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SRI RAMAKRISHNA CENTENARY

PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS

TOWN HALL, CALCUTTA

ADDRESS OF

SIR BRAJENDRANATH SEAL, Kt.,

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1st MARCH, 1937



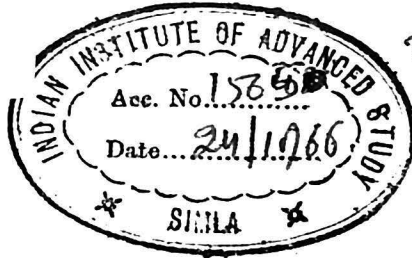
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DEAR FRIENDS,

The Parliament of Religions that is commencing to-day is one of the items, perhaps the last item in the programme of year-long celebrations in connection with the Centenary of the birth, or as others would have it, the advent into this world of Paramahansa Ramakrishna.

More than 25 years ago I recall having written at Sister Nivedita's request a paper entitled "An early stage of Vivekananda's mental development." I concluded that paper with an account of a visit I had paid to Vivekananda's master, Sri Ramakrishna. That was a stormy evening and it was accompanied by thunder and lightning, and this suited well my mental commotion which was created in me by that visit. This afternoon in the calm and dispassion of the evening of my life I deem it a privilege to be able to share along with the thousands who are present in this hall in person or in spirit the centenary celebration of one who in his sojourn on earth was above time and above space.

This Parliament of Religions has evoked cordial responses from far and near. The participants who are present in person are going to deal with the problems of religion, life, moral welfare, spirituality and social progress from varied points of view. The teachings of Ramakrishna constitute the topic of some of the papers to be presented before this assembly. I shall confine myself to recording just a few reminiscences of mine in regard to the great saint as well as placing in the philosophical and historical perspectives his special contributions to the realm of human thought and action.

In his early boyhood Ramakrishna took part in popular shows and exhibitions, e.g., Krishnalila and Gajan songs. He

would play the part of Krishna or Siva in these popular shows. On the death of his elder brother, he became priest at the Kali Bari (temple of Kali) of Dakshineswar near Calcutta. He wanted to see Kali, the Divine Mother, and threatened to stab himself to death if Kali would not deign to appear. He was half-mad and at last he had, as he thought, a vision of Kali.

He then began to practise austerities. He took on himself a vow to abjure lust and gold (Kama and Kanchana). Taking gold in one hand and mud in the other, he would mutter, 'Gold is mud and mud is gold.' In the same way he conquered all cravings of the flesh and in the end he revered every woman as mother.

A youthful and beautiful woman initiated him into Tantric practices (Sadhana). Lying on her lap he meditated on Kali. She was a Brahmacharini, using wine and flesh in the rituals of worship. He worshipped her as a naked goddess. All sensual cravings were thus seared and burnt up in him.

He sought to experience each religion in its entirety in Sadhana or spiritual discipline. Now he would be a Moslem Fakir, with appropriate rituals, attitudes and garb, and now a Christian neophyte, stricken with a sense of sin and crying for salvation. There was nothing of mere pose or mere imagination in all this. In the same way Vaishnava Sankirtan and music were added to his religious exercises.

Among early personal influences on Ramakrishna is to be noted that of Saint Dayananda Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj. Dayananda took his stand on the Vedas as teaching the one Universal Religion and fought all idolatry in a militant mood, but his influence on Ramakrishna could not be lasting or deep. Ramakrishna's genuineness led him to revolt against Hindu practices; he would repudiate caste and even serve the "Methar" which could hardly have been pleasing to the orthodox Vedic brotherhood. He felt himself drawn to Totapuri and other saints and these manifold experiences prepared him for his

mission in life. It was Totapuri who initiated him into Sannyasa.

He came under the influence of the Brahmo Samaj also. The New Dispensation as preached by Brahmananda Keshabchandra gave him a keen sense of certain social evils and immoralities which had corrupted latter-day Hindu religion and religious practices.

Ramakrishna was a composite personality. In contemplating Truth from the absolute point of view (Nirupadhi) he negated all conditions and modes (Upadhis) but from the relative or conditional point of view (Sopadhi) he worshipped Kali, the Divine Mother, as well as other modes and embodiments of the deity. He worshipped the one in all and the all in one and he saw no contradiction but only a fuller reality in this. So also he reconciled Sakar and Nirakar Upasana. For him there was nothing in the material form of the deity but God manifesting Himself. The antagonism between matter and spirit did not exist for him.

What he refused to delude himself with was that he was above all conditions and all infirmities of the flesh. But in his trances (Samadhi) he developed ecstasia in its purest form, such as has been rarely witnessed in the West in the religious world since the days of Eckhart and Tauler.

Like most Hindu Saints he had an inexhaustible store of homely sayings, adages, metaphors, allegories, parables, which could bring spiritual truths home to the meanest understanding and even to the child.

Rammohun Roy, in a very real sense the father of modern India, sought the Universal Religion, the common basis of the Hindu, Moslem, Christian and other faiths. He found that each of these great religions was based on this common faith with a certain distinctive historical and cultural embodiment. It is fundamental to note that Rammohun played two roles in his own person. First he was a profound universalist and in this capacity he formulated the creed of what has been called

Neo-theo-philanthropy (a new love of God and man) on positive and constructive lines. He construed the Gayatri on this basis. And strange to say this Hindu became one of the three fathers of the Unitarian creed and worship in the West.

In the second place Rammohun was a Nationalist Reformer and functioned in three different ways.

As a Hindu Reformer he gave a Unitarian redaction of the Hindu Shastras from the Vedanta and as a Moslem defender of faith he wrote the Tufatul Mowahidin and Manazaratum Adiyān which were polemical works. And finally as a Christian he gave a Unitarian version of the entire body of the scriptures, old and new, in his controversies with the Christian missionaries. Rammohun was thus in himself a universalist and three nationalists all in one.

Maharshi Devendranath organised the creed, rituals and Anusthans in the Adi-Brahmo-Samaj on a Hindu Upanishadic basis.

The work of formulating a Universal Religion free from Hindu or Christian theology fell to Brahmananda Keshabchandra Sen, who attempted this on an eclectic basis, and thus organised rituals and modes of worship. In his earlier days Keshabchandra made Christianity the central religion but in later life he was drawn more and more to Vaishnavism for emotional and religious exercises. This was selective eclecticism. He thus variegated and fulfilled religious experiences as well as concepts, rituals and worship in a way never attempted before. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Vaishnavism, not to mention other religions, each contributed its essence and substance to Keshabchandra's Religion of the New Dispensation and what was new was the eclectic cult and culture.

The next step (and it was indeed a fundamental innovation) was taken by Paramahansa Ramakrishna. The Paramahansa would experience each cult and religion in its totality or as one whole experience.

Keshabchandra would emphasise the central essence of each religion and acknowledge its truth. In this sense Keshabchandra would say, "It is not that every religion contains truths but every religion is true." But as there are different religions, it follows that they convey different aspects of truth. They transcribe not a part but the whole of life, each from one fundamental standpoint. But the religions contend with one another. Each claims that its positive standpoint is the only true standpoint and all other standpoints are erroneous. But Keshabchandra differed. He viewed life from all these different standpoints eclectically. He selected from each religion what he considered its essence, both theoretical as well as practical. He formulated a collation of all these partial aspects in the Brahmo faith and more especially in the New Dispensation creed. Put more briefly, Keshabchandra's view is that every religion as represented by its central essence is true. But it does not contain the whole truth which can be viewed only from an eclectic standpoint.

The New Dispensation would select the "distinctive" central essence from each religion and make a collection, a "bouquet" of followers as it were. Here it was that Ramakrishna differed from Keshabchandra. Indeed he differed from his predecessors in two essential respects. First, he maintained that the practices of each religion with its rituals and disciplines gave its essence more really and vitally than its theoretical dogmas or creeds. Secondly, it was Ramakrishna's conviction that it is not by selective eclecticism, but by syncretism and the whole-hearted acceptance of a religion that its full value and worth could be realised and experienced.

Ramakrishna held that selective extracts would kill the vital element in each religion. He would be a Hindu with the Hindu, a Moslem with the Moslem and a Christian with the Christian in order to experience the whole truth and efficacy of each of these religions. But he would not practise different religious disciplines or hold different creeds at one and the same time. The observances, practices and rituals of each religion are

organic to it. He would tentatively accept the whole creed and ritual of the Moslem (or of the Christian Catholic) in order to experience its religious efficacy and truth. In all these there might be temptations and pitfalls but one must be as an innocent child or babe and pass unscathed through fire. It was thus that the Paramahansa passed successively through Christian and Moslem experiences. Such was the Paramahansa's Syncretism.

Ramakrishna was thus a cosmic humanist in Religion and not a mere nationalist. He gave the impulse initiative to universal human and this must be completed in our age. Humanism has now various new phases and developments. Leaving out Comte's positivistic humanism with its worship of the "grande-*être*" and Bahatism with its later offshoot "Babism," the religion of human brotherhood (bhai), we may turn to later phases such as the new concepts of religion without a God (as in Julian Huxley). This is not all. Impersonal ideals of Truth, Beauty or Goodness have sometimes replaced the old faith in a personal God. And it is not merely the religious sentiment which claims its own pabulum in our day. A passion for science, for philosophy or for scientific philosophy, a passion for art or for *rasa* (æsthetic sentiment) in general is the badge of modernism in our culture and seeks to displace much of the old religious sentiment.

Our present quest is for a Parliament of Religions, a quest which we seek to voice in this Assembly. But this is only a stepping stone to a Parliament of Man or a Federation of World Cultures.

Articles of faith, creeds and dogmas divide man from man but we seek in religion a meeting ground of humanity. What we want is not merely universal religion in its quintessence, as Rammohun sought it in his earlier days, not merely an eclectic religion by compounding the distinctive essences, theoretical as well as practical, of the different religions as Keshabchandra sought it, but experience as a whole as it has unfolded itself in the history of man. And this can be realised by us, as Ramakrishna taught, by the syncretic practice of religion by being a

Hindu with the Hindu, a Moslem with the Moslem and a Christian with the Christian as preparatory to the ultimate realisation of God in Man and Man in God.

Religion in a broader sense is to be distinguished from the religions in the concrete. As such it is a force that organises life and life's activities. All Cultures and in fact, all concepts are dominated by the idea of religion. Food, sex-relations, the family, tribal life and warfare are all regulated by the religious idea. Empirical science and folk life are grouped round the central idea of religion. And, in the course of progress, the higher religions are evolved. The Parliament of Religions is thus to be conceived as but the apex of this ascending course of religious evolution.

Religious expression, however, is not the only expression of the ultimate experience. We have also science, philosophy, or better scientific philosophy, art or the æsthetic sensibility, (rasa sentiment or rasanubhuti) or mystical experience, all these being phases of humanism. And the consummation is to be found in cosmic humanism which frees mankind from its limitations of outlook by finding man in the universe and the universe in man. And we must seek it to be free not of this or that state but of the solar system and stellar systems and beyond, in one word, of the universe.

Our immediate objective to-day is a Parliament of Religions. But in my view this is only a prelude to a larger Parliament, the Parliament of man, voicing the federation of world cultures, as I have said, and what this will seek to establish is a synthetic view of life conceived not statically but dynamically as a progressive evolution of humanity.

