

## REVELATION AND COMMUNITY: A CENTRAL FACTOR IN THE EXAMINATION OF THE DIVINE

Revelation is the centrality of the community to which and in which God discloses Himself. How do the different religions look upon the human community in the light of the divine self-disclosure? Is not the community itself an integral part of Revelation? How does the Community shape the religious experience and man's response to God? I shall examine this point by taking Christianity and Hinduism as two divergent approaches to the same problem.

### I

#### CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO REVELATION AND UNIVERSAL SALVATION

A development towards a dialogue of Christianity with the non-Christian religions is reflected in the theological thinking of the catholic church. In the 19th century Pope Pius IX (1854) continued more expressively the traditional teaching concerning the eternal fate of non-Christians and stated that they can find salvation with the grace of God when there is invincible ignorance as to the true Christian religion. In the following years the discussions went around the question of which elements of faith and love were the bare minimum for non-Christians in order to be saved.

Only when one realised quite distinctly that an individual is, also in his religious life, primarily a social being, one began to see the necessity of a *community* for a non-Christian's salvation through which man receives his faith, expresses himself, gives, matures and so walks all the way towards his final goal. If both God's "saving design extends to all men" (Vatican II: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 1) and

man as social being tries to find his salvation through one of the great religions, one has to ascertain the fact that a non-Christian can be saved not in spite of his religion but only in or even through his religion.

Thus according to the Christian understanding there are three factors in the relationship between God and the world: The focus point of all religious interest is the goal and meaning of the world, the *salvation of the world*. This end can be neither known nor achieved without God *revealing* and communicating Himself. And, finally, there is the fact that most people in the world have contact with God through or at least under the influence of a religious *community*.

The interrelationship of God's revelation, man's salvation and religious communities is confirmed in the documents of the II. Vatican Council. In the Declaration on the 'Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions', 51, it is said that "all peoples form a single community; their origin is one... one is also their final goal, God. His Providence, the manifestations of His goodness, His plan of salvation extend to all men (cf. Wis. 8,1; Acts 14,17; Rom 2,6f; 1 Tim 2,4)..." This points to the fact that God reveals Himself to the non-Christian world. Since revelation to all men in nature (eg. Rom 1,18-2, 20; Acts 14, 16f; 17, 24ff) opens the way to the supernatural eternal goal, it is wrong to speak about an opposition between natural and supernatural revelation. The opposition is between revelation in nature and revelation in history. Supernatural revelation in nature and supernatural revelation in the Judeo-Christian history are aspects of the same revelation of God's saving design. The Pastoral Constitution 'Gaudium et Spes' § 22, emphasizes that "since Christ died for all men and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery". Normally this will happen through the non-Christian religions which "not rarely reflect a ray of the Truth which enlightens all men" (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 2).

When it is confirmed that God reveals Himself in and through religions and religious communities, it does not throw much light on the question of the inner relationship between this revelation and the religious community. A religion may come into existence because of the fact that man as a social being needs a community.

But it might also be that prior to this fact the contact itself of God with man includes something that necessarily leads to the creation of community. Are religions mere organisations and means by which religious and moral teaching is communicated and sacred traditions transmitted and preserved? Or even beyond this, is life before God as community-life intrinsically bound up with God's revelation itself and thus a pattern of his saving action?

To answer these questions we have to probe deeper into the nature of this God's saving action and realization of His universal plan of salvation, since only God determines the role and function of religious communities, because it is in God's revelation of Himself that the pattern of His universal saving activity becomes apparent, His revelation in history must be more closely examined.

## II

### REVELATION AND RE-CREATION OF THE WORLD

Theoretically, the demand for community could be just a positive law of God, as it were, a condition to be saved without any identity with the ultimate goal itself. Such an extrinsicism, however, is not accepted in the history of revelation. In the beginning of the *Old Testament* God's creative revelation of Himself makes Israel a people, and the covenant which He makes with Abraham and Moses is responsible for the existence and survival of this small tribe.

In times of great national stress, of wars and persecution, and of Israel's infidelity to Jahwe, it is mainly through the prophets that God speaks to the people, not only forgiving their sinfulness but opening up new horizons of a future messianic age—including the whole world in His salvation (eg. Is. 45. 22).

And to assure Israel of His promise to save it God reveals Himself as He in whose hands everything is held from the very beginning. God can save the world because He is the *creator* of the world (eg. Am. 4, 13; 5, 8f; Jer. 10, 6-16; Is. 40, 21-26). Creation (Gn. 1 and 2) is the first act of salvation.

In the light of God's creative power, ultimate salvation is the *re-creation* of the world. The whole universe will be renewed. Jahwe will create new heavens and a new earth (e.g. Is. 65, 17; 66, 22f; s. also Ez. 36, 26-35).

In the *New Testament*, we find a similar pattern as in the *Old Testament*, of God revealing Himself through Jesus Christ. After the resurrection of Christ and Pentecost the first small Christian community spread the message of Christ to the Jews to save Israel. Only, by slow degrees, or gradually they realised that the 'new covenant' in Christ was universal (eg. Acts 10) and included the whole of mankind, "men from every race and tongue, people and nation" (Rev. 5, 9f).

The more this universal vision of mankind's salvation was deepened, the more Christ's *creative* power was seen. He is "the one Lord through whom all things exist and by whom we are" (1 Co. 8, 6). In Him all things were created and now subsist (Col. 1, 16f). He is God's Word by whom all things were made (Jo. 1, 1ff). Here again creation is the beginning of salvation.

By His creative power He will *re-create* heaven and earth (2p 3, 13) after the dissolution of the old world (1 Co. 7, 31) so that all things will be united in Him (Eph. 1, 10). The beginning of this salvific re-creation is the communication of His Spirit to men (Ro. 8, 14-17; Gal. 3, 26ff), which makes them the beloved children of the Father. Christian community is the commencement of Christ creating a new world.

## III

### HINDU APPROACH TO REVELATION AND CREATION OF COMMUNITY

According to the Christian understanding, universal salvation will not be achieved by means of an escape of all men from the world, but by God's new creation of the world. His revelation is not just information about His eternal plans, but self communication in which they to whom God communicates Himself become united with Him and, consequently, one with His loving eternal will for mankind. In this unity with God and His will, man cannot but love this very mankind. And this is God's way of gradually re-creating the world by revealing Himself. Hinduism has the same universal claim as Christianity. The way to the Absolute is unrestrictedly open to everybody, irrespective of one's caste, class or nation. This goal of man is revealed and laid down in sacred Scriptures like the Vedas, which are regarded as revelation in the strict sense (*śruti*), or in other writings like the Bhagavad-gītā. According to the Pūrvamīmāṃsā, the revealed word (*śabda*)

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is the only source of any religious cognition. This word is eternal, efficient in itself, and without inner connexion with a 'speaking' personal God. But the understanding of the meaning of the revealed truth is not always required.

Particularly when understood as *mantra*, the mere contact with this word is sufficient. The right use and recitation of the divine text establishes immediate connexion with this reality. All important events in Hindu way of life are accompanied by the recital of *mantras*.

But so far as our problem is concerned, this specific Hindu belief in revealed words and their inherent effect is not of much interest. *Sruti* is mainly divine revelation; it is communication of truth about the essence of reality and the ultimate goal of man. The reception of this revealed truth is not a mere acceptance of information about the Absolute, but the realization and experience of this revealed reality itself as the goal of man. This revealed reality is interpreted in many ways: It can be the ultimate total liberation from all relativities and a blissful isolation of one's real self (*purusha*); often it is the emergence into the eternal ocean of oneness with the absolute brahman; or it can be the perfect unity of love with God.

But in spite of the same absolute goal for every man, the experience of this ultimate revealed reality does not lead to the creation of community and does not demand it. Surely family life, social duties, caste requirements etc., are important as they must be fulfilled to maintain the order of the cosmos. According to the orthodox schools, the loyal fulfilment of manifold duties is certainly a step towards final liberation in as far as the life of a householder (*grhastha*) provides the preliminary, social training for the perfection of character before retiring from the world as a hermit or an ascetic. But community life as such has no *inner* connexion with the ultimate goal and the revelation of this reality. For the world, history and human relationships are relative and belong to the ever-recurring realm of *samsāra*. Only by liberation from the bonds that bind him to this life man can reach the ultimate destiny.

This is achieved either through the annihilation of egotism (*ahamkara*), that is, through fulfilment of duties in a spirit of total desirelessness. Or it will be achieved by realizing that society with its obligations, duties and rights is not real, since all duality is an illusion, as put forward by all schools of absolutism. Only

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by developing this consciousness will one understand the true divine unity of all men.

Nevertheless it should be pointed out that in modern times Vivekananda stressed the obligation to work for social justice and for the unity of mankind since all men have the same atman. Here an inner connexion between the eternal Self and life in the world is emphasized.

#### IV

### GOD IN ALL AND ALL IN GOD

In Christianity the revealed promise of universal salvation concerns the world itself: not liberation from the world but of the world leads to God. This transformation or re-creation of the world and mankind towards an eternal and blissful being with God is not inherent ('natural') in the world as Hinduism rightly recognizes. It is only because of God that from the outset of its existence the world and mankind receive a supernatural dimension, which is a pure gift of His love ('grace'). Without God's loving acceptance of the world by communicating Himself, the world would finally relapse into nothingness.

Ultimately, it is this reality that was expressed in *Christ's* life and death, when God revealed to mankind in the man Jesus that His love for mankind surpasses even death, and is everlasting. Men killed Jesus Christ on the cross, refused everything that was a divine challenge in human life, but they could not kill his love for mankind. God's acceptance even encompasses man's refusal of God and His salvific plan. Christ rose from the dead and this is not to be understood as rebirth after death, as an event within the realm of space and time, but as the absolute fulfilment in and with God. In this sense Jesus' love is definite and God's love for mankind in him creatively lives on in eternity.

Man, who fully accepts this God's eternal love for mankind in faith, has to realise this divine love in himself. A *Christian* cannot say: I believe in God, without saying, I believe in the world. He will not just yearn for the unity with God, who saves him out of this world into the otherworldliness of eternal bliss, but he will have to realize union with *God-who-loves-the-world*, to become one with *God-for-man*. He will be filled with God's love and so he will be one with God; and in as much as God's

love is love-for-man he will be filled with God's love for man and will be one with man. That is, he will be touched by a love of God that makes him give himself up to God and at the same time and to the same extent will draw him to the 'next', to his neighbour, to show him that he too is loved by God in eternity.

This is basically the 'mission' of a follower of Christ to make God's divine love visible in human love and to show man, by identifying himself with him, that this man as he lives is of more importance and greater value than that man himself might ever imagine. This certainly does not always demand an emotional liking for the other person; it requires, however, true interest in the person with his individual character and his specific problems. It asks for a 'kenosis', an emptying oneself, by exposing oneself to the multiplicity of human expressions and visions. But, as we all know, this ideal and divine mission is seldom accomplished by the Christian.

Nevertheless, according to Christian belief, this is the way to mediate God's saving love. It is made known to the world through the humanization of the divine love. All who are filled with this love try by its strength to be one with one another, and live as one community. This is basically the purpose for which the Christian *Church* was founded, and that is how she has conducted herself throughout the ages. This is her ideal and she believes that in all her difficulties God helps her at least in some way to give expression to this divine-human final goal of mankind.

Thus God's revelation of Himself is creative. It converts and transforms man and makes him an instrument in the work of unifying salvation. Through man God begins to recreate the universe.

A Hindu will naturally raise the question how a human person who is relative and transient can be of *absolute* value. Can the relative and the absolute be linked? According to the *Christian* understanding, this is achieved only if the ultimate reality is a personal God, who, because of his *absolute freedom and love* can absolutely wish and thus create relative human freedom and life without being dependent on it. Because of this divine freedom, the actions of man's life are not just acts with strictly automatic consequences like those of cause and effect (*karma*), but they can be transformed, even wiped away, when man is touched by God's forgiveness and creative love.

As in the case of God's love so also as regards the ideal of *human love* and consequently *community*, Christianity and Hinduism differ: Only he who is liberated from his egotism is capable of true love. The Hindu very strongly emphasizes detachment as the best way of liberation from oneself. Detachment leads to equanimity (*samatva*), by which he treats all men equally well and in a friendly way without any self-interest. This is partly the result of his final liberation, and it helps greatly in leading a peaceful and friendly community life. But this love for man is not for any man as he is *in himself*; it is a mere consequence of the serene, detached attitude, which is no longer aggressive, angry or violent towards any living creature.

But their goal and ideal are the same: God revealed in all men. The Christian must also be detached from his own ego, and aim at a freedom *for* the world. His love necessarily builds up the community because it encounters man in his specific individuality, strengthens and encourages him, makes him important, and in short, tries to show him that he with all his good and bad features is loved and accepted by God. In Christianity there is no salvation for man unless he loves and exposes himself to the needs of his neighbour. In Hinduism salvation is only for those whose detached love and serenity can no longer be affected by earthly worries caused by the particularities of things. They see God in all and all in God; the all of the community of beings reveal the One.