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JOURNEY BEYOND CASTE, ASHRAMAS AND REINCARNATION

The current status of the doctrine of reincarnation in Hinduism and in Buddhism is unclear. Equally unclear is how essential it is to the religions. Is it merely an unquestioned assumption? Or is it an animistic hangover from the aboriginal tribes in India before the arrival of the Aryan invaders, as Radhakrishnan opines? In his voluminous *History of Indian Philosophy* Dasgupta notes that seldom before or after the Buddha is there any serious attempt made to prove or disprove the doctrine of rebirth.¹ According to R. C. Zaehner, it is simply accepted as a "self-evident fact".

Indeed, this may be as far as one can go in explaining the status of the doctrine. But if a fact is a fact only within the context of a theory, then what is the theory that comprehends the "fact" of reincarnation? Is it a primitive religious one? Is it a purely cultural hypothesis? Or is it a metaphysical intuition of the nature of reality with a religious meaning and interpretation tacked on later? One can say that it is a myth, that is, the symbolic interpretation of the real seen intuitively. But then, is the truth that is thus expressed a cultural or a religious one?

Paul Horsch insists that the Indian theory of the transmigration of souls is foreign to the Indo-Aryan context, and is a genuine Vedic

1. S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Cambridge: University Press, 1969, I, 87. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1929, I, 251. Cf. also A. Des Georges, *La reincarnation des ames*, Paris: Michel, 1966, p. 233. J. Gonda, "A Note on Indian 'Pessimism'," *Selected Studies*, Leiden: Brill, 1975, IV, 302-316. Betty Heimann, "Varuṇa-Rta-Karma," *Beitrage zur Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte Indiens*, ed. W. Kirfel, Bonn: Klopp, 1926, pp. 201ff. W.D. O'Flaherty, ed., *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

development.² Contributing to the formation of the notion were not only the phases in nature, for example, the "rebirths" of the moon, but also animistic beliefs. He grants that only the preliminary stages (*Vorstufen*) of the doctrine are to be found in the Vedas. Still, already in the Brahmanic period the idea of rebirth after a brief stay in another world was current. It was believed that one's existence would be prolonged in the world of the fathers until appropriate funeral offerings had been made; but there was also the risk of a second death and eventual annihilation.

Certainly, reincarnation is a well-developed doctrine by the time of two of the oldest of the Upanishads (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* 6. 2 and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5. 3-10). And it is closely connected with the notions of *karma* and *samsara*. Indeed, it is the introduction of the notion of *karma* which spheres to shift things away from Vedic belief. What would save one? Not sacrifices, but knowledge of the identity with the Atman. In any case, the sort of rebirth that the Upanishads would claim to find in the Vedas is not really there. It was inevitable that the techniques and the consequent insights of yoga would shift the meaning of "salvation" from external rites to the internal "within" of gnosis. Thus, whatever belief there may have been in rebirth before that time, and after, was bound to be different.

By the time of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* the idea of reincarnation is firmly established in Hinduism. The embodied will assume another body; "... in this a thoughtful man is not perplexed" (*Gītā* 2, 13); sure is the death of all that is born, sure the birth of all that dies (*Gītā* 2, 27); though the one that comes nigh to Krishna will never be born again (*Gītā* 8, 16); he escapes the road, the ocean, of recurring death (*Gītā* 12, 6). As with the Upanishads the Gita takes a negative view of sacrifice: those that follow the Vedas, their merit exhausted, will have to be reborn (*Gītā* 9, 20-21). Again, the belief (assumption, or "fact")

2. "Vorstufen der indischen Seelenwanderungslehre," *Asiatische Studien*, 25 (1971) 99-157. Alex Wayman argues that the idea of rebirth or transmigration arose as a correspondence between the human soul and the sun. "Climactic Times in Indian Mythology and Religion", *History of Religions*, 4 (1965) 318. *The Cultural Heritage of India*, 2 ed.; Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission, 1958, I, 80. Betty Heimann, "Within the Framework of Indian Religion: The Main Dogma of Buddhism," *Numen*, 8 (1961) 1-11. N.R. Reat, "Karma and Rebirth in the Upanishads and Buddhism," *Numen*, 24 (1977) 163-185.

of reincarnation is not argued in the Gita; rather, it is used as an argument, by Krishna, to convince the warrior Arjuna to fight in a fratricidal war, since all those killed would be reborn anyway (*Gītā* 2, 12-29).

There are, of course, divergent interpretations of the meaning of reincarnation, or rebirth, in Buddhism and in Hinduism, on account of the Buddhist rejection of the Atman, in the sense of a personal substantial substract. To put it simply: for Buddhism there is rebirth without transmigration (of souls). In the *Questions of King Melinda* III, 5, 5, the example is used of lighting one lamp from another to indicate how there can be "rebirth" of the flame without their being reincarnation of it. There is no substantive loss of the flame on the part of the original lamp with the lighting of the new lamp. Another example used is that of the pupil learning from the teacher or master; the "rebirth" of knowledge in the pupil implies no loss of knowledge on the part of the teacher.

One might characterize the difference between the two by saying that for Hinduism there is transmigration of souls, whereas for Buddhism there is a rebirth of consciousness, along with its accompanying *karma*, since it is possible to recall previous rebirths or existences, as may be inferred from the *Jātakas*, the tales of the Buddha's previous existences. But despite these differences, both Hinduism and Buddhism are concerned, or at least are supposed to be concerned, not with gaining a happy rebirth, but with putting rebirth or reincarnation to an end, getting off, once and for all, the eternal merry-go-round of samsara. As the Gita puts it, he is not born again who knows beginningless Nature and Person (*Gītā* 12, 23). The continuous round of births and deaths must be put to a stop. So if what is reborn dies, then the thing to do is to put a stop to rebirth or reincarnation.

Whether in the Hindu or in the Buddhist context, however, rebirth or reincarnation is increasingly regarded as a "weak hypothesis."³ There is little question but that the doctrine was part and parcel

3. D.L. Gosling, "Thai Buddhism in Transition," *Religion*, 7 (1977) 18-34, who quotes 1970-1973 studies of Indian scientists, and the views of Thais educated in the universities. N.K. Devaraja, *Hinduism and Christianity*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969, however, begins his work with an explanation and attempted justification of the 'doctrine,' considering it as an aspect or corrolary to the law of *karma*

(Contd.)

of classical Hinduism and Buddhism. It was, however, called into question with the onset of *bhakti* religious devotionalism. What attempts that have been made in recent times to defend the doctrine have largely been brought on by the impact of modern science upon the cultures in which these religions are set and by contacts with other religions. Nevertheless, that the belief, doctrine, assumption, "fact", or whatever, is undergoing a rethinking and reinterpretation in contemporary Buddhism and Hinduism is obvious.

Caste

Further weakening the notion of reincarnation, at least in Hinduism, is the breaking down of the notion of caste in Indian society, at least in its rigid form. Or to put it another way, the belief that each individual is reborn into a particular caste as a result of past action is less and less used to justify the caste system, especially as that system is increasingly called into question in its confrontation with Western political and social values.

There are other reasons for the breaking down of caste. It no longer successfully functions as an effective division of labor, or better, as an effective division of economic function within the society. Indeed, the extent to which caste ever really did provide the structure of collaboration and coordination, much less the assimilative power of Indian culture, should perhaps be called into question. Granted, from the Vedas down to the Gita, caste has been given a religious interpretation or justification; still, its inclusion in the *dharma* (the way things are, and should be) has never been more than artificial. The very words for it, *jati* (birth, species) or *varna* (color), are indicative of this fact.

and contrasting it with Buddhism. N. G. Chaudhuri insists that doctrine of rebirth is central; *Hinduism: A Religion to Live By*, New Delhi: B.I. Publications, 1979, p. 10; however, he argues that it is because Hindus love the world so much that they believe in cycles of birth, so that the possibility of leaving it for good is rendered thoroughly remote.

This mode of argumentation against the thesis of Max Weber's *The Religion of India*, namely the otherworldliness of Hinduism, may be typical of the life-affirming attitude of Vedic religion. However, the notion of reincarnation in its classical form does not really get developed until the Upanishads.

In the earliest period of the Indian religion the social classes were associated with, and were said to be established by, the ritual sacrifice, the creator God *purusha*, the primal person which, in self-sacrificing itself, dismembers itself in the creation of the world. This is one of the early accounts of creation. In the Gita it is asserted that Krishna generated the caste system (*Gita* 4, 13). Indeed, this is one of the reasons given for Krishna's regenerating himself in one of his manifestations or appearances as an *Avatar* (descent), namely to reinstate caste: in such a pass the *dharma* is not being observed. Now it is entirely true; unlike the religion of the Vedas, the Gita opens up religion, in the sense of the self-surrendering devotionism of *bhakti* to the lower classes, and to women. But although the devotees may lose themselves in devotional feeling, as identity with the God is attained, they still end up in the caste with which they began, and in which they were born. In other words, the imagined egalitarianism of *bhakti* is only apparent. The Gita is by no means a revolutionary social document, but fully in harmony with the Hindu caste tradition.⁴

It is sometimes maintained that caste serves the important function in Indian culture not only of social but also of religious assimilation, providing the broadest possible structure for the acceptance not only of a wide variety of peoples and cultures, but also of different religions and sects. It is argued that the great religious freedom of India is, or at least was, possible because of the very rigidity of the caste system, as contrasted with those societies in which there is greater social and political freedom, but tighter systems of religious orthodoxy. However, if this were the case, then one would expect India to become less and less tolerant of other religious beliefs and persuasions as the caste system more and more breaks down. This does not, however, appear to be the case. Which leads one to believe that the artificiality of caste,

4. D.D. Kosambi, "Social and Economic Aspects of the Bhagavad Gita," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 4 (1961) 219-221, notes that "Practically anything can be read into the *Gita* by a determined person, without denying the validity of the caste system", (p. 202). Cf. also Paul Levy, "Le probleme des castes dans *Homo Hierarchicus* de Louis Dumont," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 13 (1970) 91-100. Betty Heimann, "The Basic Ideas of India and the West," *Indian Art and Letters*, N.S. 19 (1945) 10-14. According to Louis Renou, *L'Hindouisme*, 7 ed.; Paris: PUF, 1979, p. 78, it is the notion of impurity which is at the base, theoretically at least, of the institution of caste.

even though it may be given a religious justification and underpinning in the Hindu tradition, is not really as basic to Indian religious tolerance as, rather, the unparalleled assimilative power of the Hindu notion of God.

Ashramas

Perhaps more important for understanding the structure of the Hindu religion in its societal expression are the *ashramas*, or stages in life. According to the classic Hindu view there are four stages in the life of man. The first quarter of the hundred years is to be spent in study and preparation under a teacher or guru (the *brahmacarya*); the next quarter, as a householder (*grahasthya*), fulfilling one's familial and social duties. After these are completed one may repair to the forest, perhaps with one's wife, in preparation for the last stage, one of complete detachment, in which one becomes a *sannyasin*, a renouncer. The ritualistic, sacrificial, or priestly aspect disappears with the last two stages, giving way to the monastic. The priestly role disappears because the fires of sacrifices have been turned into the sacrificial fires within, the "heats", or *tapas*, of austerity. The vital breaths in yogic practice take the place of the ritual fires.

The renouncer who gains spiritual insight may himself become a teacher or guru. In its communal tradition Indian monasticism depends so heavily upon the spiritual master or guru that few such ashrams survive the death of their founder. This very fact guarantees that there will be sects in Hinduism, although it should be noted that in the Indian context "sect" is not a bad word. It is the idiosyncratic insight of the particular renouncer that produces the guru, and thus the sects, and the sects within sects, of Hinduism.

One can interpret the system of *ashramas* as the attempt, on the part of the culture, to bring the endemic tendency toward renunciation and the desire for gnosis, or mystical insight, into some sort of structure. One is permitted to "go the spiritual route" only after the obligations of family and the duties to the society have been fulfilled. Then, and only then, is one freed from the constraints of society and caste even though the route of the *sannyasin* traditionally is open only to the higher castes. The climate and the practice of begging makes this sort of wandering life possible; the frustrations of a tight social struc-

ture or, in present-day terms, the bureaucracy, make it desirable; but it is the Indian religious impulse which makes it a reality.

The spiritual route taken by the wandering ascetics of India, the *saddhus*, is a path of spiritual freedom. One can go where one likes, do what one likes, say what one likes. Such a one is totally and absolutely free. A Western parallel for such a freedom is not easy to find. There is the freedom accorded to the writer in France; there is the Christian saint in certain ages of the Church, perhaps the athlete in some cultures, or the clown. But the parallels are not exact, since the renouncer makes of himself an out-caste; though it might be more accurate to say that the sannyasin has placed himself beyond caste. Indeed, there are some that would appear to have gone even beyond the fourth, and final, of the ashramas, dispensing not only with the staff and the small metal bucket, the symbols of the pilgrim, but with every manner of clothing as well. He is the wandering naked ascetic clothed only with the wind or the yellow dust of India.⁵

5. "Whether it is considered as the fifth ashrama or simply as beyond all ashramas, a life-style of total freedom—freedom from rules and customs, from duties and insignia—was recognized by a broad spectrum of Bramanical thinkers." Patrick Oliville, "Pancanas ramavidhi: Rite for Becoming a Naked Ascetic," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Sudasiens*, 24 (1980) 129-145. Same author, same journal, "A Definition of World Renunciation," 19 (1975) 75-83. Cf. also Daniel Acharuparambil, "Monasticism in Hindu Tradition," *Euntes Docete*, 30 (1977) 443. *The Cultural Heritage of India*, I, 217, 242-243. M. B'ardeau and C. Malamoud, *Le sacrifice dans l'Inde ancienne*, Paris: PUF, 1976, p. 35. J.C. Heesterman, "Brahmin, Ritual, and Renouncer," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Sud und Ostasiens*, 8 (1964) 1-31. Karel Werner, "Yoga and the Rg. Veda: An Interpretation of the *Kāśin* Hymn (RV, 10, 136)," *Religious Studies*, 13 (1977) 289-302. Louis Dumont, "Le renoncement dans les religions de l'Inde," *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, 7 (1959) 45-69. J. Monchanin and H. le Saux, *Ermîtes du Saccidananda*, 2 ed.; Tournai/Paris: Casterman, 1957, p. 118.