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Krishna or Christ ?

BY THE REV. W. ST. CLAIR TISDALL, D.D.

AS in the days when Greek, Roman, and Egyptian heathenism was fading away before the dawning of the Sun of Righteousness, so now in India men are face to face with the great question, as in the West they were then, "Is the Nazarene to conquer?" The old, corrupt forms of paganism, it was then felt, must go; but the difficulty was to find something in the ancient faith which, ennobled, purified, idealized, might be made use of to stem the advancing tide of the new religion. A foreign faith, born among the Jews, but in large measure disowned by them, threatened to shatter the temples of the heathen gods, and had already silenced their oracles. Could not some one of these gods—perhaps the brilliant Apollo, possibly the mysterious veiled Isis—inspire devotion enough into men's hearts to enable them to resist the all-constraining attraction which seemed to draw men in ever-increasing numbers to the Crucified? The attempt was made; the contest lasted for generations; the result was reluctantly proclaimed by the dying lips of the Emperor Julian: "Vicisti, Galilæe!"

In India at the present time the same contest is going on. Amid the multitudinous gods, mostly evil, worshipped by modern Hindūs, none can claim greater popularity than the ever-youthful Kṛishṇa. Hence it is that an attempt is being made, in large measure by those who have received a European education and who know something of Christianity, so to exalt Kṛishṇa that he may successfully rival Christ. Kṛishṇa is at least a native deity, not one introduced by foreigners. Regarding faith in Christ, I have myself heard it publicly asserted by Indians educated at an English University that Christianity was not the religion of England, and that during their whole residence in this country they had never met a Christian. The lives of many Englishmen in India—there are noble exceptions

—lend but too much support to the statement that Christ is not believed in nor obeyed by us as a nation. Why, then, it is asked, should Hindūs accept Him whom His own “receive not”? Why not rather “cling to their noble ancestral faith,” as during the last few years they have been more than once urged to do by Englishmen in high positions under Government? This, it is hoped, may be possible if Kṛishṇa can be so idealized as really to attract not only the ignorant multitude, but the philosophically inclined also. For the latter, the Bhagavad Gītā has its charm; for the former, the tales told of Kṛishṇa in the Purāṇas and the Mahābhārata¹ are of perennial interest.

That the attempt to compare Kṛishṇa with our Lord to the disadvantage of the latter is being made in India, with the hope of resisting the progress of Christianity, is clear even from the title of a book, “The Imitation of Kṛishṇa,” published there a few years ago. That such a movement should have some temporary success is not to be wondered at when we remember that in October, 1907, in a leading English journal, there appeared an article which endeavoured to prove that the “Gospel” of Kṛishṇa was, in its aim and spirit, identical with the Gospel of Christ. The latter article must have had some weight with many, for even the writer of a notice of it in the *Guardian* spoke of its authoress as having apparently proved her contention! No better instance of the exceeding danger of “a little knowledge” could well be found.

What is the character of this, the favourite god of modern India? His name signifies “the black one,” and was doubtless given him because of the supposed colour of his skin, since his worship was adopted by the Āryans from the black aborigines whom they conquered. But his moral character, as depicted in the Purāṇas, agrees admirably with the meaning of his name. There is no proof that he ever existed, though some hold that he was a religious reformer, or perhaps a warrior-king.

¹ The Bhagavad Gītā is an episode in the Mahābhārata, but it has no real connection with the narrative in the epic, and is frequently published and dealt with separately.

Many of the details of his conduct, related for the edification of his Indian devotees, are unfit for publication in these pages. The recital of the folly, dirtiness, and immorality ascribed to him in the Hindū books would serve no useful purpose. His life, according to them, was full of adultery and murder. Among his more than 16,000 wives, eight were his special favourites. Of his 180,000 sons, many slew one another, and the survivors were killed by their father. Under ordinary circumstances a Hindū regards adultery and murder as heinous crimes, but not when committed by a god ; for the Bhāgavata Purāṇa says : “ Even the lords of the people [Brahmā, Indra, etc.] deviate from the path of virtue and become guilty of ravishment. But their acts do not bring any sin on the powerful and dispassionate ones [who perpetrate them], even as fire is not to be blamed for burning all things.” The same principle is applied to Kṛishṇa in his human form, regarded as an *avatāra* or “descent” of the god Viṣṇu. But Hindū perversity goes further, and urges that Kṛishṇa's immorality, which cannot be either concealed or explained away, renders him a far more perfect human character than he could have been had he been free from vice. A modern Hindū¹ writer on this subject says : “ The being who is equal in virtue as well as in vice is to us a grander being than the extremely virtuous man. One whose moral equilibrium remains intact in every act which the human mind is capable of imagining is the grandest being in the universe. The great Kosmic law can never affect that being who acts without *sanga* (or ‘attraction’). To teach this great lesson practically Kṛishṇa came to the world, and to teach this great lesson practically he treated vice and virtue alike. In every line of the Bhagavad Gītā is stamped this great lesson, and the whole of Kṛishṇa's *māyāvīc* [illusional] life is an embodiment of this teaching. Action committed without ‘attraction’ is neither virtuous nor vicious. . . . Conceive a man who is trying his utmost to fly from vice to its opposite pole, virtue ; imagine also a being to whom heat and cold, virtue and vice, are the same, and you will

¹ Mulopadhaya, “ The Imitation of Kṛishṇa,” Preface, pp. ii, iii.

find that the latter is *infinitely* superior to the former. The one is the infinite, the other is the finite; the one is the absolute, the other is the relative."

Such is the logic and such the morality taught by the enlightened followers of Kṛishṇa in modern India. But perhaps it may be urged that the teaching of the Bhagavad Gītā itself is very different. It would be strange indeed if those whose religious textbook *par excellence* this is should be guilty of seriously misrepresenting its doctrines. But it is not so. The Bhagavad Gītā represents Kṛishṇa as acting in disguise as the hero Arjuna's charioteer. The latter is about to join battle with his relatives for the throne of a large part of India. When he sees the armies on each side drawn up in order of battle and ready to engage, Arjuna shrinks from the thought of the terrible slaughter which is bound to ensue, and says that, rather than cause so many deaths and so much misery, he would resign his claim and retire into private life. Kṛishṇa tells him that if he does he will be reviled as a coward, and urges him to fight, since a man is bound to perform the duties of his caste, *even though sinful*,¹ and Arjuna, as a member of the *Kshatriya*, or warrior caste, is therefore obliged to shed blood. Kṛishṇa states that a man who kills is not guilty of murder if he does it without "attachment"² of intellect—that is to say, if he believes that he is not the real doer of his actions because he is indifferent to them. This is exactly the argument which we have been considering above. Kṛishṇa further contends that killing is not murder, because of the doctrine of transmigration. "As a man, having put off worn-out garments, taketh different new ones, so the soul, having put off worn-out bodies, proceedeth to other new³ ones." In modern India also this argument has been used to justify murder, on the ground that the soul cannot be destroyed, and that it is not a crime to help it "to put off an old garment."

But it is not with regard to murder only that Kṛishṇa uses

¹ "Sahajam karma, Kaunteya, sadosham api na tyajet" (Bhagavad Gītā, xviii. 48).

² Bhagavad Gītā, xviii. 17.

³ *Ibid.*, ii. 22.

his philosophy to promote evil-doing. He teaches that the one thing needful is for one to perceive that he is not the real doer of any act, but that it is really due to Prakṛiti, or Nature. To grasp this is to attain true knowledge, and those who have thus attained are not liable to suffer any evil consequences from their actions. "Even¹ if thou art the most wicked-doing of all wicked men, just by the raft of Knowledge (*jñāna*) wilt thou altogether cross over all sin. As the kindled fire, O Arjuna, reduces to ashes the pieces of fuel, so the fire of Knowledge reduces all acts to ashes." He teaches Pantheism, stating that all are but parts of the one, all-pervading, universal Soul (*Ātman*). Men ought to realize this, and then they are identified with this Supreme Soul. "As² the all-pervading ether (*ākāśam*) through its subtlety is not defiled, so the soul, abiding everywhere in the body, is not defiled." Hence we see that Kṛishṇa's worshippers are justified in every immoral practice by the teaching of the Bhagavad Gītā. And this is the book which, we are gravely assured, is in "surprising agreement" with the New Testament! "Turning from the Bhagavad Gītā to the New Testament," says a modern English lady writer, "we shall find that the ideal which Jesus Christ held up to His followers is essentially the same as that which Kṛishṇa proposed to Arjuna." If so, words have no meaning, and black is white. We might, perhaps, compare Kṛishṇa to Mephistopheles, but certainly to no one bearing a holier name.

The worship of Kṛishṇa as a "descent" (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu was doubtless sanctioned by the Brāhmins in order to incorporate into Hindūism an aboriginal deity who was too popular to be discarded. A new element or principle—that of *bhakti* or personal "devotion" to this god—has thus found an entrance into the religion of India. Devotion to the Deity is of the very highest value, if the Deity to whom such love and service are rendered be the True God. We know how frequently our Lord appeals to this principle, as, for example, when He says to His disciples: "If ye love Me, ye will [R.V.] keep My command-

¹ Bhagavad Gītā, iv. 36, 37.

² *Ibid.*, xiii. 32.

ments."¹ The constraining love of Christ has in all ages been the mainspring and motive power of Christian life and conduct. But it is far otherwise when the object of devotion is an evil being, the very incarnation of vice, as in Kṛishṇa's case. There is a very powerful and influential sect in India who are worshippers of Vallabhāchārya, a man who was supposed to be an incarnation of this god. These people hold that they owe the devotion of "body,² mind and property" to everyone who happens to be reckoned among this man's descendants. The very water in which these man-gods have washed their feet is drunk with religious avidity by their worshippers. Again and again have cases been brought before the High Court at Bombay by the police in which the gross immoralities and the resultant almost incredible crimes committed under the sanction of their religion by these inhuman monsters have been fully exposed. One such revelation of obscene wickedness and cruelty took place when the writer was in Bombay in 1899. No punishment could be inflicted on the culprit, for his conduct was fully sanctioned by his caste laws, and in complete accordance with Kṛishṇa's own cherished example.

Such is the consequence of the perversion of a good principle to sanction and encourage what is essentially bad. Popular as it is in India, the worship of Kṛishṇa is fruitful in all kinds of evil, of which the above is only a single example. The attempt to exalt him as a rival to our Lord is not likely to succeed except among men who are striving to find religious sanction for their evil practices, and among their unfortunate dupes. But to *compare* Kṛishṇa with Christ, though, as we have seen, the attempt has been made both in India and in England, would be ludicrous if it were not blasphemous. Some have fancied that they could detect a resemblance in the two names, though in reality, when they are correctly pronounced, there is not a single letter in the names which has the same sound in one as in the other. In meaning the appellations are essentially different. Probably Kṛishṇa never existed, though

¹ John xiv. 15.

² "Tan, man, dhan."

of course the tales told about his crimes may be founded upon the evil deeds done by some aboriginal chief of early days. If so, it is too true of him that "The evil that men do lives after them"; for, whether in part real or wholly mythical, a god made in the image of his worshippers, no deity in India now exercises a more immoral influence over his devotees than does Kṛishṇa. Regarding our Lord, on the other hand, even Strauss has said that He is "the one character without the idea of whom in the mind personal piety is impossible."

We have indicated the struggle now going on in India. What will be its result? Will it end, as in the ancient world, with the triumph of the Crucified and the fleeing away of the darkness that now broods over hearts and consciences? Or will India finally reject Christ, choosing darkness rather than light through love of evil deeds? The result may be long in coming, but who can doubt that finally the darkness will have passed away, and the true light shine there at least as brightly as among ourselves? It is a trite saying that history repeats itself. In India, however, instead of the grudging confession of the dying apostate to the triumph of Him whom he contemptuously styled "the Galilæan," may we soon hear resounding from the lips of that many-millioned land the words of her own sweet hymn—

"Jai, jai, Prabhu Yesū!"¹

or may she borrow those of the great Apostle of the Gentiles, "Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

¹ "Victory, victory, Lord Jesus!"

