

EASTERN SPIRITUALITY

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PAGANISM, that is ethnic religions, can only be understood historically. They are the precipitate of a tribe's, a people's, group-experiences during its process of formation. They are passed on from generation to generation by way of tradition and are expressed either as customs, as mythology or as cult—the distinction between these three kinds of thoughts, words and deeds always remaining pretty vague. Moreover, all these group-expressions are in a constant flux; new experiences are added, modifying and perhaps logically contradicting, the previous forms of expression, possibly superseding them altogether.

Nothing, therefore, could be more misleading than wanting to explain a pagan ideology, an ethnic religion, in the same manner as that of a religion based on a *depositum fidei*, from which everything can be logically deduced. An ethnic religion never starts as a system, though in the end, at a certain point of intellectual development, systematisers arise that try to arrest the growth of amorphous agglomerations of group-experiences in the rigid moulds of a static ideology. Should they succeed, and should there be no further development in, for instance, the mythology of a pagan people, their religion dies—witness the death of the religion of Greece, after the age of poets and sophists had succeeded in eternalising the Olympians in the popular concepts of the sixth to fifth centuries B.C.

When we speak of the death of the religion of Greece, we mean of course that religion which has been preserved and embalmed in literature and has therefore continued to be known as such by the heirs of the Hellenic Civilisation, ourselves included—and not the popular religion of the Greek people, which went on growing mainly by acculturation of Oriental cults, until it was transubstantiated into Christianity.

In India, the evolution of her ethnic religion has taken a different course, because there from an early age religion and philosophy were running parallel courses. Popular religion was left unsystematised and free to develop in accordance with the spiritual

experiences and needs of the day,¹ whilst the systematisers and rationalisers found full scope in elaborating systems of their own by interpreting current popular concepts after their own fashion, or else by disregarding them altogether as belonging to another sphere, that of the common people, who were incapable of rising to the intellectual heights of philosophy.

Indian popular religion has from its Austric origins been the Agriculturist religion, which centres around the concept of fertility, symbolised by the Mother-Goddess, subsequently coloured and modified by the Venatorial² civilisation of the Dravidians, which reasserted the rights of the male in the matriarchal society of pre-Dravidians. The hysterical trances of women possessed by the Mother-Goddess, Mahâdevî, were thus taken over by the latter's husband, Mahâdeva,³ represented by its priest, who became a *shaman*—by which term I mean a man who makes a profession of falling into trances, disposed thereto naturally or artificially and by invitation.

It is at this point already, which antedates the Indus Valley Civilisation of c. 3000 B.C., that there takes place the momentous bifurcation of religion and philosophy: a development which, in that Indus Valley Civilisation and under the stimulus of Asianic newcomers responsible for it, led to the setting aside of an élite of shamans, who became the first philosophers by contrasting their inner experience of a static self with their outer observation of a constantly changing world. The very concept of fertility being based on an everlasting cycle of seed-time and harvest, of growth and decay, of birth and death, all subject to a repetitive law capable of being manipulated by man, the former vulgar *shaman* became a *yogin*, who practised an esoteric knowledge and art (*yoga*) of quitting this doleful existence of eternal, and therefore purposeless, cycles and of escaping into the serene world of unchanging ideas. Influenced by the totemism of the Venatorial Civilisation, the

¹ Such popular devotions, as those to Ganeça and Râma for instance, are quite recent developments, continuing to the beginning of this twentieth century, when they produced the novelty of political propaganda.

² For details of the three primary types of civilisation, Venatorial, Agriculturist and Pastoralist, may I refer to my 'Protohistory' (St Louis, 1947).

³ = 'the Great God', later called Civa; Mahâdevî = 'the Great Goddess' becoming later Durga ('the inaccessible one') and Pârvatî ('the mountain dweller'), as well as Ambikâ ('the mother').

cycles of phenomenal change for man became, both in popular religion and in philosophy, expressions of the Karmic law of a transmigration of souls; to transcend and break which vicious circle of existences, only the yogin had the knowledge (Sanskrit *jnâna*, Greek *gnôsis*), winging his way, alone, to the Alone.

From its inception therefore Indian philosophy has premised as axiomatic (1) the transmigration of souls in (2) a world which is *mâyâ* (illusory), whilst (3) the self is *kevala* (self-subsisting): the process (4) (*yoga* and *jnâna*), by which the latter realises this, leading to *mokṣa* ('deliverance').

The Aryan conquest of India, which began *c.* 1500 B.C., led to the ideological conquest of the Aryans, whose religion was originally the Pastoralist near-monotheism of Vedism. But in the Vedas⁴ already we can trace the degradation of a universal God of Right (Varuna), who metes out justice, into an Aryan god of Might (Indra), the Thunderstorm god of War, who helps his votaries to rich loot. Subsequently there was a complete cultural assimilation of the savage invaders by the native civilisation of India, an assimilation, in which we can distinguish two phases. In the first, Vedism is superseded by Brahmanism, a sacrificial magic which relegates the gods to the rank of popular deities, subject to the magic word of power, *brahman*, wielded by a caste of Brahmanic priests, who were incorporating into their close corporation the popular medicine-men of pre-Aryan India. In the second phase or movement, an élite of the conquerors tries to assimilate the esoteric philosophy of the conquered, by combining the remnants of its own theism with the atheistic system of pre-Aryan India, the four basic points of which we have set out above. The result of this effort are the Upanishads,⁵ which try to save theism by equating God (*Brahman*) and soul (*âtman*): a mere variant, as will readily be seen, of the *kevalatva* concept, enumerated by us above *sub.* 4. The Vedas were similarly saved in a purely formal manner, by clinging to a perpetuation of the text, whilst giving it a fanciful and novel, because quite alien, interpretation.

This capture by the Aryans of non-Aryan esoteric wisdom caused a non-Aryan reaction, which consisted in a reformulation

⁴ The Vedas consist of collections of hymns chanted by different priestly families during sacrifice. They constitute the most ancient extant Indo-European literature and date from *c.* 1500 B.C.

⁵ Composed *c.* 750-700 B.C.

and reaffirmation of their own native spirituality, without any admixture of Vedas and Theism. One goes by the name of Jainism, a 'Victory Religion' (*jina*='victor'), presumably to indicate that, though the Aryans might have overcome them by brute force, theirs was a greater, because spiritual, victory of the Self overcoming the illusions of *mâyâ*. The restorer of this ancient native Indian religion, Mahâvîra (literally 'The Great Hero'), lived 539 to 467 B.C., i.e., at a time when Persian influences were becoming strong in India. He was a younger contemporary of the Buddha (563-483 B.C.), who likewise had reacted against the Aryan attempt of stealing India's native thunder by excogitating a new method of his own, whereby to extricate man from the meshes of illusive existences—again, of course, without recourse to Vedas or gods.

Persian cultural paramountcy in India may be said to have begun with the eastern campaigns of Cyrus II (558-529), only to be continued after Persia's downfall at the hands of Alexander the Great by India's great Maurya dynasty (320-184 B.C.). Thus an impact of Zoroastrian thought not only imbued Jainism and Buddhism with ethical ideas foreign to the basic Indian system of philosophy, but strongly affected the kindred Aryans and their upanishadic speculations, strengthening the theistic and ethical elements in Brahmanism. As a consequence there flowered forth c. 250 B.C., the masterpiece of Indian religious literature, the Bhagavad Gîtâ ('The Song Celestial'), which essayed a popular synthesis of preceding ideas by reducing them to the common denominator of loving devotion (*bhakti*) to a personal God (*Içvara*), who was now said to be but another aspect of the impersonal *Brahman*.

Thus it will be seen that from its very inception philosophy was an idealistic monism, which knew only the reality of essences, having on the warranty of yogic experiences pronounced the phenomenal world an illusion. Such was therefore also the philosophy of the Greeks, whom these ideas had reached, though without a knowledge of the art of yoga, until the genius of an Aristotle brought pure thought in the West back to the dualism and realism of commonsense, restoring to the existential its rightful place beside the essential, and interpolating between 'real' and 'unreal' the 'potential'. Western thought has ever since been Aristotelian, notwithstanding the extravaganzas of exceptional individuals, but

the East has continued solidly in its pre-Aristotelian metaphysic and even logic.

Indian religious thought can only be said to have turned a new page with the Bhagavad Gîtâ, inasmuch as the latter tried to reconcile the ethnic religion of the masses and the esoteric philosophy of the élite, a syncretism which henceforth goes by the name of Hinduism.

On the religious side of this Hinduism, the personal God, on whom the bhaktas lavished their devotion, was in Western India identified with Vishnu, in Southern India with Civa, in Bengal with 'the Mother' (Mahâdevî). It produced eventually the great Marathi poet-saints of whom Tukarâm (1608-1649) is the best known: Caivaite Tamil bhaktas like Mânikka-vâçagar (tenth century): and Bengali ecstasies like Chaitanya (1486-1543). On the philosophic side there arose the traditional three great schools of Cankara (eighth century A.D.), Râmânuja (twelfth century A.D.) and Madhva (thirteenth century A.D.), who taught respectively a theopantic Monism, a 'qualified' Monism and a dualism, which did not identify the self and the Absolute. Cankara's 'Vedanta', i.e., final interpretation of the Vedas, refused to ascribe reality to anything but the Absolute and insisted on *jnâna* (gnosis) as the only path to Brahman, whilst Râmânuja saw in *bhakti* (love) the readiest way of the soul's self-identification with the Beloved. It has since then become axiomatic of Hindu spirituality that *jnâna* is the proper way to Brahman, as *bhakti* is to Içvara, and that the two are of equal value, the devotee's temperament deciding which method he would employ. Indeed there is a third method, *karma* (= 'work'), which consists in the minute observance of ritual, but which in the twentieth century has been interpreted as consisting in the good works of social service.

As will be seen from this cursory sketch, Hinduism claims above all things to be universalistic, because all-comprehensive. Buddhism has disappeared from India, because its own *bhakti* towards the Buddha was absorbed by the Hindu *bhakti* of Içvara, the Buddha himself being eventually called an *avatâra* ('descent') of Vishnu. Jainism still maintains itself in Gujerat, but is steadily dwindling, numbering today only one out of the 350 million Indians. Islam and Christianity alone have not only proved unassimilable, but have contributed to the strengthening of Theism in Hinduism itself.

For all its comprehensiveness and syncretism, Indian spirituality remains dominated by its fundamental tenets of metempsychosis, *mâyâ*, and *mokṣa*. It suffers from an inability to distinguish aseity from reality and in Being between actuality and potentiality and instead knows only the dilemma of being and non-being. Its *mokṣa* is deliverance from the phenomenal. This deliverance was sought originally, as it still is in Jainism, by an asceticism which equates evil with matter, whilst the Buddha preached a psychological method of getting rid of the thirst for existence; the Vedanta relying on an intellective illumination that the phenomenal does in fact not exist at all. All three are therefore tending to Pure Potentiality⁶ as their *summum bonum*, and not to the *Actus Purus* of thomism.

Traditional Indian thought therefore not only lacks all historical sense, but deliberately despises it as something unworthy of the superior man. Events being part of *mâyâ*, they are valueless, as is everything actual and existential: only the essential and potential has value. Events form part of an everlasting cycle and will therefore be repeated again and again and again—*ad nauseam*. Even if the Hindu were to accept the Incarnation, he could only see in it an event which has happened in former *kalpas* ('eras') already and which will be reiterated in future *kalpas*. The Hindu can therefore attach no more importance to the historical fact of the Passion of our Lord than to the mythological tale that Civa, after churning the ocean, drained all the poison that was about to destroy the world, by drinking it—the poison burning his throat black. In Hinduism there is no such concept as that of the uniqueness of an event, of any event—since all historical events are part of the phenomenal world, which itself is a mere illusion. To him the historical sense is a mark of *avidyâ* ('ignorance', 'lack of illumination').

Again, the idea of *sin* in the sense of one's own will refusing and even resenting the obligation of falling into line with God's design for oneself and the universe, is foreign to all Indian ideologies. Man may make mistakes—but only out of ignorance; once one knows, one can but act accordingly. As for all gnostics, there is for the Hindu no such discord as that between mind knowing the greater good and will desiring the lesser. Therefore only the

⁶ As for instance the *nirvâna* of the Buddhists which is explained as neither 'being' nor 'not-being'.

Christian prays to be delivered from Evil: the Vedantist wishes to be delivered from illusions and the Buddhist from suffering. Therefore, also, nothing is more misleading than to translate *mokṣa* by 'salvation'. There is no such concept in Eastern thought as *salvum facere*, as healing and making whole and hale again a world wounded by sin.

But into these systems of man getting rid of an illusion by his own efforts, there broke the loving gratitude and devotion to the Buddha, who deferred his own deliverance out of pity for suffering humanity, to whom he wished to make known his sovran method of overcoming suffering. Thus the Teacher of the Hīnayāna became the Saviour of the Māhayāna⁷—a concept which re-vivified in upanisadic circles the Vedic concept of God as 'friend', Mitra, and as 'apportioner of affection', Bhaga, and thus led to the Bhagavatism of lovers of a personal God, Iṣvara. But even the Bhāgavatas (or bhaktas) remained without a sense of sin and, unaware that the spurning of God is not due to ignorant folly, but to an evil will, simply revel in an emotionalism which Eastern philosophy rightly considers inferior and subordinate to the intellectualism of *jñāna*.

Hindu Philosophy boasts of comprehending everything—the best and the worst in man, food and poison, pearls and ordure. It declares them all to be but different aspects of the one ineffable Reality and refuses to set up a hierarchy of values among them, since after all they are all *māyā*—illusions which one must transcend to realise that 'I am He'.

Hindu Bhakti religion on the other hand is capable of producing out of the already mentioned mythological tale, such a couplet as Mānikka-vāṇagar addresses to Civa:

'Thou mad'st me thine:

Didst fiery poison eat, pitying poor souls,

That I might thine ambrosia taste—I, meanest one.'

And on this unresolved dissonance of head and heart we had perhaps most fittingly end this summary exposition of Eastern Spirituality.

⁷ *Hīna* = 'deficient', *mahā* = 'great', *yāna* = 'vehicle', scil. to convey man to *mokṣa*. Names of the two schools of Buddhism, the Hīnayāna prevailing in Ceylon and Indo-China, the Mahāyāna in China and Japan.