

RADHAKRISHNAN'S APPROACH TO RELIGION: Reflections based on "An Idealist View of Life"

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The well-known contemporary Indian historian, K.M. Pannikar, states:

In philosophical thinking the Indian mind has been particularly barren during the last 100 years....Western education in this field has been altogether sterile and....helped to dry up the roots of philosophical thinking in India. It is significant that not one of the universities has produced a philosopher of any distinction who has made a contribution of value.¹

Indian intellectuals who have not studied Radhakrishnan, K.C. Bhattacharya, Dasgupta, A. Coomarasamy and others can make a comment like the above. However, a host of professional philosophers, like J.H. Muirhead, believe that Bergson and Radhakrishnan occupy similar positions as leaders of thought in Europe and India. E.S. Brightman hails Radhakrishnan as "one of the greatest philosophers of mysticism in modern times."² The Library of Living Philosophers, Inc., has brought out a

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¹ K.M. Pannikar, *The Foundations of New India*, p.135 as quoted in K.Satchidananda Murty, "Dr. Radhakrishnan As a Philosopher" in Verinder Grover (ed.), *Political Thinkers of Modern India* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1992), vol.XX, p.386.

² cf. Murty, *op.cit.*, p.387.

separate volume on him, which contains twenty-three studies by Indian and Western authors on various aspects of his thought.

Outside India, Radhakrishnan is remembered as a philosopher, statesman, diplomat and principled politician. He was Vice-Chancellor of several major universities, including the Benares Hindu University. Given his felicity of expression, he deserves to be listed among the great stylists in the history of philosophy. He had the capacity to raise philosophical prose to the level of creative literature.

Born on September 5th, 1888, in a small town in South India called Tiruttani, sixty kilometres north of Chennai, Radhakrishnan rose to the highest position of being President of India by dint of hard work. His schooling and college studies were done at Christian institutions, where Indian philosophy and religion were some times subject to carping criticism by his teachers. He would reminisce later: "...a critical study of Hindu ideas was thus forced upon me....The need for philosophy arises when the faith in tradition is shaken".³

His works are many. Besides several articles contributed to international journals of repute, they include books like *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (1918), *Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy* (1920), *Indian Philosophy* (in two volumes) published between 1923 and 1929, *The Hindu View of Life* (1926), *Kalki* (1929), *An Idealist View of Life* (1932), *Eastern Religions and Western Thought, Religion and Society* etc. published after 1932. While his *Indian Philosophy* is considered to be his *magnum opus*, *An Idealist View of Life*, which C.E.M.Joad describes as the "Counter-attack from the

³ Quoted in Vishwnath S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd., 1978), p.222.

East," seems to be the most original work. I shall confine most of my reflections in this article to this book.

Broadly speaking, Radhakrishnan can be classified under the school of Advaita Vedanta, but his interpretation of Vedanta is so flexible that orthodox followers of Shankara would not like to admit Radhakrishnan into their inner circle. Although he acquainted himself with the primary sources of the Vedas, Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the basic texts of the Orthodox schools and read European philosophers widely, he would say:

My thinking had, however, another source. It proceeded from my own experience, which can never be the same as the experience one acquires from reading or study. It is born of spiritual awareness rather than deduced from logically ascertained premises. Philosophy is produced more by our encounters with reality than by our historical study of those encounters.⁴

His mature writings focus on three closely-related issues: his presentation and positive interpretation of classical Indian religious thought, or Vedanta, especially as seen in its three basic scriptures, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma Sutra; his defense of philosophical idealism, both in its Indian version and as found in the West from Plato to Hegel and Bradley; and finally his critique of contemporary (mostly Western)

⁴ Quoted in Naravane, *op.cit.*, pp.223-4.

materialist and scientific thinking in as much as it rejects religious and spiritual values.⁵

His philosophy has often been described as "idealistic". His idealism can be considered to comprise the contemplative spirit of Plotinus, the other-worldliness of the Indian mystics and the this-worldliness of Western pragmatists. However, what Radhakrishnan means by "idealistic" is in fact "telefinalistic". In his monumental work *An Idealist View of Life*, he asks: "What is Idealism?" Rejecting Berkeley's "esse est percipi" and Kant's categories of the mind, he proposes a third view: "...There is a third sense in which the term 'idea' is used.... An idealist view finds that the universe has meaning, has value. Ideal values are the dynamic forces, the driving power of the universe."⁶

Thus the idealism of Radhakrishnan is not conceptualistic. He exposes the inadequacy of scientific materialism to explain the complexity of the cosmic process. The alternatives to religion do not remove our anxieties because they do not take into account the depth and essence of the soul. Stoicism and neopaganism are efforts at escapism, while agnosticism and scepticism downplay the mind's capacity for reflective or intuitive knowledge. Even humanism with all its lofty conception fares badly, as it forgets the religious aspect. He goes on to say in *An Idealist View of Life*:

⁵ Robert. A. McDermott, "Radhakrishnan, Sarvapelli" in Mircea Eliade (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol.III, p.198.

⁶ Quoted in R. Raphael, "Radhakrishnan and the Religion of Man", in Grover, *op.cit.*, pp.534-5.

Have you that spiritual dimension to your being, that mood of reflective inquiry and self-contemplation, that anxiety of mind to know the things spiritual in which is the true dwelling place of man...? Philosophy is understanding, contemplation, insight, and a philosopher can find no rest until he gains a new of vision of the world of things and persons which will enable him to interpret the manifold experiences as expressive... of a purpose.⁷

The Need for Religion

Radhakrishnan is fully convinced of the need of religion in modern times. Today, intellect and reason seem to be victorious because they have apparently given birth to advanced science and technology. But, in spite of our social, political and other developments, man is restless. In his book *Religion and Society* he observes: "The serious distemper of our social life is traceable to the lag between our institutions and world purpose".⁸ He adds in his *Recovery of Faith*: "Sensitive and informed minds believe that the fundamental need of the world, far deeper than any social, political, or economic readjustment is a spiritual reawakening, a recovery of faith".⁹

⁷ *Ibid*, p.535. In the second chapter termed "Substitutes for Religion" of his *An Idealist View of Life*, Radhakrishnan examines successively various theories like naturalistic atheism, agnosticism, scepticism, humanism, pragmatism, modernism, authoritarianism and exposes their inadequacy as they lack the spiritual or religious character so basic to man.

⁸ Swami Vikrant, *S. Radhakrishnan* (mimeographed notes), p.2

⁹ *Ibid*.

Radhakrishnan believes that the underlying need for religion, so far as humanity is concerned, springs from the universal and basic fear that is in every human heart, namely, the fear of nothingness. Religion is the attempt to satisfy this fundamental need of man by giving him a faith and a way of life that will restore the broken relationship between him and the spiritual world. In *East and West in Religion* he would observe: "Religion is native to the human mind, integral to human nature itself. Everything else may dissolve, but belief in God which is the ultimate confession of all the faiths of the world remains".¹⁰

The Essence of Religion

What did Radhakrishnan exactly understand by Religion? In the semi autobiographical work, *My Search for Truth*, he states:

Religion is not a creed or a code but an insight into reality....Spiritual certainty is conveyed by spiritual knowledge, which is not merely perceptual or conceptual. This knowledge is not a-logical but super-logical. It is called integral insight or intuitive knowledge.¹¹

Justifying the validity of religious knowledge and distinguishing it from scientific knowledge he adds:

Our deepest convictions, for which we are sometimes willing to die, are not the results of rational calculation.... Their driving power is in those urgent and intimate contacts with reality which convey to us deep certainties which transform our lives... The

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.2-3.

¹¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *My Search for Truth* (New Delhi: Newman Group of publishers, 1977), p.64.

fact of this integral or intuitive knowledge tells us that we are not helplessly shut out from an insight into reality by the constitution of our minds.¹²

Showing the relationship between the intellect and intuition in this regard, he would say:

The world is creative activity but a continuous one and a rational one. While the rationality of the world is transparent to the intellect, its mysteriousness can be grasped only by intuition.... An intellectual search for the ultimate course may lead us to an idea of God. Intuition tells us that the idea is not merely an idea but a fact.¹³

In *An Idealist View of Life* he corroborates and sharpens his view of religion:

Religion has been identified with feeling, emotion and sentiment, instinct, cult and faith, and these views are right in what they affirm, though wrong in what they deny.....Religious feeling.....is quite distinct from any other type of feeling.¹⁴

He carefully distinguishes religion from ethics and philosophy thus:

Religion is not mere consciousness of value. There is in it a mystical element, an apprehension of the real and an enjoyment of it for its own sake which is

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.64-65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.65-66.

¹⁴ S. Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1988), p.69.

absent in the moral consciousness. Religion is not a form of knowledge as Hegel sometimes urged. While religion implies a metaphysical view of the universe, it is not to be confused with philosophy.¹⁵

According to Radhakrishnan religion engages the whole man and the reaction of the whole man to the whole reality may be called spiritual life.

Philosophy of Religion

Radhakrishnan himself gives us a clear definition of the above concept in his *An Idealist View of Life*:

Philosophy of religion is religion come to an understanding of itself. It attempts a reasoned solution of a problem which exists directly only for the religious man who has the spiritual intuition or experience and indirectly for all those who, while they have no personal share in the experience, yet have sufficient belief that the experience does occur and is not illusory.¹⁶

He repudiates the negative stands of an over-critical approach of psychologists of religion by observing that "to trace the psychological conditions of a belief is not to determine its validity". Psychology cannot argue that sense perceptions answer to reality while spiritual intuitions do not.

Another argument put forward by psychologists of religion against the validity of religious experience could be the following: psychological experiences rationalized by science are more or less uniform for all observers, while the data for philosophy of religion are diverse and discordant.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.66.

For example, stones are hard and the sky is blue for all. But when it comes to religion, God is Buddha to some and Christ to others. Radhakrishnan avers that "this difference means that the (religious) facts are more complex and require closer study".¹⁷

A philosophy of religion, then, is an attempt to organize and unify the data of religious experience. Religious experience poses its own distinctive character and we are in touch with another reality different from that of matter, life or mind.

Radhakrishnan then proceeds to show how philosophy of religion is different from speculative theology and dogmatic theology. As D.S. Sarma interprets Radhakrishnan, speculative theology proceeds from general principles and arrives, using the dialectic, at the conclusion that God is a possibility, while philosophy of religion proceeds from religious experience and tradition and asserts in terms of logical understanding that God is a reality. Dogmatic theology, on the other hand, confines itself to the exposition and defence of one set of doctrines recorded as revealed in a particular tradition while philosophy of religion takes into consideration the different types of religious experience of all ages and cultures.¹⁸ To quote Radhakrishnan:

Philosophy of religion..... rejects the high *a priori* road of speculative theology and the apologetic method of dogmatic theology and adopts a scientific view of religious experience and examines with detachment and impartiality the spiritual inheritance of men of all

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.67.

¹⁸ Radhakrishnan, *My Search for Truth*, p.85. Henceforward known as MST.

creeds and of none. Such an examination of the claims and contents of religious consciousness, which has for its background the whole spiritual history of man, has in it the promise of a spiritual idealism which is opposed to the disintegrating forces of scientific naturalism on the one hand and religious dogmatism on the other.¹⁹

Character of Religious Experience

Radhakrishnan admits that to study the nature of religious experience is a rather difficult matter. Generally speaking, it is a kind of experience which is not clearly differentiated into a subject-object state. It can also be described as an integral, undivided consciousness in which man's whole being seems to find itself. Professor D.S. Sarma summarizes succinctly Radhakrishnan's views on the character of religious experiences in nine points:²⁰

One: as we pointed out earlier, religious experience is a reaction of the whole man to Reality. It includes but at the same time transcends all intellectual, moral and emotional activity. It is concrete and not abstract and general as in the case of conceptual knowledge. Two: it is an integral intuition and has within it its own validity. It is sovereign in its own right, self-established and requires no other evidence. Three: religious experience reveals to us a Being which is absolute and eternal, beyond the categories of thought and expression. When we attempt to describe the absolute in a negative way, it means that it is nothing which we created beings can conceive with our finite minds. Four: in the Hindu tradition, mystic experience has

¹⁹ Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life*, p.68, Hence forward known as IVL.

²⁰ cf.MST, pp.86-88.

the three characteristic features of reality, awareness and perfect bliss or *Sat*, *Cit*, and *Ananda*. We attribute the highest qualities that human beings know to God, namely, holiness, justice, love, mercy, etc. But we are also aware that these qualities exist in the absolute in a different sense. Similarly, although the absolute is beyond the concept of personality and impersonality, we attribute personality to it, as personality is the highest category we know of. Thus, personality may be understood as a symbolic, poetic view of the Absolute and not as a scientific one. Five: spiritual experience brings home to the mystic the conviction of the unity of the world. For him all things live, move and have their being in one universal spirit. Six: the intimate relationship that is felt between the soul and God is very important in religious experience. In moments of deepest insight, the barriers between the individual self and the ultimate reality seem to drop away. Seven: the fact that this great experience of union with the Absolute is only intermittent or temporary or even fleeting in the most spiritual of people shows that there seem to be many obstacles to self-realization. The disciplines, purifications and sadhanas of each organized religion point to the conditions under which the original founders saw their vision. In the early stages of the inward life, it appears advantageous to have the help of an organized church or religious tradition to guide the soul along to greater heights. Eight: different symbols are used by different spiritual persons to describe the same flaming experience. People who are unwilling to go beyond these symbols to the Reality are guilty of some form of idolatry, foment quarrels and bring religion into disrepute. True religious souls try to always recapture the spirit behind symbols and practices.²¹

²¹ Radhakrishnan would say that the religious experience is something direct but is unconsciously interpreted in terms of the tradition to which the individual belongs. For example, St. Theresa of Avila tells us that after her

Nine: religious experiences help one to recognize and appreciate the highest values of the spirit, like virtue, beauty, truth and love, and attract us to hasten our journey towards the Absolute, which is the perfection of all these values.

God and Self

Radhakrishnan now turns to examine the relationship between God and the self, as the nature of religious experience throws up this all-important question. If the real were utterly transcendent to man, he avers, we would not even be able to say it is "wholly other"²². After studying closely the Hindu and the Christian mystical traditions, he quotes from *Varieties of Religious Experience* of William James thus:

The overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystic tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime and creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we have the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical

experience she learnt to understand the Trinity. Radhakrishnan maintains that she would not have recognized the revelation as that of the Trinity if she had not already known something of the Trinity. So also Paul would not have recognized Jesus on the road to Damascus if he had had no pre-knowledge about Jesus. Thus, Radhakrishnan concludes, the frame of reference which the individual adopts for the interpretation of his or her religious experience is determined by heredity and culture.

²² cf. *IVL*, p.81.

utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think and which brings it about that the mystic classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land.²³

According to Radhakrishnan, the mystical experiences or the insights of the best moments of life reveal the deepest in us. We would be doing ourselves an injustice if we separated the power of spiritual apprehension from the rest of our nature and called that as something divine. He would explain himself by asserting "the Divine is both in us and out of us. God is neither completely transcendent nor completely immanent."²⁴ He points out that there cannot be any fundamental contradiction between the philosophical idea of God as an all-embracing spirit (as in the *advaita* tradition) and the devotional ideas of a personal God who by His grace arouses in us the specifically religious emotion (as in the case of some of the seers of the Upanishads, the author of the Bhagavad Gita, St. Theresa, St. John of the Cross, etc.). Though the supreme spirit in its essential aspect is the changeless, noumenal reality, we can say that its representation in the form of a personal God who would be the source, guide and destiny of the universe appears to be the highest open to the logical mind. Radhakrishnan asserts categorically:

The difference between the Supreme as spirit and the supreme as person is one of stand point and not of essence, between God as he is and God as he seems to us. When we consider the abstract and impersonal aspect of the Supreme, we call it the Absolute; when we consider the Supreme as self-aware and self-

²³ *Ibid.*, p.83.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

blissful being, we get God. The real is beyond all conceptions of personality and impersonality.²⁵

Radhakrishnan urges us never to forget the symbolic character of religion. Personality of God is also a symbol. "All religion is symbolic, and symbolism is excluded from religion only when religion itself perishes."²⁶ Every individual has his freedom in his approach to God. Any name, any form or any symbol may stimulate one's heart. God may be viewed as master, personal friend or lover. Many people feel the need for a human intermediary; an *avatar* like Krishna or an incarnation like Jesus. Others may seek a prophet like Mohammad or others may be contented only with a *guru* who passes on a living experience.²⁷

Radhakrishnan ends his chapter on "Religious Experience and Its Affirmation" in *An Idealist View of Life* by declaring his belief in the doctrine of *Karma*. He defends this theory by stating that the way to realization is a slow one and that the utter self-giving which is the end of man is not easy. As no effort is wasted, the spiritual dignity of man is realized slowly from life to life and from plane to plane.²⁸

Universal Religion

Radhakrishnan feels that the differences among religions seem permanent, because we do not seem to know the basic truth of our own religion. He asserts that there is a common element in all religious experiences. He suggests that we do not need a new religion but an enlarged

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.85-86.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.96.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.96-97.

understanding of the old religion. Each religion will continue to retain its integral structure, but will take on new materials. The unity of all religions will not be at the external level.

He observes in *Recovery of Faith*: "It has to be realized in an inward and spiritual way without prejudice to any particular forms"²⁹

It is a question, then, of not fusing all religions into one, but enabling each religion to assimilate whatever it can from the truths of other religions. Our quarrels will cease if we understand that one truth is darkened and diversified in the different religions.

Radhakrishnan envisions a new society which will be built by those who have deepened their lives. Today's imperfect social order is a challenge to those who have achieved inner strength and integrity. No individual can be saved until society is perfected. The stronger individuals should help the weaker ones until salvation reaches all (*Sarvamukti*). As he asserts in his semi-autobiographical work: ".....Universal salvation is the aim of the historical process, and when the goal is reached, the process disappears. The temporal becomes the eternal."³⁰

Different parts of the world have been brought together by man's mechanical genius. This unity should now be given a spiritual basis: In *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* he would say: "The supreme task of our generation is to give a soul to the growing world consciousness, and to develop ideals and institutions necessary for the creative expression of the world soul".³¹

²⁹ Quoted in Vikrant, *op.cit.*, pp.4-5.

³⁰ MST, p.66.

³¹ Quoted in Naravane, *op.cit.*, 252.

Religion, increasingly freeing itself from dogmatism to maintain its dynamism, can join hands with philosophy in realizing this ideal of world-integration. Institutional religions have, in the past, often co-operated with forces of violence and fanaticism. Yet Religion, as distinct from religions, Radhakrishnan observes, can be a powerful force for unity: "When we dispute over dogmas, we are divided. But when we take to the religious life of contemplation, we are brought together.... The hardness of the ego melts, the tentativeness of the creed is revealed, and the intense focusing of all souls in one utter being is grasped".³²

Critical Remarks

I am personally inspired by some of the remarks that Prof. Naravane makes on the thought of Radhakrishnan. Naravane points out that there was a time when Radhakrishnan's work in the field of comparative philosophy (East and West) was admired by many of his readers, especially in India, for the wrong reasons, like seeing in Radhakrishnan a champion of Hinduism, a scholar who had proved that Indian philosophy possessed all that the West had, and so on. In reality, the main object of the comparative approach of Radhakrishnan in philosophy and religion was to reveal the strong points of each tradition and thus pave the way for a fruitful synthesis. C.E.M. Joad describes his role as a "liaison officer" between East and West. In his more mature works, he comes out as a "philosophical bilinguist" helping the two hemispheres to understand each other's language. He is thus a great bridge-builder between the East and the West.³³

When Radhakrishnan started writing on Indian philosophy, two extreme tendencies were apparent in the

³² *Ibid.*, p.253.

³³ cf. *ibid.*, pp.248-49.

field of Indian scholarship. There were some who suffered from a cultural inferiority complex and missed the richness and variety of their own philosophical heritage. As opposed to this, there were also revivalists who gave into uncritical adulation of ancient India and despised the West. When Radhakrishnan wrote *The Hindu View of Life* (1926), he tried to show that Hinduism did not consist in a rigid set of doctrines, but was a way of life characterized by tolerance, sympathy and breadth of vision. But he was criticized for presenting too positive an image of Hinduism ignoring its darker side. However, in fairness, every thinker has to be judged by his more mature works. This is the main reason why I have given a predominant place in my paper to what is perhaps his most refined work, *An Idealist View of Life*. Many consider this work to be his most significant contribution to contemporary philosophy. His outlook in this book is punctuated by restraint, while the presentation remains balanced and eloquent. Radhakrishnan describes what he calls as his personal faith in this work. Although Joad calls the book "the counter-attack from the East", Radhakrishnan's tone in it is far from aggressive. His main contention is that systems of philosophy in East and West are not as divergent as they might appear to the superficial scholar. There is a deep undercurrent of idealism which unites them, though, like Ananda Coomaraswamy, he maintains that the idealistic (whose meaning is closer to spiritualistic than conceptualistic) tradition has been more consistently developed in the East than in the West.³⁴

Some critics have opined that Radhakrishnan, while being a great synthesizer, lacks originality. Muirhead's comment serves as a relevant answer to this criticism:

³⁴ cf. *ibid.*, pp.227-28.

If originality, in philosophy as in poetry, consists not in the novelty of the tale, nor even in the distribution of light and shade in the telling of it, but in the depth with which its significance is grasped and made to dominate over details, *An Idealist View of Life* certainly does not fail in this quality.³⁵

Some writers have accused Radhakrishnan of syncretism. I do not share this opinion. Our discussion above regarding his concept of Universal Religion would bear out my view. Radhakrishnan wants each organized religion to continue to maintain the identity proper to itself but at the same time calls all religions to work towards a sustained unity at the mystical or transcendental level.

He has also been criticized, as already hinted above, as being basically an apologist trying to vindicate Hinduism against the attacks of Christian missionaries. While this is avowedly true, this attitude is prevalent more in his earlier works, especially in *The Ethics of Vedanta* and to some extent in *The Hindu View of Life*. P. Fallon quotes a certain Christian theologian in this regard:

Radhakrishnan's language is very ambiguous. He freely uses terminology which in Christian thought connotes something else, to justify to men the ways of the Vedanta. Although at the time of reading it is very lucid and pleasant, yet when all the factors have been taken into consideration the result is ambiguity.³⁶

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.228.

³⁶ Quoted in R. De Smet and J. Neuner (eds.), *Religious Hinduism* (Mumbai: St. Paul's, 1997), p. 367

However, I agree with those who point out that in his enthusiasm to demonstrate that mysticism is beyond faith and dogma and that it is common in its essence in all religious traditions, R. has sidelined or even ignored most major Christian philosophers and theologians down the ages. Further, a minor inconsistency that I could discover regarding his religious thought is the following: Radhakrishnan shows himself highly critical of dogmas, but accepts in the same breadth the doctrine of rebirth and the ancient system of *varnasrama dharma*. He does not put forward convincing proofs to defend these doctrines. But these drawbacks hardly discount the depth and range of his religious philosophy expressed so elegantly in masterly style and diction.