Hinduism

Indian thought has greatly attracted me since in my youth. . . . From the very beginning I was convinced that all thought is really concerned with the great problem of how man can attain to spiritual union with infinite Being. My attention was drawn to Indian thought because it is busied with this problem and because by nature it is mysticism. What I liked about it also was that Indian ethics are concerned with the behavior of man to all living beings and not merely with his attitude to his fellow-man and to human society.

—Albert Schweitzer[1]

1. A. Schweitzer, Indian Thought and Its Development, Henry Holt and Co., N.Y., 1936, preface, vi.

INTRODUCTION: MAN AND HIS WORLD

RABINDRANATH TAGORE sees one factor which distinguishes Hindu thought from all others—its geography. Classical Greek civilization—being urban—was a culture nurtured within city walls. Such a life results in an ultimate separation between the world inside the walls and that outside. Fortified with such barriers, man becomes suspicious of anything beyond them.

Indian civilization on the other hand grew out of life in the forests. When the first Aryans migrated into India (c. 3500 B.C.) they found a vast woodland which sheltered them from tropical heat and rain. Forests provided pastures for cattle, materials for building and fuel for their homes and sacrificial altars. Surrounded by such a friendly environment, and in constant contact with a living, growing nature, the Indian mind had no need of erecting walls. Consequently, the Hindu's religious philosophy centered on attaining truth by growing with and into his natural surroundings. The forest sages taught that man existed to realize the great harmony between his spirit and that of the world.

Thus, says Tagore, the contrast with the West is very distinct. While India emphasized the *congruity* between man and nature, the West stressed the cleavage. City dwellers felt as if man had to wrest his living from an unwilling alien power. The world was characterized and imagined as a hostile environment, which urban men felt they had to subdue.

And working from that viewpoint, European man creates a further artificial barrier, in the eyes of the Hindu. The Western man believes that there is a sudden unaccountable break between the human being and nature. That is, nature is limited to inanimate things and "beasts," which are considered on a "lower" scale of being. Whatever has the stamp of perfection on it, intellectual or moral, is exclusively human.

India, however, affirms the fundamental unity of creation. The earth is not merely an assemblage of physical phenomena we use and then discard. Quite the opposite: we need to establish a

conscious living relationship to every aspect of nature. Instead of scientific curiosity or material greed, man should be impelled to realize the potentialities of nature in a spirit of sympathy, with a feeling of joy and peace. Everything physical has a living presence, and by meeting the eternal spirit in every object the individual becomes emancipated. His harmony with the All is established.

Tagore looks at the historical differences between the settlers of America and those of India to illustrate his point. European colonists, he maintains, ignored the forests. The great living cathedrals of nature had no deep significance for them. They sought only wealth and power from nature, never a sacred association. In India, on the other hand, every spot of natural splendour became a place of pilgrimage. From the Himalayas to the Ganges holy places became sites of a great spiritual reconcilement between man's soul and that of the world. Indians even went so far in demonstrating this universal sympathy with life that they gave up eating animal food.

For Tagore, man is essentially not a slave "either of himself or of the world; but he is a lover. His freedom and fulfillment is in love, which is another name for perfect comprehension. By this power of comprehension, this permeation of his being, he is united with the all-pervading Spirit, who is also the breath of his soul. Where a man tries to raise himself to eminence by pushing and jostling all others, to achieve a distinction by which he prides himself to be more than everybody else, there he is alienated from that Spirit[1]

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Hindu Scriptures

Unlike Buddhism, Christianity or Islam, Hinduism did not have a founder. It grew gradually over a period of 5000 years absorbing and assimilating a variety of religious and cultural

[1] R. *Tagore, Sadhana,* Macmillan & Co., London, 1913, pp. 3-22.

movements on the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, it does not have an authoritative Torah or New Testament by which the true faith can be distinguished from heresies and misinterpretations. As has been pointed out by an unfriendly critic, Hinduism looks like a jungle of thought-patterns, a mysterious world of high-soaring and deep-plunging thought, gorgeous and weird mythology, bewildering variety and rigid customs, noble ethical purity and startling licence. [2]

Hinduism often claims to be the religion of the Vedas—in which case its earliest written records go back to at least 1200 B.C. These Vedas were introduced by Aryan tribes who migrated into India from the northwest for a period of 700 years. The *Rig-Veda,* an Aryan hymnal containing 1028 religious songs, represents the oldest Hindu scripture. The *Sama-Veda, Yajur-Veda* and *Atharva-Veda—collections* of sacrificial hymns, ancient charms and primitive incantations—come from remote antiquity; but in the form we now have them they are tentatively dated around 1000 B.C.'

The second great section of sacred literature is known as the *Upanishads.* Of these two hundred and fifty metaphysical treatises, thirteen are considered the most important. Again, we cannot be certain when they were composed; probably the bulk of them were produced around 800-700 B.C. According to some scholars the *Upanishads* are "jumbles of lecture notes, miscellaneous quotations, aphorisms, short hymns and formulae for memorizing." [4] Yet others, no less famed, point to these writings as the most profound explanation of religious experience. No one will deny that Upanishadic texts have provided Hinduism with its deepest philosophy—a type of metaphysical monism and panthe-

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H. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith,* Lutterworth Press, London, 1956, p. 101.

[a] These dates come from K.M. Sen, *Hinduism,* Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, 1961. According to orthodox Hindus, all the sacred books from *the Rig-Veda* to the *Bhagavatam* were revealed 5000 years ago.

A.C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion,* Penguin Book, Harmondsworth, England, 1967, p. 128.

ism popularly called " Vedanta."

The Hindu epics and *Puranas* ("ancient tales") in a broad sense are also part of Indian scripture and have been the most effective literary means for the popularizing of the faith. The two classical epics are the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana.* The former, often termed "the fifth Veda," is an immense poem with 100,000 stanzas—about seven times the length of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined. While the main story deals with the wars between rival royal dynasties, the epic includes many digressions on statecraft, the art of warfare, the caste system, fairy tales and mythical history. Most importantly it contains the *Bhagavad-Gita,* a religious and philosophical poem which purports to be direct revelation from the god Krishna. Tradition asserts that the epic was composed by the original compiler of the Vedas and dictated by the elephant-faced god of wisdom, Ganesha. Although the traditions are ancient, modern scholars date the *Mahabharata* somewhere from 1 A.D. to the middle of the 3rd century.

The *Ramayana,* a poem of 24,000 couplets about Rama, the seventh incarnation of the god Vishnu, is an epic of military valor and the unconquerable love of a married couple. The story begins when an aged king decides to abdicate in favor of his eldest son, Rama. On the day set for the change of rulers, the king's youngest wife asks a favor. Not realizing what the scheming woman desires, the king promised to grant her wish. She then demanded that her own son be crowned and Rama exiled for fourteen years. There was nothing to do but grant her what she wanted.

The queen's son was visiting a foreign land when news of his mother's trickery reached him. By the time he had returned home, the old king had died of grief and his rightful heir had gone into exile. After condemning his mother for selfishness and cruelty, the new king went searching for Rama. Finding him living in the jungle as a hermit, the king tried to persuade Rama to take his rightful place on the throne. Not wanting to break his father's promise, Rama refused; but after much pleading he agreed to serve as the regent for the new king, hence ruling without actually reigning.

Later, the demon-king of Ceylon kidnapped Rama's wife, the beautiful Sita. When she refused to enter his harem, he imprisoned her in his impregnable castle. Rama looked everywhere for his wife to no avail; that is, until the monkeys told him what had happened. The monkeys then help him build a bridge over to the island of Sri Lanka. After many bloody battles, Sita is rescued and the demon-king slain. Since fourteen years had passed, Rama and Sita return to their home where he can reign as king.

While to outsiders the *Ramayana* epic may seem more like a fairy tale than holy scripture, for the pious Hindu it teaches how important it is to keep one's promises, obey the will of one's parents, prove one's love for his wife and be courageous enough to overcome every obstacle. For the Hindu, Rama is an incarnation of divine virtue and valor, a perfect embodiment in human form of Vishnu's providential power. Also, the *Ramayana* shows why Hindus worship the monkey god Hanuman: Rama would have been unable to rescue his wife and destroy the evil spirits ruling Ceylon without the aid of the friendly monkeys.

Although the *Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita* and *Ramayana* are the classic sources of Hindu religion, of at least equal importance for popular piety are the eighteen *Puranas.* As a whole, the *Puranas* are ancient tales and teachings designed to extol worship of the Hindu trinity: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Siva the lord of change or destruction. Six *Puranas* exalt the god Brahma, six are devoted to Vishnu, and six to Siva. Among the separate *Puranas,* of great value is the *Srimad-Bhagavatam,* from the Vishnu group, because it tells the story of Lord Krishna, one of India's most popular incarnate gods. [5]

Mention must also be made of the *Tantras,* sixty-four Sanskrit books containing conversations between Siva and his divine spouse Kali. They discuss how to obtain superhuman powers and ways to unite with the Supreme Spirit. As handbooks for occult practitioners, they provide magical formulas and the meaning of mystical letters and diagrams. In addition, they describe a great

[5] Swami Prabhavananda, translator, The Wisdom of God (Srimad Bhagavatam), Capricorn Books, N.Y., 1968.

variety of charms, all of which are supposed to have the power to influence people, make them fall in love, cure them of diseases, curse them with blindness, etc.

Tantrikism involves worship of the divine energy in a female form, Kali, the consort of Siva. The believer feels that since the ultimate bliss consists of the union of Siva with Kali, man's supreme goal can only be obtained through sexual ecstasy. In "right-handed" Tantra (the respectable variety), the union of husband and wife symbolizes the blissful union of the soul and God. "Left-handed" Tantra however, fosters sexual permissiveness. Hindu, Tibetan and Buddhist devotees of Tantrikism illustrated their faith with controversial paintings of a dark-skinned male and light-skinned female engaged in lovemaking; not to arouse erotic feelings but as pictorial representations of the mystic union of male and female aspects of the Godhead, from which the universe was created. [6]

Because Hinduism has no sacred canon in the strict Judeo-Christian sense, and because the vast majority of Indians until recent years have been illiterate—making a book religion virtually impossible—whenever writing has been highly esteemed it became scripture. Besides the previously mentioned writings, among the influential Hindu books are the *Laws of Manu, The Ocean of Love* ("Prem Sagar"—a Hindi free rendering of the *Bhagavata Purana),* the lengthy verse hymnal of the South Indian Vishnaivas, the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna ,* Tagore's *Sadhana* and *Religion of Man,* Vivekananda's speeches and the publications of Radhakrishnan, Aurobindo and Gandhi.

Growth and Development of Hinduism

Quite appropriately it has been said that Hinduism is the substance of Indian civilization and Indian civilization is the form of the Hindu religion. For more than five thousand years Hinduism has been the expression of the needs and aspirations of the Indian people. Consequently **it** has changed and grown in response to

[6] E. Royston Pike, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Religions,* Meridian Books, N.Y., 1958, p. 368.

different cultural conditions and deeper religious insight.

Some scholars, like Professor D.S. Sarma of Madras, divide Indian history into six periods from 2000 B.C. to 1885 and a seventh, the present age, which signals the dawn of a new day. Since Christians find that the Bible provides a pattern for the history of restoration, it may be of value to see how far the scriptural model fits the pageant of Indian experience.

The first period of Indian history begins in the third millennium B.C. and concludes with the birth of Buddha (560 B.C.). Archeologists have unearthed many signs of prehistoric men living in India and at about the time of Egypt's pyramid builders, the subcontinent had civilizations equal to those around the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates rivers. An Indus Valley culture—not discovered until after World War I—was particularly noteworthy. Living in well-constructed cities, Indus Valley merchants, artists and farmers practiced ceremonial bathing and venerated trees. Beyond that, they also worshipped the Mother goddess and a fertility god like Siva and believed in sacred bulls. Thus they provide a key to understanding much of later Hinduism.' In south India another civilization—called Dravidian—was equally well-developed prior to the Aryan invasion of 1500 B.C.

Like the Hebrew invaders of Palestine, the Aryans conquered a people in many respects far more civilized. The Aryans swept down into northwest India, gradually subjugating a large part of the area. Nothing could halt their chariots and expert archers. A modern writer has compared the Aryans to the Vikings: both were hard-fighting and heavy-drinking warriors who worshipped the gods of fire and thunder. They celebrated by getting intoxicated on soma and conducting bloody animal sacrifices." The Aryans—like the Dravidians—did not build temples. They prayed at a sacred fire, with their rulers serving as priests.

Brahminism, the first stage of Hinduism, represents a synthesis of the victors' religion and that of the conquered. The Aryans

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J.C. Powell-Price, *A History of India,* Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, 1955, pp. 7-8.

[8] A.C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion,* p. 125.

gave to India the hymns of the *Rig-Veda,* Sanskrit as a sacred language, some of the gods, and the basis for the Hindu epics. The Indus Valley people and Dravidians were responsible not only for the reverence given the cow, river and snake, but also phallic worship, veneration of Siva and Kali, and caste.

Once the Brahmins had tightened their hold on India, their priestly rule became intolerably oppressive. Caste regulations were continuously made more detailed and rigidly enforced. Far too often Brahminism was just the celebration of expensive sacrifices, elaborate rituals and social stratification in the extreme. Many must have cried out for social reform and spiritual revitalization.

Buddhism and Jainism in the 6th century B.C. represent two powerful attacks on the religion of the Brahmins and signal the beginning of a new era in Indian history—from Buddha's birth to the fall of the Mauryan empire (200 B.C.). Since other parts of this book will deal with the religious reform movements, we turn directly to the important political developments of this period. After the death of Alexander the Great, an exiled soldier and his Brahmin priest advisor were able to stage a coup d'etat and rather quickly establish India's first empire—covering all of north India.[9] The new emperor, Chandragupta Maurya, relied on sheer military power—a standing army of 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, 9,000 elephants and strangely enough, a personal bodyguard of well-trained *women* soldiers. His military state lasted 150 years. After twenty-four years on the throne, however, the emperor joined the Jains, abdicated, became an ascetic and starved himself to death. His grandson, Asoka, became India's most important ruler until the time of Akbar the Great in the 17th century. Asoka reigned forty years, was famed as a patron of Buddhism and (legend says) had become a monk prior to his death in 232 B.C.

This second period in Indian history was characterized by two features: a widespread attack upon the established Brahmin faith

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[9] For details about Chandragupta Maurya I and the shrewd counsellor Chanakya (who is often compared to Machiavelli), see J.C. Powell-Price, *Ibid,* pp. 38-50.

and the birth of the first great empire. Both attempts at social change were led by the warrior class. On one hand India sought a faith which did not restrict men to a rigidly segregated society and on the other, it welcomed greater political unity. Each reform, however, was somewhat frustrated. Jainism and Buddhism, in spite of temporary successes, were unable to displace Hinduism's caste structure. As for the Mauryan dream of a centralized India, that was not accomplished until the British occupation of the 18th century.

The third stage extends from the fall of the Mauryan empire to the rise of the Guptas dynasty (200 B.C.-300 A.D.). During these years the two Hindu epics took their final form, the influential legal code of Manu was created, and some of *thePuranas* were composed. Buddhism adopted more and more features of Hinduism until the Mahayana school became firmly established. Politically at this time, Indians expanded their influence over Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Malaysia and Indo-China.

So far as religion is concerned, the epic age saw the creation of what most Hindus now believe and practice. As students of Indian piety tell us, Brahminism became Hinduism. The sacrificial altar of the past was replaced by the temple. To make the metaphysics of the Vedanta a faith of the masses, emphasis was placed on the personal God rather than the Absolute. Devotion to the Lord of all the worlds and Friend of every living thing was stressed. Most noteworthy was the popularization of the *avatar* doctrine: out of compassion for mankind Vishnu comes to earth and incarnates Himself as our protector, guide and companion. Such a belief reinforced image worship, religious processions, holy day festivals and pilgrimages to sacred shrines.

Next came the golden age of Hindu India (300-650 A.D.). A new dynasty created a second Gupta empire covering most of northern India which lasted for about a century and a half before the Huns swept down, shattering everything. Not until the 7th century could a new monarch, Harsha, temporarily restore some semblance of peace and order in the area, but this vanished again after his forty year reign.

The *Puranas,* collections of ancient religious tales and extravagant mythology, come from this golden age, providing the real Hindu Bible of the common people. Worship of specific gods and goddesses (called "sectarian Hinduism") became normative. Men now concentrated their devotion on Vishnu, Siva, Shakti (the divine Female), Surya the sun god, or Ganesha", the elephant-faced god of revelation. While this change was taking place in popular Hinduism, the scholars developed the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy" to combat the heresies of Buddhism and Jainism. Also at this time devotees of Shakti created Tantrikism'[2], with its mystical ritualism designed to give adepts supernatural power through union with the Mother goddess.

India's fifth period covers in succession: the breakup of India into small warring kingdoms; the Muslim invasion beginning with Mahmud Ghazni (998); the creation of the Islamic Mughul empire; its ascendency and decline; the establishment of British rule in Bengal (1757). Since this time involves a thousand years, our treatment must be extremely sketchy. For Hinduism this long period saw the appearance of Shankara, the father of Vedantic philosophy, and Ramanuja, his peer and rival. Shankara (b. 788), often called the Aquinas of India, expounded and systematized an interpretation of the *Upanishads* which came to be known as the philosophy of non-duality. Seven basic principles provide the pillars of his metaphysical system:

1. The eternal, impersonal Absolute (Brahman) is the only ultimate Reality.
2. Maya (illusion) is the power by which the Absolute appears to us in a transient universe of time and space.
3. Causality explains the universe but not the nature of the Absolute.
4. Man's spirit is identical with the Supreme Spirit.
5. Sin and suffering originate from our failure to realize our essential oneness with the Absolute.

'" Often called Ganapati.

" Cf. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and C.A. Moore, A *Source Book in Indian Philosophy,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1957, pp. 339-572.

[12] H. Zimmer, *Philosophies of India,* Meridian Books, N.Y., 1956, pp. 560-602.

6. Liberation cannot be achieved by action (karma) or devotion but only by means of illumination (jnana).
7. Solely because of our ignorance do we see diversity, multiplicity and finiteness where there exists in reality only the oneness of Brahman. ' [3]

Ramanuja (d. 1137) gave India's classic defense of personal theism as a conscious reply to Shankara. By contrast to the latter's philosophy of non-duality, Ramanuja recognized three ultimate realities: God, the soul, and the realm of matter. He insisted on the superiority of devotion (bhakti) to the personal God over metaphysical illumination. Finally, instead of interpreting the final goal of man as mystical absorption, he stressed the ultimate enjoyment of personal bliss with—but not in—God."

In general, the appearance of the Muslims should be considered the chief characteristic of this fifth period. For good or ill, the religion of Allah made a decisive impact on Indian life and thought. Hindus can never forget or forgive the way Muslims smashed the idols, converted many temples into mosques, and forced millions to accept a new creed or face death. This intolerance, say Christians like Toynbee and Hindus like Radhakrishnan, is a defect of all the Semitic religions based on the Old Testament and its concept of the jealous God. However, it should also be noted that in a positive fashion Indian Islam did inspire several reform movements among the Hindus. It likewise gave to India some powerful emperors like Akbar the Great and Shahjahan, and it produced artistic masterpieces of which the Taj Mahal and the Great Mosque at Delhi are precious examples. Nor was the influence completely one-sided in favor of the Muslims. Indian thought greatly affected Islamic mysticism and in several cases made Muslim religion a little less intolerant of other faiths. From the standpoint of Hinduism, the Muslim invasion begins a period of alien conquest and foreign domination. Muslim power, however, was concentrated in north India.

" D.S. Sarma, *Ibid. pp. 35-36.*

[14] For a study of Ramanuja cf. B. Kumarappa, *The Hindu Conception of the Deity,* Luzac and Co., London, 1934.

The sixth period in Indian history is marked by the arrival of the Western imperialists—Portuguese, Dutch, French and British. There is no way to overlook the enormous impact which the West made on the subcontinent, but probably the ardent nationalists exaggerate the destructive and demoralizing effects of the two centuries of rule by the British raj. With the European soldier, civil servant and merchant came the Christian missionary. Again the Hindu faith faced a resolute foe, yet in the long run the Christian may turn out to have been a friend in disguise. There is no doubt that the missionaries stimulated social improvement and Hindu religious reform. While never becoming more than a tiny minority Christians often forced India to come to terms with the modern world and—though this was seldom their intent—they introduced Indian literature to the West.

A new day dawned for India with the departure of the British army and administrators. Nevertheless, the joy of liberation was muted by the tragic separation of the Hindu and Muslim: there were terrible communal riots, rampage, bitterness between India and Pakistan, and war over disputed Kashmir. Nevertheless, free India can be proud of making Radhakrishnan its second president: this Oxford professor was excelled by none as a Hindu apologist. The new India was likewise proud of putting untouchables in positions of political influence, and of honoring capable women like Madame Pandit in the United Nations and Indira Gandhi in the prime minister's office.

Though the Indian Republic under Nehru's guidance decided to be a secular rather than a Hindu state, disappointing many religious traditionalists, since World War II there has been a growing popularity for Indian religion. One aspect of this is a regular parade of Hindu holy men to the West: Swami Prabhupada of Hare Krishna, Meher Bab, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and others. Hinduism these days has enthusiastic disciples in Boston, Buenos Aires, Berkeley and Basle as well as Bombay. In India and elsewhere Hindus look to the immediate future as a time of unparalleled hope.

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[15] M.K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma,* Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1950, P. 7.

Hinduism's External Features

Hindus call themselves believers in the eternal and universal religion; modern writers emphasize this by pointing out how tolerant Hinduism has been in accepting an amazing variety of beliefs, rituals and conflicting theologies, as well as a multiplicity of gods favored by this or that minority. However, Hindu orthodoxy does have within it certain distinct limits to its seemingly catholic sympathies. They fall roughly into four categories: acceptance of the *Vedas* as scripture, tolerance towards image worship, veneration of the cow, and acceptance of caste.

The good Hindu must accept the absolute authority of the *Vedas* as divine revelation. Most defenders of orthodoxy add that one must also accept the inspiration of at least the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad-Gita.* Mahatma Gandhi, for example, claimed to be an orthodox Hindu because he believed in the *Vedas,* the *Upanishads,* the *Puranas* "and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in *avataras* (incarnate gods) and rebirth.'" [5] Many, however, denied Gandhi's orthodoxy and it was a Hindu fanatic who assassinated him.

Nevertheless, for Gandhi such a belief was not limiting. The father of modern Indian independence claimed that he did not believe in the *exclusive* divinity of the *Vedas.* For him the Bible, the Quran and the Zoroastrian *Zend-Avesta* were as divinely inspired as the *Vedas.* To accept the authority of the *Vedas* in his opinion did not require him to accept every word and every verse. He declined to be bound by any interpretation, however learned, if he felt it to be repugnant to reason or morality. He compared his attachment to Hinduism as equal to his love for his wife. Nothing elated him so much as the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Ramayana.* But while he was a reformer through and through, as he put it, his zeal never caused him to reject the essentials of Hinduism. [16]

The orthodox Hindu allows the cult of sacred images. Gandhi publicly stated that he did not disbelieve in idol worship, even though he personally felt no veneration for any of the religious idols. Images are an aid to worship. Idol worship is part of human

[18] *Ibid,* p. 8.

nature, in his opinion; and therefore he did not consider it a sin.

Ram Mohun Roy, one of the apostles of modern reform Hinduism, denounced image worship, however. According to the Hindu scriptures, the best way to secure immortal bliss is the purely spiritual contemplation of the Supreme. Idol worship, in his mind, is intended only for persons of limited capacity. If the *Vedas* tolerate idolatry it is only for those who are "totally incapable of raising their minds to the contemplation of the invisible God of nature." [17] When Ram Mohun founded the Brahmo Samaj, India's first society for the creation of a noble Hinduism which Christian missionaries could not attack, he forbade the use of any graven image, statue, carving, painting or picture within its meeting houses. At the same time he commanded his followers never to revile, or be contemptuous of any object of worship used by other men.

Attacks on Hindu image worship came from the Muslims and the Christians: from the Muslims because they were against all visible representations of the divine, and from the Christians because Hindu worship was (1) considered idolatry, (2) Indian religious symbolism was grotesque and (3) the statuary and carvings were obscene. Muslim warriors and Mughul rulers often simply smashed the Hindu idols and turned the temples into mosques. Christian missionaries could only ridicule the Hindu gods and demand that the British government suppress Hindu immorality.

Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Zimmerman voices a typical complaint against the ugliness of the Hindu idols: ". . .whilst the cultured and art loving Greeks made their gods beautiful the Oriental has often given hideous shape to some of his, as though he had no eye nor love for the beautiful, for at times the outward expression is more demonical than divine and hideous enough to frighten the children and give the nightmare to adults." [18]

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[17] D.S. Sarma, *Hinduism Through the Ages,* Bharatiya V idya Bhavan, Bombay, 1973, P. 66.

[18] J. Zimmerman, *The God Juggernaut and Hinduism in India,* Fleming H. Revell Co., N.Y., 1914, p. 16.

Kali, the Mother goddess, seems to substantiate his point. She is regularly depicted in fearsome shape—a black female with bloodshot eyes, fang-like teeth, tongue thrust out, blood on her face and bosom, hair matted. Around her neck hangs a chain of skulls, corpses form her earrings and her waist is girded with skulls. In two of her four hands she holds a noose to strangle her victims and an iron hook to drag them to their doom."

Yet, just such a goddess inspired Sri Ramakrishna, India's most noted 19th century saint. The sole purpose of his existence was to see this Divine Mother. When She did finally reveal Herself to him, he said that the temple and all other objects vanished before his eyes. He had no idea of what was going on in the outer world: but within he felt an indescribable felicity like he had never known. When the presence of the Divine Mother was later gone, and he regained consciousness, there was only the word on his lips: "Mother."[20]

Dr. Zimmerman is unappreciative of the "Divine Mother"; he is equally sharp in his denunciation of obscene Hindu temple carvings. Writing about "the most indecent realism of figures imaginable, far surpassing the most vulgarly obscene figures discovered in Pompeii," he concludes: "These striking examples of phallic worship I have seen on the temples and sacred cars in certain cities of India, and they should make every Hindu with a moral sense of refinement blush because these disgraceful representations are retained by their religion, and in defiance of every sense and standard of decency in our modern civilization."[21]

Without denying the erotic practices connected with "left-handed Tantrikism" in times past and the rather earthy attitude of Indians by comparison with the Victorians, one should at least read Gandhi's reply to those who condemned Hinduism for licentiousness: ". . .millions are unaware of the obscenity of many practices

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[19] E. Royston Pike, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Religions,* Meridian Book, N.Y., 1958, p. 219. H. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization,* Harper Torchbook, N.Y., 1962, pp. 211-213.

[20] Introduction to the *Gospel of Ramakrishna,* Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, N.Y., 1942, p. 14.

[21] Zimmerman, *!bid,* **p.** 129.

which we have hitherto innocently indulged in. It was in a missionary book that I first learnt that *shivalingam* (the ordinary phallic symbol for Siva) had any obscene significance at all. . . . It was again in a missionary book that I learnt that the temples in Orissa were disfigured with obscene statues. When I went to Puri it was not without an effort that I was able to see those things. But I do know that the thousands who flock to the temple know nothing about the obscenity surrounding these figures. The people are unprepared and the figures do not obtrude themselves upon your gaze." [22]

Besides accepting the authority of sacred scripture and the right to worship images, the orthodox Hindu believes in veneration of the cow. Gandhi called it the central fact of Hinduism, the dearest possession of the Hindu heart. "No one who does not believe in cow protection can possibly be a Hindu." [23] Cow worship meant to him the worship of innocence, a vow to protect the weak and helpless. It takes the human beyond concern for himself. Through the cow man is enjoined to realize his identity with all that lives. If an Indian acts cruelly to his cattle, he disowns God, declared the Mahatma.

Albert Schweitzer felt that "reverence for life," all life without exception, was one of Hinduism's great contributions to mankind. For him and many others the Indian doctrine of *ahimsa*-refraining from killing—was far superior to the Christian doctrine that man alone was made in the image of God, with the right to dominate or exploit the rest of creation.

Gandhi knew from bitter experience how easily the *ahimsa* idea could be misinterpreted or violated. Some Hindus, notably the worshippers of Kali, practiced animal sacrifice—the beheading of young goats to appease the Divine Mother's thirst for blood. Others let their cattle starve, used iron goads to drive their oxen, and castrated their bulls. To counter these abuses, the Indian leader publicly favored the merciful killing of suffering cows, rabid dogs, destructive monkeys, poisonous snakes and incurably ill humans.

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[22] Gandhi, *Ibid,* p. 27—remarks published in *Young India,* Sept. 15, 1927.
[23] *Ibid,* p. 297.

Of course, traditionalists violently objected. Replying to them, he pointed out that it is impossible to sustain one's body without the destruction of other living things to some extent, that all of us have to destroy some life to sustain our own bodies as well as those under our care. Yet one should resort to killing as little as possible, only when it is unavoidable, after exhausting all remedies to avoid it. [24]

A fourth tenet is seen in the orthodox Hindu's commitment to the caste system as a useful, divinely-ordained structuring of society. This most complex institution is very difficult to understand and at least in practice is almost impossible to defend in a democratic world. Certain factors, nevertheless, should be taken into account.

Caste seems to have originally been a method by which the Aryan invaders of India enforced their rule over the vast multitude of subject peoples they had conquered. Restrictions were instituted and perpetuated to keep a ruling minority from being swallowed up by the captive majority. Many have shown that caste is not an essential part of the Vedic religion of the oldest Hindu scriptures—because the hymns of the *Rig-Veda* predate the Aryan migration. As a purely convenient technique by which a privileged ruling class consolidated its power, the caste rules against intermarriage and interdining are understandable and represent a social pattern carried out by many conquerors: the Macedonian Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt, the British civil servants in India, the French *colons* in Algeria and the Yankee missionary class in Hawaii, for instance.

However, originally, Hindu caste also represented a form of racial segregation. The fair-skinned Aryans considered themselves a master race, God's chosen people, destined to rule over the darker-skinned peoples they had subjugated. According to Hindu mythology, the Brahmin priestly class was created from the head of God, the warrior caste from his arms, the merchants from His thighs and the laborers from His feet. Other, non-Aryan, races by

[24] Cf. Gandhi, *Ibid,* pp. 183-245 for the debate in the Indian press.

contrast sprang not from God but from the darkness cast aside by the Creator when He formed the world. This theory, revived by the Nazi Aryan "supermen" after World War I, now has few defenders in India because nearly everyone is dark-skinned.

Caste has been interpreted by certain Hindu apologists as a useful and valid analysis of men's different functions in society. Brahmins represent the moral and intellectual leaders of a nation, the Kshatriyas its guardians and protectors, the Vaisyas its money-makers and the Sudras its average workers. In this sense, the Hindu caste system can be seen as an Indian counterpart to the good society envisioned in Plato's ideal Republic.

According to some Indian writers, caste is not all evil. By defining everyone's role in society, it eliminated the undesirable competitive spirit which they feel is the curse of capitalist countries. It tended to cultivate a cooperative spirit because each group had a recognized function in a well-adjusted social order. By keeping the Brahmins free for religious and scholarly pursuits, caste exalted the wise man above the soldier and profiteer, hence stimulating the cultivation of literary and aesthetic works. [25]

The evils of such a rigid stratification of society are obvious, especially since the Sudras and the outcastes ("untouchables," "unapproachables," "unlookables") form the bulk of the Indian population. For this reason repeated efforts have been made to break down the caste system: by Buddha who disregarded the rules, by V ishnaivas and Saivite saints who welcomed disciples from all castes, by Muslims who gave positions of responsibility to non-Brahmins, and by the Christian missionaries who gained converts predominantly from the untouchables. And by Hindus themselves, via the various 19th century Hindu reform movements, or through the untiring efforts of Gandhi.

Thus, even prior to the birth of an independent India after World War II, an Indian critic of the caste system could point to the signs of its future demise. The nationalists realized that a country with a large percentage of its inhabitants victimized by an oppres-

" P.J. Thomas, *Hindu Religion, Customs and Manners,* D.P. Taraporevala Sons, Ltd., Bombay, no date, pp.22- 23.

sive social structure "could neither fight for independence, nor keep it, if and when won." [26] Hindu leaders recognized that the "depressed classes" were becoming Christian or Muslim, and this manpower drain threatened whatever influence Hinduism might have in a free India. Western-educated Indians, a small but powerful pressure group, agitated for social justice. And the British occupation authorities granted concessions to the "untouchables" whenever they were in a position to do so.

Before 1947 the outcastes were allowed to enter most of the Hindu temples and walk along the main roads—a victory for Gandhi. Outside the privacy of their homes, all Hindus in the cities were free to disregard caste and usually did so. Interdining in the restaurants had become accepted and intermarriage had begun to be tolerated. Village life, nevertheless, moved slowly, making significant reform difficult.

Free India made caste changes easier. No longer could Hindu traditionalists blame attempts at democratization on the British imperialists and their Christian agents. The fact that the government was in the hands of secular-oriented Indians like Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi meant that the Hindu traditionalists had little influence in deciding national policy. Caste in its worst forms was doomed.

Nehru's ideas on caste reveal the opinions of a large portion of India's educated elite. He told his countrymen repeatedly that they were too much in the grip of the past: a past symbolized by a narrow religious outlook, an obsession with the supernatural, the speculative and the excessively mystical. When Hindus talked of going back to the *Vedas* he dismissed their dreams as idle fancies. India must lessen her religiosity and turn to science.

In that spirit free India's first prime minister looked at caste as a prison, stunting the Hindi soul. For him, the day-to-day faith of the orthodox Hindu is more wrapped up in considerations of what to eat and what not to eat, who to eat with and who to keep away from, than with religious values. Rules and regulations of the kitchen dominate his life. All this is symbolized and bound up

[26] Thomas, Ibid. p. 23.

with caste. For Nehru, in the social organization of today, caste has no place at al1. [27]

The Hindu Ceremonies

According to ancient Hindu religious **law** and traditional practice, a Hindu youth submits to twelve basic purification rites from his conception until he marries. Among the most important of these is the *Upanayana* sacred thread initiation ceremony. Investiture with the sacred thread, usually occurring between the age of seven and ten, confers upon a boy the status of the "twice-born" and is his formal initiation into one of the three higher castes. [28]

Until the performance of this rite, the child is treated as a member of the servant Sudra caste. Before the investiture, an orthodox Brahmin cannot eat with his son. Until he wears the sacred thread the boy is also not allowed to repeat any of the verses of the sacred *Vedas.* An astrologer fixes the date and time for the ceremony, in one of the five auspicious months in which the sun is moving northward toward the ecliptic. The rite is held between 6 a.m. and noon, the most fortunate part of the day. It must take place when the sun is exerting strong influence upon the earth.

Prior to the ceremony the boy's head is shaved, then he is bathed and anointed with perfumed oils. The officiating priest formally presents the child to the household gods; after which he bows to his parents and assembled guests. He sits on a wooden stool facing his father while the priest repeats Vedic chants. When these are completed the boy bows down to his father, touching his parent's feet with folded hands—a symbol of the utmost respect and obedience. As the father blesses his son, the guests shower rice on the child for good luck. A fire is lit with sacred twigs and fed continuously with clarified butter as a reminder of the divine presence.

The sacred thread, now to be presented, consists of three white cotton strands each made of three finer threads twisted together. These represent the trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. The

[27] J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India,* John Day Co., N.Y., 1946, pp. 531-532.

[28] Thomas, *!hid,* pp. 89-90.

family priest places the string on the left shoulder of the boy, passes it across his body and ties the two ends under the right arm. Vedic verses are then chanted by the priest and attending Brahmins.

After the girding of the thread, the boy has to repeat the sacred *Gayatri* prayer which is believed to possess miraculous powers:

> This new and excellent praise of thee, 0 splendid playful sun, is offered by us to thee. Be gratified by this my speech; approach this craving mind as a fond man seeks a woman. May that sun who contemplates and looks into all worlds be our protector. Let us meditate on the adorable light of the Divine Ruler. May it guide our intellects. Desirous of food, we solicit the gift of the splendid sun with oblations and praise. [29]

In ancient times, following the thread ceremony the boy was taken from home to the abode of a guru for his education. Because in those days a student was required to beg for his food, a beggar's staff is presented to him as a symbol of the ascetic life of those seeking knowledge.

Some Brahmins change their sacred threads annually. After the initiation rite is completed, the beggar's staff is taken from the boy and he is dressed in the clothes of a householder. In place of the staff he is presented with an umbrella, the sign of prosperity and dominion. A feast for the guests and gifts for the attending Brahmins conclude the celebrations.

Besides solemn daily rites and special festivals at the Hindu temples, there is also ceremonial worship performed in the home as thanksgiving for favors received from the gods. A ceremony honoring the five great gods of sectarian Hinduism is typical. Five stones are used to represent the divinities: Vishnu by a black stone, Siva—white, Ganesha—red, Shakti—varicolored, and the Sun—a crystal. These rocks are arranged on a circular metal disc with the symbol of the favored god placed in the center. Within reach of the worshipper are also a vessel filled with water, a conch shell and a

[29] Thomas, Ibid. p. 32.

small handbell. A plate containing Tulsi leaves sacred to Vishnu, Bilva leaves for Siva, perfume, flowers and fruit is placed on the right side of the officiating priest.

To prepare himself for worship, the worshipper sips and swallows water while the twenty-four names of Vishnu are recited. He then pays homage to the water vessel, conch shell and bell.

> 0 bell, make a sound for the approach of the gods, and for the departure of the demons. Homage to the goddess Ghanta (bell). . ."

Following these preliminary ceremonies, the service proper begins—a ritual consisting of sixteen stages: (1) invoking the presence of the gods, (2) offering them a seat, (3) providing water for washing the gods' feet, (4) offering them rice, (5) giving them water to drink, (6) offering milk and honey to bathe in, (7) providing Tulsi leaves as symbolic clothes, (8) more leaves for upper garments, (9) offering perfumes and sandalwood paste, (10) offering flowers, (11) giving incense to the gods, (12) prayer for illumination, (13) offering of food, (14) reverential circling of the shrine, (15) recitation of Vedic texts and offering of flowers, (16) final act of adoration.

This pattern of worship—though on a much more elaborate scale—is conducted in the great temples daily. These temples represent the actual houses of the gods or goddesses made visible in idols. Each day the priests carry out a ritual of waking, bathing, clothing, feeding and entertaining the resident deity, his wife and companions. For the laymen religion refers not to congregational meeting for prayer and instruction, but instead to visits in the palace of the god. Individually, they present him a gift and walk around the temple admiring the god's living quarters.

Hindu Renaissance: Accomplishments and Aspirations

The movement for Hindu revival, which has done so much to restore Indian self-respect and promote social reform, has no one

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[30] Thomas, *Ibid,* p. 33.

date of origin. With justification Oriental scholars point to a variety of incidents that were critical in the formation of this renaissance. There was the surprise outcome of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905: for the first time a non-Christian and non-Western nation battled and defeated a Western Christian power. The myth of Western invincibility was shaken. Another critical moment was Swami Vivekananda's electrifying speech in defense of Hinduism at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Of no less impact was the publication in Europe and America of The Sacred Books of the East under the editorial guidance of Max Muller. Some scholars credit Ram Mohun Roy's creation of the reformist Brahmo Samaj in the second decade of the 19th century or the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885, which eventually was instrumental in ending British domination, as of prime significance. Whoever is most correct, it stands to reason that all of these factors worked to stimulate a rebirth of Hinduism and to spread the Hindu message to every part of the globe.

The Hindu Renaissance is certainly one of the striking sociological phenomena of our age. It seems to bear out what Oswald Spengler called "The Decline of the West" and what Paul Tillich dubbed "the end of the Protestant Era."[31] Westernization would continue economically, scientifically and industrially, but politically and religiously its worldwide advance had been halted. Japan first, then India, had forced the Western world into a retreat, the end of which we have yet to see. Churchmen, looking at what has taken place, dejectedly reconcile themselves, in their words, to a "post-Christian" world.

No doubt the Hindu Renaissance has raised the status of India in the eyes of the world. In every arena—political, religious and social—she has given positive proof that her ancient spiritual fire is still burning within. At least according to one Hindu historian,[32] Hindus believe that this once-conquered nation, with her masses

[31] Tillich marks this as the year 1914.

[32] U.S. Sarma, *Hinduism Through the Ages,* Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1973, pp. 261-277.

still subject to intolerable poverty, is, in her rebirth, presently in a position to give light to the world enveloped in darkness.

In the religious sphere, the Hindu revival has reminded Indians that their faith can exist apart from the mythological, ritualistic and obsolete sociological forms in which it has oft become embedded. Vedanta philosophy and the religion of spiritual experience are independent of and supersede caste, superstition and ritual.

Socially too the specifics of change are noteworthy: "Today Sati (the voluntary suicide of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands) has become an incredible thing of the past. Child-marriages and polygamy have become illegal. Widow-marriages have been made possible. Provision is made for divorce. Foreign travel has become very common. The ban against inter-dining has been lifted. The caste system has become less rigid. And, thanks to Mahatma Gandhi, the demon of untouchability has been overthrown. Women have become educated and have begun to occupy the highest offices in the State." [33]

India has come down to earth, so to speak. Though the Gita taught that man should strive for spiritual freedom *in* society, discharging one's duties faithfully, India had forgotten. When she lost her political independence, the nation sought refuge in asceticism and otherworldliness. The law of karma was used to cloak neglect of one's neighbor and the downtrodden. But through the renaissance, adjustment came in the form of reconciliation with the scientific and political ideas of the West. New knowledge in geography, history, astronomy, civil rights and social obligations was incorporated into Hindu thought. Radhakrishnan has been of immense value in this matter. [34]

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[33] Sarma, *Ihid,* p. 263.

[34] Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was educated in a Christian missionary college but rather quickly became the most well-known expounder of Hinduism. After serving as a philosophy professor at Madras, Mysore. Calcutta and Benaras he taught at Oxford before becoming Vice-President and President of the Republic of India. The author of many books, he was accorded equal treatment with John Dewey, Einstein, Whitehead and Santayana in the Library of Living Philosophers (1952)—the only non-Westerner to be so honored. Among his best-known works are *An Idealist View of Life, Indian Philosophy* (2 volumes), *The Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy. Religion and Society, The Hindu View of Life* and *East and West in Religion.*

Finally the reformers had awakened Indians to the importance of unity. This has been reinforced by their struggles against Christian missionaries in the field of religion and "misguided Muslim separatists" [35] in the field of politics. In the past unity had been fostered by the annual rounds of festivals and pilgrimages. In recent years—since the granting of independence in 1947—an Indian communal feeling has been generated by the nation's revival of Sanskrit, Indian history, philosophy, music and traditional dance. Activities that encourage pride in their land and heritage have been vigorously promoted.

II. BACK TO GODHEAD

Finding God: A Hindu View

Vinoba Bhave, who spent his life encouraging the wealthy to donate land to the poor, was one of Gandhi's chief disciples, and during India's struggle for independence a frequent political prisoner. However, during his imprisonment under the British he preached several sermons to the ordinary criminals as well as fellow political prisoners. In these, he explains how the Hindu can come to feel the presence of God.'

Men can be taught to see God everywhere by the same methods we employ to teach children to read. In the latter case we draw big letters on the blackboard and after the children recognize the alphabet, we reduce the size of the letters. It is likewise easiest to see God's presence in big things. Magnificent natural objects such as the mountains and the seas catch our eyes at once. When we recognize God in these mighty forms, we can gradually come to realize that every drop of water and grain of sand that make them up are also filled with the same God.

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[35] During the discussions over the creation of a free India, the Moslem League advocated the separation of Muslim-dominated areas from the rest of the subcontinent. After considerable turmoil East and West Pakistan were formed. Hindus still think of this as a "misguided" endeavor but it did to a large degree calm the traditional animosities between Muslims and Hindus inside the secular Republic of India.

' A. Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gita* (sermons given to his fellow political prisoners in Dulia Jail, 1932; reprinted in "Sunday Standard" of Madras, Bombay and Delhi, 1956-57), Sarva-Seva-Sangh Prakashan, Rajghat Varanasi, India, 1964, pp. 142-169.

We also teach children to read by showing them the simple words first; similarly Hinduism reveals God by disclosing His easily understood forms in the beginning, before going on to more complicated ones. For instance, the compassionate, lovable Rama, the divine epic hero, is an easy god to know and make our own. But with other traditional gods it may be more difficult to recognize divinity. Similarly, we initially are disposed to finding the Lord in good people, and only after some spiritual maturation can we do the same with those not so attractive.

According to Vinoba, the earliest form in which God appears to us is our own mother. As the Vedic scriptures say, "Let your mother be your God." In her the Lord may appear as the embodiment of tenderness. Thus one can and should call God "Mother." Worship of the mother can extend in any direction: our personal mother, our mother country, the universal mother earth, even the "Mother Ganges": "Mother Ganga washes off and carries in her course all the uncleanness of our mind and body. If God is not manifest to us in Mother Ganga, where else shall we see her?" [2]

Having first seen God as Mother, then we see Him in the father, the teacher, the saint. But Vinoba extends the divine immanence much further, in several enlightening illustrations. He writes, "In the form of the loving cow, the Lord stands at our door." [3] And further, God reveals his presence, power and beauty in the horse, lion, tiger, monkey and the snake. Of the latter he says, "This helpful creature so clean, so powerful, this lover of solitude, is an image of the Lord." [4] When he was a child, he pleased his mother by drawing a figure of a snake for her to worship—which she promptly did. St. Francis, says Vinoba, welcomed the snake as his "brother" and let it play in his lap and crawl up and down his body. He knew most snakes were not only not poisonous, but never attacked unless provoked. In addition, they guard the farmers' fields by living on destructive insects and vermin. For all of these reasons, snakes are connected in one way

[2] *Ibid.* pp. 147-148.
[3] *Ibid.* p. 148.
[4] *Ibid.* p. 152.

or another with many of the Hindu deities. The elephant-faced god Ganesha wears a snake around his waist. Siva, the God of change and destruction, wraps one round his neck. And Vishnu, the divine Preserver, sleeps on a snake as his bed. [5]

Besides demonstrating the way to recognize God in man, the earth and its creatures, Vinoba uses the omnipresence of God to defend the popular image worship. If God pervades every particle of this universe, then he can be present in an image. The image can in fact be a tool to recognize the greater Reality. If one cannot recognize wheat when shown a handful, of what use would it be to give him a sackful?

However, when we bow our heads to an image of divinity, if the heart too does not bow, the external act of worship is meaningless. The outer and the inner must become one: "I worship the *Siva-linga* symbol of Lord Siva, perform *abhisheka* (ceremonial bath), by bathing it in a continuous stream of water. But if, as I do this, the stream of my meditation too is not unbroken, what is the value of this ritual? Then the *Siva-linga* is a stone, and I am another. It only means that two stones confront each other." [6]

Concluding his speeches, this modern Hindu stresses the note of God-centeredness which has always been the chief characteristic of Indian religion. Hinduism urges man to give up his will, his self-centered striving, and take refuge in God. Do not let any personal desire arise in your heart. Rest with the thought, "Not my will but His be done." One should feel, "I am not, Thou alone art. Thou art everything." As Vinoba writes, when a goat is alive it bleats, "Me. . . me. . .me. . . ." Its whole life revolves around its own interests, the satisfactions of its selfish appetites. But when the goat is dead and its guts are made into strings and mounted on a bow for carding cotton, then it sings, "Thou, Thou, Thou alone.' For this state—freeing ourselves of the sense "I"—all who would be moral should strive.

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[5] For a fuller exposition of the religious significance of the snake, cf. Zimmer. */bid,* pp. 62-67, 77-90.

[6] V inoba. */bid,* p. 44.

[7] Vinoba, */bid,* pp. 306-307.

Hindu Polytheism

Contemporary Hinduism provides a unique showcase for the polytheism which was once characteristic of most civilizations. By examining what Indians believe and how they worship one is able to see firsthand what faith and sacrifice were like when Greeks worshipped Zeus and Aphrodite, or when Germanic tribesmen bowed before Thor, Woden and Freya.

Hindus once worshipped 330 **million** gods—gods who controlled natural forces, gods who personified human virtues and vices, gods of the planets and gods of ancestors, fertility gods and tribal patrons. Obviously "god" in Hinduism does not mean quite what it signifies in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Hindus have a tendency to deify almost anything: a stone, a tree, a river, a cow, as well as men. For centuries some have worshipped a granite pillar seven feet high which was originally a Muslim relic said to have been brought from Mecca. To call something a god in Hinduism means that it is worthy of respect, honor, and veneration. Hence, an American student can say, "Hinduism is not a god-oriented religion, at least not in any Western sense of God." [8]

Vedic religion recognized many deities. The most important were the sun god Surya, the fire god Agni and the sky god Indra. Agni is depicted riding a goat or ram and has seven tongues for licking up the melted butter used in sacrifices. Indra, a god with a thousand eyes, is pictured riding on an elephant. Surya, a god who is still worshipped by Hindus each morning and evening, drives across the sky in a golden chariot.

Without denying the existence of the other gods, later Hinduism put in first place another trinity: Brahma, the god of creation, Vishnu the protector and Siva the destroyer. Brahma, the father of all things, is represented as a red-colored man, with four heads and four arms, who rides on a flying swan. His consort **is** the goddess of learning, Sarasvati. Vishnu, a benevolent deity who preserves the world, **is** depicted as a handsome youth with four hands in which he holds a conch shell, disc, club, and lotus. He

[8] Troy W. Organ, *Hinduism,* Barron's Educational Series. Woodbury, N.Y., 1974, pp. 23-24.

rides on Garuda, the king of birds, which has a man's body and limbs but an eagle's head and wings. Vishnu sits and sleeps on a huge serpent. His wife is Lakshmi, the beautiful goddess of good fortune. Siva, the lord of change, has five faces and four eyes, is covered with ashes, wears a tiger skin and carries a trident, club, thunderbolt or axe. Siva takes many forms: lord of the cosmic dance, the representation of the perfect ascetic, the lord of ghosts and demons haunting graveyards, even the symbol of divine revelry—a jovial winebibber who enjoys a life of unceasing pleasure on the peak of the Himalayas.

Above this trinity—either three gods of equal power or one god with three faces—stands the impersonal Absolute, known as "Brahman." Brahman is sexless—as opposed to the masculine god of creation. Vedanta theologians distinguish between the inferior, conditioned, qualified Brahma and the supreme Brahman who is above all attributes and free of every limitation. The supreme Brahman is "neither gross nor minute, neither short nor long. . .neither shadow nor darkness. ..without savour or odor, without eyes or ears. . . without interior or exterior."[9]

In spite of many centuries of Muslim rule and about two hundred years of British Christian colonial government, most Hindus are still polytheists. Many, however, are henotheists, i.e., they recognize the superiority of one god over all the others. Some are monotheists in the Western sense, worshipping a single God like Vishnu, Krishna, Siva or Brahma; while others, like the Vedantists, maintain a pantheistic reverence for an impersonal Godhead revealed in everything. Vedantists sometimes claim that Hinduism began with animism, turned into polytheism, was gradually transformed into personal theism and by the sages became mystical monism. Theists on the other hand interpret the Indian religious heritage as coming into full bloom when it favors worship of a personal God of love. The fact is that Hinduism has expressed itself in a variety of ways among which one can pick whatever path or interpretation he prefers.

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[9] Nikhilananda, "Discussion of Brahman in the Upanishads," *The Upanishads,* Harper Torchbook. N.Y., 1964, p. 32.

The Divine Polarity

Indian theology is well aware of the principle of polarity which characterizes the visible creation and provides a clue to the nature of the Godhead. There are many ways to represent how the Absolute expresses itself in contrasting yet cooperative pairs of opposites. Among the most ancient is that based on the fundamental duality of the sexes: Father Heaven and Mother Earth; the Greek sky king Zeus and his wife Hera; or in Chinese tradition, the Yang and Yin. In Hindu art, the visual imagery is erotic yet behind each of the outward forms the artist intends an allegory of the spirit: in the union of god and goddess our world is produced. As scholars like Heinrich Zimmer maintain, "In the primal couple engendering the spheres of being we are to behold personified the divine essence in its productive aspect, polarized for fruitful self-reflection.""

A notable example of the supreme god Siva and the goddess Shakti" in loving embrace can be seen in a piece of bas-relief sculpture from Bengal produced in the 10th century. The goddess sits on the god's left thigh with her right arm about his shoulder, while his left arm gently holds her waist. The divine couple gaze at each other with intense emotion that reflects their deep, everlasting rapture. Though separate and distinguishable, they have become fundamentally one.

Siva has four arms. With one he holds his divine beloved; with two others he grasps a trident, the symbol of his power as a conquering hero, and a rosary, the sign of his religious devotion. These illustrate how Siva combines the active and contemplative principles. In his remaining right hand, held before his chest, he grasps a stalk crowned with lotus petals. This flowering rod is an emblem of the god's creative power. Shakti, in her left hand, holds up the emblem of her femininity, a circular object marked with a furrow.' [2]

In stone and bronze Hindu artists repeatedly depict this classic

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I" H. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization.* Harper Torchbook, Harper & Row, N.Y., 1962, p. 137.

" Sometimes spelled "Shiva" or "Shakti".

[12] Illustrated in *Zimmer, Ibid.* plate 34.

theme of the loving god Siva and beloved goddess Shakti. According to Indian religious philosophy, the embracing deities represent the first and one of the most important self-revelations of the Absolute. The male personifies the calm and passive quality of eternity. His female counterpart symbolizes activating energy, passionate desire and the ceaseless movement of time. God and goddess are two distinct, separate, yet mysteriously united aspects of the single absolute divinity.

An unusual characteristic of the polarity between Siva and Shakti deserves mention. In Western religious thought as well as in Chinese philosophy, the male principle is considered active and aggressive whereas the female is described as passive and receptive. Hindu theology reverses the ordinary picture. Instead of an active sky god subduing and inpregnating a passive goddess of earth, the Indians regularly depict an aggressive, passionate goddess tempting and seducing a calm and impassive god. In Hindu theology the aggressor is female rather than male. Why? Is it because Indian religion has generally valued most highly the ascetic life of detachment and other-worldly contemplation? Since Hindu thought teaches that creation, multiplicity and individuality are evils to be overcome, the "eternal Eve" is often blamed for the Fall of man and the whole universe.

An even older artistic embodiment of the male and female attributes of divinity can be found in the Siva temple at Elephanta, an 8th century A.D. creation. [13] Among the decorative bas-relief sculptures in the huge subterranean hall cut out of rock is a carving of the three-faced Siva. The middle head of the image represents the Absolute, the divine essence out of which proceed the masculine and feminine principles. The central face is both majestic and sublime, serene and detached. Over the right shoulder and growing out of the central figure is the male profile of Siva. Portrayed in the face and form are the masculine virtues of virility, will-power, pride, valor and determination. To the left of the central mask is a profile of feminine beauty and seductive allure.

But the middle head is self-absorbed in lofty, stony silence. It

·· Illustrated in Zimmer, *Ibid.* plate 33; for interpretation cf. pp. 148-151.

overpowers the characteristic features of the contrasting faces on either side. The creative tension and interaction of the masculine and feminine principles come to rest in the dream-like aloofness of Siva the Absolute. He either never feels the joys and agonies produced by their attraction—or more likely he reveals the peace which the world can neither give nor take away. The central head depicts the face of Eternity, blending in transcendent harmony all the powers, sufferings and delights of the masculine-feminine polarity in our world.

According to one interpretation, the three faces of Siva depict the basic message of Vedanta theology: "The two profiles are happening; the universe is happening. . . . But in what sense are they happening? Do they *really* happen? The central mask is meant to express the truth of the Eternal in which nothing happens, nothing comes to pass, changes or dissolves again. The divine essence, the solely real, the Absolute in itself, our innermost Higher Self, abides in itself, steeped in its own sublime Void, omniscient and omnipotent, containing all and everything. "[14]

The above interpretation of the three-faced Siva owes much to the Hindu philosophical theology expounded in classic form by Shankara—but may be only one of several possible explanations of the work of art under consideration. Is it not conceivable that the philosophic calm of Siva represents the by-product and after-effect of the eternal marriage between the masculine and feminine principles within the Godhead? For Shankara and the Vedanta theologians who follow him, the Absolute contradicts and nullifies the validity of the creativity expressed in the fruitful polarity of Siva and Shakti. The reality and supremacy of God for such Hindu thinkers can be affirmed only by denying the value of the created world. Yet another interpretation is no less valid: the untroubled bliss and complete contentment symbolized by the central Siva face could be the result of the happy union of the masculine and feminine principles. In this case the Hindu artist would be trying to convey the serenity of soul which results from the loving embrace of Siva and Shakti.

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[14] Zimmer, */bid,* pp. 150-151.

A third example of the concern for the divine polarity can be found in a common **H**indu geometrical design called the "yantra." The yantra is a design used in meditation to channel the psychic forces by concentrating them on a specific mystical pattern.It suggests a static vision of the divinity to be worshipped. One such mystic design is a concentric composition of nine interpenetrating triangles. By meditating on such a yantra until one grasps its full meaning, the worshipper gradually comprehends the nature of the Godhead and is filled with divine power. When he fully understands the mystical meaning of the sacred design and unites with it, the devotee travels ever inward from the everyday state of naive ignorance to attain the realization of the Universal Self.

In the yantra there are nine triangles interpenetrating, five pointing downward, four upward. The downward-pointing triangles symbolize the female; the upward-pointing ones the male. Together the series of triangles signify the various stages of polarity as the creative cosmic energies of the Absolute are embodied in an evolutionary process. The intersection of four pairs of triangles suggest how the masculine and feminine aspects of the Godhead unite to produce the basic four position foundation of our cosmos: the four elements, four directions of the compass, etc. One downward-pointing triangle, however, has no partner, as if to say that the soul longs for union with the invisible Absolute, its natural mate.

To quote Zimmer, "The five female triangles expanding from above and the four male emerging from below, signify the continuous process of creation. Like an uninterrupted series of lightning flashes they delve into each other and mirror the eternal procreative moment—a dynamism nevertheless exhibited in a static pattern of geometrical repose. This is the archetypal *Hieros Gamos,* or 'Mystical Marriage', represented in an abstract diagram—a key to the secret of the phenomenal mirage of the world.""

The world around us, say the Siva-Shakti thinkers, illustrates innumerable unions of the masculine-feminine polarity. All of

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[15] Zimmer. *Ibid.* p. 148.

creation speaks of the wedding night of the divine Bride and Bridegroom. Once man becomes aware of this fundamental design to the universe, quite naturally his soul awaits the arrival of the eternal Lover. Hinduism celebrates the importance of the divine marriage in a yearly ritual which ancient Indians at least believed was necessary to guarantee an adequate rainfall, stimulate the fertility of man and beast, as well as secure the general welfare of the kingdom. An elephant is painted white with sandal paste and led in solemn procession around the streets of the capital city. Its sacred attendants are men who put on women's clothes and imitate attractive girls who are trying to arouse the desires of their boy-friends. By means of this strange ritual, the worshippers do honor to the cosmic female principle and its counterpart, the masculine strength symbolized by the elephant."

III. THE PURPOSE OF CREATION

After finding God, or the Gods, the Hindu has sought to define man's place and purpose in creation, as well as to determine the purpose of the Creator himself. In this regard several special features and uncommon terms occur. Mystical unity—realization of the divine Self, the *Atman—is* the goal of religion. How one achieves liberation or *Moksha,* however, is open. As we pointed out earlier, *Jnana yoga,* an intellectual approach, is one path; *Bhaktic yoga—more* devotion oriented—is another. What man is liberated *from—maya,* delusion, the chain *of karma* and *reincarnation—is* of additional concern. As for God's purpose, could **it** be *lila—Divine* play, as the *Bhagavad Puranas* intimate? These topics, as well as the more noted figures who helped to formulate them, are treated in this section.

Man's Goal: Mystical Unity

One interpretation of the Hindu philosophy of life was given by Swami Ranganathananda in his 1962 lectures in Calcutta. According to this Ramakrishna monk and Vedanta scholar, when a man realizes the *Atman,* the divine Self within, he sees the same

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[16] Zimmer, *Ibid,* pp. 108-109. Cf. also Cheever M. Brown, *God As Mother: A Feminine Theology in India,* Claude Stark & Co., Hartford, Vermont, 1974.

Self in every being and hence cannot hate anyone—for there is none separate from him. He achieves equal-mindedness everywhere. As a result of this realization he becomes free of delusion and sorrow. For delusion and sorrow only afflict a person when he sees things in their separateness.

Indian philosophy teaches a single great lesson—the realization of the One behind the many and the One in the many. How can there be sorrow once we realize this oneness? How can there be hatred once men understand that ill will is born out of a sense of separateness? Man achieves universality when he transcends the barriers which his little ego with its sense-bound mind has erected around itself. Behind the ego is the true Self of the individual, which is also the true Self of all, the reality of God.

To transcend the ego is the whole purpose of religion, ethics and the social process. Vedanta theology teaches that the universal is a given fact of experience. Man's true selfhood is seen in its identity with the cosmic Self. But in his ignorance he cuts this up into finite loyalties of caste and creed, race and sect. By removing these ego-built limitations man allows the universal to shine through him, pure and untarnished. In the deepest sense, all education and culture should be methods by which this ever-present Atman is liberated from the temporal restrictions of the finite and particular. By becoming educated and cultured, one sees ever more clearly the essential oneness of things—a vision expressed in a life of increasing compassion, love and service. Exploitation and egotism, violence and wickedness are fruits of a smallness of mind and littleness of character indicating a truncated vision.

Where is the limit of man's being? asks Ranganathananda. Can the skin be his limitation? Can his sect, creed, race and nationality pen him in? Such limitations reveal ignorance of our true human nature. But as we remedy our lack of knowledge, we overcome our limitations and recognize ourselves as we truly are—infinite and immortal. Man's infinite being finds only partial expression through the body and the senses, through political and social systems, through religious sects and church creeds. It can

never be exhausted in any of these, for it is in them yet transcends them. "This is my countryman; that is a foreigner—such a view is entertained only by small-minded people; but to the noble-minded, the whole world becomes his family.'" For the modem Hindu, the whole trend of modem civilization is directed toward the creation of global unity and the emergence of the universal man. And he finds that vision in ancient Vedanta.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) declared: "If one-millionth part of the men and women who live in this world simply sit down and for a few minutes say, 'you are all God, 0 ye men, and 0 ye animals, and living beings, you are all the manifestations of the one living Deity,' the whole world will be changed in half an hour. Instead of throwing tremendous bombshells of hatred into every corner, instead of projecting currents of jealousy and of evil thought, in every country people will think that it is all He." [2]

If the world is essentially spiritual, certain consequences follow for the life and destiny of man, say the Vedanta philosophers. True religion must unify the external and internal, the secular and sacred. It must bring science and religion together. In their view, Hinduism accomplishes this. Discord and conflicts arising from fragmentary views of reality become resolved. Vedanta offers a comprehensive spirituality in which the believer and nonbeliever, the theist and agnostic, the man of religion and scientist become transformed into fellow-seekers of truth, brothers in a single universal family and varied expressions of the one God.

Lofty goals, but are they reachable? The question is best answered, the Hindu might say, in those who have experienced the mystical unity, and seen all barriers dissolved. Ramakrishna (d. 1886) was one who has apparently done so. [3] Sri Ramakrishna observed that there are three classes of religious people. The lowest kind say, "God is up there" and point to heaven. The next say that God dwells in the heart as man's conscience, his inner

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' An ancient Sanskrit verse, quoted by Ranganathananda, *The Message of the Upanishads,* Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1971, p. 124.

[2] Quoted, Ranganathananda, *!bid,* p. 114.

[3] Harold W. French, *The Swan's Wide Waters, Ramakrishna and Western Culture,* Kennikat Press, N.Y., 1974, pp. 9-36.

controller. But the highest devotees affirm, "God has become everything. All that we perceive are different forms of God."

All doubts disappear when one sees God, taught this Hindu mystic. It is one thing to hear of God but quite a different matter to see Him. If a man cannot have full conviction through hearing, when he beholds God face to face, then he will be wholly convinced. At this point, formal worship drops away. Ramakrishna's own realization occurred one day as he went to worship in the Kali temple according to prescribed fashion. Abruptly, it was revealed to him that everything was Pure Spirit. The utensils of worship, the altar, even the door frame—all were Pure Spirit. So with everything else—men, animals, every living being—all Pure Spirit. Like a madman, the seer said, he began to shower flowers in all directions. Whatever he saw he worshipped! [4]

"When I see a man," he later remarked, "I see that it is God Himself who walks on earth. . .. [5]

Bhakti

As Ramakrishna illustrates, Indian religion is a matter of direct experience rather than a code of conduct. And over the ages different paths have been specified to attain the esteemed bliss and liberation. In the pre-Buddhist age, the masses and their Brahmin leaders emphasized the importance of *Karma-yoga,* salvation through sacrificial rites and prescribed duties. From the 9th century A.D., *Jnana-yoga—salvation* by intellectual insight—and *Bhakti-yoga—salvation* through loving devotion—caught the popular imagination. Shankara, the author of Jnana-yoga, deserves credit. for restoring the supremacy of Vedic philosophy and overthrowing Indian Buddhism, but his yoga was far too philosophic for the general populace. Therefore, when Ramanuja came along, his Bhakti-yoga, also based on Vedanta—but a distinct interpretation—filled a great need and became the dominant theme in India's religious life.

Bhakti connotes infinite attachment and unlimited devotion to

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Nikhilananda, trans., *Ramakrishna, Prophet of New India,* Harper & Bros., N.Y., 1942, p. 146.

[6] *Ibid,* p. 146.

God. Worship is based on love. Meditation consists of steady, uninterrupted homage like a river's flow. In worship one offers all activities to God and feels extremely restless and miserable at the slightest lapse in remembrance of Him. The beginning of bhakti can be found in the ancient hymns of the *Rig-Veda,* India's oldest scripture. In one song the god Indra is touched by heartfelt prayers because "he is longing just as a wife with desires gets her husband" (I, 62:11). Worship means responding to God's longing heart: "All my hymns in unison praise Indra: as wives embrace their husbands so do my thoughts embrace Indra, the divine bestower of gifts. For the sake of a favor they cling to the liberal God (Indra) as wives do their lords, or as a woman does her handsome lover (X 43:1). "[6]

If the seed of the bhakti doctrine can be found in the oldest portions of the Vedas, the blossoms are found in the *Upanishads,* and later in the *Bhagavad-Giza* and *Bhagavat Purana,* sacred scriptures of the Indian middle ages.

The medieval bhakti movement begins with Ramanuja (d. 1137). He was a member of the Vishnaiva sect (worshippers of Vishnu). For a time during his student years, he had been a disciple of Shankara's Jnana-yoga but as a result of a dispute over the meaning of one of the sacred texts he left his teacher and became associated with a devout yogi of the Sudra caste. Shankara had limited his teaching to the educated Brahmin class and centered his devotion on the Absolute (Brahman). By abandoning the Shankara school, Ramanuja took two revolutionary steps. First, he looked to a Sudra (the lowest of the four Hindu castes) for religious guidance. Second, he concentrated his attention on the personal god Vishnu in preference to the impersonal Brahman. Both actions are comparable to St. Augustine's conversion from neo-Platonism to Christianity.

Ramanuja was married at the age of sixteen. This may surprise the modern reader but was a common practice in tropical India. There, children mature more quickly and it was customary

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[6] Quoted, A.K. Majumdar, *Bhakti Renaissance.* Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1965, p. I.

to find a suitable mate for one's son as soon as he reached puberty. Ramanuja's wife, however, was difficult to get along with. Like Socrates' wife Xanthippe, she had a sharp tongue and disagreeable temper. Especially distressing for the young husband were her arguments with his uncle's wife. Since the uncle was also Ramanuja's religious teacher, the young man was often torn between love for his wife and respect for his guru. To free himself from such a troublesome environment Ramanuja left the woman after fifteen years of marital turmoil and led the life of a mendicant monk. Although he had renounced family ties, he did not become a recluse however; in fact, soon a large number of disciples gathered around him to become his spiritual brothers and children. Before his death at an advanced age (tradition says he lived to be 120) Ramanuja was the religious master of seventy-four monasteries containing seven hundred ascetic yogis, twelve thousand monks and three hundred nuns.

His religious philosophy was notable in four ways. First, he refined and deepened the importance of absolute surrender *(prapatti)* to the will of Lord Vishnu. Prapatti means to act in accordance with the divine will and to give up everything which may be against the Lord's desire. Complete faith that Vishnu will protect his devotee is required.' Second, he surpassed the excellence of Shankara by disregarding the traditional caste restrictions. Shankara had limited his teaching to the upper class Brahmins and repeatedly declared that the lower castes were too ignorant to understand Vedic scripture. But Ramanuja admitted Jains, Buddhists, Sudras and even untouchables into his monasteries. He thus recognized the worth of all men. Since he himself had been taught by a Sudra, it was easy for him to disregard the intellectual and social pretensions of the Brahmins. He may also have been shrewd enough to recognize the virtue of the Buddhist repudiation of caste. Unfortunately, Ramanuja's example was not widely imitated until Gandhi's time—eight hundred years later.

Third, Ramanuja threw his support toward image worship, popular ritualistic devotions and the building of temples. Though

[7] A.K. Majumdar, *Ibid.* p. 18.

very large and impressive temples greatly predate his time, and image worship goes back to the days of the Indus Valley civilization, Shankara's speculative mysticism tended to minimize the external. He downplayed the importance of religious ceremonies, statues of gods and goddesses, outward symbols and specific houses for divine abodes. Ramanuja by contrast gave elaborate directions to his followers on how temples should be constructed and images worshipped. This made him popular with the ordinary people—who had neither the ability nor inclination toward profound metaphysical theologies.

Fourth, Ramanuja exalted the supremacy of Vishnu, the divine Preserver, over all rivals. In this, he was a crusading sectarian and actually rather narrow-minded. Yet—ironically-just such dogmatic exclusivism wins far more followers than an attitude of broad-minded tolerance. Shankara had advocated the worship of five gods—Vishnu, Siva, Shakti, Ganesha and Brahma—while stressing the central importance of Brahma. For him true worship should put Brahma in the center of a square temple with each of the lesser gods and goddesses in one of the four corners. Ramanuja, however, was wholly and exclusively devoted to Vishnu—like the Hebrew prophet Elijah was to Yahweh. But also like the Old Testament figure, he aroused the opposition of people in high places. And in spite of his popularity as a teacher, he was finally forced to flee for his life when he clashed with the Siva-worshipping Emperor Kulottunga I.

After Ramanuja's death, the bhakti school was defended by a long line of successive teachers. Their works are of immense significance to students of Indian religions and philosophy, but we must limit our treatment to two of the major expositors: Vallabha and Ramananda.

Vallabha (b. 1479 or 1481) was from a prominent Brahmin family. His maternal grandfather had served as a priest in one of India's many royal families. Vallabha was born while his father and mother were escaping from Benares which, rumor had it, was soon to be attacked and sacked by Muslim invaders. After the baby was born in the forest, the family went back to their native city.

As a boy, Vallabha astonished everyone by his keen intellect. Deprived of any further formal education at about age ten when his father died, he started to wander all over India and covered the entire country several times. His ability as a thinker came to be widely praised and soon he was asked to debate at conferences held in the imperial court. Settling at Benares, he married and fathered two sons. As much as possible, however, without abandoning the duties of a married man and householder, he lived the life of a monk. Because of opposition to his religious views he for a time left the city, lived on the banks of the Ganges near Allahabad and became a *sannyasin.* The final year of his life (1533) was spent back in Benares.

As Ramanuja paid homage to Vishnu, his successor Vallabha advocated surrender to Krishna, one of the celebrated incarnations of Vishnu. Bhakti then took on the additional implication of affection or sentiment derived from the pure grace of the Lord. Krishna plants the seed of bhakti in the individual heart to sprout and flourish by the devotee's acts of renunciation, meditation on religious literature and chanting of Krishna's holy name. Even as a householder, a person can worship Krishna and gradually become completely absorbed in devotion to Him. Finally as one progresses through seven stages of spiritual training, he can experience such "passion for Krishna" that it becomes impossible to remain apart from Him.

Besides his emphasis on passion for Krishna and the value of repeated chanting, Vallabha should be remembered for his distaste of ascetic practices which many yogis believed to be all-important. When critics of Hinduism use the naked yogi on a bed of nails as an example of normative Hindu other-worldliness, it is important to remember that the ascetic is only one kind of Indian devotee and often not the most inspired. As Nanak, the contemporary of Vallabha and founder of the Sikh religion, wrote, "Religion consisteth not in a patched coat, or in a yogi's staff, or in ashes smeared over the body;

"Religion consisteth not in earrings worn, or a shaven head, or in the blowing of horns. . . .

"Religion consisteth not in wandering to tombs or places of cremation, or sitting in attitudes of contemplation. . . .

"Abide pure amid the impurities of the world; thus thou shalt find the way of religion." [8]

Ramananda (mid-15th century) was another Hindu holy man who defended the bhakti school. Born at Allahabad, he studied philosophy at Benares, became dissatisfied with conventional V ishnaivas and proceeded to found a new sect of Vishnu worshippers based on a more intense devotional life. Like other reformers he disregarded caste and openly ate with non-Brahmins who were devotees of Vishnu. Among his first twelve disciples were a weaver, barber, cobbler, local ruling chief and a peasant. He also introduced in a revolutionary way the use of vernacular language instead of Sanskrit in his writings. **In** the single fragment of his work that still exists one glimpses the same spirit of reform and devotion that bhakti inspired in Vallabha and Ramanuja: "I had an inclination to go with sandal and other perfumes to offer my worship to Brahman. But the guru revealed that Brahman was in my own heart. Wherever **I** go, I see only water and stones (worshipped) but it is Thou who hast filled them all with thy presence. They all seek thee in vain among the Vedas. My own true guru, Thou hast put an end to all my failures and illusions. Blessed art Thou! Ramanda is lost in his master (svami) Brahman; it is the word of the guru that destroys all the million bonds of action." [9]

One should note the fact that the West today generally is not familiar with the bhakti tradition. Vedanta Hinduism with its roots from Shankara—which is more intellectual and philosophical—has had a wider reception. Only the Hare Krishna movement"' gives us a glimpse of bhakti, and it is not really typical of popular Indian tradition. But in India, bhakti is still the refuge of the masses.

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[8] Quoted in Majumdar, *Ibid,* p. 28.

Majumdar, *Ibid.* p. 40.

[10] Cf. section four, "The Coming Kingdom", "Krishna Consciousness".

Liberation

The Hindu doctrine of man involves four basic principles: the permanence of the essential Self (Atman), the operation of original ignorance (maya), the possibility of union with the Supreme Being (samadhi) and the doctrine of karma. In this section, we consider the first two. From the *Upanishads* we find a classic explanation in the context of the tale of a king and his son. Though we have examined the concept of the Atman in connection with man's mystical unity with creation, this account relates the Atman with the continuity of life.

In the *Katha Upanishad* the story is told of a Hindu king who once promised to give everything he owned as a sacrifice to God. After all the royal treasures had been offered up and the king was at the point of giving his old cows, his son asked when he was to be sacrificed. He felt that his father had not really given everything until he too was offered. Angry at the impertinence of the boy, the king declared that he was handing him over to Yama, the god of death.

Banished to the underworld, the prince found that Yama was not at home. For three days and nights the boy fasted until at last the god of the dead returned. To make amends for not being at hand to welcome such an honored guest Yama promised to grant any three wishes the youth might make.

First the prince asked that his father be no longer angry about what he had done and be not anxious about his banishment to the place of the dead. Next, he requested to know where one could enjoy a long life of complete happiness. Yet realizing that such bliss was not enough, he inquired if man possessed an immortal soul that survived the death of the body. In this sense, he was requesting knowledge. For the prince knew that self-knowledge alone bestows the highest good.

To test the youth Yama offered him every earthly enjoyment rather than such knowledge. The boy replied that money is of value only so long as a man is alive. What he sought was to solve the riddle of life itself rather than to obtain riches. Yama was impressed by the young man's insight. As he explained, the good is

one thing; the pleasant, another. He who chooses merely the pleasant misses the goal of life. Out of greed the man who concentrates on earthly satisfactions is a fool. Perplexed by the delusion of wealth, he thinks, "This world alone exists and there is no other." Such a man again and again comes under the sway of death.

Yama then instructs the prince concerning the reality of the Atman—the knowing Self:

> The knowing Self is not born; It does not die. It has not sprung from anything; nothing has sprung from It. Birthless, eternal, everlasting and ancient, It is not killed when the body is killed.
> If the killer thinks he kills and if the killed man thinks he is killed, neither of these apprehends aright. The Self kills not, nor is It killed. . . .
> Though sitting still, It travels far; though lying down, It goes everywhere. . . ."

Linked with the Hindu concept of the Atman two other technical words are commonly used: *Maya* and *Moksha.* If the Atman is alone truly valuable and real, everything which is not the Atman is maya. Maya has been defined variously as delusion, illusion, mere appearance, dream. In this case, nothing exists but the Self; everything else has no true reality. Maya has, nevertheless, also been given a less extreme meaning. According to some Hindus, the world of appearances is as *real* as the Atman but *without its value.* The dream is real to the dreamer but by comparison with the waking state it is of far less consequence."

One frees himself from maya through moksha. Freedom, liberation, salvation, escape, fulfillment, realization, enlightenment—all of these are synonymous with moksha. In most cases moksha refers to the long-hoped-for release from the round of births and death. Within Vedanta though, there are varying concepts of release. In Shankara's version, closer to Buddhism, libera-

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" *Karha Upanishad* I:2:18-21a (Nikhilananda translation).

[1 2] T. W. Organ, *Hinduism,* pp. 260 ff. for a careful discussion of both views. Also S.N. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism,* Frederick Ungar Pub. Co., N.Y., 1959, pp. 33-57.

tion implies the transcendence of individuality in the identification of the self with the Absolute. Whereas with Ramanuja's version of Vedanta that stresses the personhood of God, adherents contemplate the possibility of heaven. '[13]

Professor Ninian Smart contends that such distinctions in the Hindu doctrines of liberation can be seen in the light of their mythical context. Shankara's teaching, which has been modified in various ways by Radhakrishnan, Swami Vivekananda and Aldous Huxley, is presented in the context of the worship of Siva, "who dynamically and kaleidoscopically mingles opposites in his own person. "[14] Because Siva is both creator and destroyer, we must go beyond good and evil, life and death, for merger with the Impersonal Reality. This is the tone of the *Katha Upanishad,* and Yama's advice to the prince. However, for Ramanuja's school and the bhaktic tradition which centers on Vishnu, the stress is different. Writes Smart, "There is less of this sense (the impersonal) in the cult of Vishnu, a kindlier representation of the ultimate. The *Bhagavad Gita,* for instance, which is the greatest testament to the religion of Vishnu in the Indian tradition, is more concerned with reliance on God than going beyond Him to a transcendental state in which all distinctions are lost." Thus, there is the possibility of heaven, where one can be with one's God. It is true too that when such a fervid personal theism is developed there is less of an emphasis on the doctrine of rebirth; because one is near to a "kindlier" god such as Vishnu, the effects of karma can be short-circuited by grace and by calling on the name of his chosen God, one can conquer the impermanence of maya. '[15]

Karma

According to the Hindus, a law of cause and effect operates in the moral world as invariably and inviolably as it does in the physical world. Morally good acts necessarily produce good and

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[13] Ninian Smart, "Attitudes towards Death in Eastern Religions," A. Toynbee, ed., *Man's Concern with Death.* McGraw-Hill, 1968, N.Y., pp. 101-103.

[14] Ibid, p. 103.

[15] *Mid,* pp. 104-105.

morally bad actions result in evil.' [6] This law, called karma, is an essential element of Hindu ethical theory and that religion's solution to the riddle of suffering and inequality among men.

Two aspects of the doctrine of karma should be clearly distinguished. First, as every event in the physical world is determined by its antecedents, so everything happening in the moral world is preordained. The heart of the world is just, our lives are subject to moral law, therefore all the good and all the evil actions of men will receive a perfectly just recompense.

Secondly, there are no actual iniquities or misfortunes which befall men. What we sow, we must reap. One can blame neither God nor our neighbor for our pains because we are only getting what we deserve. Hindus therefore express no bitterness about their fate. Man's destiny is always self-determined.' [7]

Since it is evident that here and now, some humans seem to live a charmed life and others seem cursed from birth, Hindus claim that all the good and evil deeds done in one life will be recompensed with an equivalent amount of happiness and misery in a later life. Orthodox Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews solve the problem of suffering by saying that after death a man will be duly rewarded—with either heaven or hell. By contrast, at least by the time of the *Upanishads,* Hindu sages were teaching the doctrine of transmigration of souls: that we were once incarnated as animals and plants as well as humans.

Karma challenges man to live a truly moral life, say the Hindus. Rewards and punishments are not ends in themselves but serve as a stimulus to personal growth. No external fate constrains us. If we do our best in our present life we can be sure of a better one in the future. Gradually we can rise to higher levels. If one is a good "untouchable" in this life, cleaning toilets without complaint, for instance, in the next life he may be a Sudra carpenter or even a Brahmin priest. On the other hand, if we violate the standards set up by the community or grumble about our sorry

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[6] R.N. Dandekar, "The Role of Man in Hinduism", K.W. Morgan, ed. , *The Religion of the Hindus,* Ronald Press Co., N.Y., 1953, pp. 127-128.

[7] M. Hiriyanna, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy,* George Allen & Unwin, London, 1956, p. 48.

state, in the future we will undoubtedly have to suffer the indignities of an even more despicable condition.

Man's body, character, capacities and temperament are the just compensation for his deeds done in earlier existences. Every act necessarily works itself out in another birth. Every good action ennobles the soul while every bad deed degrades it. A man who persists in righteousness makes early progress towards perfection, while continued vice plunges the soul in ever-deeper corruption. What could be more just? Every thought, word and act of a man are weighed in the scales of eternal justice. Our destinies are not shaped by the arbitrary decrees of an external God—a force outside and above—but according to an organic law wrought into our nature. God does not sit in judgment on us at some future day in thunder and lightning, but judges here and now through the ordinary workings of the moral law."

Karma recognizes both some freedom and some predetermined factors in human existence. Every man is like a farmer to whom a plot of land has been given. The size of the plot, the quality of the soil and the changes in weather are outside the farmer's control. Yet the owner is free to till the ground, fertilize it, raise useful crops or to neglect the garden and grow only weeds.

Karma does not fill Hindus with despair, as Christian missionaries have charged. It simply teaches men to cease dreading the arbitrary will of supernatural powers or relying on luck. When Hindus know that sin entails suffering, that what we are is the result of our own past deeds and that we shall be given chances to improve ourselves, they are filled with hope. Hindus do not believe they are predestined to eternal misery or everlasting bliss by the decree of Providence. If men do something wrong they will always have freedom to repent and retrace their footsteps.

Four complaints have been made against the karma doctrine. First, by making everything depend upon individual virtues and vices it ignores the social causes of sin and suffering. In 1930 during the worldwide depression, a man in Bombay might suffer

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[18] D.S. Sarma, *What is Hinduism?,* Madras Law Journal Press, Madras, India, 1945, P. 90.

not because of his own moral failures but as a result of capitalistic mismanagement in New York. Second, karma tends to reinforce the status quo in society and discourage reform. Why clean up contaminated rivers which cause plagues when the victims of disease are being justly punished for their sins? Thirdly, belief in karma promotes a fatalistic philosophy of life negation. If a man must go through a multitude of births in order to achieve lasting happiness, then existence seems like prison. Consequently, the Hindu prays for escape from the world of matter. Finally, karma doctrine almost inevitably leads to asceticism. Repeatedly men attempt to break their bondage to the wheel of fate by denying the basic biological drives for food, sex, home and security. However much truth there is to these criticisms, the point should be made that such accusations are directed at karma not only by Christian missionaries and Western secularists but also by the greatest champions of reform Hinduism.

Samsara: Reincarnation

The reincarnation tenet—so central to karma dogma—is ordinarily assumed to be an indispensable feature of Hindu belief. Yet a careful study of the Indian scriptures indicates that this was not always the case.

The hymns of the *Rig-Veda* say nothing about a cycle of rebirths. Vedic religion simply promised that the departed would enter the heavenly world of the gods. Of course, such a happy fate was only **for the** righteous and pious, especially those who had faithfully performed the required sacrificial rites. The destination of faithless and evil men was not elaborated upon.

However, in the Upanishads of a later period, we read: "All who depart from this world go to the moon. The waxing half fills it with their lives; in the waning half it is effecting their rebirth. The moon is the gate of heaven. He who knows how **to** reply to **it,** him it allows to pass by. He who cannot **reply,** him it sends, changing itself into rain, down to the earth in rain; he is reborn here and there according to his deeds and knowledge as a worm, fish, bird, lion, **wild boar, jackal, tiger,** man or whatever it may be. For when a

man comes to the moon, the moon asks: Who art thou? Then he ought to answer: I am thou. . . . If he speaks thus, then the moon lets him get away out above itself!" [19]

If the Vedic warriors did not originally believe in reincarnation, neither did the Hindu philosophers. For the Brahmin sages, since all individual souls were part of the Universal Soul, they would be reabsorbed in the Absolute as soon as they left the world of the senses. It was assumed that there is a continuous influx of souls into the material world and a continuous return out of it—like a shower of sparks out of a fire and falling back into it. The soul comes from God, is incarnate but once, and returns to God.

Once these original views concerning the afterlife are admitted, we must come back to the fact that for many centuries Hindus have believed in reincarnation and do so still. Attached to this belief is a corollary doctrine: that all living things have souls and in most cases these are human souls condemned for sins committed in a previous existence. Panpsychism and reincarnation are combined in Hindu doctrine.

Panpsychism fits in with Hinduism's reverence for all life and its faith that everything is a manifestation of God. Because all that exists was created by God and is a reflection of His being, then everything must have a soul—plants, insects, snakes, birds and mammals. Goethe, the German biologist Gustav Fechner and the contemporary process theologian Charles Hartshorne are among those who have defended the panpsychic idea. Recent scientific evidence which points in that direction would include studies of animal intelligence, the language of porpoises and the sensitivity of plants to music, prayer and curses. In a book on Indian yoga written by a Benedictine monk it is reported that Luther Burbank, a world-renowned American horticulturist, claims to have bred thornless cacti by talking to them lovingly, telling them that they no longer needed thorns to protect themselves. [20]

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[9] Kausitaki Upanishad, 1, quoted by A. Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development,* Beacon Press, Boston, 1957, p. 48.

[20] Dom Denys Rutledge, *In Search of a Yogi,* Farrar, Straus and Co., N.Y., 1962, p. 230.

As for reincarnation, the doctrine has been accepted by a variety of Western philosophers and writers from Pythagoras to Rev. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, one of Great Britain's foremost Christian clergymen.' But opposition to it has been no less vigorous. Unfortunately, the case for it has often been weakened by fantastic claims made by charlatans and the credulous. To cite one example, the Theosophical Society leader Mrs. Annie Besant claimed to be a reincarnation of both Hypatia (4th century) and the philosopher Giordana Bruno (16th century). Her associate Colonel H.S. Olcott was said to formerly have been the Indian emperor Asoka. She derived this knowledge from clairvoyance, [22] she said.

Is there any reliable evidence for the doctrine of reincarnation? How do we decide between a psychic like Edgar Cayce who believed in reincarnation or another who does not?"

Fortunately, the American Society for Psychical Research has published a careful study in *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnadon.* [24] Consider this typically illuminating case from India. When a son of an Indian professor (b. 1944) was about two and a half, he began to tell his mother not to cook because he had a wife in a city sixty miles away who could cook for him. At age four he said he had a large soda and biscuit shop in the same city. He also reported that in a previous life he had become ill after eating too much curd.It turned out that the owners of a soda and biscuit shop in the city referred to had a brother who had died in 1943. The child correctly reported that the deceased had four sons, a daughter and a wife, also that he owned a hotel and movie theatre. When taken to the city, he recognized the way from the railroad station to the shop, identified the room in which he had slept in his previous life, greeted his former mother, daughter, wife and son, his family doctor and a taxi driver who owed him money. All together, thirty-six definite bits of evidence were presented by the child

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[21] L. Weatherhead, *The Case for Re-Incarnation,* M.C. Peto, London, 1957.

22 D.S. Sarnia, *Hinduism Through the Ages,* p. 118.

[23] See Y.O. Kim, *Divine Principle and Its Application,* H.S . A .-U.W.C. , Washington, 1968, pp. 103-112 for an alternative explanation of phenomena that suggest reincarnation.

" Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation,* American Society for Psychical Research, N.Y., 1966.

which would seem to indicate the likelihood of knowledge of a previous life. [25]

Yoga and Yogis

Along with karma and reincarnation, *Yoga* is one of the few Hindu words to have become part of the standard Western vocabulary. But the true scope of the term has frequently been misunderstood. For the Hindu, yoga is more profound than physical exercises and breath control. Yoga actually refers to the whole art of rejoining man to God. Certain sitting postures or breathing exercises are only designed to accelerate the first stage in one's ascent to God: restoring harmony between mind and body. Thus, yoga in the proper sense should be considered a practical systematization of the means of attaining union with God. *The Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali written about 150 B.C. represents the classic handbook of the art, yet the novice will find it extremely difficult to understand.

A Catholic monk and expert in contemplative mysticism states that "yoga philosophy is based on a deep awareness of what Christians call the 'Fall,' by which man has become immersed in matter and subject to his material, sensible environment instead of being able to dominate it by the power of the spirit; that his higher spiritual powers have become atrophied by disuse." [26] Since Hinduism does not have a sacred story comparable to the Fall account in *Genesis,* it is interesting that a Catholic theologian could find a parallel in yoga philosophy. [27] More conventional Christians would hardly define the Fall as man's immersion in matter, even if that is one feature of our fallen nature. Though Origen for one, did believe that the real Fall was the soul's descent into our material world, few agreed with him at the time or since.

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[25] I. Stevenson, *Ibid.* pp. 97-113. Only after careful study of all the cases can one determine whether some explanation other than reincarnation (e.g. "possession" by a discamate soul) would be valid.

[26] Dom Denys Rutledge. *In Search of a Yogi,* Farrar, Straus & Co., N.Y., 1962, p. 44.

[27] Possibly he does so because of his sympathy for the theology of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the fifth century compiler of angelology.

The important point is that yoga demonstrates that man can completely subjugate his material environment with the power of the spirit. Proponents openly profess to know the techniques to accomplish this. Such publicists for yoga state that they can show how to release preternatural psychic powers inherent in all of us but normally submerged through excessive concern with the external senses. Yoga is said to produce the gifts of clairvoyance, telepathy, second sight, levitation, etc.

In one way or another all Hindu leaders practice yoga, whether they call themselves a sannyasin, sadhu, swami or simply a yogi. Even a very secular-spirited statesman like Nehru confessed that he practiced a few simple yoga exercises for many years and found them very profitable. [28] However, it is the more spectacular phenomena that are usually associated with the practice of yoga and these give it a certain notoriety. A Roman Catholic author who visited India accepted the truth of the claim that a man can remain alive in a sealed air-proof chamber for fifteen hours by the use of proper breath control. He also believed those who said a man buried for six months was still alive when he was dug up. [29] Nevertheless, the monk was unsuccessful in his search for a "true yogi" who could "control matter by mind to the extent of calling it into existence and dissolving it," as Patanjali testifies yogi ns could do. [3] "

Indian religion has at various times encouraged some rather curious, even questionable practices in the quest for union with God. Men sleep on nail-studded beds or bury themselves up to the neck in sand. Some have insisted on not wearing clothes in public or staring at the sun until they go blind. Temple dancers were also temple prostitutes even during the British imperial period. In the Baul sect, a group of Bengali Vishnaiva adherents believe that sex is the highest kind of worship and that procreation, a sin in their eyes, can be prevented by drinking a sacred concoction made of cow dung.Nor is this sort of thing limited to the credulous. Rama-

[29] Nehru, *Discovery of India,* pp. 179-80.

[29] Dorn Rutledge, *!bid,* p. 218.

[3°] *Ibid,* preface, xiii.

krishna, India's great 19th century saint, tried to turn himself into a woman in order to experience the bliss the maiden Radha had with Lord Krishna and also attempted to become a monkey in order to unite with the beloved monkey god Hanuman.

Critics of yogi pretensions and practices are numerous among the educated Hindus. One Indian has called the numerous "holy men" the scavengers of religion: vultures, that is, who live off the refuse other men have cast away. When Madame Blavatsky, then living in India, said she could produce actual letters from spirit world, the Society for Psychical Research investigated and found all such letters were clumsy forgeries." From Patanjali to V ivekananda[32] the most reputable yogis have insisted that whatever unusual powers one may obtain from mystical experience are unimportant by comparison with the chief goal of disciplined meditation—namely, unity with God.

A French Benedictine monk and advocate of "Christian Yoga" writes that we cannot become truly ourselves until we accept our nature as men and aim at establishing balance between the parts of man in us: our animal body, thinking soul and spirit. "Christ came in the first place so that this 'creature of God' within us, concealed under a human complex, bruised and torn by original sin, should flower and open out in its full beauty and wealth of talent. . . . A Yoga that calms the senses, pacifies the soul, and frees certain intuitive or affective powers in us can be of inestimable service to the West. It can make people into true Christians, dynamic and open, by helping them to be men."[33]

The God of Play

According to the *Bhagavat Purana,* a long philosophical-theological poem written about 900 A.D. , the best way to understand the relationship **of** the world to God is to conceive of it on the analogy of sport: the universe expresses the fundamental playfulness of the Eternal. This interpretation differs from several of the

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[31] D.S. Sarma, *Hinduism Through the Ages,* p.

[32] Cf. Nehru, *Ibid,* pp. 180-181.

[33] J.M. Dechanet, *Christian Yoga,* Harper & Row, N.Y., 1960, pp. 12-13.

ordinary Hindu theories. The world order is not the product of a natural evolution out of some primordial energy. Nor is it the illusory appearance of inert existence-consciousness created by the inexplicable operation of *tnaya. It* is neither the product of a voluntary action on the part of a divine personality nor the result of the *karma* of individual spirits. Behind our world is divine *lila,* the sportive self-expression of the Supreme Spirit. The universe represents "the free unmotivated self-expression in a spatio-temporal order of His supra-spatial, supra-temporal perfect self-enjoyment." [34]

Once *lila* is recognized as the reason for all we see or do, we can find the supreme Spirit everywhere in the world—in both the beautiful and the unsightly. We can love our world, face its difficulties and even embrace it, because our whole universe is the playful embodiment of the Beloved God. The *Bhagavat Purana* further envisions all the varied orders of beings in the world as incarnations *(avatars)* of the supreme Being. Every apparently finite and transient person or thing is a self-manifestation of the Absolute. In lower species of life the spiritual character of the Self is only slightly visible. It becomes more and more unveiled in higher forms of conscious life, and is most exposed in human beings. The divine characteristics are prominently displayed in the extraordinary lives of great men.

While there are countless *avatars,* Krishna is the most perfect embodiment of God's love, wisdom and playfulness. The *Bhagavat* devotes a whole section, ninety chapters, to Krishna's life. In depicting his career, the book does not deify an unusual human personality who once lived on the earth but humanizes the supreme Spirit. Krishna illustrates by the events of His playful earthly career how divinity can be manifested in humanity: "He plays excellently the parts of an infant, a child, a boy, a youth, a son, a playmate, a sentimental lover, a warrior, a controller of the forces of evil. . .His limitations are self-imposed, and He transcends them

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[34] A.K. Banerjee, The Visnu and the Bhagavata Puranas", S. Radhakrishnan, ed., *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western,* George Allen & Unwin, London, 1952, volume I, p. 125.

whenever He likes. The whole cosmic and supra-cosmic character of the supreme Spirit is visible in his life." [35]

It is important to note the dissimilarity between Krishna and His later historical rivals, such as Jesus or Buddha. Consider this summary of Krishna's character given by a modern Hindu scholar: ". . .Frightened by His mother's chastisement, He opens His mouth and shows her the whole cosmic system within it; He shows the boundless space with all its contents within the small cavity of His mouth. As a boy he persuades His father to revolt against the longstanding religious practice of Indra-yojna (ceremony), and when Indra comes to inflict punishment, He picks up the hill of Govardhana on the tip of His little finger, puts it as an umbrella upon the heads of the inhabitants of Vrndavana and protects them from Indra's wrath. . . . While playing with the simple boys and girls of Vrndavana, He devours the forest fire, which was about to burn them to ashes. Powerful demons appear now and then to create disturbances in His boyish games; and He kills them in various playful methods which only add to the pleasures of His playmates. . . " [36]

Westerners usually are surprised and often repelled by the strange symbolism of Indian mythology and art, so it becomes difficult to appreciate the meaning of Hindu religious stories. For the author of the *Bhagavat Purana* and modern Hindu commentators, the point of the above incidents in Krishna's childhood is that "The boys and girls of Vrndavana are devotees of the highest order, 'who live for Krishna, work for Krishna, yearn for eternal union with Krishna, who have no concern with the superhuman or cosmic powers and actions of Krishna, but look upon Him as the eternally perfect embodiment of beauty and sweetness and love.' They not only experience the supreme spirit in 'inner consciousness,' but also 'in all the diverse expressions of His cosmic and supra-cosmic *play*. . -- [37]

While the Krishna of the *Bhagavat Purana* illustrates the

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[35] *Ibid,* p. 128.

[36] *Ibid,* p. 129.

[37] *Ibid.* p. 129.

divine playfulness in legend and scripture, Hindu theologians who come after the writing of this poem elaborate on its metaphysical justification. Why should God create the world? asks the I 1 th century Brahmin theologian, Nimbarka. Creation is an act which must have some motive. Our human acts are due to some wants we have, some imperfections we wish to overcome. Since God is eternally perfect, eternally satisfied, eternally blissful, He does not need to remove an insufficiency or labor to attain completion. As God lacks nothing (in the Hindu view), the creation of the world cannot be for His sake.

Nimbarka answers his own question, solving the difficulty with *lila:* God is like a king who indulges in sports because all other desires are fulfilled. God the all-perfect, ever-happy Being creates the universe out of the fullness of His nature. The world originates from bliss, is sustained by it, changes because of it and dissolves in it.

God's creation is play, a pastime. We do not play because we have to. Pastimes are due to the exuberance of joy rather than any lack of it. We are so happy we have to sing and dance. Creation is thus the result of an overflow of God's perfection, an outer expression of His infinite bliss. To quote Prof. Rama Chaudhuri of Lady Brabourne College in Calcutta, "If we accept the view of ever-perfect Reality, this is the only way out, and credit must be given to the Vedantists for having thought of it." [38]

IV. THE COMING KINGDOM

Hinduism and History

Whereas Jewish, Christian and Muslim philosophies **of** history are linear and progressive, Hindu philosophies of history are essentially cyclic. Creation, existence, decay and dissolution are

[38] S. Radhakrishnan, ed., */ bid,* p. 340. Nimbarka, of course, realized that the *lila* doctrine might explain why God created the world but the concept of spontaneous play fails to explain the purpose the creation has for humans. We live on earth and are embodied for moral improvement and spiritual training. Hence, in this basic respect, God's ways are not our ways nor His thoughts our thoughts.

endless ever-repetitive processes. When God breathes out, Hindu mythology explains, a universe is brought into being. When He breathes in, that universe is swallowed up in the Void. Our world was thus created by Brahma and after a definite time it will be destroyed and replaced by another.

Each day in Brahma's life is 4,320,000,000 years, divided into 1,000 cosmic ages of equal length. Our universe was born and will die within one of these aeons. Its life span consists of four smaller epochs of unequal length and ever-decreasing value. In the first age-1,728,000 years—all men are equal and there is no evil. Sin appears in the second age which lasts 1,296,000 years. During the third age evil grows with such rapidity that goodness has to struggle with an adversary of equal strength. Finally, our age appears when evil becomes so powerful that Vishnu will have to come to earth as a judge (Kalki the destroyer) sentencing the world to oblivion by water or fire. According to some Hindus, however, there are still about 425,000 years left before the end.

The Tantra of the Great Liberation describes the four ages of any cosmic era in considerable detail.' In the First Age, men by the practice of yoga and sacrifice prescribed by Siva were virtuous and pleasing to the gods and their ancestors. By the study of the *Vedas,* meditation and austerities, and the conquest of the senses by acts of mercy and charity, men possessed exceptional power and courage. They were adherents of the true Law, wise, and of firm resolve. Mortals though they were, they were yet like gods and went to the abode of the gods. Kings then were faithful to their responsibilities and ever concerned with the protection of their people. They regarded their subjects' wives as their own mothers, and their subjects' children as their very own. The people, too, looked upon a neighbor's property as if it were mere lumps of clay, and with devotion to the Law, kept to the path of righteousness. There were then no liars, none who were selfish, foolish or evil-minded. All were of good heart and of ever-blissful mind. Land then yielded in plenty all kinds of grain, clouds showered seasonable rain, cows

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A. Avalon. trans., *Tantra of the Great Liberation,* Dover Publications, N.Y., 1972, pp. 6-10. Translation slightly abridged.

gave abundant milk, and trees were weighted down with fruit. No untimely death there was, no famine, no sickness. Men were ever cheerful, prosperous and healthy and endowed with all qualities of beauty and brillance. Women were chaste and devoted to their husbands. The four castes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants) and Sudras (servants)—kept to and followed the Law, customs and sacrifices of their respective classes. Each attained final liberation.

In contrast to this ideal age—India's parallel to a Garden of Eden—is the complete depravity of the final stage. Now the sinful Kali Age is upon us, when the Law is destroyed by evil customs and deception. The *Vedas* have lost their power, holy traditions are forgotten, and many of the *Puranas* which show the ways leading to salvation will be destroyed. Men will become averse to religious rites, maddened with pride and ever given over to sinful acts. Those in the upper classes will act and live like servants. Brahmins will be greedy, and averse to all austerities. They will be heretics and imposters—yet think themselves wise. Without faith or devotion they will recite scriptural texts and conduct worship with no other end than to dupe the people. The only sign that they are Brahmins will be the sacred thread they wear. Observing no rule in eating or drinking, scoffing at the Law, no thought of pious speech ever entering their minds, they will be just bent on injury. When such evils befall mankind, the End is at hand.

At first glance, this Hindu conception may look something like the Zoroastrian eschatology of Iran or the Jewish-Christian apocalyptic viewpoint. Actually, even if the Aryan invaders of India were blood brothers of the Aryan colonizers of ancient Persia and early Greece, the differences are far greater than the similarities. Parsi apocalyptic and its Jewish-Christian derivatives preach a gospel of hope looking forward to a kingdom of God on this earth. The traditional Hindu philosophy of history is designed to make men lose faith and despair of any cure for this world. Our age is destined to worsen, no matter how hard we work or how valiant our efforts at social reform. We are trapped in a vast cosmic cycle of repeated creations, inevitable decline, predestined dissolution.

There is not much purpose in works: for in Brahma's century-long life each day spans over four billion human years. [2]

Despite this attitude however, two factors tended to mitigate such fatalism—a new interpretation of the avatar and the rise of Indian nationalism. Both grew out of the age-old Indian heritage and worked to bring an awareness of the positive value in the world and history.

At the close of the 15th century, the coming of Chaitanya caused the avatar concept to be given a new interpretation in certain quarters. While the older Hindu cosmology was built upon the pessimistic feeling that man lives in the Kali age, a time of increasing evil and inevitable doom, the Vishnaiva theologians implied that when social conditions get bad enough, Vishnu (or Krishna) becomes incarnate to redeem mankind. Chaitanya was and is still revered as an incarnation of Krishna. Coming at a time when Hinduism in Bengal was at such a low ebb that men worshipped snakes, tigers and illicit sex, he was commissioned to revive true worship.

In a similar way, though on not as wide a scale, Ramakrishna in the 19th century was hailed as a revelation of God in human flesh. [3] At that time many British-educated Indians were losing their faith because of the influence of Darwin and other agnostic scientists. Ramakrishna was said to have appeared to verify the reality of God and the value of Hinduism. In the twentieth century Gandhi and Aurobindo were considered by some to have played analogous roles to Ramakrishna and Chaitanya; both, however, denied divinity or special status. While some wanted to erect temples to him, Gandhi never claimed to have been more than a truth-seeker. Aurobindo considered himself only a poet, politician and writer, but thought of his European-born wife, called "the Mother" by disciples, as the manifestation of the divine process

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Albert Schweitzer has interpreted the whole history of Hindu philosophy from the standpoint of the conflict between life negation and life affirmation, *Indian Thought and Its Development,* Henry Holt, N.Y., 1936, pp. 1-18, 250-265.

[3] By a famous Brahmin nun, two noted Hindu theologians and his disciple Vivekananda. Cf. Solange Lemaitre, *Ramakrishna and the Vitality of Hinduism,* Funk and Wagnalls, N.Y., 1969, pp. 79-84.

for this age.'

Indian nationalism—like Arab nationalism in the Middle East—serves as an antidote for pessimism, fatalism and other-worldliness. Independence for India came to be viewed as a religious crusade. Hindus particularly found it exhilarating to think of themselves as special instruments of divine destiny. Their cry "Victory to Mother India!" from the 1930's on gave them a sense of mission. History suddenly assumed importance in their eyes. History became a challenge to achieve national liberation and fulfillment. Aurobindo called upon his countrymen to dedicate themselves to Mother India, a goddess worthy of their highest worship.

Nationalism has been one of the most widespread faiths of the modern world—a pseudo-religion possibly, but one to which large numbers of people have dedicated their lives. Because of its Hindu heritage, Indian nationalism has been somewhat distinctive. Unlike the Europeans and the Japanese, the Indians have stressed the value of cultural variety. The republic of India contains over 500 million people speaking about fifteen distinct languages. Under British rule in the vast land there were over six hundred semi-independent principalities and states. Nevertheless, though the people in free India were held together by neither language nor force, the nation has enjoyed a stable administration. According to Radhakrishnan, the stabilizing factor has been Hinduism. Because of its traditional tolerance, it has remained the faith of eighty-five per cent of the population, and is broadminded enough to embrace the other faiths.

Indians believe that this Hindu broadmindedness would be of immeasurable value for the world at large. In foreign policy, the Indian Republic has tried to steer a middle course between the Communist world and the free world. Nehru was an ardent exponent of the Third World idea and India has often been the spokesman for non-aligned nations. During decades of the Cold War

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R. McDermott, ed., *The Essential Aurohindo,* Schocken Books, N.Y., 1973, p. 16. Aurobindo (1872-1950) became the leader of the extremist wing of the Indian nationalists, then retired to an ashram to study, lecture and write from 1910 until his death.

between America and the Soviet Union, Hindus like Radhakrishnan have preached: "In such dark periods when tragedy beckons us all, only free spirits who own world loyalty can lead us out. A new creative phase of living should start with meetings of minds. We should own that we are responsible for the state of the world. Men and women of the different sovereign independent states of the world should be trained to live as citizens of the world and in cases of conflict between national interests and those of the international community, should prefer the latter to the former. The present world is the raw material of the world to be." [5]

The Avatar: Hinduism's Christ

Aldous Huxley, who—besides being a novelist and social critic—was a Vedanta enthusiast, believed that mankind has developed a "Perennial Philosophy." Though this philosophy is expressed by Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus in different ways, each religion incorporates the doctrine that God is incarnated in human form. For this British writer there is a basic similarity between the Christian doctrine of the incarnate Christ and the Hindu idea of the avatar. Both represent a descent and manifestation of God in human flesh.

There is no mention of this idea-in the early Vedic hymns of the Aryan conquerors and it plays no part in the mystical monism of the *Upanishads.* But by the time of the epic *Mahabharata,* belief that Vishnu appeared in material form more than once was part of popular Hinduism. The only debatable point from that period on was whether devotees of Vishnu recognized ten, twenty-two or even more avatars of the protective god. Basing their faith on a variety of sacred texts the Vishnaivas claimed that their favorite deity came to earth in the form of both animals and men. Vishnu was supposed to have lived as a swan, tortoise, fish, boar, half-lion, half-man, and a dwarf. He also incarnated as Rama, the princely hero of the *Ramayana,* and Krishna, the dark-skinned lover of Indian cow-girls. They also believed Vishnu would reap-

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S. Radhakrishnan, *Our Heritage,* Hind Pocket Books, Delhi. 1973, pp. 155-156.

pear at the end of our age as the cosmic judge Kalki. [6]

The Hindu faith in the avatar to come is of particular interest to eschatologically-minded Christians. According to the *Mahabharata,* Kalki will appear during the troubles which are to take place immediately before the end of our world. Born a Brahmin he will openly glorify Vishnu. Prior to ushering in a new age, he will destroy all evil; riding a white horse and brandishing a flaming sword, he will destroy thieves and foreigners. Public order will be restored and peace on earth will ensue. Having thus proved his ability to rule, Kalki will formally declare himself king of kings and perform the horse sacrifice expected of an emperor. Then he will give the whole earth to the Brahmins and retire to the forest to show the superiority of the contemplative life. Inspired by the presence of the avatar, men will imitate him.'

After a careful study of Indian religion, one contemporary Christian theologian found twelve basic characteristics in the avatar doctrines: I) in Hindu belief the avatar is real, a visible and fleshly descent of the divine to the terrestrial plane; 2) the human avatars are born in various ways but always through human parents; 3) their lives mingle divine and human qualities; 4) the avatars finally die; 5) there may be a historical basis for some of the Hindu avatars—Rama, Krishna, Chaitanya, Ramakrishna, for example; 6) avatars are repeated: one appears whenever there is a catastrophic decline in righteousness; 7) one avatar differs from another in character, temperament and worth; 8) each comes with work to do: the restoration of harmony in human society and universe; 9) avatars are not world-renouncing, and constantly advocate the importance of action rather than contemplation alone; 10) avatars for Hindus provide "special revelation" as the self-manifestation of Godhead; 1 1) they reveal a personal rather than impersonal God; 12) avatars prove the existence of a God of grace, in Hindu eyes; as Ramanuja insisted, a man cannot maintain his existence without God and God cannot maintain Himself without

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[6] Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation,* Barnes & Noble, N.Y., 1970, pp. 19-27. The analogies to the Old Testament prophecies are obvious. For details on Kalki, see E. Abegg, *Der Messiasglaube in Indien and Iran,* 1928, pp. 40ff., 138ff.

man. [8]

This theologian then concluded: "The Avatars of Hinduism lead up to Christ and they are valuable preparations for him. More easily than Jews or Greeks, Indians can understand the coming of God in human form. Yet this very ease has great dangers, and the casual way in which many modern Hindus consider Christ as just another Avatar deprives him of significance and challenge."

Ramakrishna taught that the saviors of humanity are those who see God and are so anxious to share their happiness of divine vision that they voluntarily undergo the troubles of rebirth in order to lead a struggling humanity to its goal. An avatar serves as a human messenger of God, like the viceroy of a mighty monarch. When there is a disturbance in some distant province, the king sends his representative to quell it; likewise, when religion wanes in any part of the world, God sends His avatar to guard it. In such a way Christ, Krishna, Buddha, Chaitanya, etc. were incarnations of God, that is, extraordinary human beings who were entrusted with a divine commission."

Gandhi held a slightly more critical view of Jesus. It was more than he could believe, he confessed, that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God or that one could go to heaven only by becoming a Christian. If God could have sons, all men were His sons. If Jesus was like God, then all of us are like God. He could not accept literally the notion that Jesus redeemed the world by his blood. He denied that Jesus was the most perfect man ever born and even as a martyr was surpassed by some Hindus. Rather than expecting India to develop one religion, wholly Christian, wholly Muslim or wholly Hindu, he wanted his nation to be widely tolerant with different faiths working side by side." Because Hindus believe in many avatars instead of a single incarnation, they feel their faith makes them far less bigoted than Christians.

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[8] Parrinder, *Ibid,* pp. 120-127.

Ibid. p. 277.

[10] Swami Akhilananda, "Hindu View of Christ", David W. McKain, ed., *Christianity: Some non-Christian Appraisals,* McGraw-Hill, N.Y., 1964, pp. 39, 41.

" D.W. McKain, ed., *Ibid,* pp. 75.76, 90.

Krishna Consciousness

Until the youth revolution of the 1960's Hinduism in Europe and America was almost exclusively taught by disciples of the Vedanta, the impersonal monistic pantheism of Shankara. Since that time the personalistic theism associated with the Hare Krishna sect has received an equal hearing. Consequently, the phrase "Krishna consciousness" merits brief consideration.

Swami Prabhupada arrived in New York in 1965, sat under a tree in Tompkins Park on the Lower East Side and began chanting the names of Krishna. Naturally, he attracted attention. Hippies in particular were fascinated. This man, born in 1896, had graduated from the University of Calcutta with majors in English, philosophy and economics. Until his retirement in 1954 he was employed as manager of a chemical firm.

As early as 1922 he had become a devotee of bhakti worship based on the Chaitanya revival .[12] A few years before, a former professor of mathematics and astronomy had founded a Krishna consciousness school which established over sixty centers in India. Prabhupada joined this group, became one of its leaders and was commissioned to carry Chaitanya's message to the West. In 1959 he became a monk, separating from his wife and family, in order to devote all his energy to Krishna worship.

The first Hare Krishna center opened **in** New York in 1966; a second was begun in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district the following year. By 1974 the International Society for Krishna Consciousness had sixty-eight centers, twenty-eight of them in the United States. At present ISKCON has temples in four African countries, eight Latin American nations, as well as centers in Asia and Australia. An unusual percentage of American converts come from Catholic and Jewish backgrounds. Among its friends should be mentioned the Jewish poet Allen Ginsberg, whose poem "Howl" was once considered a manifesto of the counter-culture.'[3]

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[12] For information on Chaitanya (b. 1486), see M.T. Kennedy, *The Chaitanya Movement,* Association Press, Calcutta, 1925, pp. 13-59.

[13] J. Stillson Judah, *Hare Krishna and the Counterculture,* John Wiley & Sons, N.Y., 1974—a thorough and generally sympathetic study.

According to ISKCON, Krishna consciousness means that we can come to a state of unending, blissful consciousness in this lifetime. We are not bodies but souls, parts and parcels of God (Krishna). All of us are brothers, and Krishna is ultimately our father. Krishna is the all-knowing, omnipresent and all-attractive personality of Godhead: He is the father of all living beings, and the sustaining energy of the entire creation. Some of their further tenets include the beliefs that absolute Truth is contained in the *Vedas,* whose essence is found in the *Bhagavad-Gita;* we should learn Vedic knowledge from a genuine spiritual master; we should perform all our actions as offerings to Krishna and do nothing for our own sense gratification. And finally, and most centrally, ISKCON gives the recommended means for achieving the mature stage of love of God in this age of Kali, or quarrel: chant the holy names of the Lord: "Hare Krishna. . .Hare Rama. . . ."

The Coming Age of the Spirit

Those who criticize Hinduism for being other-worldly, life-negating and blind to the need for social reconstruction probably have never read the books of Aurobindo, one of modern India's two most celebrated philosophers of religion. After winning fame as a nationalist revolutionary, Aurobindo suddenly retired to an ashram at Pondicherry—not because he had abandoned the cause of Indian independence but rather to work out a spiritual philosophy which would give substance to the nation when it won its freedom.

During World War I he published a series of essays explaining his theory about "the psychology of social development."[4] As he saw the situation, man necessarily evolves through three stages. First comes an infra-rational period in which men act principally on the basis of their instincts, impulses and vital intuitions. The society they build is thus primarily the canalization of responses to these needs and crystallized in a variety of social institutions. During this conventional age society tends to fix and formalize a

[4] Printed in book form under the title *The Human Cycle,* Sri Aurobindo Library, N.Y., 1950.

system of rigid hierarchies. Education becomes bound to a traditional and unchangeable form. Authorities claim to be infallible. In later times, it appears to be a "golden age," because of its order, precise social architecture and admirable subordination of all its parts to a general scheme. Hence the Westerner's longing for the Middle Ages or the Hindu's admiration for the Vedic period.

But behind splendid facades such times were harsh ages with hidden evils. For Aurobindo, the medieval period in Europe and the Vedic age in India were stagnating societies floundering in the iron grip of conventionalism. Revolution was thus inevitable.

Revolt against the infra-rational stage produces an age of reason and individualism. Each man uses his reason to judge, destroy and recreate his institutions. The individual asserts his rights to develop himself and fulfill his life according to his own desire. He admits no limit to his liberty except to respect the same rights for others. Each man and nation has the inherent freedom to manage its own affairs—or mismanage them—without interference. This age of reason however inevitably results in a tragic conflict between nationalistic or imperialistic egoism and individual or national liberties. Consequently we witness the birth of a new idea of universalism or collectivism.

And that is where we are now, states Aurobindo. The Age of Reason is visibly drawing to an end. During World War I he predicted the morning light of a new period in the human cycle. The Age of Protestantism, Revolt, Progress and Freedom is in an inescapable process of breakdown. Nevertheless, two ideas produced by the rationalist period cannot be entirely eliminated. First, the future must preserve the democratic right of all persons to full development of their capabilities. Secondly, the individual is of value in himself. He is not merely a member of a pack, hive or ant hill, i.e., as in Fascism/Communism. Each soul requires freedom, space, and initiative—though of course he must learn to accept the collectivity of his fellow-beings.

Aurobindo sees man approaching a third stage of his evolutionary development. We have moved beyond the instinctive to the rational, but must now step higher to the "supermental." Man is at

present ready to develop a spiritual, supra-intellectual, intuitive outlook—"a gnostic consciousness." [15] He must exceed himself, divinize his whole being, become a superman.

Only a spiritualized society can bring about the crucial harmony between individual and communal happiness. Using familiar Christian language, Aurobindo calls for "a new kind of theocracy, the kingdom of God upon earth, a theocracy which shall be the government of mankind by the Divine in the hearts and minds of men." [16] For such a new age the superman must live in the free light of the intellect, and breathe the fresh air of higher ideals. The age to come requires wide intellectual curiosity, a cultivated aesthetic taste and an enlightened will.

Aurobindo carefully distinguished between what he hoped for and the ordinary Christian hope for the coming kingdom. "The trend of the Jewish nation which gave us the severe ethical religion of the Old Testament—crude, conventional and barbarous enough in the Mosaic law, but rising to undeniable heights of moral exaltation when to the Law were added the Prophets, and finally exceeding itself and blossoming into a fine flower of spirituality in Judaic Christianity—was dominated by the preoccupation of a terrestrial and ethical righteousness and the promised rewards of right worship and right doing, but innocent of science and philosophy, careless of knowledge, indifferent to beauty." [17] A better symbol for the age of the superman is found in Hindu sacred literature.While in the age of Power, Vishnu descends as king and in the age of Balance, as the legislator or codifier of moral laws, in the final age—that of Truth—he comes as the Master of works manifest in the hearts of his creatures. Such is the kingdom to come, as we are beginning to see, when we find God not in a distant heaven but within ourselves and our society." Or as Aurobindo's widow put it in 1956, the manifestation of divinity (the Supramental) is no longer a promise, but a verifiable fact. Not only

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Aurobindo, *Ibid.* p. 206.

[16] *Ibid,* p. 204.

[17] Aurobindo, *Ibid,* p. 103. For this insight he confessed his indebtedness to Matthew Arnold, a leader of the Anglican Broad Church movement in the 19th century.

[18] *Ibid.* pp. 284-285.

is it at work here, but the day will come when even the most blind and unwilling will be obliged to recognize it."

-- Robert A. McDermott, *The Essential Aurobindo,* Schocken Books. N.Y., 1973, p. 237.

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