

# The Lost Veda and the Unknown Christ

ARVIND SHARMA\*

## I

Hinduism has, since ancient times,<sup>1</sup> developed the doctrine of the lost Veda according to which the entire Vedic corpus is no longer available to the world.<sup>2</sup> Christianity has developed, or at least placed new emphasis on, the doctrine that, especially in recent times,<sup>3</sup> Jesus Christ has been at work *incognito* among the members of other religions.<sup>4</sup> On the face of it these two ideas do not seem to have anything in common. It is the purpose of this paper to show that, notwithstanding their obvious dissimilarity smacking of an artificial juxtaposition of two different concepts, they possess an underlying commonality.

## II

To see this it is helpful, at the very outset, to indicate that both of these concepts seem to be designed to cope with the same problem. The problem is: how does one reconcile the claim of a Revelation to universality when some item of the same universe with which the Revelation deals seems to lie obviously outside that Revelation.

\* Dr Sharma is Lecturer in Indian Religions at the University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Australia.

<sup>1</sup> See Haridas Bhattacharyya, ed., *The Cultural History of India*, Vol. I (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1958), p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., "Vedic rites include *śrauta* and *smārta karma*. *Śrauta karmas* are those rites which are ordained in the *śruti*. *Smārta karmas* are those which are learned from the *smṛtis* but which are supposed to have been enjoined by *śruti* text lost to us" (T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism* [Bombay: Chetana Ltd., 1960], p. 40).

<sup>3</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, "The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue", in John Hick, ed., *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth-Claims* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> C. Murray Rogers, "Hindu and Christian—A Moment Breaks," in Herbert Jai Singh, ed., *Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Bangalore: The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1967), p. 116.

For this "extraneous"<sup>5</sup> of the unincluded item constitutes a standing challenge to the claim of a Revelation to universality.

The excluded item thus poses a special problem: it must either be *rejected*<sup>6</sup> or included. How is it, however, to be included if the dimensions of the existing Revelation have been defined?

Two specific examples may be cited. The Hindu, at a certain stage in the history of Hinduism, may have inclined to the view that ritual (*kalpa*) is that which is laid down or revealed in the Vedas. At the same time, he may have observed some rituals in operation in contemporary society which are *not* enjoined in the Vedas. Now what is going to be his attitude towards those rituals? He can either reject them outright as false, or merely regard them as un-Vedic. But then he is trained to regard the whole pattern of Hindu life as based on the Vedas, rooted in the Vedas or at least consistent with the Vedas, and inasmuch as these unaccounted for rituals are a part of Hindu life, or *his* Hindu life, one cannot merely regard them as un-Vedic and stop there, for this compromises his Vedism—the belief that life is or should be organised totally in accordance with the Vedas.<sup>7</sup>

The way out of this impasse could then be found through a fiction—the comfortable or comforting fiction<sup>8</sup> that, although the rites being practised are not found in the existing *śruti*, they can be "supposed to have been enjoined by *śruti* text lost to us."<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, the Christian is brought up on the belief that spiritual life, truly, can only be found in Jesus Christ. So long as the various cultures flourished in comparative isolation this belief did not face any serious challenge. Other non-Christian religions, inasmuch as one was aware of their existence, could be dismissed as "pagan" or untrue religions. The contemporary world, however, has brought the various religions to each other's door and now the Christian finds that it is only blindness which can prevent him from seeing that the followers of other religions also bear authentic witness to God in some sense. But they are not Christian: how then is their obvious spirituality to be reconciled with the belief that the only true spiritual life is in Jesus Christ?

<sup>5</sup> The word "extraneous" has been deliberately used in an effort to avoid the use of the word "otherness." So long as the unincluded item is regarded as "other" it can always be rejected as false and hence its non-inclusion in a universal Revelation can be explained away. The problem comes into existence when the excluded item is not rejected as the "other" but is recognised as authentic, and additive.

<sup>6</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1965), Chapter I.

<sup>8</sup> The word is used here non-pejoratively.

<sup>9</sup> T. M. P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p.40, fn. 1.

This reconciliation is effected by a comfortable fiction, that the people are bearing witness to Jesus Christ without knowing it, that, for instance, "the Hindu may be regarded as an 'anonymous Christian.'"<sup>10</sup> And thus a parallel emerges between the Hindu doctrine of the lost Veda and the Christian doctrine of the Unknown Christ."<sup>11</sup>

### III

It may be pointed out, however, that these are not the only responses to the problem available within the tradition. Not only are other responses available, indeed, they have also been tried.

Let the Hindu case be examined first. Even more than a repository of ritual or *karma*, the Hindu tradition looks upon the Vedas as the repository of spiritual knowledge or *jñāna*.<sup>12</sup> Now then, if the Hindu tradition encounters a piece of impressive spiritual insight how does it reconcile it with or relate it to the Vedas? It could, of course, regard it as based on a lost Veda, but in this situation it has usually chosen to use two other options. One has been to maintain that both the Vedas and the non-Vedic text constitute a genuine revelation so that it is not a question of choosing between either the Vedas or the extra-Vedic text but of regarding both the Vedas and the extra-Vedic texts as Revelation. Thus one observes the development of the doctrine of *ubhayavedānta*<sup>13</sup> in Śrīvaiṣṇavism.<sup>14</sup> The other has been to argue that if the Vedas=Revelation, then any Revelation=Veda! Support for this position can be adduced from some Vedic texts themselves, for as the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa says, "The Vedas

<sup>10</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> This expression must be understood carefully. It is part of a title of a book: *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: 1964) by Prof. R. Panikkar. Although I have used the expression because it expresses my point well, it should be noted that the position developed by Prof. R. Panikkar in the book is somewhat different from the one I have presented under the phrase "Unknown Christ" borrowed from the title to the book, as will become clear soon. The Christian position developed in this section is represented by such books as E. Hillman, *The Wider Ecumenism: Anonymous Christianity and the Church* (London: 1968) and J. Neuner (ed.), *Christian Revelation and World Religions* (London: 1967).

<sup>12</sup> See T. M. P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> T. M. P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to observe that even the *this or that* approach too has been used in Hinduism but the *or* then stands not for a radical choice between the two but reflects the view that as both are on par one can avail oneself of either! Or that one who chooses one gets at the essence of the other as well, because they are the same. Hence the verse, well-known in Śaiva circles that "the Veda is the cow; its milk is the true *āgama*; and Tamil sung by the four is the ghee extracted from it; and the virtue of the Tamil work, full of wisdom (*bodham*) of Meykaṇḍār of the celebrated (city of) Veṅṅai is the fine task of the ghee" (see T. M. P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p. 168).

are endless”<sup>15</sup> Its practical application can be seen in the efforts by Dārā Shukoh to integrate the Vedic and Qur’anic revelations<sup>16</sup> and Rāmākṛṣṇa’s acceptance of the scriptures of all the other religions.<sup>17</sup>

We may now turn to Christianity. One finds these two options also being used in Christianity when it encounters other religious authenticities but in a lower key because of its deep commitment to the Christian dogma that salvation can be found only through Christ. The “this *and* that” approach has been adopted by Prof. Raymond Panikkar in his discussion of the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity when he remarks :

The relationship between Hinduism and Christianity finds in the linking conjunction “and” a more or less adequate expression, but this “and” does not express relationships such as falsehood—truth, darkness—light, sin—sanctity, damnation—salvation, and similar pairs. One tends to associate it with such pairs as potency—act, seed—fruit, forerunner—real presence, symbol—reality, desire—accomplishment, allegory—thing-in-itself, and so on; or...there is a certain relationship between belonging to the Christian dynamism of death and resurrection.<sup>18</sup>

The other approach, of regarding the Bible as Revelation and therefore all Revelation as Bible again would perhaps compromise the Christian claim too much. But it is at least now being asked: Is the Bhagavadgītā the Word of God?<sup>19</sup> Whether or not this is accepted theologically, at least linguistically it is well-known that the Bhagavadgītā is freely referred to as the Bible of the Hindus.

<sup>15</sup> Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa Kāthaka I. xi. 4: *ānanta vaivedāh.*

<sup>16</sup> See Yohanan Friedmann, “Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 95, No. 2, April-June, 1975, p. 217.

<sup>17</sup> Swami Sharadananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1952) p. 156, etc.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Eric J. Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p. 94, note 29. In keeping with the Christian commitment to the ultimacy of its own dogma, however, one notes that Prof. Panikkar seems to be using the conjunction “and” (*ca* in Sanskrit) in a sense which subordinates one of the members to another somewhat (a similar use of *ca* being referred to as *anvācaya* in Sanskrit vide Vaman Shivram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1965] p. 423).

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, “Is the Bhagavadgītā the Word of God.” in John Hick, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 111.

#### IV

It is clear, therefore, that the doctrines of the Lost Veda in Hinduism and the Unknown Christ in Christianity are comparable doctrines, using one option out of several in a creative endeavour to reconcile other religious authenticities with their own.