

The Dialogue with Hinduism

by Bede Griffiths

404

The establishment of the new Secretariat for other religions in Rome is a sign of a new approach within the Catholic Church. For the first time in history the Church has begun to adopt a positive attitude towards other religions. In the past the belief has been that it is the mission of the Church to 'teach all nations' and to convert them from 'error' to the knowledge of the 'truth'. It is true that there has always been a recognition of the fact that there is truth to be found in other religions and that men can be saved in them, and this goes back to the earliest tradition of the Bible, but never before has there been an open recognition of other religions as entities with which the Church can enter into a dialogue. Just as the Secretariat for Unity has taught us to recognize Christian values in the separated Christian Churches and to enter into ecumenical relations with them, so the new Secretariat for Religions is a recognition of the fact that there are religious values in other religions and opens the way to an ecumenical dialogue with them as corporate bodies or institutions.

This new attitude is due, no doubt, primarily to the changed condition of the world. For the first time in history the great religions of the world have come into global contact with one another and have begun to confront one another with mutual understanding. There are today five great religions in the world, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, to which one may perhaps add a sixth, Confucianism, if one understands by that the tradition of Chinese religion, which includes both Taoism and Confucianism. It is true that this is now submerged in China, but one can hardly doubt that a time will come when the Chinese will be led to recover the values of their ancient civilization. Each of these religions has a certain claim to universality. With Judaism, Christianity and Islam this has always been explicit; Hinduism and Buddhism and Confucianism have so far been confined to Asia, and Hinduism and Buddhism have only recently begun to lay claim to universality, yet one may say that the claim is in a sense implicit in them. Hindus called their religion *sanatana dharma*, the eternal religion, and it is their belief that it reveals the eternal nature of man and therefore can embrace all mankind. The Buddha also believed that he had discovered the final truth, the way of salvation for man, and Buddhism has always shown a strong missionary spirit.

These religions can be divided into two groups, which are sharply distinguished from one another, and form as has been said two 'spiritual hemispheres'. There are the three western religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which belong to the 'prophetic' type and all alike recognize one, supreme, transcendent personal God, who reveals himself through his prophets; and on the other hand there are the three Eastern religions which are of a 'mystical' character, recognizing the one, infinite, eternal Being which is immanent in nature and the soul of man and which is known in the experience of the soul in its depths. The difference, however must not be exaggerated. There is a mystical tradition in both Judaism, Christianity and Islam, while Hinduism, and to a less extent Buddhism and Confucianism, have also their worship of a personal God. The antithesis, in fact, only brings out the fact that these religions are essentially complementary, representing the two sides of all genuine religion. One may believe that it is the task of the future to bring these two traditions into vital relation with one another, and that the Secretariat for Religions is one of the instruments devised for this undertaking.

In other words the western religions, which have always tended to regard themselves as forms of the one true religion and to seek to impose their belief on others, have to learn to recognize that they can no longer ignore the spiritual wisdom of the East and have to come to terms with Eastern religion. On the other hand, the Eastern religions have to learn to face the reality of the prophetic message of the West and not to assume, as they tend to do, that it can be simply absorbed in the synthesis of their own religion. The difficulty which a Christian experiences in India today is that Hindus consider that all religions are but different forms of the one *sanatana dharma*; all are essentially the same, and differ only in their accidental forms, their 'rites and dogmas'. This is certainly attractive as a way of reconciling the differences in religion which divide mankind, but for a Christian, as for a Jew or a Muslim, it involves the denial of what he believes to be essential in his religion. The problem, then, is how this synthesis can be achieved without renouncing any of the essential values of the different religions. This is the ecumenical problem in the world today.

One may believe that India is in a privileged position in this matter, because in no other country is there such a deeply rooted diversity of religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Parseeism, Judaism and Christianity have all been in India for nearly two thousand years, and in no country is there such a profoundly religious culture surviving today. When one looks back over the history of India it is difficult not to believe that it holds a privileged place in the history of religion. From its beginnings in the first millenium before Christ Indian religion has undergone a continuous evolution, giving birth to at least four different religions,

Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, and to innumerable sects within Hinduism, each with its own doctrine and cult, and developing a continuous philosophical tradition, in which the religious genius of the race has found expression. It would, I think, be possible to argue that all mystical religion has its source in India. Certainly the spiritual movement which gave birth to the Upanishads, to Buddhism, and to Jainism in the sixth century B.C. is unique in the history of the world. Then for the first time it seems that the human mind broke through the barrier of the senses and attained to an intuition of the ultimate reality. It is this intuition of ultimate reality, transcending both sense and reason, whether it is known as Brahman or Atman or Nirvana, which has been the inspiration of all Indian religion and underlies all its philosophical thought. Beyond this, it seems certain that it was from this source that Pythagoras drew the inspiration which introduced a mystical current into Greek thought and descended through Plato and Plotinus into the Christian Church. It can further be shown that it was from this source that a new mystical current entered into Islam and transformed Sufi doctrine. Perhaps the only other genuine mystical source is to be found in the Taoist doctrine, which arose at almost the same time in China.

The mystical tradition in India has, however, two distinct streams, both of which can be traced to their origin in the Upanishads and which continually converge, but which create a kind of tension in all Indian religion. The first is the more philosophical experience which received its final formulation in the advaita doctrine of Shankara. This has its source in the earliest Upanishads, where the great discovery is made that all this world is Brahman. Beneath all the apparent diversities of this world there is to be found one eternal Being, unseen, unheard, unknown, from which this world arises and into which it is resolved. This is the Brahman, the one 'without a second' (*advaita*). From this arises the second great intuition of Indian philosophy: the Brahman is the Atman. Just as beneath all the external appearances of the world there is to be found one unchanging Being, so beneath all the apparent diversities of the human person there is to be found one unchanging Self (*Atman*) and this Self is the Brahman. There is an absolute identity of knowing and being which is also absolute bliss, and beyond this there is nothing at all. This is the central intuition of the Upanishads upon which Shankara based his whole philosophy and in the light of which he interpreted all religious truth.

But alongside this there is another aspect of the doctrine of the Upanishads, which led to a different development. The Brahman-Atman has both a personal and an impersonal aspect. If the Brahman is Being, it is also knowing; it is the great Person (*purusha*). As such it is known as *Isa* or *Isvara*, the Lord. In the later Upanishads like the Svetasvatara, this personal character of the Brahman is strongly emphasized and as

Isa, the Lord and Creator, he is identified with the god, Rudra, who later became known as Siva. The problem was thus posed for Indian philosophy, what is the relation between the Brahman and the personal God, and it is a problem which one may say has never been resolved. With this goes the problem of the nature of the world and the soul; do they really exist or are they only an illusion? For Shankara the Brahman alone really exists; the personal God, the Creator and Lord, and the human soul and the world are all alike 'maya'. They are 'superimposed' through ignorance of the one reality of the Brahman. Though such concepts may be helpful at a certain stage of spiritual progress, ultimately they are unreal, and wisdom consists simply in the knowledge of the non-dual Brahman, in which all differences disappear. There is certainly a basis for this doctrine in the Upanishads, but it has not yet crystallized and Shankara's rigorous doctrine does not seem to do justice to the other aspect of Hindu thought.

This other aspect, the recognition that the ultimate reality is personal and that the world and the soul have a real relation to this personal God, was developed through the growth of a remarkable movement, which grew up some centuries before the birth of Christ. This was the movement of devotion (*bhakti*) to a personal God, known as Vishnu, one of the old gods of the Vedas, who came to be regarded as the Lord and Creator of the universe. At much the same time devotion seems also to have arisen to Shiva, a strange god associated with the storm and with fertility, having the lingam as his symbol, who was also worshipped as the great ascetic, having his seat on mount Kailasa and ruling the world by the power of his austerity (*tapas*). It was thus that in the course of time Vishnu and Shiva came to be worshipped together with Brahma (in the masculine) as different aspects of the supreme God, the Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer (but also renewer) of the world. But eventually Brahma ceased to attract any worship (there is said to be but one temple to him in India today) and Vishnu and Shiva each came to be worshipped as the one supreme God, their followers being known as Vaishnavaites and Shaivites respectively.

The cult of Vishnu and Shiva is of extraordinary interest, because it brought with it an intense devotion to a personal God, who was conceived as a being of infinite love, who draws his worshippers to him by his 'grace' (*anugraha*). Furthermore Vishnu was believed to have manifested himself at different times by his 'descent' (*avatara*) to deliver the world from evil. The two principal avatars of Vishnu are those of Rama and Krishna. Rama was originally the hero of the great epic poem the Ramayana. The original poem was probably written about 500 B.C., but it received numerous interpolations in the course of time and was not finally completed until about A.D. 400. In these later books Rama appears no longer as a merely human hero but as the avatara of

Vishnu, and from this time the cult of Rama began as the 'incarnation' of the Supreme God, and as such he is worshipped throughout India today. It is said that the last words which Mahatma Gandhi uttered when he was shot were an invocation of Rama. The avatara of Vishnu as Krishna was first celebrated in the Bhagavad Gita, the Song of the Lord, which was added to the other great epic, the Mahabharata, probably about 300 B.C. Here again Krishna first appeared in the Mahabharata as an epic hero, but in the Bhagavad Gita he is represented as the 'incarnation' of Vishnu. From this time he also came to be worshipped as the supreme God, and his cult was spread all over India.

The cult of Rama and Krishna and Shiva seems to have developed first in south India between A.D. 500 and 1000. It was spread by groups of poet-saints, who wandered round the countryside singing songs in honour of the god to whom they were devoted and roused the feelings of the people to intense devotion. But this cult was given a philosophical form by Ramanuja, a Tamil Brahmin, who was born near Madras in the second half of the eleventh century. In opposition to Shankara he maintained that the supreme Being was not the impersonal Brahman, but the personal God Vishnu and that the human soul was not destined to merge in the infinite Brahman but to live for ever as a distinct individual united by love to its Lord. Ramanuja's doctrine was generally accepted by the Vaishnavite movement and was developed further by a series of great theologians, Madhva, who carried it further towards a doctrine of complete 'dualism' (*dvaita*), Nimbarka and Vallabha, who each centred their doctrine on devotion to Krishna. In this form the doctrine was spread all over north India and gave rise to numerous movements of devotional piety, which have left their mark on Indian religion to the present day.

When we consider the general character of this movement, its worship of one Supreme God, whose nature is said to be Being, Knowledge and Bliss, the Absolute of the Vedanta, but who at the same time is believed to have a personal form, manifested as Shiva or Vishnu, Rama or Krishna, and whose chief characteristic is his love, which is shown to his worshippers by the bestowal of his grace: when we consider too the doctrine of the avatara, so closely akin to the idea of incarnation, and the conception of final bliss as consisting in union with God in the love of total surrender (*prapatti*), it is difficult not to see in this religion a kind of prefiguration of Christian religion. It is to be noted that a similar development of devotion to a personal God grew up even in the austere doctrine of Buddhism at about the same time before the birth of Christ, and gave rise to the cult of the Bodhisattva, the 'enlightened one', who out of love and compassion for the world refuses to enter Nirvana until all living beings have been delivered. There is no reason to believe that there has been any direct influence of Christianity on either of these

developments, and therefore one is compelled rather to see them as manifestations of the universal providence of God, who thus made himself known in different parts of the world at more or less the same time.

Yet though the parallels with Christianity are undoubtedly close and should not be underestimated, there are also very important differences. Indian religion seems never to have been able to reach a clear conception of the idea of creation. In the Upanishads, as we have seen, there is evidence of the belief in the ultimate identity of all things in the absolute Brahman 'without duality', but the doctrine had not been strictly defined and there is evidence equally of the acceptance of the world as having reality in itself. But as the nature of this reality is not defined, and there is no clear conception of creation, Ramanuja and the later doctors of the Vedanta were never able to conceive the real relation of the world to God. Thus Ramanuja was led to say that the world though distinct from God is yet a 'part' or 'attribute' (*prakara*) of God. In his view the nature of God is 'qualified', having different 'modes' and 'attributes', and the world and souls are among the modes or attributes of the divine Being. Apart from Madhva, who was a strict 'dualist', all the other doctors of the Vedanta follow Ramanuja in one way or another, often with great subtlety, but it is difficult for any of them to escape the charge of pantheism.

Thus Indian philosophy moves between the two poles of 'advaita', in which the world of nature and of men is held to have no distinct reality and 'vishishtadvaita' in which the world and men are held to be 'parts' of God. It is true that in Madhva we find a system of strict duality, in which it is declared 'diverse are all things of the world and they possess diverse attributes', but even in him there is no doctrine of creation. The world of nature and of souls is held to exist eternally in dependence on God but not created by him. Thus it seems, as Father Johanns maintained in his comprehensive study of the Vedanta in the light of Christian thought, that the Vedanta never finally resolves the problem of the relation of the world to God. In the same way it has never been able to establish the relation of the personal God to the supreme Brahman. Either with Shankara it says that the personal God ultimately belongs to the world of Maya and is lost in the absolute Brahman, or with Ramanuja it maintains that though the personal God is absolute his nature is 'qualified' and he possesses different attributes, so that the simplicity of the divine nature is destroyed. For most Hindus today it must be said that the tendency is to accept the solution of Shankara as ultimate, even though in practice they may be devoted to a personal God.

May we not believe that this unresolved problem at the heart of the Vedanta presents a challenge to Christian faith at the present day? So far we have been content to preach the Gospel in terms of Greek philosophy,

in which the Church learned to express her theology when she first encountered it in the Roman Empire. Are we not being called now in India to express our theology in the terms of the Vedanta? This would be not simply to adopt certain terms of the Vedanta and adapt them to a preconceived theology, but to see how Christ comes in the fullness of his divine and human nature to answer the problem which is posed by the Vedanta itself. This would be a genuine meeting of Hindu and Christian thought, in which Christ would be seen as the true 'end' of the Vedas, towards which the Vedanta has been unconsciously leading but which of itself it is unable to reach. At the same time it would be to bring to Christian doctrine the immeasurable riches of Hindu thought and experience adding a further dimension to the growth of the mystical Body of Christ.

Our Aim of Truth

'In our aim of finding and telling the truth we will not primarily concern ourselves with what is good; but only with the highest good, the Truth. This is but to realize that transcendentals, such as truth, must be sought for their own sake or they will not be found in their fullness. Truth-seeking and truth-telling must not be blended and weakened with enquiries into the economic, political, ethical or theological value of the truth. Men should not accept the findings of science because they are useful; nor the axioms of mathematics because of their economic value. So too it is a kind of unconscious treason to believe in God (if that were possible) because it profits us in this world or in the next. To serve the Truth otherwise than because it is true is to withhold from the altar some of the sacrifice.'

Fr Vincent McNabb, O.P.

in *Blackfriars*, Vol 1, No 1, April 1920