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Christian Faith and Hindu Bhakti

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(An article contributed to the encyclopædia Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart in which it appears in German ; we are most grateful to the Editor for his permission to publish it in The Indian Journal of Theology.)

The term 'Hindu' though not originally invented by the Moslems certainly gained currency only after their invasions of India beginning from the end of the tenth century. It was applied by them to everything non-Moslem. In the field of religion, therefore, it came to denote a wide variety of religious thought and practice. A comparison of Christian or Biblical faith with it, therefore, is fraught with great difficulty, because of the incapacity of almost any judgment to hold good with perfect accuracy over the whole gamut of what is termed Hinduism. It must, therefore, be understood that when speaking about Hinduism we can only refer to certain main tendencies.

Both faith and bhakti are concerned not with affirmations about the Reality round whom or which religions centre, but with the responses made to those affirmations. Since both are concerned with human response it is natural that there should be similarities and agreements ; but since the response is evoked by different affirmations about Reality it is also natural that there should be disagreements.

Hindu bhakti agrees with Christian faith in carrying a sense of whole-hearted trust in or commitment to somebody. For this reason, to those who cling to the older tradition in Hinduism if bhakti is not an actual heterodoxy it is just a concession to human weakness. But such trust is the chief feature of bhakti religion and constitutes its main difference from the tradition stemming from the Upanishads. That Hindu bhakti is often as disinterested and intense as New Testament faith is also undeniable. A feeling of the 'otherness' of God is another characteristic of Hindu bhakti as it is of Christian *pistis*. Hindu bhakti also rises above all legalism and sacerdotalism like Christian faith. Though Hinduism is rightly regarded as a caste-ridden religion the influence of bhakti has been against caste and has greatly modified the constantly prevailing tendency to make religion a privilege of the few. Similarities of this nature between Bhakti

religions and Christianity may be so strong as to justify the statement of Śiva Vākya that he might just as well have been worshipping in the local Christian Church, or even lend colour to the suspicion entertained by some eminent authorities that the Bhakti movement was influenced by Christian impacts from early times.

In spite of such resemblances there are important differences between Hindu bhakti and Christian faith. The differences arise largely because of the unsettled nature of the debate in Hinduism about the nature of God. The charge that Hinduism is not fundamentally concerned with the nature of God or even his existence but only with the liberation of the soul is entirely untrue. In fact, the nature of God or Reality is the main pre-occupation of all Hindu thinkers ; but the field of Hindu religious thought is not one in which the voice of the prophet has sounded crying out : ' Thus saith the Lord ' . It is, therefore, not unusual to find that while the Bhakti poet is paying the most loving tribute to his god that god is suddenly slipping into the blankness of unqualified monism. This may be observed to happen in Tulsī Dās, Tukārām and even Māṇikka Vāchakar and Tāyumānavar. *Advaita* and Bhakti have been said to be not contradictory theories about Reality but varying moods. The mind wavers because of a lack of certainty about the nature of god. Uncertainty at the very point where there should be certainty is a terrible solvent corroding Hindu bhakti. When Śaṅkara the teacher of the most uncompromising form of monism feels free to set himself up as a Bhakti poet we may know how weak the basis of bhakti can be.

Because what should be a subject of affirmation at the very heart of all religion continues to be a subject of unsettled dispute in Hinduism, it is not unnatural that in a field so cluttered with gods, worship though offered to one god is usually not monotheism but henotheism. The god to whom bhakti worship is most often offered is either Viṣṇu or Śiva. The devotees of each hold their god to be the supreme deity : but there is little inclination to deny existence to the other god or even to the rest of the pantheon. In fact Bhakti religion flourishes on Puranic literature, whose *raison d'être* is the existence of many gods and the need to define the relationship between them. A common theme of the Bhakti poets is the superiority of their favourite god over the others, especially those in the triad. That there should be a pantheon in the foreground while there is a monism in the background is one of the necessities of a monistic philosophy which wants to turn religious.

While the existence of other gods may be acknowledged, the essence of Bhakti is to be able to say ' *Nānyam daivam naiva jāne na jāne* ' (Another god, I know not, I know not). What if other gods exist ? As far as the Bhakta is concerned, only one matters. Henotheism is temporary monotheism. Concentrated worship demands that the god worshipped should be treated with a feeling

of 'otherness'; but in Hinduism there is no 'creatureliness' felt on the part of the Bhakta. The character of God never acquired sufficient distinctiveness in Hinduism to lead to a doctrine of Creation. There may be a feeling of separation from God on the part of man; but it is not a separation which leads one to say, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of Hosts'. Before Kṛishṇa in the Gita overawes Arjuna with the shattering vision of his ultimate ontology, he has confided to him, 'Among the Pāṇḍavas I am Arjuna'. In Śāṅkara the separation between man and God is due to *Avidya* (ignorance). In Śaiva Siddhānta the *Pāśa* which keeps man away from God is coeternal with God and the human soul. More often than not the difference between God and man in Hinduism is a metaphysical difference, in which the finite when sufficiently produced may if it does not actually become the infinite come very near it. The cry for union with God heard often in Hinduism is moving and natural, but the cry for forgiveness if heard at all sounds strange. The relationship between God and man is not such as to give rise to the need for Atonement.

New Testament religion consists of faith in Jesus Christ. 'Only believe' may be said to be the fundamental demand made on the Christian. In Hinduism generally bhakti is one of the three alternative methods of obtaining salvation. A considerable amount of philosophic thought stresses the superiority of *gñāna mārga* (way of knowledge) over other methods. Bhakti religion naturally stresses the importance of bhakti. But neither the Gita nor Rāmānuja, the authorities *par excellence* of Bhakti religion, nor Śāṅḍilya, the author of 'Bhakti Sūtra', though they plead for Bhakti, set the other ways at naught. The Teṅgalai sect, an extreme school of Bhakti, even adds two more ways to the existing list. The teaching of such alternative mārgas (ways) envisages a god who waits to be reached or attained and not a God who is striving to reconcile us to Himself.

The fact that Bhakti is considered a method of attaining to God, along with or exclusive of other methods, shows that it is set up as an instrument to appropriate grace. There has always been a tendency in Hinduism to put a certain power into the hands of man in the religious sphere. Either through sacrifice, meditation, asceticism or the repetition of formulas man was invested with certain power over the gods. The gods seem to need control, as in the last analysis their reliability is suspect. Man is, therefore, given this power. In the devotion that grew round Viṣṇu and Śiva this power became associated with Bhakti. Justification by faith in the New Testament on the other hand is acceptance of a salvation already wrought. 'I write unto you . . . because your sins are forgiven.'

There is also a difference between Hindu bhakti and Christian faith in their effects on man. According to the New Testament, if any man be in Christ he is a new creation. The range of Hindu bhakti is extremely wide, consisting of diverse

types and covering many centuries. But it may be observed that in practically all the types, Hindu bhakti, while it produces a tremendous religious preoccupation and a concentration of devotion (*ananya bhakti*) that can be oblivious of almost everything else, does not generally result in a recreation of personality. A god that can recreate the personality of others must himself be a personality of undoubted clarity.

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LIFE'S PILGRIMAGE

*Pilgrims are we, which day by day
Go journeying on the world's highway,
On to our city, where is laid
A treasure that can never fade.
Six days to fare through sun and rain,
And taste our lot of joy and pain ;
The seventh to rest us from the road,
And gain our blessed sight of God !
Six days in bridal exile drear !
The next, ah joy ! for home is here !
Saith Dāsa, passing strange and wise,
In sooth, is all God doth devise.*