

Hinduism and Christianity

There are about seven hundred million people in India; of these seven hundred million, the vast majority, that is about 80% are Hindus; then there are several millions of Hindus living in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Nepal, Burma, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries. Thus in all, there are over 700 million Hindus — one sixth of the world population — living on this earth. Apart from its numerical strength, Hinduism has a highly developed religious philosophy, venerable practices, amazing cultural heritage, astonishing mystical insights, admirable musical systems and extraordinary achievements in art and architecture. So, Hinduism in every sense, is a World Religion. Moreover, Buddhism, another World Religion is almost an offshoot of Hinduism. Other ancient religions such as Jainism and Zoroastrianism are closely allied to Hinduism. And the Hindu religion has inspired Sikhism, and is influencing even Islam and Christianity. Besides the vast scope for fruitful dialogue with Hindus and Hinduism arouses genuine interest on the part of many Christian scholars for a deep study and sincere appreciation of the manifold values of Hinduism. Hinduism, unlike Islam or Judaism, is a very open religion; educated Hindus have such great appreciation for Jesus Christ that they call Him 'Yesu Deva' i.e. the Lord Jesus. And surprisingly enough, those Christian scholars who have gone deep into Hinduism, find therein immense values which could serve as vehicle for the dissemination of the salutary message of Jesus Christ. Though there are many things in Hinduism which we

Christians find unacceptable, this great World Religion deserves our special study.

Within the compass of this article, I briefly explain some of the important doctrines of Hinduism which will pave the way for a rewarding dialogue with Hinduism.

1. *God the Author of the Universe*

Indian thinkers in general, the Advaita-vedantins in particular, regard the 'creation theory' of the Christians to be utterly unsatisfactory to account for the God-World relation; they point out that the Christian religious philosophy stemming from the Aristotelian concepts envisages the illogical situation of 'Infinite plus the finite'; 'God plus the world'; 'One and many'; 'Spirit plus matter'. "Since all things are from God, and all things are in God and God is in all things, and all things will return to God and nothing can be outside God, it is meaningless to conceive of 'God and the World' or 'Infinite and the finites'. Along with Spinoza, the Advaita-vedantins of India propose 'Deus sive Natura; non Deus et Natura: that is to say, 'God or Nature; not God and Nature.

The penetrating Advaitic thought explains the God-world relation as follows: 'God, like a wonderful magician possessing immense powers (may-sakti), manifests Himself in the form of the world of men and other beings; so instead of looking at the world as something distinct and different and apart from God, we must look at the *World as the self-manifestation of God*; thus it is not 'God plus world', but God showing Himself in the form of the world — this is the Advaitic Weltanschauung. 'But the trouble is' — contends the Advaitin, 'that as long as we are at our ordinary level of consciousness we cannot but see the world different and alien to (anya) God; as long as we are endowed with our present psycho-physical organism, as long as we are in the 'Avidya-state' (the 'vyavahara' our mundane existence), we can only consider the world as separate from God, just as a man with yellow glasses can see all things only as yellow. But there is the higher state, the transcendental state the mystic rapture (paramartha, saksatkara), when one can see 'God and the world as one';

God as the inner reality of all; that is the God-experience transcending ego-consciousness and world-consciousness. This is the Advaitic or Non-dualistic system of Indian though faithfully developed from the great utterances (maka-vakyas) of the Upanisads the inexhaustible store-house of ancient India spiritual wisdom. Of course, the Advaita philosopher does not deny the validity and meaning of the world at the 'vyavahara' level or mundane level at the level of our normal waking consciousness; the fact is that the transcendental level (paramartha) is more true than the mundane level (vyavahara).

The Advaita vedanta system is in harmony with the great mystical systems of the west, especially that of Meister Eckhart, the 14th century German Dominican mystic.¹

Let me cite here a few celebrated texts from the hindu religious writings in support of the God-world inseparableness. "This whole universe is that Great Person, God; having encompassed the world of all sides, this Great Person stands ten inches (ten toes) above the world" (Rgveda, 10.90.1-2). Here in this passage; God who fills the universe transcends it. This Vedic idea is reiterated later in the upanisads too. Thus the Chandogya-upanisad (of the seventh century B.C.) declares: "All the world is Brahman, the Supreme Being; Brahman is this whole world" (3.14.1). Other upanisads also repeat the same idea. The Vedic doctrine that the world is not something *separate* from or *independent* of or alien to (bhinna prathak alien) is masterfully expounded by the great Indian grammarian philosopher Bhartrhari (6th c. A.D.) who opens his 'opus magnum' as follows: "God the Eternal and Immutable, the Essence of all words and ideas, transforms Himself into the world; — thus the existence of the world has to be accounted for" (Vakyapadiya, 1.1.1).

At the same time we hear the Hindu sacred scriptures emphatically speaking of God as the only source of all things, the very foundation (adhithana, Urgrund) of all. "Brahman (God) is that Great Being from which all these beings are born, by which all are kept alive and into which, departing from here, all

¹/Cfr. 'Breakthrough, Eckharts' 'Creation Spirituality' By Mathew Fox, Image Books, New York 1980.

enter. You must earnestly desire to know Him, the Brahman" (Taittiriya-up. 3.1.1). The Chandogya-upanishad (6.8.7) proclaims God to be the very soul, the life-principle, of all that exist: "aitad atmyam idam sarvam". And the Bhagavadgita (1st c. B.C.) the Gospel of ordinary Hindus declares: "I, the Lord (Bhagavan), am the Alpha and Omega of all. All things revolve on Me, the Pivot" (7.6;10.8). "All things shine after that great Light, the ever Brilliant one" (Katha. up. 2.2.5). Here naturally we are reminded of the great utterance which St. Paul quoted for the Athenians: "It is in Him that we live, move and have our being" (Acts, 17.28). Similarly, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth" declares the Bible.

2. *The Father-Mother God*

Now scholars agreed that the Father-Mother concept of God clearly expounded by Hinduism is a great contribution to the world's religious philosophic thought. Hindu scriptures and writers are very emphatic in extolling God, not merely as a Father, but both as Father and Mother or as Father-Mother. Right at the beginning of the Rgveda we hear the poet-philosopher chanting: "O God, be to us of easy access as a father is accessible to his children: Sa nah piteva sunave, agne supayano bhava" (Rg. 1.1.9). The Yajurveda has the following verse extolling God as a Father: "Lord, you are our Father. As a father teaches his children so must you teach us. We worship you" (Yaj. 3.7.20). Well-known is the Bhagavadgita verse: "Lord, God, you are the Father of all things, living and non-living; you are the most venerable Guru in the whole world" (Gita, 11.43). Hindu religion is very articulate in its doctrine on the Motherhood or Father-Mother concept of God. The worship of the Mother Goddess prevalent all over India is traced back to the third millennium B.C. to the Indus Valley Culture, and even to the Pre-Indus culture at Mehrgarh in the present Pakistan. Kali or Devi is the name usually given to the Mother Goddess everywhere in India. Numerous are Kali temples, temples of the black Goddess, seen at every nook and

corner of Indian villages and cities. Even the very name Calcutta means the 'City of Kali'.

Hindu thought often describes God as 'Parents of the universe' which implies the Father-Mother aspect or the male-female character of God. Thus Kalidasa (servant of Kali Goddess), the Shakespeare of India (4th c. A.D.) opens his world-famous poem 'Raghuvamsam' praising God as the '*Parents of the Universe*' (jagatah pitarau). Here Kalidasa is clearly articulating the traditional Hindu doctrine that God is the embodiment of all sublime paternal and maternal qualities in their infinite degree. Following this line of thought, Hindu mythology often depicts God as '*Half-Man-Half Woman*' (ardha narisvara). The philosopher of Ramanuja (13th c. A.D.) acclaims Goddess Laksmi as the Divine counter part of God Visnu; he then pours out his heart before the Mother-Goddess through many devotional hymns.

The doctrine that God is also a Mother is implicitly contained in the Bible too. Thus for example, the Psalmist sings:

"Lord, as a child lies quietly in its Mother's arms, so my heart is quiet within me (with you)" (Ps 131.2). And in Isaiah (49.15) we read: "Even if a Mother forgets her child I will not forget you". And through the prophet Hosea (11.1) God declares, "when Israel was a child I loved him and called him out of Egypt, as my son". The motherly aspect of God is reflected clearly in the words of Our Lord: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you kill the prophets, and stone the messengers God has sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her chicken under her wings and you would not" (Mt. 23.37). Even a group of Jewish women in New York have recently made a combined statement: 'we object to the idea of presenting God merely as masculine; we believe God is equally feminine'.

The Father-Mother concept of God in Hinduism has expressed itself in various mythological ideas about the Godhead: Popular Hinduism presents God as 'Trimurti' or three persons with their feminine counterparts who are all loving Mothers. Naturally this leads us to the Hindu concept of Trinity or Trimurti.

3. *Trimurti and Trinity*

The concept of Divine Trinity, usually known as 'Trimurti' (Tri-form or Triple form) is another important doctrine that brings Hinduism closer to Christianity. Hinduism presents its popular Trimurti-doctrine as follows: God has three main functions, namely, creation, preservation and destruction. The creator God is Brahma; the Preserver is Visnu; and the Destroying God is Siva. And Brahma the creator requires infinite wisdom for his creative activity; so the Goddess Sarasvati is the Personification of wisdom; Sarasvati is the wife of Brahma. Similarly, Visnu the Preserver needs wealth or riches for the maintenance of the world; so the Goddess Laksmi is the personification of riches; Laksmi is the wife of Visnu. Likewise, Siva the Destroyer requires strength or power for his destructive process; so power personified (Sakti) is Kali or Parvati; she is the wife of Siva or Mahadeva; in truth, Parvati is the very power of Siva. These mythological presentation of Trimurti with their consorts implies also the Father-Mother idea of God, that God is the embodiment of all special perfections that we can think of in a father and mother.

The Indian mind from time immemorial vaguely perceived the Divine Trinity in the things God has created (Even the scientists find a sort of trinity in the atomic structure of matter, namely, in the electro-proton-neutron structure of the atom). First the ancient Vedic Indians conceived of the triad of Earth-Atmosphere-Heaven, a sort of three-decked universe. Then they thought of the three forms of Light, namely, Sun in the sky, Lightning or Air in the atmosphere, and Fire on earth; correspondingly they also conceived of God as Brahma-Visnu-Siva, and their three consorts. Similarly we hear also of the three Vedas (threefold holy scripture), namely, Rg Yajur and Sama (Br.up.2.4.10). Following this line of thought, the Taittiriya Aranyaka (10.13.12) speaks of Brahma, Visnu or Hari and Siva. The Maitri upanisad (5.1) praises the Trimurti: "You are Brahma, you are Visnu you are Rudra or Siva, you are all".

In the Harivamsa (10.622) of the epic Mahabharata, God is acclaimed as "one nature, three persons, namely, Siva, Visnu and the Great Father Brahma: ekah murtir trayo devah Rudrah Vis-

nuh Pitamahah). Kalidasa in his celebrated poem 'Kumarasambhavam' (7.42) sings of God as "one only God is divided so to say, threefold; they have all things in common" (ekaika murtir bibhide tridha sa, samanyam esam prathama-avaratvam. Cfr also 2.4;2.6; 10. 16-17). Kalidasa expounds further: "You who are one, manifest your glory through your three functions, namely, creation, sustentation and absorption" (ekastvam tistrbhir avasthabhir mahimanam udirayan, pralayasthiti-sarganam karanatam gatah/ Kumara, 2.6). In the Mahabharata, the poet speaks to God: "You create in your Brahma-form; sustain in your Visnu-form; you destroy in your Raudra (Siva)-form; these three are the three forms of prajapati, the Lord of creation" (3.272.48). The Padma-purana (1.3) and Visnu-purana (1.2) describes the threefold appearance of Visnu as creator-sustainer-destroyer.

More appropriate is the Indian philosophic concept of 'Sat-Cit-Anandam', to express the Trinitarian aspect of God. The venerable utterance of the upanisads on God 'Sat-Cit-Anandam' conceives of God as 'Existence-Conscience-Bliss' (Tait. 2.1; Tejobindopa. 3.26). The formula of God as 'Satyam Sivam Sundaram' — Reality-Auspiciousness-Beauty, is another trinitarian dictum. And Hinduism like Christianity insists also that one requires God's grace to know God properly. "The Paramatman cannot be grasped by Scripture reading nor by intellectual astuteness nor by much hearing of lectures; he whom the Paramatman chooses, that man knows the Paramatman; the Paramatman manifests Himself to such a person" (Kathaupa. 2.23).

4. *Incarnation*

God's Incarnation is another great doctrine that makes the Hindu-Christian dialogue easy and fruitful. The renowned verses of the Bhagavadgita proclaim the Divine Incarnations as follows: "Whenever there is decline of righteousness, and increase of immorality, then I (Lord) Incarnate myself". "I incarnate myself from age to age for the protection of the good, and for the destruction of the wicked" (Gita, 4.7-8). As in Christianity, it is the second member of the Trinity Visnu that 'Incarnates'. In the epic,

Mahabharata, the most important 'avatara' or Incarnation of Visnu is Krsna; in the other great epic, Ramayana, Rama is the important avatara of Visnu. Both Rama and Krsna are worshipped by Millions of Hindus as Divine Incarnations. Besides Rama and Krsna there are eight avataras usually reckoned; but they are not as important as Rama or Krsna; even some of the irrational beings also are counted as avataras. The full list of the ten Hindu avataras is: Fish, Tortoise, Boar, Man-Lion, Dwarf, Rama with axe, Sri Rama, Bhadra Rama, Krsna, Kalki (Exterminator, Anti-Christ). Though the Hindu avatara doctrine differs on many points from the Christian Incarnation, Hinduism supplies a stepping stone to the unique Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Even the monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam are poles apart from christianity on this issue of Divine Incarnation. The Hindu belief in Divine Incarnation expresses man's natural desire to see 'God with us', the 'Immanuel' who 'dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (Jn 1.14).

5. *Sacraments*

There is also a full *Sacramental Life* in Hinduism. From conception to funeral, the average Hindus life-span is covered by no less than sixteen sacraments. "These Hindu sacraments", as the great Indologist Maxmuller writes, "are the expression of the deepest aspiration of the human heart to connect the important events of human life to a Supernatural Being, and to grasp the inner meaning of human existence that is intermingled with sorrow and happiness". These Hindu 'Samskaras' or Sacraments also pave the way for the great sacrament, the primordial Sacrament, namely, Jesus Christ, the 'World-Guru'.

6. *Apotheosis*

The Indian mind is very conscious of God's immanence deep within the soul. The intense longing of the Indian for God-experience and intuitive vision is amazing. The 'Great Utterances' of the upanisads such as 'you are God' (tat tvam asi), 'I am God' (aham Brahma asmi), the Brahman knower becomes Brahman (Mu.up.3.2.9; ch.u.6.8.7; Br.u.1.4.10) are well-known. They are rough equivalents of the Christian teaching of the 'children of

God' or participation of Divine Nature as taught in Mt 6.18; 7.21; Lk. 11.2; Rom. 8.14-16; Gal. 3.5; Jn. 2.9; 1 Cor. 13.12; Mt. 5.8 2; Pet. 1-4.

In short, Hinduism's exalted concepts of God, the Author of the Universe, the loving Father-Mother, the Ultimate Supreme End of man (Mu.u.2.2.9), the doctrine on Divine Trinity, Incarnation, Sacraments, and the possibility of the Intuitive Vision of God even here on earth (jivanmukta) are all great contributions to the World-Religions and Dialogue with Christianity. A person carefully studying Hinduism is reminded of the great saying of Tertullian: "Anima humana (Indiana) est naturaliter Christiana".

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