

Hindu and Christian *Bhakti*: A Common Human Response to the Sacred

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Of all the traditions which characterize Hinduism perhaps none has so stirred the hearts of Christians as the personalist tradition of religious devotion or *bhakti*. Here, it is commonly felt, is a tradition which has close affinities with Christianity and can surely be used as a way of leading to the fuller Indian understanding of the Christian faith. Indeed, here there is warmth and love and personal devotion; here is the experience of God's grace; here that utter self-abandonment to the love and power of God which has characterized so many Christian saints. Is it any wonder then that for so many, here has seemed to be a direct bridge linking the Christian faith with Hindu faith, a bridge over which the *bhakta* may pass and still feel that he has not strayed from home? In all of this there has been no dearth of theological and philosophical studies—too many to attempt to list them here. However, in order to understand more fully this major component in the religious life of human beings, and thus to contribute to the on-going dialogue between men and women of various faiths, it would seem useful to explore devotion and worship¹ in the general history of religions. Being acutely aware of the vastness of the subject I can only plead for forbearance, in that the present treatment is, of necessity, selective. However, it is hoped that on the basis of the examples and interpretation presented it might be possible to demonstrate that Hindu and Christian *bhakti* participate in a certain kind of common human response to the sacred.

Devotion as a Response to the Sacred: Outward Action

Although it is not possible to present a precise picture of the structure of devotion at the so-called "primitive"² religious level, an

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¹ In the context of our discussion, as well as in a more general sense, worship may be understood as "devotion occurring in event." Hence, the terms "worship" and "devotion" may justifiably be used as mutual referents, devotion being the more inclusive category.

² Though the term "primitive" is misleading and should be replaced by "pre-literate" or "non-literate," I have kept it, with the majority of authors, for reasons of convenience.

understanding of "primitive" man's religious experience may help to clarify the origin of religious devotion in its more definite forms in other areas of the history of religions. To this end, then, we may take cognizance of the general form of the manifestation of the sacred, which has been shown by Mircea Eliade to involve certain principles of coherence that can conveniently be outlined in the following manner:

1. The sacred is qualitatively different from the profane, yet it may manifest itself no matter how or where in the profane world because of its power of turning any natural object into a paradox by means of a hierophany (it ceases to be itself, as a natural object, though in appearance it remains unchanged).
2. This dialectic of the sacred belongs to all religions, not only to the supposedly "primitive" forms. It is expressed as much in the worship of stones and trees, as in the theology of *avatārs*, or the Christian mystery of the Incarnation.
3. Nowhere does one find *only* elementary hierophanies (the kratophanies of the unusual, the extraordinary, the novel, *mana*, etc.), there are also traces of religious forms which "evolutionist" thought would call superior (Supreme Beings, moral laws, mythologies, and so on).
4. There is, even apart from these traces of higher religious forms, a system into which the elementary hierophanies fit. The "system" is always greater than they are: it is made up of all the religious *experiences* of the tribe (*mana*, kratophanies of the unusual, etc., totemism, ancestor worship, and much more), but also contains a corpus of traditional theories which cannot be reduced to elementary hierophanies: for instance myths about the origin of the world and the human race, myths explaining present human conditions, the theories underlying various rites, moral notions, and so on.³

This basic analysis of the manner in which the sacred is experienced in "primitive" religions points up the essential characteristic of the religious response as worship or devotion: it is a response directed toward that part of man's environment in which the sacred manifests itself. In practice this may include individual objects in nature, such as trees, stones or rivers, or it may involve images, mythic heroes or historical powers. The object of worship may be as wide as the universe itself or it may be limited to an idea in the worshipper's mind. Devotion may also be directed to the formless divine. What is necessary is that a "localization" takes place toward which human spiritual energies may be directed for the purpose of devotion.

³ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1967), p. 30.

As an example of a "primitive" religion moving towards an experience of devotion we may cite the example of the Baigas of Central India, with their belief in a Supreme Being, Bada Deo.

Anything massive, such as a large mithan or a great boar, or any other impressive object is called Bura Deo, which is meant to indicate that the deity takes up his abode temporarily in these things. . . When a fierce electrical storm lashes the Satpūra hills, Bura Deo is said to be coming down in anger. The thunder is the voice of the deity and the earthquake is caused by his mighty footsteps. Bura Deo sometimes comes also in the body of a tiger or python, and it is in that form he walks about among men to see what they are doing.⁴

However, it is not at all clear that acceptance of this general sacred character for the natural environment, even including particular reverence shown towards manifestations of Bada Deo, also indicates the existence of devotion in any technical sense. Nevertheless, it is out of this more generalized spiritual state that human beings ultimately distinguish and organize their life of religious devotion. What concerns us here is the religious act by which elementary hierophanies are integrated into the epiphany of the Supreme Being, and this example is particularly instructive because it involves an aboriginal tribe, whose members, it seems safe to assume, have not experienced the severe systematization imposed by theologians or mystics. It would seem rather to be a case of the spontaneous integration of elementary hierophanies with the complex concept of the Supreme Being. Surely, then, the universality of the sacred in human experience at this level allows one safely to assert that a real religious experience, however indistinct in form it may be, results from the effort which human beings make to enter the real, the sacred, by way of the most fundamental physiological acts transformed into ceremonies. The notion of a personal deity who is capable of responding with love to the homage of devotion is largely lost in the diffusion of this religious experience, although other elements do enter into the fundamental basis of the religious expression.

1. *Symbol-Making Mechanism*

Perhaps it is not too far afield to find in the very process of the symbol-making mechanism of "primitive" religion the source from which arise the religious forms that "allow" worship, properly speaking, to take place. However, it should be noted that this symbol-making mechanism is not the simple affair which it might seem on the surface to be. It is clear from an analysis which can be made of the component parts of hierophanies that the process of symbolization tends to group similarly related forms into major symbol systems,

⁴ R. V. Russell and Hira Lal, *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (Delhi: Cosmos Publications, 1975), Vol. II, p. 85.

sub-systems, etc. But it is not our purpose to investigate this highly technical character of religious expression here, though we may indicate briefly what is involved.

Similarly the sacred power of water and the nature of water cosmologies and apocalypses can only be revealed as a whole by means of the water symbolism which is the only "system" capable of including all the individual revelations of innumerable hierophanies. Of course this water symbolism is nowhere concretely expressed, it has no central core, for it is made up of a pattern of interdependent symbols which fit together into a system: but consistency of the symbolism of immersion in water (Baptism, the Flood, submersion of Atlantis), of purification by water (Baptism, funeral libations), of the time before creation (the waters, the "lotus," or the "island," and so on), enables us to recognize that here is a well organized "system." This system is obviously implied in every water hierophany on however small a scale, but is more explicitly revealed through a symbol (as for instance "the Flood" or "Baptism"), and is only fully revealed in water symbolism as displayed in *all* the hierophanies.⁵

The diffuse character of these individual water symbols—and there are many more, including related symbols, than indicated in this quotation—is somewhat mitigated by the fact that they are perceived together in a coherent way. "The primitive mind did genuinely have the experience of seeing each hierophany in the framework of the symbolism it implied, and did always really see that symbolic system in every fragment which went to make it up."⁶ Now the result of this is that, while on the one hand there is a tendency towards fragmentation or diffusion in "primitive" religious consciousness, on the other, there is a grouping of components under overarching or encompassing single systems. A person himself enters into this process and the symbol systems of which he is a part ". . . open to all the other living cosmoses by which he is surrounded. . . lead him towards himself, and reveal to him his own existence and his own destiny."⁷ Thus it is that the religious systems of "primitive" men and women begin to take on a personal quality insofar as through them they recognize themselves as persons. Moreover, it seems to be the case that as religious systems (symbolic systems) tend to represent a particular kind of personalization, e.g., sky god, earth goddess, etc., these deities also move to a universality of character that enables them to become objects of worship and devotion in the fullest sense. Indeed, Eliade notes that ". . . we can identify a double process in the history of things religious: on the one hand, the continual brief appearance

⁵ M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 449.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 455.

of hierophanies with the result that the manifestation of the sacred in the universe becomes more fragmentary; on the other, the unification of those hierophanies because of their innate tendency to embody archetypes as perfectly as they can and thus wholly fulfil their own nature."⁸ In this way a totem, or a tribal god, can give rise to a deity which has the status of the God of a monotheistic religion or a minor goddess can become the Mother of the Universe.⁹ Worship; of course, is potentially present at every level of religious expression; but on the analogy provided by the growth of religious symbolic systems it would seem to appear in its standard or recognizable form only in conjunction with the resolution of its components together with the appearance of a personal god.

Another way to approach the issue of worship and religious devotion is by means of a consideration of certain of the religious dimensions of life in which they figure prominently. Here also we are faced with the realization of the immensity of the area to be covered. For our present purposes it will suffice to indicate some of the more general ways in which worship is manifested and then present a general interpretation that may be useful for understanding the particular religious character of devotion.¹⁰

2. *Sacraments*

One of the most common ways, of course, in which people experience the life of devotion is through the celebration of sacraments. Disregarding, for the time being, the sacramental life of "primitive" religion, where indeed it is difficult to distinguish what is not sacrament, we may usefully refer to a definition of sacrament supplied by Gerardus van der Leeuw.

The sacrament is a sublimation of some of the simplest and most elementary of life's functions: washing, eating and drinking, sex intercourse, gestures, speaking; and it is their sublimation because in the sacrament this vital activity is disclosed from its profoundest bases upwards to where it touches the divine.¹¹

But especially, he goes on to say, as sacrament is concerned with bringing the worshipper into communion with "Power,"¹² which by no

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

¹⁰ See *supra*, p. n. 12.

¹¹ G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestations*, 2 vols., (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938; rpt., Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1967), p. 365.

¹² For van der Leeuw's understanding of religious phenomena "Power" is the key concept. "Thus the first affirmation we can make about the object of Religion is that it is a *highly exceptional* and *extremely impressive* 'Other' "

means remains merely impersonal.¹³ Various examples may be adduced to illustrate the further point that the sacramental experience involves both nearness and distance, intimacy and remoteness; or to use Rudolph Otto's familiar terminology,¹⁴ the sacrament is in one respect *fascinans* and in another *tremendum*, but always *mysterium*.¹⁵ By way of illustration we note in passing that worship often takes place pre-eminently in the context of a sacred meal, such as the heroic feast of the Mithraists¹⁶ or the Christian Eucharist or the initiatory "meal" of the Kabīr-panthis.¹⁷ The marriage rite, also, becomes the occasion for the manifestation of Power in a form which can be worshipped. A most remarkable instance of this is to be found in the "holy marriage" of the Eleusinian Mysteries, in which the initiates and worshippers stood in the darkness while the high priest and priestess effected for them what was necessary for their salvation.¹⁸ Nor is the culmination of the *cakrapūjā* rites of the tantric tradition unrelated.

For van der Leeuw the meaning of worship through the sacramental medium is to bring sacred power out of remoteness, or a dormant phase, into direct relationship with men and women, thus bestowing on them Power, in turn either for their life or salvation. It is clear, also that the experience of communion with sacred power elicits states of devotion that we find experienced and expressed by a Hindu like Kabīr.

None is as closely related as the *Satguru*,¹⁹ no bounty equal to (his) salvation.

... Theory, and even the slightest degree of generalization, are still far remote; man remains quite content with the purely practical recognition that this Object is a departure from all that is usual and familiar; and this again is the consequence of the Power it generates" (*Ibid.*, p. 23). Though not identical with Eliade's concept of the "sacred," essentially the two have much in common.

¹³ Examples of the personification of Power may be found, for example, in the 12th chapter, entitled "The Saviour," of van der Leeuw's study, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-14 and the chapter dealing with the "Father," pp. 177-81.

¹⁴ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

¹⁵ In the present context of the word "sacrament" is intended to partake not only of the elements of the Latin *sacramentum*, an oath of allegiance, but also of the full range of the extraordinary numinous significance of the Greek term *mysterion*. See Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1958) under the appropriate headings.

¹⁶ H. Stuart Jones, "Mithraism," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, VIII, pp. 752-59.

¹⁷ K. M. Divedi, *Kabīr aur Kabīr Panth* (Prayag: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1965), pp. 196; 199.

¹⁸ P. Gardner, "Mysteries (Greek, Phrygian etc.)," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, IX, pp. 77-82.

¹⁹ Following the *Siddha(s)* and *Nāth-panthi(s)*, for Kabīr and the later *Sant* poets the role of the human *guru* as an external teacher and guide tends to

There is no benefactor to compare with Hari, no family equal to Hari's devotees.²⁰

As a corollary of the offering of a sacrament there is an action which places a person within certain area of sacred power. A person performs the action of sacramental offering in his worship but something appears or exists beyond the action.

Something different and something more is done than what is actually performed: things are manipulated to which man himself is not superior; he stands within a sacred activity and not above this. He does not govern, that is to say, but serves.²¹

So it is that all the services human beings devise for their worship, including dances and dramatic performances, or the setting provided for the sacred banquet, through sacred action, become means whereby sacred power is amassed. Indeed, in this fashion God comes to men and women while they approach Him.

3. *Festivals*

Festivals which move progressively throughout the year and through a cycle of years are, of course, another example of the organized actions which human beings devise for their worship. The day itself becomes a paradigm for the operation of the sacred; morning, noon and evening are particular temporal foci for worship, as seen, for example, in the three daily *soma* oblations of Vedic times. In addition, sometimes seven hours are set aside for monastic prayer. Further, day and night conveniently divide human experience of the sacred into units that have emotional as well as spiritual overtones. The gods of the daylight are also most unanimously thought of as benevolent, while the gods of the night are perceived as malevolent, or at the very least mysterious. The ordinary round of hours, days, years and cycles of years in which sacred time, revealed in acts of worship, always returns to a primordial moment is drastically changed, however, when historical time is perceived as indicating the sacred event. To this van der Leeuw attests.

One of the most important dates in the history of religion, therefore, was the transposition of the Israelite Nature festivals into *commemorations* of historical dates, which were simul-

be obliterated, as he merely makes manifest the true nature of "guruhood," which participates and expresses itself in the power of the divine *sabd*. Indeed, the very term *satguru*, generally translated as "true guru" or "perfect guru," implies the potency of the *guru* since *sat*, lit. "being" or "truth," refers to the Supreme *brahman*.

²⁰ *Kabir Granthāvalī* (K. Gr.) *Sākhī* (Sa.) 1:2.

²¹ G. van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 373.

taneously manifestations of power and deeds of God, so that when the ancient moon and Spring festivals of the *Passah*, which was connected with tabus, was transformed into the festival of God's redemptive deed in the exodus from Egypt, something completely new was inaugurated.²³

Sacred time, thereafter, is repeatable, but it is always remembered as having begun at a definite moment, so that though there is no intrinsic necessity of returning to the primordial moment, the existential memory of it remains for the worshipper.

Within the structure of sacrament and festival, worship occurs in the form of praise which "... is distinguished from prayer by being, not an assumption of a position before the divine will on the part of man's will, but a 'confirmation' of divine power."²³ Praise may be understood as a total offering of an emotional response to the divine without any specific intention in mind for, let us say, the daily needs of life. Rather, it is a total giving of self in an act for the sake of the divine, hence, praise is worship. Most typically, praise takes the form of song, or it may be thought of as one's work performed for the deity, as in the oft-quoted verse from the *Bhagavadgita*.

Doing My work, Intent on Me,
Devoted to Me, free from attachment,
Free from enmity to all beings
Who is so, goes to Me, son of Pandu.²⁴

Or as van der Leeuw has it:

... measured by human standards, then, the purpose of life is uselessness and superfluity; this purpose is to confess to the Lord that He is the Lord and that His name is mighty. But this implies that life finds its own fulfilment only in life's surrender, and that genuine powerfulness is attained only by relinquishing all power.²⁵

Praise may also take the form of incoherent or unintelligible utterings as in the phenomena of *glossalalia*.

For mystics praise in its most profound form is realized in the utter silence of the prayer of the heart. "Universally, mysticism seeks silence: the strength of the Power with which it deals is so great that only silence can create a 'situation' for it."²⁶ In a sense, liturgical

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 391-92.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 430.

²⁵ B. G. 11.55.

²⁶ G. van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 431. Certainly in the Hindu ideal of *tyāg*, self-surrender and genuine powerlessness are necessary for experiencing the joy of salvation as is also true in the Christian ideal of self-emptying (*kenosis*) expressed in Phil. 2:5-8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 433.

worship may also be thought of as "an approximation to silence," for the celebrant and the worshippers find set prayers and gestures allow them to keep silence while the liturgy "speaks" through them.

Further, a crucial factor in worship, as also previously noted with reference to "primitive" religions,²⁷ is the necessity of the deity or sacred power being localized. Van der Leeuw says that "the sacred must 'take place,'" and Eliade has clearly pointed out how this is possible through the "dialectic of the sacred,"²⁸ in which material forms are also forms of or habitation of the deity. When we get outside of the compass of "primitive" religion we begin to see many examples of the structure of the dialectic of the sacred. Very typically, the altar is the place where the sacred manifests itself, and it has been perceived as the table or throne of God. The altar is also the place from which the sacrifice is offered and communion descends or extends from the deity.²⁹ In many instances the altar has as its focus an image or icon, which is the temporary or permanent abode of the deity. Indeed, "the *image of the god* is a means of holding him fast, of guaranteeing his presence."³⁰ One may also distinguish between representational images and cruder or deliberately formless images, so-called fetishes, that have an aura of the dreadful about them. Indeed, the horrible and almost inhuman tends to express more adequately the "wholly other" nature of the sacred than does the human. It may be significant to note that in some instances the locus of the sacred is an empty throne which is filled only when the deity is invoked for worship.³¹ In addition, of course there is the fact that in some way

²⁷ *Supra*, p. 13.

²⁸ For an elaboration of this concept see Eliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-14; 26-30.

²⁹ "In Vedic India the gods descended into the altar. In the beginning every altar or sacred site was regarded as a privileged space, separated from the rest of the territory: in this qualitatively different space, the sacred manifested itself by a rupture of planes permitting communication among the three cosmic zones—heaven, earth, subterranean region. Now this conception was extremely widespread, existing beyond the frontiers of India and even of Asia; the symbolism of royal cities, temples, towns and, by extension, every human habitation was based upon such a valorization of the sacred space as the centre of the world and hence the site of communication with heaven and hell" [M. Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958; Bollingen Paperback, 1971), p. 220]. For an excellent discussion of the idea of the local presence of the deity or sacred power see Kees W. Bolle, "Speaking of a Place" in *Myths and Symbols: Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade*, eds. J. M. Kitagawa and C. Long (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 127-41.

³⁰ G. van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 449.

³¹ This is true not only of the altar but also of the sacred space of the *maṇḍala*. "When the site and arrangement of the *maṇḍala* itself have been already laid out it is necessary to proceed to the invocation of the Gods who must here take up their places" [G. Tucci, *The Theory and Practice of the Maṇḍala* (London: Rider & Co., 1961; Amer. ed. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1970), p. 87.]

or other all the resources of human musical, architectural and artistic expression contribute to the elaboration of the form or forms toward which worship is addressed.

Devotion as a Response to the Sacred: Inward Action

Thus far we have been discussing what in van der Leeuw's scheme is termed the "outward action" of worship and devotion. From among the great variety of topics offered we have dealt with those elements which represent best the orientation of our present concern with a complete understanding of our subject, the historical and morphological development of worship and devotion.²³ Of primary concern are the elements of this aspect of the religious life, which is termed the "inward action."

At this point a word of caution seems necessary in order that a division for the purpose of description and analysis, of the religious life of human beings into "outward action" and "inward action" should not be understood as implying the possibility of easily separating the "inner" from the "outer." Certainly, that which appears externally is closely connected with something internal, and conversely, without the outer there is no inner, or if there were it would not appear.²⁴ A sacred stone, a god, a sacrament, therefore, are experiences as precisely as fear, love and piety are, since in both cases it is for us a question of what appears, of what makes itself known by signs. Feeling does not exist without speech and gestures, nor is thought present without form and action. Even mysticism requires words to convey its experience to others, however inadequately. This fact, in turn, leads us to note that it is not permissible to contrast experience as purely "personal" with the collective element of outer action. Indeed, in a very real sense, everything religious is personal since it can never be manifest outside the parameters of existential

²³ The fact that *bhaktas* frequently condemn empty ritualism does not diminish the importance of the "outward action" of worship and devotion for this aspect of our study. Rather, it serves to point up the intrinsic mutuality of "outward" and "inward" action in true worship and devotion.

²⁴ "The underlying problem here is not only that of the relationship between essence and manifestation, but also the distinction between appearance and reality, which science and mysticism share, and which is rejected by philosophies which confine themselves to 'phenomena' as they present themselves to ordinary experience, or to ordinary language . . . Negligence of the distinction between appearance and reality prevents a rational interpretation of religious experience. . . . So we arrive at the following division. On the one hand, rational analysis, most of the sciences (in particular the physical sciences) and also religion adhere to the distinction between reality and appearance; on the other hand most contemporary philosophies and some of the sciences (in particular the behavioural sciences) reject that distinction and adhere to the study of surfaces only" [Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 60-61].

human determinateness. At the same time, nothing is ever purely "personal" since nothing whatever could be manifest were it not at some time or other understood by more than a single solitary individual.

However, in order for worship to take place at all, it must be granted that religious experiences are a possibility for human beings, and this is the orientation from which we proceed. Experience in this sense is not limited to a consideration of entirely subjective³⁴ elements, feeling states, and so on, but encompasses a totality in which outer expression, i.e., the forms we have been discussing, has a relationship with an inner realization or understanding. The two dimensions together form a whole. With respect to religious experience, from our present orientation, the Object is more important than he who experiences it.

In religious experience, however, this orientation is a presence, subsequently an encounter, and finally a union. And in this presence not he who experiences is primary, but He who is present; for He is the holy, the transcendently Powerful.³⁵

Without fear of major contradiction it may be averred that, of all the ways of speaking about the inward action of worship and devotion, the most complex and encompassing term is mysticism. Again, we turn to van der Leeuw for a fairly exhaustive phenomenological definition of mysticism.

. . . in mysticism the schism between subject and object is in principle abolished. Man refuses not only to accept the given, but he also opposes care, strangeness and foreignness, and every possibility; he needs no rites whatever, no customs, no forms; he does not speak, he no longer bestows names and no longer wishes to be called by a name: he desires only "to be silent before the Nameless."³⁶

As opposed to the outward actions of worship, which enable us easily to distinguish one sect from another or one religious level or type from another, the inward content of mysticism leads to surprising similarity in experience throughout the religions of mankind. "Mysticism . . . is international and inter-confessional; in this too it

³⁴ That scholars and scientists are generally suspicious of the "subjective" is not only due to the difficulty of checking and testing in such cases. There is also some semantic confusion. "Subjective" means at least two things: (1) "subjective" as opposed to "objective" in the sense of "objectively true" with "subjective" therefore meaning false; (2) "subjective" as relating to the "subject" which is complemented by "objective" in the sense of relating to the "object." Ours is the second sense.

³⁵ G. van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 462.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 493.

knows no limits."⁸⁷ Wherever the individual has the experience of emptying himself so that, as it were, the divine in him communicates with the greater divine or sacred reality with which he shares a common ontology, mysticism is the common experience, though it would be a mistake to reduce all mystical experiences to the same level, high or low.⁸⁸

1. *Morphology of Devotion*

Thus far we have been discussing those external activities and symbols which not only are expressions of, but also assist in the enrichment of religious experience. Before getting into a consideration of mysticism, the inward action of worship and devotion *par excellence* it will be useful to turn our attention briefly to a description of the morphology of devotion. W. Major Scott has shown how devotion appears as the "inner action" of worship, in one sense, and how it culminates at the level of mysticism. In summary Scott says, "... we may best define devotion as the inner, intimate, essential side of worship... Devotion, then, involves the deliberate movement of the will towards the object of worship."⁸⁹ Prayer is, of course, as the interior aspect of worship, an essential element in the development of religious devotion. In simple terms, prayer is the formulation that human beings make in language or through subtler states of consciousness to establish communication with the sacred. In its most obvious forms, prayer consists in acts of petition, requests for help or relief for oneself or for others and acts of praise. We have previously mentioned praise as an "outward action" of worship; however, praise also becomes an aspect of the private prayers of those religions which use collections of hymns, such as the Psalter or the Vedas, to further the process of personal communication with the sacred in the lives of individual worshippers. This is true in spite of their common use in the corporate worship life of the community. Praise becomes a means, as well, of inducing especially exalted levels of prayer. Prayers of petition and praise can lead to the peculiar prayer of mysticism, which is without words, the prayer of "quiet," or the so-called prayer of "union."

As a concomitant of the acts of worship directed towards the symbols of the divine, such as statues or powerful visual images like that

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

⁸⁸ Some of the most important contributions to an understanding of different types of mysticism have been made by R. C. Zaehner in his study entitled *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957). His treatment of mysticism has been admired and criticized, but it should not be ignored. He is highly critical of those writers who would reduce all mystical experiences to the same level, high or low and he formulates his own useful definitions of different types of mysticism.

⁸⁹ W. Major Scott, "Devotion and Devotional Literature," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, IV, p. 693.

of the goddess Kālī, an inner state exists which has been called adoration. It, too, has the tendency to become "adoration of the inconceivable" and to move over into the highest form of mystical devotion.⁴⁰ Adoration may also be a function of the technique of meditation which is used in various religions to accomplish the goal of excluding all "irrelevant" psychic material from the religious consciousness:

All the scattered interests of the self have here to be collected; there must be a deliberate and unnatural act of attention, a deliberate expelling of all discordant images from the consciousness—a hard and ungrateful task.⁴¹

Another useful category for considering the internal aspect of worship through devotion are all those various practices called "spiritual exercises." These generally are a part of the ascetic preparation for visions or states of illumination, or they may be considered as penitential offerings which have a bearing on one's future state after death. Typical among the literary documents which represent this devotional technique are the *Yoga-sūtra* of Patanjali and the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, both of which consist of detailed instructions for disciplining the imagination, will and body. The former collection of aphorisms arose out of an ancient tradition which gave great importance to the interiorization of Vedic ritual sacrifices⁴² and was linked up with the concept of *tapas*,⁴³ one of the aims of asceticism. The latter, the *Exercises*, fit into a venerable tradition going back to the ascetics of the Egyptian desert in the early centuries of our era. Aside from the more or less formal treatises, "spiritual exercises" are to be discerned in certain practical measures as well. The state of poverty, for instance, has long been considered especially beneficial for the advancement of the soul in the spiritual life. St Francis of Assisi, in the Judeo-Christian tradition of the West, was one who valued poverty as a treasure of great worth because it removed all "earthly hindrances" to the soul's free "flight to join herself to

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 694.

⁴¹ E. Underhill, *Mysticism* (London: Methuen & Co., 1930), p. 374.

⁴² "Having kindled it (the sacrificial fire) he makes it blaze, thinking herein I will perform the sacred work. Thereby he makes blaze that fire which has been established in his innermost soul." S. Br. 2.2.2.16. Translated by J. Eggeling, *The Satapatha Brahmana*, Vol. XII, *The Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882).

⁴³ "As early as the creation myths we saw how the creator of the universe prepared himself for this work by the practice of *tapas*; in which word the ancient idea of the 'heat' which serves to promote the incubation of the egg of the universe blends with the ideas of exertion, fatigue, self renunciation, by means of which the creator is transmuted (entirely or in part) into the universe which he proposes to create" [P. Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1906), Amer. ed., New York: Dover Publications 1966, p. 66. See also D. Knipe, *In the Image of Fire: Vedic Experiences of Heat* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1975), pp. 122-30.]

God Eternal." The various orders of mendicants, *sālu(s)* and *Sufi(s)* of India as well as those of Buddhist and Jain monks espouse a rigorous state of poverty as a part of the ascetic discipline of the spiritual life.

The ideal of poverty can further be translated into another realm in the disciplined deprivation of the body through fasting. Indeed, fasting is an ancient technique for inducing peculiar states of consciousness as well as for the acquisition of merit in the eyes of the deity to whom the worshipper is devoted.

It cannot be denied that, as a spiritual exercise, evoking, training, and shaping the mysterious potentialities of the soul, fasting under its various forms does effect in many instances the most fruitful spiritual developments, and justifies itself as a "gymnastic of eternity."⁴⁴

Many examples could be mentioned of the effects of fasting, which is undoubtedly one of the oldest of man's devotional methods.⁴⁵ The penitential use of fasting was certainly common in ancient Israel and India. The famous fastings of the Buddha prior to his illumination have been recorded in ancient texts and statues with striking realism.⁴⁶ In shamanic practice as well, fasting has helped a candidate find his tutelary spirit. St. Catherine of Siena and St. Catherine of Genoa also used fasting as a preparation for spiritual rapture and ecstatic experiences.

The essential mark, however, of this spiritual ecstasy would seem to be a supreme and overwhelming joy in the possession

⁴⁴ W. M. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 696.

⁴⁵ Dr Staal's "rational" approach helps shed some interesting light on the subject. "Many of the required or recommended methods for (the training of a mystic) are likely to be irrelevant, because they are religious or moral paraphernalia belonging to what may be described as superstructure. The number of these increases with the extent to which mystical experiences have been integrated into a religious cult or a philosophical or ethical tradition. But there are other methods for which there exists independent and purely secular justification.

"An example is fasting. At first sight this may seem to be primarily a meritorious form of suffering or self-sacrifice, but apart from the none too elusive effects on the mind, fasting has very definite effects on the body. Many medical experiments require an empty stomach on the part of the patient. So do experiments with drugs. The difference of the effects of drugs on a full and on an empty stomach can be measured, and has been measured fairly precisely at least in the case of animals" (Frits Staal, *op. cit.*, p. 136). Staal goes on to describe some of the specific effects which have been observed, but this would lead us too far afield.

⁴⁶ E. J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, 3rd ed., (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 70-71.

of a new knowledge gained not as a prize of toiling thought, but "in the upper school of the Holy Ghost."⁴⁷

2. *Mysticism*

All these various dimensions of prayer and devotion, considered as the interior action accompanying worship, have as their goal some form of communion with the divine and lead to one or another form of mysticism. Kabīr says, for example:

Kabīr, I have no one, I belong to no one;
He who has created this world, I am absorbed in Him.⁴⁸

The author of the article on devotion goes on to say,

Thus, if the communion of man with God is to be attained the devout soul . . . has always seen that the Divine Life, potential or actual, within him must be tended with "an intense solemnity and energy."⁴⁹

Returning to van der Leeuw's phenomenology of mysticism, we find help in seeing the great variety with which the interior action of the mystic ideal operates in the context of varying religious practices. Thus, the ascetic *yogi(s)* discipline the body and mind "almost to immateriality,"⁵⁰ as well as the Christian saints we have mentioned. We should also note, however, that some religious adepts attain to the mystical state through wine and poetry, as did the Persian *Sufi(s)*, or through "blood feasts" as among the followers of Dionysus.

But all these practise, and practise repeatedly, the loss of the self, either in self-indulgence or in fasting; here there opens out the path of deprivation of being . . . Fasting, rapture, control of breathing, contemplation, meditation, prayer—all these and yet more have only the one purpose to induce unconsciousness, to reduce the self to nothingness.⁵¹

⁴⁷ W. M. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 696.

⁴⁸ *Adi Granth*, Sloka 214.

⁴⁹ W. M. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 696.

⁵⁰ See K. Gr., Sa. 4.15; 29.12.

⁵¹ G. van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, pp. 495-96. Directly related to the point here are some very significantly suggestive sections of Prof. Willard Johnson's article, "Death and the Symbolism of Renunciant Mysticism," *Asian Religions/History of Religion 1973 Proceedings*, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, pp. 12-22. While calling for a study of "the place of renunciation in religious valuations of life," Johnson suggests one element as "a means by which man defines his relation to his own impending death. As a beginning to his discussion of the place of renunciation in religion the author proposes the term *renunciant mysticism* to designate that form of mysticism which bases itself on a central act of renunciation which I think can itself best be understood as a ritual of anticipatory dying . . . We have long misunderstood and over-

The peculiar thing about this highest state of devotion is that in spite of the fact that its end result is reduction "of the self to nothingness" and the deity himself becomes Nothingness where "void meets void," it results in the creation of beautiful images, poems, ecstatic attempts at self-examination that have entered into the world's greatest art and literature. It is the kind of paradox that we have observed in respect to the liturgy, which makes it possible for the worshipper to keep himself silent.⁵² Van der Leeuw perceptively points up this paradoxical relationship which exists between the mystical act of worship, which is the poem or the image, and the incommunicability of the *unio mystica*:

For the very essence of mysticism is silence: in the ground mute silence rules. But this silence becomes apparent only in speech, and indeed in excessive and over hasty speech, one image being annulled by another which then, like its predecessor, is outstripped and suppressed. Behind the radiant splendour of the images stands the majestic barrenness of the imageless; behind the diversified form of speech the fearful power of silence.⁵³

And so the ultimate resolution of worship, in these terms, is the extinguishment of self, of the deity and of the act of worship itself in the silence of the "imageless."

3. *Loving Devotion*

However there is one form of religious experience which grows out of worship and is perhaps always found to some degree in the life of religious devotion throughout all the stages of human religious history. It is the experience of the deity or the sacred transforming itself from the undifferentiated into the personal, a sense of the "Thou" revealing itself in all the practices we have described.

Further, this experience of a personal deity in religion leads to an elaboration of the divine as love in various religions and theologies of the world. The experience of this divine love by no means implies, however, that the total content of the religious experience is relieved of all other types of ambiguity. Once again van der Leeuw is helpful in suggesting that the essential character of sacred power is that it

looked the meaning of Asian renunciant mysticisms and have often made the renunciations they recommend over into an image of a dry and emaciated asceticism. Perhaps such an image appealed to those who were first to gain acquaintance with Asian mysticism, but today we can see that it is quite in violation of the evidence, presented in the texts themselves. It should be set aside for newer, more adequate ways of understanding the renunciant symbolism of these examples taken from among Asia's many diverse religious encounters with death and dying" (pp. 16, 19).

⁵² *Supra*, p. 21.

⁵³ G. van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 500.

should be loved even when it does not necessarily reveal itself specifically in that character. Indeed, he suggests that this very ambivalence of divine love may be the basic experience in religion; "for without the attraction there would be no fear, no celebration, indeed no religion whatever."⁵⁴ As a matter of fact, from the point of view of the development of devotion through worship, love comes to dominate, in a rather specific way, the cult and theories about it in various religious traditions.

We may assume that the attribution of love to the deity is present in many levels of man's religious experience as it seems coterminous with the extraordinary or unusual circumstances of his life. That is to say, it is not necessarily confined to specific ritual situations or to a mythic context as such. When a person is saved from danger, illness or death, or when he receives unusual benefits from his labours or his creation, he may feel a sudden sense of divine mercy as love. It seems obvious, too, that his personal relationships with parents, friends, spouse and children provide emotional parallels for the inner emotional content of the experience of divine love. In the more specifically religious context, through prayer, meditation, and formal acts of worship, there is a revelation of divine love which exists apart from other aspects of his religious experience. The way in which this has taken place in the history of religions has received some phenomenological clarification by van der Leeuw. Thus one aspect of the experience of divine love is through surrender

Surrender implies the gift of oneself; while the gift . . . is itself always to a certain extent a surrender, is therefore the outward act pertaining to the inward experience . . . it follows that love always presupposes love in return, exactly as the gift presupposes a counter-gift. Or rather, as man's gift is always a counter-gift, so too his love is always love in return.⁵⁵

The ambiguity of love as surrender has been movingly portrayed in the Old Testament book of Hosea. The prophet's erring wife is Israel, whose covenant relationship with Yahweh has been broken through acts of "religious" infidelity in pursuit of rival gods venerated by an indigenous Canaanite sect. But the meaning of the parable applies to the individual response to God's love as well. Where love exists there is the possibility of betrayal because one is surrendered. Usually, the religious consciousness perceives divine love as eternally faithful; but there are examples, as well, of a sense of the withdrawal of God's love. So in the book of Job, the suffering of that just man is in a certain sense a trial of love surrendered but seemingly unreturned. Likewise, in the experience of the Christian mystics' "dark night of the soul" in the so-called *via purgativa* is the withdrawal of God's sensible love as an element in the training of the soul.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 509.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 509.

For Hindu mystics like Kabir and Mirabai the love of God becomes the primary focus of his religious perception. The loving graciousness of God is central to Kabir's experiences.

I was left behind with the world and the Vedas as my companions; The *Satguru* met me on the way and put a Lamp in my hand.⁵⁶

At the same time, however, it is significant that for the Hindu *bhakta* the most common experience of divine love was expressed not in terms of its pleasurable aspects. Rather, it is the painful aspect of divine love withheld, the pangs of separation, known in the *bhakti* tradition as *virah*.

Surrender as a psychological dimension of the experience of love corresponds, from the human side, to the distinctive elements of worship of which we have spoken in the discussion of prayer, rituals, festivals, the use of images and so on. Thus the ancient description of the ritual act as that of *do ut des* moves up through higher planes until the material aspects of the act of worship have been transfigured. From an emphasis on asceticism and the "gymnastics" of yoga in its various early descriptions, "... the knowledge of God, the most essential of all religious values in India, is gradually transformed into a love of God; and in this change the lord, from being a teacher, a supreme *guru*, becomes more and more an all-sufficing God."⁵⁷ It may be useful, then, at this point to consider the phenomenological parallel which exists between the Judeo-Christian tradition and Hinduism in this respect.

From the perspective of Christianity, the religion of Israel was a preparation for the coming of the Christ.⁵⁸ The deity revealed himself in the Old Testament as the giver of the law, the judge, the covenanter, and so on. He also revealed himself as the God of love but his character remained ambiguous in this respect because he had never become incarnate. With the revelation of God in Jesus as the Christ, those who accepted him thus found the expectations of the Old Testament fulfilled and revalorized in a striking and powerful way. The ambiguity had been removed. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..."⁵⁹ Later elaboration of the doctrine of the Trinity clarified the way in which the Father (the God of the Old Testament) and Christ (Jesus of Nazareth) were, for the orthodox, one through the Holy Spirit. With the development of the Christian cult, it seems fair to say that the Christ became the centre of worship through whom God as a person could be addressed and, especially

⁵⁶ K. Gr., Sa. 1.14.

⁵⁷ G. van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 511. In the Hindu tradition the idea of guruhood is often so exalted that the *guru* is identified with God.

⁵⁸ If the Jews had accepted Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, it would have appeared to them in the same light as well.

⁵⁹ John 3:16.

loved. The mysticism of the Western Middle Ages and after it is particularly clear in this respect.⁶⁰ Another element, too, was important in the Christian perspective which gave its worship a new element of ambiguity characteristic of the love relationship between God and man, i.e., Jesus' promise to return to earth at the end of the world.⁶¹ But when would this event take place? The writers of the Gospels and the Epistles thought it would occur very soon,⁶² but later Christian history did not confirm their expectations. As a consequence, the Christian Church has been cast in the role of the bride (of Christ) who longs for the return of her beloved. In a real sense the suffering of the Christian Church consists primarily in the mystical deprivation of the bridegroom, the Christ. Hence, the worship of the Christian Church, and especially the Eucharist, has afforded a means by which this longing is assuaged. However, the ambiguity remains intact, depending on the Christian's capacity to transcend it.

This telescoping of the Christian experience, of course, leaves out many complex elements but it does enable us to make a comparison with the religion of love, *bhakti* in the Hindu tradition. Elements in the older forms of Indian religion, the so-called Vedic religion, were not unlike elements in the religion of the early Israelites. The latter eventually developed as aggressive monotheism but in its initial stages the role of Yahweh could be compared with that of Indra insofar as they were both deities of pastoral people, both were gods who manifested themselves in atmospheric phenomena, and so on.⁶³ Animal sacrifices were a part of the cultic ritual of both the early Israelites as well as the early Indian Aryans. Further, religious adepts also appeared among the early Indian worshippers, like the *sramanas*,⁶⁴ who sought through ascetic practices to go beyond the materialism of the Vedic cult with its emphasis on the practical, worldly benefits of the sacrifice for the sacrificer. These early sages began to teach conformity to the transcendent cosmic law of *Karma-samsāra*⁶⁵ and the direct experience of the absolute, through one's own efforts, in a way which could be seen as parallel to the efforts of the Israelite prophets to release a new energy into the religious community through their emphasis on the worthlessness of the sacrificial cult,⁶⁶ and the concomitant necessity of a change in heart, an ethical perfection, in order to enter into a proper relationship with God.⁶⁷ Of course, the

⁶⁰ It may be noted also that the Jews developed theories, as in Isaiah, which enabled them ultimately to see themselves as a community, representing God's love to the world. See Isaiah 42: 6-7; 49: 5-7; 60: 1-3; etc.

⁶¹ John 14: 1-7.

⁶² I Cor. 1:8; I Thess. 2:19; 3: 13; 4:15-18.

⁶³ M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 84-86; 93-95.

⁶⁴ See P. S. Jaini, "Sramanas: Their Conflicts with Brahmanical Society," *Chapters in Indian Civilization*, ed. J. W. Elder (Dubuque Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1970), Vol. I, pp. 39-82.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

⁶⁶ Isaiah 1:11-14; Amos 5:21-23.

⁶⁷ Isaiah 1: 16-19; Amos 5:24.

community came more and more to be the focus of religious value in Israel; whereas in India the individual gradually broke through to the heroic path of mystical self-realization.

But in India, as well, a moment arrived in which the quest for God could no longer be limited to ethical or ascetic values alone. Rather, devotion to a personal God came more and more into the centre of religious aspiration, particularly under the influence of Buddhism and the development of the cult of the *avatār* (s) of Viṣṇu. The end result was that the older Vedic religion came to hold a secondary place in the Indian consciousness while the two currents of heroic self-realization through mystical technique and self-surrender through loving devotion to a personal incarnation of Viṣṇu or to Siva and his consort vied for supremacy. The former could perhaps only serve usefully for the especially gifted spiritually and so its role has remained to the present. The *bhakti mārga*, meanwhile, has enlisted the support of the masses as well as specialists in the experience of God through love.

Now, the point we wish to make is with respect to the Indian religion of devotion, which shares a common ethos with Christianity in some respects. We have pointed out that the result of Christian worship has grown out of the need to maintain communion with a saviour who revealed that God is love but then left the world with the promise that he would return. In expectation of the fulfilment of that promise, or, rather in an effort to actualize it in the religious community now, certain measures have been taken, culminating in the Eucharist, to give the worshipper the feeling that he does enter into a loving relationship with the Christ. But, we suggested, there is a tension; the Christ has not returned and the Church suffers.

A similar tension of separation and longing exists among the devotees of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, for these manifestations of Viṣṇu performed spectacular feats of heroism and condescension which have incited man's admiration and love. The community of believers has, therefore, created a situation of expectation in which, through the actualizing of the presence of the deity in worship, through dance, poetry and ritual based on myth, the gulf which divides present, profane time from the time in which God was on earth is transcended with greater or lesser success. Another element enters in as well. On the analogy of universal human experience, as was the case in ancient Israel and in the image of the Christian Church as waiting bride, the fulfilment of divine love in human life is frustrated. In spite of everything Rāma or Kṛṣṇa remains absent. The worshipper knows that he shares some part, through the poem, offering or meditation on the divine attributes, in the life of the beloved, but he desires the complete fulfilment that comes from mutual surrender, and to this God does not often comply. In India, particularly, the relationship of the worshipper to God is compared to the plight of the young girl married in infancy, who reaches adolescence without having met her Lord—a tragic situation and typically Hindu. She longs for the meeting or that ultimate vision which would consummate the union and make her at

last a *suhāginī*, a happy wife. Thus, the theme of separation, of *virah*, a tormenting desire of the soul for the absent beloved, dominates the *bhakti marga* in Hinduism.⁶⁸

If one may draw any general conclusion, then, from the analysis which has gone before, it is that devotion encompasses a wide spectrum of religious experiences and practice. We have tended to use the words worship and devotion interchangeably, although here and there we have made a certain distinction as to external forms and internal states, because the character of the quest for God is always holistic. What is done is but a projection of what is experienced, however imperfect either aspect of devotion may be. It would seem that perhaps the most comprehensible way in which devotion presents itself is in the religions which centre around a personal deity, in which God reveals himself as loving and desirous of being loved. But we have not failed to hint at the fact that other levels of religious experience or attitudes are not incompatible with worship and devotion. Paradoxically, the gods and goddesses of horrible mien, e.g., who consume the universe with their fanged jaws, have inspired the sublime love songs of the august Sankarāchārya as well as the tender piety of the saintly Rāmakṛṣṇa.

But devotion and worship also imply a distance between human beings and the sacred, indicative of which is our observation that worship *per se* is most difficult to distinguish in "primitive" religion, where this distance is least clear. The great religions of devotions, such as Hinduism and Christianity, have found ways to give themselves almost completely to the articulation of cult and literature for the purpose of loving God without reservation. However, in them, as in certain forms of Buddhism and Sufistic Islam, the pathetic separation between the devotee and God, conceived of as lover and beloved, has inspired an anguished creativity both in spiritual perfection and of the drama of men's and women's spiritual quest through poetic utterance.

It is commonly recognized that the interaction of men and women of various faiths has brought decline to many of the formal structures and dogmas of the Christian churches and has led to a reassessment of their role and message. The renewed emphasis on religious experience and devotion which is to be found in many religious traditions today is taken both as an indication of the universality of the inner life of the spirit and as the real link between persons who may be divided by dogmas but are really united in their quest for the universal One. What we have been attempting is not merely a detached study or a descriptive essay, but an understanding of those devotional experiences which claim to give the final truth about the universe. Religious devotion is not a substitute for science; rather its conviction of the mysterious unity at the core of things may alone provide that order and continuity on which everything else depends.

⁶⁸ See the poetry of such *bhakta(s)* as Jayadeva, Mīrābai, Sūrdās, Tulsidās, etc.