destruction of all. St. Paul, speaking to Galatians, tells us how the Spirit fosters tendency of unity, harmony, friendliness and peace and how the flesh, our fallen human nature, falls prey to the violent desires of egocentricity, dissensions and war (Gal. 5:19-23). The unifying tendency we call symbolic and the divisive tendency we call diabolic. The word symbol means that two things fall together into one meaning. Thus, when Jesus said: "I am the vine and you are the branches", He meant that as the vine and the branches fall together into one plant so Jesus and humanity fall together into one mystical body of Christ. The vine and the branches become a symbol of the unity between Jesus and all human beings. The divisive tendency is known as diabolic which means that two things fall apart. Devil is a symbol of divisive tendency. Therefore, in Latin, devil is called dia-bolus, which means something that has an inherent separatist tendency than of unity. So the devil tries to separate us rather than unite. In all conflicts, whether in religion or secular matters, separatist tendency is dangerous and ultimately destructive. In the distorted rhythm of life after the original experience of paradise, there is a tendency in all of us to develop an ego-centered consciousness which ultimately asserts itself over others and separates oneself from others. The divisive tendency that is mentioned here is not against the diversity of nature, culture and religions. Diversity is something to be appreciated, accepted and integrated into our lives. This is a need for our growth, flowering and mutual harmony in life. Divisibility here means a tendency to discard or devalue the real

meaning of diversity and a desire to thrust one's own being forward, insensitive to the needs, feelings and rights of others. From this context we have to see the reason and development of conflicts in religion.

Conflicts in religion largely points to conflicts in interests. All people are not equally religious. People's understanding of religion is not the same, not even of the members of the same religion. For some people ideologies take the place of religion. Thus we have secular ideologies of liberalism, Marxism confronting religion in a negative way. On the other hand, we have fundamentalism and fanaticism as religious movements but not acceptable to many believing religious people. Conflicts of interest, difference in outlooks and philosophies are at the root of these diverse visions and consequently religious disharmony.

After obtaining freedom from British rule, India established a secular government in which the country pledged equality to all religions, with no preference to any religion. Religion was considered as a private matter, not something to be entertained by the public or government as such. Hence there was no religious education in the government schools or religious practices in any of the government institutes. Educated in England, where secular humanism was running high, Pandit Javaharlal Nehru and many of our freedom fighters, opted for a secular vision for the free India of many religions. Politically this was perhaps the ideal solution. However, many hard-core Hindus were dissatisfied with this kind of an approach to religion, especially to Hinduism which is the religion of the majority in India. The Book *Hindutva* was already written by V. D. Savarkar in 1923. Two years later R.S.S. was founded by K. V. Hedgewar who was its first president from 1925-1940. A thorough secular government for India was not acceptable to them and their followers. So the secular approach to religion was opposed by this group with a special emphasis on

Hindutva ideology for all who live in India. Thus we have conflicts between a liberalist/secularist view of religion and politics and a fundamentalist or a fanatic view of the same. These conflicts arose because the way of looking at one's own religion and society was largely different. The underlying force now becomes not unifying but divisive.

When Gandhiji was leading the freedom struggle in India he conducted several prayer meetings before they started the *padayatra* (traveling by foot). The atmosphere of prayer in which members of different religions participated and the impact they made by walking together, fostered the spirit of unity and harmony. A different atmosphere can be noticed in Advani's *Rathyatra* (traveling on chariot) to Ayodhya. Union or division is primarily a reality in the heart. If we see all as children of one Father in a spirit of accepting each other in variety and beauty, we are moving towards unity and concord. But, if on the contrary, we are over concerned about our own individuality and are moved by a spirit of domination, naturally one becomes opposed to the other. The underlying spirit is divisive. This dynamics can be seen not only in religion but even in looking at any object with an attitude of possessiveness or non-possessiveness. Suppose we are looking at a tree: this tree can be looked at as earthly, as something to be understood by a human being, as a symbol of divine love, which has provided the tree for us and finally as something that elevates us to the divine. If a tree is looked at with this perspective, it unites the earth, the humans and the divine. The same tree can be looked at by another individual as "my" tree, that is, something that belongs to me alone and I have exclusive right on it. This spirit of "having" over against that of "being" makes us mutually exclusive. The spirit of having, self-assertiveness over others brings divisive tendency into our religious experience. When religion is looked at as a means for power, influence and position in the society, it loses its internal and spiritual flavour and along with it the

symbolic character it carries. It slowly turns to be dia-bolic (falling-apart). Surprisingly, the Latin word for devil is *dia-bolus*, a force that brings division into our heart. One of our ancient text from the *Upanishad* is worth remembering:

The earth is like honey to all beings. All beings are like honey to the earth. The shining immortal person who is in the earth dwells in your body. He, indeed, is this self. This is Brahman. This is all (*Br. Up. II.5.1*).

This text shows how the ancient Indian sages looked at everything in the harmony of the universe to which belonged the earth, the humans and the divine.

Even though religions preach and foster unity and harmony, history bears testimony for manifold divisions, oppositions in religious movements. Very often we find conflicts between a liberative or conservative tendency in the same religion. Thus in Buddhism we find two schools which later came to be known as *Hinayana* and *Mahayana*. The real name of *Hinayana* was *Teravada*, the doctrine of the elders. This vision of traditionalism was emphasized when the other school, *Mahayana*, started new interpretations of the doctrines of Buddha.

When, with the influence of European thinkers, especially of British rulers and missionaries, some of the educated Hindus initiated a progressive movement called *Brahmasamaj*, the fundamentalist group of Hinduism got worried and a counter movement was started under the name of *Aryasamaj*. In principle *Aryasamaj* was the forerunner of the R.S.S. and stood for preserving the traditional Hindu values from getting influenced or diluted by the secularist ideologies of the West.

In the United States when liberal theologians came forward with modern and liberal interpretations of the Bible and Christian

world-vision, a group of traditionalists published twelve booklets under the title *The Fundamentals of Christian Faith*. Our word “fundamentalism” goes back to this event which took place in U.S.A. from 1820 onwards.

All the above mentioned conflicts were within one and the same religion. But it can happen that conflicts assume larger dimensions and become separative forces between different religions. The emergence of contemporary Hindu fundamentalism in India is due to two basic reasons: (1) The spiritual vacuum of political secularism and (2) The felt need for Hindus for self-defense against other religions which they thought are more active and aggressive. The wide acceptance of *Hindutva* ideology, the spread of R.S.S. all over India, the success of B.J.P., etc., are to be seen from this perspective which refers to our colonial past, long periods of Muslim and British rule in India, and religionless secularism.

The rise and fall of Taliban is another example of success of extreme fundamentalism in Islam and its elimination by secular and military forces. Taliban also shows us a conflict within the Islamic community as well as against all other liberal views whether political, social or religious.

1. Towards Healthy Relations and Reconciliation Among Religions

Relation is something very fine, but feeble; very delightful but equally delicate. This is because it is not a being in itself; it is just a matter of ‘getting related to someone else’. In other words, it is a matter of inter-subjectivity. Relation is neither in myself nor in the other. It is in between. It has no independent existence of its own. It is basically an ‘orientation’ towards the other. This is why relation is a delicate matter to deal with. The basic requirement to develop authentic and long-standing relationship with another

is openness. Human being, endowed with consciousness, is basically open. A human being is always ahead of himself/herself, going in search of reality, being and truth, and when he/she discovers it, he/she pitches his/her tent nearby and dwells there. Reality can be any being I encounter, especially other human beings like me, endowed with consciousness and therefore equally capable of moving to myself as I move to them. This openness makes relation possible. Relation is therefore a way of defining myself in the presence of the other. Every presence is a ray of light, a call, demanding a response. A proper response to this call builds up true relation. Relation is always inter-subjective. Our relation, if genuine, always presupposes our readiness to accept and appreciate the being of the other, with respect and love.

Our relations become spiritual, when they are guided by the inner awareness of the Spirit. Only the abiding Spirit can make our relationship spiritual. The question is therefore, whether we are really aware of the Spirit within us and allow him to operate from within and dispose us for his operation.

The motives that guide our actions play a role in keeping good relations. Love, justice, peace, etc., are the right motives that should produce good and salutary actions and consequently good relations among us. Material or political motives such as wealth, advantages and power will not lead us to healthy relations between religions. Revenge and retaliation are not at all acceptable motivations. But unfortunately our relationship can also be controlled by our motivations which are not always Spirit-filled. The human being is a composite of different layers of consciousness, intentions and motivations. Relationship with others can sometimes be controlled by our interest in wealth and worldly affairs, life and its amenities, ideas, ideologies and human values. Though none of these is bad, unless they are transformed by the Spirit, these motivations do not make us spiritual. Real spirituality begins when the Spirit, the

abiding consciousness of God within us, whispers from within, enlightens our consciousness and guides our motivations from within. Here our vision is not just from reason and argumentation but also from a superior source, flowing from the opening of the inner eye, the eye of faith. A faith-vision can build up a deeper relationship with people, which left to our reason alone, would have been very difficult. Reason follows logic: "They should be punished or brought to justice." On establishing my envisaged path to justice many innocents also may die. The so-called collateral effect is not just one individual who dies in major conflicts like wars.

2. Towards A Peaceful Co-existence of All Religions

Conflicts are human; but they are to be reconciled. Un-reconciled conflicts lead us to disastrous destruction of wealth, people, cultures and above all peace. Reconciliation is the restoration of rhythm and harmony in the world order and above all in the heart of every human being. When rhythm is restored both in cosmic, human and divine realms we have peace and harmony. We have already seen the divine rhythm and the flow of harmony in paradise. The original rhythm and peace of paradise was lost for humanity after the first conflict between God and the humans. Peace will be restored only when the human mind and the divine 'mind' get reconciled and the rhythm of the divine begins to flow into the world through the human hearts. As we have seen peace (*shanti*) is the result of the pacification of conflicts. *Shanta* is the pacified one and *shanthi* is the state of pacification, serenity and peace. Individually *shanti* is experienced by pacifying one's own passions and desires. But this is only a purifying step. But *shanti* is also to be understood in a positive sense, as our participation in the peace which God establishes in each one's heart. Our entry into divine serenity is the source of peace on earth. For a communitarian experience of peace inter-personal conflicts are to be reconciled.

Only such a step will give us a sense of security and mutual trust. Our peace should be safeguarded and fostered by a sense of trust in one another and all of us placing our trust in the loving providence of God. Conquering one by another and establishing an iron rule for all, will not safeguard the peace we are thirsting for. The real peace should come from within and not from outside. Jesus said: "My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (Jn.14:27). Of course we should create an atmosphere of life in which all nations, religions and peoples feel secure and trust one another. Love alone, characterized by selflessness, will make this possible.

IV The *Yama-niyama* for Inter-faith Relations

The five *yamas* (principle of self-restrains) and five *niyamas* (ideals to be observed) are very ancient in our Indian traditions. They were the principles and ideals to be observed by the students during their time of formation in *gurukula* (house of the master). I think they are very good principles also for fostering inter-religious harmony and concord. So I am presenting these *yamas* and *niyamas* as useful means for promoting inter-religious understanding, harmony and peace in the world.

1. *Yama*: Principles of Self-restraint

About *yama* Patanjali, the author of *Yoga Sutra* says:

Unrestricted to any particular caste, country, season or time, these virtues become great universal vows for all (YS II.31).

- i. *Ahimsa*: This word, though etymologically negative (*a-himsa*), has a very positive content. In the inter-religious context it means respect for all religions, which alone will set a right atmosphere for dialogue. It asks us to avoid aggressiveness,

over-assertion about our own religion. Try to respect all other forms of life, especially forms of religions.

- ii. *Satya*: Try to understand truth/faith and doctrine of other religions. Let any being or truth shine forth.
- iii. *Asteya*: Remain committed to one's own faith with all sacrifices it demands. Avoid expansionism of one's own religion. This is not against sharing one's religious consciousness with the other, for example, in the novel *Fabiola*, her slave shares his consciousness of Christ to his mistress, which eventually evokes her admiration for Christ and Christianity.
- iv. *Brahmacharya*: Be focused on God as our supreme goal. Try not to flirt with minor issues of one's own faith. A lot of dissensions are made due to misplaced emphasis and our eagerness to impose it on others. E.g., the desire to impose circumcision on Christians of non-Jewish origin by Jewish Christians was a false zeal which St. Paul criticized.
- v. *Aparigraha* : Foster freedom to give up what is dear, for the sake of the whole truth. Do not hold on to an unhealthy position, just for prestige and honour. St. Paul gives up his prestigious position of a Pharisee, when he was awakened by the Spirit.

2. *Niyama*: The Ideals to be Observed

As regards the *niyama*, the five observances to be practiced, Patanjali says the following:

In order to counteract thoughts hostile to self-realization we have to nurture positive helpful thoughts (YS II.33).

- i. *Saucha*: A purified concept of one's own religion is to be developed. See the difference between essentials and accessories. For this a journey back to the sources is recommended. For Christians an authentic search for Jesus

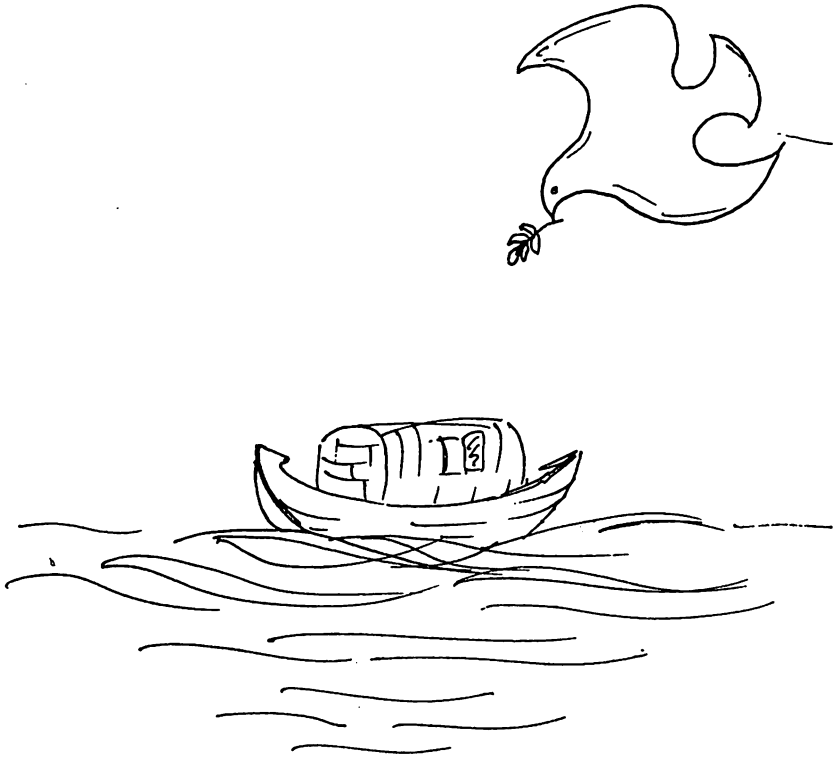
experience is necessary, which is not to be identified with the cultural framing given to it in any country or culture.

- ii. Santhosha:* Inner contentment in the truth revealed is to be fostered. Joyfully search for unity in variety. Be happy about the gift of faith one has received and the contributions made by other religions.
- iii. Tapas:* Spirit of self-control in all matters of relationship with others. A commitment to love one's own religion and the sacrifices it involves. Foster dialogue of life rather than of brain alone.
- iv. Swadhyaya:* Along with the commitment to study one's own religion, develop deep interest in understanding other religions as well. Avoid prejudices; learn to appreciate.
- v. Isvara-pranidhana:* A prayerful and meditative attitude all through one's life and a will to appreciate the same in other religions.

Conclusion

*To the heavens be peace, to the sky and the earth,
to the waters be peace, to plants and all trees,
to the Gods be peace, to Brahman be peace,
to all men be peace, again and again
- peace also to me!*

(Yajur Veda XXXVI,17)



“Peace be with you” (Jn. 20:19)

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The Asian Vision of God



V. F. Vineeth