

Vedanta and Christianity

By Swami Tathagatananda

A new wind is blowing all over the world due to the influence of Vedanta, and some Christian writers are voicing their views in this regard. Wisdom in Vedanta demonstrates a harmonious attitude of acceptance of all other religions. Hinduism has never prevented Christians and believers of other faiths from practicing their own spiritual traditions within India, which has been home to all the major world religions. It is known to all that in spite of the high philosophy of Hinduism, Hindus could not live up to its precepts; hence, Hindu society suffered gravely in many ways. Swami Vivekananda did not hesitate to point out, "No religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism" (C. W., V: 15). Hinduism is not to blame; people in general under any culture, are not able to follow the precepts of their culture. Swamiji says, "Renunciation and spirituality are the two great ideas of India, and it is because India clings to these ideas that all her mistakes count for so little" (C. W., II: 372).

In fact, the current inter-denominational approach of Christianity actually has its roots in Vedanta's dynamic philosophy of spiritual unity. Christians have been safely practicing their faith in India since the first century A. D., with the visit of Christ's disciple St. Thomas to Kerala. Although the Christian presence has been penetrating India first by imperialist and colonialist force in the sixteenth century and later by the force of ideas, four centuries later we see that India's tolerance and accommodative spirit helped Christianity to thrive in India without fear and without interference. Hindus gave not only moral support, they gave money to the Persians, Jews and Christians.

The age-old fraternity of Hinduism is illustrated in modern times by the following event. A few days before Christmas in 1964, Pope Paul VI visited Bombay after publishing an encyclical that proclaimed Christianity's exclusive claim to truth just prior to his visit. It read in part, "Indeed honesty compels us to declare our conviction that there is but one true religion, the religion of Christianity. It is our hope that all who seek God, and adore him, may come to acknowledge its truth" (Swami Prabhavananda, Religion in Practice, p. 47).

The masses that gathered in Bombay to see the Pope listened eagerly to his spiritual message and demonstrated complete tolerance and respect for his views as well as reverence and cordiality for him as a man of God. When the Pope returned from India, the journal India News reported the event in its January 1, 1965 issue, which included his

reaction to the unexpected and unforgettable spiritual fervor and accommodating attitude of the multitude:

Pope Paul VI, on December 22nd, described his visit to Bombay early this month as “full of incomparable human value for us.” The Pontiff in his Christian message to the world said, “We might well have stayed there [in Bombay] like a stranger, isolated, and surrounded only by our brothers in faith . . . but, on the contrary, we met an entire people . . . It represented, it seemed to us, immense crowds of the vast Indian territory and those also of Asia.”

“This country is not Catholic,” Pope Paul said, “but what courtesy, what opening of spirit, what an avid desire to get a glance, or a word from this strange traveler from Rome! . . . That was a moment of understanding, of community of mind. We do not know what these rejoicing crowds saw in us, but we saw in the crowds a humanity of great nobility, identified with its millennial cultural traditions. These crowds were not all Christians, but they were profoundly spiritual, and in so many ways so good and winning.” (Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 48)

On December 7, 1965, Pope Paul VI remarks in one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), “Let them (Catholics) reflect attentively on how Christian religious life may be able to assimilate the ascetic and contemplative traditions whose seeds were sometimes already planted by God in ancient cultures prior to the preaching of the Gospel” (Pope Paul VI, *Vatican Council II (Ad Gentes, 7 December 1965)*. Cit. from PB, Jan. 2001, p. 77).

The next pontiff, Pope John Paul II, essentially repeated the message of his predecessor, Pope Paul VI: “Saint Paul is profoundly aware that Christ is absolutely original and absolutely unique. If He were only a wise man like Socrates, if He were a ‘prophet’ like Muhammad, if He were ‘enlightened’ like Buddha, without any doubt He would not be what He is. He is the one mediator between God and humanity [*italics not ours*]” (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, pp. 42-43).

The Second Vatican Council also included other statements of Pope John Paul II, the *Nostra Aetate* (“In Our Times”) in particular, in which the Pope stressed the need for improved relations with other religions. In 1986, Pope John Paul II invited representatives of the world’s religions to “The World Day of Prayer for Peace” in Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis.

We are learning about the new attitude of the Catholic Church through the various encyclical statements coming from the Vatican in recent decades, which state a slightly broader view of interaction with other religions. But there were signs of Christian interest in an inter-denominational approach—with a specific interest in the principles of Vedanta—as early as 1913. In his article, “Christian Vedantism,” published that year in the Christian journal, *Indian Interpreter*, R. Gordon Milburn drew attention to the need for Christians to broaden their attitude by taking into consideration the spiritual teachings of

Vedanta. S. Radhakrishnan quoted from this article in the Introduction to his book, *The Principal Upanishads*, which was published more than forty years later in 1953:

Christianity in India needs the Vedanta. We missionaries have not realized this with half the clearness that we should. We cannot move freely and joyfully in our own religion, because we have not sufficient terms and modes of expression wherewith to express the more immanent [sic] aspects of Christianity. A very useful step would be the recognition of certain books or passages in the literature of the Vedanta as constituting what might be called an Ethnic Old Testament. The permission of ecclesiastical authorities could then be asked for reading passages found in such a canon of Ethnic Old Testament at divine service along with passages from the New Testament as alternatives to the Old Testament lessons. (*Principal Upanishads*, p. 19, n. 1)

Of the many celebrated scholars of the western world we are mentioning only a few. In the October 1960 issue of the scholarly *Hibbert Journal*, Professor Woodbridge O. Johnson contributed a thoughtful and enlightening article, "The Coming of Copernican Christology." Professor Johnson suggested the incorporation of a new Copernican Christology that "is gaining a wider hearing with men of other faiths like Ramakrishna." In keeping with modern man's scientific outlook and knowledge of the expanding universe, modern intellectuals demand an intellectually satisfying and spiritually inspiring concept of universal Truth. It cannot be circumscribed and limited by exclusiveness and sectarianism. The older concept of Christology is dubbed as "provincial" and is said to be "culture-centered rather than humanity-centered," since it restricts God's active concern for man to the Jewish culture of the Near East, and allows Him only an indirect interest in the rest of mankind. It is also geocentric, rather than heliocentric, for it is "still postulated on the Ptolemaic world view, which holds that earth is both spatially and axiologically the center of space-time . . ."

Professor Johnson pointed out that in the light of Copernican Christology indicated in the writings of Paul Tillich, "Jesus Christ is no longer the one and only complete and final creating and saving word of God. His sovereignty is limited to this 'way-side.' He is but one among other instances of the eternal Logos becoming flesh in a divine kinesis. He is not the only supernatural savior, but one of a plurality of saviors sent forth to save a plurality of intelligent races of beings on a plurality of worlds throughout the flow of time." The author drew his conclusion with these pregnant words: "The new Christology, if and when it becomes dominant, should transform the intolerant provincialism of Christianity into a new humanity and a new insight into the wideness of the divine mercy."

There is an increasing awareness among the unorthodox of the necessity for religious tolerance and for the truth that many paths lead to the goal when they are followed with deep sincerity and dedication. Apart from that, there is the very fact that one may directly know and be united with one's real inner Self, the Atman, through meditation and spiritual practice, without the aid of any external authority. The significant modern attraction of the term Yoga ("Union with God") holds great promise to all who are tired of hearing the same hackneyed religious concepts of sin, hell, eternal damnation,

perdition, confession, commandments and so on. People are eagerly searching for a new source of inspiration. It is a scientific, historical and critical attitude that subjects religion to scrutiny. The late Dean Inge aptly remarked, "One of the chief obstacles to the acceptance of Christianity was the history of the Church." The doctrinal anchor of the Christian is becoming weaker and weaker. The excellent biographies of Shri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, translated into all the major languages including Russian, give readers their first opportunity to become acquainted with the wonderfully catholic message of the Master and his foremost disciple. In addition, the works of Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Khalil Gibran have done their part, together with liberal-minded Christian writers and other authors who are stimulating liberal thinking both within and outside the Church. Many voices have risen to speak against the Church—against Church revelation, many Church doctrines, the belief in miracles and the historicity of Christ. The bulk of literature on Eastern and Western religions is remarkable, whether it is illuminating and significant or not. These are clear indications that the religious-minded intelligentsia is keenly interested on religious affairs.

Swami Vivekananda's prophetic vision anticipated these reactionary trends and emboldened him to declare the lofty message of Vedanta for Westerners: "That which exists is One; sages call It by various names" (C. W., III: 113). Robert C. Zaehner (1913-1974) was Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. His concise introduction to India's eternal philosophy is given in a small book of great merit called *Hinduism*. Zaehner wrote about Swami Vivekananda with penetrating insight:

Vivekananda performed the extraordinary feat of breathing life into the purely static monism of Sankara. In Europe and America he proclaimed from the housetops the absolute divinity of man and the sinfulness of the Christian preoccupation with sin. This obsession with sin and its corollary, the helplessness of man and his absolute dependence on the grace of God, he, like Nietzsche, saw as something debilitating and degrading. Man is by nature free (mukta) his liberation is permanently with him, and it is he, no other, who binds himself in illusion: he has within himself the power to cast off his chains, and it is only his attachment to his miserable, unreal ego that prevents him from doing so. So "when we have nobody to grope towards, no devil to lay our blame upon, no Personal God to carry our burdens, when we are alone responsible, then we shall rise to our highest and best. I am responsible for my fate, I am the bringer of good unto myself, I am the bringer of evil. I am the Pure and Blessed One. . . . I have neither death nor fear, I have neither caste nor creed. I have neither father nor mother nor brother, neither friend nor foe, for I am Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss Absolute; I am the Blissful One, I am the Blissful One. I am not bound by either virtue or vice, by happiness or misery. Pilgrimages and books and ceremonies can never bind me. I have neither hunger nor thirst; the body is not mine, nor am I subject to the superstitions and decay that come to the body, I am Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss Absolute; I am the Blissful One, I am the Blissful One."

This open challenge to all the values of orthodox Christianity was not without its effect, for he made several devoted English converts, and laid the foundations of Neo-

Vedantism in America which later captivated Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard, and other well-known literary figures. On his return to India he saw to the foundation of maths or monasteries throughout the peninsula, and these continue to thrive and to multiply. He still believed that Hindu spirituality was supreme—for it alone proclaimed the great Advaitin Truth and the means by which it could be realized but since the revelation he had received at Cape Comorin he realized that this must be allied to practical service to the needy and to the Western scientific techniques which make that service possible. Thus in India the Raamkrishna Mission concentrated on the performance of good works—for only through self-forgetfulness can one hope for self-realization—while abroad it concentrated on spreading the gospel of Neo-Vedantism, publishing the sayings of Ramakrishna, the works of Vivekananda, their lives, and a number of classic Advaitin texts with English translation. In this way it has done much to familiarize the West with Hindu monistic thought; it has put India on the intellectual and religious map of the world, and its huge contribution to thought and religion is now universally admitted. (R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 168-9)

Two remarkable qualities coexist without contradiction in India's philosophy: the characteristic originality and freedom of the Vedanta and the absolute dependence of its logic on the divine revelations of the ancient seers in the Upanishads. Müller appreciates them both:

The most extraordinary feature of this Vedanta philosophy consists . . . in its being an independent system of philosophy, yet entirely dependent on the Upanishads, a part of the Veda, nay, chiefly occupied with proving that all its doctrines, to the very minutest points, are derived from the revealed doctrines of the Upanishads, if only properly understood, that they are in perfect harmony with revelation, and that there are no contradictions whatever between the various Upanishads themselves. . . (Müller, "Origin of the Vedanta," *Three Lectures*, p. 31)

Like other religions, Vedanta claims to be the revelation of truth but unlike other religions, it does not pronounce an exclusive claim to truth and does not force others to accept Vedanta as the only genuine revelation; Vedanta remains impartial without any aloofness or lack of fellowship. This is true of Vedanta's position with all religions, not just Christianity. Abdul Razak Berni, a Muslim ambassador from Persia who was strictly faithful to Islam, visited the court of the Hindu ruler of Calicut in Kerala sometime around the middle of the fifteenth century. His remarks bring to light that Hindu ruler's "perfect toleration" for the practice of Islam in the territory within his protective rule:

The people (Hindus of Calicut) are infidels; consequently, I (Abdul Razak Berni) consider myself in an enemy's country, as the Mohammedans consider everyone who has not received the Koran. Yet I admit that I meet with perfect toleration, and even favor; we have two mosques and are allowed to pray in public. (Murray, *Discoveries and Travels in Asia*, Vol. II, p. 20)

Vedanta recognizes that the mystical spiritual message of the inspired scripture of all the major religions is eternal and infinite, whereas the historical message that each one brings

is socio-political and therefore limited. Every religion's eternal truth-essence gives it the potential to infinitely re-interpret that truth to meet the needs of every age; this Vedanta alone has done impressively from its very inception in human life by dynamically proving its re-creative, inspiring and fulfilling values in every age. Swami Vivekananda says:

There is always . . . a small group of men who teach religion from experience. They are called mystics, and these mystics in every religion speak the same tongue and teach the same truth. This is the real science of religion. As mathematics in every part of the world does not differ, so the mystics do not differ. They are all similarly constituted and similarly situated. Their experience is the same; and this becomes law. (C. W., VI: 81)

Religion is not information; it is transformation. The modern world accepts the firm faith of all religions and wants religious life to be lived, to bring change in tone, temperament and behavior in order to establish harmony between individuals and among all the peoples of the world. As Shri Ramakrishna says, Truth is One. As many minds, so many paths to the ultimate Truth.