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The Christian Pramanas

or

The Norms of Theological Thought

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It would be useful in this article to discuss the norms of theological thought. They are known in Sanskrit as *Pramanas*. Every great theologian in India makes clear at the outset of his enquiry the *Pramanas* which he proposes to follow. *Shabda* (Scripture), *Anumana* (Reason) and *Pratyaksha* (Perception) are the best-known *Pramanas*. My father was a devout Hindu who became a Christian in his youth. He wrote several small books expounding Christianity. Following this well-known Indian classification of *Pramanas*, he sought to support the statements he made with Scripture, Reason and Experience. The order in which these *Pramanas* should be followed may be mentioned first. Psychologically the right order is Scripture, Reason and Experience. In early childhood the truths of religion are conveyed to us in the stories of the Bible ; as grown-up children we are taught the Bible in the Church and in the Sunday School ; in youth we seek to understand with the God-given gift of human reason those religious truths which we have learnt. There come moments of religious experience, in youth, middle age and old age, in fact any time and often many times, when these truths are realized with a vividness and power which no religious teaching by others, the study of the Bible or the diligent exercise of the human reason to understand what is taught can ever give. This order may also be regarded as the correct theological order.

The great truths of the Christian religion are found in the Bible. It is the standard of our faith and is clear and definite. It is the first and foremost *Pramana*, the highest court of appeal for every one. With the aid of reason we may and should endeavour to understand what is set out in the Bible. All our efforts with the aid of human reason are of no avail unless they are supported by our religious experience. Prayer is not real because it stands to human reason that a good and loving God who has created us responds to our prayer. But prayer is real supremely because we have found in our practical experience that God answers prayers. All these *Pramanas*, Scripture, Reason and Experience, work together to establish firmly our faith. It may be pointed out that this is not, however, the correct historical order. What first took place in the history of the Christian religion was the direct contact of God with the Prophets and Apostles of the Bible and the appearance on this earth of the Incarnate Jesus. Thus the revelation of God was given in the first instance directly by God to the Prophets and Apostles. *Pratyaksha* was

really, in point of time, the first *Pramana*. This *Pratyaksha* was recorded in the Bible, which became another *Pramana*. We, living in the twentieth century, should make the Bible the primary *Pramana*, as we cannot afford to throw away the legacy of the past.

It is characteristic of Hindu thought with its lack of recognition of the corporate character of religion, that no reference is made in it to the institutional element. There is another *Pramana* of very great importance and that is the teaching of the Church, *Sabha*. This should certainly be added to the three *Pramanas*, viz. *Shabda*, *Anumana* and *Pratyaksha*, acknowledged in India as valid. In the order of importance, its legitimate place is immediately after the Word of God in the Bible. Even as children we are influenced by the Church long before we can grasp its significance. Without a recognition of God's Presence in the Church, Christian thought and experience is woefully incomplete. It is of the essence of the Christian religion that God reveals Himself not merely to individuals but to His Church. The Hindu religion fails disastrously in this respect. It only recognizes God's dealings with individuals ; it does not recognize God's Presence in His believers, as a group or collectively.

Relation Between Pramanas and Christian Theology

We should understand clearly the relation between the *Pramanas* and Christian Theology. They are, as it were, the scaffolding which is necessary to put up the structure of Christian doctrine. Without a scaffolding no building of any size can be built ; the greater the building the more elaborate is the scaffolding. This illustration is, however, not quite adequate. It makes a complete distinction between the body of Christian doctrine and the methods by which it comes into being. When a building is complete the scaffolding is taken down but the edifice of the Christian religion is never finished and the scaffolding is never removed. Perhaps a more adequate way to conceive of the methods which God uses to impart His revelation to mankind is to regard them as the springs in the bed of a river. These springs never dry up ; but water is continuously welling forth and the river flows along to irrigate the fields and to quench human thirst. God is revealing Himself all the time.

I have mentioned briefly the number, nature and order of the *Pramanas* which the Christian theologian in India should follow. I shall now proceed to deal more fully with two of them—*Pratyaksha* and *Shabda*.

Pratyaksha or Perception

All through the ages there has been a deep yearning in the human heart for a vision of God. A Psalmist cries, 'As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God ; when shall I come and appear before God?'¹ Another Psalmist says: 'As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness ; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.'²

¹ Psalm xlii : 1, 2.

² Psalm xvii : 15.

There have been many saints in India who have been moved by a passionate longing for a vision of God. In his book entitled *A Sixteenth Century Indian Mystic*, Dr. W. G. Orr tells us about an interview which Dadu, a humble saint, had with Akbar, the great and powerful Moghul Emperor. There was a deep strain of religion in Akbar. When in the course of his tours he heard of Dadu, he expressed a desire to see him. Dadu was most unwilling to go to the Emperor, for he cared nothing for kings or royal favours. After much persuasion Akbar's courtiers prevailed upon Dadu to meet the Emperor. In the course of this interview Dadu quoted a Persian couplet:

'The soul filled with passionate yearning stands expectant at the door of vision.

The surrendered heart dwells every moment in the Divine Presence watchful, alert.'¹

There was a long discussion between Akbar and Dadu about the ways in which the Presence of God becomes manifest to the soul. The Emperor pressed Dadu to visit him again and to discuss religion with him further. Dadu absolutely refused to see the Emperor again. He had a passionate devotion to God and for nothing else. The patronage of a powerful Emperor and the favours which he was prepared to lavish were as nothing to him.

Mr. P. Chenchiah, a devout and well-read Indian Christian layman, thus speaks of the vision of Christ and the *Pramanas* of the Christian theologian. 'Why did Jehovah who spoke to Moses and the Prophets and was a friend of Abraham cease to have any dealing with men directly? Is it because Jesus has come in His place? Why has Jesus ceased to have direct transaction with us? The Indian Christian question of direct experience cannot be answered by diatribes against Mysticism. The Indian Christian seeks a plain answer for a very unmythical question.

'Jesus did not die. He rose. He did not put off His body but ascended to Heaven with it. It cannot be said that He left the world for Heaven only to return at the second advent. He appeared to Paul. If He appeared to Paul, why not to you and me? Why do Churches and books intervene and bring Him to us like water from a distant fountain-head? Is it because nobody wants to meet Him and we are all satisfied with the Bible and the Church? Why should we believe and trust those (as Dr. Bouquet wants us) who have received it as in a flash from the mind of God Himself when we do not believe the mystic when he says that he received it in more than a flash?

'The Church mechanism assures us that direct knowledge of Jesus is not possible. The central importance given to Mass among Catholics and the equally central place given to the Bible among Protestants confirm the view. If there could be direct contact with Jesus, why should we seek it through bread and wine? If God speaks to us today why hear His words through a book written about twenty centuries ago?'² With considerable emphasis this writer urges that all our knowledge of God and Christ comes from our direct contact with them and

¹ W. G. Orr, *A Sixteenth Century Indian Mystic*, page 83.

² P. Chenchiah, *The Guardian*, Madras, February 13, 1947.

and sing "He hath put down the mighty from their seats and hath exalted the humble and meek" without turning a hair'. These sentences are lifted from an article that appears elsewhere in this magazine. One may not agree with all that is said in this article but it is a reminder to the church in India and elsewhere that there is a great deal of worldliness in it. With such worldliness within it, the church cannot fight with vigour and conviction evil outside it. Few Christians will deny that Communism constitutes a real danger for human welfare and for those values for which the Christian faith stands. At the same time, neither the church that makes compromises with the world and its ways nor the church that turns away in contempt from the world in which it is set and resorts exclusively to an other-worldly pietism, can effectively fight against Communism. The present situation in India and in the world calls for repentance on the part of the church here and elsewhere, for its divisions, its worldly ways and its ineffective witness to the Christian gospel of redemption. There is also a call to us particularly in India for a positive and concrete approach in accordance with the mind of the Master, to contemporary problems that are a source of confusion and even despair to men everywhere.

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It is a matter of great satisfaction that the World Council of Churches is alive to the great need to train Christian churches everywhere to take an intelligent and active Christian interest in contemporary problems of the human society. We commend to our readers the study programme of the World Council of Churches, sponsored through its study Department. Through the activities of this Department there is a continuous flow of ecumenical conversation the world over, on such subjects as 'The Christian Hope', 'The Responsible Society', 'Meaning of Work', 'Race Relations' etc.

Lest one should think that the activities of the World Council of Churches in this regard are confined only to the promotion of theoretical discussion, we draw the attention of our readers to the activities of the Churches' Commission on International Affairs—a body jointly set up by the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council. The report of this Commission concerning its activities during the year 1951 makes very inspiring reading. Among other activities, its 'lobbying' (using the word in its best sense) in appropriate places has played a no mean part in such matters as the formulation of 'the Charter of Human Rights' by the U.N.O.'s Commission on the subject and in the spreading concept among the industrially advanced countries, of aid to underdeveloped countries.

On the whole the two ecumenical bodies, viz. the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council, which now work in close co-operation, deserve our fullest support and co-operation. There can be no doubt that they are potent instruments in the hands of God for the furtherance of His purposes in the world.