The Crisis of Hinduism[1]

By

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TODAY there is no *living* Hindu society in India. The process of the decay of Hindu society and religion (which must be distinguished from Hindu spirituality) began very long ago. It reached a decisive phase during India's encounter with Islam and continued in a different form throughout the comparatively brief but radically significant period of British rule. It has taken yet another form in independent India. So far, I have seen no signs of a genuine renewal. And the future is dark; more so because our vision is obscured by a false light.

Was there not a renaissance of Hinduism during the early British period? And right now, do we not see in India a violent attempt to revive Hinduism? Has India not been passing through a new wave of Hindu nationalism that signifies a reinforcement of counter-secular forces in Indian politics? Has there not been in recent years a noticeable set-back in the modernizing processes, and does it not indirectly strengthen Hinduism? And above all, is not Hinduism showing, once again, its unique strength to meet the new challenges of secularism and modernization?

At the level of facts, the answer to all these questions is broadly in the affirmative; and at that level, there is a certain obvious persuasiveness about it. But this in no way compromises the truth of the statement that there is no *living* Hindu society in contemporary India, even though the Hindu tradition is not decayed or dead.

What instinct is to the animal order (which is passive and non-self-conscious), tradition is to the human (which is active and self-conscious). Man too has instincts, but unlike animals, he cannot live by them alone. Tradition, then, is that by which man, *qua* man, lives.

This presupposes the definition of man. Man cannot define man without falling into contradiction. So man is the being who cannot define himself and yet who, by virtue of his self-consciousness, cannot live without seeking self-definition; in other words, without yearning for self-knowledge. This yearning, this search, implies his finitude; the contradiction of its fulfillment, his infinity. The tension between finitude and infinity is man's existence. Tradition enables him to cope with (not resolve or eliminate) this radical tension. To lose (or reject) tradition is to be sick in the soul.

Since man as man cannot live without tradition, the existence and continuity of tradition is simply the reality of human existence. However, since tradition is concerned with man's transcendent destiny, it is greater than, and prior to, man. (Hence no merely anthropological and sociological theory of tradition can be adequate). But man ultimately has to transcend all hence he is more than tradition. Man himself lives between temporal realities and a temporal meaning: he cannot be identified with either of them. Tradition, as the mediator between time and eternity, duplicates this Janus-like quality of man. Thus the relation of Man and Tradition is one of synonymy but without mutual reducibility.

As symbolic system Tradition points to the Transcendent, the Absolute, the Unmanifest; in a dialectical identification with the symbolized, it is, therefore, primordial, a-historical; hence perennial and universal. As a mediator, it is a specific formulation of transcendent or supra-temporal truth. A formulated tradition, though always pointing beyond itself, exists in time and space, and has a history. The Hindu tradition is one of the earliest formulations of the Primordial Tradition. There are other formulations: Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam and the Far Eastern and Near Eastern ancient traditions.

The Hindu tradition, though a modality of the Primordial Tradition, is intended to be complete and universal. (This does not exclude other modalities of the Primordial Tradition—say, Judaism, Christianity or Islam—from being universal and complete in their own way. This point cannot be elucidated here, but it is important to mention it).

In virtue of its universality and completeness, the Hindu tradition provides for man a whole way of life grounded in a theory of cosmic history, worked out in all necessary detail. A "sacred" science of society and history thus becomes a necessary aspect of the Hindu tradition. This is not true, for instance, of the Buddhist tradition, in which a social order is presupposed rather than derived from its first principles. "Why have I taught you nothing about the world? Because that would be in no way useful to you for deliverance". (A saying of the Buddha).

Thus to be a Hindu is to participate wholeheartedly, in the prescribed manner and at the prescribed level, in a social order based on, and functioning in accordance with, the "Sacred" Sociology. The progress of the Hindu towards his ultimate goal, *Mukti*, the authenticity (or meaningfulness) of his life, is thus a function jointly and integrally of the participant's sincerity and the conformity of the social order to traditional principles (sacred sociology). Any antithesis of the two, though not excluded empirically, is theoretically ruled out. It follows that one has no way of being a Hindu—in fact, of leading an authentic human life—if there is no traditional (sacred, normal) society in which one can participate.

There is one important exception to this. Besides the religio-social mode of the Hindu tradition, there is another, the intellectual-spiritual. The intellectual-spiritual mode of the Hindu tradition is basically a *Sadhana* (spiritual exercise). It is the effort to realize directly the ultimate Transcendence, the supreme identity of the individual and the Absolute. This, in the *last* analysis, is not a matter of doing anything or of participating in a traditional social order. One can realize the supreme Self-knowledge whatever one's situation. The whole question is one of cultivating purity of mind.

One can try to do this by stepping out of the social order and joining a monastic order which, theoretically, can exist within any kind of society and yet preserve its integrity; or by cultivating inner detachment in a degree that enables one to remain completely unaffected by one's participation in the socio-cultural system. A high level of detachment is, in fact, also required in the case of the monastic option when it is not an integral part of the dominant world-view of one's times.

This exception is an extremely restricted one. For obviously, only those already endowed with superior intellectual-spiritual qualities can follow the direct mystical-intellectual way to Self-realization. Indeed, at this level it is no longer a question of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity or Islam, etc.: it is entirely a question of following the technique of spiritual growth (*Sadhana*) most suited to one's nature (*Svabhava*). A number of different *Sadhanas* have always been available within the historical world of Hinduism, but a Hindu can, quite consistently with tradition, follow a Buddhist, Christian or Islamic technique of interior spiritual-intellectual

growth.

Thus the asocial, personal, spiritual-intellectual mode of Hinduism being available only to extremely few people, it remains true to say that for the vast majority of Hindus the disintegration of the religio-social mode means the absence of all opportunity for an authentic (normal) life.

The distinction between the two modes of the Hindu tradition (the religio-social and the mystical-spiritual-intellectual—or, more simply, Hindu Religion and Hindu Spirituality) is not new; but it has often been misunderstood. In the first place, it is not an evolutionary or developmental distinction: the two modes do not and cannot represent different stages in the historical development of Hinduism. Secondly, they are not equivalent modes: the one cannot replace the other.

It is of the utmost importance to understand the true relationship of the two.

The religio-social and the spiritual-intellectual modes are asymmetrically related: the second is logically independent of the first which is dependent on it (the spiritual-intellectual) both logically and existentially. This implies that the two modes represent two levels which are logically discontinuous but existentially continuous. The contradiction that this involves is internal to the Hindu tradition as a whole and represents a Mystery.

The asymmetrical relationship of the two modes, however, does not imply any relationship of inferiority and superiority insofar as the modes represent discontinuous levels. At the existential level they are hierarchically related: the first leading to the second.

It is in this way that the Hindu tradition in its spiritual-intellectual mode is perennially alive, while in its religio-social mode it is in utter decay today. The death or near-death of Hindu society does not prevent one from becoming a saint, a *Yogi*, a *Siddha;* but it does hinder one from attaining to a meaningful level of life short of actually being a saint.

To understand the contemporary situation of Hinduism, to see the unauthentic nature of the Hindu response to the present challenges and to understand the false consciousness of which the contemporary Hindu is a tragic victim, a backward glance—brief in the extreme—is necessary.

In its encounter with Islam, there were three possible responses for the Hindus:

1. to be converted to Islam *en masse;*

2. to resist Islamic domination relentlessly and unceasingly in the spirit of do or die;

3. to evolve a mode of coexistence with Islam including the effort to create a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam.

The first possibility arises from the a-historical, transcendent nature of the Hindu tradition. Islam too is a modality of the Primordial Tradition. In transferring from the Hindu to the Islamic mode one would still remain within the Tradition. The collective conversion to Islam could be thought of as the contemporary mode of Hindu renewal: by dying as an old and defeated religion it might be reborn as the youngest modality of the Primordial Tradition. (One could picture this as the generalization of the custom the Rajput women developed of putting themselves to death when their kingdom and men were hopelessly defeated and captured. This was interpreted as martyrdom, for suicide is not permitted by Hinduism)[2]

I do not think this possibility ever emerged as an actual option.[3]

The reason for this too is to be discovered in the dialectic of Hindu metaphysics. If all

religious traditions are spiritually equivalent at the highest level, the question of transferring to a tradition other than the one of one's birth does not arise: there can be no logical grounds for such a move. Only exceptionally can there be a true case for religious conversion, namely, when one discovers that the perspective and spiritual resources of another tradition are far better suited to one's nature than those of the tradition of one's birth. How one ascertains the truth of such a discovery—indeed, how one is led to make it in the first place—is not a relevant question in this context.

The point is that, in the nature of the case, the grounds for conversion apply only to individuals: a collective decision to convert to Islam cannot be taken without implying the ultimate superiority of one tradition over another and that is incompatible with the Hindu position. In the historical context, a proposal for collective conversion would have required one to equate the political victory of Islam with the death of Hindu religio-social tradition and the descent of a new modality of the Tradition for the Hindus. It is clear that there was nothing in the historical situation to provide spiritual authority for such a decision that could not but look like a rationalization of political defeat. In the absence of such an authority any such decision would have been unconvincing.

The actual options for the Hindus were therefore only the second and third. Throughout the long history of Muslim domination the Hindus oscillated between these two, leaning naturally quite heavily on the third option in which, however, they eventually did not succeed. With some modifications which I will mention subsequently, the following paragraph well sums up the situation: "The standpoint taken here is the treatment of Muslims by Hindus as merely another caste; the interpenetration of Hindu customary law among Muslims in the villages; the creation of a Hindu-Muslim ruling class by the Mughal emperors with a system of rank in the imperial service and common interest in polo, elephant fighting and common modes of dress; the development of a *lingua franca*, Urdu, combining Hindi grammar with Arabic and Persian vocabulary; the study of Hindu thought by Muslims such as al-Biruni or Abu'l Fazl; the composition of histories in Persian by Hindus; the syncretist religions of Kabir and Guru Nanak— all of these notwithstanding neither educated Muslims nor educated Hindus accepted cultural co-existence as a natural prelude to cultural assimilation.

Thus, long before British rule and long before modern political notions of Muslim nationhood, the consensus of the Muslim community in India had rejected the eclecticism of Akbar and Dara Shikoh in favor of the purified teachings of Shaikh Ahmad of Sirhind and Shah Wali-Ullah. Cultural apartheid was the dominant ideal in mediaeval Muslim India in default of cultural victory".[4]

It is obviously out of the question to substantiate this thesis here. A few comments however may be in order. First about Kabir and Guru Nanak. Kabir himself was a radical critic of both Hinduism and Islam in their religio-social form: as such he could not be, and was not, interested in sponsoring any religion or sect. He was a master of the Hindu Intellectual Way, having his own system of esoteric *Yogic Sadhana*. There did arise a sect named after him (*Kabir panth*), but that is a different story.

Sikhism, which developed from the teachings of Guru Nanak, could be said to represent a synthesis of Islam and Hinduism; but it is remarkable that in becoming a religion, from its origin as a *Sadhana* (personal way of spiritual realization) it eventually developed into a violent anti-Muslim movement (though not necessarily a pro-Hindu one). In other words, only at the level of esoteric personal realization, the level of saints and aspirants to sainthood, could there be any genuine synthesis or interaction.

The other thing to note is that it was not *cultural* but *religious* apartheid that was the dominant ideal in India under Muslim rule. Religious apartheid was the response of the Hindus to their *political* defeat and of the Muslims to their *religious* defeat.[5]

It is important to see why it is truer to say that it was religious and *not* cultural apartheid in Muslim India. Leaving aside the interaction of Islam and Hinduism at the spiritual level (*Vedanta* and *Sufism*, Kabir, etc.), all efforts toward synthesis were, as the cited passage briefly indicates, in the socio-cultural sphere. This was the inevitable consequence of the Hindu acceptance of Islam as the sovereign political power while rejecting it as a religion. This acceptance involved the active collaboration of the Hindus with the Muslims in the political and economic spheres, and in this process it was just too hard, if not impossible, for the Hindu not to accept and adopt a large measure of Muslim culture.

What is deeply disturbing and of far-reaching consequence is that this process of "cultural interaction" between two different and exclusive traditions introduces into the Hindu world an idea which is completely foreign and unintelligible to both the Islamic and the Hindu tradition, namely, the idea of an autonomous culture i.e. patterns of thought and behavior which are unrelated to the religious and spiritual belief systems. In other words, since in both the Hindu and Islamic traditions culture cannot be independent of religion nor of the Intellectual-Spiritual tradition, Hindu adoptions from the Muslim world, given religious exclusivism, would imply precisely the introduction of meaninglessness into Hindu life, the existential expression of which is a lie in the Soul.

Both Hinduism and Islam being total systems, all efforts at developing a mode of co-existence involved serious and far-reaching loss. The Hindu tradition does not allow any dichotomy between the inner and the outer life: it closes the gap by making both the inner and the outer different but equivalent expressions of the Transcendent—beyond time and space. In its encounter with Islam, this unity was disrupted with the development of the *Bhakti* tradition (devotionalism) and the so-called social reform and humanist movements associated with it.

The *Bhakti* movement was essentially asocial and emphasized the cultivation of an inward emotional life dedicated to one's God or deity. It thus opened to every Hindu the possibility of seeking an authentic existence, of following a direct path to Self-realization, independently of his society but without renouncing it. Thus it authorized a gap between the inner and outer life which the saint transcends by the high level of his inward detachment; but the ordinary man cannot do so and therefore has to mask it by a kind of structural self-deception. In effect, the *Bhakti* movement allowed a general personalization of the tradition, such as the Hindu tradition permits only at a high spiritual level, and, by implication, to a small minority alone. Thus for the majority *Bhakti* strongly encourages the privatization of religion, which, in the Hindu theory, is a contradiction in terms and necessarily leads to falsification of consciousness itself.

The *Bhakti* movement, it is true, did generate social criticism; it was against the caste-system and untouchability. But in this, as well as in other "humanistic" and "progressive" ideas that can be found in the movement, one can see the beginning of the tragic confusion between Hindu spirituality and Hindu religio-social tradition which persists up till now. If the institutional forms of Hinduism were outworn and stood in need of reform, the task for mediaeval leaders was to formulate and fight for a whole new social system which would be the contemporary application of the traditional Hindu sociology. In the absence of this, the *Bhakti* movement, in spite of its social criticism, remained asocial.

Thus Tulsidas (1532-1623) whose *Ramayana* is read and venerated almost as scripture by the

Hindus, could be an uncompromising supporter of the *Varna* system (caste) and yet sanction, even glorify, its non-observance on the part of the *Bhaktas* (devotees). Such an inconsistency is too important to be ignored even by a great poet. Clearly Tulsidas thought that the norms for the *Bhaktas* operated at an asocial level. The *Bhakti* movement gave us a new form of Hindu spirituality which was accessible to all. But since the two modes of the Hindu tradition are at two different levels and so are not mutually substitutable, this universalization of Hindu spirituality tended only to sanctify and thus mask the disintegration and even the perversion of the Hindu religio-social tradition.

The other side of the process that sustained the *Bhakti* movement was fanaticism and formalism expressed internally by the growth of sectarianism, cultism, empty and rigid ritualism and resultant intolerance and persecution, and, externally, by violent waves of anti-Muslim activity.

Was this lie in the Hindu's soul, this falsification of his consciousness, an unavoidable consequence of Hinduism's encounter with Islam? I do not know.

As Islamic rule moved towards its decline, the Hindus, spiritually enfeebled but unreconciled, made persistent efforts to regain their political sovereignty in the name of restoring Hinduism. By this time, it was no longer a straight contest: European powers and Christianity had entered the scene. After a century of confusion and struggle the British succeeded in establishing their rule over the whole of India. It was a complete defeat for both Hindus and Muslims.

Both now faced common challenges: Christianity, foreign rule, *modern* Western civilization. I will refer here to the Hindu response alone.

The option of mass conversion, which in one sense was open to the Hindus in the case of Islam, was *not* open to them in the case of Christianity. If all the Hindus had become Christians they would still be confronting the most radical challenge of a "rationalistic" scientific, humanist, technological, industrial, secular world-outlook of which India's newest conquerors were the carriers. For the Hindus, therefore, British rule presented three distinguishable challenges even though overlapping and often confused: Foreign rule, Christianity, Modernism and Secularism.

The response to foreign rule eventually developed as a straight opposition up to the point of do or die. But it cannot be discussed here for want of space even though it was an important factor in the development of the responses to the other two challenges.

The basic principle of the Hindu response to the challenges of Christianity and modernism (and secularism) may be called the *Nilkantha* syndrome. It is assimilation, synthesis, harmonious co-existence; this was the strategy the Hindus had *unsuccessfully* used earlier in their encounter with Islam. This period (1800-1947) has usually been regarded as a vital and creative period. It has been generally called the Renaissance of Hinduism. However, the fact that no advance was made beyond the untenable idea of assimilation and synthesis shows how deeply the Hindu consciousness had been falsified.

One of the first movements of the "renaissance" of Hinduism was the *Brahma Samaj* (1828), an underlying idea of this movement being that a reformed Hinduism could assimilate Christianity; or in any case, that a synthesis of Hinduism and Christianity could be created. In spite of a number of Hindu features (including caste consciousness) being present in the ways of thought and life of the Indian Christians, it was and remains unrealistic to think in terms of absorbing Christianity into Hinduism.

There are at least two related doctrines that will always prevent this: one, the doctrine of

Jesus Christ as the Savior; and two, the world-historical and missionary nature of Christianity. Hinduism can make an idol of Jesus Christ; this will be a misunderstanding of the Christian tradition. Alternatively, it can understand him as a symbol (an iconic symbol)[6], or else it can accept him as an *Avatar*. Neither of these modes of understanding Christ will be acceptable to Christianity (except, perhaps, to the mystical tradition; this, however, is not the level in question here).

But whatever the validity of these interpretations, the very fact of understanding Christ through Hindu categories makes Christianity a sect within Hinduism and this seriously compromises the world-historical mission of Christianity. Moreover, the dialectic of Hindu categories blunts the uniqueness of Christ and hence will always be resisted by Christianity.

In the whole religio-social development of the 19th and 20th centuries the impact of Christianity is clearly discernible. But it is equally clear that Christianity cannot absorb or replace Hinduism, for the same reasons as make it impossible for Hinduism to absorb or replace Christianity. It is significant in this context to note that the *Brahma Samaj* and its offshoot *Deva Samaj*, which are the earliest religious movements responding to strong Christian and Western impact, became more and more heretical and non-Christian as they moved more and more towards Christianity.

Both Keshab Sen (of the *Brahma Samaj*) and S. N. Agnihotri (founder of the *Deva Samaj*) set themselves up as new Christs, as the bearers of new post-Christian revelations. It is true that Keshab Sen was not consistent in this; if he said, "If Christ was the center of his Dispensation, am I not the center of this?", he also said in the same lecture, "No, a prophet's crown sits not on my head. My place is at Jesus' feet". And, according to a testimony quoted by Farquhar, on his deathbed he prayed: "Buddher Ma, Sakyer Ma, Nirban dao". (Mother of the Buddha, Mother of the Sakyas, grant me Nirvana)[7] But this precisely illustrates my central point, namely that the meaninglessness which entered Hindu life through the Islamic encounter only deepened during the Western encounter. As Keshab moved farther from the tradition of his birth, he failed to find roots anywhere else.

The other, and perhaps more important, aspect of the "renaissance" of Hinduism was a continuing movement towards reform of Hindu customs and institutions. From Raja Rammohan Roy and the *Brahma Samaj* through the *Arya Samaj*, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Indian National Social Reform Conference, the All-India Women's Conference, the Depressed Classes League, the *Jat Pat Torak Mandai*, Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress and many other men and organizations, down to the present day when it has been taken over by the Indian State, one can see social reform as a powerful element in the Hindu response to the Western challenge.

Christianity was only one, and perhaps not a major, source and inspiration for this movement. It was inspired very much by eighteenth and nineteenth century rationalistic and humanistic thought in England and Europe. A large part of this thought (and the values it espoused) was non-Christian, some of it even anti-Christian. Raja Rammohan Roy denied the divinity of Jesus Christ and, in general, did not accept a specifically Christian foundation for his ethical system.

He definitely sought the foundation of all the new ethical and social ideas in ancient Hindu thought. And whatever the immediate sources and contexts for social reforms, their ultimate legitimation was always sought in the Hindu tradition, however reinterpreted.

The other important source and context for all these reform movements was the Indian Freedom movement. A number of leading figures in the social reform movement, Rammohan

Roy, Lala Lajpat Rai and other *Arya Samaj* leaders—Gokhle, Kelkkar, Gandhi—were also leaders of the freedom movement and realized that in order to unify and strengthen Hindu society, as also to give people a strong sense of self-respect and identity, certain major reforms in customs, habits of thought and institutions were imperative. A dynamic interpretation of *Karma*, reform or abolition of caste and untouchability, advancement of women's education and of their social status, development of social activism and the missionary spirit, were often seen more as conditions and requirements of success in the struggle for freedom than as a religio-social concern.

This political and defensive (rather than creative) character of Hindu social reform was reinforced by the fact that whatever its true source, its context was one of subjugation by an alien power claiming legitimacy in terms of the socio-cultural superiority of the modern West and, unofficially, in terms of religious superiority as well.

If the Hindus (in fact, the Indians) had accepted this theory of Western domination, there could have been no demand for freedom: the Western rulers would grant the Indians independence when they would be fit for it; that is, when they would be sufficiently civilized. And what does "sufficiently civilized" mean? Does it mean `better' Hindus and Muslims? Does it mean superior Indians? Does it mean Christianized Indians? Does it mean Indians anglicized? If the theorists of Western imperialism, old and new, ever had *a coherent* answer to these questions, I am unaware of it.

Whatever the imperial answer to these questions, Colonial India had to face them, for even though the majority of Indians never accepted the "civilizing mission" theory of British Rule, they, as a subject people, had to prove their "freedom-worthiness" as part of the legitimization of the independence struggle. And to make the freedom struggle stronger this proof had to be given largely in terms of the West's own standards. But this involved a separation of culture and society from religion, which led to a concept of social reform as distinguished from religious reform. In other words, the history of Hindu response from Rammohan Roy to Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave, and the present day Hindu revivalisms (the Jana Sangh, the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh and Anti-Cow slaughter movements) centers once again on one key issue: is the separation of society and culture from Tradition compatible with Hinduism?

It would seem that broadly the answer of reformists and revolutionists is, yes, and that of revivalists, no. But this division is far less clear-cut than it looks: in fact, notwithstanding important differences, there is a unity in their responses.

A very early revivalist movement was the *Arya Samaj* (*1875*) founded about fifty years after the Brahma Samaj. It was both reformist and revivalist. It successfully sponsored a number of important social changes; it was against the existing system of caste. However, in all this it claimed to have gone back to the traditional form: the Vedic Society; it did not want any change as such. And yet the existing society in India was not Vedic, but one that was heavily menaced by the forces of modern Western civilization. A consistent revivalist theory of the *Arya Samaj* type can hardly stop at piecemeal reforms, it requires a complete rejection of modern Western civilization (whatever that may mean).

But the *Arya Samaj* in practice took a different view. It stuck to the doctrine that the Vedas contain all possible human knowledge.[8] So all modern science and technology, indeed, all knowledge in any sphere past, present or future must be in the Vedas and one can, by going back to their study and practice, become even more modern than the modern West: even more advanced scientifically and technologically. For the Arya Samaj therefore the question of adjustment to the West, as also the resultant problem of separating religion from society and

culture, does not arise. When India regains the full possession of its Vedic heritage it will replace the West completely. Society will be inseparable from Vedic religion, but it will be, by the same token, scientific-technological, industrially and politically advanced. In a book, published in 1965, Nirad C. Chaudhry offers a variant of this theory.[9] Modern Indians, he says, are ancient European Aryans, Let us take possession of our true inheritance and thus eliminate the problem of meeting the Western Challenge: we are the original West!

There were other movements and organizations which differed from or opposed the *Arya Samaj*, the Theosophical Society, the *Bharat Dhama Mahamandal*, the *Sanatan Dharma Sabha*, the *Shuddhi League*, the *Hindu Mahasabha*, the *Ram Rajya Parishad*, the *Jana Sangha*, the *Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh* and others. They, in the main, differed in defending the whole, or nearly the whole of Hindu historical tradition and not just the Vedic. Thus some of these organizations have been opposed to most of the social reforms proposed or legislated. They do believe in the inseparability of Hindu society from Hindu religion, but either do not consider the Western challenge of modernization (secularization and industrialization) really serious or believe in Hinduism's capacity to assimilate it.

The reformist group from Roy to Vivekanand and the contemporary Indian State answer the question of separation of religion and society in terms of synthesis, Indian society will be an Indian version of the modern Western one; in fact, it will be one far better equipped since it can and will represent a synthesis of the best in Hinduism, Islam, Christianity (and, of course, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikkhism, and other religions) and the best in the modern scientific, secular, humanist world-view. The great exponent of this view is the former President of India, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan.

Mahatma Gandhi stands apart. He believed in the Hindu tradition; he believed in the equality of all religions; he believed in and sponsored, often successfully, far-reaching changes in the customs, beliefs, thinking, attitudes, and institutions of Hindu society; at the same time he did not believe in the modern secular, technological-industrial society and culture, and though he could see certain valuable things in modern civilization, he clearly did not believe in any real synthesis between tradition and modernism; on the other hand, he wanted to change radically the modern Western civilization itself.

Vinoba Bhave, who is generally regarded as Gandhi's successor, is the leader of the Gandhian *Sarvodaya* movement. He also believes in Hinduism, the unity of all religions and a simple non-technological society. But his attitude to Western science, technology and secular humanism is quite different from that of Gandhi. In his own way he does seem to believe in a synthesis of tradition and modernity, between traditional metaphysics and modern science and technology, between the Hindu and other religions as also between secularism and Hinduism.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Aurobindo Ghosh and Ramana Maharshi have remained unmentioned so far. Though Ramakrishna Paramahansa by implication authorized Swami Vivekananda's world-historical mission of Hindu revival, he himself remained occupied with personal realization in the spiritual-mystical mode of the Hindu tradition; and, though one of the most dynamic and effective social action and social work organizations in India bears his name (The Ramakrishna Mission, founded by Swami Vivekanand), he himself often strongly discouraged social work.

Aurobindo Ghosh began as a political leader of India's freedom movement; he withdrew from the movement and retired into an *Asram* as he realized that the spiritual regeneration of India came absolutely before everything else including political freedom. He became a *Yogi* and,

through his writings, a noted interpreter of the Hindu tradition. I have no access to his later thinking, but earlier writings show him as concerned simultaneously with the religio-social and the spiritual modes of the Hindu tradition. He thought he could mediate the descent of the spirit at a collective level and thus a new spiritual social system could be brought into being. In this sense, Aurobindo was deeply concerned with Hindu religion and society even though, apart from his own *Sadhana*, he remained preoccupied only with guiding devotees who were themselves engaged in personal *Sadhana*. The Aurobindo Ashram is now the scene of an educational experiment designed to lay the foundation for a new man and society.

The realization and knowledge of the Self was the sole concern of Ramana Maharshi's life and teaching. He taught people to seek the answer to the question: Who am I? And in this search, the whole meaning of life is to be found. He definitely discouraged any concern with society and history.

Ramakrishna, Aurobindo and Ramana actually embody the perennial spiritual tradition of India "and thus serve as an impressive warning, lest the demands of the soul be forgotten amid the novelties of Western civilization with its materialistic technology and commercial acquisitiveness. The breathless drive for power and aggrandizement in the political, social and intellectual sphere, gnawing at the soul of the Westerner with apparently insatiable greed, is spreading irresistibly in the East and threatens to have incalculable consequences. Not only in India but also in China, too much has already perished where once the soul lived and thrived. The externalization of culture may do away with a great many evils whose removal seems most desirable and beneficial, yet this step forward, as experience shows, is all too dearly paid for with a loss of spiritual culture".[10] The synthesis ideology, or the *Nilkantha* Syndrome which has continued to possess the Hindu consciousness from the days of Muslim and British domination down to the present time, is the Hindu way not only of paying the fatal price for some kind of survival, but also of masking the fact that such a tremendous price is being paid.

The Reform movement started by Rammohan Roy, supported by Vivekanand, and today by the Indian State, has failed to understand that effecting reforms and changes in response to emerging situations carries the danger of slowly undermining the social structure and of reducing it to mere congeries of institutions, often expressing conflicting principles and realities. This is not the way of renewal but of deeper decay.

The reason for this has been the belief that the basic principles of Hinduism are compatible with the ideas, institutions and principles that have to be accepted from the West. But this compatibility has almost always been sought at the level of Hindu spirituality and this is wholly fallacious. Swami Vivekanand felt this from time to time in his heroic career. What he was really interested in was monastic reform: he established a new kind of monastic order. But in order that this may transform the social structure, more than the personal social involvement of spiritual men is required; for, as he knew, there is a discontinuity between the religio-social and the spiritual orders. What Hinduism needed was a new theory of society: a new application of sacred sociology which would be a bridge between religion and spirituality by reflecting the Transcendent in time as the spiritual reflects it atemporally.

Again, contemporary Indian social legislation is not based on any coherent theory of society. The modern ideas that are expressed in these social reforms are shown to be compatible with Hinduism at the level of spirituality, whereas what is required is that they should fit in with a new systematic reinterpretation of traditional Hindu theory. This has not been accomplished.

Though the *Arya Samaj* theoretically eliminates the challenge of modernity, in practice it

assumes, without noticing it, the synthesis ideology. For it does not grapple with the problem of unifying the values of Vedic society with those of the technological society. (We have a similar problem with van Leeuwen's doctrine that technological society is the latest phase of Christianity: technocracy being here regarded as a development from the theocratic Christian cosmology)[11]

The other parties and movements in contemporary India (Jana Sangh, etc.) insofar as they do not ignore it, hold to the synthesis ideology.

If one does not confound the spiritual and the religio-social levels, one can easily see the incompatibility between a Hindu society and the secular technological world-view.

The two are incompatible because the autonomy of society and culture necessarily required by the synthesizing process contradicts the Hindu tradition.

The modern world-view denies the doctrine of *karma*. If contemporary Hinduism too rejects this doctrine in order that Hinduism may not be an obstacle to "modernization", it has to devise or import (from where?) a new metaphysical system as consistent as the traditional metaphysic. Has this been done? Are we even aware of this problem?

The technological society of today is not a random development which has just happened to man and is still happening and to which man simply has to adjust himself. The problem is not to develop another human power to counter, and thus to use and master, man's technological power. Not at all. Technology itself is an expression and product of contemporary man's highest powers. Its gigantic, overwhelming development in modern times is the consequence of asking the proud question: What can I do?, without bothering to ask the absolutely prior, human question: What ought I to do? In technical words, a technological society develops from the rejection of the traditional hierarchical theory of knowledge and the adoption in its place of the modern autotelic (self-sufficient) theory of knowledge. Between these two theories there is no possible synthesis. (This shows up the fallacy of Vinoba Bhave's theory).

Is the modern world-view (secular, humanist, technological) a consistent system? If it is, and if the traditional world view too is a consistent system, can there be a selective synthesis between the two except in terms of a third system? Where is that third system?

If the modern world-view is not a consistent system, what is it to which the Hindu tradition must adjust? Do Hindus today realize that the modern Western world view is already obsolete and itself needs radical renewal?

Contemporary thinkers and religious and political leaders do not, apart from a few exceptions, concern themselves with these questions; the synthesis shibboleth has, by constant repetition, dulled contemporary Hindu sensitivity in this respect. Synthesis is the present form of the meaninglessness and rootlessness towards which Hindus have been moving ever since the Muslim Conquest.

How have we tried to cope with this absence of meaning? By fanaticism; by ritualism; by other forms of sentimental revivalism; by politicization of religious feelings and urges.

The Hindu political parties sense that the real challenge to tradition is constituted by secularism and the technological society. But unwilling to accept this, they obscure the fact by the synthesis ideology and project, instead, Islam and Pakistan as the major threat to contemporary Hinduism. This is a form of our false consciousness. Its dangers cannot be overemphasized. But this self-deception is unavoidable as long as the false hope in the synthesis ideology persists, for it is simply the other side of the untenability of that ideology.

It is not that the Hindu political parties have not opposed secularism. The division of India in 1947 was against the ideology of the *Hindu Mahasabha* and was opposed by it. But the resistance was half-hearted, nor did the *Hindu Mahasabha* or the *Jan Sangh* continue the struggle for a re-united India. One can even say that the Hindus accepted the division of India. Some leaders of the *Jan Sangh* now support secularism on the ground that Hinduism is fundamentally secular in the sense of tolerance for, and equality of, all religions ("*Sarva-dharma-samabhava*"). Early in Independent India, the *Raina Rajya Parishad* (now practically defunct) and other predominantly Hindu parties opposed the Government of India's legislation that introduced fundamental changes in Hindu personal law. But here again the opposition was not sufficiently determined and was not continued after its initial failure.

This continued failure is connected with the fact that the Hindu intellectuals did not develop any systematic theory of society and state which would be traditional and adequate to the needs of the contemporary plural society of India. This non-contemporaneity of the Hindu consciousness also throws light on the fact that a large number of Hindus joined the nationalist freedom movement led by the Indian National Congress without being personally committed to secular nationalism. The point here is not, of course, that commitment to secular nationalism was a precondition for being active in the freedom struggle. That is false. The point is that those (Hindus or Muslims) who were opposed to secular nationalism did not see sharply enough the conflict between the official Congress ideology and their own. Not being clear in their own feelings, attitude and thinking about nationalism and secularism, they could not be effective in prevailing upon the Congress to reject the two-nation theory. The almost sudden acceptance of the two-nation theory on the basis of a religious difference represents the abandonment of the secularist ideal of Indian unity. However, the Hindus who did not accept this theory wholeheartedly nevertheless indirectly contributed to this result because Hindu intellectuals had not worked out a contemporary and traditional form of personal law or of the hierarchical principle of social organization. Thus they lacked and still lack an intellectual basis for resisting the secularization of contemporary society.

And if there cannot be a contemporary institutional form of traditional principles, it is far better, in the last analysis, to accept this and prepare to face the consequences of the secularization of man and society with clear vision and fortitude.

It is this consciousness of a decisive movement of history that is lacking in the Hindus, if not in the entire Indian people. What we find is that loyalty to Hinduism is expressed in fanatical and, therefore, necessarily sentimental forms (agitation and demonstration against Cow-slaughter, anti-Muslimism, anti-Pakistanism, etc.). A fanatic, sentimental approach and a clear-headed, responsible approach are two very different things.

Gandhi was deeply aware of these tremendous problems. He knew the meaninglessness, the despair of the false ideology of synthesis.

He was fully aware of the disastrous forms in which the Hindus were wont to express their betrayal of their tradition. He had not worked out a solution. I do not know if he could have done so. But he was not deceiving himself. Nor us. And he was responsible.

He was shot dead by a Hindu on 30th January 1948, a few months after India gained her independence from the British.

[1] This article, in an earlier form, first appeared in *Convergence, 1969*, and is now published, after revision by the author, with the permission of the editor.

[2] There is scriptural authority for this prohibition:

Supremely important as the ritual death may be in which the sacrificer's final attainment of his immortal goal is prefigured, it is still of utmost importance (as explained in Satapatha Brahmana X 2-6.T. 7-8, where also suicide is expressly condemned) that he should live out his full term of life on earth, for the "hundred years" of his earthly life correspond to the "thousand years" of his heavenly life (the "thousand years" is a round number: "a thousand means everything", *Satapatha Brahman*, passim)."

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: *Svayamatrnna: Janua Coeli* in Zalmoxis II, 1, 1939, p. 9, Paris.

Except as an heuristic aid, it is perhaps misleading to suggest that the total conversion of Hindus to Islam should be pictured as the generalization of the Rajput custom of collective suicide to avoid ignominy and forced conversion. Referring to the eleventh and twelfth Centuries Dr. B. P. Majumdar writes in *Socio-Economic History of Northern India* (Calcutta, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960), pp. 361-66:

Another characteristic feature appears to be the prevalence of the practice of committing suicide, especially amongst the ruling classes. Manu and other Dharamshastras condemn suicide in severest terms.

(Manu, V-89; Para sara IV. 1-2).

But the *Mahabharata* permits one to end one's life at a sacred place like Prithudaka, the holy Himalayas and Prayaga. (Kane, History of Dharamasastra, p. 925).

The Matsya and the Kurma Puranas extolled the merits of sacrificing one's life in holy places. Lakshrnidhara quotes extensively from Matsya Purana and bestows praise upon those who commit suicide by burning themselves at Varanasi or by drowning themselves in the confluence at Prayaga, or by leaping from the hills at Amarkantaka into the Narbada river to drown themselves.

(Tirthavivechana, pp. 21, 138-139, 142-146, 200).

Alberuni also refers to the banyan Tree of Prayaga from which Brahmanas and Kstriyas threw themselves into the Ganges. (Schau: Alberuni's *India:* II, p. 170-171).

He further informs us that persons intending to commit suicide sometimes "hire somebody to drown them in the Ganges keeping them under water until they are dead".

(Schau: *op. cit.*, II, p. 170).

This shows that it may not be correct to interpret *sari* and *jauhar* as acts of martyrdom. They were more likely variations on the idea of suicide as a way of *mukti* (ultimate Deliverance) and thus were a falsification of scriptural doctrine. This and some other mediaeval theories and practices have to be regarded as without traditional authority partly because the authenticity and authority of many of these late *Puranas* and *Smritis* is doubtful, but more essentially because the *Yugadharma* cannot contradict the *Sanatanadharma*.

[3] This is not to say that no efforts in this direction were made at all. Some Sanskrit scholars tried to prove that the Muslim rule was providential for India. The following quotations, which are given only as samples, contain this idea:,

(*a*) One of them, Vijaya Gupta, mentioned above, described Hussain Shah as an ideal king whose subjects enjoy all the blessings of life and compares him to the epic hero Arjuna. Another goes even further and describes the Muslim Sultan, notorious for breaking Hindu temples, as the incarnation of Krishna in the Kali Age.

The Delhi Sultanate The History & Culture of the Indian People, (General Editor, B. Majumdar, R.C. Bombay, 1960), p. 635.

(b) In Bengal the followers of the Dharma cult hailed the conquests of the Muslims. We learn from the *Sunya Purana* and the *Dharma-Puja-Vidhana* that when the Brahmanic people of Maldah began to tax and persecute the Dharmites Lord Niranjana became angry in Vaikuntha (heaven) and revealed himself as the Khuda of the Muslims in the village of Jajpura; he was seated on a horse with a black hat on and with a bow and arrow in his hands, and all the gods and goddesses of the Hindu Pantheon gladly put on the dress of Muslim soldiers and accompanied the Lord. The Lord broke all the temples of the Hindus, plundered, ravaged and persecuted them and saved the Dharmites... Later

works of this sect state that Lord Dharma assumed the Muslim incarnation (*Yavanavatara*).

Buddha Prakash: *Aspects of Indian History and Civilization*, Agra, 1965, pp. 221-22.

However, as these quotations show, even these intellectuals did not advocate an end of the Hindu religion and the collective acceptance of Islam—which indeed would be contrary to the Hindu theory of Avataric function; they wanted only the acceptance of Muslim Rulers, even though they did not oppose the theory that the Muslims were Mlecchas.

[4] de Bary, William Theodore (Ed.): *Sources of Indian Tradition*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 362-63.

[5] From our point of view, the Hindus were defeated both politically and religiously, which means the political and religious victory of the Muslims. If, however, we take the Muslim rulers' religious goal as the conversions of all Hindus to Islam, then the Muslims eventually failed to achieve this.

[6] We cannot go here into the general theory of Symbolism. Briefly, an iconic symbol is one that also is what it represents; for example, a straight line not only represents the shortest distance between two given points, it actually is the shortest distance between the points it connects.

However, the concept of iconic symbol, when interpreted as the identity of the symbolized and the symbol, does give rise to ambiguities and contradictions inseparable from the dialectics of the Absolute and the Manifest.

[7] Farquhar, J. N.: *Modern Religious Movements in India* (1915), Indian Edition, Delhi, (1967), p. *68*.

[8] See Rai, Lajpat: *A History of the Arya Samaj.* Revised Edition (New Delhi, Orient Longmans, 1967), pp. 76, 110, 190, 197.

[9] Chaudhary, Nirad C.: *The Continent of Circe*, (London, Chatto and Windus, 1965).

[10] Jung, C. G.: *Psychology and Religion* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1958), pp. 584-85.

[11] van Leeuwen, Arend, Th.: *Christianity in World History* (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1964).