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Hindu Interpretation of Christ

MAHATMA GANDHI (1869 - 1948)

Many historians call Mahatma Gandhi as the man of the century, “the most effective potency in the awakening of the Orient”. In India, without doubt he is the watershed in the modern history of the century, and the most influential voice in every sphere of thought among the Hindus. As such, Gandhi’s understanding of Jesus Christ and the Christian message carries greater weight among Hindus than perhaps all the Hindu philosophical and religious interpretations of Jesus.

Life and Work

Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma is a title, meaning ‘great soul’) is the subject of literally hundreds of books if not thousands, and so his life sketch is too well known to be repeated here. His autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth* is an authentic and absorbing self-examination of a sincere soul, and makes profitable reading. We need only to mention some major elements of his life which have been influential on his thinking. The powerful position his father and grandfather had as ministers in the local principedom, and his mother’s Vaishnavite bhakti devotion must be the earliest and strongest to make impression on Gandhi’s character. His early youthful experiences and failures led Gandhi to be “devoted to none but truth”. Right from an early age, there is an intense and unyielding pursuit of truth as the chief characteristic of his personality. Later, when he went to South Africa as a lawyer, there he encountered his first life-mission: the two decade long struggle against the racist discrimination against the Indian settlers

there. Gandhi's patriotism was awakened here. The second work which absorbed his time and his attention was his life-ambition and attempt to bring Hindu-Muslim unity in the land, but which unfortunately ended in the division of India into Hindustan and Pakistan. His third life-mission was simultaneous with the last mentioned one, viz., to lead successfully the Indian Independence struggle against British colonialism. Gandhi described the communal violence that erupted after the Partition as "the greatest tragedy of my life", because the masses had completely forgotten Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence. His final mission which he set before himself was the emancipation of the untouchables and the socially outcast. It was in opposing this orthodox caste system as well as in his attempt to reconcile Hindus to the Muslims that Gandhi angered the Hindu orthodox elite, fell prey to their plots and so died a martyr. He realised rather too late to what an impossible extent he had to appease the Hindu orthodox for the sake of Indian unity and freedom. Thousands of years old structures cannot be rooted out in a short span of decades — can they?

Beside the collected works of Gandhi and perhaps more readable are the smaller booklets published by non-Gandhian organizations in his honour. *Gandhi — the Man and His Mission*, *Mahatma Gandhi — an Interpretation* are among the books which described Gandhi's understanding of Jesus Christ and Christianity. *Christian Mission in India*, *The Christian Significance of Mahatma Gandhi* (by John W. Sadiq), *What Jesus Means to Me* (compiled by Prabhu), *Gandhi's Challenge to Christianity* (by S.K. George) are some of the good ones. I personally like the two small booklets by Anand T. Hingorani, a personal friend and associate of Gandhi: *My Philosophy of Life*, and *The Message of Jesus Christ*, here Hingorani lets Gandhi to speak for himself (quotes all relevant writings/words of Gandhi) without much of his interpretation, and so they are valuable.

Philosophy of Life

Being primarily a man of political and social action, Gandhi was no systematic thinker. Nonetheless, he had a broad philosophical framework which governed all his thinking and acting. So before looking at his approach to Jesus Christ, it will be necessary for us to briefly look at his underlying philosophy of his — "my philosophy of life", as he called it.

In the ashram Gandhi founded at Wardha, every inmate must take eleven vows, and Hingorani rightly points out that these eleven vows are the epitome of Gandhi's philosophy. Gandhi always said that life without vows was "like a ship without anchor or like an edifice that is built on slippery sand instead of a solid rock".

These eleven vows are: 1) Truth, 2) Non-violence, 3) *Brahmacharya* (chastity), 4) Control of the palate (fasting) 5) Non-stealing 6) Non- possession (renunciation or *sanyasa*), 7) Fearlessness, 8) Removal of untouchability, 9) Equality of religions, 10) "Bread-labour" and 11) *Swadeshi* (indigeniety).

Of these except truth, non-violence and *swadeshi*, the rest of the vows deal with the practical aspects of developing personal and social virtues, while equality of religions will be discussed later. So we will concentrate here mainly on these three, which form the core of his framework as many point out. Here it must be noted that Gandhi arrived at this basis empirically, he said that they are "not final — I may change them tomorrow!"

Of the three cardinals of Gandhi, *Satya*, *Ahimsa* and *swadeshi*, (truth, non- violence and indigeniety), truth is by far the most important. He always put truth first — "I was capable of sacrificing non-violence for the sake of truth", said he. Truth is the supreme goal or *dharma* of man (cf. the motto on the Seal of the Indian Government: *Satyameva jayate* - truth alone conquers). In an honest confession Gandhi says, "I am but a seeker after truth. I claim to have found the way to it . . . But I admit that I have not yet found the Truth."

Gandhi knows that this way is “straight and narrow . . . like the edge of a sword”, and he strives and rejoices to walk on it – for God’s word is that “he who strives never perishes”. And what is the nature of this truth? “Truth is God – nothing else, nothing less . . . I worship God as truth only . . . My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other god than Truth.”

Gandhi could say that love is God and God is Love; with Christians he always preferred to speak of God as Truth and Truth as God. This means, for Gandhi there is no atheist, for even an atheist is a seeker after truth! And the vision of God means the realization that God dwells in one’s heart – truth “is what the voice within tells you”. But it is also relative (and only God knows the absolute truth, it is not given to man). This means that people who worship idols also are pursuing truth, albeit in a lower level. This condemned and supported at the same time the idolatry of the Hindus.

Is then Gandhi’s concept of God impersonal? He himself says, “I do not regard God as a person. Truth for me is God . . . Because God is an idea . . . not a blade of grass grows or moves without his will.”

Ahimsa, non-violence, is always coupled with *Satya*, truth, in Gandhi’s thinking. His ashram’s ideal was, “seeking Truth through the exclusive means of *Ahimsa*”. Thus if Truth is the supreme *dharma* (the goal or righteousness), *ahimsa* is the supreme – “exclusive” – means to attain it. “*Ahimsa* means ‘love’ in the Pauline sense”, said Gandhi. Negatively, it means “not injuring any being, whether by body or in mind”. Positively, “*ahimsa* means the largest love”. That is why if I follow *ahimsa*, I must love my enemy. The difference between man and beast is that while man can practice *ahimsa*, a beast can practice only *himsa*. For *ahimsa* requires the highest form of courage – the spiritual courage. Hence no coward can be a practitioner of *ahimsa*, and the greater the *ahimsa*, the greater the civilization of the people who practise it. Gandhi therefore equated cannibalism with *himsa* and vegetarianism with *ahimsa*. When pressed, he admitted that *himsa* is the utter selfishness of

man, while *ahimsa* is the self-giving love. But Gandhi was careful enough to see the limits of his concept. So he admitted also that all taking of life is not *himsa*. “Even manslaughter may be necessary in certain cases”. A man who runs amuck and goes about killing people, needs to be killed. A physician’s operation causes only pain and not *himsa*. So to commit as little as possible *himsa* to others means to practice *ahimsa*.

Gandhi, ascribing good to the spirit and evil to the body, like the Greek Gnostics, affirmed that as long as we are in the body it is difficult to live a fully non-violent life. *Ahimsa* is essentially a soul-force, while *himsa* is a body-force. Perhaps the great strength of Gandhi’s teaching on *ahimsa* is that he practiced it:

I have been practicing with scientific precision Non-violence and its possibilities for an unbroken period of over fifty years. I have applied it in every walk of life, domestic, institutional, economic and political. I know of no single case in which it has failed.

Thirdly, *Swadeshi*. “*Swadeshi* is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the world remote. By this he meant, “I must not serve my distant neighbour at the expense of the nearest.” It does not imply hatred of the foreigner or of foreign things, but it means positively that a man’s first duty is to his neighbour. It is for this purpose, to help our own neighbours, the village producers, that Gandhi supported the wearing of *Khaddar* (home spun yarn and cloth), and the use of the spinning wheel.

This *swadeshi* spirit for Gandhi is all pervasive. Concretely it takes the following forms: In economics, it means a rejection of Industrialization and modernization and the encouragement of cottage industries to create self-sufficient villages; in sociology, *swadeshi* means the submission to the age old *varnashrama dharma* (the duty of a Hindu to his caste and stage in life), and the rejection of the foreign Christian, liberal or other social systems. In politics, it means the support of the ancient village *panchayat* or *gram panchayat*. In religion, one’s continued support of

one's own religion in opposition to conversion. "I must restrict myself to my ancestral religion – that is, the use of my immediate, surroundings in religion. If I find it defective I should serve it by purging it of its defects", instead of forsaking it. As such, Gandhi does not envision one world religion in the future, but rather that each religion grows strong and participates in a parliament of religions.

Gandhi's Understanding of Christ

With the above philosophical basis of Gandhi, let us now turn to his understanding of Christ and Christianity.

It is rather unfortunate that Gandhi's contact with the gospel was not good to start with. The condemnation by the missionaries of the Hindu gods and religion, the conversion of a Hindu who was 'forced' to eat beef, drink alcohol and wear western dress, his reading of unpalatable books in the Bible like Leviticus or Numbers – all this seems to have driven him away from the content of the biblical message. Happily, his reading of the New Testament, and especially of the Sermon on the Mount, caught hold of his heart and imagination at once. "Resist not evil" seems to have been the most influential message he got from Jesus' teaching. In spite of his rejection of the gospel message in its essence, Gandhi was honest enough to say that it is Christianity to which he is indebted "for the religious quest which (it) awakened in me".

"It is that Sermon [on the Mount] which has endeared Jesus to me." And the message of Jesus is contained in this sermon. Bhagvadgita's message of renunciation was confirmed for Gandhi in the Sermon, and so became one of his most cherished sources of life. But Jesus himself failed to impress upon Gandhi's mind. Like Vivekananda, Gandhi also rejects the significance of Jesus' historicity, for Jesus is only an illustration of the principle of Christhood.

I may say that I have never been interested in a historical Jesus. I should not care if it was proved by someone that the man called Jesus never lived, and that what was narrated in the gospels was a figment of the writer's imagination. For the Sermon on the Mount would be still be true to me.

Therefore, for Gandhi, like a great number of Hindu thinkers, even the cross of Jesus is only a symbol of the principle of Christhood, and at best a concrete example of Christ's selfless love for others. So Jesus was a martyr. But in the ultimate analysis what is significant is the eternal principle of Christhood (for that matter, also the principle of Buddhahood) and the person becomes irrelevant. Hence there is no uniqueness in Jesus not found in other souls. The birth, life and death of such Christs are recurring events in the history of mankind. It is by following what Jesus taught that we can attain to his height. Following from this, Gandhi said that God did not bear the Cross nineteen hundred years ago, but he bears it today. He is also dying and is being resurrected day by day. It is clear that in all of this Gandhi is strictly following the primacy of principle over person. Here one is moved by the frank challenge given by Stanley Jones – a friend of Gandhi – to "penetrate through the Principle to the Person" of Jesus Christ, in order to find the truth. As Jones says in his book *Mahatma Gandhi – Christian?*, Gandhi failed to penetrate the principle and meet the person Jesus.

Once this uniqueness is rejected, the equality of all religions is just a matter of deduction. As M.M. Thomas analyses, the basis for this equality is to be found in Gandhi's beliefs: a) that there is one God, unknowable; b) his revelations and human responses to them are to be found everywhere and in all ages; c) the central teaching of all religions boils down to the principle of *Ahimsa*, though it is called by a multitude of names; d) there is error and imperfection in all religions as human enterprises; e) all religions are continuously evolving towards the fuller realization of Truth. So Truth or revelation cannot be the monopoly of any single religion. This calls for mutual respect and tolerance of one religion to another.

For Gandhi religion is a matter of the heart, not of the mind. If one reaches in his own heart in his quest, then he has reached all hearts too. So, preaching of one's faith to another, and proselytisation of any kind are unwarranted.

The value of each religion must be judged by its ethical teaching and practice, rather than its mystical or philosophical achievements. In another context Gandhi even talks like a nationalist: he says that from his youth upward, he “learned the art of estimating the value of scriptures on the basis of their ethical reality.” He exercises “his own judgment about every scripture, including Gita” on the basis of his own conscience and reason. “I cannot surrender my reason while I subscribe to divine revelation!”

Having experienced the Western Christianity adulterated with imperialism and materialism, Gandhi has a lot to say to remake Indian Christianity. He insisted that Indian Christianity must disassociate itself from its Western counterpart, because of the latter’s alliance with *himsa* and mammon. Christians have misunderstood Christ’s command to “go ye into all the world” by taking it to mean only proselytisation. But what Christ actually sent his disciples into the world for was philanthropic work. We have already seen how Gandhi’s opposition to conversion and evangelism stems from his concept of Swadeshi in religions, and so we need not go into that here.

Evaluation

By way of evaluation, we can see the following:

a) the greatest strength of Gandhi lay in his life rather than in his teaching. With utmost diligence and sincerity he practiced what he taught, – almost perfectly. This is perhaps the greatest challenge he has for you and me as the disciples of Christ. I am reminded again of the maxim of Stanley Jones: “If I will not obey the light to the extent I can, the time will soon come when that light turns into darkness, and I cannot obey even if I will!” Gandhi did obey the light given to him, there is no doubt about that. Have I so obeyed?

b) As almost every Christian critique of Gandhi has rightly pointed out, Gandhi’s concept of God is far from the biblical concept, but soon turns into an impersonal idea, and not a living person. This is at the root of most of his misunderstandings of the Christian message.

c) In spite of all the geniality and tolerance, Gandhi was, or became in his maturer years, a staunch Hindu. His supreme allegiance to Bhagvadgita, the name of Rama and, to the Hindu caste system show that he died a Hindu.

d) It is this loyalty to Hindu teaching that blinded Gandhi from seeing the uniqueness of the historical person, Jesus Christ. In one sweep the Cross, the person and work of Jesus are brushed aside as irrelevant and the principles he represents are preferred instead. Once a hot debate, the question whether Gandhi was a Christian thus need not detain us a bit here. He was born, lived, worked and died a martyr for the Hindu cause.

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA (1862-1902)

Ramakrishna and Vivekananda

During the waning years of Brahmoism there arose in Bengal another entirely different movement in the person of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who was the guru of Swami Vivekananda. We cannot study Vivekananda’s thought without getting acquainted with his guru. So here we do a brief summary of the life and teaching of Ramakrishna.

Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1834-86) originally Gadhadhar Chhatopadhyaya, is the name he chose for himself when he became a *sanyasi*. He was through and through a mystic, little educated in Sanskrit or English or in his mother tongue Bengali. Coming from a very poor Brahmin family of Karparkar (West Bengal), at an early age he was made a *pujari* (ministrant, priest) in Calcutta, and later of the famous Dakshineswar temple. He gave it up later to devote his life fully to contemplative meditation and the practice of *Yoga*. At the age of 59 he married a five year old girl, Sharada, who later became his disciple and lived with him as a virgin all through his life.

His thought was influenced by several people. As a young man he came into a contact with a Hindu nun Bhairavi, through whom he was introduced to ecstatic visions as possible and essential religious experiences.

Through the ascetic Totapuri he learnt Shankara's Advaita. Only later in his life he learned about Christianity, through Jadhu Malik, who was one could say, an uncommitted Christian. Except in the first case of Bhairavi's ecstatic visions and trances, Ramakrishna was not committed to others. He also went through experiences of other religions in turn, and so through these trances he came to his basic philosophy of religions: all religions are the same. So much so that he could experience the opposing strands, like Shaktism and Vaishnavism. He was even in a trance for six months with Christ — after which till his death, Ramakrishna was convinced that Jesus Christ was an incarnation of God. This experience is described by the publications of Ramakrishna Mission in Belur Math thus: "Christ merged in Ramakrishna, who forthwith lost his outward consciousness and became completely absorbed and *savikalpa samadhi* in which he realized his union with Brahman with attributes."

Swami Vivekananda, his archdisciple, was never tired of telling his disciples that Ramakrishna was not only a perfect man, but the incarnation of god himself, and relates how on several occasion Ramakrishna claimed this, and in some cases also manifested his superhuman power.

Ramakrishna was a unifying factor not only for *Bhakti* and *Shakti* sects of Hinduism, but the whole of Hinduism in himself — the goal of course to unite all religions. Thus, as Thomas points out, personal, ecstatic experience was to Ramakrishna of supreme importance in his religion. That is why he repeatedly said:

I have practiced all religions, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity . . . and I have also followed the paths of different Hindu sects . . . I have found that it is the same god toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths . . . The tank has several *ghats*. At one Hindus draw water in pitches and call it *jal*; at another Musalmanns draw water in leather bottles and call it *pani*; at a third Christians do the same and call it water.

This equality of all religions and the realization of this fact through the medium of *Sadhana* (practice, experience)

have remained as Ramakrishna's main tenets. Only he vehemently rejected the Christian concept of sin, and refused to settle down to one concept of god as well.

Once a man gave me a Bible. A part of it was read to me, and it was full of that one thing — sin and sin! One must have such a faith in oneself that one can say, 'I have uttered the name of god . . . how can I be a sinner?' This is the one trouble with Christian and Brahmos.

There is thus a lack of a realistic concept of human nature as well as against the biblical understanding of fallen human nature. All these three elements — the equality of all religions, personal, mystical, experience as necessary, the rejection of sinful human nature — have been passed on to Swami Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda's Life

If we pause to note that Vivekananda lived only forty years, his influence and creativity cannot be explained except we accept him as an intellectual giant and spiritual genius. Originally named Narendranath he was a sensitive soul, who came into contact with Ramakrishna Paramahansa in his search for an authentic guru. To his question, Have you seen god? the simple answer 'yes' of Ramakrishna ended his search there. Unlike Ramakrishna Vivekananda was a highly educated and intellectual person. He graduated from Calcutta university in 1884. In 1886, when his guru Ramakrishna died, he was the obvious choice and successor and took on *sanyasa* with the name Vivekananda. His faith in Ramakrishna as the incarnation of God seems to have given him an unquestioned leadership and following among the educated Hindus. In 1893 he was sent by the maharaja of Mysore to represent Hinduism at the world parliament of religions. He gave there several addresses and was hailed as the greatest influence and thinker at the meeting. Later on he also founded the Vedanta Society of America which became a part of the Ramakrishna Mission, with Belur Math as the headquarters. This Ramakrishna Mission, the first missionary organisation proper of Hinduism, was also his creation. The

main objective of this Math was to propagate the teaching of Ramakrishna (as described above) and also to revive Hinduism. He toured all over India and established Maths whose objective was to produce dedicated workers for the good of Hinduism and India. He died very young at the age forty.

His speeches and writings have been selected and published as *Collected Works*, in seven volumes. There are numerous Christian interpretations of Vivekananda also, of which the dissertation by J.R. Chandran on a comparative study of Vivekananda and Origin, is worth special mention. An easier reading would be *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, published by the Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, in 1944.

Vivekananda and advaita

Advaita was in the air as the hottest subject of philosophical debates in India, and being a fully patriotic Hindu, Vivekananda identified himself at once with the movement of Advaitism. Thus it is true to say that Vivekananda added Advaita to Ramakrishna's other teachings. For Vivekananda, Vedanta is the true and universal religion, and mother of all religions. The reason for this universality, as against Christianity for example, is that while Christianity rests upon a person as its basis, Vedanta's foundation is purely principle:

It is in vain we try to gather all peoples of the world around a single personality. It is difficult to make them gather together even round external and universal principles. If it ever becomes possible to bring the largest portion of humanity to one way of thinking in regard to religion, mark you, it must be always through principles and never through persons.

But this does not mean that every human being must follow the same religion. He advocated Ramakrishna's concept of *Ishta Devata*, one's personal God according to one's liking. A person can at best provide one of the paths but never be universal, for there are ever so many persons to follow — and Christ is only one among them. Vivekananda defined the concept of *Ishta Devata* thus:

Your way is good for you, but not for me. My way is good for me, but not for you. My way is called in Sanskrit my *Ishta*. Mind you, we have no quarrel with any religion in the world. We have each our *Ishta*.

This idea of *Ishta* stubbornly rejects any corporate religion! For here religion is purely a private affair — an echo of what Ramakrishna taught.

Advaita and Christianity

With this basis of Vedanta as the universal religion, he interprets Christ and Christianity in Hindu terms. Christ is a Vedantin for Vivekananda. Buddha is the greatest character the world has ever seen, and Christ is next only to him — but both are representations of the principle of Christhood and Buddhahood. Each of us too can attain this state of Buddha- or Christ-hood:

Jesus had our nature; he became Christ; so can we and so *must* we. Christ and Buddha were the names of a state to be attained. Jesus and Gautama were the persons to manifest it.

Thus Jesus is unimportant, except as an instrument for the manifestation of the Christhood. But the significance of Jesus as an incarnation of God is to be seen in three aspects:

1) he was a yogi who has realised *jivanmukta*. This Jesus achieved by complete self-renunciation. In renunciation, the man within dies and only God remains — thus the Vedantic goal is realised.

2) Christ was God "If I as an Oriental have to worship Jesus of Nazareth there is only one way left for me, that is to worship him as God and nothing else." Here the advaitic idea of "I am God" is clear. For, in the same breath when he acknowledged Jesus as God in the above quotation Vivekananda continues, that he also worships all criminals and murderers and everyone else as God!

3) Jesus realised his identity with Brahman and taught this at three different levels. To the common people, Jesus taught, "Our Father..." To a higher circle he gave a more elevated teaching, "I am in my Father and he in me, and I in

you...” But his final and most advanced teaching was advaitic – “I and my father are one”.

These are the three Christian *mahavakyas*. It is of course easy to see all the dvaitic, vishishtadvaitic and advaitic teachings.

From this it is clear that there can be no real significance of the Cross and hence of atonement. “Christ was God incarnate; they could not kill him. That which was crucified was only a semblance, a mirage.” We are “saved” by imitating Jesus and hosts of others like him; as noted earlier, Vivekananda does not use Christian categories.

Again, as an Advaitin, it is impossible for Vivekananda to have any sympathy towards the Christian concept of sin: He says,

The greatest error is to call a man a weak and miserable sinner. Every time a person thinks in this mistaken manner, he reverts one more link in the chain of *avidya* that binds him, adds one more layer of ‘self-hypnotism’ that lies heavy over his mind.

The fact that Jesus cannot be separated from Christ is *the* problem of Christianity. Having a circular view of history, Vivekananda affirms that nothing happens in history only once, and therefore all historical personalities and events are accidents for him – only the principles are eternal and universal.

Close to the foregoing is another essential advaitic element in Vivekananda’s teaching: God cannot create anything, be it even *ex nihilo*, but only evolves himself. As such man is not created and so cannot be identified with the essential conditions of this history.

There is not much of Vivekananda’s understanding concerning other aspects Christian faith to be learned. But the above sample suffices to show that he stoutly interprets – for the first time – Christ in terms of Hindu goals. This was a line which Radhakrishnan developed more fully in his *Polemics Against Christianity*.

Evaluation

By way of evaluation, one can say several things in appreciation of Swami Vivekananda. For example, he was an innovative thinker in Hinduism itself. His idea of ‘practical vedanta’, that is, absorption into Brahman through selfless service gave this material world and man’s actions essential place in Hindu theology for the first time. Notice here the departure from the classical understanding of such absorption – absorption into Brahman through self realization. Further, his commitment to advaita philosophy is consistent. When we look at his approach to Jesus Christ as being God, it is this advaitic interpretation rather than any Christian one. In any case it is to Vivekananda’s credit that he gave the highest possible status to Christ in his system. In all his thinking he most deliberately and consciously using Hindu terms – as such fully relevant to the Hindus. This is perhaps one of his greatest appeals with his countrymen.

On the other hand, being a dedicated disciple of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda could not come out of Ramakrishna’s teaching of the equality of all the religions, the plurality of the approaches (the concept of *Ishtam*) and the divinity of the human nature. This is also Vivekananda’s greatest misunderstanding concerning the Christian gospel. Lacking a biblical concept of holy and gracious God, he could not see the human depravity, the qualitative difference between God and man (what Karl Barth calls the ‘gulf’). For this same reason Vivekananda could not see through the seeming equality of all religions to their essential differences, or the significance of a human person over against a principle. As such he tends to reject sin as moral evil.

Further, thanks to his loyalty to advaita, Vivekananda doesn’t seriously consider God as being a personal being, and all historical personalities are given even lesser significance. We need not find fault with his handling of the biblical passages inadequately and eclectically, but it is enough to say that it is this mishandling of the Christian

Scriptures that leads him to wrong interpretations of biblical doctrines.

As noted earlier, Swami Vivekananda, as the pioneer of one of the two types of modern neo-Hinduism schools, is of crucial importance in relating the Gospel of Christ to the modern Hindu mind.

SARVAPALLI RADHAKRISHNAN (1888-1975)

Background

By sheer force of personality Gandhi's understanding of Christ became more or less the most common Hindu understanding. But because Radhakrishnan was an original thinker and philosopher of the highest calibre, his interpretation of Jesus Christ is better known and discussed in the West and in Christian circles. He is regarded as "the spokesman par excellence for Hindu spirituality". Moreover, we could also say that he is the most formidable Hindu opponent of Christianity! Being the "the best, most eloquent, learned and erudite ambassador of India all over the world," he lacks the utter honesty and courage of Gandhi. Instead, even in his appreciations of Christian elements, one invariably finds a mine hidden! There is a reason for his approach. While he was studying in Madras Christian College, he was intensely disturbed by the condemnation of Hinduism by the missionary professors and principals of the college. Their attack on Hinduism, that it was not coherent intellectually, aroused in him the fighting spirit to defend Hinduism at all costs. In one of his letters to a friend at that time, he reveals how he vowed to reverse the trend and determined to create a Hindu apologetic and polemic against Christianity.

This warns us to be careful in our dealing with our neighbours, does it not? Often *what* we speak may be forgotten, but *how* we speak remains! More than the content of our words, the attitudes behind them evoke a response — either positively or negatively.

Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan was born in Tiruttani, Andhra Pradesh, in a rich Brahmin family. He received his education in almost exclusively Christian institutions, such as Madras Christian College, Tambaram. Later he worked as professor of philosophy in the universities of Madras, Mysore and Calcutta. During 1936-52 he was at Oxford as a professor of Eastern religions and ethics. After this he entered politics, and was the leader of various Indian delegations to UNO commissions. From 1949-1962 he was the Indian ambassador to Moscow. Afterwards he became the vice-president of the Indian Republic, and finally the President.

He wrote many books. Some of the well known are: *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I & II; *The Hindu View of Life*, *The Religion We Need, East and West*, *Eastern Religion and Western Thought*, *Religion and Society*, *Recovery of Faith*, etc. His philosophy has been included in the best series all over the world which are dedicated to the study of philosophy or religion. (e.g. in the Library of Living Philosophers, History of Philosophy, Eastern and Western and many others).

In his autobiography, Radhakrishnan says that it is Vivekananda who aroused the patriotism in him, not Gandhi! Thus we have here the second line of neo-Hinduism, that of Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan.

Radhakrishnan's Philosophy

Radhakrishnan's method is quite scholarly, yet simple. For him, water is purer at its source, though it gets muddied in its flow later. Similarly Radhakrishnan compares in order to evaluate a religion, be it Hinduism or Christianity (incidentally, these are the two religions in whose context Radhakrishnan's thought developed exclusively), we must not go to the church history in Christianity, nor to the later accretions in Hinduism. Each religion must be judged according to its Scriptures — we must go to Vedas and the Bible. Yet, he is 'progressive' enough to reinterpret these conservative thoughts in a way that is relevant to the modern time.

Like all Hindus, Radhakrishnan also starts with a concept of reality. What is reality? Following Shankara, he also affirms that the absolute or the Brahman is the only reality. However, there are five different stages in realizing this reality – *anna* (matter), *prana* (life), *manas* (consciousness), *vijñana* (intelligence) and *ananda* (bliss). In this ladder of reality, different religions belong to different stages. Semitic religions (Judaism, Islam and Christianity), being object oriented religions, belong to the lower type. Hinduism or Buddhism, emphasizing experience, are of the higher type. While the former insist upon belief and conduct, rites and ceremonies, authorities and dogma, the later go beyond these and insist upon self-discovery and the contact with the divine. As such, the latter are the spiritual religions! “The fundamental truths of the spiritual religions are that our real self is the supreme being, which it is our business to discover and consciously become what this being is.”

This is pure Advaita, to be sure. From this as a corollary it follows that this world is not a creation, as the Bible teaches, but a movement of God. Further this world is not an illusion or unreal: “the perfection of God overflows into the world. The world is the outflow of the surplus energies of God, the supreme artist.” This is a far cry from Shankara or orthodox Hinduism! Following this process of argument, Radhakrishnan redefines the concept of Hindu *karma* as well. For him, it is an expression of the functioning or moral law in human life. Since the past has inescapable influence on the present, and since God is the supervisor of this process of automatic justice, the doctrine of *karma* is fully consistent both with facts and with Hindu thinking. It is most significant that in spite of all his elaboration of *maya* and *karma* doctrines, he never says a word about another related and important Hindu concept – that of *sansara* (world).

Radhakrishnan’s Interpretation of Christ

Now we are ready to analyze Radhakrishnan’s understanding of Christ and Christianity. For him, Christ is nearer to the Indian thought than the Western or Greek.

Hence Christ must be interpreted and best understood in the Hindu framework. In Jesus, the Jewish nationalistic spirit as well as the Indo-Aryan religious elements were mixed – nay, they were in tension. Thus Jesus was a mixture of conflicting elements, hence not perfect. The legalistic and the mystic, material and the spiritual, messianic and the universalistic, militarism and passivism – were constantly fighting to dominate Jesus’ actions. It must be stressed that the latter concept in each of the above pair belongs, according to Radhakrishnan, to the Indo-Aryan element in Jesus. Thus Radhakrishnan’s Christ is an integrated Christ. In this scheme, the Cross is understood as “the abandonment of the ego” and “identification with a fuller life and consciousness”. Similarly, resurrection and eternal life are merely goals of men in Christian garb. But understood in their true spirituality (that is, in Hindu terms), resurrection is “the passage from the death of self-absorption to the life of unselfish love . . . from falsehood to truth, from slavery to the world to the liberty of the eternal.” This allegorical interpretation is again typical of Hindu as well as liberal thinkers.

But further, Radhakrishnan sees in Jesus a failure. Jesus was hoping for the establishment of the kingdom of God in the Jewish manner. As he failed to fulfill this claim, eschatological interpretations became predominant, and the risen Lord takes the place of God, and the Church the place of the Kingdom of God! So just as Jesus is the mixture of Hindu (Aryan), Jewish, Platonic, Gnostic influences, Christianity also is a syncretistic religion, incorporating in itself the Upanishadic, Buddhist, Gnostic concepts. But the worth of Jesus is to be seen in his historical context, just like Rama’s or Krishna’s *avatara* in their contexts. As such, Jesus is not unique, but only an *avatara*. His incarnation is neither final, too – there could be better incarnations in the future.

His attitude to religions is again exclusively a Hindu one. In a nut-shell, he says that all religions are equally true, but Hinduism, being the *sanathana Dharma*, (the ancient

religion) is the essence of them all. This attitude we can truly call Hindu *philosophia gloria*. The reasons for this glorification of Hinduism are precise in his thinking.

First, the most basic tension between the plurality of the expressions of truth about the ultimate reality and the one truth, is best dealt with in Hinduism. Secondly, religion, being above all a matter of experience, and mystical experience at that, is best fulfilled in Hinduism. Vedas are “the record of spiritual experiences of souls strongly endowed with the sense of reality. Thirdly, a central principle of Hinduism is religious tolerance, since Hinduism is totally undogmatic, and is therefore best suited to become the universal religion. Fourthly and finally, the Hindu *dharma* alone “acknowledges all spheres of life and accords to them their appropriate place and mutual relations within the system.” Here Radhakrishnan means no doubt the caste system, the four stages of life and the three *margas* or *yogas*.

Christianity because of its idea of exclusiveness of Christ, Judaism because of its concept of ‘jealous God’, Islam because of its *Jihad* — they all lack inclusiveness which Hinduism has. In fact, it is wrong to speak of different religions — there is really only one religion. All religions are different expressions of the true religion. And what is this religion? Radhakrishnan says, “The eternal religion behind all religions, this *sanathana Dharma* . . . it is our duty to get back to this central core of religions”.

Hinduism is the modern, anglicized name for this *sanathana Dharma*, as all Hindu writers throughout the ages have emphasized.

Evaluation

It is difficult to evaluate Radhakrishnan’s thought, because he appears to be more tolerant and sympathetic, while in reality he is a strong Hindu defending Hinduism to the last straw. But a few things can be said about him.

First, Radhakrishnan’s attitude to religion in general, and Christianity in particular, seems from his self-assigned

mission of defending Hinduism at any cost. This lacks a scholar’s integrity and honesty.

Secondly, being a militant Hindu, his understanding of Jesus is a Hindu interpretation — he is of course free to interpret Jesus as he likes, but the point here is that like Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan also sees Christ as an imperfect traveler on the road to the advaitic goal. This does not do full justice to the claims either of Jesus, or of the prophets and apostles. In making Jesus a mixture and Christianity a syncretism, Radhakrishnan advocates a universal religion which borrows faithful obedience from Judaism, a life of beauty from Greek paganism, noble compassion from Buddhism, divine love from Christianity and a spirit of resignation from Islam.

Thirdly, he himself does not stand in the line of orthodox Hinduism, but rather his is a radical modern interpretation of Hinduism.

Fourthly, his goal was so to interpret the Hindu fundamentals that they give an undergirding to the problems facing modern India — as such his relevant expressions are praise worthy but to claim the stamp of orthodoxy for them is to defeat orthodoxy.