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THE WORD AS 'VAC' AND THE SILENCE OF JOY: A FEMININE INTERPRETATION

This, (in the beginning) was only the Lord of the Universe. His Word was Him. This Word was his second. He contemplated. He said: I will deliver this Word so that She will produce and bring into being all this world. *Vāc* is the first-born of Truth. (Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa 11.8.8. 4-5). *Vāc* was at the side of God (Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa 11.8.8. 2.8)

Vāc is Brahman. Through the Word every thing has been produced. (Brh. Up. 1 3.21)

One cannot but be struck by the similarity of the above verses with those of the Prologue of St. John:

In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came to be; not one thing had its beginning but through him.
(John 1. 1-3)

In the Christian Tradition we are used to thinking of God as "the Word" more than Silence; and the Word of God being more 'male' than as 'female'. Here I should like to try an approach to the Word as *Vāc* or speech, which is feminine even grammatically, and speech rather than the Word as *Śabda*, or sound. By *Vāc* or speech I understand a gentler, quieter witness and by *Śabda* or Word, a more forceful masculine proclamation and verbal testimony.

In the Hindu Tradition, God is both Sound and Silence.
"By Sound we go to Silence
The sound of God is OM

At the end of OM there is Silence
It is a silence of Joy" (Maitri Upaniṣad 6. 23)

1. The language of Silence

For the last two thousand years Christians have spoken of "listening to" and "proclaiming" the *Word*. Our world in its present sad state does not seem to have heard or proclaimed it too well. Is it because the word has not proceeded from our silence? The Russian lay theologian Evdokimov spoke some years ago of the language of the next century being that of Silence. We have only a few years left to prepare to understand and speak that language which St. John of the Cross called the language of Love. Some - mostly in the post-Christian world or those thinking of the New Age - have begun seriously to prepare for Listening to God as Silence - in the Silence of their hearts, in their daily meditation. I do not believe Meditation is just a fad. I think it is today a serious need of the human heart and perhaps a more dire need than activists' words and deeds. Only we need to sit at another's feet and learn it seriously.

Our own culture has known and spoken this language from the time of the ancient ṛṣis to the masters of our own day, such as, Śri Ramana Maharishi; and we must cease to think of it as a luxury that only the rich and educated 'elite' of our Society can afford to practise, or are able to. The simple, the illiterate can do so too and should be taught.

There will surely be some who will object that the Word is meant to lead us to action and that is also true. But as the contemplative politician - whom I think of as a Western Gandhi - Dag Hammerskjold said: "We should speak only out of silence; act only out of stillness"; if our words and actions do not proceed from silence - as did those of Jesus - they will be futile, fruitless, like branches cut off from a tree, the Vine that is Christ. Contemplatives have often been called useless for they do not "do" anything, but their role and function is precisely primarily to be; not to do; to stand still before Yahwe and wait patiently for *His* action; to stand straight and tall like trees. If they are cut down, in the world of the Spirit too, there would be ecological devastation.

Our Lord, the Word of God also taught us that. Before He spoke, He was silent and listened. Constantly in St. John's Gospel, we hear Him say: "I speak only what I hear the Father say." To hear or listen one has to be silent. Silence is a discipline of the ear, more than the tongue. "I do only what the Father bids me do" His doing, his Obedience too comes from listening first. (*Ob-'audire'* = to listen). For thirty years He led a hidden life of Quiet - like His mother and father - in preparation for merely three years of active public life. And when even *that*, He began with forty days of silence and fasting in the desert. These 'preferential options' of Jesus made him and his Word all the more powerful. He "spoke with authority" and amazed all. "From whence comes this Wisdom,"; "You have the Words of Eternal Life" cried Peter. He himself said "My Words are spirit and Life." Because, they, like his whole being, came from the Silence of the Father and returned to that Silence Who is Father. Even one word would be powerfully active because it came from Silence. "Say but a word," pleaded the centurion, "and my servant shall be healed."

Jesus must have learnt to be the Word out of Silence from Mary, His Mother for she also spoke out of silence. In a feminine spirit of loving passivity, she surrendered to the first Love-call she heard: "Be it done to me according to your Word" Her thanksgiving Hymn of Joy before Elizabeth came out of her Stillness of her months before conception. Her first words of concern too - "They have no wine" - out of a sensitivity to others' needs that springs from silence and leads to loving action. Her first word of advice was also that which invited to be "listening" - "Do whatever He shall say to you" and the servants, *mirabile dieth!* - "heard the Word" and did it so that water became wine! At the foot of the Cross she stood in silence and only listened, "Mother, behold your Son," and her mother's heart, which she had already been told would be pierced open, opened wide to accept all humans as her children. Her silent presence after the Resurrection must have been a tremendous support to the quailing disciples and taught them how to prepare in silence waiting for the coming of the Spirit who is silence-in-Love! By gazing in silence on Mary one could pray:

"May my silence give place to your Word
 my quiescence to Your action,
 my seath to Your Life" (St. Madeline Sophie)

But it is above all in John's Gospel that one learns about the Word.

2. Why in the Light of St. John's Gospel?

The first obvious reason is that while each of the evangelist has his own approach to Christ's person and mission, for St. John, Jesus is primarily "*The Word made flesh*" come to give life to humanity (1.14) and thus the mystery of the Incarnation dominates the whole of John's thought.

Apart from this important point, I feel John's Gospel is *the most intelligible* for India and particularly suitable to the Hindu psyche. His emphasis on the *Interiority dimension* of the spiritual life and *advaita* (non-duality, appeal to the Hindu. "You in me and I in You"; "My Father and I are one." For John Eternal life (the Kingdom of the synopsis) is essentially *within* and one-ing.

Also John's *symbolism* is relevant today and symbols are part of Indian Life. The 'signs' not only manifest Christ's glory but are also symbolic of his gifts (bread, life, light etc.)

John brings out the *spiritual meaning* of even non-miraculous events, *sees spiritual depths* even in the most material elements of history- he comes as light to battle with darkness, he is the lamb of God, the New Temple, 2.21; the healing serpent of Moses, 3.14; etc; there is no tension between the symbolic and the factual.

John is less concerned with history and more with bringing out the spiritual meaning of the historic events. All these are important if the Word is to be made intelligible to our people.

Finally, St. John comes nearest to bringing the element of Joy, so enormously and sadly missing in the way Christianity has been presented and so alive and important in the Hindu life and spirituality. John begins the public life of Jesus with a wedding feast where obviously, there must have been festivity - music dance, cheer and laughter! His first miracle was to bring joy to a family he saved from embarrassment - thanks to His mother. Several times celebrations of Festivals are mentioned by John. Though Jesus is clearly a figure from another world, he is simple and utterly human.

The concept that Jesus is truly the creative Word of God, Who already existed at the beginning of time, is found not only in Jewish tradition

but also in Hellenistic thought. "Logos" meant divine utterance, emanation, mediation, (all these meanings have something in common with *Vāc*). In the Old Testament, the Word of God is God's manifestation, the revelation of Himself in creation and in prophesy. All these strains of thought are taken up by John who shows that Christ, the Incarnate Word is the ultimate and complete revelation (cf. Heb.1,1-4; Col. 1, 15-20), as far as it was understood in his day.

Above all in John's Gospel the "silence" of the Word is often implied, as seen above, in Jesus' constant reference to his "listening" to his Father.

3. The Vac in Hindu Scriptures

a) *Vac in Vedas*

In the Vedas, *Vāc* is:

"the Word Imperishable, the first-born of truth,
 Mother of the Vedas and hub of Immortality
 May she come to us, in happiness, in the sacrificial
 May she, our protecting goddess be easy of entreaty"

(Tait. Brāhmaṇa II 8.8, 5)

Vāc is truly "the womb of the universe" for "by that Word of his, by that self, he created all this, whatever there is, (Satpatha Brāhmaṇa 6.5,5). Though as Dr. R. Panikkar points out, in the Brāhmaṇas there may be a certain ambivalence as the texts sometime identify *vāc* with Prajāpati (cf. Satpatha Brāhmaṇa V, 1,5,8) and sometimes consider the Word as a mere instrument, subordinate to *manas* (mind) and other fundamental concepts of the Brāhmaṇas, it is specially significant that *vāc* is feminine in the Brāhmaṇas. In a very feminine way, she is a supreme queen, the consort of Prajāpati, the Creator.

The Feminine has to "be with". The very fact of Being - with - itself, the principle of reflection, is the real beginning: *Manas* that is the mind, was there at the beginning; but a *manas* that is also heart, that can be at times like its own image or icon. The shadow can at times help and enable us to know the Reality, the who 'I am', the real *Aham*.

"What thing I am I do not know,
 I wander secluded, burdened by my mind,

When the Firstborn of Truth has come to me
I receive a share in that selfsame Word.
(Ṛg Ved. I, 16 4.37)

Vāc is she who can perhaps enable us to uncover the layers that cover the depth of the heart. Meister Eckhart speaks of man having many skins in himself, covering the depths of his heart. He says that man knows so many things he does not know himself. Why, thirty or forty skins of hides, just like an ox's or a bear's, so thick and hard, cover the soul. Go, he tells us, into your own ground and learn to know yourself there.

This 'enabling' is part of feminine genius, part of the function of the feminine aspect of 'the Word'; which is characteristically found in the archetype of feminine love, the feminine feature of love being that of finding not only fulfilment but being itself in the beloved¹

Femininity in the Word is essential both for Creation Creativity and efficient heart-communication. The 'mind' otherwise is not "brought down to the heart" – where the Word is first to be conceived and pondered – as in Mary's heart. *Vāc* has a feminine characteristic not only of contemplation but as Dr. Panikkar says of complementarity, a mediatorial role, a certain feminine docility and obedience, a surrender to the Source – sometime considered a feebleness – and defeated by Manas. There is the story of the discussion between mind and speech, where Prajāpati's decision is in favour of mind, for the speech or word can imitate, follow and communicate what the mind has first conceived! (Tait Saṁhita II. 5,11,4)

b) *Vāc in the Upanishads*

Gradually however, *Vāc* begins to decline in importance. Even so, the feminine aspect of *Vāc* seems to continue to shine. The Upanishads add depth to the vision of the Word, 'the primordial principle' at the origin of everything! But their emphasis on Brahman relegated *Vāc* to performing other functions of the Word. *Vāc* was '*eka*' (one). Already in the Ṛg Veda, she is spoken of both as the subject of speech ("the word speaks" that is, '*revelation*') and the object of speech

1. Raimundo Panikkar, the Vedic Experience, Mantranjavi (London: Daston, Longmann and Todd, 1977), p. 89.

("the Word is spoken – by all kinds of beings", that is, *language*). As subject she is also the Queen of the gods; as object she is produced by the gods.

C) *Interiorisation*

Also, in the Upanishads, with greater stress laid on the realisation of the individual and the interiorisation of external actions, her status varies. Sometimes, her importance is rediscovered when she is ranked next to *Ātman*, which on an interiorised level corresponds to the *Puruṣa* or Prajāpati of the Saṁhitas and Brāhmaṇas". However, since the knower, not the known, the seer and not the seen now become stressed in the Upanishads, any type of mediation – of Sacrifice or the Word of revelation is to be refused.

d) *Speech inspired from within – the Self/Spirit.*

While the Vedic ṛṣis were overwhelmed by the power of the Word, the Upanishadic sages enquired 'whose' is the Word. They were thus directed not only to the speaker, but even beyond – to the Self which, as *Antaryāmin* (Indwelling Spirit) inspires speech from within. This 'inspiring from Within' aspect of Word is feminine, even as the Spirit/Self is feminine (binding the Father and the Son in one embrace, to turn for a moment to Christian analogy). The Word as the "Self, the Inner Inspirer" – turns our minds as it were, into the strength of the Spirit – *Śakti*. In a 15th century picture of the Trinity in an Austrian Church, is seen a woman standing between Father and Son as though the Speech (Vāc) between Father and Son is Love and is dressed as a woman – the embrace or the kiss between Father and Son.

4. The Word in the Trinity

One cannot think or speak of the Word without the Trinity. It is the ultimate mystery of the Self, inscribed at the very heart of being. Faith-understanding of the Trinity is a matter of silence of prayer-experience of darkness of knowing not to know-not of thought and analysis; not Trinity in the sense that most theologians would think/speak of it. For, to quote Swāmi Abhishiktānanda because theologians know everything; all except the essential, namely, *not to know* (cf. *Kena Upaniṣad* II, 3; I Cor. 8.2) independence on Semitic

and Greek systems of thought which they have inherited, but the mystery, at once of being and not being 'a se'?².

And, as the final word of the Upanishads is *Neti Neti* (not this, not this. - cf. Brih. Up. II, 3, 6.) the Absolute can only be designated as *tad avachyam* - the unspeakable (*Maitri. Upaniṣad VI.7*), that to which *Vāc* cannot be applied and from which any word recoils.

5. The Splendour of God in the Word

In *Maitri Upaniṣad VI.7* Sāvitrī, that desirable Splendour, is verily god... so say the expounders of *Brahma Vidya*. Thoughts verily are meditations. May he inspire these for us, so say the expounders of *Brahma Knowledge*".

The Gāyatri Mantra from *Rg Vedic* times, makes us pray this - expressing our desire to know more and more. Radhakrishnan in his commentary on the Upaniṣads quotes "To be able to know ever more and more, to love ever more and more without end, this is our likeness to eternal Wisdom..." This again brings to mind somehow the femininity of Wisdom and the seat of Wisdom in the heart, the Self or the Spirit - Indweller, the Source of all knowledge and Wisdom Who is itself (Herself?) Love.

6. The Silence that is Spirit

The same *Maitri Upaniṣad* (6.17) says:

"The Spirit supreme is immeasurable, inapprehensible, beyond conception, never-born, beyond reasoning, beyond thought"

The Spirit is S/he who reveals the Son to us, as Swami Abhishiktananda says. However, the Spirit is not the Word. She is the inaudible murmur in which the Word is finished, that movement or vibration of air in which it is prolonged, in Upanishadic terms it is the nasal resonance in which the sound of *om* comes to an end. Like the Father she is silence. The Spirit is the silence of the communications, which responds to the Silence of eternal beginnings. The voice of the Son in the bosom of the Being, springs forth from the silence and goes to silence.

2. Henri Le Sank OSB (Swami Abhishiktananda), *Initiation à la spiritualité des Upanishads, "Vers Centre Rive"* (Sisteron: Presence, 1979), p. 150.

This reminds one of St. John of the Cross: The Eternal Father spoke only one Word. He spoke it in silence, only in silence can it be heard and it leads us back to Silence. But, adds Swami Abhishiktananda "None will ever be able to hear or penetrate to the Silence from which the Voice is born unless he allows himself to be 'engloutir' (French: meaning 'immersed?'). at first in the silence which proceeds from that Voice" (Vac).³

7. God is Sound and Silence

As in all traditions sitting still in contemplative silence is highly praised in Christianity. "Sit still, motionless like Mary at the feet of God, and gaze upon Him in silence (The Aneren Riwle). But how does one achieve that? The mind is like the wind! For thoughts to become silence is one of the hardest things to achieve in life, as anyone who 'meditates' – in the Eastern/Indian sense-knows. And this is where one has to learn to profit by the practical use of the sound that is *Śakti*, the Word *that is Om*.

In Hindu tradition sound is of primary importance, Sound is *Śakti*., the creative energy of the Absolute, and through the power of sound, *Vāc*, the whole universe is created. The *Rg Veda*, mankind's oldest religious text, tells us:

First there is Brahman, Lord of all,
With whom is *Vāc*, the Word,
And the Word, verily, is Brahman (cf. John 1. 1-2)

The unstruck sound, the primordial vibration from which the rest of menifest creation emerges is *OM.OM* creates and sustains the Universe, and at the end of each cosmic cycle the universe returns to *OM*.

3. *Sagesse hindoue mystique Chretienne: du Védanta à la Trinité* (Pans: Centurion, 1965), p. 249. For a Study on Mantra see chapter on Mantra in my book *Nama Japa—Prayer of the Name in Hindu and Christian traditions*. (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Why the Word 'OM' is considered the highest mantra and how it could possibly be useful to Christians is explained by Swami Abhishiktananda in his books.

a) *Saccidānanda, A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1974), 189-191.

b) *Prayer* (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1979), 70-75.

"All words come from the sound OM̐.

OM̐ is the whole universe" (Chānddogya Upaniṣad 2,23,2)

"Of words, I am OM̐, the Word of Eternity"

(Bhagavad Gita 10,25)

"I am OM̐ the sacred Word of the Vedas" (Bhagavad Gita 7,8)

"OM̐, this eternal Word is all: What was,

What is and what shall be and what beyond,

is the eternity. All is OM̐" (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad. 1)

8. The Mantra that leads us into the Mystery of the Spirit

The *Mantra* is a sound – structure of one or more syllables, which represents a particular aspect of the Divine Vibration. Sages in deep meditation heard these sounds and handed down these *mantras* through generations. The entire creation is nothing but sound vibrations which give rise to forms. The Word (AUM-OM̐) is the humming of the Cosmic Vibration. We have to tune ourselves through the *mantras* energy-force and vibrate in the same wavelength as the Cosmic Sound:

Ramana Maharishi who taught his disciples to enquire constantly 'Who am I?' said: "Other thoughts might come and go like various notes of music, but the 'I' continues with all other notes. Remain aware of the 'I'. This is the Self, the Spirit of whom John speaks in 7,37-39.

This awareness is the Water turning into a spring inside him, welling up to eternal life.

9. The Practice of Omkar Sadhana

It is necessary in order to practise the *Oṃkar Sādhana*, to learn from a Master how, practically to sit, to breathe and chant the OM̐ correctly. The vibrations of this great *mantras* are powerful and can be very beneficial for learning *ekāgrata* (one pointedness) or concentration, to experience peace and deep Inner Silence, which is true *Ānandam* (joy) for which we all long. The OM̐ is also a great help when one is very distracted during meditation.

To practise this *Oṃkar* before reading or studying the Word of the Scriptures is another helpful habit to form. But above all, after the listening (*śravaṇam*) and reflecting on the Scripture passage (*mananam*), using our minds, with commentaries, footnotes, applying that particular

teaching of the Master to our own human situation of this day, in the Here and Now, and speaking to Him about it—all of which most Christians are familiar with, thanks to the teaching and practice of the first method of “meditation” of St. Ignatius – it is absolutely essential to enter into the silence of the third phase of “Meditation” according to jñāna yoga – (*nididhyāsanam*)– where, by sound from the Word we go into silence, the silence of meditation (*dhyāna*) or ‘contemplation’ in the Western Christian sense.

In *nididhyāsana* the mind no longer strives to grasp the Word, its meaning, but allows itself to enter into the Stillness that is God, to “be still and know that I AM”. Instead of the mind trying to understand, the Word sinks into the heart, into silence, along with the mind; and now allows itself to be transformed; the heart or oneself becoming the Word that is God.

“In truth who knows God becomes God” (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* III, 2.9) and we become what we meditate on – The Samaritan Woman becomes the Living Water (John 7. 5, 9) as Our Lord explains, in the painting of John chapter 4 by Jyoti Sahi.

This transformation into God, ‘becoming God’, as the early Church Fathers would say, is the goal of the Word and of the Silence. Words are now no longer necessary. The disciple and guru have become One. What remains? Who is there to speak? and Who to listen? They have had their *satsang* – in Silence.

10. *Communicating the Word in Silence*

In “*Silence and Satsanga*” chapter 9 of his excellent book *Be As You are*, David Godman describes how the essence of *satsang* according to Śrī Ramana Maharishi, is not merely to be in the physical presence of the Master (*sat-sang*, meaning literally ‘association with being’ – or with other seekers of Truth), but has a much wider definition. We are so used to ‘Proclaiming the Word’ through words, that for most Christians, Sri Ramana Maharishi’s method comes first as a shock, and later as a shock of joy.

When Śrī Ramana was asked ‘Why does not Bhagavan preach the truth to people at large, he answered: “How do you know I am not

doing it? Does preaching consist in mounting a platform and haranguing the people around? *Preaching is simple communication of knowledge.; it can really be done only in silence*". What do you think of a man who listens to a sermon for an hour and goes away without having been impressed by it so as to change his life? Compare him with another, who sits in a holy presence and goes away after some time with his outlook on life totally changed. Which is better, to preach loudly without effect or to sit silently sending out inner force?

Again, how does speech arise? First there is *abstract knowledge*. Out of this arises the *ego*, which in turn gives rise to *thought*, and thought to the *spoken word*. So the word is the great grandson of the original Source. If the word can produce an effect, judge for yourself, how much more powerful must be the preaching through silence.

To understand and believe this, one needs to experience sitting at the feet of a guru for a long time. Christians are, as a rule loth to 'sit' (they prefer to be up and doing to change the world outside themselves) and even more reluctant or afraid to sit as a disciple of a human guru. "Have we not the Sadguru Jesus Christ" they say. We have indeed. But, He never forbade us to learn humbly from other traditions of our own culture; He only forbade us not to be proud and call ourselves 'Masters' who think they know all.

He taught the value of silence: forty days in the desert after thirty years of a hidden life, as seen above, before he began to preach, and often going away from the crowds to the mountain or to the desert or to a 'lonely place' to be alone with the Father; - and he also showed us how not to be like the Pharisees and Scribes who did not practise what they preached.

11. As a Gentle Breeze

Finally, the Word's "feminine" aspect is seen in a quiet, gentle breezeliike approach, hardly audible, therefore it can be heard only if the soul is tranquil and ready to yield its noise and self-opiniated thoughts. It can be felt only in the strength of God that is as gentle as a mother. Juliana spoke of "Jesus our Mother"; The Word's quiet passivity into gentle surrender, like Mary's response to the Word

spoken to her: "Be it done to me according to your Word" (rather than 'I will do the Word'). It is seen too in the power of silence. Mary is rarely heard to speak in the Gospels; her strong and silent husband, never! And when Mary did speak, as seen, all her words proceeded from silence and led to peace. "In silence and in hope will be your strength" ... as Isaiah foretold.

The power of God - *Paraśakti* - who overshadowed Mary is Pure Silence; though the Spirit of the Triune God is the author of the Words of God (Scriptures) and *param-anandam*, supreme Joy - that has these world, maintains it and draws it back into Herself. After much practise of *tapas*, Bhrigu knew that "by Sound we go to Silence"; he saw that:

"From Joy all beings have come,
By Joy they all live,
And unto Joy they all return" (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. 3. 1-6)

The End is a Silence of Joy !
May we all know IT !