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# Interpreting the Christian Doctrine of Creation in India\*

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As we place the Hindu and the Christian doctrines of creation side by side, a good number of issues will grip our attention demanding special thought and consideration. Let me pick out ten of them which I consider decisive.

1. *The Doctrine and Authority.*—Why do Hindus wholeheartedly accept a fixed pattern of origin of things? The simple answer is that it is the revealed truth. The common Hindu view is that the Vedas are authorless and eternal. But we may move beyond the unsophisticated common man. This is what Dr. D. S. Sharma says: 'The root fallacy in the Western interpretation lies in the mistaken belief that the Vedic seers were simply inspired by primitive wonder and awe towards the forces of nature . . . Correct position seems to us to be that the Vedic sages were greatly intellectual and intensely spiritual personages, who in their mystic moments came face to face with Reality and this mystic experience, this direct intuitive spiritual insight overflows in literature as the Vedic hymns.' Even if we agree with Dr. Sharma, it must be recognized that the intuitive content of any mystic thought is determined, as Rudolf Otto has pointed out, by his understanding of reality around him. Because mythology is the earliest attempt to explain reality in every ancient religion, we have to recognize the place of Hindu mythology in Indian thinking. Though interpretations differ, the Hindu doctrine of creation is rooted in the ancient Hindu mythology. This is the source of the common pattern of origin of things accepted as part of divine truth by both Hindu masses and thinkers.

Christians also cherish certain mythological stories about creation. To the Jews the creation stories narrated in the Book of Genesis were not simply ancient Babylonian myths but stories interpreted in the light of God's covenant relationship with His people. Christians understand these stories only in the light of the new covenant in and through Jesus Christ.

The Christian conception of creation will become intelligible to India only when Hindus understand God's redemptive act

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\* A paper read at the seminar on *The Doctrines of Creation* held in Madras.

accomplished by Christ in history. Only then will they be freed from mythological conceptions that dominate their speculations. Even the best of our interpretation with the most gripping terminology and convincing reasoning will not have much effect unless there is a corrective in accepted authority. So the Christian insists that the Biblical myth of creation should be interpreted only in the light of Christ's redemptive act.

2. *Conflicting Hindu Views.*—To attempt a Christian interpretation of the doctrine adequate enough to satisfy different branches of Hinduism is a very difficult task. There are three major conceptions of creation in Hinduism. They are: *Prakṛti Parināma Vāda*, *Brahma Parināma Vāda*, and *Brahma Vivarta Vāda*. Though they have many things in common, on some basic principles they show fundamental differences. When, for example, the first says that the world is a modification of pre-existent matter, the second holds that it comes about by means of the eternal *Brahman's* self-imposed modification and the third argues that the world is simply a projection grounded in *Brahman* through *Māyā*. Which one of these will we select to establish a point of contact? The terminology of which school would best convey our message?

3. *Creatio Ex Nihilo and Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit.*—*Creatio ex nihilo* is central to the Christian understanding of creation. We are fully aware of the danger all around if we part with this central emphasis. A number of other Christian doctrines and teachings rest on this. On the other hand Hindus are so sure about creation out of nothing that in their view it is impossible and philosophically untenable—*ex nihilo nihil fit*. They maintain that every effect must be a modification of its material cause—*kāryakāraṇa bheda*, the non-difference between cause and effect. Can we suggest any interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* to those who strongly hold that out of nothing nothing comes?

I have read an answer to this offered by a Roman Catholic recently. Creation, he argues, necessarily presupposes the existence of a Self-Existent Being endowed with intelligence, will and power. So creation is a realization in time of those things which from all eternity have existed in the mind of God. In other words, creation is the production of things from the eternal ideas contained in the mind of God by His omnipotent power. An interpretation like this may pave the way for an explanation of the Christian doctrine to the Hindus. But will this be acceptable to all Christians?

4. *Satkārya Vāda and God's Infinite Power.*—By *satkārya vāda* a Hindu asserts that the effect is already in the cause. This is almost unanimously held in Hinduism. Creation is therefore only a change from potentiality into actuality. In dissolution things created will come to exist in a different form.

The Christian doctrine stands for the absolute beginning of things. There is a real distinction between the nature of the efficiency of secondary or finite causes and that of the infinite cause. All finite causes necessarily need material causes to pro-

duce things. Being finite, their power cannot cross the infinite distance that exists between non-being and being. But the infinite power can cross the infinite gulf that separates them.

Here the Christian conception agrees definitely with the Christian faith in God, namely that He is almighty. To be sure, Hinduism also accepts that God is almighty. But in Hindu thinking although God is all powerful, He is not fully responsible for this world of *samsāra*. He cannot cross the infinite distance that exists between being and non-being, not because He is powerless, but because it is below His divinity to do that. As opposed to the Hindu view the Christian has the conception of the God of love. The love that seeks sinners, that alone is able enough to cross this distance. Only that divinity which is divine enough to abandon His divinity can call this world to existence. The problem here is, how to make the Hindus understand the Christian conception unless they change their understanding of God ?

5. *Immutability of God and the Creative Act of God.*—Hindus believe that an actual exercise of a causal power previously quiescent implies a change in the cause. If the Supreme Self-Existent Being is the cause of the world, it comes to saying that He undergoes a change from a quiescent state to an active state and from a state of non-fulfilled purpose to its fulfilment. To avoid such problems the Hindu *Achāryas* maintain that *Prakṛiti* evolves into the world while *Brahman* is in its proximity, or that the world is only an appearance made possible by *Brahman* or again that *sṛiṣṭi*, *sthiti*, and *samhāra* are effected by *Brahman* in a lower state called *Īvara*. Behind all these emphases there lies the insistence that *Brahman* is immutable.

Christianity believes that the Supreme Being is also Pure Activity. In other words essence and operation are one and the same in Him. He is always existing and is always acting. There is no action in Him that is new. The triune God is full, perfect, and active in Himself. He lacks nothing ; and it is out of His overflowing love that He created the world. This is the idea affirmed by the Christian in his creed when he says, 'I believe in God, the Father almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.' The Creator is also the Father.

How may God who is perfect in Himself be involved in action without causing damage to His perfection ? This has to be explained to the Hindu thinkers.

6. *Finite Beings and the Infinite Being.*—Both the ancient and the modern Hindu thinkers who affirm that Reality is One feel a kind of aversion for the theory of creation out of nothing. Being monists, they think that it is absurd to place the finite by the side of the Infinite. Thus the idea of finite beings plus the Infinite Being is for them a stumbling-block. To get over the difficulty, on the one hand they admit that *Brahman* and the world are one and the same in essential nature, the difference between them being simply one of name and form ; and on the other, pure monists among them maintain that even the name and form by which the world is distinguished from *Brahman* are themselves

unreal from the ultimate standpoint. These positions, we may argue, are opposed to sound reasoning, experience and science. The problem is real indeed.

We say God does not grudge the existence of reality distinct from Himself. The existence of the creature alongside God is a miracle which we have to admit humbly. The universe exists because God gives it existence. The Christian doctrine of creation affirms that we and the world are not God. It also insists that by creating the world and man God has taken on Himself a voluntary self-limitation. We say this as we proceed from the present state of the world and try to see its meaning for the past and the future. But this is no argument to the monist. How may we convince him of the Christian view ?

7. *Eternal Soul and Created Soul.*—According to the Hindu theory the soul is an entity separate from human personality. It is either co-eternal with *Brahman* or *Brahman* Itself reflected in *Māyā*. There is no uncreated soul, insists the Christian, which can be understood as ontological consciousness. Man, for the Christian, is a body-soul entity created by God. Eternality is not his birthright, but is only a gift of God.

A Hindu practises his religion on the assumption that he has in himself an eternal soul which is by nature either *Brahman* Itself or like *Brahman*. So he channels his religious striving towards the goal of liberating his soul from involvement in matter. This view is by no means exclusively Indian, for it is found in many other religions including those of the primitive man. Mystics of many religious traditions have claimed that in their moments of the highest religious realization they have experienced the eternity of their souls.

The success of our interpretation will depend a great deal upon what we have to say about this thorny problem. Does Christianity rule out such conceptions completely ? If it does, we shall have to recapture it for India. Probably a new interpretation of the 'Image of God' is worth using in trying to satisfy the Indian mind.

8. *Purposive Creation and Purposeless Creation.*—The Christian doctrine of creation inevitably presents a purpose in creating the world. Heaven and earth declare the glory and the majesty of God. Out of His love God created the world to share His bounty. God created the world to bring into being history where God's will may be done till that perfection designed for creatures might be attained. The creation is real and good ; it is not a passing show. As we read the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 8, a great and glorious future is awaiting this world which will be revealed at the perfection of the saints. In short this creation is a mould, in and through which God is working for a new heaven and a new earth. In this Christian doctrine the Providence of God plays a very important role.

Hindus are very careful not to attribute any purpose to God in creating the world. To do this, for them, is to limit God's nature and to make Him involved in *samsāra*. So God is either simply

an onlooker of the evolution and the involution of the universe or these processes constitute a *līlā*—sport—of the Supreme Being. In this there is neither a real conception of the Providence of God nor any purposive direction for the endless cycles of *yugas*.

Some sort of dissatisfaction about this traditional view of the world has already been expressed. The Saivites, for instance, think that the process is going on for the benefit of the souls in order that they shall have a further chance to free themselves from *mala*. Recently Sri Aurobindo Ghosh could see in this process a spiritual upward evolution, through which the creatures may advance. This shows that Hinduism today may, in the light of concern with national developments and planning, accept a realistic view of the world with meaning and purpose. But the problem involved in the cycle theory still remains to be faced.

9. *Redemptive View of History and Pessimistic View of History*.—The purpose of God for His creation, believes the Christian, has been manifested in history. Along with creation, history has both a beginning and an end. Man has been created to declare the lordship of God in history and to confront God, the Lord of history, as a free and responsible being. God has put everything under subjection to man, so that he may share the glory of God in dependence on Him and that he may be a keeper of his brother. But by the wrong use of his God-given freedom, man, free and responsible being though he is, has forfeited the purpose of God designed for him and history. The redemptive history of the Bible clearly shows what God does in and to history. God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ makes the middle point of history and the basis of our knowledge of God, man, creation, eternity, and time. God has entered history, and it receives its true meaning and purpose from that entry. Christ is the very pattern upon which human life should be moulded in history, and we are being challenged for responsible action, moral living, and spiritual worship in order to bear fruits worthy of the kingdom of God. There awaits a judgment of God on history when all worthless chaff will be removed and precious things will be preserved.

Though Hindus accept history as empirically real, they do not accept that God can reveal truth in and through history. They are concerned with timeless and eternal truths, and in their view history has no conceivable use to God. As to man, the world is a stage of enslavement for his soul, and it is bound by the inexorable law of *karma*. How are we to present to the Hindu the view that history and its movements are precious not only empirically but also ultimately ?

10. *Science and Creation*.—It has been pointed out that the working of nature does not show a single instance of creation. All things come into being by evolution, emanation, composition, and combination. So the present state of things does not provide with facts adequate to prove the reality of creation. Some scientific theories of evolution are thought to question the Biblical view of creation. Recently Hindu thinkers have claimed that their theory of creation shows remarkable resemblance with the evolutionary

theories of science. So they argue that the Hindu theory is more tenable than the Christian view.

The question of creation, we know, cannot be settled in the light of experience or history because it transcends them both. Finite beings cannot produce a thing merely from non-being. However, religion seeks to know the ultimate source of things of this world and to get at the right meaning and direction of our spiritual and moral life, civilization, and culture. The problem of the relation between scientific truth and religious truth has to be discussed in the Indian context.

*Our Task.*—The great *Āchāryas* of India, we should not forget, have thought about these problems in their own way and worked out the Hindu understanding of creation. Each one of them defended his position, criticizing and rejecting others. Philosophical and theological reasons have played an important part in their work.

We also should adopt the same method in trying to offer a systematic Christian interpretation of creation in India. Persons well versed in Sanskrit terminology should undertake the work of using them with Christian meaning-content, as St. John did with the Greek term 'Logos'. This effort need not rule out other methods.

We shall in this endeavour to do justice to the great task that lies before us.