

A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO HINDU BELIEFS

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THE HINDU scriptures, the Vedas, are a compendium of spiritual wisdom as it developed in India through many centuries, starting well in advance of the beginning of the first millennium before Christ. Orthodox Hindus hold them to be divinely revealed. There is a vast difference, however, between these scriptures and the Bible. They are not a history of God's continuing relations with men, but rather the fascinating record of certain men's reaching out for God.¹

The Vedas are four in number. Each section contains (1) a part made up of hymns and instructions about religious rituals, and (2) a part made up of profound teachings about God's nature and the soul's close relationship to Him. These two parts of each Veda are known as the *karmakanda* and *jnanakanda*, the "ritual part" and "knowledge part."

The *karmakanda*, which comprises by far the greater portion of the Vedas, preserves the hymns to be recited during the Vedic sacrifices; it includes, as well, detailed descriptions of the rites that "householders" (laymen) were required to perform, with the help of priests, to meet the various contingencies of daily life or attain certain material or spiritual ends. These Vedic sacrifices have long since fallen into disuse. The real basis of modern Hinduism² is the comparatively smaller *jnanakanda*, comprising the Upanishads or books of spiritual instruction, which are placed at the end of the "ritual part" of each of the four Vedas. The teachings of the Upanishads and the later commentaries on them by scholastic philosophers are what is popularly meant by the term "Hindu philosophy," and the name of this philoso-

¹ What there is of history in the Hindu religious tradition is to be found in lesser sacred books, namely, the puranas and the epics; these are really mythological accounts embodying occasional glimpses of ancient history, and they serve to illustrate the "eternal truths" contained in "revealed" scripture.

² In using the word "Hinduism" we must be cautious; it is difficult to state, in terms that a Westerner can understand, just what Hinduism is. Here I use the phrase "modern Hinduism" in contradistinction to "orthodox Hinduism" of the devotional sects, which developed after Vedic times and is still very much alive.

phy is Vedanta, which means both the end and the conclusion of the Vedas.³

Also popularly known as Vedanta is the unique synthesis of the teachings of the various schools of Vedanta and of the various devotional sects made by the saint or sage Ramakrishna (1836–86 A.D.) and expounded by his foremost disciple Vivekananda (1863–1902 A.D.). Though there are several other modern interpretations of the body of Hindu belief, this synthesis represents what is most typical and viable in it. Two of the basic dogmas of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, based of course on the Upanishads, are (1) the absolute non-duality of the Godhead and (2) the essential divinity of the soul. Closely following these two dogmas in importance is the doctrine known as the “harmony of religions,” namely, that all great religions must be accepted as valid (not merely tolerated as less evolved faiths) because each if sincerely practiced leads to communion with God.

In the light of recent developments in the Christian world, this last teaching has a surprisingly familiar ring. It cannot be said to owe anything to the Western spirit of “ecumenism,” however, for its first expression comes in the earliest of the Hindu scriptures, the Rig-Veda which reached its final form *ca.* 1000 B.C. There it is said: “Truth is one: sages give it differing names.” Religious Hindus could hardly be blamed today if they should smile at current efforts to establish a conversation between Christianity and non-Christian religions. Though they would no doubt be too charitable to criticize, they would be justified in thinking such efforts long overdue.

And yet, obviously, the two approaches cannot simply be equated. Indeed, this very dogma of the “harmony of religions” was one of the contributing causes of my own realization that I—formerly a Hindu monk of the Ramakrishna Order—was a Christian and not a Hindu. What modern Hindus really mean, I gradually concluded, when they say that all religions are valid ways to God is something like this: “All religions (as we understand them) are valid because they lead to the experience of God (as we define Him).” In a word, they were disregarding as irrelevant those elements of other religions that disagreed

³ There are actually six separate schools of Hindu philosophy, all based on the Vedas in one or both of their major parts.

with their own beliefs and were defining God on the authority of scriptures whose divine inspiration was not recognized by other faiths. The idea of acceptance was a noble one, but acceptance of this sort was not quite as easy as it appeared. If you looked hard enough—it occurred to me—masked under an apparent inclusiveness you found a real exclusiveness.⁴

Christians, too, are not entirely blameless in this regard. It is their professed hope that through conversation with non-Christian religions not only may non-Christians arrive at a fuller appreciation of the one true God, but Christians may arrive at a fuller appreciation of that same God's providence in revealing some of His truths to peoples outside the faith. Yet they are in danger of making in reverse the same mistake that Hindus seem to have made in the past. They are trying to enter upon a conversation without sufficiently recognizing where Hindu belief sees eye to eye with, anticipates, perhaps even illuminates, Christian belief.

An attempt to establish a conversation with the Hindus is, in fact, already under way. Many Catholics know the name of the Benedictine monk Dom Bede Griffiths, who wrote of his conversion to Catholicism in *The Golden String*. For some years this extraordinary man has been living at the monastery Kurisumala Ashram, in South India, a life as close to that of a traditional Hindu sannyasi or monk as it is possible for a Christian monk to live. As a result, he has developed certain valuable insights into what Christianity has to offer India, and what Indian spirituality has to offer Christianity.

During the past decade, Dom Bede has published a number of articles on the encounter between Christianity and Hinduism—many of them in *Commonweal*. Two recent ones have come to my notice. The first of these, "Indian Spirituality and the Eucharist," is one of seven chapters of a small pamphlet collection of essays by Indian Catholic scholars, *India and the Eucharist*, which appeared about the time of the Eucharistic Congress held in Bombay late in 1964. The other, "Dialogue with Hinduism," was published in the *New Blackfriars* for April

⁴ I hope that I am not being unfair; it is possible that my own approach to the doctrine as a believing Hindu was untypical. But I believe my conclusion to have been just. At all events, I myself have been guilty in the past of holding that Hinduism was, after all, the "best" of religions, because it alone recognized that *all* were equally valid for reaching God!

1965 and reprinted in the *Catholic Mind* for June. Both essays deal with the important currents in Hindu religious thought, some of the similarities between Christianity and Hinduism and some of their differences, and how Hinduism can be fulfilled through acceptance of Christ as the Saviour.

Dom Bede's analysis makes it relatively easy for the Westerner to obtain a preliminary understanding of a very complicated system—or complex of systems—of religious thought and practice. My own discussion of a valid Christian approach to Hindu beliefs in this article will make use of this analysis. If I am to be honest to my own understanding of modern Hinduism, however, I must take issue with him on several points. In our conversation with Hindu belief, we must make sure that what we as Christians say about the religion does not appear inaccurate to informed Hindus—those for whom such a conversation can have most meaning at the present time. If we wish to carry on a really two-way conversation with believing Hindus, and not merely talk for our own edification, our best course will be to try to understand the other religion *as that religion understands itself*.

THE NONDUALISTIC TRADITION

Hindu religious thought and practice, in Dom Bede's analysis, include two fundamental strands: the "mystical" and the "devotional" (equivalents of the Hindu terms *jnana* and *bhakti*).⁵ The first embodies the philosophical teachings of the Upanishads (completed by at least the sixth century B.C.), as commented on and expanded by Shankara. It is the Upanishads that first taught the essential identity of the individual soul (*atman*) and the Godhead (*Brahman*): *Tat tvam asi*, "That thou art." This Godhead is also called *Satchidananda* (i.e., *Sat* or Absolute Being, *Chit* or Absolute Knowledge, and *Ananda* or Absolute Bliss—which are held to be not attributes of the Godhead, but its very self). Out of the Upanishads and the related teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita and the Brahma Sutras, a work harmonizing the

⁵ These two terms correspond to two of the famous yogas or "paths" in Hinduism, *jnanayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*. Hindus usually include two others: the "active" and the "psychic," corresponding to the terms *karmayoga* and *rajayoga*. Since these latter are mostly practiced in conjunction with the other two, it is convenient to accept Dom Bede's division. Besides, this interpretation corresponds neatly to the twofold aspect of the Vedas we have already noted: the "ritual part" and the "knowledge part."

Upanishads, the South Indian philosopher and mystic Shankara (788–820 A.D.) developed a philosophical system that is the chief expression of Advaita or nondualistic Vedanta. In his commentaries on these three works, all of which are held to be canonical works because they either are or are based on scripture, he maintained that all the distinctions in the world—even that between creature and Creator—are “unreal.”⁶ They are appearances that disappear when reality itself is experienced by the individual. The God of this school of philosophy is defined as impersonal (or more exactly, perhaps, suprapersonal); of this supreme reality, the personal God is considered to be a lower manifestation—somewhat after the manner of Gnosticism. The impersonal God is said, however, to be both immanent and transcendent. And the final end of the Advaita Vedanta discipline is realization (i.e., experience) of the essential oneness of the individual soul and the Godhead. Yet Shankara himself, despite the rarefied philosophical system he elaborated—one of the profoundest in the history of philosophy—worshiped as a devotee the Divine Mother and the Lord Krishna.

One of the most characteristic and important concepts of the nondualistic philosophy of Shankara (aside from the two central ones concerned with the nature of God and of the soul) is that of *maya*. The term *maya* indicates the inexplicable power inherent in God that makes the world appear to be separate from God. One important school of nondualism, that of the philosopher Gaudapada (teacher of Shankara’s teacher), following a rigorous logic, holds that there is indeed no such thing as *maya*; there never was any world different from God, or any worshiper in bondage to seek the freedom of union. But Shankara makes an allowance for human limitations and admits the contingent reality of the “relative” world. According to him, *maya* is merely a name for our seeing or experiencing the world as something absolute in itself rather than as depending for its reality on the reality of God.⁷

⁶ When a Hindu philosopher uses the term “real,” he indicates something that never changes; in the present instance, “ultimately unreal” might be a more precise term.

⁷ It must be remembered that *maya* can be spoken of only from the relative or temporal point of view; it is an attempt to explain multiplicity when one sees multiplicity. How God, who is nondual and indefinable reality, can appear as the universe is something, Shankara says, that can never be explained. That God is nondual and “impersonal” reality is known not only from the experience of the individual mystic, but from the evidence of revealed scripture (itself a record, in its philosophical parts, of the spiritual experiences of illumined seers) and of reason.

A related doctrine is that of cosmic cycles (which, in his very general studies, Dom Bede does not discuss). According to the Vedas, the material world has no beginning. The world process is not simply a progression from a unique creation to a unique consummation in a day of judgment. The material universe continuously appears and disappears—after tremendously long periods of time—in a perfect rhythm, in relation to the life experience of the first-born deity, or Cosmic Mind.⁸ When this deity, who is endowed with infinite powers, awakes, the material universe comes into being out of an unmanifested or potential state in which forms are not yet evolved; when he goes to sleep, a cosmic dissolution ensues, and all thoughts, all desires, remain in a potential state—just as when a human being falls asleep. There is another sort of dissolution at the end of the Cosmic Mind's life span,⁹ at which time the universe enters on a period of nonmanifestation equal in length to that of the deity's lifetime. This being, it should be noted, is simply a soul who has arrived at his exalted position as a result of earning an exceedingly great amount of merit through sacrifice and pious living. At the end of his lifetime, therefore, he is liberated from limited existence and another soul takes his place.

The waking state of the Cosmic Mind is known as Brahma, the Creator. Brahma does not, however, "create" anything out of a void, since the material of the world of the previous great cycle is already there in unmanifested form.¹⁰ He is said to "project" the universe out of himself. It is through the act of his will that the universe is thus projected in accord with the order of the preceding cycle of creation.¹¹

There are thus two sorts of creation, as it were: the timeless phenomenon of *maya*, by which the indefinable nondual Godhead or impersonal Brahman appears as the personal God and the multiple world of matter and souls, and another phenomenon, related to time, by which the personal God, or Brahma, projects the universe out of "nonexistence."¹²

⁸ The deity, sometimes known as Hiranyagarbha, is said to be the first manifestation in each cycle, through the working of *maya*, of ultimate reality itself.

⁹ It is known as a "great cycle," and is said to endure something like four billion years.

¹⁰ Sometimes, in philosophical writings—and in the Upanishads—it is given the technical name of *asat*, "nonexistence."

¹¹ The Vedantic doctrine of cycles and creation explains in a more scientific way what the stories in the puranas about Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—all known as mythology—describe for the man of ordinary intelligence.

¹² Hindus sometimes profess to see here a parallel with the Christian conception of

There is one difference here between the Christian and the Hindu conceptions of creation that appears to be crucial. The objective purposelessness of the Hindu cyclic creation is apparent in that the forms and actions of each great cycle are said to be sheer repetitions¹³ of those of the previous one. This in itself sets the Hindu doctrine off from the Christian belief about the creation as described in the Old Testament. Yet this much of subjective purpose can be found in the idea of cyclic creation: it provides a means—so the explanation goes—for individual souls to escape from a state of mind that sees multiplicity as something self-sustaining, and to find that what sustains all things, including their own existence, is the reality of God. (Here it may be noted that Hindus would be more likely to describe the goal of life as finding one's true identity in God rather than as becoming "absorbed" in God.) Thus, although this doctrine of creation differs vastly in expression from the Christian doctrine, it may well be studied seriously for what insights it offers, and not merely set aside as meaningless in that it differs outwardly from the Church's position.¹⁴

Closely related to this concept of cycles is the doctrine of *karma* (action and the fruits of action) and rebirth. Souls in the relative, that is, contingent or finite, world, Hindus believe, perform virtuous or wicked actions and as a result are born into higher or lower bodies,

"creation out of nothing"; but since the term "nonexistence" refers to a fine state of matter, it would appear more justifiable to see in the idea of the mysterious appearance, through *maya*, of the personal God (and the universe He supports) from the impersonal an attempt to state that the universe was created out of nothing, and in the cyclic projection of the universe by Brahma an approximation of the creation of the world by a personal God by an act of will. Interestingly, in the Hindu conception, the first to be created in the material order is not light but sound.

¹³ Some modern Hindus contend that there is at least a slight difference between cycles, but the best-established view seems to be that the content of the cyclic repetitions (representing the life span of Brahma) are absolutely identical. It should be remembered that it is the forms and events that are said to be identical, and not the souls inhabiting living bodies, which merely enter into them and into the web of events in order to fulfil their destiny and become liberated from *samsara* or the "round of rebirth."

¹⁴ There is, it would appear, no real conflict with Christian teaching in the matter of absence of a definite beginning of the material world in time. The Hindu view seems, after all, to be simply a way of saying that before God's creative act there was neither matter nor time—time and matter having come into existence at one and the same instant. The *maya* theory here supplies the element missing from the cyclic theory.

until through illumination they are at last liberated from the bondage of ignorance and enter into union with God. Since the teachings on this subject, even within the school of Advaita or nondualistic Vedanta, are various and not at all clearly articulated, they need not be discussed here. It may be mentioned, however, that in the Hindu conception man is not entirely a prisoner of an inexorable law of cause and effect; the *atman* or soul, being free in its essential nature, is always able to reassert that freedom, even if its bodily and mental inclinations stem from previous desires and actions. Though the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth may not be an accurate statement of objective truth, it is an ingenious attempt on the part of Hindu thinkers to give men an incentive for seeking God in this present life, rather than suffering the uncertainty, ignominy, and pain of unending life separated from God in a series of limited bodies.

This very inadequate outline of nondualistic thought leaves unmentioned the elaborate Hindu theories about the five "sheaths" that make up the individual human person, and the five "elements" of which all matter is composed.¹⁵ It also neglects the four "goals" of life and the four "stages" of life,¹⁶ all of which must be studied—along with the four castes—for a rounded understanding of classical Vedanta, from which modern Hinduism derives its approach to life. Equally worthy of mention are the practical virtues as taught by Patanjali, the authority on *rajayoga*, in his Yoga Sutras; these are accepted by all schools as the prerequisites without which progress in spirituality is impossible: noninjury, truthfulness, noncovetousness, chastity, non-acceptance of gifts, internal and external purity, contentment, austerities, study of scripture, self-surrender to God. In addition to these are prescribed, in the Advaita discipline of Shankara, the following: discrimination between the real and the unreal; renunciation of the unreal; mental virtues such as calmness, self-control, bearing of afflictions, withdrawal of the senses, faith, self-settledness; and yearning for freedom from ignorance.

¹⁵ The five *koshas* or sheaths are: (1) the physical, (2) the animated, (3) the mental, (4) the intellectual, (5) the blissful. The five elements are: (1) *akasha* or space, (2) air, (3) fire, (4) water, (5) earth—corresponding to the senses of hearing, touch, sight, taste, smell.

¹⁶ The four goals are said to be: (1) righteousness, (2) wealth, (3) aesthetic fulfilment, (4) liberation. The four stages are: (1) celibate student, (2) married householder, (3) retired contemplative, (4) all-renouncing monk.

So much, then, for the nondualist tradition, as expounded especially by the great scholastic philosopher Shankara, at the beginning of the ninth century of our era.

THE DEVOTIONAL TRADITION

Side by side with the nondualist tradition—whose adherents, though the most vocal, are said to represent no more than twelve per cent of the Indian religious population—is the *bhakti* or devotional tradition. There are more than a few references in the Vedas to worship of a personal God; from the beginning, the Hindus were conscious that personality provided an important means of understanding ultimate reality. But, as Dom Bede points out, the tradition found its first outstanding expression in the world-famed Bhagavad-Gita or Song of the Lord, some little time before the birth of Christ. This scripture, which forms an integral part of the epic Mahabharata, also includes a highly sophisticated exposition of the nondualist teachings, and of the discipline of *karmayoga*, the “path of action,” as well.¹⁷ But its presentation of the “path of devotion,” although it is scarcely as elaborate as that of the later devotional writings, is especially congenial to a Christian.¹⁸

In the devotional view, ultimate reality is worshiped as a person, under such mythological forms as Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, and Kali. Rama and Krishna, two of the human *avatars* or descents of Vishnu (the first an ideal king, and the second an ideal lover and, subsequently, adviser of kings), are also worshiped widely. Early in the Christian era the worship of Vishnu, the Preserver of the universe (looked upon by his followers as the all-pervading reality), and of Shiva, the Destroyer of the universe (pictured as the Lord of ascetics as well as the god whose phallic emblem—naturally, with no pornographic significance—is worshiped as a symbol of deity), were widespread in South India. The goddess Durga, Mother of the universe and consort of Shiva, was also worshiped, as well as the more terrific Kali, who however is also known as Bhavatarini, the Redeemer of the world. “God is also a person,” said Ramakrishna in the last century, restating this tradition, “and can be seen and known as a person.”

¹⁷ This path deals both with ritualistic worship and with selfless activity in the world.

¹⁸ The whole of chap. 12 and parts of chap. 18 set forth this approach eloquently.

The devotional tradition is strikingly reflected in the songs of a number of South Indian saints, and it penetrated into the two great Indian epics, the Ramayana, which details the exploits of King Rama, and the Mahabharata, an account of the fates of the descendants of India's mythical first king Bharata. Both are vast treasure houses of ancient lore, wisdom, and spirituality. But the tradition became expressed perhaps most fully in the lengthy popular versions of mythology known as puranas. Here Vishnu or Shiva (or some other god), depending on the particular work, is regarded as the one supreme God and as having definitely personal character. He calls for the devotion of his worshipers and assists them by his grace to attain union with him.

The earliest exponent of the devotional tradition is undoubtedly the sage Narada, whose Bhakti Sutras, a collection of aphorisms on love of God, outline some of the fundamental teachings of early times. Narada, however, is actually a mythological figure, and the author of the Sutras may have given his name to the work to bring it greater glory. The date of its composition is uncertain.

Among historical figures, the greatest as well as earliest teacher of devotion in India was Ramanuja (1017–1137 A.D.). It was he who, through his commentaries on the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, and the Brahma Sutras, founded the school of Visishtadvaita or Qualified Nondualism. Like the nondualist Shankara, he was born and lived in South India. But he opposed Shankara in maintaining that the Supreme Being is a personal God.¹⁹ His answer to the question of why God created the universe was that it was created in sport (*lila*), since God obviously needed nothing besides Himself for self-fulfilment. In the view of Qualified Nondualism, the distinction between God and the worshiper remains even in the final state of *moksha* or release. But Ramanuja described the world of nature and the world of souls as "modes" or "attributes" of God; he even called them "parts" (*amsa*) of God.

Since Ramanuja had to start with the Vedas as his revealed scripture, he, like Shankara, accepted the doctrine of world cycles and of rebirth. As Dom Bede points out, he had no clearer idea than Shankara of creation as Christianity understands it; his conception of the rela-

¹⁹ A fruitful subject for study in the confrontation between Christianity and Hindu belief would be the connotation of the term "personal" in this connection in both religions.

tion of God and the worshiper could not, therefore, according to Christianity, be a complete one.²⁰ Ramanuja's favorite image to describe this relation was that of the body and the soul: God is, as it were, the soul, and the universe and souls comprise His body. He is the indwelling presence, the controller who directs the world and souls from within.²¹ But the divine nature is said by him to be "qualified" by nature and souls—a position unacceptable for Shankara and Dom Bede alike, though for different reasons.

A second great medieval exponent of the devotional tradition, Madhva (1199–1276 A.D.), also a South Indian, completely broke with Ramanuja. In his commentaries on the canonical works, he developed the school of Dvaita or Dualism. In his view, difference is of the very nature of things. God, man, and nature are eternally different and God alone exists absolutely and independently. Nature and man exist in dependence on God. Here we come closer, Dom Bede thinks, to a true doctrine of creation; but for Madhva, nature and man are eternal, like God, and their difference lies only in their radical dependence on Him. Elements in his philosophy suggest, says Dom Bede, that there may have been some amount of influence from the Syrian Christians among whom he lived; but this, he adds, is by no means certain.

A further system mentioned by Dom Bede in his survey of the devotional tradition is that of the Shiva Siddhanta, which also originated in South India, taking definite shape during the thirteenth century. According to Dom Bede, this system is in deliberate opposition to the philosophy of Shankara.²² Here we find a concept of God as the absolute Lord, whose nature of love and grace is brought out with great clarity—more clearly, Dom Bede claims, than in any other system.²³

²⁰ In view of the subtlety of the Hindu teachings about the personal relationship possible between the soul and God, one must guard against merely dismissing them as inadequate before a thorough study has been made of their similarities to the Christian position and differences from it.

²¹ Shankara used this description of God as the "Inner Controller," too, though in a slightly different sense, since he likewise based his commentaries on the Upanishads, from which this concept is taken.

²² It would be interesting to know what its followers' attitude was toward Shankara's practical devotional attitude in everyday life; as we have seen, though an uncompromising nondualist in philosophy, he was also a worshiper of the personal God.

²³ This statement might be challenged. Dom Bede would have to show in what way it

The Shiva Siddhanta held that the soul (*pasu*) is eternally distinct from God (*pavi*), but when it is released from the bondage (*pasa*) of ignorance through the grace of Shiva, it is purified and enlightened and becomes one with Him, sharing His nature and yet remaining distinct from Him.²⁴

This school, Dom Bede points out, suffers like the others in that it lacks understanding—from the Christian point of view—of the soul's direct creation by God, the purposive creation of the world, and the radical distinction between the soul and God. Nevertheless, one seems to detect here, Dom Bede believes, a movement of Hindu thought toward the idea of the soul's transformation by grace, so that it shares in the nature of God without either being identified with Him (as in Shankara's view) or becoming part of Him (as in Ramanuja's).²⁵

SIMILARITIES TO CHRISTIANITY

In a meaningful conversation between Christians and Hindus, one of the first subjects for study will be the obvious similarities between Hindu beliefs—whether dualistic or nondualistic²⁶—and Christian. Special attention should be given to the concept of God's appearance on earth as conceived by the devotional schools of Hinduism, to the concept of grace, to the various "sacraments" accepted by Hindus of all schools, and to the concept of ultimate reality in nondualism most nearly corresponding to that of the Trinity in Christianity.

surpassed the highly evolved system of Chaitanya (born 1485 A.D.), based on love of Krishna; or the sensitive love of Rama expressed by the poet saint Tulsidas (1532–1623 A.D.) in his universally admired version of the Ramayana in Hindi, a retelling of the ancient epic; or the devotion to Mother Kali embodied in the remarkable songs of Ramprasad, in Bengal, in the late eighteenth century, which bear witness to how loving and human a relationship the worshiper had with this supposedly terrific deity; and finally, to mention only the most outstanding example of all, the synthesis of all Hindu devotional and nondevotional elements made by Ramakrishna in the nineteenth century.

²⁴ In all these respects, it sounds very close to the Tantra philosophy, another highly important school, developed mainly in Bengal probably in ancient times (Dom Bede neglects to mention it), which incorporates many of the concepts of nondualistic Vedanta, but accepts Shiva and Kali as male and female embodiments of absolute reality, through whose grace the worshiper is liberated.

²⁵ This statement seems to hold good of all the examples of the devotional tradition mentioned in note 23, with the exception of Ramakrishna, whose special contribution will be considered later.

²⁶ From the nondualistic point of view, the dualistic beliefs are valid for the world of multiplicity, but they cannot be accepted as a true picture of ultimate reality.

Of the various aspects of the personal God worshiped in India, Vishnu, the Preserver of the universe, is said to have manifested himself in nine *avatars* or descents (a word often translated into English by Hindus as “incarnations”). The earliest of these, according to Hindu mythology, had nonhuman forms, such as fish, turtle, boar, and man-lion (there was even a flood at the time of the fish *avatara*); the later ones, such as Rama and Krishna, were human, though still mythological or at best semihistorical. Modern Hindus accept both Buddha and Jesus as *avatars*, and the followers of several other historical personages—such as Chaitanya in the early sixteenth century and Ramakrishna in the nineteenth—claim this distinction for their own spiritual guides. There are also those who speak of *avatars* of the god Shiva. In the Bhagavad-Gita it is said that whenever virtue declines and vice prevails, the personal God descends on earth for the punishment of the wicked and the re-establishment of *dharma* or virtue.

In discussing the Incarnation in Christianity and the *avatara* in Hindu belief, Dom Bede calls attention to the vast difference between the two concepts. Christ, as he says, comes to authenticate the reality of human nature and human history. His is not simply the appearance of a mythical god in a human form, but the reality of a human nature that loves and grieves and suffers and dies—a human nature that enters at a critical moment in the history of its people and into the drama of human history. The man Christ, he points out, is believed by Christians to be God—not again the God of an ancient mythology, but the Creator of heaven and earth, the author of the moral law, the Judge of the living and the dead. This is something unique in the history of the world; nothing like it was claimed for Rama or Krishna, or for Buddha or Mohammed. One may reasonably question the truth of this claim about Christ, says Dom Bede, but one cannot reasonably deny its uniqueness.

Just here is where, in any conversation with Hindus, Christians will have to proceed with extreme caution if they are not to end up talking to themselves. From my own knowledge of Hinduism, I should say that a Hindu might well not only “question” but be discouraged from any consideration of Christ’s claim to being God’s only Son, when it is put in these terms. In the first place, he would certainly feel it was biased for a Christian to claim that the Hindu *avatara* is only the

appearance of a “mythical god in human form,” whereas the Christian Incarnation was the Creator of heaven and earth. How can you demonstrate to me, he would ask, that the Christian God, in His beginnings, is any less of a “myth” than the Hindu ones? And how, again, that the living God of the Hindu, who answers prayer and bestows holiness, is any less the Creator of the universe than the Christian? If he was a follower of Ramakrishna, he might well quote that saint: “Everybody says that *his* watch alone is right!”

But this is not all. For the Hindus are already perfectly aware of the *avatara*'s having a complete human experience. Though the descent takes place for a divine, preordained purpose, the *avatara*—Rama, for instance—loves, grieves, fights, suffers, and dies as a human being. It is true that the Hindus, lacking a sense of the all-importance of history (and it is a considerable lack), cannot fully appreciate the historical aspect of the Incarnation, something that makes it necessary that there be only one. But followers of Krishna believe that Krishna is not only an appearance of God but the totality of the Godhead, that all is contained in him. Again, followers of Kali, the Divine Mother, claim that in her is contained the Brahman, the ultimate impersonal reality, of the nondualistic Vedantists. And in Tulsidas' sixteenth-century version of the Ramayana is found the striking concept that everything in the universe is contained in Rama's stomach. Finally, in one of the most important works about the nineteenth-century *avatara* Ramakrishna, translated into English under the title *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*,²⁷ the saint is quoted as saying: “I see that everything has come out of this [body of mine].”

Christians may, therefore, ask themselves whether, in fact, the “uniqueness” that Dom Bede imputes to the claim about Christ's divinity has anything to do with its importance. True, Christ Himself is unique. And one might well argue that after any perceptive religious person impartially studies His life and words, he will have to grant the uniqueness of this personality. But it is here a question—is it not?—of the proper approach. Were one to assume that the *claim* is unique,

²⁷ The translator of this work is Swami Nikhilananda, and the publisher the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York. In another great work about the saint, *Ramakrishna the Great Master*, by one of his disciples, Swami Saradananda, occurs an illuminating study of the question of the *avatara* from the Hindu point of view; it has been published in English by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, India.

one would be failing to see Hinduism as it sees itself; for to a Hindu the claim does not seem to be at all unique. Thus one would be guilty of the same failure with which I have charged Hindus who say that Christianity is as "true" as Hinduism or Buddhism or Islam. It is elsewhere, I believe, that Christians will have to look for a means of helping the Hindus break through the confining belief that the *avatara* is identical with the Incarnation.

In the Hindu devotional tradition there are, as Dom Bede rightly declares, definite hints of several other important features of Christian belief. There is, as we have seen, a well-developed theory of grace—without which the worshiper is said to be unable to know God. In this path, as in the "mystical" one, moral disciplines such as those listed by Patanjali in his *rajayoga* treatise²⁸ are stressed as the first prerequisite as aids to grace; devotional Hindus insist that the individual worshiper must make an effort himself, even though the grace of God cannot be purchased in this way. In addition to these moral disciplines, certain specialized means have been developed to approach God as a person, in each of which the worshiper carries out a certain role. These are five in number: the "peaceful" approach (that of the sages whose words are recorded in the Upanishads), the approach of a servant, of a parent of God, of a friend or playmate of God, of a lover of God.²⁹

There are, too, in Hindu religious practice what we may call sacraments: birth ceremonies; the investiture with the sacred thread (the "second birth," suggestive of confirmation); the partaking of sanctified food offered in a *puja* or ritualistic worship service; penance; marriage; holy orders; death ceremonies—to mention only those that remind one of the Christian sacraments. All these will have to be sympathetically studied—not set aside as merely pagan superstitions—in a meaningful conversation with believing Hindus. But the subject is so vast that it can be no more than mentioned here.

What is, however, of surpassing importance for Hindus in understanding Christianity is a careful explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is through the Trinity, I believe, that Hindus can understand Christ. A hint of the mystery of the Trinity is seen by Dom

²⁸ See page 65 above.

²⁹ Particularly an illicit lover, to bring out the need for complete self-abandonment, just as a man's mistress sacrifices her whole reputation in society for the sake of having his love.

Bede in what has been called the "Hindu Trinity" of mythology: Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; Shiva, the Destroyer of the universe. Perhaps there is justice in the comparison: each of these gods is a person (though none "proceeds" from another). Yet an even more striking parallel is to be found in the Vedic concept of *Satchidananda* itself. *Sat* or Absolute Existence would suggest the eternally existent Father; *Chit* or Absolute Knowledge, the Son, the eternally existent image of the Father begotten of the Father; and *Ananda* or Absolute Bliss, the Holy Spirit, who proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son. These three are not said by Hindus to be "persons," nor is there said to be a procession of the second from the first, or of the third from both the others; yet they are defined as not separate from each other, and not separate qualities of ultimate reality, but each and all identical with reality.³⁰ Nowhere, however, in Hindu doctrine is there any concept remotely like the Christian concept of three Persons with one nature, so congenial to—and in a certain sense close to—our own inner nature.³¹ Once this concept is thoroughly explained and thoroughly understood, I submit, the superior intellectual satisfaction to be derived from it simply as a concept—even aside from the important fact that Jesus Christ Himself bore witness to it—should be self-evident.

It is through discussion, then, of the meaning that Christians impute to the word "God" that our best hope of fruitful conversation with Hindu believers lies. If Christians are to convince Hindus of the uniqueness of Christ as the Incarnation—the only-begotten (not made) Son of the Father—both parties must understand the difference, as well as the similarities, between the Trinity, the supreme reality of Christianity, and *Satchidananda* (whether personal or impersonal), the

³⁰ It may be ventured that the term "circumincession," in the sense of "resting within" each other, as applied to the Trinity, might be used here also; that is to say, each of these "absolutes" rests in and is totally at one with the others. It would be valuable, in exploring this parallel, if Christian theologians could study the exact meaning of the expressions "Absolute Existence," "Absolute Knowledge" and "Absolute Bliss" in Hindu theology, as explained by both Shankara and Ramanuja.

³¹ In a lecture in New York, in 1963, Dom Bede equated Christ and the *atman* in man (the witnessing awareness or self in each, which is one with the absolute awareness that underlies the personal God); but unless we understand Christ here in a highly special sense—the "Christ in us" that St. Paul speaks of, perhaps—we may be led into confusion by such an identification. The Holy Spirit would seem to me to be a nearer "equivalent" of the *atman*, since *atman* refers to a consciousness that is contentless.

supreme reality of the Hindu schools. Without such a clarification, no Hindu will ever grasp the vast difference between the *avatara* (endowed with many divine powers, be it remembered, including the power to work miracles) and the human embodiment of the Second Person of the Trinity. Hindus will still always feel justified in saying: "Yes, we accept Christ as *an* incarnation. You have nothing to teach us."

OBSTACLES TO UNDERSTANDING

As things now stand, the situation is very confused. If a Hindu reads what Christians have to say about God (i.e., when they fail to be explicit about the doctrine of the Trinity), he simply thinks—if he is an Advaita Vedantist—in terms of a Divine Ground very much like that preached by Meister Eckhart and the German mystics; or—if he is a worshiper of the personal God—he imagines something very like his own ideal deity. On the other hand, the Christian is tempted to see the Hindu's concept of God (where he does not simply equate his own and the Hindu concept uncritically) in terms of philosophical speculation or of mythology.

Even where there is some amount of familiarity with Hindu thinking, the obstacles to understanding for a Christian are formidable. According to Swami Nirvedananda, in *Hinduism at a Glance*: "Some hold that God is without form and without attributes; some believe that He is formless, yet He has attributes; some others hold that He has eternal forms and attributes. The last group, again, is subdivided according to the choice of different forms."³² The bewildering variety of concepts all accommodated within "Hinduism" is something that theologians will have to accustom themselves to if there is to be any interchange at all between the two faiths.

Many questions, to be sure, remain to be discussed once the con-

³² This book, published by the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Dhakuria, West Bengal, is an invaluable beginners' guide to a Hindu view of Hinduism. I have long been convinced that no Westerner can obtain a just view of Eastern philosophies or religions simply by consulting books written by Western scholars, no matter how well informed; for the temptation to build theories about an ancient religious philosophy, often in total disregard of long-established tradition, is almost irresistible. There are, of course, very competent works by Indian scholars as well, but this volume was written by a learned Hindu monk of the Ramakrishna Order, familiar with both tradition and modern trends of thought.

versation is genuinely started: the meaning of revelation for a people who already possess a "revealed" scripture, the meaning of the Church as teaching authority, the meaning of the Mystical Body, the meaning of the Eucharist—to mention only a few of the most important. In one way or another, all these depend, for their true understanding, on an acceptance of Christ as the unique Incarnation. But, as I hope I have shown, without a thorough examination of the meaning of the Trinity as opposed to *Satchidananda*, there can be no headway in this direction.

One important point remains to be made—and a very practical one—in our search for means to further our own understanding of Hinduism, and Hindus' understanding of Christianity. In his analysis Dom Bede has stressed what he calls the "unresolved tension" that exists between the two fundamental strands of Hindu thought—the mystical and the devotional—we have been considering. It is a point that seems central to his approach. On the one side, he says, is Shankara's doctrine that in the ultimate illumination all differences disappear (soul, God, and nature being experienced as absolutely identical); on the other is Ramanuja's belief that soul, God, and nature are distinct, and that in the ultimate state of bliss there is communion but not identity.

I am of the opinion that this "tension" he speaks of seems to be a tension largely from a Christian point of view—i.e., if one assumes Hinduism to be what an average Christian would take it to be: an organized church with a central teaching authority. But what we have to remember is that there is no single church of Hinduism within which such a tension could exist. Again, from the point of view of modern Hinduism (which at least talks as if there were such a thing as "Hinduism"), whatever tension might have existed earlier has been resolved by the spiritual experiences and subsequent teaching of Ramakrishna. To this fact Dom Bede himself seems to bear witness when he writes: "For most Hindus [he means intellectual Hindus] today, it must be said that the tendency is to accept the solution of Shankara as ultimate, even though in practice they may be devoted to a personal God."³³

Ramakrishna himself meticulously practiced the disciplines of all

³³ Note here the striking similarity to Shankara's own practice in the ninth century (see p. 62 above).

the major sects of Hinduism, and experienced (according to his own witness) the same communion with the personal God of Hinduism through each of them; he then practiced the "mystical"³⁴ discipline of Advaita or nondualistic Vedanta, as explained by Shankara, and according to his own assurances and those of reliable witnesses (versed in Hindu scripture) experienced communion with the impersonal Brahman, which in Hindu nondualistic belief underlies all phenomena. And he remained in a state of communion with Brahman for as long as six months, coming down from that plane of consciousness only occasionally, when a man who was taking care of him forced him to eat. He also prayed later according to the Islamic and Christian fashions and had visions of both Mohammed and Christ. His followers, therefore, claim that he is qualified to say (as he did say) that all religions lead to one and the same experience.³⁵

It seems reasonable to assume that Ramakrishna is indeed qualified to speak for the many Hindu sects. The interpretation that modern Vedantists put upon his achievement, however, is not beyond reasonable doubt. Basing their conclusion on his experience, they are in the habit of saying that devotional approaches are stages in the religious path, of which Advaita Vedanta, Shankara's approach, is the final goal. In my opinion, this amounts to a somewhat superficial and doctrinaire estimate of Ramakrishna's own position (though one that may even have been fostered by some of his disciples). For it was Ramakrishna's considered judgment that the experience of the highest knowledge of God (*jñana*) and the highest devotion to God (*bhakti*) are one. In such a view, surely, there is little room for "tension."

In speaking, then, of modern Hinduism—the reality, not the subject of highly insulated scholarly study—we should not assume that it is now what it was at the time of Shankara or Ramanuja or Madhva.

³⁴ Though I have accepted Dom Bede's terms, it would certainly appear that he is using "mystical" in a very special sense; for certainly worshipers of the personal God, too, can have mystical experience (i.e., direct communion with God) in Hinduism as well as Christianity—as, for instance, Ramanuja and Chaitanya, to name only two.

³⁵ Since Ramakrishna did not actually follow any "disciplines" of Christianity or Islam, but simply put himself in sympathy with some of their attitudes through hearing their scriptures read to him and praying some of their prayers, both Christians and Moslems will justifiably question their statement. Followers of Ramakrishna would contend, however, that such a towering spirit could grasp the essence of a religion without having learned its details.

Complex as it still is, it is something that, like the Church of Christ, is living and changing and evolving. Perhaps we can get an idea of what modern Hinduism is by imagining what Christianity would be now if every heresy had been treated seriously and allowed to grow unchecked, and there had been no Church to define what was Christian truth and what was error. Or perhaps by thinking of modern Christianity in all its diverse forms, including all the multitude of denominations that have arisen since the Reformation, as the "whole" of Christianity. Hinduism is indeed a perplexing subject. But it seems to me that Ramakrishna—and the great monastic and philanthropic organization that sprang from his life, the Ramakrishna Order—can be taken as a sort of final authority today for practicing Hindus.

It should be noted, finally, that in the discussion of Hindu beliefs by most Westerners, all the concepts of Hindu spirituality appear to be treated as if they were pure speculations. Perhaps this results from the fact that most studies of Hinduism are made by scholars, not by practicing religious persons. In crucial passages no mention is made of the universal Hindu assumption that all the schools of philosophy have been founded by saints or seers, and that their teachings are all based on what Hindus consider to be profound spiritual experiences. These men have "seen" the "truths" they have taught. Personal revelation (if in accord with scripture and reason) is one of the criteria of truth, according to Shankara's—and no doubt many another philosopher's—teaching. In every school, great store is set on the experience of *samadhi*, the state of mystical union with a spiritual ideal—i.e., God or ultimate reality. The founders' systems, in other words, are not speculative in the sense that the systems of the Western philosophers are; they are, rather, attempts to explain the world in terms of what their purified minds had seen.³⁶ In order to be "orthodox," of course, their systems all had to acknowledge the authority of the Vedas—even though the Vedas themselves say that experience of God transcends the Vedas.

³⁶ The stress laid on personal mystical experience by Hindus, whether in ancient or modern times, has great significance for understanding the doctrine of the "harmony of religions," which we have considered earlier. In a religion without a central teaching authority, like Hinduism (where, as we have noted, scripture is the authority), the dogmas of dualistic religion were certain to appear to those of an inquiring mind as being of secondary consequence (there are, of course, many more who are content never to question

The Hindu approach involves an assumption, a claim, that deserves to be sympathetically looked into rather than blandly ignored. It was St. Thomas who advocated, by his own practice, the appropriation of all the knowledge available in the views of others. So it must be in our meeting with Hindu beliefs. Like St. Thomas, we can judge them fairly in the light of Christ's revelation of truth. Wherever Hindu belief goes counter to Christ's central teaching, Christians will of course judge it for what it is; and yet, as it has been said, in every heresy is hidden a kernel of neglected truth—distorted though it may have become in the expressing of it. If there is to be any true and honest conversation with Hindu belief, surely the considerable fund of truth it enshrines must be devotedly sought out.

the sole truth of their own dualistic, devotional faith). For it was found that, in spite of all these dogmas, as a result of Hindu meditative techniques for concentrating the mind, members of all sects achieved the same sorts of experiences: what they interpreted as forms of mystical union with God. And since there was no divinely appointed teaching authority like the Church to judge what was truth and what heresy among these experiences, these latter, being most compelling and more or less similar in content, appealed to the inquiring as more important in the long run than the *beliefs* that those who enjoyed them acknowledged. This would explain why the Hindus, in "accepting" Christianity—which contradicts some of their basic dogmas—can simply ignore the dogma, saying in effect that what Christians *believe* does not matter nearly so much as what they experience: mystical union with God.