

The Use of Indian Philosophical Traditions in Christian Thought†

J. G. ARAPURA*

I set forth before you the topic "The Use of Indian Philosophical Traditions in Christian Thought" in all earnestness. However, at the very outset I must clarify that I am not going to speak about the so-called indigenisation of Christianity or something called Indian theology but about Christian thought as such with no geographical or cultural boundaries in mind. Further, when I say Indian philosophy I mean its principal tradition, namely Vedanta in its non-dualist form, which I hold to be nothing but the thoroughly complete and consistently developed expression of what was once a widespread tradition known as philosophy wherever philosophy was known. It so happens not only that it was in India that this tradition found its finest expression but that, again, in India it still exists in a form which permits its essence to be recovered. Much of my philosophical work and many of my writings in recent years have concentrated on this theme. In my address to you tonight I wish to draw some of its implications for Christian thought.

From its genesis Christianity's trek was westward and consequently it was inevitable that it should have acquired certain fundamental categories of thought which we know today as distinctly western. These categories are no longer confined to Christianity as they have become basic to all modern perceptions, both religious and non-religious. The role that Christianity itself played in generating them is something that calls for extensive investigations. But that is not our task tonight in any case. Further, it would even seem that by virtue of its origin and the forces which shaped it as a particular religion, Christianity is at least predisposed to these categories. What, then, are these categories and what end do they serve? Some of them are categories of reality, others those of perceptions of that reality, and yet others those of access to that reality. There is a whole list of these but since we cannot mention all of them, let us name but the most decisively important ones, strictly as applicable to reality, its perception and access to it. These would be "person," "creation," "world," (including all that is so called whether earthly or heavenly),

† This article is a revised text of a talk given at Bishop's College, Calcutta.

* Dr Arapura is Professor of Eastern and Comparative Philosophy in McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada.

“action,” “faith,” etc. (You will notice that I have not mentioned “God” in this list because “God” is never used as a category. All these categories are employed in reference to God, the supreme reality.)

Christian thought has been limited to the circle of these categories and it regards anything that is incompatible with them, seemingly or otherwise, as anathema. As a result such notions as the personhood of God, God’s saving acts in history—and that too limited to a specified and constricted period—are treated as axiomatic foundations, no alternatives to which are entertained. Because of the exclusive emphasis on these things, some Christian thinkers in the latter day have in their enormous intellectual confusion sought affinity even with those non-religious and anti-religious secular doctrines which too are founded on these same categories. The quest on the part of some Christian activists for solidarity with Marxist movements today is a concrete example of this. Also, strange phenomena such as the doctrine of religionless Christianity and death of God theology have appeared in recent times. The latter, by the way, is a grotesque product of misunderstood Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God had indeed deeper philosophical reasons than have ever been grasped by his modern Christian imitators. Nietzsche’s nihilistic utterances are such that they must provoke the question of the transcendent by overtly forbidding it—and that too is an inevitable route and unavoidable destiny of thought.

How is it that Christian theologians—at least many of them—lend themselves to things that come and go? Is there nevertheless an intellectual link between those Christian theologians who do so and those more traditional ones who do not do so that we might ask whether the very orientations of existing Christian thought create that link? If that is the case must we not raise again the question of the foundations of Christian thought, not with a view to eliminating the temptation to fall prey to transitory movements—for those who will be tempted will be tempted—but for the sake of making well-grounded Christian thought a sheer possibility for those who are so minded?

No doubt the traditional categories of Christian thought applicable to reality, its apprehension and access to it have so far served Christianity well in a limited way. But the service in a limited way is also a disservice in a larger way. What is meant by this is that they have made it difficult to raise the questions of ultimate reality outside their circle. The inability to distinguish philosophically between ultimate reality and all that is presented to us as reality but is non-ultimate lies at the root of this.

When we speak about the foundations of Christian thought, we must raise the question of ultimate reality along with the question of Christ. No doubt, to propose that Christian thought can proceed from the former alone without taking account of the latter should be deemed entirely inauthentic. Certainly we are not aiming at some

logical absurdity such as a Christian thought without Christ, similar to the absurdity of a theology without God or a Christianity without religion that some have recently produced. Christians will be right in maintaining that the place of Christ is not negotiable in anything that claims to be Christian thought. But the key question is indeed raised by the word "place," for that calls for the thinking of that wherein something is placed as also of that which is placed.

Here is the great parting between the thought of reality in terms of the circle of categories we have mentioned, particularly in terms of history, and the thought of reality that is not in terms of it. Normally, in Christian thought history is taken to be the place. But we are now asking about placing that which is to be placed in ultimate reality rather than in history or in the world of man or in the sphere of action, even if action is construed as that of God.

There is a problem about placing the fact of Jesus Christ or to put it in Paul Tillich's language "the event of Jesus as the Christ" in history because it comes to us as being already placed there. And it is only because it comes to us as placed in history (in the sense of mankind's consciousness) that there is a problem. The problem is not one of history but of a philosophy that implicitly asks the question of ultimate reality but is nevertheless able and willing to take this powerful fact of history as one of unconditional importance. Philosophy of this kind may expose itself to any fact without depending upon it but the difference here is that Christianity stakes itself on this particular fact in a way which is without parallel anywhere.

Of course the historiographer primarily wants to determine the outward veracity of this fact and all that goes with it through scientific research, and that is his privilege. But whatever result he achieves has no effect on philosophy as it cannot be interested in receiving answers to questions it does not ask. Philosophy takes the reigning fact of an enormous segment of mankind's religious life just as it finds it and then it sets for itself the task of integrating it into its understanding of ultimate reality in the quest of which it is engaged at the same time and in the same manner.

Here one must start with both ultimate reality and the fact to be integrated simultaneously. There is no question of succession of either one after the other. Here the use of Indian philosophical traditions, principally Vedanta in its non-dualistic form, becomes viable. In fact one finds nothing better for this task. For it has been the unique dispensation of Indian philosophy to penetrate the question of ultimate reality with unparalleled power, and as to this there is no doubt. Is that enormous asset to be thrown away? And with it we may even bring back to life all similar traditions of the world which have in the past pondered deeply on the same question but now have been pushed aside. The Christian thinker may raise the question of ultimate reality in the vedantic fashion and at the

same time, and within that question itself, ask about the meaning of Jesus Christ.

No doubt the fact to be integrated with the understanding of ultimate reality is not inherent in the thought of ultimate reality. Nor can it be derived through some deductive logic. The attempt to derive it that way even through the use of the *logos* would be just as erroneous as the inductive method which largely dominates much of present day Christian theology. In this respect I am one with Karl Barth, although not for his reasons.

The fact of Jesus Christ, or in other words "the event of Jesus as the Christ," cannot *a priori* be named the *logos* because it is something presented by history, that is to say the religious consciousness of a huge segment of humanity. The statement of the Fourth Gospel "The *logos* became flesh" appears to be the first ever effort to integrate this fact with philosophy's understanding of ultimate reality through the prevailing doctrine of the *logos*. But the contingency of this fact was not to be set aside; it had to be acknowledged and even celebrated by the use of the very verb "became" (*egeneto*). It is even possible that the fact could be taken in such a way that it eliminates all prospect of its philosophical integration. From that point on, if at all it addresses philosophy, it can do so only as a voice from outside. This is what has marred most Christian efforts to achieve philosophy. For such an address is different from the address from within, which is the only one that philosophy can heed. Even the philosopher who wrote the Gospel which we call the Fourth knew this and hence he introduced the *logos* (*vak* in the Indian tradition), and introduced also that which always attends it, namely "light" (*jyotih* in the Indian tradition).

These are indeed the means of integrating a supremely principal fact of religious history with the understanding of ultimate reality. But if we hold out for the fact as such there will be no integration. For integration in this respect calls for internalisation of the fact in philosophy. And this call in turn is the ground of interpretation. In fact interpretation is internalisation and is also integration. The demand for integration calls for internalisation which in turn calls for interpretation.

For the sake of these ends fact has to be metamorphosed into truth, for indeed fact cannot be internalised unless it dies and is raised again as truth. Death reigns in the facticity of fact, which is mortal. So what we have encountered once as fact will have to be encountered again as truth, but shorn of its mortal facticity.

Fact is the object, the *ob-jectum*, what is out there as itself, in its own right. When it is grasped as truth it is the subject, the *sub-jectum*, the *hupokeimenon*, or what underlies the object marked by an essential disposition to be internalised *according to* what is ultimately real. This is all there is to "subject" and "object," which refer to one and the same thing in every instance. The common

notion that *subject* is what is in here within, contrasted with *object*, what is out there, has no grounds at all.

S. Kierkegaard is celebrated for, among other things, his statement "subjectivity is truth." We can use that formulation in our discussion too, although not strictly in Kierkegaard's meaning. We say then truth is fact internalised in philosophy, it being understood that philosophy in turn is what is internalised in the self of the thinker (or Self as it will eventually turn out to be). In any case Kierkegaard saw the need for this double internalisation (with no understanding, however, of the Self). Ultimate reality is mystery, in Sanskrit *rahasyam* or *guhya*m. There are no facts whatsoever to indicate it. For that reason, in raising the question of ultimate reality thought is on its own and even the self of the thinker must dissolve into something with which it can be neither internally nor externally related and hence expressible only in the language of identity (of self=Self). But then there are also facts and wonderful facts. A wonderful fact, in the language of the Bhagavadgītā, *āścaryam*, is a fact which is on the point of metamorphosis into truth, because it evokes wonder. But metamorphosis is possible only by leading it to the mystery of ultimate reality. The mystery of ultimate reality, however, is even beyond wonderful facts.

As the Bhagavadgītā says, one encounters (the fact) as wonderful, another speaks of it as wonderful and yet another hears it as wonderful (*āścaryavat paśyati kaścitenam, āścaryavat vadati tathai'va cānyaḥ, āścaryavat anyañ śruṇōti*). Yet even after hearing (*śrutvā'pi*) no one really grasps it (*na gṛhṇati kaścanaḥ*). Likewise, the Upaniṣadic analysis of the word *satyam* (truth) into the three syllables *sa ti yam* shows that from the middle we must go towards the two ends in order to grasp it.

If one were to say that the incomprehensible must be comprehended, that statement would be either a self-contradictory injunction or an empty promise to be fulfilled at a later moment as in a "mystery" novel. What it really means is, that is full comprehension which is the holding to heart of that which is beyond any positive comprehension while undeterredly dwelling in it. That is the soul's highest worship, and it is called by the name gnosis or *jnāna*. All other kinds of worship, whether by devotion (*bhakti*) or moral exertion (*karma*) must lead the way to this highest worship to which the knowers (or shall we say thinkers?) are called.

The one hope that there is for placing the fact of Christ or the event of Jesus as the Christ in the understanding of ultimate reality is to grasp it as mystery in the fashion we have disclosed, that is by approaching it as truth internalised. The question arises, quite rightly, as to how this truth stands in its relation to all other truths? Christians have a tremendous stake in the uniqueness of the fact of Jesus Christ and that too is quite right. Does it have to be surrendered? Not at all. What is to be given up in the interest of

actually standing guard upon uniqueness is the exclusivity with which it is unfortunately equated. Exclusivity is not the same as uniqueness, and, on the contrary, it may sometimes become the negation of uniqueness. When one moves from the realm of fact to that of truth, uniqueness devoid of exclusivity becomes a real possibility.

Uniqueness is the participation of an unconditional fact in what is but one, acquiring thereby the character of truth. Participation, by philological definition, is the facilitation of that by which something shows itself in something else. When the something is the One the something else is the fact which shows all to the something. In such participation, the division between universality and particularity is overcome and the triumph over that division is itself the foremost gift of uniqueness. And how long has Christian theology suffered from the fear of losing the particularity of what it holds to be unconditional fact! What is really required is the restoration of uniqueness and not the stubborn and blind affirmation of particularity residing in the facticity of fact.

That in which the unconditional fact participates is the One, which is how Vedanta understands ultimate reality. And Vedanta calls it *Brahman*. The word "Brahman" is not at issue as according to the Upaniṣads it is only a name. And it is declared, "What is but a name is merely an (apparent) modification (of the One) rooted merely in language (*vācārambhaṇam vikāro nāmadheyam*)."

A wonderful fact is that which is at the point of being metamorphosed into truth and in itself carries that potentiality. And most of all it is always something given, not man-made. As such it is capable of being integrated into ultimate reality by being internalised in philosophy. Its at-home-ness in thought is the test of its authenticity. This is the reason why the would-be "wonderful facts" of man-made new religious movements are not wonderful facts at all. They cannot be integrated into ultimate reality by being internalised in philosophy and they are not at home in thought. In them there is no participation in the One and hence they are the very antithesis of what is unique.

What at last is to be understood by "the use of Indian philosophical tradition in Christian thought"? The meaning has already been all but explicitly presented. It will also be noticed that the phrase employed is "in Christian thought" rather than "for Christian thought." That is because we intend Indian philosophy to be, not a ladder to be kicked off, but something continually operative within Christian thought.

It is clear that I am speaking for a thorough-going philosophical expression of Christianity, which I must submit in the entire history of Christianity has not been fully achieved. The circle of categories in which Christianity has been bound has been a great liability and so the wonderful fact which it no doubt also has carried with it—for which thanks must certainly be given—could so far not be fully placed philosophically in an unfettered understanding of ultimate reality.

Personal and corporate piety (*bhakti*), and action (*karma*), the latter originally of charity but now extended through dialectical processes to what is no longer simple charity, have been the dominant modes of Christianity's spiritual expression. We are asking, "How about gnosis (*jñāna*)?" And we are not talking about something called *jñāna-mārga* or the path of knowledge so called. The question of path (*mārga*) is a complex one, and the term is never used *philosophically* in the Indian tradition. *Jñāna-mārga* is a derivative with little philosophical status. We are speaking of *jñāna* or gnosis as such and of its being the basis of thought.

In the world today, Christian world necessarily included, we hear much talk denigrating thought and indeed in that sense philosophy too. There is a fear that philosophy as such is not "relevant." If philosophy is to be entertained at all it must be merely instrumental to bringing about cherished social goals. This is nothing entirely new but this change has been spearheaded by a variety of movements, most importantly Marxism and no doubt also by what is ideologically on the other side, which is marked by the spirit of capitalism and by what used to be unfettered faith in technology, which incidentally is the more rampant today in countries where technology is still new and young and where the general spirit is marked by some traditional malaise.

There is too much talk about action as only that which is supposed to be "relevant." There is a spiritual restlessness everywhere and people turn to all kinds of actions and activist ideologies, which too as we have observed earlier are the outcome of a certain circle of categories which originally bound Christianity itself. To this extent there is a tendency to turn away with scorn from a clearly non-active philosophy like Vedanta, and it is present as much among Hindus as among Christians.

Now, with no intention to rebuke history, we may ask, "How has the world come to this pass?" This tremendous fear of time, this despair about man's fate in the world, what are their causes? Historicity is its own undoing. When enthusiasts prescribe more varieties of action to cure the ills, which, we argue, are the outcome of spiritual phenomena in which action has been unrestrained, we are reminded of a remark made by a German philosopher about psychiatry: "It is the disease which pretends to be the cure." Is it not time that we turned to a critique of history-and-action-oriented thinking? It is here that Vedanta and what it represents—Platonism in the West, for example—appears to be more truly relevant. Of course we are not going to avert one fate in this world, which is probably unavoidable, thanks to the extreme foolishness of universal activism, including that of the theologians. The question now is how do we *transcend* this fate, and transcend it in thought? The answer is clear.