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On The Alleged Unity of Religions

D.P. Chattopadhyaya



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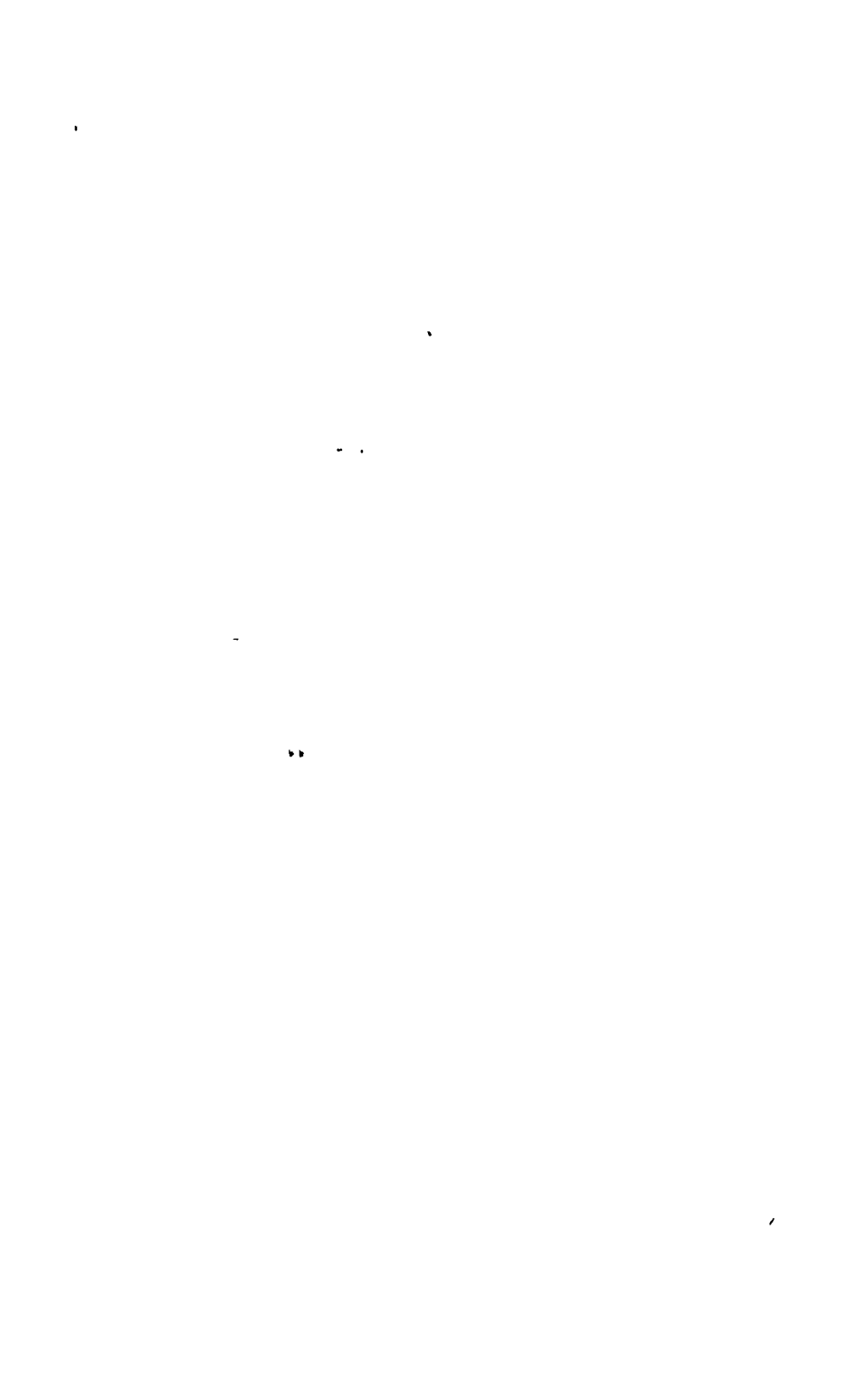
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D.P. CHATTOPADHYAYA

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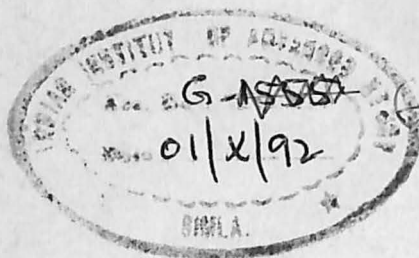
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FOREWORD

The Indian Institute of Advanced Study celebrated its silver jubilee in 1990-91 with a number of academic programmes. One such programme was to organize a special lecture in the memory of Professor S. Radhakrishnan who had much to do with the founding of the Institute at Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla, as the President of India. In fact, the Institute was inaugurated by Professor S. Radhakrishnan himself on October 20, 1965.

We thought of Professor D.P. Chattopadhyaya, an eminent philosopher who also happened to be the chairman of the Governing Body of the Institute, as the most appropriate scholar to deliver the memorial lecture. He acceded to our request with his characteristic grace and delivered the lecture at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library on January 15, 1991, after the inauguration of the silver jubilee celebration of the Institute by Shri Chandra Shekhar, the then Prime Minister of India.

I take this opportunity to thank Professor D.P. Chattopadhyaya once again for his illuminating lecture on 'the alleged unity of religions'.

Rashtrapati Nivas. Shimla.
March 1, 1992.

J.S. GREWAL
Director



ON THE ALLEGED UNITY OF RELIGIONS

I

Is religion, rightly understood, unique? Or, is it by its very nature diverse? These questions are being debated and discussed endlessly and inconclusively. As a *matter of fact* or, sociologically speaking, that there are many religions like Hinduism, Confucianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, can hardly be denied. But, as a *matter of principle*, one is free to assert, as it has been asserted, that all religions are only apparently diverse but really or essentially same. The former, that is, relativistic view of religion, has been defended, among others, by anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard, sociologists like Max Weber and philosophers like Troeltsch.¹ The latter view, that is, the essential unity of religions, has also its numerous proponents like Hegel, Schleiermacher, Tagore, Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan. According to the pluralists like Ernst Troeltsch, 'the earthly experience of the Divine Life is not One but Many'.² In contrast, the monists like Radhakrishnan are of the view that the difference between religious monism and religious pluralism rests on the difference, but *not* sharp division, between 'God as He is' and 'God as He seems to us'.³

The diversity of religions and religious Gods appears merely symbolic to Radhakrishnan. While the symbols are to be taken seriously, he argues, what all these symbols stand

¹ E. Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, S.C.M. Press, London, 1972.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Religions*, Vision Books, New Delhi, 1979, 102.

for is one and unique, the true Spirit. It is to be noted that Radhakrishnan's view of religion has been influenced by several eastern and western theologians and philosophers.

In this lecture, I propose to first critically consider the theses of (1) religious monism or unity and (2) religious pluralism or diversity. In the process (3) I would examine the supporting arguments and their tenability or otherwise. Thereafter (4) I would examine the thesis which tries to reconcile the other two seemingly incompatible theses of (i) unity and (ii) diversity. Finally, (5) I would try to show that this debate squarely rests on the intended meanings of our concepts of religion.

II

To take up the thesis of religious pluralism first. The relativist relies mainly on historical and cultural diversity. Different forms of religion are said to be due to historical development. History does not allow any particular form of religion to remain static down the ages. For example, Hinduism of today is not what it was during the epic period (say, 2000-1000 B.C.) or when it was interacting with and perhaps overwhelmed by Buddhism (say, between the period 300 B.C.-A.D.700) or when it was interacting with the Islam (say, A.D. 900-A.D.1900).

What is historically true of the different periods of Hinduism is more or less applicable to other religions as well. I say 'more or less' because the career of every religion is unique in a very important sense. Similarly, it may be said that every period or epoch of every religion has its own peculiarities. Notwithstanding these peculiarities, the history of a particular religion has a unity of its own, unity which is marked by periodic or epochal diversity. So, it has been argued that the expression 'historical unity of religion'

represents a sort of ideal concept. This concept is the result of conceptual distillation. When the peculiarities of different epochs are deliberately ignored and their points of similarity are brought together or generalised, what we find is an ideal concept. It is an intellectual accentuation, not a faithful description, of historical diversity marked by the individuality of the concerned events, macro and micro.

The difference between the 'major' religions is undeniable. It is clearly indicated by the difference of their (a) authority, (b) mode of worship, (c) rites and rituals, and several other things. In spite of these numerous differences the very fact that these 'religions' are denoted by a general term 'religion' has an interesting logical significance. It is this. The applicability of one and the same term 'religion' to different religions marked by their clearly distinguishable characteristics or peculiarities shows that they have something common in between them. These common characteristics are their defining properties. For example, the modes of worship, the rites and rituals and the authorities of the Hindus, of the Christians, and of the Islamic people, though numerically different, have their qualitative and conceptual unity or at least affinity. It may be pointed out that each one of these religious groups has its own mode of *worship*, its own mode of *authority*, and its own forms of *rites and rituals*. Like the (definiendum) term 'religion', its defining characteristics (definiens), 'worship', 'authority', 'rites and rituals', etc. may be used in two different ways: (1) as *pure* concepts and (ii) as exemplified objects of the said concepts. In other words, the term 'religion' has a conceptual meaning of its own irrespective of its application to concrete objects or, in our case, religions like Hinduism, Islam, etc.

Like *historical* ideal types we have also *cultural* ideal types. Historical periods, ancient, medieval and modern, are neither precisely definable nor sharply separable. Where exactly one

period or epoch ends and another begins cannot be clearly indicated. Similarly, cultural ideal types designated by such terms as 'tribal', 'communal', 'national', and 'international' have their inherent indefiniteness and overlap. Conceptual clarity and fuzziness at the ground level, historical and cultural, are co-existent in our map of social understanding.

The above point seems to be the root of the problems attending the difference between, and unity of, different religions. The magnitude of the problem can somewhat be reduced by reminding ourselves that cultural reality and historical reality are not altogether different. They represent two views, one synchronic and the other diachronic, of one and the same social reality. If culture is synchronic, history is diachronic. If culture is enfolded history, history is unfolded culture. Their contents are not different, only their modes of representation or configuration are so. The basic content of social reality consists of individuals, their dispositions and actions.⁴ The basic units of society are individual human beings who can perform and understand meaningful actions. Similarly, it may be shown through analysis that individuals are the ultimate authors of history. To say this is not to deny the existence of quasi-autonomous societal facts like 'tribal society', 'modes of production', 'market' and 'judiciary', which can be understood without reference to *specific* individuals who are associated with these facts. For example, what market is can be understood without referring to individual buyers and sellers operating in it. Somewhat similarly, individuals are what they are irrespective of their social relation with a particular market or any economic mode of production or a specific political

⁴ D.P. Chattopadhyaya, *Individuals and Societies: A Methodological Inquiry*, Enlarged 2nd Edition, Scientific Book Agency, Calcutta, 1975, 42-53.

set up. In brief, individuals and societies, although inter-definable, are, to a great extent, independent of one another. Therefore, their interdefinability is not vicious.

The relevance of this point to the context of religious pluralism is this. Religion, though relative to a culture or a historical epoch, has its independent existence. For example, Hinduism retains its identifiable form even if a particular generation which professes it disappears. Religious diversity, though on ultimate analysis, is found to be rooted in different human beings, every religion may be said to have a life of its own.

This formulation of religious relativism and diversity, the anti-relativist critic argues, seems to be satisfactory only at the ontological level. But a normative charge has often been levelled against it. It may be formulated in this way. If every religion has a reality or life of its own and is more or less autonomous, then does it not lead to break-down of communication between different religions and paving the way of conflict between them?

This criticism is understandable and perhaps historically justifiable to some extent. But the religious relativist is entitled to defend his position along the following lines. First, diversity as such is not incompatible with peaceful co-existence of, and even interaction between, different religious groups. Secondly, inter-religious conflict is not a *necessary* consequence of religious diversity. It is purely contingent - contingent upon many extraneous factors like political rivalry, economic disparity, ethnic affiliation, etc. Thirdly, conflict is not peculiar to inter-religious relationship. It is often found even intra-religiously, between the sects or groups of the same religion. Finally, and more positively speaking, we have many historical and contemporary examples to show that different religious groups are living peacefully together. Their relationship is even marked by cordiality and mutual respect.

III

Religious monists like Radhakrishnan draw their main inspiration from a metaphysical thesis to the effect that ultimate reality is one and the same and its different religious articulations must not be construed in purely pluralistic terms. In their view, sociological pluralism and metaphysical monism – pantheistic, panentheistic or monotheistic, go well together. This thesis is often radically presented in this form. Reality or God or Absolute is inherently so rich in itself that its articulations – sociological, historical and religious, cannot be monotonously identical. They are bound to be diverse.

For example, Hegel maintains that religion is 'a self-subsisting essence' which historically manifests itself in different forms – Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Schleirmacher and Goethe share a comparable view. Every religion gives us a taste of infinity. But none of them can give us the taste of plenitude of infinity.⁵

Tagore is of the view that the incompatibility between the finite and the infinite, between One and Many, is born out of ignorance of the finite mind. In this connection, he extensively refers to *Īsopaniṣad*:

They enter the region of the dark who are solely occupied with the knowledge of the finite, and they into a still greater darkness who are solely occupied with the knowledge of infinite.

We are hidden in ourselves. . . when we know that this One in us is One in all, then our truth is revealed. . . the unity of soul must not be an abstraction. . . not that negative kind of universalism which belongs neither to one nor to another.⁶

⁵ Schleirmacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers*, Harper & Row, New York, 1958, 15, 16, 217-18.

⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality*, Macmillan, London, 1954, 67; See also, 14, 53, 56, 69.

The true nature of man, according to Tagore, is embedded in society and affiliated to the infinite and yet it has a concrete individuality of its own. Because of man's affiliation to the infinite, his religious quest and artistic creativity know no finality. They are ever unending process.⁷ Because of the concreteness of his individuality, his religious life, like the artistic one, has a distinct character of its own. This accent on the reality of the individual human beings distinguishes Tagore's approach from the classical Vedantin's.

Tagore defends what he calls the religion of man. His book, *The Religion of Man*, tries to show that the true nature of man is universal and therefore the true religion is intended to be universal. The inmost nature of all human beings, despite their racial, cultural or other differences, is identical at bottom. Difference enriches unity. Tagore prefers the term *harmony* to that of unity. It is the key concept of his philosophy. Although he does not deny the role of conflict in heightening the effect of harmony in life, his emphasis is always on the latter. The taste of harmony underlies both artistic creation and quest for universal religion.⁸

A somewhat similar approach is discernible in the writings of Sri Aurobindo. He finds no incompatibility between a finite individual and the infinite, between the temporal and the eternal. What is unmanifested in the Timeless eternity has an aspect of it in the eternity of motion. Man is simultaneously eternal in his spirit and situated in the motion of the earthly and evolutionary time.

[T]he man who most finds and leaves from the inner self, can most embrace the universal and become one with it. . . it is one of the greatest secrets of the old Indian spiritual

⁷ D.P. Chattopadhyaya, *Individuals and Worlds: Essays in Anthropological Rationalism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1976, 88-93.

⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, Macmillan, London, 1958, 119, 131, 139, 223.

knowledge, . . . to live in one's self, determining one's self-expression from one's own center of being in accordance with one's own law of being, *swadharma*, is the first necessity.⁹

Philosophically speaking, Sri Aurobindo's approach to religion is evolutionary and, culturally speaking, it is historical. In the scale of evolution man has substantially, but not entirely, come out from the level of *material* inertia and *vital* habituality, instinctiveness, and sluggishness alternated by aimless restlessness. Generally speaking, man now lives at the mental plane, occasionally visited by supramental and luminous consciousness. Pulled by the forces down below the mind and drawn by those above it, the mental being (*manomaya puruṣa*) is caught up in a progressive dynamics. Reason, the main faculty of man to deal with the said contrary forces, is somewhat mechanical, logical but archaic, and lacks in spiritual plasticity and creativity. Sri Aurobindo believes that gradually man, the mental being, will, in the course of evolution, be superman endowed with the powers of the supermind. Ability to know objects directly and in an integrated manner and freedom from sense-dependence and logical stereotypes are among the main characteristics of the supermind. Influenced by Nietzsche, in this respect, Sri Aurobindo anticipates the views of biological scientists and philosophers like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Samuel Alexander and Julian Huxley.¹⁰

⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, New York, 1953, 438-39.

¹⁰ See, 'Sri Aurobindo and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: Studies in Evolution' in my, *Environment Evolution and Values: Studies in Man, Society and Science*, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 1983; see also, *Sri Aurobindo and Karl Marx: Integral Sociology and Dialectical Sociology*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1988, Chs. 3 & 4.

Historiographically speaking, the present age is called 'subjective' both by Nietzsche and Sri Aurobindo. It is marked by a growing realisation of the inadequacy of purely logico-discursive method of understanding the complexity of the problems of life and the increasing inwardisation of consciousness in search of an alternative and integral approach. One of the yields of the new approach is an emergent consciousness of the vast spiritual potentiality of human consciousness exceeding the bounds of mechanical reason. There lies, thinks Sri Aurobindo, the seat of what he calls 'the religion of humanism'. It is interesting to note the similarity between Tagore's concept of *the religion of man* and Sri Aurobindo's concept of *the religion of humanism*. None of them believes in denominational religion as ordinarily understood and both defend a universal form of religion which, to their mind, comprises all institutional forms of religion.

Perhaps it will not be out of place to recall two other contemporaries of Tagore and Sri Aurobindo who expressed themselves on the theme of religion in a strikingly comparable vein. I have Vivekananda and Gandhi in mind. Officially affiliated to the Advaita philosophy, Vivekananda has his personalistic style of interpreting it. To him, the different credal religions are like rivers, 'running through crooked or straight courses', and flow into the same ocean of God:¹¹

No search has been dearer to the human heart than that which brings us light from God. . . . Man has wanted to look beyond, wanted to expand himself; and all that we call progress, evolution, has always been measured by that one search - search for human destiny, the search for God.

Every person has his own way to reach the ultimate goal. Although otherwise a devout Hindu, Vivekananda is never

¹¹ Swami Vivekananda, *What Religion Is*, edited by John Yale, London, 1962, 10.

tired of speaking of 'the harmony of the different religions'. This indicates that, to him, Hinduism is not an exclusive institutional form of religion.

Ordinarily known as a politician, Gandhi has paid serious attention to the question of religion. He is opposed to the dead scriptural form of religion. Like Buddha's, Kant's, and Gandhi's view of religion is essentially moral. He observes:¹²

Any tradition however ancient, if inconsistent with morality, is fit to be banished from the land. True religion and true morality, like poetry, must be 'creative' and cannot consist in following the 'beaten track'. Religious quest is essentially a quest for what is true and what is right.

[R]eligion should pervade every one of our actions. . . . [R]eligion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordained moral government of the universe. . . . this religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supercede them. It harmonises them and gives them reality.

It is of some historical interest to note that these four thinkers, Tagore (1861-1941), Vivekananda (1864-1902), Gandhi (1869-1948) and Sri Aurobindo (1871-1950), were all born within the short span of a decade and lived, thought and worked influencing each other. Perhaps it will only be fair to recall that the most pronounced influence on Vivekananda was that of Ramakrishna, another very unorthodox Vedantin.

IV

There is no doubt that Radhakrishnan's view of the relation between different institutional religions and what he calls

¹² M.K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, 10th February, 1940, 256. See also, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 22, 154-271.

the Religion of the Spirit has been influenced both by the classical thinkers like Śamkara and Hegel, on the one hand, and his contemporary thinkers referred to above.¹³ His metaphysical commitment does not appear to him to be inconsistent with the recognition of the empirical world and the practical values of our earthly life. The terms, 'Absolute', 'God' and 'Spirit' are used interchangeably. According to him, the Vedānta is not a religion, but religion is itself its most universal and deepest significance.¹⁴ To him, the Vedānta is religion *par excellence* in the sense that it is Religion of all religions. In this respect he takes his stand on the Vedic aphorism, *ekam sat, viprah bahudhā vadanti* (The one true reality is spoken of in various ways).

The true reality is in the nature of Spirit which is both finite and infinite, both absolute and relational. But how it is so is a question which, Radhakrishnan, like Śamkara, concedes, is an incomprehensible mystery *māyā*.¹⁵ It is to be noted that the key term used here is *māyā* and not *lilā* preferred by thinkers like Rāmānuja and Sri Aurobindo. But one has to admit that Radhakrishnan attaches great importance to such concepts as 'evolution', 'historical process' and 'spiritual purpose'.¹⁶ The purpose of the Spirit is being gradually and progressively unfolded. In the process the differences between different religions are being narrowed down and their similarity, if not unity, is becoming more

¹³ See papers by A.L. Herman, Julius J. Lipner, Glyn Richards, John M. Koller and myself in the book, *Radhakrishnan: Centenary Volume*, edited by G. Parthasarathi and D.P. Chattopadhyaya, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989.

¹⁴ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1927 (Unwin Paperback Edition), 1980, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion in a Changing World*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1967, 92, 104, 133, 136-37.

and more clear:¹⁷

The function of the discipline of religion is to further the evolution of man into his divine stature, develop increased awareness and intensity of understanding. It is to bring about a better, deeper and more enduring adjustment in life. All belief and practice, song and prayer, meditation and contemplation, are means to this development of direct experience, an inner frame of mind, a sense of freedom and fearlessness, strength and security. Religion is the way in which the individual organizes his inward being and responds to what is envisaged by him as the ultimate Reality.

The diversity of religions may be understood in two different ways: (a) in terms of their *essential* unity and (b) in terms of their *cultural* diversity. The metaphysicians like Radhakrishnan are of the view that God, Ishvar, Allah, Tao, Buddha are only different names of one and the same ultimate Reality. Cultural diversity is superficial or empirical and not essential or transcendental. But the philosophers of antimetaphysical persuasion may well reject this solution of the problem of religious diversity. Cultural diversity, marked by historical and sociological peculiarities, seems to be very real to them. They argue that it is not something which can be lightly dismissed by some imperceptible and postulated reality like God. To speak in terms of cancellation or sublation of social reality by metaphysical reality does not appeal to many scientific-minded philosophers.

One, and perhaps the most widely prevalent, response to this criticism from the metaphysically minded religious philosophers is a sort of *anekāntavād*, many-sidedness of

¹⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, 'Fragments of a Confession' in P.A. Schlipp (ed.) *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, Tudor Publishing Company, New York, 1952, 68.

truth, not necessarily of the Jain variety. For example, Ramakrishna was fond of saying that every believer has his/her own path to God. Somewhat in the same vein Radhakrishnan observes:¹⁸

Every view of God from the primitive worship of nature upto the Father-love of a St. Francis and the Mother-love of a *Rāmakṛṣṇa* represents some aspect or other of the relation of the human to the divine spirit. Each method of approach, each mode of address answers to some mood of human mind. Not one of them gives the whole truth, though each one of them is partially true.

Unfortunately these proposed solutions are not acceptable to all, not even to thinkers like Hegel and Radhakrishnan. The latter in their critical moments of philosophising do recognise the distinction between the different qualities of different religious approaches to what they call the ultimate Reality, Absolute or God. For example, there are many Hindu, Christian and Islamic philosophers who maintain that the worshippers of the Absolute and impersonal God are superior to those of personal God. It has also been maintained that the worshippers of the saints and the incarnations of God belong to a lower level of religious consciousness. In this way one may strongly criticise the worshippers of ancestors and different natural forces as lacking in reflective or high religious consciousness.

This line of argument shows, among other things, that religious pluralism can well be hierarchical from an evaluative point of view. But the question remains: which standard of evaluation is to be accepted as supreme or final?

The problem of pluralism and relativism is not peculiar to the pluralist or the relativist. In a subtle or complex way it

S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, London, 1980, 22.

appears even in the realm of absolutism or monism. Otherwise one has to accept the view that all religious faiths or philosophies are equally good or bad or indifferent. Obviously that is a position which almost everybody finds difficult to accept.

V

What, then, is the way out?

Let me indicate briefly my own understanding of a possible way out. Strictly speaking, this is not a mere possibility but a statement of what we are actually doing in a pre-reflective way not only in the sphere of religion but also in other spheres, cognitive, emotive and conative. But I maintain that it may be defended even at the reflective and critical level.

Religions, like human lives, are engaged in an endless conversation. The point may be illustrated both historically and conceptually. Historically speaking, one has to admit, for example, the indebtedness of the Hindu religion to the pre-Vedic cultures of India. Similarly, the interactions between Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Hinduism have produced some effects on each one of these religions and accordingly some new sects and philosophies have come into existence.

The indebtedness of Christianity to Judaism is equally undeniable. From recorded history if we move to the areas of proto-history, anthropology and mythology, it will be even clear that no religion is secular or purely autonomous, developing or degenerating in isolation. Positively speaking religions, like cultures and languages, are mutually interactive. It becomes very clear when we look into the neighbouring languages, particularly their contiguous dialects. Also this is evident from the nature of the simultaneous presence of

different religions in the same geographical area. None of our life-forms is impervious to neighbouring influence, good or otherwise.

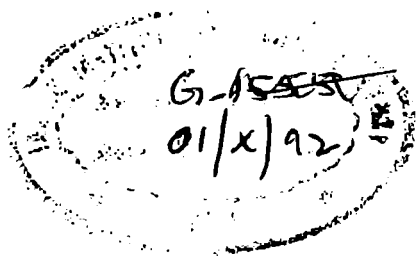
The same point may be indicated conceptually. Every text, written or oral, is embedded in a context from which the former cannot be absolutely separated. Every text, closely observed, discloses its textile-like texture consisting of finer threads, fibres or constituents. These two features of text intellectually demand, and are open to, many interpretations. In a sense every text keeps enclosed within itself various meanings which, on question and search, disclose themselves. For example, the same Vedas have been differently interpreted by Sayanacharya, Dayanand Saraswati, Sri Aurobindo and Madhusudhan Ojha.

Different systems of Indian philosophy, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mimāṃsā and Vedānta, claim their rootedness in the Vedas. Different sects or schools of Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and Islam claim their common spiritual or scriptural parentage. All these in a way show that whatever might be the text available to different human beings, culturally belonging to different religions, they have their own ways of understanding and interpreting the same. This difference is ontologically rooted in human nature, in human freedom.

This freedom articulates itself not only in the diversity of religion or cultural pluralism but also in and through endless conversation, communication or polylogue between different human beings.¹⁹ If speech acts and religious faiths are two forms of human freedom, the yearning to understand each other and the will to enlarge the domain of freedom are also disclosive of the basic human nature.

¹⁹ D.P. Chattopadhyaya, *Anthropology and Historiography of Science*, Ohio University Press, Ohio, 1989, 135ff., 119ff.

In support of this view of mine I can extensively quote Radhakrishnan.²⁰ But let me leave that excursion for another occasion.



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²⁰ *Radhakrishnan Reader: An Anthology*, ed. by P. Nagaraja Rao, K. Gopaldaswami and S. Ramakrishnan, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1988. See particularly, 129-43, 441-77.

