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INDIAN THOUGHT AND CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION.

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THE late Bishop Westcott is credited with the remark that we stand as yet in need of an exhaustive commentary on St. John's Gospel, and the learned prelate was hoping that an Indian Christian would Christianize some of the wonderfully inspiring teaching of the Gita (the Lord's Song) and fill up this lamentable gap. Of late years there has been a considerable increase in the output and circulation of Indian and other Eastern literature, owing mainly to the strenuous efforts of missionary organizations, helped no doubt to a very large extent by cultural societies; and many who have come into contact with Eastern ideas and Eastern outlook on the problem of existence begin to feel that the Bishop was right, and that the East has a most valuable message for the West. We would do well and would learn most valuable lessons if, under the guidance of a seer like Rabindranath Tagore, we endeavour to penetrate into the somewhat mysterious teaching of the East. Perhaps these lessons, new to many of us, would put fresh life into the bones of a Western world, wellnigh dead to spiritual values and all but crushed under the heavy weight of ponderous machinery. The phraseology is doubtless strange, and we have to confess that more than ever we did put aside such fascinating books as Tagore's *Sadhana*; but the results should stimulate us to put forth an extra amount of intellectual energy. Perhaps the very novel form in which Eastern ideas are presented to us may prove both an incentive and an inspiration to many, enticing them to reflect upon religious problems, which are, after all, the most vital of all.

Let it be stated at the very outset that Indian thought supplies us with a solution to the problems of existence, which, though tentative, as finality in this case seems to be baffling us still, appears to us to be more akin to Christian ideas than most of our Western thinking is. Doubtless some of the Upanishadic ideas and many of the expressions so familiar to Indian seers could be construed

as to give a hopelessly pessimistic outlook on life; and one does frequently meet with expressions which seem to point to a total extinction of personality and individuality on reaching life's goal, Brahma. But Tagore reminds us of the fact that "man is never literal in the expression of his ideas, except in matters most trivial." And do not Western mystics and poets use language which, if taken literally, could be interpreted as implying annihilation of man's personality in his union with God? The average Western thinker can, without difficulty, see clearly from the pinnacle of his isolation the disastrous consequences a monistic basis of life leads to. The force of his logical argumentation drives his opponent to obliterate distinction, to squash differences, and to do away with one of the most cherished of Western notions of individuality, which is no doubt a veritable *impasse*. But the Eastern thinker, on the other hand, sees, with no less lucidity, the appalling consequences of a dualistic position with all the suspicion and hatred it engenders and with all the desire for personal aggrandisement to the detriment of our fellow-men that it fosters. But we must not anticipate our line of argument.

We pass first of all to put before the reader what we consider to be extremely suggestive thoughts concerning our relation to the universe and to nature around us. A religiously minded person, in thinking out the mystery of existence, and his or her place in the world, is sooner or later confronted with a bewildering problem, the problem of harmonizing the material with the spiritual, the temporal with the eternal, the self, the individual, with the non-self, the universe at large and other intelligent beings. And in the presence of these two seemingly opposite beings, the thinking person will be forced to pronounce on their relative values. For it seems inevitable that a theoretical valuation should precede our moral decision of identifying ourselves with either of them. Now, most of our Western thought starts from a peremptory dualistic position, which sets two classes of things one against the other. The temporal is conceived as in opposition to the eternal; the individual is viewed in constant conflict with the universe to maintain his claims; man is imagined as wrestling with the hidden forces of nature, and the material is held to be alienated from the spiritual. Do not certain sets of words we delight in using suggest this alienation? Man strives to wrest out of nature

the secrets she is supposed to guard jealously from man. We are proud of our scientific conquests, of extending our possessions, unmindful of the fact that our possessions are our limitations, of enlarging the range of our dominions, and of asserting, more or less to our satisfaction, our fictitious rights to supremacy over the rest of the world of nature. A natural sequel to this attitude of mind is an over-developed instinct of pugnacity. Ample scope is furthermore supplied to our self-assertiveness. This dualism secures for us likewise recognition, a hankering after which seems to form part of our Western character. No wonder that real Christianity, apart from formal and traditional religious practices disfiguring themselves under that name, has not permeated more deeply the social life of the West and has not influenced more powerfully its mental outlook. The West, after centuries of Christianity, still clings pertinaciously to the idea that accumulated wealth is a mark of superiority. Our possessions and our treasures are held to be distinctive criterion of greatness, in spite of Christ's injunction to the contrary.

The main feature, on the other hand, of Indian thought is the essential harmony between man's spirit and the universe, between the individual and nature. India has ever upheld that a kind of kinship spreads throughout the whole realm of existence, linking up everything in an intimate consortium of beings. India knows nothing of mutual jealousies and of irreconcilable enmities between man and nature. The Indian thinkers do discern diverse strata in the scale of beings, but do not discern alienation between them. "The fundamental unity of creation was not simply a philosophical speculation for India," writes Tagore, "it was her life-object, this great harmony in feeling and in action." The Indian seer's aim has always been to see God through the veil of finite existences, to salute Him in everything in the world and bow before Him everywhere. Bishop Lightfoot pays a very warm tribute of admiration to Cleanthes' hymn, a Christian hymn penned by a heathen seer. In it Cleanthes salutes God as "the Father of all, which is above all, and through all and in you all." And do not those beautiful lines of the Apocrypha contain the same inspiring truth :

> Lift up the stone and you will find me,
> Cleave the wood and there I am.

In consequence of this, we do not find in Indian thought those ideas of conflict and struggle with the cosmos which we notice to figure so prominently in our Western vocabulary. The Westerner sees in the phenomena of nature only instruments for his own aggrandisement. The sight of a cascade sends through his nervous system a most pleasing sensation of anticipated wealth. The water will easily be transformed by his magic power into electricity, and this into wealth; while the Indian sees in its crystalline purity a symbol and a sacrament of God. Obsessed with the idea of his own aggrandisement, the Westerner is bound to miss the inward meaning and the deep significance of natural phenomena. He will read in them only that which furthers his own selfish ends and what secures the gratification of his personal desires. No wonder, then, if the Westerner has no ears to hear the message that the soft breezes of the spring morning bring to him, nor eyes to see God's beauty in the multi-coloured hues of the meadows. No, he has an eye on business, which is a different way of saying that he has an eye on *himself*. "When we look at the world," writes Tagore, "through the veil of our desires we make it small and narrow and fail to perceive its full truth. Of course it is obvious that the world serves us and fulfils our needs, but our relation to it does not end there. We are bound to it with a deeper and truer bond than that of necessity. Our soul is drawn to it; our love of life is really our wish to continue our relation with this great world. This relation is one of love . . . this world is our compeer, nay, we are one with it. Through our progress in science, the wholeness of the world and our oneness with it is becoming clearer to our mind." (*Sadhana*, p. 112.) And in the same chapter he tacitly answers the objection of those who would be scandalized at the insinuation of *oneness* with the world and the Supreme Spirit. "In love all the contradictions of existence merge themselves and are lost. Only in love are unity and duality not at variance. Love must be one and two at the same time." "In this wonderful festival of creation, this great ceremony of self-sacrifice of God, the lover constantly gives himself up to gain himself in love. Indeed, love is what brings together and inseparably connects both the act of abandoning and that of receiving." And out of such premises, the conclusion would naturally flow that "wherever there is a bit of colour, a note of song, a grace

of form, there comes *the call for our love.*" And the essential condition to hear the call of love and to answer it is readiness not to get, but to give, not to enlarge the self in its distinctness and isolation, but to enlarge it by fusion with a larger self.

It is pleasing to see a distinguished Western scholar giving expression to the same views. Sir Oliver Lodge says in his *Man and the Universe,* in this connection : " Realize that you are part of a great orderly and mutually helpful cosmos—that you are not stranded or isolated in a foreign universe, but that you are part of it and closely akin to it—and your sense of sympathy will be enlarged, your power of free communication will be opened, and the heartfelt aspiration and communion and petition that we call prayer will come as easily and as naturally as converse with those human friends and relations whose visible bodily presence gladdens and enriches your present life." (*Man and the Universe,* p. 80.)

The great scientist is right. There is only one key which will open to us far and wide this mysterious nature, and that key is Sympathy. If we knock at her doors with the armed fist of a warrior, anxious to plunder and eager to carry away rich booty, Nature is sure to redouble her efforts in concealing from us her secrets.

To realize the importance of this attitude of mind towards the non-living world, we would do well to consider that it is bound to influence our thinking both in regard to our social relationships and our religious life. For once we have established ourselves successfully on a pedestal of glory, constituting ourselves as centres of reference of the material world, isolating ourselves from the same, and finally building up a castle of refuge against the onslaughts of a relentless enemy, it will inevitably prove extremely difficult not to extend the same treatment to our fellow-men. With the self looming so large in our own lives, everything around us is bound to lose importance. After falling into the habit of looking at everything as means to an end, it will not be at all easy to make an exception in favour of man, one out of many objects of the visible world. Western ethics, one would be inclined to admit, had reached their culmination in that austere maxim of a severe master, Kant. The dignity of a rational nature is such that it should never be distorted and made into means to something else : it is an end in itself. The faultless dialectical reasoning

of the author of the *Critique* will doubtless carry conviction to the mind, but unfortunately in questions of morals the theoretical argumentation is not enough; and one would doubt if Kant's maxim supplies the *driving* force as well, the controlling and motive power to action.

Tagore, as an exponent of Indian thought, in spite of expressions which might be construed as pantheistic, is human. Analysing the basis of our social relationships, he goes to the root of the matter when he says: "When we know him [man] as a spirit, we know him *as our own.* [Italics ours.] We at once feel that cruelty to him is cruelty to ourselves, to make him small is stealing from our own humanity, and in seeking to make use of him solely for personal profit we merely gain in money or comfort what we pay for in truth." And in other places he deplores the various forms of cannibalism that have existed and darkened our civilization, foretelling also its own destruction. "Civilization can never sustain itself upon cannibalism of any form." "It is *self-deception* on a large scale. Our desires blind us to the *truth* that there is in man, and this is the greatest wrong done by ourselves to our *own* soul. It deadens our consciousness, and is but a gradual method of spiritual suicide. It produces ugly sores in the body of civilization, gives rise to its hovels and brothels, its vindictive penal codes, its cruel prison systems, its organized method of exploiting foreign races to the extent of permanently injuring them by depriving them of the discipline of self-government and means of self-defence." (*Sadhana*, p. 109, and *passim.*)

The famous words of the Stoic emperor convey the same idea: "For we are made for co-operation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth." "So too a man when he is separated from another man has fallen off from the whole social community." Now, when Tagore emphasizes the fact of our oneness with our fellow-men, and ultimately with the Supreme Spirit, we are apt to dismiss him summarily with the remark that he is tainted with Pantheism. It is not our intention to discuss the grounds of this condemnation, we are more concerned with living ideas than with dead nomenclatures, but is not St. John's argument for brotherly love identical in spirit, though perhaps raised to a higher plane? This we find condensed in his first Epistle, chapter iv. 20: "If a man say, I love God, and

hateth his brother, he is a liar ; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen ? " St. John tacitly assumes that man is, if we may be allowed to put it so, the visible aspect God, and from such premise the conclusion is most forcibly drawn that hatred of the visible manifestation of God is quite incompatible with sincere and honest love of the invisible God. Only on the strength of *Diiestis* St. John's argument can be cogent at all.

Then finally in the attempt to throw new light on the supreme paradox of all religious experiences, one is bound to admit that Indian thought supplies us with a basis of explanation suggestive of the Christian interpretation. Bishop Temple has well said that the main business of all religions is to transform us out of selfishness into love. The mystery of the Cross has to some extent to be reproduced in the lives and experiences of every believer. The wisdom of the ages incarnate in our Lord and Master has said it and there is no room for doubtful questioning. We can save our life only by throwing it away ; the road to life is death to oneself. Not getting, but giving absolutely and completely is the way to riches and wealth. What is the appeal of Western thought to draw us out of our selfishness and to transform us into love ? Modern psychology is perplexed with the problem, and is struggling to find a telling message.

In our humble opinion Barry touches the central point when he writes : " The self-centred life is never unified ; it is ever fightings without and fears within." We cannot identify ourselves with a higher purpose, a nobler ideal, unless we convince ourselves of utter insufficiency. To know the limitations of ourselves and to cease seeking ourselves, are identical. " The chick knows when it breaks through the self-centred isolation of its egg that the hard shell which covered it so long was not really a part of its life." And how this unification of all our efforts is to be accomplished, Barry explains as follows : " And because, as Christians hold, that the Master is the revelation of the soul of the world, his life will be completed and made his own in growing correspondence and accord with the will that rules the universe. He has found the truth, and the truth will make him free."

Tagore in his teaching starts from a similar assumption. Life, for the Upanishadic seers, is immense. In consequence to realize

oneself is essential to " cross the limiting barriers of the individual, to become more than man, to become one with the all." " In order to be fully conscious of the reality of the all, man has to be free himself from the bonds of personal desires." This discipline we have to go through to prepare ourselves for our social duties—for sharing the burdens of our fellow-beings. Every endeavour to attain a larger life requires of man " to gain by giving away, and not to be greedy. And then to expand gradually the consciousness of one's unity with all is the striving of humanity." A self-centred life separates itself from the all-pervading life of the universe. No member in our physical bodies can grow if it wilfully cuts itself away from the life-giving centre; and the same is true in the great republic of spirits.

Two ideas seem to be central in St. John's Gospel, the oneness of Christ with His Father and the revelation of God through His Incarnate Son. Both of these ideas are emphasized over and over again throughout the Gospel. And it is very significant that these very same ideas seem to dominate the ancient thought of India as interpreted to us by Tagore. Who were the rishis? The rishis were those who having reached the supreme God from all sides had found abiding peace, had become united with all, had entered into the life of the universe. " If man apprehends God," says a seer of the Upanishads, " he becomes God." " The deepest and most earnest prayer," says Tagore, " that has ever risen from the human heart has been uttered in our ancient tongue: *O Thou self-revealing one, reveal Thyself in me.*" (*Sadhana*, p. 37.)

The ancient Upanishadic seer was anxious to be made a channel for God's manifestation, a reflection of His attribute and the mirror of His glory. But we have in Christ the fulfilment of that earnest desire. On the eve of His passion, Christ uttered that wonderful prayer that has been preserved for us by St. John. In it, not boastfully, but out of the conviction of his own consciousness, Christ tells us that He has accomplished that for which the Upanishadic seer prayed: " I have glorified Thee on earth . . . I have manifested Thy name. I have given unto them the words which Thou gavest Me." This surely is the mission and purpose in life of every one of us, to let the eternal light in us shine through us; not to hinder the manifestation of the Eternal Spirit through us. Was not this the supreme purpose of the Incarnation? And we,

also, who are in smaller measure, infinitely smaller measure than Christ was, the temple and abode of God, should aim at that same thing. Oh, if at the end of our days we could say as truly as Jesus said, "I have manifested Thy name"—"O Thou self-revealing One, Thou hast revealed Thyself in me"!

It has been pointed out (cf. McKenzie's *Hindu Ethics*) that the distinctive feature of Hindu mysticism is that it aims at unity, oneness with the Supreme Spirit, while the true Christian mystic aims not at unity but at union. The fact is that when we attempt to describe in precise philosophical language what actually takes place in that supreme moment when it is given us to apprehend God, to see Him face to face, we have to resort to analogical terms which fail to express exactly the meaning. Thomas Aquinas maintains that in the act of apprehension the intellect and the species *intelligibilis* become more intimately one than *materia* and *forma* become one in constituting actually existing things. Christ Incarnate is still to-day a mystery; for the simple reason that the human mind fails to grasp how the union of the divine and the human could be accomplished without resulting into a unity. And until we explain the mystery of the God-Man in Jesus Christ, we shall not be any nearer to the solution of the problem of our ultimate union in God. The Western clings tenaciously to his own personality and individuality and in consequence discountenances anything that is likely to suppress it or destroy it; the Eastern, on the other hand, seems to hold unconsciously what we might call a depreciated opinion of himself, and is in consequence more ready *to lose himself*, to die to himself, in order to attain Life.