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## ENCOUNTER BETWEEN HINDUISM AND CHRISTIANITY

(A Historico Theological appraisal.)

### Introduction

Encounters between one religion and another have been a constant phenomenon in India for centuries, at first among Indian religions themselves and later between Indian and other religions. However, today, the meeting of religions is a more common feature, as the world is gradually growing smaller and smaller, and every man is becoming the neighbour of everyone else. All the same, one cannot minimize the need for encounters among religions, as all of them are obliged, one way or other, to meet the challenge posed by a growing secularism, materialism and atheism. Scholars like Raymond Panikkar and others are of the opinion that religions are moving towards an encounter not merely on account of the present irreligious wave, but also because of their inner dynamism, both intellectual and existential; intellectually, because no religion can claim to have deciphered fully the mystery of man and God; existentially, because man himself suffers more and more the attraction as well as the repulsion of other religions. The meeting of religions is a vital religious problem. A missionary zeal without knowledge and love, would lead to disastrous consequences. A proud isolation without regard for others would be impious selfishness and cause the ruin of one's own religion.<sup>1</sup>

The study of the encounter between religions is as old as the scientific and comparative study of religions. Scholars like

1. Raymond Panikkar, *Worship and Secular Man*, (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 62-69.

Rudolf Otto<sup>2</sup> and F.X. Max Müller<sup>3</sup> have contributed immensely to the mutual understanding of religions. In the recent past the study has captured the attention of many serious students. Stephen Neil's book *Christian Faith and other Faiths*,<sup>4</sup> and Kenneth Cragg's *Christianity in World Perspective*<sup>5</sup> are only two examples of this growing interest. What we propose to undertake in the following pages is a modest study on a rather restricted sphere of religious encounter, namely the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity. This encounter, though not unique in itself, has got certain characteristic features which make the study interesting though sometimes intriguing. We may divide the long history of that encounter into four main periods: the Early Beginnings, the Middle Ages, the Modern Times and the Contemporary Period. We shall try to make a short historical survey of the different periods together with a modest, theological appraisal. We hope that our concluding remarks will not only generate interest in the study of the past but also encourage experimentation in the present and open vision for future study and research.

### 1. Early Beginnings

Arnold Toynbee has reportedly maintained that mankind is moving towards an Oriental religion, namely Christianity, but in combination with one of the Hindu outlooks.<sup>6</sup> This vision of Toynbee is of special interest for the Hindu-Christian encounter in India. It is equally interesting to look at the earliest Hindu-

2. Rudolf Otto contributed immensely to the comparative study of religions. His book *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923) became a classic on the subject.
3. Max Müller, the 19th c. Oxford scholar was instrumental to a great extent in opening the unfathomable riches of Eastern religions to the West, by editing their scriptures in the *Sacred Books of the East* series.
4. Stephen Neil, *Christian Faith and other Faiths*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).
5. Kenneth Cragg, *Christianity in World Perspective*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968).
6. Dom Bede Griffiths wrote: "In the final meeting of East and West in Christ, the Church will receive into herself all the treasures of the wisdom of the East, in which Christ is already hidden, and the East will find all its aspirations fulfilled in Him in whom dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily." Bede Griffiths, "The Meeting of East and West," in Christopher Derrick (ed), *Light of Revelation and Non-Christians* (New York: Society of St. Paul, 1965), p. 37.

Christian encounter which dates from the arrival of St. Thomas the Apostle in India. According to the well-established tradition, St. Thomas arrived in India in the second half of the first century A.D.<sup>7</sup> According to the same tradition, he was able to convert a few Brahmin families to his own Christian religion, before he was martyred in A.D. 72. The seven churches he founded are all in Kerala.<sup>8</sup> We do not know very much about the reasons and circumstances that paved the way for the conversion of some members of the traditional Indian priestly class to Christianity, at the time of St. Thomas. However, from what we know of their subsequent history, moral values and social customs, one is not surprised, if they are described as "Hindu in culture, Christian in religion, Oriental in worship."<sup>9</sup> Today, although one may not agree completely with the view that the ancient Indian community of St. Thomas Christians can be taken as an example of the perfect adaptation of the Catholic Church to India, this ancient community which has come down to our own times, and which is still flourishing as an Indian Christian Community merits special study and scrutiny. According to scholars, this was not the only

7. After weighing the arguments for and against the strong tradition of St. Thomas' Apostolate in South India, Cardinal Tisserant wrote: "Summing up the present results of historical scholarship on the origin of Christianity in India, particularly in Malabar, we may say this: there was a very ancient evangelization, started by St. Thomas the Apostle, and mainly in South India." Eugene Cardinal Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1957), p. 10. For a detailed appreciation of the arguments, Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-10. = cf. also, Placid, "The South Indian Apostolate of St. Thomas," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 58 (1952), pp. 229-245; also P. J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970), pp. 15-26; cf. E.R. Hambye, "Saint Thomas in India," *Clergy Monthly* 16 (1952), pp. 362-375; A.M. Mundadan, *Tradition of the St. Thomas Christians* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1970), pp. 2-6; C.P. Mathew and M.M. Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas* (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1967), pp. 5-13; F.A. Plattner, *The Catholic Church in India* (Allahabad: St. Paul's Publications), p. 15.
8. These Churches are believed to be in Cranganore, Palayur, Parur, Korkkangalam, Niranam, Chayal (Nilakal) and Quilon. cf. Placid, *The South Indian Apostolate of St. Thomas*, p. 231, Mundadan, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62.
9. For an appreciation of this multidimensional individuality of the St. Thomas Christians, cf. Placid, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion. Oriental in Worship," *Ostchristliche Studien*, 8 (1959), pp. 89-104.

Christian Community in India in ancient times.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, regrettable to note that internal evidence of Indian History upto the 13th century A.D. with regard to the state of existence and growth of these churches, is comparatively scarce. At any rate, there is no doubt that Christianity was established in South India from very early times. Tradition also records that in A.D. 345 a Syrian Christian merchant called Thomas of Cana brought with him a group of Syrian settlers to Malabar.<sup>11</sup> Missionaries from the Persian Church, which also called the 'Church of the East', used to come to South India before the arrival of the Portuguese in India.<sup>12</sup>

Although Christianity claimed a few families from the traditional Indian—learned and priestly classes, one does not find any trace of a distinctive type of theology resulting from this living encounter. Probably it may be too much to expect a comparatively small community of indigenous Christians, living relatively far away from the mother church, and surrounded by a strong and well-developed religion, to create a distinctive type of theology. At the same time it is remarkable that they were able to make a distinction between the faith they believed in and the social customs and habits they were used to. While accepting the new faith, they did not find it incongruous to keep their family and social customs, some of which have come down to our day, giving it an added Christian dimension.<sup>13</sup> This may also be proof enough to demonstrate the flexibility of the early church, the lack of which was the reason for bitter complaint by people like Dr. Radhakrishnan, against the Church in later centuries.<sup>14</sup> It is also important to remember that this was a period when the churches in

10. Speaking of the Apostolate of St. Thomas, some of the early writers like Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Rufinus of Aquileia and others make mention of Parthia. Parthia in the early Christian centuries included a considerable portion of modern India.
11. Cf. Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity*, pp. 8-9; Mundadan, *Traditions*, pp. 89; 92-97.
12. Cf. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, pp. 36; 63-69; cf. also Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity*, p. 10.
13. For a better appreciation of these social customs, cf. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, pp. 79-83.
14. Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, (2nd imp., London: Oxford University press, 1940), pp. 276-277. Cf. also Bede Griffiths, "The meeting of East and West," in Christopher Derrick (ed), *Light of Revelation and Non-Christians*, (New York: Society of St. Paul, 1965), pp. 18-19.



Rome, Ephesus and other places were also adjusting themselves to the new climes and countries.<sup>15</sup> Still one is inclined to ask a few questions at this stage of the Indian Church's development. Did the new Christian community find any similarity or dissimilarity in their beliefs about God, His native, the role of man and the universe etc. with that of their adopted religion? Was it a simple substitution or a kind of integration and assimilation? Did the fact of their regeneration in the spirit bring about a similar change in their outlook and attitudes? Did they consider the retention of their social customs and habits while they changed their faith as an integration or mere juxtaposition? What was their attitude towards witnessing to their faith in Christ? Did they realize the need and urgency of evangelizing their compatriots and to what effect? Even if one would like to find satisfactory answers to these and allied questions, we are not in a position to answer them all at the moment; and that for two reasons: First of all we do not simply have adequate internal and external data about this early period of the Indian Church. What we might be able to do is to try out some hypotheses based on their later development and history of which we have sufficient matter to work with. Secondly the limitations of space do not permit us at this juncture to go deep into the possible answers to the questions raised. All the same, from the meagre sources of evidence we have, we are inclined to believe that the Hindu-Christians of early centuries were able to work out some kind of integration between their new faith and the old social and family customs they retained.<sup>16</sup> This may further imply that either they gave these customs and habits a new Christian dimension which may well be the case or they accepted the new faith on their own terms, which we are not in a position to ascertain for lack of adequate information. We may not be wrong in maintaining, with Boyd and others, that although the early Christian community in India has been culturally closely integrated with Indian Society, there has been practically little attempt to work out a theology in Indian terminology and philosophical background.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand one cannot entirely discard the possible in-

15. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

16. For a detailed appreciation of this sense and practice of integration in Church architecture, administration of sacraments and sacramentals, cf. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, pp. 85-94.

17. Cf. R.H.S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1969), p. 9.

fluence Christianity had on the religions with which it came into contact. Thus we may conclude that although the process of the earliest encounter between Hinduism and Christianity did not result in a perfect integration and assimilation, it was none the less a two-way-traffic, beneficial to both the partners. It helped Christianity to acclimatise itself in its new home, while at the same time playing the role of a catalyst in influencing and transforming certain ideas of the existing religious traditions.

## 2. Middle Ages

The second encounter between Hinduism and Christianity took place some time in the middle of the 16th century A.D.<sup>18</sup> The Sixteenth century witnessed the beginning of a full-scale missionary work on the part of the Roman Catholics. This work in India was pioneered by the Portuguese,<sup>19</sup> with Saint Francis Xavier and his companions in the lead.<sup>20</sup> Coming in the wake of the Reformation in Europe and following the drive for restoration on the part of the Roman Church, the pattern followed by the missionaries in India was that of close adherence to Roman Christianity as it existed in the West. The unfortunate accolade between the cross and the standard had its undesirable effects although it brought about the conversion of a large number of people in certain parts of the country. It seems that the Hindu community in general was so dissatisfied and alienated that in places they even avoided any communication with Christians.<sup>21</sup>

18. Although it was on 14th May 1498 that Vasco da Gama landed near Calicut, the first Portuguese missionaries did not reach India before the first quarter of the 16th century. For a fuller appreciation of this encounter, cf. Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity*, pp. 27ff; Plattner, *Catholic Church in India*, pp. 16ff; cf. also A.M. Mundadan, "The Eastern Church, 16th-17th centuries" in H.C. Perumalil, E.R. Hambye (eds), *Christianity in India* (Alleppey: Prakasam Publications, 1972), p. 85. We do not forget some "tentative and short-lived visits" by European missionaries to India in the thirteenth century. cf. Plattner, *Catholic Church in India*, p. 16.

19. For fuller details, cf. J. Wicki, "The Portuguese Padroado in India in the 16th c. and St. Francis Xavier" in H.C. Perumalil and E.R. Hambye (eds), *Christianity in India*, pp. 46ff; cf. also Plattner, *Catholic Church in India*, pp. 17-18, 19.

20. Francis Xavier came to Goa in the beginning of May 1542. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

21. Cf. Plattner, *Catholic Church in India*, pp. 18-21. Although the apologetics of the author may be an explanation, it would hardly be a justification.



However, the beginning of a new and changed attitude began to appear with the activities of Roberts De Nobili, a young Jesuit missionary who came to India in 1606 A.D.<sup>22</sup> From his own personal experience and that of others, he came to the conclusion that he could never come closer to the people of India and win them over to Christ if he continued to live in the European-style. He was aware of the contempt and disdain his Indian visitors had for the Portuguese ways of life-style, dress and customs.<sup>23</sup> Thus well aware of the fact that his black cassock and leather shoes were coming in the way of his work, he sought and finally received permission to adopt the Indian style of dress and costumes that were common to "holy men" in the country.<sup>24</sup> This change of attire and way of life seem to have worked well in his being accepted as a "sannyasi" or religious master, thus making it possible to establish a community of disciples around him. This in turn would make him greatly acceptable to the masses to whom he could preach the Good News of the Christian faith.<sup>25</sup> Considering the spirit of the times this new departure was certainly admirable and in a sense heroic. The only precedent to this was the case of De Nobili's compatriot and fellow-religious Fr. Matteo Ricci, who entered China and accepted the Buddhist way of dress and life-style. He dressed like Buddhist bonzes in ash-coloured coarse cloth, with shaven head and face.<sup>26</sup> This kind of adaptation, at least in externals, was itself quite a step forward in the encounter between Christianity and the indigenous cultures. But the question is whether this was an adequate enough step to demonstrate their appreciation of the local culture and indigenous religions.

De Nobili was not satisfied with the adoption of the Indian style of life alone. With the help of a pandit he learned Sanskrit so that he could read and understand the Sacred Books of the Hindus.<sup>27</sup> He admired some of the doctrines found in the Vedas and the Upanishads. He even wrote to the Jesuit General: "We imagine that these people are ignorant, but I assure you that they

22. Cf. A. Meersman, "Development of the Church under the Padroado" in H.C. Perumalil and E.R. Hambye (eds), *Christianity in India*, p. 74; cf. also Plattner, *Catholic Church in India*, p. 21.

23. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

24. Cf. Bede Griffiths, "The meeting of East and West" in C. Derrick (ed), *Light of Revelation and non-Christians*, p. 20; cf. also Plattner, *Catholic Church in India*, p. 21.

25. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

26. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

27. Cf. Plattner, *Catholic Church in India*, p. 21.

are not. I am at present reading one of their books in which I am learning (philosophy) over again; the terms they use are almost the same as ours, but, of course, their philosophy is fundamentally different."<sup>28</sup> However, further reading and discussions with his pandit seem to have convinced the missionary that the Vedas were basically polytheistic or pantheistic and the Vedanta or the Upanishads, as explained in those parts of India (Madurai) unequivocally monistic.<sup>29</sup> This way of understanding the sacred doctrines of the Hindus proved crucial in his effort at Indianization of Christianity. He felt constrained by the "monistic" theology which left no room for the central doctrine of Christianity, the Incarnation. Similarly it left no room for the union of the human person with the living God in a love which transforms but does not consume. Thus he found it impossible to accept Vedantism as a philosophy compatible with Christian revelation, and hence abandoned his attempt to base an apologetic directly on the Vedas or on the Upanishads.<sup>30</sup>

This seems to have been a turning point in De Nobili's attempts for a real encounter with Hinduism. He too seems to have been possessed or obsessed in the idea of a clear cut distinction between true and false religions. In one of his important works '*Gñānopadesa Kurippidam*' he mentioned six distinguishing marks of the true religion; and examining the Hindu religion as he knew it, he found that Hinduism did not fulfil practically any one of them. Therefore, his attempt was to bring Hindus to the true religion of Christ. Hence his uncompromising attempt was to win converts to Christianity. In fact we find that he repeatedly emphasised in his writings that all religions other than Christianity, were the creation of ignorant men, blind to the truth; they lead to hell; there is no way of salvation in them, because the gods they profess are not gods. He was committed to spreading the Catholic faith and this he seems to have tried to do by simple expositions of the faith in terms of the scholastic theology of the middle ages and particularly after the teaching of the council of Trent.<sup>31</sup> His life-long contact with Hinduism does not seem to have changed his attitude towards it. In spite of the fact that he made a few references to the greatness of Hindu philosophical

28. V. Cronin, *A Pearl to India: The life of Robert De Nobili*, 1959, p. 97.

29. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

30. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

31. Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, p. 13.



thinking in his letters to his superiors and friends abroad, he did not accept the possibility of using Hindu concepts to expound christian faith. One may not be wrong in concluding that by and large his attitude to religious Hinduism was entirely negative, and he wrote only to refute.<sup>32</sup>

The result of this encounter between Hinduism and Christianity in the seventeenth century was meagre and short-lived. There was practically no room for a meaningful dialogue between the two religions in the way they were understood by their protagonists. Perhaps it is surprising to note that even a person like De Nobili, who was sympathetic to the customs and habits of the people of India in general, and to certain religio-philosophical doctrines in particular, was not able to find a bridge-head connecting the two. Perhaps it is not surprising, coming as it did, just after the counter-offensive against Protestant Reformation in Europe. One is also left wondering if there was a sincere effort not only to understand the religious concepts and ideas that emerged from the sacred writings of the Hindus, but also the faith and the reality that lay hidden under or behind these expressions.

### 3. Modern Times

From the 18th century onwards, there was a renewed and more vigorous attempt at evangelization by foreign missionaries in India, and consequently a further and more constant encounter between Hinduism and Christianity. In our survey of this period we have to be selective to some extent because, in fact, a very large number of personalities are involved in the venture. First of all both Catholic and Protestant missionaries were involved in this movement for evangelization, although we learn more about the Protestants than the Catholics during this period. Among Protestants themselves there were different denominations which were trying to propagate the Gospel.<sup>33</sup>

From all accounts it seems to be quite certain that the first Protestant missionaries even to come over to India were the German Lutherans, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau, both of whom reached the Danish settlement of Tranquebar

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

33. For fuller details, cf. M.E. Gibbs, "Anglican and Protestant Missions 1706-1857" in H.C. Perumalil and E.R. Hamby (eds), *Christianity in India*, pp. 211-212.

on the South East Coast as early as in 1706 A.D.<sup>34</sup> Trained under one of the leaders of pietist movements in Germany, Professor Franke of the University of Halle,<sup>35</sup> Ziegenbalg soon began to observe, study and analyse the religious beliefs of the people whom he met in and around Tranquebar.<sup>36</sup> In 1710 he wrote back to the mission headquarters in Halle a sympathetic account of the Indian religion. He wrote among other things: "I do not reject everything they teach, rather rejoice that for the heathen long ago a small light of the Gospel began to shine... One will find here and there such teachings and passages in their writings which are not only according to human reason but also according to God's word."<sup>37</sup> Such a sympathetic attitude towards the Hindu religion was in itself a step forward in the on-going dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity. However, Ziegenbalg does not seem to have gone much further.<sup>38</sup>

Towards the end of the century there arrived in Calcutta an English missionary, burning with zeal for saving souls for Christ. He was none other than William Carey who helped to revive protestant missionary movement as a whole.<sup>39</sup> Carey arrived in Calcutta in 1793.<sup>40</sup> From the time he and his colleagues settled down at Serampore on the banks of the Hoogli river, there was a tremendous missionary movement in the North East of India.<sup>41</sup> Carey and his indefatigable companions started

34. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

35. Professor Franke was known for his pietist inclinations, and it was to him that King Frederik IV of Denmark requested to send to him two missionaries to be sent to the Danish settlement of Tranquebar in India.

36. Ziegenbalg's experiences are described by himself in a book called *Propagation of the Gospel in the East* (London: J. Downing, 1711).

37. For a fuller appreciation of Ziegenbalg's understanding of Hinduism, cf. Ziegenbalg, *Beschreibung der Religion und heiligen Gebranche der Malabarischen Hindus*, Teil I-IV, Berlin, 1791.

38. The Christian consciousness does not seem to have been prepared at that time to go any further.

39. Already in 1792, William Carey started the Baptist missionary Society "desirous of making an effort for the propagation of the Gospel among the heathen." For further details on its background, early members etc. Cf. S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey* (8th ed., London: The Carey Press, 1934), pp. 68-92.

40. Cf. Carey's letter to his friend Rev. J. Sutcliffe, received on July 29, 1794.

41. For a short sketch of the Baptist mission in Bengal, cf. M.E. Gibbs, *Anglican and Protestant Missions 1706-1857*, pp. 222-224. For fuller details cf. Daniel Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India 1793-1837*. (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1967).



printing and preaching the Word of God, thus bringing the word to a personal encounter with living Hinduism. The period between 1800 and 1840 was one of intense activity and immense creativity.<sup>42</sup> Carey and his companions really made a spiritual commotion in Calcutta and its suburbs. The tireless preaching and frequent doctrinal debates of the missionaries with the people including Brahmins, often quoting freely from the Sacred books of the Hindus, threw a veritable challenge to the educated Hindus.<sup>43</sup> It obliged them to think, to study and reflect seriously not only on their own *sastras* but also on the Christian scriptures.

The response to this challenge came forth from Raja Rammohan Roy,<sup>44</sup> who had established himself in Calcutta as a wealthy and very learned Brahmin. From 1815 onwards he was translating the Vedanta of Samkara and some of the principal Upanishads into the native languages, together with informative and critical introductions.<sup>45</sup> Deeply convinced of the monotheistic tendencies in the Upanishads, one of the three set of canons of Hinduism, he was bewildered at the sight of polytheistic beliefs and forms of worship and idolatrous practices connected with them. He also believed that a number of less commendable customs and practices connected with temple festivals and image worship were the result of ignorance of the true nature of Hindu religion. His numerous books and pamphlets on religion and religious practices and his discussions and debates with the proponents of polytheistic beliefs made him famous as a staunch believer in monotheism and a passionate reformer of Hinduism.<sup>46</sup>

In the meantime he also learned assiduously the Christian

42. In a letter to his friend Rev. Andrew Fuller Carey wrote: "I was never so closely employed as at present... I therefore can scarcely call an hour my own in a week..." (Letter to Fuller, March 25, 1813).

43. Cf. Daniel Potts, pp. 36-37.

44. Rammohan Roy was born on 22nd May, 1772, in an illustrious brahmin family in Bengal.

45. Cf. S.D. Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohan Roy* (3rd ed., Calcutta: Sadharma Brahmo Samaj), p. 63. For a full list of his works on the Vedanta, cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

46. His scathing criticisms of some of the practices and customs connected with certain forms of worship and his open denunciation of 'polytheism' sparked off a controversy between himself and the orthodox camp. For further details, cf. U.N. Ball, *Rammohan Roy—A study of his works and thought* (Calcutta: U. Ray and Sons, 1933), p. 57.

Scriptures.<sup>47</sup> From the existing letters, reports and other documents we are unable to trace any contacts that Rammohan had before 1815.<sup>48</sup> However, from that time onwards, there are many documents to show that he was collaborating with the Serampore missionaries in their tremendous effort to propagate some of the fundamental Christian values as he understood them. While his study of the Hindu Scriptures deepened his conviction of the unity of God, his study of the Christian Scriptures obliged him to write: "The consequence of long and uninterrupted researches into religious truth has been that I have found the doctrines of Christ more conducive to moral principles and more adapted for the use of rational beings than any other which have come to my knowledge."<sup>49</sup> As Boyd correctly notes, "it was Christian ethics rather than Christian dogma which attracted Rammohan Roy and he saw no reason why a compromise should not be possible between his own Hindu monism based on the Upanishads, and the morality of the Sermon on the Mount which so greatly attracted him."<sup>50</sup>

The missionaries looked upon Rammohan as the one who shall be instrumental in leading his countrymen in big numbers to the feet of Christ. On Rammohan's part, he expected sympathetic appreciation for his work from the missionaries. However, the controversy that followed the publication of his work *Precepts of Jesus* shattered those pleasant dreams on either side. The *Precepts of Jesus*<sup>51</sup> was mainly a collection of extracts from the four gospels (especially from the Synoptics) covering the greater part of the teaching of Jesus, which, as Rammohan believed, was a guide to happiness and peace. It must be admitted that he did not care very much for the historical facts about the life of Christ or some cardinal doctrines such as the Incarnation, resurrection etc. of Christ.<sup>52</sup> The fact that the "Precepts" was

47. Cf. Rammohan's letter to his friend John Digby in England, S.D. Collet, *Life and Letters*, p. 71.

48. *Periodical Accounts*, for the year 1816, Bristol, Vol. VI, pp. 106-107.

49. S.D. Collet, *Life and Letters*, p. 71.

50. Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, pp. 19-20.

51. The full title of the book was *Precepts of Jesus, guide to peace and Happiness* (Calcutta: 1820).

52. His entire book *A Second Appeal to the Christian Public* (Calcutta: 1821) was devoted to refute the seven arguments in favour of the divinity of Christ. Similarly in the *Final Appeal in defence of the Precepts of Jesus* (Calcutta: 1823), he wrote that he "cannot conscientiously and consistently embrace... the doctrine of persons of the Godhead."



only a part of the gospel, and that too not a representative part, spurred the missionaries of Serampore, especially Joshua Marshman to write a long criticism against it, in his editorial comments in the *Friend of India*, a magazine run by the missionaries.<sup>53</sup> This was followed by three Appeals to the Christian public by Rammohan, and Marshman answered each of the Appeals. Without going into the details of these writings we can say this much: Being Christian missionaries and champions of Christian orthodoxy, the Serampore missionaries wanted to safeguard both the historical facts about Jesus' life, death and resurrection together with the Christian dogmas based on the teachings of Jesus. And hence they defended them ferociously against any suspected attack from all quarters. For Rammohan, on the other hand, these facts were not so important, neither the particular dogmas and doctrines about Incarnation, the natures in Christ etc. What was important for him was the set of moral precepts that he discovered in the teachings of Christ. These precepts together with a staunch belief in the unity of God appeared to him the best guides to a life of peace and happiness both in this world and the world to come.<sup>54</sup>

Thus it is not difficult to realize that the differences were in the understanding and motives of the two parties in relation to the teachings of Christ. A careful analysis of the entire writings of Rammohan, especially in relation to the Christian doctrines, would reveal very clearly his attitude towards Christianity. Although he admired and accepted the person of Jesus Christ and his moral teachings, he was not willing to accept the fundamental doctrines of Christianity such as the Trinity of God and the Incarnation of the Second Person. He remained to the end a Hindu and a Vedantin. Similarly the missionaries made an effort to understand the Hindu Scriptures and the Hindu way of life. But they were not able to accept or harmonise much of it with the Christian doctrines and way of life as they understood them. Some may attribute this "failure" of understanding to the staunch Calvinistic background of the Serampore Baptists. However, a close examination of the work and preaching of Christian missionaries from other denominations also reveals that they did not differ very much from the Serampore Baptists in their attitude towards Hindu-

53. "Remarks on certain observations in 'An Appeal to the Christian Public in defence of the Precepts of Jesus, by a Friend of Truth,' *Friend of India*, Vol. III. no. XXIII (May, 1820), pp. 133-139.

54. Cf. Rammohan Roy, *Precepts of Jesus*, p. 4.

ism.<sup>55</sup> This leads us to conclude that the uncompromising stand which Christian missionaries in general had taken against Hinduism and the incompatibility of its fundamental tenets with Christian doctrines derive from two different but related sources: namely, their common understanding of Christian doctrines based on the Scriptures and their subsequent understanding of Hinduism or the lack of it against the background of the Christian doctrines. Similarly another fact emerges from this Hindu-Christian encounter. Although previous encounters have demonstrated, in an amorphous or less articulated way, the "discordant concord" between the two religions, the encounter in depth between the Serampore missionaries and Rammohan brought out, in a well-articulated manner, the fundamental convergence and divergence of the two religions.

A historical survey of the encounter between Christianity and Hinduism cannot but include such epoch making personalities like Keshub Chandra Sen,<sup>56</sup> P.C. Mazoomdar,<sup>57</sup> Nehemiah Goreh<sup>58</sup> and others. However, due to lack of space, at this juncture we are obliged to restrict ourselves only to a mention of their names and to pass on to a different period.

#### 4. Contemporary Period

Among the many personalities who made their mark in the history of this encounter during this period, we may deal with only two men who seem to be outstanding, namely, Brahmanandhav Upadhyaya and Dr. Radhakrishnan.

Brahmanandhav was born a Bengali Brahmin in 1861 and was given the name Bhavani Charan Banerji.<sup>59</sup> From early boyhood he came under the influence of famous Bengali leaders like Keshub Chandra Sen, P.C. Mazoomdar and K.C. Banerji, his own uncle. In 1891 when he received baptism, he did not want to be assigned to any particular church.<sup>60</sup> However, before the end of

55. Cf. B. Griffiths, *The meeting of East and West*, p. 17.

56. Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-1884).

57. P.C. Mazoomdar is also important for his influence on Brahmanandhav Upadhyaya.

58. N. Goreh (1825-1895).

59. Cf. Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of indigenous Christianity*, (Bangalore: The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society 1969), p. 26.

60. In fact, he was baptized in the Anglican Church in Hyderabad, but he declared immediately afterwards, that he did not intend to become an Anglican or have any other denominational affiliation. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 28.



the year he became a Roman Catholic and chose for himself the name Theophilus, which he translated as "Brahmabandhav", the friend of Brahma.<sup>61</sup>

It seems that even before his open profession of Christianity he had given serious thought to the possibility of "pure Hinduism and pure Christianity." While still a Hindu, he wrote: "To preach Christ as the eternal Son of God, as the Logos in all prophets and saints before and after his Incarnation, and as the incarnate perfect Righteousness by whose obedience man is made righteous."<sup>62</sup> His deep knowledge of Hinduism and especially that of the Vedanta led him to study and examine the Christian revelation in relation to the deep insights of the Hindu Scriptures. He became convinced that the best way of bringing home the Christian faith to thinking India was by making use of the categories of the Vedanta. He wrote:

Indian thought can be made just as useful to Christianity as Greek thought had been to Europe...The truths of the Hindu Philosopher must be "baptized" and used as stepping-stones to the Catholic Faith...The European clothes of the Catholic religion should be laid aside as soon as possible...It must assume the Hindu garment which will make it acceptable to the people of India. This change can only be effected by Indian missionary orders who preach the Sacred Faith in the language of the Vedanta.<sup>63</sup>

Analysing the Christian faith as it appeared in the Bengal of his time, he was convinced that christianity in its purity was hidden under a series of Western structures and thought patterns. His vision of the Christian faith was that it had not reached its full development. It would grow, blossom and fructify till the end of time. The Indian soil and its humidity would make the ever-new Christian Revelation put forth newer harmonies and newer beauties, revealing more clearly the invincible integrity of the Universal Faith deposited in the Church by the Apostles of Jesus Christ. The Hindu mind and heart, coming under the dominion of the One, Holy, Apostolic and Catholic Church, would sing a new canticle which would fill the earth with sweetness from end to end.<sup>64</sup> That was the noble vision of Brahmabandhav about the result of the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity.

61. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

62. Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, p. 64.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

64. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

Once again, we see here a distinction made between the deposit of faith entrusted to the Church and the form or garb which it has taken at present. He makes it clear that it is not absolutely necessary for the faith to put on the western garment all the time. And he was thinking seriously of expressing the Christian faith in an Indian form, using Indian categories. He was fully convinced that this was possible, and hence was to be attempted. From Keshub Chandra Sen he accepted the description of God as Brahman in its definition as **Sat, cit, Ananda (Saccidananda)**.<sup>65</sup> He discovered this as the key concept for the fulfilment of his great dream of reconciling Hinduism and Christianity in the Person of Christ. The hymn he composed on the Trinity as **Saccidananda** bears eloquent testimony to the basis of his newly established theology, a perfect blend of Christian orthodoxy and Hindu terminology.<sup>66</sup> That was a tremendous feat of lasting promise in the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity. Here he was helped very much by the teaching of Keshub Chandra Sen, especially his understanding of the Trinity as **Saccidananda** and the God-head as the **Nirguna Brahman**. These concepts have also created certain problems for the Christian thinker; but he was able to solve them with the help of some of Keshub's own thinking. Basing himself strongly on Vedantic philosophy and making use of the Thomistic thought as a model, Brahmabandhav tried to evolve a whole system of Indian Christian theology.<sup>67</sup>

He never questioned the basic deposit of the Christian faith as found in the Bible. However, he showed a way to express this faith in traditional Indian thought-patterns whereby the faith will become liberated from its existing strictures and structures, and will become incarnate in the Indian soil. He would even accept the possibility of Indians being both Hindu and Christian. In his magazine *Sophia* he wrote:

By birth we are Hindus and shall remain Hindus till death. But as *dvija* (twice-born) by virtue of our sacramental rebirth, we are Catholic, we are members of an indefectible communion

65. Cf. M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Bangalore: The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1970), p. 105.

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

67. Cf. Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity*, p. 35. Such attempts to "press Indian Thought into the Thomist mould, in the process of adapting it to Christianity" came for criticism by people like Dr. M.M. Thomas. Cf. M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Madras: C.I.S. 1970) p. 113.



embracing all ages and climes.... Our thought and thinking is emphatically Hindu. We are more speculative than practical, more given to synthesis, more contemplative than active. It is extremely difficult for us to learn how to think like the Greeks of old or the scholastics of the Middle Ages. Our brains are moulded in the philosophic cast of our ancient country.<sup>68</sup>

These words of Brahmabandhav would suggest that he was interpreting the word Hindu and Hinduism more in a secularised way representing a national culture than as a particular religion.

Brahmabandhav has certainly achieved a unique synthesis between Hinduism and Christianity. The sort of Hindu-Christianity, the result of the encounter, which he envisaged as the proper christian faith for Indians deserves careful study and commendation. Whatever be its apparent short comings, it has been, no doubt, one of the rare achievements Christian faith has ever scored in an alien culture and civilization.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the late philosopher-statesman of India, has been hailed as the greatest interpreter of the East to the West. A careful student of Philosophy of Religion, he came into contact with Christianity while still a student in Christian institutions.<sup>69</sup> Spurred by the unfavourable criticisms against his native religion, namely Hinduism, by some of his Christian professors, he applied himself to the study of Hinduism and later of comparative religion.<sup>70</sup> Well-versed in the Scriptures of Hinduism, Christianity and other religions, and deeply hurt at the bickerings and quarrels among religions, he was trying to envisage a universal religion, which he called the "Religion of the Spirit,"<sup>71</sup> of which Religious Experience was the basis and foundation.

68. Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, pp. 83-84.

69. "I was in the German Mission High School, Tirupati (1896-1900), Vorhee's College, Vellore (1901-1904), and Madras Christian College (1905-1909)." S. Radhakrishnan, "My Search for Truth," in Vergilius Ferm (ed), *Religion in Transition* (London: Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1937), p. 15.

70. Cf. S.J. Samartha, *Introduction to Radhakrishnan: The Man and His Thought*, (New Delhi: Y.M.C.A. Publishing House, 1964), p. 3.

71. Cf. A.N. Marlow, *Radhakrishnan, An Anthology* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952), p. 4. Radhakrishnan's ideas on the Religion of the Spirit are expounded mainly in his *An Idealist View of Life* (1957), *East and West in Religion* (1967) *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (1940) and *Recovery of Faith* (1961).

According to Radhakrishnan, Religious Experience is an immediate ineffable and undifferentiated experience of the Real, of the non-duality between the Real and ourselves.<sup>72</sup> It is an immediate experience given to us as if from above.<sup>73</sup> The Real is presented to us as if without any medium except, of course, the psychological media of concepts. Quoting St. Teresa of Avila for his support<sup>74</sup> he says that during the mystical experience the person is conscious only of the undifferentiated non-duality of the one experiencing and the experienced. However, on reflection, one tries to understand it in terms of concepts and categories one is familiar with and thus identifies the experienced as Christ, Buddha and others. The experience itself escapes adequate description by our limited, structured concepts. The experience can never be adequately described with positive concepts. Hence the mind tries to explain it by saying not this, not that etc. However, the mind is not satisfied with such a negative approach and hence has recourse to positive but essentially limited concepts. Thus, any explanation and description of the experience is limited. Theologies and religions are the external, systematic expressions of this integral and internal experience of the divine. If such expressions can only be limited ones, it follows that every religion is limited and hence imperfect. In other words, no religion can claim to be perfect or to possess the whole truth.<sup>75</sup>

At this juncture Radhakrishnan turns to Christianity which considers itself as the true religion, a claim which, according to him, is untenable. He argues that Christianity is based on the unique religious experience of Jesus of Nazareth. But he questions the right for Christianity to claim that as the sole and only experience on which the whole of mankind shall put its trust. Even if Christ had such a unique experience of God, our knowledge of it is already limited and imperfect as it comes to us through the layers of mediations. He would only agree that Christ's experience is one such religious experience, may be the highest, but of a kind which other God-men also had. In prin-

72. Cf. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, pp. 129-130; *Religion and Society*, pp. 44-45; *A Hindu View of Life*, pp. 15-16; *An Idealist View of Life*, pp. 92-95.

73. Cf. Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma Sutra: The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960), p. 107; cf. also *An Idealist View of Life*, pp. 93-94.

74. Cf. Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life*, pp. 93-94.

75. Cf. Radhakrishnan, *Recovery of Faith*, p. 194; *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, pp. 326-327; *An Idealist View of Life*, p. 120.



ciple every man is open to such a possibility. But in fact only a few attain to that perfection.<sup>76</sup>

It is on this philosophical basis that Radhakrishnan did not accept Christianity's claim to uniqueness and absoluteness. He used to say that Christians were a group of ordinary people who claimed extraordinary things.<sup>77</sup> And he does not consider Christianity as a pure species of unmixed growth. He believes that Christianity developed in the same world and breathed the same air as Alexandrian Judaism, Gnosticism and Neo-platonism.<sup>78</sup> And even New Testament Christianity shows marks of the influence of the climate. He is of the opinion that if Christianity is to be rooted in India, it has to shed its western structures and inflexibility and present itself in the patterns of thought and style of life of the Indian people.

The world is at the threshold of a new humanity, a humanity with a world culture and a universal religion to support and sustain that culture.<sup>79</sup> That religion shall not be the exclusive property of any particular group or section of mankind, but every man shall regard it as his own. This will be possible only if one's own culture and religion becomes part and parcel of his brother's culture and religion. However, there shall be one religion which, with its broad base and adaptability, would serve as a possible common ground for the emergence of the expected universal religion. Radhakrishnan does not think that Christianity with its doctrinal intolerance and claim to uniqueness and absoluteness will be able to serve this purpose. He would think that philosophical Hinduism especially that of the Vedantic strain may be the best suited to serve as the common ground for the "World's unborn soul."<sup>80</sup> This religion will be the Religion behind all religions, the Religion of Spirit, which will evolve in every culture and clime accepting its positive contribution and adapting itself to its life-style and thought-pattern. Thus a fellowship of religions, based on the religion of the Spirit shall be the future of religions. Each religion will be a variety of the religion of the Spirit, but at the same time, some of the positive aspects of each religion will be

76. Cf. Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life*, p. 120.

77. Cf. Radhakrishnan, *East and West in Religion*, p. 40.

78. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

79. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

80. This was the title of Radhakrishnan's inaugural lecture as Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics, at the University of Oxford on 20th October, 1936.

a corrective to other religions. In that sense, Christianity also will have to contribute its share while at the same time receiving what it may, from other religious traditions.

Radhakrishnan's approach to Christianity is radically different from that of Brahmabandhav. For Radhakrishnan, first of all, there is no philosophical basis why the Christian religion and its doctrines should have any absolute and unique value. As he himself would say they are only relatively absolute or unique and not absolutely absolute or unique. Secondly, his vision of the future of religion and a universal religion based on the religion of the Spirit renders every authentic religion part and parcel of it. The fact of one being a Christian is not in opposition to another being a Hindu; they only complement one another.

### Conclusion

Our survey of the long history of the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity is obviously not exhaustive. However, there emerge certain points which may be worth noting. The early Christian contact with Hinduism resulted in some of the Brahmins accepting Christianity and its doctrines; but at the same time keeping the social customs and family traditions intact. There did not seem to be any attempt at Christianising the Hindu thought, although some of the Hindu customs were "baptized" and practised by Christians. In the Portuguese encounter with Hinduism although missionaries like De Nobili and Beschi accepted Indian customs and life-style, they were not in any way inclined to christianize or accept any fundamental Hindu religious concept. In fact they found them incompatible with Christianity. One must say that this was, by and large, the attitude of missionaries from the West whether Protestant or Catholic. From the 19th century onwards learned Hindus were beginning to defend the legitimacy of their own philosophical and theological doctrines against the attack of the missionaries. They were also developing the idea that salvation was not dependent on any particular system of religious thought, but it was entirely dependent on faith and trust in the One God, Creator and Preserver of the universe. In Brahmabandhav we have an Indian Brahmin convert Catholic who, remaining a catholic, tries to understand and interpret the Christian faith and doctrines in terms of Hindu Vedantic-Theology, thus making Christian Theology Indianized, making it feel at home in India, without remorse or regret for having shed its foreign garb. If Brahmabandhav accepted the



Christian faith and indigenised it, Radhakrishnan does not find the need to accept the Christian faith as such, since it is only one of the living expressions of the religion of the Spirit and not a substitute for his own Hinduism, which itself is another, different but unique expression of the fundamental faith in God realized in a Spiritual Experience.

To my mind there seems to be a progress in the evolution of the process of the historic encounter between Hinduism and Christianity. Before proceeding any further we would also like to note the two tendencies discernible in this process: one that of those who accept faith in Christ and then try to adapt it to both the indigenous culture and theology. In this category we may include the early Christian community in India and Brahmabandhav and his followers. These two communities complement each other and a blend of the two seems to provide Indian Christians with an indigenous theology perfectly acclimatized and adapted to Indian culture and pattern of thought. The other is that of those who do not accept the faith in Christ, but try to relate themselves to Christ in their own right as non-Christians. Here again, we do see a progress in the religious thought of the Hindus from the time of Rammohan Roy to Radhakrishnan. Rammohan Roy found the fundamental principles of Christianity unacceptable, except the moral teachings of Christ; Radhakrishnan would also find some of the fundamental tenets of Christianity unacceptable. However, he is not thinking of the past or the present, but of the future. And in this future of society and religion, both Christianity and Hinduism will find themselves complementary and both will have to play their own, respective roles.

The big question is: are these two visions really different, or can we trace any similarity between the two, namely: a Christian faith understood in Hindu religions and theological terms, and Christian and Hindu faiths understood as the limited expressions of the Religion of the Spirit, and at the same time complementary to each other? It is a question which demands an answer; but that answer, on its part, demands a deeper study and further research.