

# CHRISTIANITY CONFRONTS HINDUISM

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## I

**A**FTER TWENTY-FIVE years as a member of a Hindu monastic order, I discovered that Jesus Christ had a special meaning for me, a Westerner, over and above the meaning Hinduism gave Him. In becoming a Catholic, however, I did not find it necessary to deny the profundity of the faith to which I had so long adhered. It was thus with the greatest anticipation that I learned that the documents of Vatican II were to include a Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.

When I obtained a copy of the Declaration, I was much disappointed. Here is what I read about my former religion: "Thus in Hinduism men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an unspent fruitfulness of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek release from the anguish of our condition through ascetical practices or deep meditation or a loving, trusting flight toward God" (no. 2).

Where is any mention of the profound mystical experiences of the ancient Hindu *rishis* or sages, upon which the most significant revelations of the Hindu scriptures, those found in the Upanishads, are based? Where is any acknowledgment of the constant stress on morality as the bedrock of the spiritual life? First place is given here to a bloodless "contemplation" of the divine mystery. And the juxtaposed phrases "unspent fruitfulness of myths" and "searching philosophical inquiry," through which the Hindus are said to "express" that mystery, convey the impression of an unintegrated combination of primitive belief and refined speculation. The second of the two sentences devoted to this rich tradition contents itself with describing Hinduism's spiritual disciplines as "ascetical practices" or "deep meditation" or a "loving, trusting flight toward God"—all presumably for the purpose of "release" from the "anguish" of life, instead of for communion through grace with ultimate Truth.

The treatment of Buddhism is even more disappointingly vague. I cannot believe that any Asiatic non-Christian reading these sentences would be persuaded that Catholic Christians were eager for a real conversation with either Hinduism or Buddhism. True, two notes in the American edition of *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York,

1966) apologize for the insufficiency of this seemingly casual treatment; but these do not excuse the text's inadequacy.

In any valid dialogue between religions, it has been said many times, both sides must be willing to listen to each other—be they Catholics or Protestants or Jews or Hindus or Buddhists or Muslims—not only in respect but also with love. Each must be confident, too, that from the confrontation a result will issue that is beneficial to both. The Vatican II Declaration hardly encourages such an atmosphere. In speaking in general terms of ancient religions other than Christianity, it states merely that their ways of conduct and of life, their rules and teachings, though “differing in many particulars” from what the Church holds and sets forth, nevertheless “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (no. 2). It is not enough, I submit, to urge Christians “prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, . . . [to] acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods” found among non-Christians (*ibid.*). These men of whom the Declaration speaks all happen to believe sincerely that their own religions are the truth. Yet they are addressed by the Council Fathers as if they were misguided children who surprisingly manifest on occasion a certain amount of good sense. The over-all impression created by the Declaration is certainly, though not intentionally, one of benign condescension.

It is central to the belief of Christians that ours is the “fulfilment” of the non-Christian religions. But merely *telling* sophisticated “heathens” that our own faith embodies all that their faith is reaching toward is not usually the way to help them discover through grace who and what Jesus Christ is. Before we are in a position to tell Hindus, for instance, that our faith embodies all the best of theirs and more besides, we must intimately know what their faith embodies. We must be able to describe their faith in a way that satisfies them. We have long since abandoned the attitude that would condemn the religious beliefs of non-Christians as outright falsehoods. But too often we still seek to “preach the gospel” to these men without first acquainting ourselves—as St. Paul certainly did when he preached to the Greeks of the “unknown God”—with what they actually believe. This sort of indifference to the content of the faiths of others (to which I would couple the willingness to believe uncritically what other Western Christians have written about them) is the greatest single obstacle to true dialogue with non-Christians in the Orient.

But even among those Christians who seek to acquaint themselves with the content of others' faiths, a tendency sometimes manifests itself that constitutes another serious obstacle to true dialogue between

religions. It is well known among ecumenists that some persons, no doubt out of the goodness of their hearts, seek to mute the differences between their own and another faith. In *Ecclesiam suam* Paul VI has characterized this syncretistic tendency as an "immoderate desire to sink differences at any cost" (no. 88). Aspects of the other religion are asserted to be identical with aspects of Christianity; exact meanings of long-established terms are disregarded. (Hindus, too, have been prone to indulge in the same sort of carelessness with regard to Christian doctrines, such as that of the Incarnation.) There are even those who, while calling themselves Christians, manifest a form of overzealousness toward selected "truths" in another religion. They would accept certain doctrines or disciplines, even certain points of view, of a non-Christian religion as valid complements to or substitutions for doctrines or disciplines of Christianity. "A little learning is a dangerous thing," said Alexander Pope, and there was never a better illustration of the saying. Quite as much an obstacle as indifference, in the delicate process of dialogue, is the false irenicism that would lead men to believe they can find a common denominator in matters of dogma—perhaps even in matters of discipline.

We are not seeking through the dialogue for a new, "universal" religion, an eclectic invention that will somehow satisfy everybody. The goal we seek is to be attained neither through indifference nor through any muting of disparities nor by any misguided zeal, but rather by humbly facing the total structure of the other religion and of the mystery of its persistence through millennia. What that goal is, indeed, we can only dimly surmise. That it can be attained we must believe. In the dialogue with Protestant Christianity, Anglicanism, and the Orthodox Church, advances have been made that no one would have thought possible even a few years ago. So too, I believe, there will be unforeseen advances in the dialogue with non-Christians—especially with Hindus. All that is needed is a willingness on both sides to wait for some sort of change of thinking, a mutation in spiritual sensitivity, as it were, that neither party to the dialogue can foresee—and that affronts neither.

Perhaps as a result of my Hindu background, I arrived at this conclusion independently. In the process of studying the problems of the dialogue with Hinduism, however, I have found that similar ideas were expressed, with regard to the ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Protestants, by the Abbé Couturier as far back as 1935 in his "The Psychology of the Prayers of the Octave for Christian Unity," and more recently by the Protestant Robert McAfee Brown in his book written in collaboration with Gustave Weigel, S.J., *An American Dialogue*

(1960). The Abbé has suggested that the Octave should be looked upon as a "convergence of the prayers of every Christian confession in full liberty and independence toward the Christ whom we love, adore and praise." Dr. Brown, commenting on the Abbé's ideas, states quite frankly that a united Church would, in the eyes of Catholics, be one that gave its allegiance to the Bishop of Rome. But even so, he says, Protestants can pray the prayer of Abbé Couturier that Christ's Church may be made one "in accordance with His wishes and through the means that He will choose." Significantly, he goes on to suggest that while both Protestants and Catholics may conceive unity in their own way, in this effort both will be "engaging in a risk—the risk of prayer—which is that God might choose to answer their prayers in ways quite different from those that any of His children contemplate."

Fr. Weigel, in the same book, enlarges on the implications of this dialogue:

The starting point would be that Catholics and Protestants are here as a matter of massive fact, and that neither wants to become the other. The goal, therefore, will not be that they do become one church, though this is not a negation of the hope that at some day by God's grace they will. The purpose of the continuous symposium would be to eliminate or reduce the hostilities but not the differences existing between the two parties.

It is in this same spirit, I submit, that the dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism must be conducted. What we shall need, as certain writers have already pointed out, is a thoroughgoing objectivity. This is not easy to achieve. But to the extent that we are faithful to our own beliefs for their own sake (not for the sake of proving them superior to any others), and to the extent that we live up to them, to that extent we can dare to be and manage to be objective. It is out of this sort of fearless and prayerful approach that we can hope for the change of thinking, on the part of both sides of the dialogue, that I have spoken of. In order to grasp better what I mean by honest dialogue, we shall have to consider a few pertinent facts about Hinduism and Christianity as they come into confrontation. Yet, before we begin to speak about similarities and disparities, let us first determine just what we mean by the terms "Hinduism" and "Christianity."

## II

Since we must all begin, as Jacques-Albert Cuttat has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> with our own particular religious experience, we shall here define

<sup>1</sup> Cuttat's points mentioned here are gathered from the excellent article by Maria-susai Dhavamony, S.J., "Christian Experience and Hindu Spirituality," *Gregorianum* 48 (1967) 776-91.

Christianity as the religion of the Roman Catholic Church. The problem of how to define Hinduism is more complicated. If, as Cuttat has suggested, the question in any such confrontation is which of the two religions is capable of including the other without mutilating its essential positive values, or better, which of the two is comprehensive enough to assume the other and perfect it, then how we define Hinduism means a great deal.

Our problem comes to this: Are we to take Hinduism to mean the whole diverse collection of Hindu systems (as if we were to define Christianity as the totality of all orthodoxies and heterodoxies since the time of Christ), or as one of the several popular dualistic and devotional sects, or again, as the Advaita or nondualistic Vedānta of Śankarāchārya? Obviously, we cannot take it to be the mere totality of all the Hindu systems if we are to have a meaningful dialogue with Hinduism, any more than we can take Christianity to be the whole assortment of present-day Christian denominations. But neither can we take it to be any one of the dualistic or qualified nondualistic sects, for then we should have to exclude one or another insight that has been contributed by the peculiar Hindu genius. Despite a natural Christian desire to identify as Hinduism something that approaches Christianity, we are forced, I believe, to settle on the nondualistic Vedānta as being what truly represents Hinduism—for the single reason that Śankarāchārya's school is the only one that claims to have no quarrel with anyone, but rather to respect all phases of Hindu belief as different levels of understanding of the one indivisible Reality.

I should even go a step farther and state that, in my belief, the Advaita Vedānta of Śankarāchārya, as illuminated and revived by the experiences and teaching of the modern *avātara*, Rāmakrishna, in the nineteenth century, is what we should seek to dialogue with. Each of the devotional sects, and perhaps even the sect of Śankarāchārya itself, has tended to affirm itself as the fulfilment of all the others. In Rāmakrishna's interpretation of Vedānta alone do we find a thoroughgoing acceptance of all sects as valid ways to one and the same goal of God-consciousness. Even those who claim for Śankarāchārya's Vedānta the right to represent Hinduism, however, have a great deal to back their claim, for in interpreting the Vedas all other schools are forced to strain the meaning of certain Vedic texts far more than is the system of Advaita Vedānta.

Cuttat declares that if there is between man and God, who is the absolute Person, a distance across which man is confronted with God, who reveals Himself to him, then the Oriental spiritual experience can be "assumed" into Christian experience without mutilating its essential values. This might possibly be true were we to accept

dualistic Hinduism as the true measure of Hinduism. But it is precisely this "distance" between man and God, in His essence, that nondualistic Vedānta denies—on the basis of the mystical experience of the Hindu seers as well as the evidence of scripture. How the nondualistic teaching can be assumed into Christianity without mutilating this "positive value" is difficult to understand. Moreover, were Hinduism to be thus "included" in Christianity, another most characteristic doctrine, that of the cosmic and the individual *māyā*, would also have to be rejected. It is this doctrine that explains that the phenomenal world and the individual soul, while utterly factual from the world's point of view, are perceived as a result of misapprehension and are not ultimately real.

The only way in which Hinduism could be assumed into Christianity, it would appear, would be to show that the "attributeless" suprapersonal Reality, or Nirguna Brahma, of Advaita Vedānta, was in actuality one with the personal, creative God, the Trinity, of Christianity. But to prove this would involve long and painstaking inquiry into the true meaning of the term "personal" in both religions. Another way might be, as I myself once thought, to show that the experience of the nonduality of Ātman and Brahman, even though a mystical experience, was heretical not only from the Christian point of view but also from that of all the other Hindu schools. Yet to exclude nondualism, when more crucial texts in the Hindu scriptures support than oppose it, now seems to me highly questionable. And to decide that Christians have a right to determine what is essential and what nonessential in a religion other than their own is to beg the question.

Thus we are faced with a serious difficulty if we insist, as Cuttat does, that in any confrontation between religions one of the religions must be able to include the other; for only by an arbitrary omission of certain facts can we assert that no mutilation of values would occur—and especially when the religions happen to be Christianity and an Oriental religion. Indeed, I am convinced that it is inadmissible to say, as Cuttat does, that the relation of tension between Christian and non-Christian religions "cannot be one of simple juxtaposition but must be one of hierarchical subordination." It appears that this hypothesis is one as yet to be proved so far as a true dialogue between Christians and non-Christians is concerned. I would suggest that the only confrontation in which it might be argued that one religion might possibly be able to include or subordinate another would be among religions that started with the same revealed scripture. Yet it is highly dubious whether—except in the eyes of Catholics—Christianity could "include" Judaism, or even Protestantism, without doing violence to its positive values.

If this is true, how can it hope to include an Oriental religion like Hinduism, which begins from so different a scriptural base?

### III

If we look objectively at the totality of Hindu doctrines, both nondualistic and dualistic or devotional, what do we observe? Aside from the unique nondualistic doctrine of the essential identity of Ātman and Brahman, the immortal soul and the transcendental Reality, we notice certain striking similarities between the beliefs of Hindus (based either on revealed scripture or on the experience of mystical philosophers) and those of Christians (based likewise on revealed Scripture and the definitions of the magisterium of the Church). We notice, too, of course, important differences.

In the first place, there is a striking similarity in the idea of a personal God. The personal God of Hinduism, whether He is thought of as formless yet endowed with attributes (Saguna Brahman) or as having form as well as attributes (the various deities, such as Śiva and Kālī), is the ruler of the universe, and it is through His grace that the soul is eventually joined with Him in loving, eternal relationship. Yet there is, at the same time, an important difference in the fact that God as conceived in Vedānta does not create the universe out of nothing, as Christians believe God creates the world. He creates out of the eternally existing basic matter of the physical world, through an impulse of will. What seems the most striking difference of all, the suprapersonal Reality posited by nondualism, which transcends all normal definitions of personality, may turn out on examination to be not very different from the Divine Ground of Christian mystics—such as the pseudo-Dionysius or Meister Eckhart—who was to be known through “unknowing.” The highest affirmation of Vedānta is not something utterly incomprehensible to Christian mystics.

To consider the concept of the Godhead a bit further, we find some interesting parallels in the concept of the Trinity. It has been urged that there is an approach to the Christian concept of the Trinity in the classical trinity of Hindu mythology: Brahmā, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; Śiva, the Dissolver. True, these are in some sense persons. But a far more meaningful parallel, it seems to me, is to be found in the nondualistic concept of the Nirguna or pure Brahman as Satchidānanda—*Sat* or absolute existence, *Chit* or absolute awareness, *Ananda* or absolute bliss—in which these three “aspects” of the Godhead are not separate from each other, but each and all are inseparable from Reality. Moreover, as I have said, in the qualified nondualist and the dualist schools of Vedānta, that Brahman or God is conceived as re-

creating the world or, more exactly, reprojecting it, by an act of will out of the eternally pre-existing subtle matter. At the same time, in the nondualist school, though this "creating" is accepted as fact from the empirical point of view, from the point of view of Brahman the universe is conceived to appear as a result of *māyā*, an inexplicable power said to inhere in Brahman.

Here, then, we have the concept of a personal God willing the "creation" of a fresh cycle of cosmic existence, together with the subtler concept of matter itself being created, as it were, "out of nothing." It should be noted that both the concept of eternal cycles of existence initiated by the personal God and the concept of a deluding *māyā*, which first veils Reality and then projects the world of forms, are based on the spiritual experiences of seers, not simply on speculation. Interestingly enough, from the Hindu point of view it could easily seem that the Christian concept of a single creation by a personal God out of nothing represented only a single stage of the series they had conceived, and that in this one respect Hinduism might be said to be able to "include" Christianity—were the Hindus interested in attempting this sort of rebuttal.

From the devotional scriptures, further, has come the doctrine of the *avatāra* or incarnation of Vishnu, the Preserver. The incarnation is not conceived as the Second Person of a Trinity, the perfect image of the Father, but rather as an appearance of God, who manifests Himself whenever virtue declines and vice prevails, for the upholding of righteousness and the destruction of wickedness. One exception to the *avatāra* explanation is the Lord Krishna. Usually called an incarnation by Westerners, he is actually worshiped by his followers, whose number is very large, as the totality of Vishnu or the Godhead.

Though there is no exact parallel to the doctrine of the Incarnation as it is found in Christianity, there is a fascinating hint of the Logos doctrine. It is the doctrine of the *Sphota*, the eternal Word, from which all sounds and thus all names derive. (Sound, not light, is considered by Hindus as coming first in the order of evolution of the material universe.) The primal word that includes all utterable sounds is, according to Vedānta, *Aum (Om)*; there is an elaborate analysis of its meaning in Vedāntic scholastic philosophy. "In the beginning was the *Sphota*," the Hindus would say.

Radically different, apparently, are the Christian and Hindu concepts of the fate of the soul. In contrast to the Christian affirmation that the soul is created out of nothing at or about the time of conception, Hinduism asserts that the soul in its essence is eternal existence-awareness-bliss; that it has simply forgotten its true nature and hence

must pass from life to life until it remembers who it is and learns that no desire brings satisfaction but the desire for God. (Some advanced Vedāntic thinkers have gone so far as to say that the whole doctrine of rebirth is not necessarily a logical, but is rather a psychological, truth to impress men with the urgency of striving in this life for perfection and love of God.) Hinduism maintains that there is no example of something that, not having existed before, continues to have existence eternally, after its creation. Perhaps the difference is not as great as it at first appears to be, for in talking about the soul Hindus and Christians are not always talking about the same thing. It is the individual soul after it has been deluded by *māyā* that corresponds to the Christian soul, and that soul in a sense may be said to have been created out of nothing through *māyā*.

The Hindus maintain, however, that the true nature of the individual soul keeps breaking through, something that is responsible for the belief innate in every man that he possesses free will. Here again we see a parallel to Christian doctrine, where God is said to have created man with free will either to love and obey Him or to reject Him. This freedom, the Hindus say, is of the soul's very essence. Indeed, it might well appear to a Hindu that the biblical statement that man is created "in the image of God" is simply another way of saying that the human soul is, in essence, divine.

When we consider the individual soul or *jīva*, we find a further parallel. The *jīva* is said to be enclosed in five sheaths or *kośas*: the physical sheath, the sheath of the life force or *prāṇa*, the sheath of mind or *manas*, the sheath of intelligence or *buddhi*, and the sheath of bliss. It is the last four of these sheaths that travel with the soul when it passes from the present life. Whether or not these sheaths have any relation to the "spiritual body" of which St. Paul speaks is a matter for research on the part of theologians. The soul is said by the Hindus to be identified with the various sheaths at various times: for instance, when one is pondering a problem, one is identified with the sheath of *manas*; when one solves a problem or comes to a decision, one is identified with the sheath of *buddhi*; when one is intensely enjoying music or art, or rapt in prayer or spiritual thought, one is identified with the sheath of bliss.

To continue the discussion of similarities and differences between the two religions: Hinduism also has its parallels for heaven, hell, and purgatory. In the devotional sects, as in Christianity, there are eternal heavens where the individual soul, once it has been purified of defect through spiritual discipline and love of God, lives in eternal bliss in His presence. There are also lesser heavens where those who have done

meritorious work go to reap the fruit of their good deeds (done, however, with a view to earning rewards); on the exhaustion of their supply of merit, these souls return again to the human world. Nondualistic Vedānta accepts all these, but holds that higher than any heaven, even the *Brahmaloka*, where very pure souls enjoy the beatific vision till the end of the cycle, is the state of *jivanmukti*, liberation in this very life—a state in which the soul is constantly caught up into God and enjoys Him everywhere and in all things. This, to the nondualistic Vedāntist, is the true salvation, for it is a state without relation to time.

Hells there are, too, in the dualistic religions, to which evildoers must go to reap the fruits of their evil deeds. Though some dualists have affirmed an eternal hell, other schools hold that, as with the lesser heavens, no soul will remain in hell indefinitely; on the exhaustion of their supply of demerit, the souls return again to the human world to continue their evolution. In this sense there is no specific “Last Judgment,” in which the soul is judged to be eternally blessed or eternally damned. The judgment is going on continuously during the soul’s life on earth (no merit or demerit is earned in any heaven or hell). All souls are, in essence, either related to God or an intimate part of God, and their goal is to realize their true nature.

Beyond this, nondualistic Vedānta would affirm that one day they will come to realize that they are not the limited *jiva* or soul under ignorance, but actually nondifferent from the Godhead. In finding God they find their true spiritual identity. Despite this fact, however, as long as souls of an active or devotional nature see the ego and the material universe as absolute in themselves, they must act just like a Christian soul, that is to say, as absolutely dependent on a personal Creator God—in fact, if they do not, they cannot hope ever to realize anything beyond that relationship. There are a few souls, it would appear, that can use the most advanced doctrine as a way to liberation from the very start; but it is a dangerous path, full of possibilities for self-deception.

As for the concept of purgatory, I think we can see a very close parallel in the concept of *karma*. According to this doctrine, the soul suffers and enjoys in a future life according to the good and evil desires and deeds it entertained and performed in the present life. Viewed in this light, the temporary hells and heavens already discussed may also be found to be closely related to the idea of purgatory. The radical difference from Christianity is to be found in that part of the doctrine of *karma* which affirms that the soul suffers and enjoys in this present life according to the good and evil desires and deeds of the

previous life. (The doctrine is more complicated than would appear from this simple statement; for certain past "impressions" in the soul are said to be suppressed during one life, till they can find a proper opportunity to be fulfilled in another, and so on. Again, the impressions of all past desires and deeds can be destroyed in the present life through spiritual discipline and love of God, thus enabling the soul to attain liberation or salvation in this very life.)

I have already mentioned Hindu arguments about the soul's pre-existence. Just how and when the individual soul enters its new abode is a favorite topic of discussion with scholastic philosophers in India, though today the explanations seem archaic. Their elaborate theories, however, are matched by those of our own thinkers, who are faced with the difficulty of showing just when God creates and inbreathes the soul into the fetus—a task made embarrassing by the fact that there is a stage in its development before one knows whether there will be a single child or a multiple birth. That there is a soul, however, and that that soul's highest destiny is to know God and enjoy Him, both religions affirm. There can be no doubt that they are talking about the same entity.

In addition to all these similarities, there are a number of other important details in which the two religions come close to each other—without ever, of course, totally meeting. The means in Hinduism through which the soul's life on earth is guided and brought into touch with God's grace include these: birth ceremonies, confirmation (the sacred thread ceremony), penance, the partaking of sanctified food, marriage, holy orders, death ceremonies. Though none of these corresponds exactly to any one of the Christian sacraments, they are similar enough in purpose to permit of fruitful investigation. The concept of grace is stressed as strongly in Hindu religious thought as in Christian. Even nondualists agree that, in the relative world, everything in the way of spiritual advancement depends on God's grace. Though human effort is important, nothing succeeds without divine co-operation. As an old saying in India puts it: "If you take one step toward God, God comes toward you by ten steps."

Though scripture is given a different emphasis in the two religions, there are in both of them many books accepted as divinely inspired, as the revelation of God's truth to men. In Judaism and Christianity what books belong to the canon was determined by priests and Church Fathers. In India, since there was no teaching authority, what books belonged to scripture was probably determined by ancient seers and prophets. (The Vedas are held to be identical in each cosmic cycle.) The Hindu scriptures themselves, however, make the state-

ment that in the state of God-consciousness "the Vedas are no Vedas." Scripture itself bears witness to the fact that there is a state of consciousness beyond itself.

It is difficult to determine how a Christian could convince a believing Hindu that the Bible (much of which was composed at a period later than the Vedic age) is the only true scripture. That Christ accepted the Old Testament as the word of God, and the Church Fathers the New Testament, is a compelling argument for a Christian, but hardly for a Hindu, who cannot grasp the fact that Krishna is not God every bit as much as Christ. Yet the Hindu would accept the Bible, along with the Vedas, as the word of God.

Just as in Christianity, saints abound also in Hinduism. Throughout the ages devotees have prayed to them; they have appeared to the pious in visions. Miracles, too, are found in abundance. If those written about in the past as having been performed by Hindu saints may more often than not have been the result of superstition, those of Rāmakrishna (1836-86) have been observed and attested to by many eyewitnesses with a modern education. (The saint, by the way, was very reluctant to perform them.)

Above all, in Hinduism as well as Christianity, prayer and meditation have played a central part in the spiritual life. Though Hinduism gives an important place to prayer, many of the degrees of Christian prayer correspond, probably, to various stages of Hindu meditation as described in the Yoga Sutras and elsewhere. In Hinduism there is an elaborate discipline of devotion, in which a religious devotee chooses one out of a number of possible loving attitudes toward God and pursues it till he achieves God-consciousness.

I have not mentioned earlier the plentiful use of "myths" in Vedic, classical, and modern Hinduism. It is a question about which there is much imprecision of thought. Suffice it to say that Hindus consider the biblical creation story as a myth much like their own myths.

#### IV

The several aspects of Hindu religious life I have outlined represent only a fraction of the total complex of Hinduism. In discussing them I am painfully aware of my own inadequacy. It is possible that in numerous instances my own interpretations have been swayed by Western prejudice or lack of penetration. Hinduism is a particularly rich religion, one that has dealt with all the major issues, and a bewildering array of the minor issues, of the spiritual life. It is impossible to do complete justice to it by means of simple generalities such as those I have been compelled to employ. Nevertheless, having

considered all these striking similarities and almost as striking dissimilarities between the two religions, we are now, I believe, in a position to examine some of the consequences of an honest confrontation between Christianity and Hinduism.

As I have said earlier, to the extent that we are faithful to our own beliefs, to that extent we can dare to be objective. And to be objective means to be willing to see similarities as well as disparities. Anyone with the slightest amount of candor must grant that so vast an array of profound spiritual insights as has been manifested in Hinduism cannot possibly be the work of man unaided by divine grace. We need not—indeed, we cannot—state precisely, at this point, to what degree the Hindu vision is the product of divine inspiration and to what degree the result of men's imagination. What is required of us now is a painstaking study, in all charity, of the implications of the great body of Hindu beliefs.

As we proceed to that prudent and loving study of Hinduism called for by the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, there are certain pitfalls to be strenuously avoided. We must not seek at the start to equate any one item of Hindu belief with its counterpart in Christianity, in the mistaken notion that we shall thereby enable members of the other faith to accept the main body of our dogma. Such an attempt has already been made in several instances. It has even been suggested that Christ and the *Ātman*, the absolute, indefinable Reality underlying the individual soul, are identical. The theory, however, ignores the vast amount of contradictory meanings connoted by the two terms; obviously, the word "Christ" here would have to be understood in a very special way.

Again, even while admitting the similarities between the two faiths, Christians must not forget the radical differences between them: the reality of sin (which to Hinduism is only error), the reality of the world as God's creation, the fact of a soul moving toward a realization of its highest potentialities (rather than trying to rid itself of encrustations and uncover what it already is, as suggested by Vedānta), the primacy of personality. None of these are stressed in Hinduism.

Thus, by no stretch of the imagination can Hinduism be said to be for Christians. At the same time, Christians must recognize that some of these differences may well be the result of a misunderstanding of terms; for neither they nor the Hindus have yet exhausted the meanings implicit in the words "soul," "person," "reality," and so on.

Perhaps each religion can learn something in this respect from the misconceptions of the other. Hindus have often said that the state-

ment "In my Father's house are many mansions" or "Other sheep I have that are not of this fold" refer to the validity of religions other than Christianity. Again, when the New Testament speaks of Jesus Christ as the only-begotten Son of the Father, a Hindu may insist that this means not that He is the only Son of God, but that He is begotten only of God. From our traditional point of view, these statements are highly suspect. They suggest, however, that in some of our texts there is further latitude than we have recognized in the past. "I am the vine, you are the branches" has been claimed by certain Hindus as a statement of the central principle of qualified nondualism; "I and the Father are one," as a statement of nondualism. If Hindus have claimed that Christ is one of the *avatāras* of Vishnu, Christians have for their part declared that the Hindu *avatāras* (such as Buddha and Krishna) are prophets of Christ. Hindus must wonder if such "prophets" as Chaitanya (b. 1485) and Rāmakrishna can logically come after Christ. They may well ask whether it is not as logical to say that the same principle that works through Christ works also through these saintly men.

Hindus think we Christians are naive in saying that ours is the only truth, that Christ alone is "the way, the truth, and the life." "Everybody says his own watch alone is right," said Rāmakrishna humorously, referring not only to the Hindu sects. Nevertheless, as Christians we know we have been given the truth, for Christ Himself has told us so. And we have been told by Him to go and share that truth with the nations. How best to share it with the Orient we have obviously not yet learned. In all the hundreds of years of Christian missionary activity in India (about 1900 years, if St. Thomas the Apostle was indeed the first Christian to visit the country), we have converted less than two percent of the population. What has been wanting, I submit, is sufficient respect and love for Hinduism and the Hindu culture in general.

Surely our best way of preaching the gospel is to live it. And surely our missionaries have been trying, often heroically, to live it according to their own lights. But too many have forgotten that part of living the gospel is not to limit one's practice of Christianity. The great Jesuit Robert de Nobili did not forget that fact, nor did Matteo Ricci in China—both certainly very good Christians. They were never condescending. They lived the gospel mentally and spiritually as well as physically and morally. If we modern Christians can learn to do so, we shall not only be fostering the dialogue; we shall also find ourselves subtly broadened and enriched without sacrificing anything of our own fundamental truth. "A dog," goes a Hindu proverb,

“can recognize his own master no matter what disguise he puts on.” Have we been failing to recognize our own Master where He appears in other faiths?

On the other hand, Hindus know they have the truth too. The Rig-Veda, one of their revealed scriptures, declared perhaps 1500 years before Christ: “Truth is one: the sages give it differing names.” And so they “accept” all faiths as true paths to God and want to enjoy them all—though, it often seems to me, as they interpret them. Nevertheless, traditionally they have not sought to persuade others to accept their own vision of religious truth.

Even the idea that Christianity is the fulfilment of Hinduism is a concept by no means new to Hinduism. In the Bhagavad Gita the Lord Krishna says: “Those who worship other Gods worship me alone. In the end they too will come to me.” The worshipers of Mother Kali, the beneficent and terrific Mother of the Universe, say that Brahman, the ineffable Absolute of the Vedāntists, which undergirds all things, is held in the Mother’s womb. To a Vaishnava, or worshiper of Vishnu, that same Brahman is merely the splendor of the form of Krishna. For centuries in India, narrow worshipers of Śiva, of Vishnu, of Kālī, have all insisted that their religion alone is the fulfilment of all religions. It is clear that a strictly dogmatic approach will not be effective with the Hindus.

If Hindus must learn to understand Christianity as Christians see it, we Christians must learn as well to understand Hinduism as Hindus see it. At the same time, as the dialogue progresses, we may begin to see a little better what both Hinduism and Christianity are saying beyond their differing dogmatic affirmations.

Perhaps what Hinduism, as corrected and integrated by the non-dualistic Vedānta of Śankarāchārya and Rāmakrishna, is really saying—beyond its affirmation of the nonduality of the Godhead and the “divinity” of the soul—is that the experience of God’s loving, guiding, saving presence, however imperfectly described in certain of the religions, is found to be identical or at least highly similar by mystics in all the advanced religions, and that in that sense all religions are efficacious as ways to Him. Perhaps it is also saying that since we are differing human beings, in differing traditions, the ways of serving God are as numerous as there are different individuals. Perhaps what Christianity, as guided by the Holy Spirit through the Church, is saying—beyond its specific message of salvation through Christ and His one Church—is that though man’s chief end is indeed to know and love and serve his Father, the only true God, the formulation of the experience of that God is not equally accurate in all

religions, and in so far as men's religion is based on faith in what a particular scripture has taught, one religion is indeed superior to another—and one is supreme. Perhaps it is also saying that since we must think in terms of our own tradition, our loyalty belongs to our own traditional dogma alone. Despite these differing emphases, however, both Hinduism and Christianity place God at the very center of human existence.

In *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, Dom Jean Leclercq has pointed out that the basis of Western monasticism is just that yearning for the highest spiritual experience that is the basis of the whole of traditional Hindu society, monastic and sacerdotal and secular. Thus it is perhaps Christian monks who, while holding fast to their faith in the uniqueness of Christ, can be most faithful to the dialogue—without rejection or misinterpretation, respectfully and lovingly seeking for that objectivity that alone makes dialogue come alive. For their part, Hindu monks and priests and laymen have shown themselves to be more than well-disposed toward loving and respectful dialogue with other faiths. As we have seen, what they most need is to see Christianity as it is, rather than as something completely reconcilable with Hinduism.

But Christians, too, may need a radical change of understanding with regard to Hinduism. As a result of unprejudiced study, it may well become plain that a great preponderance of basic Hindu belief is indeed divinely inspired. In that event, Christians will have to grant that Hinduism may actually be more valid for most of its faithful than a literal, Western-oriented Christianity. The Spirit may be working in ways that we only dimly perceive. Should this prove to be so, to become more effective apostles they will need to place far greater stress on that aspect of Christ which Hindus can readily grasp: the nonhistorical Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. I venture to say that it might well be the dream of a Hindu deeply versed in Christian doctrine that Christians should one day grant it is that Christ, through the Holy Spirit, who is manifesting Himself in all the higher religions.

I believe we can afford to give the implications of this thought serious consideration. For if Christ by His sacrifice and death redeemed all men, there is no reason why that same Christ cannot speak to all men through all revelations to the human spirit. I do not accept this idea as a truth that has been demonstrated beyond doubt; what I suggest is that, in view of the richness of the Oriental religions, we should in all humility be willing to treat it as a possibility. Perhaps there is much that Christ has thus spoken to others that we

have forgotten or not yet recognized in our own revelation. What we must guard against, at all events, is a premature assumption that God intends that everyone in the Orient should be a professing Christian.

It is impossible for Hindus to grasp the statement that their religion, whatever its particular sectarian form, is not inspired by God but is, as Christians have said, a "yearning" toward the knowledge of the fulness of Christ. The old, comfortable phrase *Anima naturaliter christiana* says the truth only halfway. It represents a way of thinking that is not acceptable to non-Christians—unless they are indeed chosen by God to become professed followers of Christ. St. Augustine, however, put it slightly differently: "What is now called the Christian religion existed even among the ancients and was not lacking from the beginning of the human race until 'Christ came in the flesh.' From that time, true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian" (*Retractations* 1, 12, 3). This is the sort of statement a Hindu can grasp.

Paul VI, in his Encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*, has made some very pertinent remarks upon the subject of the dialogue (no. 87):

To what extent should the Church adapt itself to the historic and local circumstances in which its mission is exercised? How should it guard against the danger of relativism, which would falsify its moral and dogmatic truth? And yet, at the same time, how can it fit itself to approach all men so as to save all, according to the example of the Apostle: "I became all things to all men that I might save all"? The world cannot be saved from the outside. As the Word of God became man, so must a man to a certain degree identify himself with the forms of life of those whom he wishes to bring the message of Christ. Without invoking privileges which would but widen the separation, without employing unintelligible terminology, he must share the common way of life—provided it is human and honorable—especially of the most humble, if he wishes to be listened to and understood. And before speaking, it is necessary to listen, not only to a man's voice, but to his heart. A man must first be understood; and, where he merits it, agreed with. In the very act of trying to make ourselves pastors, fathers and teachers of men, we must make ourselves their brothers. The spirit of dialogue is friendship and, even more, is service. All this we must remember and strive to put into practice according to the example and commandment that Christ left to us.

These questions asked by Pope Paul and his several answers to them provide eloquent testimony to his deep involvement with the subject of dialogue with non-Christians. And yet, not having himself taken part actively in the dialogue with Hinduism, he feels obliged to say also (no. 107):

Obviously we cannot share in these various Afro-Asiatic forms of religion nor can we remain indifferent to the fact that each of them, in its own way, should regard itself as being the equal of any other and should authorize its followers not to seek to discover whether God has revealed the perfect and definitive form, free from all error, in which He wishes to be known, loved and served. Indeed, honesty compels us to declare openly our conviction that there is but one true religion, the religion of Christianity.

Here, once again, the picture becomes clouded. "True," a Hindu will say, "you Christians cannot 'share' in other religions. There is indeed but one valid religion, the Christian—for you. But why should a Hindu be expected to inquire whether God has revealed a religion more perfect than his own, more pleasing to God Himself, any more than a Christian should?"

I submit that only a radical change in our thinking about Hinduism will suffice to convince Hindus that we do not condescend toward them or secretly wish to convert them into something they are not. About that change in our thinking, I have suggested that greater stress on the nonhistorical Christ may be the key to progress in the dialogue. If such an approach can bring Hindus to understand the meaning of Christ, what have we to fear? We who know something of the riches of Christ do not need to defend ourselves with any sort of iron curtain. In allowing for the working of the Holy Spirit in ways we do not suspect, surely we are not in any manner betraying our own faith in Christ. And if we insist on the old, literal, unyielding approach, what hope is there of success—indeed, what meaning is there in the dialogue?