

## CHRISTIAN SELF- UNDERSTANDING OF HINDUISM: SOME REFLECTIONS

F. O. K.M. George

When asked to explain the difference between western philosophy and Indian philosophy to a group of western students, T M P Mahadevan, distinguished professor of philosophy, once said: "the west philosophizes from the waking state whereas India does it from four states, namely the waking state, the dream state, the dreamless sleep state and the 'fourth' state or *thuriya*." This seems to be an interesting observation as far as the Christian self-understanding of Hinduism is concerned.

I want to make a few comments in this context. The first is about the Christian approach to Truth. Christianity, especially in its predominant western stream, as has been represented in Asian-African countries since the colonial-missionary period, seems to have a linear, singularistic vision of reality with an emphasis on dogmatic definitions and borderlines. This is probably a heritage that it shares with its younger contemporary, Islam, that became even more literalist in this singularistic approach.

Looking at the historical development of doctrine in the context of bitter and violent conflicts between parties within

### Christian Self Understanding

the church, from the Arian controversy to the Reformation debacle and beyond, one is struck by the *definitionism* of Christianity. It all arose from the conviction that truth is one and single and it should be interpreted and understood only in a single way. This approach, which we may call *singularistic*, is in marked contrast with the pluralistic Indian perception that truth is one but is interpreted and understood by learned sages in many different ways (*Ekam sat vipracahudha vadanti*). We should certainly not underestimate the conflicts, sometimes violent, that arose between different philosophical schools in India, for instance between *Advaita Vedantins* and the Buddhists and the Jains. There is a question of identity underlying all these disputes. People find their identity in the faith, doctrine or practice they follow, and depending on the circumstances or leadership, they enter into clashes, accompanied by verbal or physical violence, with those who differ. As Samuel P. Huntington explains, our identity is defined by what we are not and whom we are against. We should admit in all humility that the Christian search for identity has never been without the inquisitorial search for the enemy, the heretic and the dissident in large parts of its history.

In Christian history the singularistic approach was greatly reinforced during the colonial-missionary era in the last millennium. It made its claims to truth with a certain self-confidence verging on absolute authority and total intolerance of other perspectives. This exclusivism, buttressed by political, economic and cultural hegemony, shaped its single vision.

With the Enlightenment, the rational principle became overarching. The conscious mind in the waking state is the only

criterion for any reflection on reality. The Cartesian dictum of *cogito ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am'), in its search for certainty, ruled out any other form of certainty of existence except that of the vigilant, self-conscious, mental activity of the wakeful subject. The subject-object distance became crucial for any western reflection, in the development of modern science as well as in the formation of the western Christian mind. All these factors together led to a linear, singularist vision, considered by the western mindset to be the enlightened, rational and the only true understanding of reality.

The Indian tradition, both Sanskritic and Dravidian, on the contrary, displayed an incredible complexity, breadth and plurality of perspectives. As we know, it was not a religion in the strict sense of a system of neatly defined doctrinal beliefs and practices, but a way of life, a religious-cultural ensemble that included an enormously broad and varied spectrum of beliefs and practices, mythologies and philosophies, sacred texts and folk tales, popular religion and cultic patterns, abstruse logical, philosophical and psychological discussions, art and architecture, science and sublime literature, mystical labyrinths and spiritual techniques, brutally oppressive caste and gender discrimination and so on and so forth, that arose mainly in the Indian subcontinent over four millennia.

*Hindu-ism* is an umbrella word - a western labelling during the colonial period. It is not methodologically correct and legitimate to describe this Indic culture as a religion on the same terms as Semitic religions like Judaism, Christianity or Islam. In this Indian universe there are 'regions' (in a cosmological sense) of dark holes or dark energy that defy any neat logical inquiry or classification. Looking at

### Christian Self Understanding

Christianity from the holistic vantage point of this universe of many systems of philosophy and spiritual techniques, the former would appear to be one rather small school of religion with a straight and simplistic concept of human destiny and salvation. The doctrinal *definitionism* and the neat borders of conscious and rational faith in Christianity might appear to be alien to a world view that encompasses theistic, atheistic and trans-theistic streams of human religious quest as well as a multi-layered concept of consciousness that is far deeper than the idea of a rational mind in the state of *jagrat* or wakefulness. Paradoxically, while our regular conscious perception, soaked in the unreal realm of *avidya* and *maya*, could be considered deceptive in the Indian Vedantic view, for the west it is the conscious mind that is the sure instrument and criterion of perceiving the Real.

The question of heresy and orthodoxy exists in both traditions, but in very different ways. The kind of acrimonious terminological fights that characterized the doctrinal controversies and divisions within the Church during the Arian, Nestorian, Chalcedonian, Filioque and Reformation episodes is unique to Christianity. Some of the more discerning Church Fathers called it *logomachia*, the war of words, and denounced it as futile.

More than 25 years ago, I had to make a minor presentation in one of the Faith and Order consultations held in the Holy Cross School of Theology, Boston. Incidentally, I referred to the Upanishadic prayer *Asato ma sat gamaya... Lead me from untruth to truth...*) in order to illustrate that heresy and orthodoxy are not neatly differentiated in India unlike in Christianity, and that a gradual movement from

darkness to light with a lot of gray zone in between may provide a better approach to the Real. I was not quite sure if I was true to the faith of the Church in this regard and expected criticism from the learned theologians present there. Although they did not say anything out of politeness, some of them were apparently unhappy, and they simply ignored the whole point.

There was a bearded old man sitting apart at the back row. He appeared to be a casual visitor, not paying attention to what was being discussed. After two days, I was walking in the campus garden, and I saw the same old man in a shabby gardener's outfit watering the plants. He spotted me, gestured me to his side, and simply said: "Young man, what you said in the meeting about heresy is right." Later I learned that he was an Orthodox bishop, who had retired long time ago and whom they called a 'resident saint'. His short sentence has encouraged and inspired me ever since. I believed that the anonymous old bishop was giving me a bit of the wisdom of the true Christian tradition.

Secondly, another area that demands our attention is the idolization of the symbols of religion, even the name of God, in all religions. Judaism and Islam are strictly aniconic with regard to the visible representation of God. The Mosaic Law clearly prohibited the making of any image of God, graven or painted. Islam has the same tradition. Even Prophet Muhammad, a historical person, is not pictorially represented. Christianity only partly inherited this Jewish scriptural prohibition. In the Eastern Orthodox iconographical tradition you cannot paint the picture of God the Father, because God is Spirit having no physical form visibly

### Christian Self Understanding

perceived by any human being. You can represent the Holy Spirit only in the physical form in which the Spirit appeared in biblical revelation, for example as a dove or as tongues of fire. But you can represent Jesus the Christ on a two-dimensional plane in iconography because he was incarnate as a human being and lived among us. The Holy Trinity can never be represented except as three angels received by Abraham in an act of hospitality as narrated in Gen 18. The famous icon of Rublev representing this scene is called *philoxenia* or Hospitality, not Holy Trinity. But the medieval Roman Catholic Church broke the rules of Christian iconography and represented the Father as a long-bearded old man with flowing robes sitting on a splendid throne. They also created three-dimensional statues of God and the saints. This is considered a heretical deviation by the Orthodox iconographical tradition which also abstains totally from any gender allusion to God.

Popular Hinduism revels in images. Just as the name of God is chanted in thousand different forms (*sahasra nama*) so are the gods and goddesses visibly represented in thousands, by using all the possibilities of painting, sculpture and architecture. On the other pole, philosophical Hinduism turns to total abstraction about the Ultimate. It has no name or concept or quality or movement or class or gender. The *Nirguna* is absolute. The absolute apophatic approach culminating in absolute silence about God in the Eastern Christian theology is very similar to the Advaita approach. The only way out for the faithful is the unceasing praising of God in worship and adoration using many names and qualities and images. St Gregory of Nazianzus (A.D 390), called *the Theologian* in Eastern Christian tradition, the architect of the

Trinitarian doctrine, has a poem attributed to him, calling God the *Panonymous and the Anonymous*, 'having all names and having no name'. Even abstract concepts about God are useless in an attempt to understand the divine mystery as part of a any rational inquiry. In fact, as his friend and another great theologian Gregory of Nyssa said: "Concepts make idols of God."

So the question 'What is the name of God?' is crucial in communities where several religions exist and relate to one another. People rally around names of God and symbols of religion in order to find and assert their identity. There is probably nothing wrong with it in itself, but it has the sad potential also to issue out into mutual abuse and violence when fanned by religious and political self-seekers. In a country like India this can happen any time anywhere.

The word *Allah* is the regular Arabic word for God. All those who are born in Arabic countries and whose mother tongue is Arabic — whether Muslim, Christian or Jew — have no way to avoid the word *Allah* while speaking about God. *Allaha* is a cognate word meaning God, but a much older one, used by ancient Syriac-speaking Christians in West Asia. Yet in some countries there seems to be a law that allows only Muslims to use the word *Allah* to refer to God. In fact, in Islamic theology the holy name of God is absolutely abstract and aniconic. No pictorial or conceptual representation is possible. Still sadly the word or the name of God can be construed to be the symbol of exclusive identity of one community in opposition to others. The sign of the *Cross*, which is a symbol of sacrificial love, reconciliation of the opposites and the breaking of all unjust barriers erected by

human beings, can be used by Christians to assert their power and domination. Some Christian traditions are madly passionate about erecting crosses in all high places, not as a sign of renunciation, but as a visible symbol of capture and possession of worldly power. *Aum*, one of the most vibrant, spiritually evocative and cosmic sounds that human beings can make, could be made a dismal sign of aggressivity and parochial identity.

Recently, I joined a group of pilgrims travelling to Mount Kailas and Manasarover in Tibet which is under Chinese rule. (Many of us Indians were not aware that Lord Siva dwells in China and not in India). For me the three-week journey was **extremely exhausting** but spiritually exhilarating. By the time **we reached an altitude of 10,000 ft** in the Himalayas the paucity of oxygen put me completely down for two days. The fatigue and lack of proper sleeping and toilet facilities in the extreme cold continued to haunt me as we climbed higher and higher.

We were above the tree line. No plants or trees. Just the immense expanse of space with far snow-clad mountains and occasional blue lakes. With my semi-blunted senses, I experienced the vastness of space in the Tibetan plateau as never before in my life. It was abstraction pure and simple. I understood that in spite of the mountains and the valleys, the sky and the clouds, the earth and the soil just in front of your eyes, you could experience the landscape as an abstraction. This gave me a modest chance to reflect on my own concept and images of God - how unnecessarily theologized and convoluted they were, and how simple and transparent they should be. It was a relief that there was no



temple or shrine at Mount Kailas or Manasarover, but just nature - the bare mountain and the lake - in all its original nakedness. I had hallucinations on the way, may be because of the five-day journey that wearied me out. The distant and bare mountains sometimes appeared to have bushes and trees, and sometimes huge gangs of elephants or pouncing tigers or fleeing zebras or monsters with terrible expressions... It took some time for me to realize that they were created by the shadows of massive clouds moving above the mountains and my own worn out mind. I had to remove layers of such deceptive perception in order to keep me in the ordinary state of mind.

Raimundo Panikkar says in the introduction to his 'Mantramanjari' that the Vedic revelation is simply the revelation of the veil. This goes very well with the eastern Christian perception that Revelation reveals the veil over the Truth of God and not Truth itself. It symbolically corresponds to the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai, as interpreted by the Fathers of the Church. Moses was invited to the presence of God, to see the face of God. But he entered into thick darkness, as the Bible says, and advanced from darkness to darkness. That was spiritual progress for him; the ascent to the holy mountain. We cannot pretend to take the place of Moses, yet something of this kind of plunging into the ignorance and darkness of the knowledge of God would be a counterpoint to our overconfident concepts and names of God that apparently sustain our identity and keep us divided.

As I took a dip in the holy lake of Manasarover in freezing cold, I warmly remembered some of my Hindu friends back

### Christian Self Understanding

home, and respectfully carried a bottle of water to be given to them. Even as a Christian there was no reason for me not to consider this water holy. Year by year in the Epiphany service of my church I read out the prayer saying Jesus sanctified all waters and all their sources when he entered the water of the Jordan to be baptized by John. Apart from all that theology, you can naturally feel in this water in a high Himalayan lake the purity, freshness and holiness of all the elements that God created through God's *Vak* and *Atman*. This holy creation is the common house of humanity, of all creatures big and small.

As it was the Pentecost Sunday while we were camping on the banks of Manasarover, I celebrated the liturgy, with two Christian friends in the group, early in the morning in a tent. In fact, I had vaguely anticipated this and prepared for it beforehand without telling anybody. As the dawn broke over the lake and the mountains we chanted the liturgy in shivering cold and rarefied air. It was tiresome to chant loudly in the absence of adequate oxygen and warmth, but in the niche of the tent and while others were asleep we quietly did it, with one single candle burning in the semi-darkness and the fragrance of frankincense filling the tent. I had been taught that the offering of praise and thanksgiving (*Eucharist*) was being celebrated in the heart of the church, the ecclesia, the Body of Christ, but on that day I had also a feeling that it was being celebrated on the edge of creation, the borderline where space and time assumed a different quality, where heaven and earth merged in a gentle embrace. The water in the lake reflected like a mirror the ever changing play of soft light over the white mountains and the blue sky. Devoid of all the alluring images and the gloriously deceptive trappings

of the *vyavaharika* world, you can have a glimpse of the unalloyed purity of God's creation. All pilgrims meet here. They seem to maintain *and* shed off mantles of their separate identities at the same time...

Some time ago in a meeting of Asian Christian ecumenists and leaders in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I made a humble suggestion that instead of having consultations in sophisticated conference centres we should organize teams of Christian leaders to go on a pilgrimage to different Hindu, Buddhist and Jain spiritual centres. The direct experience of such places and people and the journey itself will change their attitude to other religions and provide an experiential ground for mutual conversation.

Thirdly, the question of interiority is important. As we read the gospels we are constantly reminded that Jesus spent most of his nights in some lonely mountain spots. He must have spent the time in deep meditation and prayer, probably in the outdoor space wide open to the starry sky. Christianity, except in some limited monastic circles in the deserts or islands, did not follow Jesus in this way. But Jesus must have spent half of his time of public ministry in such solitary *dhyana* and prayer. Even if you brush aside all sensational speculation of Jesus going to India and learning the yoga techniques etc., his hidden years were probably spent in such exercises of interiority and communion with the Source in his own country.

Christian preachers, however, placed the emphasis solely on the *kerygma*, the public announcement of the Gospel. Following the Reformation it became more and more vociferous and verbose in the name of the Word of God.

### Christian Self Understanding

With the new movements emphasizing the Holy Spirit and tongues of fire, it tended to be mostly earth-quaking sound and fury, signifying nothing. If all the preachers had followed Jesus in his silence and fasting in the desert and quiet teaching about the Kingdom of God, genuine healing of the sick, and feeding of the hungry, the Hindus would have turned to Christ far more joyfully.

In fact, it seems to me that we can sometimes learn better and deeper about Jesus from the Hindu and Buddhist interpreters of the Gospels than from our own theologians and preachers. There are parallel commentaries on Jesus and the Gospels produced by Hindu teachers in India. You may not agree with all that, but you will certainly find insights that Christian teachers and scholars cannot normally give. These Indian interpreters look at the subtle, inner dimension of the person of Jesus in contrast to the gross, physical and external approach of Christian commentators. Since the Indian distinction between *sthula* and *sukshma* aspects of reality is well known, it applies to the interpretation of Jesus and his teachings as well.

At the subtle level, the Indian interpretations using terms like inner light, realm of knowledge, internal presence, veil, seal, illumination and so on may appear somewhat to resemble the early Gnostic approach which the mainstream church did not accept for various reasons. But without falling into Gnostic dualism or elitism or gender prejudices, we can accept the kind of *sukshma bhashya* provided by some of the respected Indian teachers.

They deal with Christ's interiority while Christian teachers place emphasis on the externals since Jesus lived and died as a

real human being in history. The incarnate condition of Christ is certainly the crucial foundation for Christian faith, but in our history many Christians have apparently taken a too materialistic approach to reality on the pretext of incarnation. In fact, many people think that Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions. Some of the good Hindus I know well maintain that Christians are very successful in worldly matters because they are very materialistic and least inclined to subtle, spiritual dimensions of life.

Fourth, for Christianity the Church (*Ecclesia*) is of fundamental significance. The idea of the *Ecclesia* is the greatest treasure of Christianity. Centred around the mystery of the Resurrection of Christ we are called together as one body, the Body of Christ, breaking bread and enjoying the fellowship in love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and sharing. However, this is the most abused of all the Christian ideas. We now celebrate our divisions, scattering the Body and scandalising the world with our lust for power and self-seeking designs.

Hinduism does not seem to have a similar idea of the *Ecclesia*. In fact, there is no idea of the human community in traditional India, at least in the Hinduism that we know. We have only caste groupings which we are hardly able to overcome even in independent India with all its legal and democratic efforts. The gatherings of Dalits, women and other oppressed people around Bhakti movements in the past symbolised the quest for genuine human community that transcended the barriers. All attempts to create true community have always been resolutely resisted by the custodians of the caste system. The Buddha succeeded in creating and practising the Sangha principle over and against the fragmentation of Indian society which put the majority of

### Christian Self Understanding

human beings on the desolate margins. However, that Sangha became increasingly a monastic community catering mainly to the monks. Still that was a great step.

It is in this aspect of creating a true human community that the Christian Church in India can make a substantial contribution. But it should draw on Indian resources in this initiative, as the Buddha once did, and abstain from the greedy mission ideology and funds of the rich and the powerful Christians elsewhere. The new militant gathering of people under the *Hindutva* banner seems to be an attempt to create a sense of community on the communitarian model of Christianity and Islam. But it is perceived to be negative and ultimately destructive of true human community. The models taken by the Hindus from Christianity are unfortunately corrupt copies of the original biblical model of the Church. Christians should assume full responsibility if others take their wrong models and spread misguided and aggressive communalism in the name of community.