

DYNAMICS OF EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION IN RELIGIOUS WORSHIP

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1. Introduction

Jayadev¹ was a young man brought up in a good family. Though his parents were religious minded, they did not instruct him on the need of religious worship. Jayadev loved nature and one day he went out for a walk into the forest. He climbed the nearby hill and had a panoramic view of the land from above. It looked very beautiful: lakes and lagoons, mountains and clouds, trees and rocks, a lovely pathway running along the tree lines and two small cottages in the valley. The whole scene was marvelous and attractive. “Really this is a place of God,” he said to himself. Where many commercially minded people find an apt tourist spot, Jayadev saw a dwelling place of God, His spirit hovering over the mountains and valleys like a lovely bird fluttering its wings, flying high up and also stooping down, watching all that has been made. Jayadev slowly raised his head along with the fluttering wings of the bird, raised his eyes into the skies and beyond the clouds. What is there! There is nothing, mere emptiness or empty space! “Really there is nothing?” he asked himself. There is something, he felt; there is a touching presence, some unknown presence which invited him inevitably, bewitchingly and invisibly. Without his knowledge his hands were raised and for a moment he remained in silence. He did not know that he was worshipping the One whose enrapturing presence he felt in his heart than in his head.

At first was neither Being nor Non-being.

There was not air nor yet sky beyond.

What was its wrapping? Where? In whose protection?

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¹The name Jayadev means ‘hail to God’, an initial salutation at the beginning of any worship.

Was water there? Unfathomable and deep!

There was no death there, nor yet deathlessness;
Of night or day there was not any sign.
The One breathed without breath, by its own impulse.
Other than that was nothing else at all (*Ig Veda* X.129.1-2).

The ancient people got a glimpse of that One; they felt his presence and longed to worship him:

In the beginning arose the Golden Germ:
He was, as soon as born, the Lord of Being,
Sustainer of the earth and of this heaven.

What God shall we adore with our oblation? (*Ig Veda* X.121.1)
The finite consciousness confronting the infinite consciousness in the immaculate beauty and enrapturing scenes of nature is inspiring and thought-provoking. There is a wonderful experience of an all-pervading presence. Whose presence is this, if not of that Imperishable, Immortal One about whom Uddhalaka Aruni said to his son Svetaketu: “In the beginning this was being only, the One without a second” (*Chandogya Upanishad* VI.2.1). “My dear, that subtle essence which you do not perceive, verily, my dear, from that very essence this great *nyagrodha* (banyan) tree exists. Believe me, my dear, that which is the subtle essence, this whole world has for its Self. That is the true. That is the Self. That art thou” (*Ch. Up.* VI.12.2.3).

If that is the case, it is to him our worship should be directed. He is the Lord of the universe who is also the Lord of our destiny. “All these are the dwelling places of God: *Isa vasyam idam sarvam*” (*Isa Up.* I).

It was getting evening. Jayadev thought of returning home. Suddenly, clouds spread over the hills, darkness began to pervade and penetrate to the farthest corners of the earth. Is it going to rain? Yes, tiny particles of water fell on the earth. How does the Lord water the trees of the mountains and meadows? Is there a storehouse of water in the heavens? He asked to himself and, then, he said to that invisible One:

You make springs gush forth in the valleys
Winding among mountains and hills,
Giving drink to bees of the field,
Quenching the thirst of wild donkeys.
Birds build their nest close by

And sing among the branches of trees.

You water the mountains from your abode

And fill the earth with the fruit of your work (Ps. 104:10-13).

Yes, if I worship, I will worship the Lord of heaven and earth, of woods and waters. While he was raising his hands in adoration, his eyes were dazzled by a sudden flash of light, followed by a fierce and frightening sound. Yes, it was lightning and thunder. Jayadev fell down on the ground with fear and trembling. Fear overwhelmed him and he surrendered himself to the Lord. Really he is great, the Lord of heaven and earth, who can strike us down at any moment of our life. But where to hide? How to escape from this situation. Even if I hide in the depth of the sea, his penetrating eyes reach there. Even if I fly up and cover myself by the flowing clouds, his invisible presence penetrates also the clouds of heavens. He is frightening, yet fascinating; He is great and transcendent, yet near and benevolent. I will surrender myself to him, I will worship him:

God is our strength and protection,

An ever present help in affliction.

We will not fear, therefore, though the earth be shaken

And the mountains plugged into the seas,

Though its waters foam and roar,

Though the mountains quake and totter.

For the Lord of hosts is with us,

The God of Jacob, our stronghold (Ps. 46:1-4).

As he was returning, once again, Jayadev watched the serenity of the hills and valleys, now glittering in the smooth and soothing moon light, beaming, yet benevolent. He contemplated over the enticing experience he had and felt sad as he was distancing himself from it by every moment, as he walked back home.

2. The Agony of Expression

Jayadev is back at home. The remembrance of the fascinating experience of the presence of God, which was mighty and magnificent, still lingers in his heart. How can I live it again and again, he thought. The Lord of the clouds and mountains, seas and seasons vanishes as he comes, like a flash of dazzling light, yet dearly leaving his loving touch in my heart. I have nowhere else to go. I will perpetuate my experience and sing his glories forever.

Jayadev found it very difficult to compose a song of the Lord. Every expression falls short of the amazing grandeur of the experience. It lacks life and feeling, depth and wonder. Yes, wonder was there, as an all-pervading mystery encompassing the experience, because it was ever new and ever old, enticing, yet ever transcending. Pondering over his passing yet vaguely lingering experience he tried to recollect: “For a moment I was out of myself, standing-out, being raised up in my orientation to him. Is this what people call ecstasy?”

The word ecstasy is derived from the Latin root *stare*, to stand, and the prefix *ex*, meaning ‘out’. Ecstatic moments are moments really inexpressible, yet highly impressive, leaving seedlings of continued remembrance in our head and heart. Jayadev thought: “My heart still longs to compose a song of the Lord, though in truth, He ever remains incomprehensible and ineffable.” He tried to revive the moment of his experience; it was fascinating and even frightening. Yet, from his inner heart a voice said to him: “it is a salutary fear, and you are safe.” Therefore, Jayadev did not run away from it, instead wanted to adore, to surrender and to be with the Lord of the Universe.

The word ‘Holy’ came to his mind. Is this what people call holy, the amazing transcendence and the intimate immanence of the Lord? Spontaneously, he sang a song:

Holy God
 Holy mighty one
 Holy immortal one
 Have mercy on me.

This is one of the most ancient Christian prayers from the Orient, a response to the divine experience of the Christians of the first centuries who felt the overwhelming presence of God in and through Jesus Christ. God has come down to human beings as a little babe born in Bethlehem. He is lovely and love-inspiring. But he is the Mighty One of the Israel who had sent forth fire on Sodom and Gomorra (Gen. 19:24) and had given his commandments engraved on stone tablets by the arrows of thundering flames of fire (Ex. 19:16ff.). Yes, he is great and the most transcendent and yet small and immanent.

Subtler than the subtle, greater than the great, is the Self that is set in the cave of the (heart) of the creature. One beholds him as being actionless and becomes freed from sorrow, when through the grace

of the creator he sees the Lord and his majesty (*Swetasvatara Up.* III.20).

He alone is immortal, all of us are mortal and the chasm between the two is immense and unimaginable. As Edith Stein puts it, it is the difference between the finite and the infinite (*das Ewige und Endliche*).² We are finite and creaturely. What is this creaturely existence? It is there, yet it cannot assert itself, because it is not to be there always. It is a kind of contradiction in existence. Hence, Sankaracarya called it *sat-asat-anirvacaniya* (an indefinable composite of being and non-being).³ Every creature has to face this threat of non-being. Hence, there results fear. God knows it better than us. Therefore, whenever God comes to intervene in human history, he says: “fear not.” “Fear not, for I am with you (Is. 43:5). Even the angel, who came to announce the gladdest tidings to Mary, said: “Fear not, Mary...” (Lk. 1:29). If anything extraordinary happens, the first feeling of many a mortal is fear or anxiety. This is because of the radical insufficiency or finitude of our existence. This radical anxiety of non-being, which modern philosophers call “the Nothing,” can be overcome only by an equally radical trust in God, the source and abode of all beings, in whom our existence is guaranteed. According to St. Paul, if we die with Christ we will also rise with him (Rom. 6:4). In this level of consciousness, even death, the cessation of human life on earth, is not a real threat because of one’s trust in Jesus who has abolished death (2Tim. 1:10).

Hence, with the help of unflinching hope, the finite existence, though threatened, can transcend fear and even welcome death joyfully as a door to the fullness of life. Jayadev was enlightened and encouraged with this light and delight of hope. He still wanted to perpetuate all these, which still linger in his memory. The poets and the philosophers want to articulate, though they knew what they write is far away from the Truth, which alone is really ‘Real’ (*satyasya-satyam*). Illumined by faith and hope, humanity from the very beginning has tried to express what it thinks, in poem or prose, in parables or paradigms. *Bhagavad Gita* is a brilliant example of such an expression in lovely, devotional poem. Seeing the eternal form of Krishna, magnificent and awe-inspiring, Arjuna sang:

²Edith Stein, *Das Ewige und Endliche*, Tuebingen: Edith Stein Convent.

³V. F. Vineeth, *Foundation of World Vision*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1985, 64-65.

Thou art the Father of the world, moving and unmoving;
 The object of its worship; greater than the great.
 None there exists who is equal to Thee in the three worlds;
 Who then can excel Thee, o thou of power incomparable? (*Gita*
 11:43).

To this wonderful and devotional expression of Arjuna, Krishna, the Lord of the universe, answered:

Be not afraid nor bewildered,
 Having beheld this form of mine so terrific.
 With thy fears dispelled and with gladdened heart,
 Now see again this former form of mine (*Gita* 11:49).

Composing a hymn of worship, Arjuna had already acknowledged Krishna's greatness as the Lord of the universe, in the beginning of this apparition:

Thou art the Imperishable, the Supreme Being,
 The one thing to be known.
 Thou art the great refuge of this universe;
 Thou art the undying guardian of the eternal dharma,
 Thou art the ancient *purusa* (person), I deem (*Gita* 11:18).

All these are expressions of the experience of the great omnipotent God whom the mortal men and women worship and adore. But all expressions, however majestic and magnificent they are, have their own inherent limitations. All articulations fail, because they fall down to deadly modes of finitude, whether of words uttered or written. Finitude surrounds and swallows all attempts of articulation. So the artist always feels a delicious frustration or a frustrated delight in every expression. In ecstasy level, it is fantastic. It is as if one is in an otherworldly existence where this worldly light or delight has no place. But in expression level, it can be so frustrating that the artist or the admirer is tempted to move to silence.

3. Silence as a Medium of Unuttered Expression

Words, however excellent, are bound to fail in expressing the ineffable, since neither pen nor brush can give life to what cannot be written or drawn. The ancient sages, who had experienced the divine in the heart of nature or in the cave of their own heart, refused to take refuge in any kind of expression and opted for silence. In the *Gita*, as already quoted earlier, the Lord of the universe presents himself as silence: "In mysteries I am silence" (*Gita* 10:38). Silence became a medium in which God experience

is received without the limitation of human articulation. Many saints and sages of different religions opted silence to the sounds of articulations and negative expressions, giving way to a kind of apophatic theology. The *Upanishads* lead the way in immortalizing the experience of the Supreme, Immortal and Imperishable: what we can rightly say is only 'not this, not this' (*neti, neti*):

By what should one know him by whom all this is known? That Self is to be described as 'not this, not this'. He is incomprehensible for he cannot be comprehended. He is indestructible for he cannot be destroyed. He is unattached for he does not attach himself. He is unfettered, he does not suffer, he is not injured. Indeed, by what would one know the knower (*Brh. Up. IV.5.15*).

All expressions are primarily mental objectifications. But how can we know the knower by making him the object of our knowing? Jayadev thought: better I will keep silence, because the one whom I want to express is perhaps better expressed in negative terms.

The *Katha Upanishad*, during the discourse of Yama with Nacikethas, describes Brahman with a series of negative expressions:

The Self without sound, without touch and without form, undecaying, is likewise, without taste, eternal, without smell, without beginning, without end, beyond the great, abiding, by discerning that, one is freed from the face of death (*Kath Up. I.3.15*).

Dionysius, a Christian mystic in the first centuries of Christianity, is an apophatic theologian. Rudolf Otto, who is the author of the magnificent work *The Holy (Das Heilige)* has made a comparative study of Dionysius and Sankaracarya, two apophatic theologians from East and West, following Christian and Hindu traditions, respectively.⁴ Apophatism or silence about God is not atheism, rather an unarticulated search into the depths of the mysteries of divinity, which the Holy Spirit alone unveils to the believing minds. Because it transcends the capacity of human mind to articulate, it is expressed in negative terminologies than in the clear-cut, limited positive expressions. However, in silence a lot of expressions can be made. Raising one's own folded hands in obeisance, kneeling down in veneration, bowing deep down on the ground, etc., are silent expressions of religious worship which are very well practised in all religions. In a world of amusements and global markets, silence has become a rarity and

⁴Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism, East and West*, New York, 1932.

even a commodity, which is purchased with money in five star hotels and other luxury spots. But in ancient days people retired to forests of unpolluted nature in search of silence; they were ultimately happy, though the commodities of modern markets were not at all available even in their vicinity. The happiness rose from the inner satisfaction which they got from contemplating the nature where they felt the presence of the Divine and they communed with Him in silence.

In this context we may recall to our mind Buddha's silence on God. Silence does not necessarily mean denial of God; rather, it could be a pointer to the ineffability of God which is beyond all articulations. However, this silence is also transcended by *bhaktas* and believers by making simple expressions of devotion, love, and surrender to the Lord who comes down to deliver them. All world religions abound in these expressions and they are great contributions to humanity all over the world. Yet, undoubtedly, we need silence to delve deep into the unuttered mysteries of God, into the depth of which Holy Spirit alone can guide us, when our words and thoughts are silenced.

4. Sacrifice as the Supreme Expression of Worship

The next day morning Jayadev got up from bed, full of enthusiasm, to go to the church for participating in the worship. He reached the church where the Holy Mass was going on. Though born Christian, Jayadev hardly took religious worship very seriously. First time in his life he thought over the meaning of offering sacrifice. Surrendering himself to the Lord, who manifested himself to him in the loveliness of nature as well as in the power of lightning and thunder, Jayadev was ready to offer sacrifice, not with fear and trembling, but with affection. He thought, perhaps the ancient people already understood that the best way to worship God is to offer sacrifice. Hence, in all religions and cultural traditions we see the idea of offering sacrifice. Among the different sacrificial offerings the burnt offering was the greatest. This is because the victim is completely burnt in the fire of divine love. But among the victims offered in sacrifice, the self of the one who offers himself was considered to be the greatest. All other offerings were only symbolic gestures of this great offering of one's own self. Hence, the Lord of the *Gita* says:

Whoever with devotion offers me a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water,
That I accept – the devout gift of the pure minded

All sacrifices are symbolic. The monetary worth of the symbols offered are not at all important. That is why Krsna, the Lord of the *Gita* mentions only very little things such as, a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water. What matters is the sincere and devoted heart of the offerer. Every little thing can represent the heart and mind of the one who makes the offering with adoring love. Here offering becomes a mode of worship. *Gita* also suggests that everything what we do can be offered as worship to the Lord. The real victim to be offered is the person who offers. Therefore, *Gita* continues:

Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice,
 Whatever you give away, whatever austerity you practice
 O son of Kunti, do that as an offering unto me (*Gita* 9:27).

Different kinds of sacrifices (*yajna*) were offered all over the world before Christianity. Raymondo Panickkar says: “If one has to choose a single word to express the quintessence of the Vedic revelation, the word *yajna*, sacrifice, would perhaps be the most adequate.”⁵

The biblical paschal sacrifice is another brilliant example. Here the Lamb of God, on whom the sins of the people of God were imputed, was offered as the victim of the sacrifice. The Lamb of God represented Jesus Christ, which was realized when Jesus offered the sacrifice for all humanity. The problem with any ritual sacrifice, in which the self of the offerer is not offered, is that the sacrifice may remain ritually perfect, but not spiritually rewarding. This is because a symbolic sacrifice is not an end in itself but is a pointer to the sacrifice of the self which the offerer wants to perform. Devoid of this self-sacrifice, the offering has no real value before God. When such sacrifices were offered to God, the God of the Old Testament refused to accept them saying, “Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me” (Jer. 6:20). Whatever is offered, be it a leaf, or a flower, a lamb, or bird, is always an act of worship, representing the self of the offerer. Therefore, when Jesus came to perform the paschal sacrifice he replaced the lamb by his own self:

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me: in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure.

⁵Raymundo Panickkar, *The Vedic Experience*, California: University of California Press, 1977, 347.

Then I said, ‘lo, I have come to do as it is written of me in the roll of the book’” (Heb. 10:5-7).

The purpose of sacrifice is liberating the world from the bondage of sin and the consequent structures of evil, which have distorted the world God has created in purity and divine harmony. The rhythm of the universe, distorted by human act is to be restored by sacrifice. “But as it is, he (Christ) has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26). In the same line of thinking St. Paul appeals to the Romans: “Offer your bodies as sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). The best way of doing this is, like the one who has distorted the rhythm of the universe doing the sacrifice in reparation. All symbolic sacrifices were only a shadow of this sacrifice. Jesus, though sinless, replaced the paschal lamb and, thus, fulfilled the inner meaning which was lingering in all sacrifices by his own self-sacrifice. Thus, the rhythm was restored, when the priest and victim became one and the same. Naturally, this is the highest form of worship which can be offered to God.

The text, “This sacrifice is the navel of the universe” (*Rg Veda* I.164.35) is valid, provided the offerer and the victim become one and the same. The sacrifice is, of course, the highest form of worship. But the value of sacrifice depends on our readiness to sacrifice our selfish ego to be burnt by the divine fire of love and give ourselves in love and service to all others, as a ransom for the sins of the universe. “Really this sacrifice is the highest form of worship,” Jayadev whispered to himself.

5. Conclusion

Jayadev’s astounding experience of the Divine, followed by the agony of its articulation for perpetuation, the consequent option of silence and his final decision to surrender his own self as the highest form of worship take us to certain cardinal points which sum up and surround any genuine act of worship anywhere in the world. They are the following:

- (i) Real worship is not the fulfilment of any legal obligation or the performance of a ritual prescription, handed over by some external authority. Rather, it is the pouring out of one’s own being in obeisance to the Supreme who, directly or indirectly, reveals himself to the human person, who, in his/her turn, is drawn to worship the Lord, who is higher than the highest and nearer than the nearest.

- (ii) The act of worship is not something to be finished by a ritual performance; instead it is a living reality which needs the perpetuation of the act done with the help of continued expressions of the experience, already enjoined to the act of worship.
- (iii) Because all words fail to express the Ineffable whom the worshipper has encountered, all kinds of articulation, though lovingly welcomed, are finally transcended in his/her ever rising orientation to the Supreme Silence where all articulations are finally summarized in the eternal rhythm and unruffled peace.
- (iv) Lastly, the worshipper feels that there is no real worship of the Supreme, until and unless he/she becomes both the priest who offers the sacrifice and the victim which is sacrificed. Thus, sacrifice becomes the navel of the universe, which holds the worlds together, shattered and set apart by one's own selfish ego, which is now being sacrificed.