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The Quest for Unity through Religion

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Over sixty years ago Swami Vivekananda arrived in Chicago to attend the World Parliament of Religions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that his speech in Chicago marked the beginning of a new era in the history of religion, in that it was the first announcement of the claim of Hinduism to be not merely a religion, but *the* world religion—the religion within which the truths of all other religions had already been included and transcended. It is to the Hindu that the relation of the unity of all religions has been given: that is the conviction which gave Vivekananda his extraordinary position in the Parliament of Religions.

Within India itself, the belief that all religions are in essence one has become not merely an article of faith but almost an axiom of thought. Anyone who doubts its truth is regarded as semi-illiterate. In the new basic schools, which under the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi's educational ideas are being established all over India, students are taught to take part in the festivals of all religions, to read all their scriptures, and to take part in forms of worship which claim to be inclusive of all that is included in the religions separately. When one remembers both the evils that have been inflicted upon India by the strife of religious communities and the terrible sterility of the purely secular education which has been imparted in government schools, one can but be moved by this noble effort to teach the rising generation a universal nonsectarian religion, as the basis of their efforts for the reconstruction of the national life. Against that background, the Christian missionary has to face the charge of sectarianism and separatism. The slogan, 'Christ, the Hope of the World,' is met by indignant repudiation: 'If by the word "Christ," you mean the same universal religious principle which is also in Buddha, in Krishna, in Mohammed, in Gandhi, we agree that this is the Hope of the World. But, if you mean that all the world is to follow one way, to be enrolled under one banner, to accept one dogma, namely, the one you bring us, then we say, "No." That is not the way to unity, but the way to sectarian strife. Your religious imperialism is out of date; it is the survival of an earlier day, when every frog in its own little pond thought that that pond was the ocean. We are happy to hear what you have to tell us about your religion; we recognize in Jesus an incarnation of the

one universal religious principle. We shall gladly worship him as we worship others. But if you insist that we must all join your flock, we must tell you that you are still in the kindergarten stage of religion; that if you want to make your contribution to our national life, you must abandon these ridiculous claims to exclusive truth, recognize the truth in all religions, and join with us as brothers in the one religious task.'

I think that is a not unfair representation of the attitude of the good Hindu today to the claim of the Christian evangelist, and it will be at once conceded that there are Christians whose thinking on the subject is sympathetic to this kind of protest. Over twenty years ago the famous Laymen's Foreign Missionary Report, *Re-thinking Missions*, looked forward not to the displacement of other religions by Christianity but to their co-existence and co-operation until each has yielded up to the rest its own ingredient of truth.

Like Vivekananda, the Laymen's Report sees all existing religions as in some sense participants in one ultimate truth. The difference is that, whereas the laymen regard that truth as something not at present within our grasp, the Hindu Swami speaks with much greater confidence. The laymen look forward to a long process of purgation, in which the religions must put off the elements of untruth which they contain. Vivekananda, on the other hand, is confident that the contradictions between the religions are only apparent. 'They come,' he says, 'from the same truth adapting itself to the various circumstances of different natures.'¹ And to the question What is that truth? the higher Hinduism has, as we shall see, a confident answer. From this point of view Hinduism is conscious of a mission to the world: not the desire to spread the names and forms of Hinduism throughout the world, or to displace the names and forms of other religions, but to teach all the world that there is an ultimate truth, a transcendent standpoint from which all religious forms and names are seen to be merely relative, partial, and temporary.

The Claim of Hinduism

One of the favourite parables expressing the Hindu attitude is the little story of the blind man and the elephant. It is related that one of the kings of Benares gathered together a number of beggars blind from their birth, placed an elephant in their midst, and offered a prize to the one who would give the best account of the animal. Needless to say, the accounts varied widely, and the beggars were soon quarrelling among themselves about their rival theories. The application to the relations between religions is obvious, but the limitations of the parable should be obvious, too. For one thing, to quarrel over a small prize is foolish, but if our eternal destiny depends upon the right answer to the riddle of experience, then there is no subject more worthy of disputation. More seriously, the parable surely must provoke us to ask for the credentials of the man who tells it and who implicitly claims that in the country of the blind he alone can see. The claim of Hinduism is, in fact, this. There is a fundamental intolerance implied in the Hindu position, no less than in the Christian. His attitude of equal tolerance to all forms of religion rests upon a definite conviction in the light of

¹ *Complete Works*, p. 16.

which he believes all the forms of religion to be but varied refractions of the truth which he sees. His position is thus different from the position represented by the laymen's inquiry. His attitude is not that of the man who recognizes that we are all seekers and that our best theories are but guesses about the unknown. It is the essence of the Hindu attitude that it claims to know the truth of which all existing religions are but distortions and retractions. It is that claim which underlies the universalism of the higher Hinduism. It is a claim already to possess the clue to unity through religion. Until this present decade, India had not been strong enough politically to press this claim upon the world, though she has made it widely felt. It may be expected that in days to come she will do so with increasing confidence. Let us examine the claim and its basis.

The Basis of the Hindu Claim

The most eminent and persuasive exponent of this Hindu claim today is the great philosopher and statesman, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan who says:

The Hindu attitude to other religions is based upon a definite philosophy of life, which assumes that religion is a matter of personal realization. Spirit is free being, and its life consists in breaking free from conventions and penetrating into true being. The formless blaze of spiritual life cannot be expressed in human words. We tread on air so thin and rare that we do not leave any visible footprints. He who has seen the real is lifted above all narrowness, relativities, and contingencies.¹

This inability to express the real in human words does not, however, as Radhakrishnan makes very clear, mean that there is anything vague about it. The basis of the Hindu position, as he says, is a very definite philosophy, which, like other philosophies, is capable of statement and of criticism and which, in turn, is based upon an experience which is described as 'personal realization', 'penetration into true being', 'seeing the real.' That philosophy is what India calls the 'Vedanta', the end and summation of all revelation. It teaches that the reality behind all the manifold appearance and all the ceaseless change which our five senses report to us is one undifferentiated and unchanging spirit and that that spirit is identical with our own spirit. That spirit is defined as 'pure awareness distinct from bodily states and mental happenings.'² And, as the repeated refrain of the Chandogya Upanishad expresses it, 'this whole world has that being for itself—that is reality—that is the self—that art thou, O Svetaketu.'³

This pure awareness, however, this naked condition of pure selfhood, is normally beyond our power to realize. In proportion as we depart from it, the world takes on an appearance of multiplicity and diversity. And not only so, the experience of pure selfhood which was present in the moment of mystical union now appears in our memory as something different from our empirical self (which, indeed, it is), and to that something we give the name of 'God.' To quote Radhakrishnan again: 'The attainment of spiritual status when refracted in the logical universe appears as a revelation of grace.'⁴

¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religion and Western Thought* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 316-17.

² *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³ Chandogya Upanishad VI: 10.

⁴ Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

Thus for the Vedantin the whole conception of divine revelation belongs, along with the visible and tangible world, to the realm of *māyā*. Modern Hindu writers are anxious to insist that the doctrine of *māyā* does not mean that the phenomenal world is illusory. It does teach, however, that the appearance of multiplicity and change is illusory. For the Vedantin, the final truth is contained in the sentences which we have quoted from the Chandogya Upanishad, 'Thou art that.' Pure selfhood is the ultimate reality at the heart of all existence, 'Our real self is the Supreme Being.'¹ The apparent differences between things, and even the difference between subject and object, are transcended when the self understands its true nature. The phenomenal world cannot, according to the *māyā* doctrine, be dismissed as nonexistent. In so far as it is a refraction of the one reality seen through the eyes of the self which does not understand true selfhood, it is real; but its appearance of diversity, multiplicity, and change is unreal. 'So long as we are in the world of *māyā* and occupy a dualistic standpoint, the world is there standing over against us determining our perceptions and conduct.'² So Radhakrishnan paraphrases the teaching of Sankaracharya. Thus, so long as we are living in the world of illusion, the illusions are real to us. But this is precisely the character of all illusion. And the whole idea of divine revelation belongs to this world of illusion. The reality of which it is the refraction is none other than the mystical experience of unity with the supreme soul, which is the self.

The ultimate basis of the whole Hindu position is thus the experience of mystical union with the ultimate. On this Radhakrishnan is very explicit: 'The religions of the world can be distinguished into those which emphasize the object and those which insist on experience. For the first class, religion is an attitude of faith and conduct, directed to a power without. For the second, it is an experience to which the individual attaches supreme value. The Hindu and the Buddhist religions are of this class.'³ That experience has been described many times by mystics, East and West, and the essential features of their description are the same. The essence of it is, first, a gradual withdrawal of the mind from the world of sense perception by exercise in ascetic discipline; second, the concentration of all the mental powers upon a single object, upon an image, a text, upon a single sound, such as the sacred syllable *om*, or upon some part of the body, until the soul becomes empty of everything except the object of its meditation; and, finally, the point is reached where even the object of meditation ceases to be an object distinct from the subject. Subject and object are dissolved in a single unitary awareness, which is not an apprehension of any object but only, if one may put it so, awareness in an intransitive sense. 'The soul, holding itself in emptiness, finds itself possessing all.' And those who have visited these sublime heights tell us that they have experienced a rapture beyond any earthly joy, a knowledge beyond logic, a peace beyond understanding.

The Hindu Attitude to other Religions

It is that experience which provides the basis of certitude upon which the Hindu attitude to other religions rests. From that standpoint, every

¹ Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

expression of the religious sense, whether it be the most primitive idolatry or the most refined and spiritual theism, is seen to be but a refraction of the one ultimate truth seen through human natures which are at various stages of development—that is to say, at various stages of liberation from the toils of *māyā*. Within such a view of reality, there is room for almost infinite tolerance. Human nature varies, and each man is free to join the stream of living religion at the place to which his nature*and environment lead him. There is no place for mutual criticism or hostility. Each man must be encouraged to be faithful to the religious path of his choice but, at the same time, to penetrate behind the forms of religion, its alleged revelations, its creeds and dogmas and rituals, to find through them (and it does not matter what they are) the one truth, which is not a dogmatic statement or a personal meeting but an experience of identity with the Supreme Being.

The one thing which on this view cannot be tolerated is the one assertion which Christianity is bound to make, namely, that the Supreme Being has, once and for all, revealed himself in a historic person; that truth is to be found only by relating one's self to him; and that he is the centre around which the unity of mankind here in history is to be built. To such a claim, when it is clearly understood, Hinduism, in obedience to its own fundamental tenets, can only present an unrelenting opposition. From the point of view of the Vedanta, the preaching of the Christian Gospel is an assertion of ultimate validity for something which belongs to the world of illusion. If the preacher does it in ignorance, he may be gently and patiently helped to see beyond his illusion to the reality which he has not yet understood. But if he does it knowing what he is doing and if he steadily refuses to accept the view of his own faith which Hinduism offers him, then the limits of Hindu tolerance are necessarily reached. No tolerance can be infinite. It must be intolerant of intolerance; and when that tragic situation is forced upon us, we cannot help facing the question of truth. Is the Hindu view of religion true, and can it provide the means of unity for mankind?

There is no need to doubt, and it would be an impertinence to doubt, the reality of the mystic experience. But when the mystic builds upon his experience a philosophy and a theology, the matter is open for debate. I have no special competence to take part in that debate, but this comment at least may be pardoned: The Hindu mystic begins by abstracting himself from all apprehension of phenomena. It is therefore only to be expected that he ends with a state of pure unitary awareness, undisturbed by any kind of multiplicity. He has what he set out to seek. From the standpoint he has taken, all multiplicity has ceased to exist, because he has deliberately shut it out of his attention. But to conclude that this experience is the clue to ultimate reality is not a logical deduction, but a leap of faith; for the whole question is What is the relation of that ultimate reality to the multiplicity of phenomena? We face here, surely, an ultimate decision, which is, in the last resort, a decision of faith: whether we regard the multiplicity and change which characterize human life as a mere veil which has to be torn away in order that we may have access to ultimate reality, or whether we regard them as the place where we are to meet with and know and serve the divine purpose; whether salvation is by absorption into the Supreme Being, conceived as undifferentiated and unchanging spirit abstracted from all contact with phenomena, or whether it is by reconciliation to the

Supreme Being, conceived as personal will active in and through phenomena. Here is the dividing line between all religions; and Hinduism stands fair and square on one side of it. Its claim to be the truth transcending all religions is necessarily a flat denial of the central truth of biblical religion. The reality of the mystical experience need not be denied and, indeed, cannot be, but the assertion that it is the clue to reality is an affirmation of faith which must be judged by the criteria that are proper in the field of religious belief.

It follows from the nature of this basic experience that the unity which Hinduism offers is rather the negative unity of tolerance than the positive unity of love. Hinduism is a way of salvation for the individual. Radhakrishnan, after describing the varieties of Hindu theological thought, adds: 'All, however, are agreed in regarding salvation as the attainment of the true status of the individual. Belief and conduct, rites and ceremonies, authorities and dogma, are assigned to a place subordinate to the art of conscious self-discovery and contact with the divine.'¹ Hinduism has no doctrine of the church. By its essential character, it bids men seek beyond all the visible forms which are the mark of any human community. The standpoint from which it views all religions is the standpoint of the experience of unity with the Supreme Self, and that standpoint is necessarily a purely individual experience. There can be no such thing as a corporate *samādhi*. Nor can the individual experience lead out consistently into a corporate expression. It produces an almost infinite tolerance and courtesy to all other faiths and an abhorrence of all religious strife and bigotry. But it would be quite contrary to its own nature to produce a historic community bound together by fixed rules and customs. Modern Hinduism is largely the faith of men who have been educated in Christian schools and colleges or at least in a medium full of Christian ideas; men who know their Bibles better than many Christians do; men who have learned to love and reverence Jesus and his teachings. Their writings are, therefore, full of Christian phraseology, and their activities are often profoundly influenced by Christian ideas. But so long as the central and controlling idea is salvation through the knowledge of identity with the Supreme Self, so long as the world of multiplicity and change is believed to be not wholly real, Hinduism can never put a visible human community into the centre of its creed, as Christianity puts the church. The unity which it offers is the cessation of strife, not the creation of a new community.

Thus the Hindu offer of reconciliation between religions is a consistent whole from start to finish. It begins with the assumption with which it ends, namely, that the phenomenal world of multiplicity and change is illusory. It therefore begins by a process of withdrawal from that world, and it ends with a conception of salvation which can have no organic relation to any particular historic events or to any visible historic community. Its claim to be the truth transcending all religions is necessarily at the same time a negation of the truth of those religions as their adherents understand them. So far from providing the basis for a permanent truce between the religions, it is—when properly understood—a declaration of war upon all religions which claim to be based upon a historic revelation.

¹ Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*

There is no escaping the fact that the unity of mankind can be achieved only around some centre, and therefore the question 'What is the true centre?' is the vital question. There is no way to unity by mere amalgamation, wholesale syncretism, or universal toleration. Men are not made one except by something which draws them together. When the Hindu says, 'All rivers flow into the ocean; all ways lead to God,' he is, in fact, bearing witness to a very definite faith as to the ultimate nature of man, of the world, and of God, and we cannot avoid asking the question 'Is it true?' Once that question is raised, we are again in the realm of conflict between religions. The unity of mankind cannot be achieved except as a unity in the truth; and truth cannot make concordats with falsehood. The quest for unity must itself involve the steady repudiation of every claim to achieve unity around a false centre.

Religion deals with the sacred, that is to say, with that which makes upon man a claim to which every other claim has, in principle, to be subordinated. In so far as religion achieves intellectual coherence through theological reflection and universality through effective contact with the life of mankind as a whole, it must do so by showing the believer how all life and experience are related to the sacred. Thus every mature and universal religion will have its own interpretation of the multiplicity of religions. This interpretation is part of its own claim to be the ultimate and universal truth. When Vivekananda claims to speak for a religion in which the truth of all other religions is included, he is speaking the language proper to religion, just as Paul was when he said to the Athenians, 'What ye worship in ignorance, this set I before you.' When the authors of the Laymen's Report look forward to a higher synthesis of all existing religions, they are, in fact, spokesmen of a new religion claiming to be the ultimate truth before which every other interest must give way. Though they modestly place the revelation of this truth in the future, it would not be difficult to deduce from their writing an outline of its contents. Every claim to reconcile conflicting religious claims is itself in some sense a claim to religious truth and must be examined on its merits as such.

The Christian Claim

What, then, shall we say of the claim implicit in the existence of the World Council of Churches and explicit in the title of the assembly which has recently met: 'Christ, the Hope of the World.' The World Council of Churches, like the World Parliament of Religions, draws together bodies which hold profoundly different interpretations of the truth. Within its membership are to be found teachings which mutually contradict one another on important issues. Its member churches are not able in all cases to recognize one another as churches. Yet, by their covenanting together to form this council and by many public statements, they have confessed that there is a truth which holds them together in spite of the differences which hold them apart. We have to ask: 'What is the basis upon which this unity is affirmed in spite of disagreement on large and important matters of truth?' We have seen that, in the case of the Hindu claim to reconcile all religions, the basis is the mystical experience and the claim that this is the path to identification with the Supreme Being. What, in the case of the ecumenical

While in the east, preceded by the Dawn,
 His blushing charioteer, the glorious Sun
 Begins his course, and far into the gloom
 Casts the first radiance of his orient beams.
 Hail! co-eternal orbs, that rise to set,
 And set to rise again ; symbols divine
 Of man's reverses, life's vicissitudes.
 And now,
 While the round Moon withdraws his looming disc
 Beneath the western sky, the full-blown flower
 Of the night-loving lotus sheds her leaves
 In sorrow for his loss, bequeathing nought
 But the sweet memory of her loveliness
 To my bereaved sight ; e'en as the bride
 Disconsolately mourns her absent lord,
 And yields her heart a prey to anxious grief.¹

This beautiful description of a sunrise has become a part of the literature of mankind. After we read it, we appreciate a sunrise far more because a great poet has enabled us to see beauty as we had not seen it before. His deep emotion, committed to writing, does not swamp our appreciation of a sunrise. It would be quite wrong of us merely to read beautiful descriptions of sunrise and not to see the sunrise itself. But we should certainly learn from the great poets to appreciate better a sunrise. Every valuable insight into the Divine Nature which God has given to man in the past, especially in the Bible, becomes an imperishable part of the spiritual heritage of man. We can no more afford to throw away the records of the past dealings of God with men than we can allow the works of Kalidasa or Shakespeare to be forgotten. The records of religion in the past in the Bible do not swamp our religion today ; they give it a depth and breadth which it otherwise might not possess.



God is not known so long as we believe what we are told about Him, nor even when we buttress this belief with reasons drawn from the wisdom of the ancient world. God is known only when He is met, and that is when He comes to meet us, whether it be in the assembly of His people, or in the reading or hearing of His Word, or in the midst of the storm where He appears and with His simple I AM casts out fear. The intuition of primitive man is not wholly astray, after all. In the tumult of the impersonal forces of nature and of history the personal presence of Christ is found. And Christian faith is simply the recognition of this encounter when it occurs. H. A. Hodges in *Reformation Old and New*.

¹ *Sakuntala*, tr. by M. Monier-Williams, p. 83.