

# The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society

by

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 1 & 2. (Winter-Spring, 1983).

© World Wisdom, Inc.

[www.studiesincomparativereligion.com](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com)

*Voi nascete con diverso ingegno*<sup>1</sup>  
Dante, Paradiso 13.72

*In Deo conspicimus incommutabilem formam  
justitiae, secundum quam hominem vivere  
oportere judicamus.*<sup>2</sup>  
Augustine, De Trin. 8.9.13

*Man always at war*  
Philo, Conf. 46

*Whoe'er thou art that to this work art born,  
a chosen task thou hast, howe'er the world  
may scorn.*  
Jacob Behmen, Signatura Rerum, V.17

A traditional social order, like that of India, is not a haphazard development but one imitative of a theory or body of principles or values that are understood to have been revealed and of which the truth is taken for granted. Institutions represent an application of metaphysical doctrines to contingent circumstances, and take on a local color accordingly, changing with the times but maintaining throughout a high degree of stability, comparable to that of a living organism in which, by the repeated process of death and rebirth that we call “becoming” or “life”, an existing order preserves a recognizable identity and produces order from order. In traditional society one respects established institutions, and if anything goes wrong one does not assume that it can be put right by institutional revolutions, but only by a change of mind (*metanoia* repentance), leaving the order itself unchanged; “reformation” can only imply what the word itself imports, a *return* to some form from which a deviation has taken place. The monarchist, for example, does not think of increasing the people’s well-being by a substitution of democracy for monarchy, but

---

1. [“That you are born with diverse dispositions”.]

2. [“In God we see the immutable form of justice, according to which man is obliged to live”.]

holds that such a betterment can only be brought about when the King, who may have come to be a tyrant “ruling in his own interest”, remembers his vice-royalty,<sup>3</sup> and that his function is only to enact what the Spiritual Authority advises, and that, as the Book of the Science of Government expressly enunciates, “the whole of this science depends upon the ruler’s own self-control”.<sup>4</sup>

Every established custom has a metaphysical (rather than biological or psychological) *raison d’être*. For example, the whole pattern of marriage is founded upon the natural relations of the sun to the sky, or sky to earth, which is also that of the Spiritual Authority to the Temporal Power. Morality is a matter of correct or “skilful” procedure, and as in the case of art, a matter of *savoir faire*, of knowing what to do, rather than of feeling; and where the cosmic pattern of “good form” is unanimously accepted, public opinion sufficiently controls the whole situation. No one can be convicted of the irrationality of a custom unless his metaphysic can first be shown to be at fault. For example, it is not enough to detest and recoil from war, for if that is all, we are liable to be persuaded by other plausible arguments when the crisis comes: we must ask ourselves whether or not the concept of man as an economically, rather than a spiritually, determined creature with a consequent way of life dependent on world trade, has not made total wars inevitable; whether we have not simply “desired peace, but not the things that make for peace”.<sup>5</sup> Much too often, men of good will are ready to attack an unfamiliar institution, such as the caste system in India or elsewhere, without first asking what are its intentions, or whether these intentions which are the values by which the given society lives and which belong to the essence of its “morale”, are likely to be realized by the new institutions which it is proposed to introduce from outside. In such cases, it is overlooked that the forms of a traditional society make up a closely woven texture that may unravel and become a mere tangle if one of its threads is pulled out, and that styles of music cannot be changed without affecting the whole constitution. It is an illusion to suppose that “better worlds” can be made by combining the “best” in one culture with the “best” in others: considered as means, such “bests” are usually incompatible, and the actual effect of one’s efforts is nearly always to combine the “worst’s”.

---

3. Philo, *De Fuga et Inventione*, III and *De Specialibus Legibus* IV. 164.

4. Kautilya, *Arthashastra* 1.6.

5. “No one looking for peace and quiet has any business talking about international trade” (G. H. Gratton and G. R. Leighton, “The Future of Foreign Trade,” in *Harper’s Magazine*, 1944). “Free enterprise and the market economy mean war” (Harold Laski, in *The Nation*, December 15, 1945). “To sail the seas, says another, and to trade is a grand thing—to know many lands, to make gains from every quarter, never to be answerable to any powerful man in your own country, to be always travelling, and to feed your mind with the diversity of the nations and the business met with, and to return enriched by the increase of your gains. This, also, is a ‘river of Babylon’. But when will the gains stop? When will you have confidence and be secure in the gains you make? The richer you are, the more anxious you will be.” (St. Augustine In Ps. 136.3); and this is ‘the motive of ambition which prompted the apologists to advance the theory of social equalitarianism’ (W. G. Zeeveld). Cf. also Philo, *De Posteritate Caini*, where those who are involved in free trade are called “war-makers”.

We can only help one another to do better what each has already been trying to do; to demand of the other so to change as to be what *we* are is to destroy his morale. In the present discourse I have no intention to apologize for the Indian social system, but only to explain it: except that, before going further, I shall quote the words of that very Christian gentleman and expert Indologist, the late Sir George Birdwood, who said:

“In that (Hindu) life all are but co-ordinate parts of one undivided and indivisible whole, wherein the provision and respect due to every individual are enforced, under the highest religious sanctions, and every office and calling perpetuated from father to son by those cardinal obligations of caste on which the whole hierarchy of Hinduism hinges...We trace there the bright outlines of a self-contained, self-dependent, symmetrical and perfectly harmonious industrial economy, deeply rooted in the popular conviction of its divine character, and protected, through every political and commercial vicissitude, by the absolute power and marvelous wisdom and tact of the Brahmanical priesthood. Such an ideal order we should have held impossible of realization, but that it continues to exist and to afford us, in the yet living results of its daily operation in India, a proof of the superiority, in so many unsuspected ways, of the hierarchic civilization of antiquity over the secular, joyless, inane, and self-destructive, modern civilization of the West”.<sup>6</sup>

I quote also the anthropologist, A. M. Hocart, who has pointed out that:

“hereditary service has been painted in such dark colors *only* because it is incompatible with the existing industrial system”.<sup>7</sup>

Against these judgments, those of men like Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr and H. N. Brailsford, based either on a second-hand knowledge derived from books or upon egalitarian prejudice, carry very little weight. But since it is not my function here either to defend or attack but only to explain, it is left to you to choose for yourselves between the different points of view. I shall only hope to make it a little easier for you to understand what you must, if you want to know *what* it is that we are discussing. I am glad to have the opportunity to do this for an audience that is not, as most are, theologically illiterate. For myself, I will only say that no day passes in which I do not search the Scriptures and the works of the great theologians of all ages, so far as they are accessible to me in modern languages and in Latin, Greek, or Sanskrit, and that

---

6. Sir George Birdwood, *Sva*, Oxfrd, 1915, pp. 76 and 83-84.

7. AM. Hocart, *Les Castes*, Paris, 1938, p. 238. Hocart's words are practically the same as Buddha's, who says that “men belittle the doctrine of caste (*jativadā niramkatva*) only when they are overcome by greed (*Sutta Nipata*, 314, 315).

I am wholly convinced that *Una veritas in variis signis varie resplendet* and that this redounds *ad majorem gloriam dei*,<sup>8</sup> a glory greater by far than could be circumscribed by any creed or confined by the walls of any church or temple.

Institutions may be defined as means to the perfectibility of the individual. They are to be judged, accordingly, by the standard of whatever are held to be the immediate and ultimate ends of life; as good if they conduce to their realization, or otherwise as evil. By Hindus, the purpose of life, “man’s end” (*purusârtha*) or *raison d’être* is defined in a fourfold way, and at the same time, as regards active and contemplative lives respectively. On the one hand, the purposes of life are the satisfaction of desire (*kâma*), the pursuit of values (*artha*), and the fulfillment of function (*dharmâ*, in the sense of duty); on the other hand, the final, and in this sense the whole, purpose of life is to attain liberation (*moksa*), from all wanting, valuation and responsibilities. These immediate and final ends are listed in the order of their hierarchy, but should not be thought of as independent of, or fundamentally opposed to, one another. The last end of liberation is, nevertheless, in a manner, contrasted with the three categories of purpose proper to the active life; and this contrast is reflected in the fact that it is recognized both that a man has binding social responsibilities (often thought of as a debt to be repaid to his ancestors) and that he can have done with these responsibilities once and for all. Provision is made accordingly both for the life of the householder who practices a trade (sacerdotal, royal, pastoral or manufacturing), and for the life of poverty, that of the mendicant Sannyâsî who “gives up” at the same time all social rights and duties and, having no possession whatever, lives on “charity,” in the purest sense of the word, that of the love of his fellow men, for whom it is a privilege to feed him.<sup>9</sup>

These two ways of life, in the world and apart from it, have been aptly called the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary” norms of the cultural pattern; and it is with a view to the fulfillment of both that the institution of the “Four Âsramas” developed. I say “developed” only because the categorical formula cannot be traced as such from the very beginning, but it should be understood that as a formula it represents only a definition of the lives of the student, householder, retreating and religious that can be recognized from the first. One is, indeed, familiar with such “lives” in all cultures; for example, in Plato’s assignment of the last years of one’s life, when the soul is attaining maturity, to the contemplation of all time and all being, “if men are to crown the life they led here with a corresponding lot there”;<sup>10</sup> and in Christian Europe, where the supreme vocation of the contemplative, justified by the example of Mary (who “hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her”), represents the

---

8. “One truth shines resplendently forth in various manifestations in different ways,” and “to the greater glory of God.”

9. Franklin Edgerton, “Dominant Ideas in the Formation of Indian Culture,” *JAOS*, 62, 1942, pp. 151-156.

10. Plato, Republic, 498 C, D.

“extraordinary” norm, and is contrasted with the “ordinary” norm of those who, like Martha, are “active” (“cumbered about much serving,” and “careful and troubled about many things” other than “the one thing needful”). It is almost exclusively from the modern “Philistine,” secular, and moralistic point of view that the extraordinary norm has come to be regarded in the West as nothing but an evasion of social responsibilities; it might well be argued in reply that without the example of those who have given up all values for the sake of a Worth that is not *a* value (one amongst others), the very values on which the order of the active life depends would be reduced to the level of mere preferences and at the same time very likely be treated as absolutes.

We find prescribed as an antidote for the soul’s passivity, distress and amnesia that one should study the Scriptures and fulfill one’s own proper functions (*sva-dharma*) in that Âśrama which one may be living in at the time. One must, indeed, be also “fervent” or “incandescent” (*tapasvî*) if one is to know God or even achieve success in works; but one cannot excuse oneself from the duties of one’s “station” merely by claiming to be “fervent.”<sup>11</sup>

The root of the word *âsrama* is *sram*, to toil, whence also *śramana*, monk or religious; and these are the exact semantic equivalents of the Greek *askēō* and *asketēs*, “ascetic.” It is of equal interest, in the same connection, that Sanskrit *kuśalatâ* and Greek *sophia*, both in the sense of skill, and similarly Hebrew *hochma*, have all acquired the meaning of wisdom or prudence regarding action in general, though their original application had been only to skill in technical operations. An *âsrama*, then, is a state or station of life to be regarded as a workshop, or as a stage of a continuous and always arduous journey; the *âsramas* are so many “sojourns,” not in the sense of places of *rest* but in that of places of activity; the refrain of an ancient pilgrim song is always to “keep on going” (*caraiva, caraiva*). In a more specialized sense the word *ârama* denotes an actual place of retirement, such as a hermitage, whether solitary or communal. Apart from this special usage, the Four Mamas are those of the Student (*brahmacâri*, “one who walks with God,” an expression having also a more general application), the Householder (*grhastha*, married and practicing a trade), the Forester (*vânaprastha*, living much as Thoreau did at Walden), and finally that of the Abandoner (*sannyâsî*) or “Truly Poor Man” who has no possessions, practices no rites, is without a roof, and for whom the funeral rites have been performed. Under normal circumstances these four ways of life are to be followed in their natural sequence, and in any case, what is called a “premature revulsion” is considered very undesirable; but it is also recognized that where the vocation is irresistible, the transition from the home to the “homeless life” of the Wanderer (*parivrâjaka*, “peregrin”), who “hath not where to lay his head,” may be made at any age; just as, if you remember, it was a young man whom Christ invited to “sell all that thou hast and come follow me.” It would be impossible to exaggerate the honor and respect that are accorded by the laity to the religious, whether Hindu or Buddhist; it is the dream of every expectant mother to bear a son who shall be a religious. Every Hindu or Buddhist would endorse the words of Meister Eckhart respecting those roofless marksmen (*sâdhu*):

---

11. *Maitri Upanisad* IV. 3.

“Blessed is the kingdom wherein dwells one of them; in an instant they will do more lasting good than all the outward actions ever done”;

and those of Plato, who points out that those whom the world calls “useless” are the “true pilots.”

I was asked, as you know, to discuss the bearing of religion upon the forms of Indian society. The most general Hindu and Buddhist term for “religion” in the sense of the ultimate Truth and hence also in that of true Doctrine, is Dharma. This word, present in Dhruva, the Pole Star, symbol of constancy, and of which the root is *dhṛ*, to support or sustain, is a cognate of the Greek *thronos*, throne, Latin *firmus*, and perhaps also *forma*; it could be translated very literally by the now obsolete English word “firmity”, the opposite of that state of unbalance and disorder which is implied by “infirmity”; or translated more freely by words such as “norm”, “constant”, “order”, “law”, or “justice.”<sup>12</sup> The concept is of particular value to us for the explanation of institutions, because, as we shall presently see, its fundamental meaning is that of Greek *dikaïosynê*, “justice” (in the New Testament generally rendered by “righteousness”), and that of *lex* in the expression *Lex Aeterna*. To build up the meaning of the word for ourselves it will be necessary to cite its uses in some representative contexts. The deity is the “supporter (*dhartṛ*) of every (sacrificial) operation”;<sup>13</sup> him “both Gods and men have made their support” (*dharmān*);<sup>14</sup> and in the plural, *dharmāni* are his inviolable Laws, of which he is the Overseer (*dharmānām adhyakṣa*).<sup>15</sup> In the oldest Upanishad, where the divine procession is described, the simple deity, single *in principio*, and being himself the Sacerdotium (*Brahma*), emanates the three other castes of deities, the angelic hierarchy of Kṣatriya, Vaiṣya and Sūdra, respectively the Principalities, the Hosts and their common Provider of nourishment. But He is still not yet pervasive, not come forth, not yet existent (*na vyabhavat*): that is to say, not yet in act as regards the exercise of authority (*vibhūti* = Greek *exousia*) and He therefore emanates from himself “the more splendid form of Dharma”, Justice or Law - “that by which a Lord is lordly, so that there is naught above the Law, and by it a weak man can control a stronger, as if by an appeal to Caesar; and, verily, this Justice is the same as Truth” (*satyam*).<sup>16</sup>

The ethical bearing of this equation of Justice with Truth will be apparent at once if we recall that the earliest Scriptures already speak of Kings who “act out the Truth” (*satyam*

---

12. “Justice, which lives in itself an immutable life, can be nothing but God Himself” St. Augustine, *Ep.* 120. 4.19.

13. *Rgveda* I.11.4.

14. *Rgveda* X. 92.2; Hesoid *Theog.* 613, “will (Greek *nous*) of Zeus”; Heraclitus LXV.

15. *Rgveda* VIII.43.24.

16. *Brhadâraṇyaka Upanisad* I. 4.11—14; “We see a law above our minds, which is called Truth” St. Augustine, *De vera relig.* “By me king’s reign, and lawgivers decree just things” *Proverbs* VIII, 15.

*krnvanâh*),<sup>17</sup> or “take hold upon the Truth” (*satyam grhnânah*),<sup>18</sup> and consider that it is precisely by “taking hold upon the Truth” (*satya-graha*), Plato’s *aletheias ephapsis*,<sup>19</sup> or in other words by an appeal to Caesar, the ruling Justice of the world, that Gandhi, our most trusted politician, to whom we have given the name of “the Magnanimous” (*Mahâtma*), has sought to liberate India from subjection and exploitation. That he could, to so large a degree, expect of his followers to follow him in this procedure, which calls for the strictest disciplines, reflects the fact that in India it has been really believed that “the truth shall make you free”; that one is, in fact, freed from whatever predicament one may be in, or that, finally, it is by a last and supreme “Act of Truth”, and not as a matter of equity, that one “escapes altogether” and is admitted at the Sundoor; for the Sun himself - not the disk “that all men see, but He whom few know with the mind”, as an Indian scripture says - is himself the Truth and cannot refuse anyone who knocks at the door in His own name. Him, then, as immanent Spirit (*prâna*), the Powers “made their Law”, and “He alone *is*, today and tomorrow”.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, “this Justice is the elixir of all beings, and they are its elixir; that fiery-bright immortal Man — Brahma, the Sacerdotium — who is in this Law, He, and this fiery-bright Immortal Man — Brahma, the Sacerdotium — born of this Law (*dharma*-), *is* within you (*adhyâtman*), He is just this Self of yours, the Immortal, this Priesthood, this All”.<sup>21</sup>

“This Self of yours”, for in reality, “*That* art thou, rather than “that which thou callest ‘I’ or ‘thyself’.” “That” is our spiritual Self as distinguished from the passable, psychophysical individual; not this man so-and-so, but the “Self of all beings,” “Self’s Immortal Self and Duke,” *arche psyches athanatos, psyche psyches* as the Greek has it, or is *qui intus est*,<sup>22</sup> “not I, but Christ in me”, our Common Man or reason, Inwyt,<sup>23</sup> Conscience, Syneidesis,<sup>24</sup> Synteresis,<sup>25</sup> the

---

17. *Rgveda* X. 109.6.

18. *Atharvaveda* V. 17.10; cf. *Av.* IV. 18.1.

19. *Timaeus* 90 C; *Republic*, 608A.

20. *Brhadâranyaka Upanisad* I. 5.23; *Katha Upanisad* IV, 13. The “Powers” or “Deities” referred to are those pneumatic forms or “powers of the soul” of which the names are those of His acts rather than of ours.

21. *Brhadâranyaka Upanisad* II. 5.11.

22. “He who is within”.

23. [This Early English word and the later Middle English “inwit” mean “conscience” (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*)].

24. [A Greek word, used in theology to mean “that function...of conscience which is concerned with passing judgment on acts already performed” (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*)].

25. [Or Synteresis, a Greek word, used in theology to mean “that function...of conscience which serves as a guide for conduct” (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). “Synteresis” is ‘etymologically Skr. Samttiraka...‘one who enables another to cross over’ (to the farther shore), and so ‘savior’ or ‘deliverer’

Daimon of Socrates, who cares for nothing but the Truth and whom you cannot contradict<sup>26</sup> These two selves are at war with one another,<sup>27</sup> until we have made our peace with ourselves, until it has been decided “which shall rule, the better or the worse”: then only, when “we” have submitted, “this self lends itself to that Self, and that Self to this self; they coalesce, and with this form he is united with yonder world, and with that form with this world”.<sup>28</sup> Then only when the victory is His, can we recognize Him as our friend, then only are we liberated from the Law, being identified with it, and so “crowned and mitred above ourselves”, and become a “law unto ourselves”, in the sense that “Christ was all virtue, because He acted from impulse and not from rules”.

But those who are still “under the law”, not yet emancipated, when in doubt about ritual acts (*karma*) or conduct (*vṛtta*), should behave as Brahmans would who are competent “lovers of justice” (*dharmakâmâh*)<sup>29</sup>. The political concept is one of joint government by the Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power cooperating as in marriage; it is, in fact, a primary function of the High Priest, as the “Eye in the World”, “to see to it that the King does no wrong”.<sup>30</sup> And so, just as in China, and for Plato (for whom “the same castes—*genos=jati*—are to be found in the city and in the soul of each of us”),<sup>31</sup> this applies in the same way to the politics of our individual constitution, with its Inner Priest, Outer King, sensitive powers and physical organs of perception, “that holy world I fain would know wherein the Priesthood and Kingship move together in one accord”<sup>32</sup>. In other words, “Thy kingdom come”. The same conceptions survive in Buddhism: as the Buddha himself tells us, “He who sees the Law (*dhamma*) sees Me; and he

---

(A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*, 1942, p. 84 n. 70]

26. [Cf. pp. 188, 189. See also A. K. Coomaraswamy, “Recollection, Indian and Platonic” and “On the One and Only Transmigrant” in *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers*, edit. Lipsey, ii, pp. 63, 85.]

27. *Bhagavad Gitâ* vi. 5.6; *Dhammapada* 66; *Ep. ad Roman* vii. 22.23.

28. *Aitareya Âranyaka* 11.3.7. [“This distinction (between the two selves) of an immortal spirit from the mortal soul ... is in fact the fundamental doctrine of the Philosophia Perennis, wherever we find it”. (A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* p. 57). For this doctrine see, e.g. Coomaraswamy, “Who is ‘Satan’ and Where is ‘Hell’ “?” and “On the Indian and Traditional Psychology...” in *Coomaraswamy: Sel. Papers*, ii, pp. 24-33 and 371-377 and his *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*, 1942, pp. 71-85]

29. *Taittiriya Upanisad* III. 2.

30. *Jaiminiya Brdmana* III. 94.

31. Plato, *Republic* 551 C.

32. *Vâjasaneyi Sainhitd* XX. 5; cf. Plato, *Republic* 473 and my *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*, 1942.



who sees Me sees the Law”.<sup>33</sup> A true “son of the Buddha”, one of his disciples, is “born of the Law (*dhamma ja*), formed by the Law, an heir of the Law. How so? Because there are these synonyms of the Buddha: ‘Embodiment of Law’ (*dhamma-kâya*), ‘embodiment of Brahma’ (*brahma-kaya*); and ‘Law-become’, which is to say ‘Brahma-become’ (*brahma-bhûta*).<sup>34</sup> We are told in the same context that the King reveres the Buddha because he, the King, reveres the Law. In passing, let me say that Buddhism differs from Hinduism mainly in having a predominantly monastic application; although a morality is prescribed for laymen of all castes and classes, the Buddha’s calling upon men of whatever age or station to abandon the household life (a “dusty path”)<sup>35</sup> and all their possessions to follow Him. Because he is thus calling them from the active to the contemplative life, it would hardly be possible to deduce the forms of Indian society, which in any case are older than Buddhism, directly from Buddhist premises. Like Christ, the Buddha did not attempt to alter the forms of society; his was a kingdom, indeed, but not of this world, in which he called himself a nobody. His position with respect to caste is not in the modern sense “egalitarian”, but simply one that affirms that all men (and women) are of equal spiritual capacity and that sharply distinguishes the Brahman by mere birth from the Brahman rightly deserving the name by conduct and knowledge; and in these propositions there was certainly nothing novel, however necessary it may have been to reaffirm them. In Hinduism, in fact as Professor Edgerton remarks, “a member of any caste, or of none, might become a truth-seeking mendicant”; no one, indeed, has a right to ask of a Hindu Sannyâsi *what* he was in the world, for he has become a nobody, like the Spirit of God that “cometh not from anywhere, and has never become anyone.”<sup>36</sup>

The Buddha himself was following an ancient Way, much older than the man that he is, perhaps wrongly, supposed to have been; he denies that his teachings are doctrines of his own devising, calling them only truths that he has realized and verified. Indeed, as Philo says, “No pronouncement of a prophet is ever his own”,<sup>37</sup> In this connection it will be pertinent to cite what has been well said in the Pali Text Society’s Dictionary, s.v. *dhamma*:

“The idea of *dhamma* as the interpreted order of the World...That which the Buddha preached, the Dhamma (Greek *kat’ exochén*), was the order of law of the universe, immanent, eternal, uncreated, not as interpreted by him only, much less invented or decreed by him, but intelligible to a mind of his range, and by him made so to mankind...The Buddha (like every other great philosopher and other

---

33. *Sainyutta Nikâya* III. 120.

34. *Sainyutta Nikâya* II. 221; *Digha Nikâya* III. 84.

35. *Sainyutta Nikaya* II. 221; *Digha Nikâya* 1.62. 250.

36. *Katha Upanisad* II. 18.

37. *Spec.* IV. 49.

Buddha's...) is a discoverer of this order of the Dhamma, this universal logic, philosophy, or righteousness in which the rational and ethical elements are fused into one."

This Justice is, explicitly, the King of kings<sup>38</sup>. It is both timeless (*akâlika*) and present (*samditthika*).<sup>39</sup> The just man is *dhammattha* (in Sanskrit, *dharmasthita*); whatever takes place naturally and normally is *dhammatâ*; whatever takes place properly is *dhammena*.

That the Law of life is both timeless and secular corresponds to the distinction of the absolute Dharma that is the ruling power of God himself from the immanent Law that is, within us, our own standard of truth and conduct. And this is also the distinction of Dharma from Svadharma, which corresponds to that of the All-worker (*Visvakarmâ*) by whom all things are done and made from the individual operator (*sva-karma-krt*) who goes about his "own" particular tasks. This doctrine about the active life is best and most fully developed in the *Bhagavad Gitâ*, where the division of castes is from God, and made according to men's natural (*svabhâva-ja*) diversity of qualities and corresponding functions, and it is said that:

"Man reaches perfection (or success) by his loving devotion to his own work (*sva-karma*). And now hear how it is that he who is thus devoted to his own task finds this perfection. It is so inasmuch as by this work that is his own he is praising Him from Whom all beings (or, all his powers) are projected, and by Whom all this (Universe) is extended. More resplendent is one's own law (*sva-dharma*), however imperfectly fulfilled, than that of another, however well carried out. Whoever does not abandon the task that his own nature imposes upon him incurs no sin. One's hereditary (*sahaja*) task should never be forsaken, whatever its defects may be; for every business is involved in defects, as fire is clouded by smoke."<sup>40</sup>

Herein, of course, "perfection" or "success" does not mean the accumulation of a fortune; we have already seen that in old age a man looks forward, not to economic independence, but to being independent of economics. What is meant by "success" is the Self-integration and Self-realization of the man who is Emeritus, one who has done what there was to be done (*krtakrtyah*), and now is "Brahma-become" (*brahma-bhuta*)<sup>41</sup>. It should be noted, moreover, that by devotion to one's work is meant "diligence", the opposite of "negligence"; diligence,

---

38. *Ahguttara Nikâya* I. 109 and III. 149.

39. *Sutta Nipâta* 1139.

40. *Bhagavad Gitâ*, Chs. IV and V, summarized.

41. *Bhagavad Gitâ* XVIII. 49. 54. In Buddhist contexts *brahmâ bhfito=buddho*.

implying being fond of and caring for one's work,<sup>42</sup> is by no means the same as to be merely "industrious"; all this is not, in fact, a matter of working hard, but rather one of working easily and naturally (*sahajam*), or, in the Platonic sense (the opposite of our ideal expressed in our concepts of the "leisure state" and "forty-hour weeks"), a working at leisure.

These ideas are of the essence of Indian axiology; we find them echoed, for example, even in such a "secular" work as the Book of the Science of Hawking, where it is said: "The heavenward road is easily followed by doing what is prescribed by one's own nativity or caste" (*svajâty-ukthâbhicaranât*).<sup>43</sup> This idea of doing one's duty in that station of life to which it has pleased God to call us, the idea of vocation, if not indeed "modern", is still not peculiarly Indian. Plato defined Justice (*dikaiosyne*, i.e., Dharma) as "doing one's own work, according to Nature" (*to heauton prattein, kata physin*)<sup>44</sup> and he says, under these conditions, "more will be done, and better done, and more easily than in any other way"<sup>45</sup>. Marcus Aurelius, in the same way, connects what is "right" with what is "natural":

"A work that can be accomplished in accordance with that Reason that is common to Gods and men is free of fear. For there is no ulterior consequence to be looked for when it is simply a matter of serving our needs in the right way and according to the constitution of the forth going powers (with which we are endowed) ... Look not about thee at the norms of others (*allogria hegemonikâ*, in Sanskrit = *para-dharmani*), but look only straight at this question: To what does Nature lead thee? The Nature, that is, both of the All, and thine own with respect to what thou has to do...Deem no word or deed that is in accordance with Nature unworthy of thee...Furthermore, this Nature is called the truth."<sup>46</sup>

These are virtually paraphrases of the Indian texts, although quite independent of them; and many more could be cited. "Now say", says Dante, "would it be worse for man on earth were he no citizen? And how may that be, except men live below diversely and with diverse

---

42. On this diligence and care cf. Hermes Trismegistus as cited in my *Why Exhibit Works of Art?* p. 53, note 9. Also 1 Thess. 4. 11: "And that you use your Endeavour to be quiet, and that you do your own business and work with your own hands, as we commanded you; and that you walk honestly towards them that are without; and that you want nothing of any man's."

43. *Syainika Sâstra* I. 25.

44. cf. Heracl. CVII.

45. Plato, *Republic* 433 A-D, cf. *Charmides* 161 B; *Republic*, 370 C, 441 D; *Protagoras* 322-323 and *Laws* 689 C and D.

46. Marcus Aurelius V. 3, VII. 53-55, IX. 1. On our real needs, as the proper occasion for art, cf. Plato, *Republic* 369 D, f.

offices...And if the world down there took heed to the foundation Nature layeth, and followed it, it would have satisfaction in its folk".<sup>47</sup>

It is, in fact, Christian doctrine that "as God has distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called everyone, so let him walk"<sup>48</sup>. It is in this sense that our word "trade", etymologically a "treading", is a "walk", and *métier* a "ministry".

Caste is by no means synonymous with class, or in any sense a product of the race prejudices that are distinctive of Western democratic peoples.<sup>49</sup> It is very interesting to observe that in modern India, where the present ruling powers are anything but free from race prejudice but as far as possible ignore caste, class distinctions have arisen in the services, where they are determined by the amount of salary received; and that a very high degree of social exclusiveness has developed there, as between men who may be doing the same kind of work, but are earning different salaries according to their "grade". It is hardly less instructive to observe that in the same services there is a discrimination by "quota" against Brahmins, lest they should, by their greater intellectual abilities, "usurp" all the most desirable positions; this is comparable to the American discrimination by quota against Jews; and in the same way tends to develop a sense of class conflict where none had existed previously.

Perhaps you have been asking, how can that be called a chosen work that is entailed? Well, in the first place, how is it entailed? We must not overlook the traditional conception according to which the father, as regards his empirical personality or "character", is reborn in his son, who is to all intents and purposes identified with him and takes his place in the community when he retires or dies; and that this natural succession is confirmed by formal rites of transmission. The vocational function is a form of divine service, and the *métier*, i.e., "ministry", a work that at the same time honors God and serves man's present needs: and so it is that in India, as it was for Plato, the first reason for which one "ought" to beget children is in order to carry on from generation to generation the "good work";<sup>50</sup> so that, as the Book of Wisdom says, one's descendants may "maintain the fabric of the world",<sup>51</sup> our "social order". In the second place, it is a simple fact that no one, uncorrupted by the modern idea of "climbing", is ever ashamed of his profession, but on the contrary proud of it. As Marcus Aurelius points out, "those who love their own art wear themselves to a shadow with their labors over it, forgetting even to wash or

---

47. Dante, *Paradiso* VIII, 115 f.

48. 1 *Cor.* 7. 17. Cf. *Bhagavad Gitâ* XVIII. 41.

49. [For the origin and nature of the caste system see the article cited in n. 55a].

50. See references in my *Hinduism and Buddhism*, p. 41, note 146 with, *Satapatha Brâhmana* I. 8.1. 30, 31; Philo, *Conf.* 94, *Dec.* 119 etc.

51. *Ecclesiasticus* XXXVIII. 34.

eat”;<sup>52</sup> and for such as these, questions of time and overtime are meaningless. All this is taken for granted; we find a dancing teacher protesting that “although everyone is fondly inclined to vaunt his own family art, the importance that I attach to dancing is not a prejudice (of that sort), but inasmuch as the Sages say that dancing is a sacrificial rite well pleasing in the eyes of the Gods”.<sup>53</sup> It is from this last point of view that Hocart could say that in India “chaque occupation est un sacerdoce”, every profession is a priesthood.<sup>54</sup>

In the passage cited from the *Gita* you may have noticed the words “inasmuch as by his own work he is praising him”, which means that it becomes a sort of liturgy and that *laborare est orare*, or, as the Book of Wisdom says, that “in the work of their craft is their prayer”.<sup>55</sup> All peoples whose work has not been organized “for profit” have actually sung at their work, and in many cases the content of such songs is religious or metaphysical: but in “civilized”, that is to say, mechanized societies these songs survive only as drawing-room accomplishments, with piano accompaniment. What urbanism has done to the traditional cultures and their manufacturers (using this word in its literal and proper sense) was done first to its own workers: “We have robbed them of the possibility of producing masterpieces. We have erased from their souls the need of quality; and made them want nothing but quantity and speed”.<sup>56</sup>

Can you imagine a factory “hand” striking for the right to consider the “good of the work to be done” and not for higher wages and a bigger share of the profits; to consider which good, in

---

52. Marcus Aurelius V. 1.

53. Kâlidâsa, *Mâlavikâgnimitra* 1.30.

54. A. M. Hocart, *Les castes*, p. 27.

55. *Ecclesiasticus* XXXVIII. 34. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 135. “Homo autem ex spirituali et corporali natura conditus est. Necessarium est igitur, secundum divinam ordinationem, ut et corporales actiones exercent et spiritualibus intendat: et tanto perfectior est quanto spiritualibus intendit.” [“Now man is made with both a spiritual and a bodily nature. So he must by divine disposition both perform bodily actions and keep his mind on spiritual things: it is thus that is perfected what is spiritually intended”.]

56. Jean Giono, *Lettre aux paysans sur /as pauvreté et la paix*, 1938: “When nations grow old, the arts grow cold, and commerce settles on every tree” (William Blake). “Today the machine has become a thing of terror. It stalks here and it stalks there; in the field, in the farm, in the office, in the shop, in the factory. And wherever it stalks falls a shadow - the shadow of unemployment and under-consumption” (R. D. Knowles, *Britain’s Problems*. 1941). “Man’s labor, too, has ceased to afford him spiritual support; he is never alone with tasks endeared to him by slow and toilsome progress, sometimes extending over many years or even a lifetime... Thus the personal contact, enjoying an almost religious intimacy, between work and worker has been almost destroyed, the ‘moving belt’ permitting only an impersonal contact with thousands of unfinished parts of the whole; and the craftsman’s devotion to quality has been replaced by considerations of mere quantity”. (Betty Heimann, *Indian and Western Philosophy*, 1937, p. 134.).

Christian doctrine, the workman is “naturally inclined by Justice?”<sup>57</sup> If not, it means that the industrial, economically determined and therefore irresponsible human being has been denatured. As the Earl of Portsmouth says, “It is the wealth and genius of variety among our people, both in character and hand, that needs to be rescued now”.<sup>58</sup> All that is part of the price that must be paid for the never-ending process of “raising the standard of living”, the price that every guinea pig has to pay for the insatiable greed to which all modern salesmanship appeals so successfully. If poverty consists of never having had enough, the industrial world will forever be found wanting.

The “sanctification of craftsmanship” has been called “the most significant contribution of the Middle Ages to the world”: it might better have been said, significant heritage of a world-wide past that has been sold for a mess of pottage and has no longer any meaning in our world of “impoverished reality”. From the Hindu point of view, the castes are literally “born of the Sacrifice”: that is to say, from the “breaking of bread”, the primordial Sacrifice of the One whom Gods and men made many; and therefore also from the ritual that re-enacts the original Sacrifice and that corresponds to the Christian Mass. The deity who is, and at the same time makes, the first Sacrifice, “dividing himself to fill these worlds” with his total omnipresence, is called, in his capacity as the Demiurge through whom all things were made, the “All-worker”, Visvakarmâ: and he, indeed, performs all those diverse works, *visvâni karmâni*, that the Sacrifice, the Mass, itself requires, if it is to be correctly celebrated. But the individual is not in the same way *the* Jack of all trades. “I”, as Sri Krishna says “emanated the Four Castes, distributing qualities and operations:”<sup>59</sup> and so “there are diversities of operations, though it is the same God that worketh all in all.”<sup>60</sup>

We have seen that “Nature” has been mentioned in numerous Indian and Christian contexts as the basis of all right conduct; and before going on to our conclusions, it must be clearly understood that *this* Nature is not the environment in which we find ourselves and of which we are a part, nor the Nature that modern science investigates, but that Mother Nature by whom all things are natured, so that men are human and horses horsey: the distinction, with which we are not unfamiliar, is that of *Natura naturans*, *Creatrix universalis*, *Deus* from *Natura naturata*. The Nature that has been spoken of as a standard of action in Plato’s “ever-productive Nature” and that Indian Viraj and Brahma-womb whence all things “milk” their specific qualities; this is the Nature that all the Greek philosophers from the Ionian “physicists” to Philo, have sought to know, and which is implied in the Christian definition of all sin (whether moral, artistic or spiritual) as a departure from the order to the end, from the good that is proper to anyone,

---

57. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II 57. 3 ad 2.

58. Earl of Portsmouth, *Alternative to Death*, 1944, p. 30.

59. *Bhagavad Gita* IV.13.

60. 1 *Cor.* XII. 6.

according to his own nature or natural bent, and as “whatever is opposed to the rule of Nature, Reason, or the Eternal Law”.<sup>61</sup> It is Nature in this sense, and not the world around us, that is properly to be understood when we speak of “truth to nature” in art, or of a “return to nature” in our manner of life, or of Natural Law as the norm of man-made law.”

To this must be added a word on “equality” and one on “liberty”.<sup>62</sup> It is well to remember that our modern egalitarianism and idealization of mob-rule by count of noses differs widely from the classical and traditional notion of the equality or justice that properly subsists in an organically integrated society; that kind of equality with reference to which Oliver Goldsmith could still exclaim, “I’m for Monarchy, for the sake of equality”. Our modern conception of equality is arithmetical; the other is “proportionate” or “analogical”.<sup>63</sup> Thus, in a just State, “administrative offices and honors are to be distributed as equally as possible by an unequal symmetry”, and not, as Plato so often insists, by the mere ability to buy or catch votes. The best kind of justice is that which distributes to each according to his own nature; and it is this kind of natural quality or political justice that the State requires, if class conflicts are to be avoided.<sup>64</sup> An arithmetical quality, on the other hand, is just only within a group of peers: and that is precisely what is found in the Indian trade guilds, which are more or less coincident with the castes, and comparable in some respects to modern trade unions, except that the powers and functions of the latter are very much more limited. From this point of view, and from that of the “village councils”, it can be said that no country has been better acquainted than India with democratic procedure.

In a vocational hierarchy it is never a question of “doing what one likes”, but of liking what one does, “for all must be accounted pleasure that it is in a man’s power to put into practice according to his own nature”.<sup>65</sup> To be President of the United States is not in my power, nor would it give me any pleasure; on the other hand, I am one of the few whose work is their delight, I am contented; and having this experience, I say that any civilization stands self-condemned in which men have to earn their living in any other way than by doing what they would rather be doing than anything else in the world.

Let me give you now some examples of “proportionate equality” in a vocationally integrated society. Here, of course, the liberty of choice is more and more restricted the higher one’s status: *noblesse oblige*. Consider the freedom of speech that is granted to the kept Press, to the agitators

---

61. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I. 63.1, I-II 109. 2, II-II 133.1., etc.

62. [Cf. A. K. Coomaraswamy, “The Bugbear of Democracy, Freedom and Equality” in his *The Bugbear of Literacy*, 2nd edn. 1979.]

63. Heraclitus XCI; “The more equality, the less liberty” S. de Madriaga, *Victors Beware*, p. 108.

64. On proportionate equality, Plato, *Laws* 744 C, 757 C-E; Philo, *Spec.* IV.165, 166, 231 f. and passim; Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, I. 33. g.

65. Marcus Aurelius X. 33.

in Hyde Park, and to every dishonest politician, lobbyist, and propagandist. A King has no such freedom; in the caste system “the King is not empowered to say anything or everything, but only what is ‘correct’” (*sādhu*).<sup>66</sup> Many things are allowed to the Sudra that a Brahman or the wife of a Brahman may not do; a Sudra’s wife can remarry; a Brahman’s punishment is very much heavier than a Sudra’s for the same offence. The whole position is analogous to that of a family: as Aristotle says, “Everything is ordered together to one end; but just as in a household, *the free have the least authority to act at random*, and have most or all of their actions arranged for them, whereas the footmen and animals have but little common (responsibility) and act for the most part at random”.<sup>67</sup> The distinction is of the liberty of spontaneity that belongs to the free from the liberty of choice that is, in fact, only a subjection to our own ruling passions, or being governed by “hunger and thirst”; and what, after all, is “*free will*” but the law of *obedience* to the dictates of one’s own conscience, as the mediator of Eternal Law? Was not Socrates free, although condemned to death, in that he would not disobey his own Daimon?<sup>68</sup> Freedom can be thought of as nothing more than the right to pursue conflicting interests; but that is not justice, and only leads to unstable balances of power and to international and class conflicts. However, I think there can be no doubt that if one could imagine the pattern of a hierarchy suddenly imposed upon proletarian peoples, most Americans would choose to be Sudras, or even Casteless, for the sake of the freedoms they value most.

I shall only mention the Casteless or so-called Untouchables briefly, and because you are likely to have wondered about them. In the first place, the problem exists at all only from the standpoint of the “ordinary” norm; “men of true learning look alike upon Brahmans perfected in science and conduct, oxen, elephants, dogs and foul-feeders...<sup>69</sup> He who seeth Me everywhere, and seeth everything in Me, never shall I be lost of him, nor shall he lose Me”.<sup>70</sup> In the second place, the problem can only be understood in its historical context: throughout the ages, there has been a process of acculturation by example of aboriginal peoples, and their gradual absorption into the social hierarchy. It is only the sudden impact of modern conditions and the consequent development of political and class conflicts (often deliberately exploited, if not provoked, by those whose principle of government is *divide et impera*)<sup>71</sup> that have made the situation acute. It may help to clarify the problem as it exists if I point out that you and I too, are from the orthodox point of view “untouchables”. The feeling of ritual contamination that is felt by those whose life

---

66. *Satapatha Brahmana* V. 4.4.5.

67. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII. 10. 3; *Taittiriya Samhitā*, VI.3. 10.4. A Brahman is born with three debts: to be a pupil of the *Rsis*, to sacrifice to the Gods, and to beget unto the Fathers.

68. [See p. 84.]

69. *Bhagavad Gita* V. 18; cf. *Chandogya Upanisad* V. 24.4.

70. *Bhagavad Gita*, VI. 30.

71. “Divide and rule”.



is disciplined and reserved, when brought into contact with those whose way of life and diet are much more promiscuous, is perfectly natural; it is not, like your color prejudice, a denial of common humanity. It would be as unreasonable to expect the orthodox Hindu to admit all and sundry to their sacred precincts as it would be to expect them to admit you. You may be able to employ a Brahman cook, but that will not enable you to marry his daughter or even to enter your own kitchen without removing your shoes; and that is as it should be. The best answer to the problem was made by Swami Vivekânanda; if the casteless or outcastes want to improve their position, “let them learn Sanskrit”, which means, adopt the higher and colder standards of thinking and living that have only been preserved for millennia because those who practiced them would not mix.<sup>72</sup>

Mahâtmâ Gandhi, universally regarded as a great spiritual force in the world, would like to resolve Untouchables’ problems, but still believes in the theory of the caste system. To do away with caste, to reduce all men to the condition of the modern proletarians who have no vocations but only “jobs”, would not be a solution, but much rather a dissolution.

By this time, I hope, we have been able to build up a not altogether inadequate picture of the concepts of Dharma and Sva-karma that are the basis of the forms of Indian society. The one is the universal pattern and law of all order under the Sun; the other is that share of this Law for which every man is made responsible by his physical and mental constitution. It will serve to illustrate the “massive agreement” of the common tradition that has been all men’s heritage if we point out that it is in the same way that in Scholastic philosophy the distinction is made of Eternal from Natural Law. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, “all things under Providence are regulated and measured by the Eternal Law, but those of the individual, who participates in this Law, by the Natural Law: not that these two are different Laws, but only the universal and the particular aspects of one and the same Law”. In either sense, the participation determines the part that the creature “ought” to play in the world. *Omnia participant aliquantulum legem aeternam, scilicet ex impressione ejus habent inclinationes in proprios actus et fines*; and it is only one example of this that the craftsman is “naturally inclined by justice to do his work faithfully”.<sup>73</sup>

There remains to be made, in conclusion, a final synthesis that is explicit in the Indian sources and that may enable us to reconcile some of the conflicting positions that have already been defined. You may have remarked the terms Karma and Sva-karma employed above as the correlatives of Dharma and Sva-karma. The literal meaning of the word *karma* is “action”, “work”, or “making”. Now, just as in Latin *facere* and *operare* had an original reference to ritual performance and so implied a “making sacred”, or “making holy” (*sacra facere*, “sacrifice”), so

---

72. Manu II. 172. “Everyone is born a Sûdra. By the sacrament he is called ‘twice-born’; until he is born of the Veda, he remains a Sûdra”.

73. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-I 91.2 etc. Note especially that the Natural Law is that share of the Eternal Law which directs each creature to its own proper activities and ends.

the primary reference of *karma* (never entirely lost) is to the performance of sacrificial rites that are the paradigms of all operations. This is a point of view of the most far-reaching significance: it implies in the Comprehensor a reduction of the whole distinction of sacred from profane and of the opposition of spirit to matter, a perception of all things at the same time in their temporal and their eternal significance; it makes it possible to provide for the needs of the body and soul at one and the same time, as in savage societies, and as demanded by Plato for the ideal Republic. This in-distinction of sacred from profane activities and functions is characteristic of all traditional cultures, however primitive, of certain monastic orders and of such groups as the Shakers, and it is' often achieved by individual mystics who, like the Angels, are able to pursue very active and practical lives without breaking away from their contemplation. Thus, for the Shakers:

“The idea of worship in work was at once a doctrine and a discipline . . . The ideal was variously expressed that secular achievements should be as ‘free from error’ as conduct, that manual labor was a type of religious ritual, that godliness should illumine life at every point”.<sup>74</sup>

and this at last is what it really means to be a whole or holy man. On the other hand, where all work is economically determined and leisure is devoted to the hectic pursuit of the pleasure that was not found in the work, the common functions of life and thought are profaned, and only some things and sometimes - if any - are held sacred; and that double or half life is the outward symptom of our modern schizophrenia and amnesia. *Jam scio morbi tui maximam causam; quid ipse sis, nosse desisti!*<sup>75</sup>

In the more unified life of India it is not only in special rites that the meaning of life has been focused; this life itself has been treated as a significant ritual, and so sanctified. Perhaps we can best explain this sacrificial interpretation of life by quoting the doctrine itself as expounded by Ghora Angirasa to Krishna, the son of Devakî:

“When one hungers and thirsts and has no pleasure, that is his initiation. When one eats and drinks and takes one’s pleasure, that is his participation in the sacrificial-sessions. When one laughs and feasts and goes with a woman, that is his participation in the liturgy. When one is fervent, or generous, or does right, or does no hurt, or speaks the truth, these are his fees to the priests. Wherefore they

---

74. E. E. and F. Andrews, *Shaker Furniture*, New Haven, 1937. [cf. A. K. Coomaraswamy, “Shaker Furniture” in *Coomaraswamy: Sel. Papers*, edit. R. Lipsey, i, pp. 255 ff.]

75. Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 1.6. [“I now know the chief cause of your disease. You have ceased to know what you truly are.”]

say: He will beget, he has begotten - and that is his being born again. Death is the final ablution.”<sup>76</sup>

This is the philosophy of work (*karma*) taught by Krishna, the son of Devakî, in the *Bhagavad Gîta*. Krishna himself, who has nothing whatever to gain by any working, nevertheless “worketh still” to keep the world and all its children in being, “who would perish if all men went my way” So ought men to work, for the preservation of their lives and of society. It is true that whoever does anything whatever produces effects, or fruits, which may be good or evil, and of which he and others must taste; this is the causal aspect of *karma*. But there is no escaping this by merely doing nothing, which is anyhow impossible. The world is enchained by whatever is done, unless it be made a Sacrifice and offered up as such in the fire that is kindled by gnosis; better so than to sacrifice any concrete things. So, then, we are to do whatever Nature bids us do, whatever ought to be done; but without anxiety about the consequences, over which we have no control. We are to surrender all activities to Him, that they may be His and not ours; they will no more affect Him than a drop of water sticks to the shiny lotus leaf. There is no liberation by merit, but only by working without ever thinking that “I”, that which I call “myself”, is the actor. “Inaction” is not a matter of doing nothing, but of “acting without acting”; whoever so sees is a bridled man, a Yogi, even though doing everything. King Janaka, you know, attained to perfection, though his was an active life. So battle, and so act. “Yoga is skill in action”.<sup>77</sup>

This metaphysic of action underlies the whole Indian vocational system. But let us now for a moment forget that your ways of life and ours are superficially so different. Is there anything in the *intentions* of these lives, anything in the concepts of justice, dignity and felicity that differs in the same way? Is there anything in this philosophy of work to which the individual cannot subscribe in either context? Is it true that, in an industrial system of production for profit and where the “law of the sharks” prevails, envy and class conflicts may be inevitable: but this is a dying system even now, however catastrophic its last convulsions. It will last only for so long as you still believe in it; and I think your faith in an automatic progress is not quite what it was fifty

---

76. *Chândogya Upanisad* III. 17.1-5. For the sacrificial interpretation of the act of kind cf. *Bṛhadâraṇyaka Upanisad* VI.2.13, VIA.1-28, *Chândogya Upanisad* V.8., *Jaiminiya Brahmana* I. 17. etc. The sacrificer’s rebirth is either physical from the domestic “altar” or spiritual from the sacrificial altar, and this is the ultimate significance of the distinction of the once-born from the twice-born; cf. John III. 3-8.

77. This paragraph is a summary of Chs. IV and V of the *Bhagavad Gitâ*. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III-135: “Praecipit ergo Dominus nos non debere esse sollicitos de eo quod ad Deum pertinet, scilicet de eventibus nostrarum actionum: non autem prohibuit nos esse sollicitos de eo quod ad nos pertinet, scilicet de nostro opere.” rThus God did instruct us not to be solicitous with regard to those things which pertain to God, that is to say, with regard to the results of our actions, but he did not prohibit us to the solicitous with regard to those things that do pertain to us, which is to say our work”]. Almost exactly as in *Bhagavad Gitâ* H. 47; IV, 20; VIA, etc.

or even twenty years ago. What is to follow will depend on what you are looking for; life is your material, but the form that you impose upon it pre-exists in the mind, and it is that form that will prevail. So it is your thinking now, you're looking before you leap, that matters. In the midst of chaos you are at least free to entertain, as we have done, the idea of a society of men all earning their living by doing what each would rather be doing than anything else in the world, and therein would be thinking with us; and is it not self-evident that an agreement about ends is indispensable if there is to be effective cooperation in the choice and use of means?

There is "An Alternative to Death". I quote from the end of the Earl of Portsmouth's book, of which that is the title:

"We have much to learn from the East, from high farming to high philosophies. We have committed a crime against the Oriental countries by the arrogant superimposition of doubtful alien techniques and ideologies. Sooner or later this can bring the bitterest war in history...It may be that we can avert it even now by generosity and wisdom, in acknowledging our mistakes...We cannot do it merely by material and technical superiority without faith or high example...to the East, and the impact of our world has brought inhuman and mechanistic usury, misery and heavy industry. Spiritually we have been iconoclastic...and for that, far more than the fact that we have appeared as conquerors we shall not lightly be forgiven. We have produced the physical means of revenge...we must...make an end to European fratricide by regaining health, both physical and spiritual. Whatever forms of gods we worship, the renewal of Christendom is no ignoble task."<sup>78</sup>

It has been said, not without substantial truth, that at the present day all Oriental peoples either fear or hate the white man; very certainly they do not, and cannot, trust either his intentions or his promises. Our greatest fear of Christendom arises from the fact that your Christian civilization is not a Kingdom of God in anything but name. Refrain from your missionary zeal! We have no desire to impose our characteristic institutions on you; our function is only to remind you of the forgotten Man, our Common Man, whose name you take in vain when you come to us with the Bible in one hand and *laissez-faire* in the other. You

"think it a grand thing to make everyone happy. But there is not a worse egotist than the man who wants to make everyone happy by force. He seems to be

---

78. Earl of Portsmouth, *Alternative to Death*, 1944, p. 179.

sacrificing himself for others; but really he is sacrificing the others to his own needs, without pity.”<sup>79</sup>

I say, let us understand one another before we try to put each other right.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

*The soul cannot perform living works, unless it receives from the sun, i.e. from Christ, the assistance of the light of grace; unless it secures the protection of the moon, i.e., of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ; and unless it imitates the examples of the other saints. And from the coming together of these of living and perfect work is gathered together in it. Whence the order of living hangs on those three.*

St. Bonaventura.

---

79. Jean Giono, *Lettre aux paysans sur le pauvreté et la paix* 1938, p. 67. Cf. William Law, *The Spirit of Love*: “You are under the power of no other enemy, are held in no other captivity and want no other deliverance but from the power of your own earthly self. This is the one murderer of the divine life within you. It is your own Cain that murders your own Abel. Now everything that your earthly nature does is under the influence of self-will, self-love, and self-seeking, whether it carries you to laudable or blameable practices; all is done in the nature and spirit of Cain and only helps you to such a goodness as when Cain slew his brother”. Cf. also Plato, *Laws*, 644.