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The Vedanta Philosophy and the Message of Christ

P. CHENCHIAH

Dr. Carl Keller certainly strikes a new note in Christian theology. The Indian School of Theology with which he is good enough to associate my name would welcome him as a friend and well-wisher. So far the missionaries and Indian Christian critics who follow them see in Indian Christian theology only a deviation from the stereotype of orthodox church Christianity. I am pleased that he has not failed to perceive the deeper reality behind the movement, not a petulant departure from the Church but a departure from the Church in search of the Jesus Whom the Indian Christian longs to meet directly (*pratyakṣa*), and see Him with his own eyes and not through photos on the Church panels or hear him through canned voices in the Scriptures. I may add two more ingredients of Indian Christian theology of equal importance. Every nation is a chosen race, chosen for a different purpose: the choice consists in training and disciplining the mind to perceive features which but for such training escape the general attention. The Jew, the Greek, and the Indian are chosen people in religion just as the Germans are in pure philosophy and the French in art. The Indian interpretation of Christ is not merely a presentation of Jesus intelligible to the Hindu nor is it talking to him in a language of ideas understandable by him. It has nothing to do, primarily, with the transmission of the Christian message but with apprehending Jesus. Hinduism is our spiritual eye; but for its existence the Hindu convert would have passed by Christ. The Hindu heritage constitutes God's provision of an eye to the Hindu to see Christ. Before we rotate round Jesus, we have to be led to Him, and this task was entrusted by Christ to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit leads us to Christ and Christ takes us to God: hence the primary concern of the Indian Christian is to possess the Holy Spirit and impart Him to the Hindu. Coming to Christ is more than a human task: the Holy Spirit alone can bring the Hindu to Christ. Indian Christian theology stands on three pillars—Hindu heritage, *pratyakṣa* experience of Christ and for that purpose the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The contributions of the Jew and the Greek have already been made through St. Peter and St. John; the Indian Christian contribution remains to be made.

Dr. Carl Keller has made a significant advance over others by applying the advaitic concept to the interpretation of God and His nature and of Christ and the Incarnation. He takes us above vague generalizations and affirmations about advaita, by putting it to the test of definite Christian doctrines, and points out the gains which advaitic doctrine

yields. The prominent features of his article to which I should like to state my reactions are:—

1. Sankara advaitism as typical of Hindu religious consciousness ;
2. The interpretation of Sankara advaitism through Kant, as his countryman and philosopher Deussen has done ;
3. The contributions of Sankara advaitism to theology and Christology respectively.

Sankara Advaitism

There is no denying the intellectual pre-eminence and prestige of advaita in Hinduism. It has influenced Hindu theism and fundamentally altered Hindu metaphysics. It has uncovered an experience of God beyond all description and reachability. Nevertheless I do not think it would be correct to say that Sankara advaitism is typical of Hindu religious experience. The influence of Sankara is largely due to the fact that the advaitic doctrine stands as the background underlying Hindu experiences in all their variety, without affecting their validity. It has chosen to lie with *Karma* and *Bhakti* as its bedfellows and to accommodate itself to caste and temple ideology. In tradition it was not a reformatory force, though it must be said that modern advaitism has shown a reformatory character, a capacity for social service. I may say Sankara's advaitism has a philosophical prestige out of all proportion to its influence in shaping religious experience. It has imparted to religious thought the feeling of immeasurable depths below and unattainable heights above in God—but these all lie behind and beyond human experience like the heavens above *gopurams*—without affecting the complicated religious structure of doctrine and belief. It has been something of a plus added to the historic process which it neither touches nor transforms.

The Interpretation of Sankara through Kant

The interpretation of Sankara in the light of Kant introduces a terminology and sets problems not germane to Sankara. Reality and appearance do not belong to Sankara's advaitism, in which *sat* and *asat* and *māyā* are the governing ideas. Kant, proclaimed in emphatic terms by Bradley, holds that appearance and reality are the constituents of things. Appearance is reality in the context of time and space, which not only reveal but also distort it. Reality assumes a mask that hides its real face. Dr. Keller's whole article turns on how reality can appear and does appear without fully disclosing itself. Both in Sāṅkhya, the parent of all Indian philosophy, and in advaita *sat* and *asat* are two different orders having no connection with each other. In advaita the reality never appears and appearance has no reality whatsoever. Both Kant and Sankara agree that reality has no manner of resemblance to appearance : in Kant it is so because time and space twist it out of all recognition, in Sankara because reality has no truck with appearances. Dr. Keller observes that the investigations of God's relation to the appearances and of the appearances themselves may be more difficult. To the advaitin the problem does not exist because God has no relation to appearance. In this connection I find Ramanuja disposed of in rather a cavalier way. Then again he says that there is no solution to the problem of

icipation. This same principle applies to all those participating in the worship, the assistants, the choir, the organist and those in charge of seating or administering any part of the service. The entire personnel in leadership as well as those in the congregation must be in a unified worship atmosphere. The distractions caused by interruptions through insensitive worshippers can destroy the dramatic effectiveness of worship.

This is particularly true because dramatic worship is always unified worship which begins with the entrance into a receptive attitude and continues as the worshipper is raised to that point of unity and relationship with God which is the end of dramatic worship. It continues until the experience is completed. The object of worship should be the creation of an experience that can be carried out and continued after the group is disbanded. The more one becomes experienced in worship, the more fully he will be learning the ways in which the experience is continued.

Dramatic unity is always achieved by recognizing a beginning, a rising action, a climax and an end. These are not artificial markings. They are essential elements in the structure of a worship service. For this reason the place of worship, the establishment of the atmosphere and mood, the call to worship, the participation leading up to the climax of the moment of emotional and intellectual unity in the spirit, and the holding of that until it is established and becomes reality—all are component parts of the total dramatic worship experience.

Ways to Dramatic Effectiveness

The setting of a worship service can be either dramatic or theatrical. If it is theatrical, there will be trappings that will call attention to themselves. A dramatic setting never calls attention to itself. It always becomes part of a total picture. This means that when lighting, costuming, setting and any other atmospheric conditions calling attention to themselves obtrude so that they distract from the purpose which is to lead the inner spirit of man to unity with the spirit of the universe, then the dramatic element is lost and the service ends in a theatrically impressive but superficial experience. Anything new may often be considered theatrical. It must be introduced with explanation and through an educational process. If it startles it may succeed in being impressive but only superficially so. Changes in an accustomed service are oftentimes so distracting that they negate any chance for betterment. This does not mean that worship needs to be stereotyped or that changes cannot be made. The way in which they are made is important. Worshippers must be prepared for changes or worship is likely to be theatrically exciting but not dramatically effective.

Dramatic unity which has the structure of a beginning, rising action and a climatic ending, is not an artificial structure. The tone and intensity of worship should obviously not be the same at the beginning as they are at the climax. There should be rising action or intensifying feeling as the service progresses. The worshipper comes into the atmosphere and experience from myriad distracting experiences. Each person coming into group worship is coming from a different kind of distraction. In the theatre the lowering of the lights, the magic moment before the curtain rises when the audience is stilled, the use of music and the

The Contribution of Sankara to Theology and Christology

There are many advaitisms in Hinduism, viz:—

- (1) Sankara advaita; one alone exists; the sense of difference arises from *Māyā* ;
- (2) Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja ; nature and men are the body and Brahman the soul ;
- (3) Dvaitādvaita of Nimbārka ; similarity and difference are both real;
- (4) Suddhādvaita of Vallabha ; Krishna, the avatar, is alone the sole reality ;
- (5) Aurobindo's integral unity as reality.

Hinduism, philosophical and religious, combines two opposing currents; one, emerging from a sense of the unreality of the world and creation, attempts to flow back to the pre-creative reality of Brahman: the other, holding the world to be real but imperfectly real, seeks to bring Brahman into the cosmos. The 'idam' (all this is Brahman) in the first Upanishad Isopanishad, and the 'neti' (all this is not Brahman) in the latter Upanishads, are two fundamental attitudes, and the strength of Hinduism lies in its refusal to abandon one for the other. It refuses the seductions of the senses when it says, 'all this is Brahman'; it refuses the seduction of reason when it says, 'all this is not Brahman'. The Indian inheritance holds both propositions, though they are contradictory, and throws logic to the winds; hence the many schools of advaita.

Sri Krishna affirms, 'I am', in the Gita, Sankara affirms, 'I am not' in his Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya. If we take the Incarnation seriously, 'idam' theology will do justice to it, and not 'neti'. The avatar has been a stumbling block to advaitins in Hinduism and Barthians in Christianity. Sankara passes over Gita IV. 7, 'Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Bharata, then I come into being from age to age', without commenting, giving only *pāda* and *vishaya* (the meaning of the words). Avatars are the headache of advaita just as miracles are the headache of theological professors; the Incarnation does not fit into the advaitic framework. Sankara was a worshipper of Śakti, the consort of Siva, and not a worshipper of Krishna, although he pays homage to Krishna by writing a commentary on the Gita. Advaitism, an uncompromising doctrine of the transcendent, may throw light on theology; all that Dr. Keller says of advaitic illumination may be true of Christian theology, but it is a poor support for Christology. Barthians are in the same predicament as Sankarites; they do not know Christ after the flesh—as if there was any other Christ; the resurrected and ascended Lord had a body and carried it to heaven. I think that while Vedanta experience is fundamental to Hinduism we need not restrict it to Sankara's advaita. I would interpret Christ from the Upanishadic standpoint, rather than from the advaitic. Those portions of Dr. Keller's article which attempt to interpret the Incarnation from the advaitic standpoint are the least convincing; the Jewish mind could hardly ever attain to advaita and to quote psalms in support has the appearance of a tour-de-force.

Hinduism is still growing. The canon is a human expedient; history does not stop because we draw lines before it and abjure it not to cross:

the closure of the canon both in Christianity and Hinduism arose out of a fear of God's growing revelation. Modern Hinduism has as much right to be heard as ancient. Dr. Radhakrishnan, who popularized the Vedanta in British University circles, holds that *nirguna* Brahman should not be regarded as a separate reality from *saguna*; Sankara would not agree to this. Sri Aurobindo belongs to the advaitic tradition, although he may not be in the lines of its apostolic succession. His doctrine proclaims that God fulfils Himself in creation; the supra-mental life will perfect man and make him embodied God. We have no right to rule out modern advaitins; they are most helpful in interpreting Christ to the modern Hindu.

The contribution of Sankara to theology should be acknowledged. He did the same service for religious experience as Freud did for psychology. The mystery of life cannot be grasped in the measure of man; the Brahman stretches beyond and behind the human mind. The mind that loses itself in the immeasurable Brahman comes back refreshed and illumined and understands life better, although it cannot explain why.

The Contribution of Vallabha to Christology

If Sankara's advaitism cannot support incarnation, except by way of offering apologies for it and attenuating it as far as possible, is there any advaita which can be helpful to the Indian Christian in constructing a Christology? I think Vallabha's Suddhadvaita and Aurobindo's ideology can serve that purpose. Suddhadvaita pursues the 'idam' line of thought to incarnation, in which it finds a culmination. Vallabha does not use modern theological language nor does he use the thought-forms which St. Paul and St. John use. But he stands for the primacy of the avatar, the absolute supreme reality of Krishna. He adopts the theological framework of the Bhagavadgita. For him Krishna is the absolute—no absolute behind him, no God, no Brahman apart or beyond him. In this respect he stands at the opposite pole to Sankara: in advaita when God and man unite God alone remains; in Suddhadvaita Krishna alone remains. If Sankara says, 'how can Krishna be an absolute or universal?', Vallabha would retort, 'So much the worse for Brahman as the Absolute'. This note, that in Jesus God has become man and has come into the creative order, sounds true to the Scriptures and the early apostolic testimony. To the apostles Christ and the Holy Spirit were existing realities, and God was in them; there is no going beyond them. The metaphysical was somehow absorbed into the physical.

Sri Aurobindo comes nearest to St. Paul's Second-Adam Christology. Creation gradually draws God into itself; when the Holy Spirit or supra-mental life enters man, he becomes the crown of creation, the Creator fulfilling Himself in creation. God and man become one, the Son of Man. Jesus' description of Himself as Son of Man has yet to receive due attention from Western theology. Indian Christian theology, with the help of Aurobindo and Vallabha, may bring into relief its significance. Dr. Keller's statement that the divine assumption of human nature cannot obtain absolute reality does not ring true to apostolic teaching and conviction. The resurrection and ascension does not prove his point; for if we take them with the undeniable conviction of the second advent of Christ, Christ retaining His body all through, the

reverse seems to be the case : they show the conviction of the absoluteness and ultimacy of the Incarnation.

The Indian inherits the total culture of Hinduism and not a section of it; it lives in him not as a dogma of theology but as an intuition and a vision. The Upanishadic note is more characteristic of the Hindu heritage than the advaitic. Let us interpret Jesus in the light of our inheritance, not of a School; let us formulate our theology in the light of advaita and our Christology in the light of Vallabha and Aurobindo; why not?

In the exploratory period the Indian Christian will best serve the cause of theology by portraying Jesus from the standpoint of all the *darśanas*. We will have five or six interpretations. Dr. Karl Keller has given the advaitic portrait; I have tried, however sketchily, to give the Suddhādvaitic portrait. Let us have all the other pictures; then we can judge which of them comes nearest to Jesus.

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We have not hesitated to follow the example of scripture in saying to those who hold idol worship as the best way to know God: 'You use some *mūrti*, some material form to help to see God. It may be through *mūrtipūjā*, the worship of an earthen image; or through *śilāpūjā*, the use of a stone image; or through *panchalōhapūjā*, the folding of the hands to an image of one of the five metals. Yet you have been taught that it is only *manōmayapūjā*, the worship of the mind, of mental images, that can avail to show you the Invisible. You confess that conscience shows the ineffectiveness of idol worship. You worship some of the gods of your fathers in their *sāntamūrti*, their mild form, and also in their *ugramūrti*, their fierce aspect, suggesting both the goodness and the severity of God. Yet you know, and freely admit, that no images, however many, can show God as He is' We can and do say: 'The Lord Jesus, Whom we proclaim to you, has proved Himself to us the image, the very *tatvamūrti*, of God.'

W. E. TOMLINSON

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Brahmanical philosophers declare unconditioned Spirit to be being (Sat), thought (Chit) and joy (Anand). We, trained alike by the testimony of our own consciousness and by the teaching of our faith, to believe in the personality of God, and to think of Him as distinct from ourselves, have difficulty in conceiving an impersonal God, and in perceiving the full bearing of the above definition. But let us try to introduce into it the idea of personality and consequent relationships, and chiefly the relationship of the Creator and the creature, imparting what He Himself has; and we have: the imparters of Being—the Creator; the imparters of Thought—the Word; the imparters of Joy—the Comforter. Here, then, we have in the Vedantic Trinity a certain analogy to the Christian Trinity.

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