

S. Srinivasachar

Mysore

SRI RAMAKRISHNA - A SAINT OR PROPHET?

In the galaxy of the world's mystic philosophers from Parmenides to Hegel, and from the Upanishadic seers to Aurobindo, Sri Ramakrishna stands out among the most recent and outstanding ones. A product of the Hindu religious ethos, he demonstrated that 'the experience of God' can be Pagan, Hindu, Christian or Islamic - an experience in which no frontiers exist and no demands are made on sensory knowledge. He did not propagate a new religion or a new philosophy. Without the semantics of a metaphysician, which he never was, he showed how everyone can recover his sense of community and comprehend the truth of unity. He laid bare the profile of a moral and spiritual crisis which has dogged mankind all along, now even more than ever, with the aggressive advance of materialism. He preached that at the core of all religions lay one truth, one taste and one flavour - that of LOVE. As a yogi who experienced different states of mystic bliss he unravelled a world of Supreme Consciousness, which is more real and more universal than our immediate world of plurality and which should be comprehensible to anyone who would only dare.

It is over a hundred years since Sri Ramakrishna passed away. On the eve of his death, we learn that he passed on his spiritual mantle to Swami Vivekananda, the most favoured disciple of his, with the words: "To-day I have given you my all and am no better than a fakir, possessing nothing with the powers I have transmitted to you, you will accomplish great things in the world. Not until this is accomplished will you return (to your source)."¹ What Vivekananda accomplished in a brief span of fifteen years thereafter was to make Ramakrishna's name a house-hold word. He is remembered for the unique message of Harmony of Religions and oneness of mankind which he left behind. In Mahatma Gandhi's words: "He was a living embodiment of Godliness. In this age of scepticism Ramakrishna presents an example of a bright and living faith which gives solace to thousands of men

1. Vivekananda : A Biography by Swami Nikhilananda, p. 66.

who would otherwise have remained without spiritual light."² As Freidrich Max Muller observed: "This constant sense of the presence of God is indeed the common ground on which we may hope that in time not too distant the great temple of the future will be erected, in which Hindus and non-Hindus may join hands and hearts in worshipping the same Supreme Spirit—who is not far from every one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being."³

Whether we treat Ramakrishna as a saint or a prophet or an incarnation is not material. What matters really as we are about to be catapulted into a new century with its gathering crisis in our perception of religion and science, of progress and peace, is to examine the relevance of his experience for the future of THE ONE RELIGION enshrining the eternal truths of all the great religions of the world. The religious experience and philosophic thought of which we all are the inheritors spreads out like an ocean into which the waters of many a great river from many a blessed land has flowed. Millennia of experience from diverse races and regions have confluenced to create this common heritage of mankind. The need for a universal outlook will become increasingly urgent as the world will shrink even faster in the coming decades. Thus, in a reversal of the time process as it were, the future will make itself felt and influence the present. Several high-priests of science have already started questioning some at least of its basic premises in the light of new discoveries in physics and biology. The premises that have held sway since the time of Descartes and Newton have been found to be too inadequate to explain every phenomenon. In influential quarters among scientists there is a growing interest in the relevance of mystic experience for a more balanced understanding of everything we seek to comprehend. In this trend, which seems to persist, we see an interesting reversal of roles by which the 'theology' of science is drawn into a serious dialogue with recorded religious experience. Our ideal of a happy marriage between religion and science may yet remain a distant possibility. Even so, a blend of Western and Eastern strands of religious experience and philosophic thought need not, and should not be out of reach.

Ramakrishna's life and achievements were those of a mystic. His "personal encounters with God" and the sayings that emanated from

2. *Ibid.*, xvi.

3. Ramakrishna - His Life and Sayings - ix Oct. 18, 1898.

this experience seem to merit a closer study than they have received. The need to understand him and through him the religious ethos of India cannot be better expressed than in the following words of Albert Sweitzer in his critical assessment of "INDIAN THOUGHT AND ITS DEVELOPMENT."

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

What troubled this scholar, however, was whether the idea of world negation which Indian thought seemed to emphasize is right and acceptable. All thinking men will naturally share this doubt. India's philosophic thought contains two strands, namely, the so-called doctrine of world-negation (*māya*) and life-affirmation, giving rise in turn to the familiar concepts of *nivritti* (detachment and renunciation) and *pravritti* (attachment and duty) both of which are accorded equal recognition. It is true that Indian philosophical thought has had to contend all along with scholastic controversies pertaining to (1) the nature of the Absolute or Brahman (2) the nature of the individual soul or Atman and (3) the relation between the two, i.e., the knower and the known, the creator and the creation, and the individual soul and the infinite Being. Though he was not well-versed in Vedic lore and the commentaries thereon, Ramakrishna spoke from the depths of his spiritual insight. He said that these scholastic disputations were fruitless endeavours and will not carry disputants any the nearer to a knowledge of God. The quest of his life was for genuine God-experience and in the fruition of this quest, on however personal a level, we see him not only as a man who, off and on, lived in God but also as one who discovered for himself a deep-seated harmony in all the great religions of the world. Besides, what he emphatically told his disciples was that such an experience was accessible to anyone who had the courage, conviction and discipline to seek it.

Germane to any serious discussion on Ramakrishna and his teachings are three aspects of his personality, namely:

1. The validity of his personal experience as a man of God,
2. Its relevance to what Vivekananda called "the one Eternal Religion" and,
3. The implications of his teachings for the Indian society.

I wish to exclude the last from the purview of this article in order the better to deal with the first two within the space at my disposal.

Sri Ramakrishna, the Man

Sri Ramakrishna was indeed a complex personality—eccentric, child-like in disposition and devoid of formal education. He knew just how to read and write Bengali. Though born in a pious Brahmin family he neither studied Sanskrit nor any portion of the Vedic lore. However, by six, he was familiar with stories from the Indian epics and the *puranas*. From his childhood he was prone to experiences of trance and ecstasy which became increasingly common and as frequent he grew older. Whenever he saw something beautiful or heard the melody of God's name he tended to react with extreme emotion, sometimes losing consciousness of himself and his surroundings. By accident rather than by choice, he started out as an ordinary temple-priest but soon found himself engaged in a mystic quest which in its moments of fruition filled both the idol and idol-worshipper with an ineffable ecstasy. When he spoke, the content of his language was that of the Upanishads. He was humble to the point of self-abasement,⁴ but he also spoke with the authority and self-assurance of a master on matters concerning religion or ethics. As a priest he rarely observed the rituals of worship. His one consuming passion was to "see" Mother Kali, even as a baby, separated from his mother, seeks her presence. He prayed, beseeched and wept like a forlorn child when she did not materialize. Sometimes he would retire into the garden of Dakshineswar to meditate under an *amalak* tree *sans* clothes, *sans* his sacred thread, *sans* food and water. When his Divine Mother still did not materialize he would cry out "Oh Mother, another day is spent in vain; could it be that Thou dost not exist? Art Thou merely a dream of diseased minds?" etc. When his elders proposed matrimony as a cure for his eccentric behaviour he suggested a child-bride of his own choice from a different village and went through the ritual of marriage. When the bride did come to join him

4. "I am the most insignificant of the insignificant, the lowest of the lowly. I am the servant of the servants of God. Krishna alone is great" (*The Gospel*: p. 100)

twelve years later in the full bloom of youth, he welcomed her not as a wife but as the Divine Mother incarnate, thus committing himself and her to an unusual partnership in celibacy.

Ramakrishna had an obsessive repulsion for *Kāmini* (lust) and *Kānchana* (lucre) and his entire concept of spiritual discipline was based on their rejection. The two – woman and money – symbolized for him desire in its grossest form that bound the mind to the body so closely as to make religious experience impossible. He did not however decry the value of a house-holder's life. He pleaded that as one carried on his worldly duties according to his *dharma*, he should not lose sight of the higher goal, which was both moral and spiritual. He said: "Yes, you can perform them too, (duties associated with earning money, etc.) but only as much as you need for your livelihood." At the same time you must pray to God "Oh God, make my worldly duties fewer and fewer. I find that I forget Thee when I am involved in too many activities" (*The Gospel* 72). On another occasion he said: "There is nothing wrong in your being in the world (of activity). Do your duty with your one hand and hold on to God with the other. After the duty is over you will hold on to God with both hands" (*The Gospel* 67).

A Product of His Age with a Message for Every Age

Ramakrishna's one consuming passion in life was to experience God – a proposition which could be daunting, if not laughable, to most people. He condemned miracles and miracle-men as "wanderers from the path of truth, with their minds entangled in the meshes of psychic powers." He spoke in the simple, unadorned language of a rustic with a liberal sprinkling of appropriate parables to illustrate his every point. He loved to sing, for he had a good voice, and as he sang, his ideas shed their profundity and, meeting in the melody of the song, became more appealing and intelligible. He had no oratorical talent and for want of scholastic learning, could not quote from the scriptures. In fact he often said that scholarship by itself was a hindrance rather than a help for God-realization because every accretion to knowledge only revealed new areas of ignorance. But he had great regard for scholars and *pundits* and observed: "So long as I live, so long will I learn."

It was this unusual man who, after death, lived to inspire a movement of great significance for millions of Indians. His message of universality of religion crossed oceans and continents, making its appeal to

many men and women. In Swami Vivekananda's words, "His message was to proclaim and make clear the fundamental unity of all religions. . . . This great teacher of the nineteenth century made no claim for himself. . . . because he had realised that in reality they are all part and parcel of the ONE ETERNAL RELIGION."

Sri Ramakrishna was wholly a product of the Hindu religious ethos. He was equally a product of the nineteenth century India, troubled as it was, with the pangs of rebirth into modernity. "As a lamp does not burn without oil, so a man cannot live without God;" "God is in all men, but all men are not in God: That is the reason for (man's) suffering." These were ideas which he repeated tirelessly to his disciples. His quest for God-consciousness brought him face to face with conditions of despair, ugliness, hypocrisy, ignorance and the intellectual and spiritual turmoil that raged in contemporary India. The Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the work of Christian missions, the Islamic legacy, the Theosophical Movement and, above all, the aggressive march of materialism, science and technology constituted the Indian scenario. It produced a situation which for most people seemed confusing, challenging and unnerving. The educated few were under the spell of Europe's industrial culture and many intellectuals felt the impact of European thought. His acquaintance with and admiration for men of great learning like Keshab Chandra Sen and Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar only strengthened his conviction that "books, scriptures, and things like that only point out the way to reach God. After finding the way, what more need is there of books and scriptures? Then comes the time for action" (*The Gospel*, p. 704). He had an uncanny ability to spot out sincerity and faith in men with learning. His choice fell on Naren as one who would carry the torch he had lighted. What we see to-day in the light of this torch is not a new religion or a new dogma, but the outlines of a moral and spiritual crisis into which he injected the seed and promise of a solution.

A Man of God

India's philosophical tradition is inseparable from religion and, religion in India originated in personal experience through contemplation and meditation. The Sanskrit equivalent of 'philosophy' is *Darsana*. . . something that is experienced or seen. The fountain-head of India's philosophical systems, the *Upanishads* – is itself a quest, a free-wheeling enquiry into the nature of every component of experience, namely, the objective world, the self, body, mind, knowledge, soul and the relation between

them, together with the question of the destiny of the individual. By its very definition 'Experience' presupposes quality between the 'knower' and the 'known,' a point which is apparently not arguable. What might be arguable is to say that this experience in its ultimate state transcends every known limitation, including that of space and time. The knower and the known would then become one without distinction which means that the ego would lose its identity in a state of supreme, ineffable bliss.

"The kingdom of God cometh not with observation. Neither shall they say: 'Lo, here or lo, there' for behold, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke X, VII. 20).

"Whether in the body, I cannot tell; or, whether out of the body, I cannot tell God knoweth" (II Corinthians, XII, 2).

Ramakrishna illustrates this with a picturesque parable:

"So long as the bee keeps hovering over the petals, it emits a buzzing sound; but once inside the flower, it drinks its nectar noiselessly." Again he says: "One can get rid of the ego after the attainment of knowledge. On attaining knowledge, one goes into *samādhi* and the ego disappears" (*The Gospel*, p. 102).

How Do We Assess Ramakrishna's Experience?

Non-dualism as the essence of *samādhi* can be traced back to the *Upanishads*. yājñavalkya's statement to his wife Maitreyi in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is often quoted in support of non-dualism:

"Oh Maitreyi, the individual Self, dissolved, is the Eternal - of pure consciousness, infinite and transcendent. Individuality arises only by the identification of the Self through ignorance, and when this ignorance is removed, the identity of the Self is lost in Brahman."

Before we lose ourselves in the time-worn controversy whether non-dualism can be reconciled at all with sensory-intellectual consciousness which accepts only union with God (*Sāyujya*) and not identity, it would help to remind ourselves that Ramakrishna is not dogmatic about non-dualism. He says: "Sankara's non-dualistic explanation of Vedanta is

true, and so is the qualified non-dualistic interpretation of Ramanuja (Visishtadvaita)" (*The Gospel*, p. 709). Affirming the equal by strong claims to validity of dualism (bheda), he equates it with Bhakti Yoga, the path of love as preached by Chaitanya. To him love of God and compassion are inseparable. He says: "Through compassion one serves all beings But one thing should be remembered *daya* (compassion)" makes our hearts pure and gradually strengthens our bonds. In another context he told Manilal Mallick, a disciple, "One can attain everything through Bhakti Yoga" (*The Gospel* p. 542).

All genuine mystical experiences the world over – Pagan, Christian, Islamic included – share certain fundamental characteristics, the most important of which is the apprehension of transcendental unity in all things. Mysticism has been generally associated with religion and non-dualism, most commonly with Buddhism and Hinduism. But what logicians and theologians are prone to dismiss as purely subjective – a creation of the brain – is as much a legacy of neo-Platonists like Plotynus and Porphyry, as of pious Christians and Muslims throughout history. Besides, poets and artists have also experienced mysticism as an aesthetic experience. Wordsworth, for instance, speaks of being led on

"Until the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are led asleep
In body, and become a living soul;
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, by the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things."

(Lines composed above Tintern Abbey)

In the memoirs of Tennyson we have this unusual admission:

"A kind of walking trance I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone till at once, as it were, out of the intensity of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility (if so it were) seeming on extinction, but the only true life."

(H. Tennyson, *Tennyson: A MEMOIR.*, 1897, p. 320)

No one can doubt the sincerity or genuineness of these experiences. When he was a child of six, Sri Ramakrishna recalls that he fell into an ecstatic trance on seeing the flight of white cranes against dark clouds. The sheer beauty of the sight gave rise to this aesthetic bliss. In India, as elsewhere, philosophers and theologians have differed on the interpretation of mystic experience. Dualists like Ramanuja and Madhva reject Sankara's concept of undifferentiated unity as amounting to nihilism – a realm of nothingness which approximates to Buddhist *Nirvāna*. They emphasize, like some Christian mystics, subject-object relationship between the seer and the seen, between Brahman and the Atman. However, they subscribe to the pantheism of the *Upanishads* and this stream of thought runs all through Hinduism, finding expression right upto Aurobindo and Ramakrishna in our time. "He created all this that exists, and entered into the very thing" (*Taittiriya Upanishad*).

While mysticism and phenomenology is integral to Vedantic tradition, the history of mysticism in Christianity and Islam has not been as smooth as in India. Strongly theistic in character, orthodox theologians of both the traditions have condemned pantheism and non-dualism as heretical. Some have even been martyred on the ground that any suggestion of the identity of the soul with God is outright blasphemy. The objective world for the Vedantist is an emanation from God while for the Semitic faiths it is his creation, handiwork. So the distance between man and God is real, pre-ordained, permanent and unbridgeable. Also, the world is real, life is real and God is personal. Indian dualists like Ramanuja and Madhva also concede reality to the world, but make this subordinate to the reality of Brahman. It was Ramakrishna's conviction that any arguments based on pure logic for or against was really not relevant for one who sought the experience of God. Dualism and non-dualism are to him only different states of God-consciousness and either way it made no difference to the quality of spiritual experience. "In *Kaliyuga*," he says, "the *Bhaktimarga* is the most suitable."

The Ethical Implications of Ramakrishna's Sayings

For the critics of mysticism the implications of non-dualism are of utmost importance both in metaphysics and ethics. Logically it would appear to justify or at least lead to unconcern for the affairs of the world and present both good and evil as of little consequence for the emancipated soul. The pursuit of the ecstasy of bliss is a personal one and if it is made the goal of religious life this might result in divorcing religion

from ethics with fatal consequences for the society, making religion itself amoral. It is interesting to see how Sri Ramakrishna viewed this problem whenever he stressed the supreme importance of 'faith,' 'renunciation of *Kamini and Kanchana*,' 'Contemplation' and the conquest of the 'ego' for gaining the vision of God. To him spiritual life was indeed the ideal, the terminal point of devotion. But what prepared him for it was the purity which he had acquired through love, compassion, service and humility. A person who was indifferent to morality could not succeed in his spiritual quest unless it was preceded by genuine repentance. "Why talk of sin and hell-fire all the time" he asked. "Do say but once, Oh Lord, I have done things that I ought not to have done, and I have left undone things that I ought to have done. Oh Lord forgive me! Saying thus, have faith in Him, and you will be purged of all sins." While admitting that a devotee becomes unattached to the world after attaining God *The Gospel*, p. 1009), Ramakrishna does not fail to stress the duties that one is expected to perform. Among the virtues, he attaches the highest importance to truthfulness: "If a man clings tenaciously to truth he ultimately realises God. Without this regard for truth he loses everything" (*The Gospel*, p. 255). In another context he said: "A man leading a householder's life must have unflinching devotion to truth" (*The Gospel*, p. 370). No Indian mystics, Buddhist or Hindu or Pagan like the neo-Platonists, or Christian mystics like Eckhart or St. Teresa etc. have under-estimated the crucial importance of morality for spiritual striving. It would be an error to characterize Hindu mysticism as invariably non-dualistic and therefore amoral in its implication. For a genuine mystic a burning love of God should overflow into visible channels of love for the suffering (*Bhoota-daya*). This love, being of a divine nature, will be universal and not confined to mankind alone. At the same time, spiritual quest should not deflect a man from his path of duty or self-effort. Dependence on God's mercy cannot be a substitute for human effort, even as learning cannot be a substitute for the knowledge of God. Ramakrishna asks: "Why should we trouble the Lord for what can be accomplished by our own exertions"? Referring to householders, he says that they should diligently perform their duties. "A householder has his duties to discharge, his debts to pay; his debts to the gods, to his ancestors, to the *rishis*, and to his wife and children. He should support his chaste wife and children until they come of age" (*The Gospel*, p. 87). He does not advise *Sanyasa* for one who has not fulfilled his duties in the world. In another context, while discoursing with a sub-judge he said: "Why should you give up the world? Since you must fight, it is wise for you to fight from your fort. Therefore you will be wise to face the battle from the world."

Further, in the *Kaliyuga*, "the life of a man depends on food. If you have nothing to eat, then you will forget all about God . . . you will find it more convenient at home (than to be a mendicant) you won't have to worry about food. You may even live with your wife" (*The Gospel*, p. 594). Ramakrishna never failed to emphasize that all the great religions of the world contain the same truth however much they may differ in theology and other respects. "One should not think that his religion alone shows the right path and that others are false . . . Infinite are the paths and infinite the opinions" (*The Gospel*, p. 89). He illustrates this with a beautiful parable. "It is like your coming to Dakshineswar by carriage, by boat, by steamer or on foot. You have chosen your means according to your convenience and taste, but the destination is the same. Some of you have arrived earlier than others ; but all have arrived!" (*The Gospel*, p. 1008).

In his life-long quest Ramakrishna demonstrated the primacy of moral life as a preparation for the spiritual, and had no intellectual or sentimental prejudices against other religions. For him tolerance had a deeper meaning than the word indicates. Tolerance would imply a certain amount of condescension towards the other, a facet of the ego which is not fully enlightened. To him it meant identification with the other point of view to discover its positive side. It is in this spirit that he voluntarily subjected himself to disciplines prescribed by Christianity and Islam and experienced divine visions. He had a vision of the Madonna with Jesus in her arms, of Christ as an embodiment of light and love, and of Mohammad, the prophet of God.

New Scientific Thinking and Sri Ramakrishna

These were mystic 'Visions' of Ramakrishna, in which he retained his ego or self when the 'object' of his contemplation materialized. Striking examples of mystics other than Buddhists and Hindus would be of interest here if only to show how Eastern mysticism is not all of one kind. More often than not, phenomenological ecstasy as recorded in Christian and Islamic traditions resulted in the experience of undifferentiated unity. A few instances of this kind are being recalled here for the very interesting reason that the latest trends in modern science, particularly sub-atomic science, seem to lead us on to a path which may terminate, (if it terminates at all), on a terrain very different from the one on which religion has built its imposing mansion. The journey may be long and arduous but the adventure seems to have begun, shattering several

of the fundamental premises on which classical science has based itself all these centuries.

The basic thing common to both science and the non-dualistic mystic is that both emphasize the 'illusory' nature of the two fundamental categories of knowledge, space and time. From the days of neo-Platonists and early Christian mystics like Dionysius (5th cent. A. D.), Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), Ruysbroech (1293-1317), St. Teresa (1515-1582), St. John of the Cross and Swedenborg (16th century) right down to Arthur Koestler of our own time, it is, with slight variations in experience, the same story of undifferentiated unity in which all objects and events just melt away, transcending dimensions of space and time. Islamic mystics (Sufis), starting from Ziyad B al-Arabi (9th century), on through al-Gazzali (12th century) and others like Jalal-al-Din Rumi (13th century), not to mention a host of others, have held mystic experience of undifferentiated unity as fundamental to the knowledge of God. Emphasising the Advaitic view, Rumi says: "Do not mistake me! It is wrong to think that the Vicar and He whom the Vicar represents are two. To the form-worshipper they are two; when you have escaped from the consciousness of form, they are ONE... In things spiritual there is no partition, no number, no individuals... Unearth the treasure of Unity."

Ziad B al-Arabi speaks of the ineffable nature of mystic bliss thus:

"But if anyone asks for a further description of ecstasy, let him cease to do that, for how can a thing be described which has no description by itself, and no witness to it but itself, and its reality is known from itself, to him who has it: he knows of its existence from his ecstasy... He who asks about its flavour and experience asks about the impossible for, they are not known by description without tasting and experience."

Arthur Koestler writes that in the mystic state in which he found himself while he was in General Franco's cell awaiting undeserved death, "that I had ceased to exist" because it (the 'I') had been "dissolved in the Universal pool," bringing about "peace that passeth all understanding." Walter T. Stace, *The Teaching of the Mystics*. Sri Ramakrishna's personal experiences of ecstasy in a state of undifferentiated unity belongs to the same category as these examples proving the thesis that mystic experience knows no barriers of culture or religion or theology.

To revert to the latest trends in modern science, the new scientific hypothesis (which is called the bootstrap philosophy of modern physics), shares the world-view with Buddhist and Taoist mystics "that there is mutual interrelation and self-sufficiency" of all phenomena and that there are no fundamental constituents of matter, and "that the universe is an inseparable whole where all forms are fluid and ever-changing and that there is no room for any fixed fundamental unity." In the words of Fritjof Capra, one of the most outstanding physicists of our time: "Modern physics has confirmed most dramatically one of the basic ideas of Eastern mysticism: that all the concepts we use to describe nature are limited, that they are not features of reality as we tend to believe, but creations of the mind; parts of the map, not the territory." (*The Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra, p. 167).

These trends in the shaping of a new world-view will take us close to Buddhist mysticism which maintains that space and time are constructs of the mind and like all intellectual concepts are relative and illusory though they function in our sensory knowledge. A very significant observation made by Capra is that "the conventional notions of space and time are not the ultimate truth. The refined notions of space and time resulting from their mystical experiences appear to be in many ways similar to the notions of modern physics, as exemplified by the theory of relativity."

However unacceptable it may seem to scientists of the classical school, these new trends of thought emerging from sub-atomic physics have undermined the mechanistic world-view. Erwin Schrodinger, one of the founders of Quantum Physics, speaking about the transformation of time and space produced by relativity makes the significant observation:

"I suppose that it is this, that it meant the dethronement of time as a rigid tyrant imposed on us from outside, a liberation from the unbreakable rule of 'before and after'... and this thought is a religious thought, nay, I should call it *the* religious thought" (Turner Lectures, 1956).

Lincoln Barnett, in his book "The Universe and Dr. Einstein" (which carries a foreword by Albert Einstein himself) says:

"In man's brief tenancy on earth, he egocentrically orders events in his mind according to his own feelings of past, present and future. But except on the reels of one's own consciousness, the universe, the objective

world of reality, does not 'happen' – it simply exists. It can be encompassed in its entire majesty only by a cosmic intellect. But it can also be represented symbolically by a mathematician as a four-dimensional space-time continuum."

Now, after taking note of select mystic experiences closely allied to religion as well as aesthetics and the recent trends in scientific thinking, we are left with a residual problem – a problem of great importance to Science as well as Religion – whether the world of flux in which we live, think and operate, is at best our mental construct (*māya*). Also, if the mystic view is correct that consciousness alone is the primary reality and the ground of all being – "material, formless and void of all content" – in what way can we comprehend the Supreme Consciousness? Does religion as we understand the term flow from such a consciousness? Is it possible to place before man a definable goal in terms of basic values which should regulate his moral and spiritual life? The Advaitic tradition in Vedanta believes that the enlightened Self seeks and finds its identity with the Absolute, and when it discovers its divine essence, it merges with the Absolute, losing its identity. This extinction of duality would imply also the annihilation of space and time within whose framework the ego functioned.

It is not the purpose of this brief article to enter into semantics, but to examine whether Sri Ramakrishna faced this problem as a mystic, and if he did, how? This should be of interest to everyone who values religion as a primary force in the evolution of man as a moral and spiritual being. It is true that he dismissed philosophic disputations as irrelevant and even fatal to God-realization. He believed that direct apprehension of Divinity was possible through renunciation of gross desires, utter humility and love of God. As a *Sādhaka* or 'achiever' he experienced various levels of *Samādhi* of which the ultimate state is one of complete identity with *Brahman*.

It is now the turn of the logician to point out the impossibility of establishing the fact of 'annihilation' without equating it with physical death. Death can hardly be the way to comprehend the ecstasy of undifferentiated unity! The known fact is that the mystic returns to his natural state to tell the story or, not to do so, because the experience was ineffable. Ramakrishna solves this problem in an ingenuous way. According to him, what actually happens in this state of identity is that what is annihilated is the 'ego of ignorance' and what survives is the 'ego of

knowledge' or 'the ego of love' or the 'servant ego.' To risk a simile, the ego loses its impurity in the state of non-dualism as gold loses its blemishes in fire (*The Gospel*, p. 746). Further, this survival of the ego in its purer form is a gift of God's mercy that comes to the '*Ishwarakotis*' who, "on returning to the plane of relative consciousness after attaining *samadhi*" can work "for the welfare of humanity" (*The Gospel*, p. 175). Speaking to Narendra (Vivekananda) on the subject Sri Ramakrishna said, "I have seen that He and the One who dwells in my heart are one and the same Person."

Narendra "Yes, Yes!" *Soham* – I am He!"

Master "But only a line divides the two – that I may enjoy divine bliss."

Narendra "Great souls, even after their own liberation, retain the ego and experience the pleasure and pain of the body so that they may help others to attain liberation..."

(*The Gospel*, p. 942)

It is indeed difficult now to foresee a merger of the two traditions – the scientific and the mystic. The classical scientific notion that the individual is an isolated self, autonomous and free-willed, is gradually being undermined by the New Physics which postulates inherent harmony in nature as a result of 'new explorations in the atomic and sub-atomic world.' The theory is also gaining ground, in agreement with recorded mystical experience, that the 'self' is an inseparable part of the Cosmos and that the notion of free will is 'only relative and illusory like all other concepts we use in our rational description of reality' (– Capra *Turning Point*, p. 291).

The record of mystic experiences of great souls from all cultures cannot be, and has not been dismissed as a delusion. These experiences are of persons of high moral and intellectual integrity. The complacent self-assurance of orthodox theologians who set great store by dogmas can only be equated with the self-assurance of orthodox scientists who swear by Descartes and Newton in their world-view. It is true that the new-found interest of modern scientists in mysticism is taking them close to Mahayana Buddhism in which spiritual experience terminates in a void or *Sunyata*. But this notion has its champions also among monotheists (in Islam, Christianity and Hinduism) whose mysticism is of the non-dualist character.

It is possible that a genuine mystic state, brought about by deep meditation and contemplation can result in a metamorphosed ego, as Sri Ramakrishna said, thus enabling it to become a source of creative activity. Even if the world of relations in which we live and operate is 'illusory' it has meaning as a spring-board for higher knowledge. All the basic values which make possible civilized living can spring only from faith in the divinity of the Self whose natural inclination is to seek similar divinity in other selves. This will provide a strong and acceptable spiritual basis for the philosophy of humanism. Ramakrishna's mysticism yielded the outlines of a world-view in which all relations are governed by love, service and sacrifice, and in which man-made frontiers did not imprison his mind in dogmas or pursuit of base objects like woman and money. The new trends in scientific thinking gives us some hope that the credit of discovering a Universal Self which has so far belonged to religion will be soon shared also by the New Science so that from this new-found alliance a Universal Religion will emerge to shape the Universal Man. Sri Ramakrishna's life and achievements might at least help to inspire the emergence of such a phenomenon.

"There are as many ways to God as there are souls,
as many as breaths of Adam's sons"

(Prophet Mohannad in *Hadis*)

"Those who worship other gods with faith, they too,
Kaunteya, adore me. Behind these forms, unknowing
yet, of the one direct way..."

Bhagavad Gita