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# Hinduism Re-thinking Itself\*

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## I

The main purpose of these introductory notes on *Hinduism Re-thinking Itself* is to show that the question of the theological understanding of the problems of mankind today is also engaging the serious attention of the Hindu thinkers in our country. In India today there is a search for a new way of life, for a deeper understanding of the nature and destiny of man, and for a new integration of life in society. This search after, and research into, the meaning and purpose of life in society has become all the more important because New India does not in any way want to be left out of its spiritual contribution towards the coming into being of World Community. It is in the light of this that we should understand and study the great religious and cultural renaissance of our country as it is interpreted by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and the leaders of the Ramakrishna Mission, not to mention the others. Further the life and teaching of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Tagore have had and are having a profound effect on the lives of millions in this country. But in spite of the efforts of all these great men it is also necessary to bear in mind that there are others in India who believe that the re-organization and re-interpretation of society has to be undertaken independently of religion and entirely as a secular matter. For our purpose, however, these introductory notes will be mainly concerned with the former, with passing reference to the latter.

In his book *Religion and Society* Dr. Radhakrishnan recognizes that great spiritual issues are at stake today. Humanity is struggling to emerge out of an order which is played out; he argues, therefore, that the essential need of the day is not a programme for a party, but a way of life for the people, not a new set of adjustments but a new conception of the purpose of man. He states further that we are in the grip of demoniac forces which degrade the god-man into the herd animal. He sums up the whole situation in a most poignant sentence, 'What is missing in our age is the soul; there is nothing wrong with the body. We suffer from sickness of spirit.' The only remedy for this malady is the reclamation of man for the life of spirit. In order to do this we must discover our roots in the eternal and regain faith in the transcendent truth which will order life, discipline discordant elements, and bring unity and purpose into life.

The remaking of man must precede any profound change in man's life which will enable him to live a meaningful life. To Dr. Radhakrishnan the only justification for any organized religion is that it exists to open the way to the spiritual existence of man. Therefore, he argues, religion should not be confused with fixed intellectual conceptions,

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\*I am indebted to Dr. P. D. Devanandan's book *The Concept of Māyā* throughout this article.

which are mind-made. Any religion which claims finality and absolute-ness only desires to impose its own opinions on the rest of the world. This being his conviction he defines the essence of religion as consisting in man's hold on what is eternal and immanent in being. Hinduism is not bound up with a creed or a book, a prophet or a founder, precisely because it is a persistent search for truth on the basis of a continuously renewed experience. Hinduism according to him is human thought about God in continuous evolution. Therefore, he says, we must rediscover the soul of India. Such a discovery can only be made if it is sufficiently realized that 'this evolutionary ascent from the world of inanimate matter (anna) through life (prāṇa), mind (manas) and intelligence (vijñāna) to self-existent awareness and delight (ānanda) is happening, not automatically or capriciously, but under the stress of the Divine'. To him life is one, and in it there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular because the controlling power of spiritual faith operates in every department of life.

## II

Hinduism in re-thinking itself is doing much more than merely restating and re-interpreting the original propositions of Upanishadic orthodoxy. Dr. P. D. Devanandan in his book, *The Concept of Māyā*, says that Dr. Radhakrishnan uses the time-honoured religious terms associated so long with Hindu orthodoxy and packs them full of religious values for which it will be difficult to find sanction in Hinduism itself, and concludes: 'The Neo-Hinduism of Radhakrishnan is Hinduism re-born, a new creation, not merely revived and reconstructed'. We can readily understand this in the context of the great desire of India to march along with the totality of world-life. It is recognized that the most urgent need in India today is for a thorough re-construction of Indian society in order that India may play its full part in the affairs of the world. Therefore, in New India the ideal of service of man to man (in order to build up one solidarity and self-respect of the nation) has given a new purposiveness with a co-operative search for a social ideal. Influenced by the life, teaching and example of Mahatma Gandhi it is recognized that such a task calls for the acceptance of the ultimate sovereignty of spiritual truth and all its moral obligations, the chief of which is reverence for life.

The ideological reconstruction of Hindu religious theory today is more revolutionary and radical but yet spiritual in temper because, in the first place, the new social ideals now dominating the Hindu view of life found their way into Indian society through men who were either critical or sceptical of the validity of the faith of their fathers; secondly, though they lacked the real knowledge of orthodox Hindu religious ideals, they were enabled to appreciate the Hindu way of life and take interest in Hindu religious theory because of their great admiration for Mahatma Gandhi; thirdly, in the predominance of lay leadership of the reform movement within Hinduism there is an impatient anxiety about the application of religious truth to the current conditions of everyday life; fourthly, the impatience about religious theory and the insistence upon a practical programme is due to 'a fresh sense of history' and 'a new consciousness of politics'; fifthly, it is recognized that the urgent need in India today is for a dynamic activism which will give drive to social-reconstruction. Therefore, the present generation inspired by the leader-

ship of Swami Vivekananda insists on working out the practical implications of Hinduism without waiting for a social theory, carefully enunciated according to Hindu religious theory, which will justify the great social changes of today. K. M. Panikkar in his *Hinduism and the Modern World* speaks for such a generation when he asks, 'How can the Hindus be made vigorous, active and healthy members, instead of being the invalids, as they are now, of the human family? . . . It is obvious that, constituted as the Hindus are, they are in no position to participate effectively in the shaping of human destiny.'

What has been said so far has indicated that in India much religious thought is being given to the whole question of theological principles underlying the problems of Society. Can this reformed and vivified Hinduism provide the needed intellectual justification and spiritual drive for the new life in India? There is a possibility that in certain quarters the need for a religious theory of Society may be denied. Since religions have been a divisive force in our history much stress has been laid on the underlying cultural unity in a secular India. Further, there is also evidence of an unbounded faith that the great advance which science is making will result in the inevitable progress in the well-being of Society in India. It is easier to understand this when the sole aim seems to be material advancement through rapid industrialization. Another possibility is that though the educated Hindu may not actually deny religious values he will be indifferent to any credal religion. He seems to say: let him that believes, believe, and believe what he likes; only let us stand together in our fight for social righteousness. A passion for social righteousness and social re-construction has an enormous appeal to the vast majority of people in this country. Therefore the best men of the country, who in former generations would have sought the quiet and peace of the mountain side or the forest, are now devoting themselves to the service of the poor. There is yet another possibility. This is to seek a 'dynamic rejuvenation' of Hinduism and thereby provide an adequate religious theory of Society. To Dr. Radhakrishnan it is clear that the only way to save the people of India from succumbing to materialism in the name of secularism is to convert the Upanishadic orthodoxy from being mere 'containers' of religious philosophy into 'generators' of spiritual power.

### III

To a Christian the ideological reconstruction of Hindu religious theories whether in the name of orthodoxy or neo-orthodoxy, in the name of the absolute idealism of the Vedanta or the lofty mysticism of the Vaishnava cult, in the name of dynamic activism or in the name of social righteousness, raises a very important question regarding his own Christian faith as an Indian in a secular India, taking his full share in the material advancement of Indian society. What is he to make of the essentials of Hinduism such as the nature of the Brahman, the principle of Karma-Samsāra, the significance of the Jīvātman, the Māyā-World of action and reaction, and the Hindu social fabric of caste-dharma. These time-honoured religious terms, long associated with Hindu orthodoxy, have acquired new and vigorous spiritual content and as such are full of religious values for which it would be difficult to find sanction in Orthodox Hinduism.

The World, said Sankara, is *Māyā* because from the standpoint of *Śruti* (revelation) it is *tuccha* (fictitious); from the standpoint of *Yukti* (discursive reasoning) it is *anirvacaniya* (not to be explained in words, inexplicable, and from the standpoint of *laukika bodha* (world-mindedness, practical reasoning) it is, to be sure, *Vāstavi* (real). (Quoted by Dr. P. D. Devanandan.) This being the world-view in Hinduism it is difficult to see how any reconciliation can be made between such a view of God, world and man and the Christian conception of God, world and man. The differences become clearer when we consider the problem of the connection between the idea of God and the experience of God. The question to be asked in the Re-thinking of Hinduism is this: Who is this God who is experienced? Unless this question is asked, and repeatedly asked, how is it possible to have great and jubilant assertions of the reality of God and the meaning of religious life of man in society?

Dr. Radhakrishnan insists that religion is a matter of personal realization. Does this mean that, for a Hindu, there can really be (as Dr. Albert Schweitzer points out) no question of activity in co-operation with the Spirit of the Universe; but only of devoting oneself to (a personal) activity through which he may experience spiritual union with the Spirit? Dr. Radhakrishnan in answer says that Hinduism insists on working steadily upwards and improving our knowledge of God. Revelation, then, for the Hindu is intuitive insights of men into the nature of Reality. The Christian conviction that Revelation is the self-disclosing activity of God to man diverges completely from the Hindu conception of revelation. The Christian conviction and experience is that revelation is a movement from God's side and not a 'discovery' of God by man's intuitive insights. (Though theistic points of view may be provisionally entertained in certain aspects of Hindu thought, the all-pervading conception of the Divine is fundamentally and uncompromisingly monistic.)

Today in India there are many who believe that Sankara's reduction of the world to a mere phantasmagoria can be rejected as there is no need to be 'world-denying' in that extreme degree. To such people this can be done without surrendering the typical character of Indian religion. Thus, Ramanuja can maintain the reality of the world and even adduce a certain measure of Upanishadic backing for this. To him the world as well as the individual souls in it are real. Neither of them is essentially the same as Brahman and apart from Brahman they are nothing. They can exist and be what they are because Brahman is their soul and inwardly controlling power. To him Sankara is wrong when he describes the Brahman of the Upanishads as 'pure intelligence'. Intelligence is but one of the attributes of Brahman because the Upanishadic First Principle is not devoid of attributes. 'The Lord pervades and governs both material and immaterial things in this organic and inorganic world as their antaryāmin, inward controller.' (Dr. Devanandan.) Thus, to Ramanuja God is a person and creation takes place as a result of volition on the part of the Lord. He contends that the cognition of the ultimate reality of God is a 'gift' (*prasādam*). In this he brings out his doctrine of grace but he is emphatic that there is no merging of the soul into the absolute perfection of the Brahman. While participating in all the splendour of the Brahman, it retains its individuality. Further, he also conceives the world as the 'body' of Brahman. He defines 'body' as 'any substance which a conscious being completely controls and supports

for its own purpose and whose only nature consists in being subservient to the conscious being'. The whole world with its souls and matter is completely controlled and supported by Brahman. This is because to him the essence of 'body' consists in being subservient to the soul embodied in it. Therefore, the physical and psychological things in the world can only exist as the 'modes' of Brahman. Thus Ramanuja can maintain the reality of the world and can think in terms of a world which is created, sustained and dissolved again by God. But this world (of Ramanuja) 'remains ever what it is, a *līlā*, a sport of the Deity, a concatenation without goal and end (true, not without objective existence), but eternally worthless, never arriving at a fulness of worth, never glorified and made an abode of the Kingdom and the final dominion of God Himself'. (Rudolf Otto in *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity, Compared and Contrasted*. Quoted by A. G. Hogg.)

#### IV

To conclude, it is submitted that the Hindu understanding of the principles underlying the theological understanding of society seems to bring out pointedly that while the Christian is thinking, praying and speaking in terms of 'Faith', the Hindu is thinking, praying and speaking in terms of 'Knowledge'. It is therefore fundamentally a question of conflict, not merely of terms used, but of the whole conception of Faith in God and Knowledge of God. The one thinks in terms of the revelational activity of God in His World and the other speaks of human thought *continuing* to discover and know God. The *nāmā* (name) and *rūpā* (form) of God in Hinduism is contrary to the 'name' and 'form' of God as revealed by Jesus Christ. In the words of Prof. Otto the Hindu attitude is: 'You want "morals," "ethics," "culture," and so on. But we "are above it," for we want more and quite different things. We want "salvation" and nothing but salvation. We want to serve God and Him alone, not any cosmic purpose beside and with Him whatsoever.' 'Salvation' means turning away from the concrete and temporal to contemplation of the abstract and timeless. Therefore, philosophical Hinduism understands and teaches the language of 'Release', as opposed to the fundamental Christian doctrine of 'Redemption'. The strong feeling is that anything worth calling 'salvation' must promise escape from this endless repetition of embodied existence and point to attainment of union with the peaceful 'Absolute'. Thus, the longing is for *serenity* rather than *sanctity*.

It is in this background that we must understand the entire religious outlook of India in its traditional, institutional and reactionary aspects. There is a revolutionary urge which seeks a dynamic outlet in the passion for social service and the accent is more and more laid on the national-cultural-religious heritage. Nay more, 'we must now reorganize our religious thought and practice, if Hinduism is to recover its conquering force and power to advance, penetrate and fertilize the world,' says Dr. Radhakrishnan. It is amazing that this language of militant advance should be used now after all these centuries when the 'conquering force' has been employed in adjusting and assimilating alien ideas and ideologies within the amorphous and all-comprehending, all-inclusive system of life and thought termed 'Hinduism'.