

A/10 SEARCH FOR THE ABSOLUTE AS A POINT OF CONVERGENCE IN WORSHIP

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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 ends and inaugurates the next one. Thus the wheel of time rolls on and on reminding us of the beginning and end of things that are finite. Man himself moves from his childhood to youth and from youth 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 of decomposition which marks the inherent finitude of our nature. At the same time search for meaning is spontaneous to every human being. This search forces him to rise above all signs and structures of limitation. He tends to that which is beyond and boundless, that which is fullness and meaningful, that which is free from all possibilities of negations and structures of limitation, namely, 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.

I. *Towards Understanding the Absolute*

Strictly speaking, the Absolute is ununderstandable. It is the infinite, incomprehensible fulness of reality about which man 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,

the cloud of the unknowing, the medieval mystical classic from the West, the dark night of enlightenment described by John of the Cross etc., point to the absoluteness of the Absolute which is not understood by the logic of the thinking mind. Absolute is better known in contemplative thinking 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-Nirguna 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.⁸

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 mundane qualities for the sake of human worship and adoration.⁹ 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 *Māyā*. In worship we praise the Lord who manifests himself with his *Māyā*-power and are expected to rise above it in our orientation to the Absolute who is beyond all manifestative play (*līla*) of reality.

II. *The Search for the Absolute in Christian Tradition*

i) *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 tremendous 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 *Iswara* 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.

ii) *The Absolute in Human Flesh*

In the fulness of time when the Word became flesh, according to Christian faith, the Absolute has received name and 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 completely contain the Absolute. The Absolute is that which transcends all forms and yet is the centre 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 *via negativa* along with a *via positiva* in understanding God. I find

Dionysius, the Areopagite with his celebrated works *The Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology* representing both these methods of approach.

iii) *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 in three categories:

i) Names taken from the Sacred scriptures such as “I am that I am” (Exo 3:14), “I am the Life” (Jn 14:6), “The Light” (Jn 8:12) etc.¹¹

ii) The names drawn from the whole created universe such as “Good” (Mt 19:27), “Fair” (Ps 26:4), “Wise” (Rom. 14:27). These names presupposes 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 functions 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 of him, and yet he is nothing, the nameless.¹⁵ This takes us to the threefold path of Dionysius to the Absolute.

The Threefold Path

Dionysius says that our knowledge of God can be symbolic, positive or cataphatic, 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 cataphatic 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.

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 reach him, who is the Unknowable and this leads to the realization that most Divine knowledge of God is that he is known as unknowing, "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".¹⁸

3. *The Apophatic Way of Knowing God*

Both symbolic and catephatic 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 conceptualised 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"¹⁹ that is beyond being. 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.²⁰

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 of all names and forms used in worship in our openness to the nameless.

III. *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 man for his worship 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.

❶ *The Absolute in a Particular form of Religious Worship*

Religions as we know 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".²¹ 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 and its worship pattern claim absoluteness over others. This claim is more powerfully made by all the three Israel-born religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. 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 fulfilment which in the course of history will in no way ever be superseded.²²

This is obviously a faith-claim and faith-claim is relevant only in the group of people characterized by the same faith. Even though this claim is accepted as true from the Christian perspective of faith, it can still be asked whether the manifestation of the Absolute in Jesus Christ is exhaustive? Is not Jesus, the Absolute associated with a limited *nāmarūpa*? 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.

ii) *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 fellowmen. 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.²³

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 genuinity 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.²⁶

Let us remember the words spoken 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 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 fulness. It is that which the tongue of man cannot truly express nor human intelligence conceive. (*The Principal Upanishads*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1953, 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. *Rg. Veda*, 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.54.
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.*, pp. 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. *Divine Names*, p. 152.
19. *Mystical Theology*, p. 192.
20. *Mystical Theology*, pp. 191-192.
21. Paul Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
22. Karl Rahner, *Theological Dictionary*, p. 111.
23. Paul Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
24. *Mystical Theology*, pp. 193-194.
25. *Mystical Theology*, pp. 195-196.
26. Sankaracharya, *Commentary on Mundaka Up.*, III.2.8. Eng. trans. by Gambhirananda, *Upanishads*, Vol. II, pp. 168-169.