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# The Hindu Attitude

to

## Christian Evangelism and Humanitarian Work

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We have been told recently by some spokesmen on behalf of the Government of India that foreign missionaries should confine themselves in this land to doing humanitarian works, eschewing all motive of converting Indians to the Christian Faith. Though it is foreign missionaries that are sought to be singled out at present, such a policy if allowed to go unchallenged is likely to be extended eventually to cover the missionary activities of the Indian Church and the indigenous Christians. The reason for such a fear is obvious. The alleged policy of the Government (we are using the word 'alleged' deliberately, for we are not yet certain to what extent the Government is actually committed to the statements made in Parliament by the Home Minister) is based either on a principle or is purely discriminatory, seeking to single out foreign missionaries for the imposition of certain restrictions on their missionary activities for no reason but that they are foreigners. Such a discriminatory policy aimed at foreigners cannot be sustained by the Government without discrediting itself. One therefore is inclined to suspect that there is in the minds of some people who speak on behalf of the Government a principle—a principle arising out of their personal religious convictions but which they dare not apply to the activities of the indigenous Christians for fear of violating constitutional guarantees given to all religious communities in the State. This principle is that conversion from one religion to another is wrong. If the Government of India ever forgets that India is a Secular State, the principle may be sought to be applied to the activities of the indigenous Christians also. A Government that has a safe majority and a Parliament that comprises and that will always comprise a majority of people who believe in the principle that conversion from one religion to another is wrong, can always change the Constitution of the State. We fervently hope that India will honour its pledges to religious minorities and that its Government at no time will do anything to injure the secular character of the Indian State. If a Secular State is not entitled to legislate against the religious beliefs and practices of its citizens so long as such beliefs and practices are not contrary to morality, then the restriction sought to be placed on the evangelistic enterprise of foreign missionaries boils down to one of discrimination. The discrimination may be legally justified

but it will not bring credit to India and is contrary to her professed policy to fight against arbitrary discriminations wherever found in human society.

But the Christian should understand why the Hindu is against conversion from one religion to another as a matter of principle. The Indian Christian may take his stand on constitutional rights to propagate his faith; he might fight a legal battle against any governmental encroachment on the privilege of the Church to invite others not of Indian origin to share in the Church's evangelistic task; but he cannot fight a constitutional or legal battle against the belief that is tenaciously held by many Hindus that conversion is wrong. Here he is face to face with a religious philosophy that denies the validity of certain Christian claims. He must understand this religious philosophy and develop a Christian apologetic in relation to it. Our battle is not constitutional or legal but it is partly a battle to win and convert minds.

### Hindu Religious Philosophy against Conversion

The sum and substance of the Hindu religious philosophy directed against conversion may be stated as follows: Reality is one and undivided. This being so, we can never have any knowledge or experience of it. Why? Because knowledge and experience involve an antithesis between the subject and the object, between the knower and the known, between the one who experiences and the object experienced. An inevitable duality is involved both in knowledge and experience on the empirical level. Knowledge has always a reference to something beyond itself. But Reality is one and indivisible and when you move from the plane of plurality to the realm of Reality, all duality and all antithesis is abolished; as a matter of fact there is no place for any division and distinction. No subject-object relationship is possible accordingly, and therefore there is place for neither knowledge nor experience of Reality in the normal sense. Reality is beyond all intellectual categorization, for such categorization assumes relations and divisions. You know Reality by being it. Of course, in fact it is not knowledge but mystic intuition of identity where all movements of the intellect, will and emotion are transcended. What abides is a supra-personal existence in unity and identity.

If Reality is one, the world of plurality, that is to say the world of our normal experience, cannot be real. The One and the Many are irreconcilable. Nevertheless it should not be understood by this that the world of plurality is a mere projection of subjective ideas having no extra-mental reality. By calling it unreal what is meant to be understood is that in relation to transcendent truth it possesses no value. The realm of the Many is only provisionally or relatively real.

All our knowledge and experience has real relevance only to that which is comprehended in it, namely, the world of relations, the world of plurality. If this world of plurality though having a positive and concrete existence possesses no value in relation to transcendent truth, our knowledge and experience which pertain only to this world of plurality have also no real value in relation to transcendent truth. All the deliverances of our experience, both intellectual and otherwise, being

completely relative to that which is true only relatively, provisionally or pragmatically, never bear the stamp of ultimate truthfulness. Perhaps the right way is to treat all the judgments arising out of our experience in this world as being both true and false. Their truth consists in the first place in their pragmatic character, relative to a pragmatic world. In the second place, may not our world of relative reality express partially at least, the nature of ultimate truth, for in the end nothing can be looked upon as being outside Reality; everything must be within Reality even if only provisionally. If this be so, our judgments arising out of our experience of this world may express partially and symbolically the nature of ultimate truth. Nevertheless, they are also false in the sense that, the world of our experience having no real value in relation to transcendent truth, these judgments have no abiding value.

Since all that is said above pertains to religious experience also, all our religious affirmations are both true and false. They are all true, however divergent they may be from one another, in the same sense that intellectual judgments that pertain to the realm of the provisionally or pragmatically real are true. They are all false also, for no judgment or even a group or a system of judgments, religious or otherwise, can ever express the total or true nature of Reality. As a matter of fact Reality transcends all judgments—it is '*neti*', '*neti*'—'not this', 'not this'.

Mahatma Gandhi was not a philosopher but he thoroughly imbibed the spirit of this religious philosophy and gave a popular expression to it. He writes, 'Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so is there one true and perfect Religion, but it becomes many as it passes through the human medium. The one Religion is beyond all speech. Imperfect men put it into such language as they can command and their words are interpreted by other men equally imperfect. Whose interpretation is to be held the right one? Everybody is right from his own standpoint but it is not impossible that everybody is wrong.'<sup>1</sup> If this is the nature of religion *qua* religion, to assess the merits of various religions is futile and any attempt to convert an individual from one religion to another is, to say the least, unnecessary. As a matter of fact to convert is morally wrong for two reasons. In the first place, he who attempts to convert is claiming finality for his creed and the claim is untenable and false. Secondly, conversion instead of leading one to any enduring truth only tends to disorganize and unsettle society and demoralize the converted individual by severing him from his cultural moorings. Let all religions live in amity. As for the Christian Faith, it has great inherent merits but let it reorientate itself to the great stream of the Hindu tradition with its tolerant spirit and within that tradition it can enjoy whatever freedom it desires. To put this plainly—let Christianity be Hinduized if it is to have a place in the life and culture of the nation! This is the attitude of the educated Hindu of today to the Christian Faith and he is sincere in his attitude and it arises in a definite philosophy. It is a philosophy of metaphysical monism and epistemological relativism.

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<sup>1</sup> Mahatma Gandhi in an article entitled 'Tolerance, i.e. Equality of Religions' included in a collection of his articles under the title 'Christian Missions'—Navajivan Press, Ahmedabad.

## The Hindu and Humanitarian Works

Let us now look at the attitude of such a philosophy to those works normally designated humanitarian. For a characteristically Hindu teaching in this connection we may turn to Swami Vivekananda. The Swamiji has a complete philosophy of works in his lectures on 'Karma-yoga'.<sup>1</sup> We note the following relevant points:—

(1) It is the duty of every man to engage himself in the service of others. The Swamiji says, 'Yet we must do good; the desire to do good is the highest motive power we have, if we know all the time that it is a privilege to help others.'<sup>2</sup>

(2) The real motive and end of doing good to others is self-abnegation. In the familiar word 'self-abnegation' used by Swami Vivekananda, is hid his real philosophy of good works. He says, 'The main effect of works done for others is to purify ourselves. By means of the constant effort to do good to others we are trying to forget ourselves; this forgetfulness of self is the one great lesson we have to learn in life.'<sup>3</sup> A little later in the same paragraph he continues: 'The highest ideal is eternal and entire self-abnegation, where there is no "I" but all is "thou"; and whether he is conscious or unconscious of it, *Karma-yoga* leads man to that end. A religious preacher may become horrified at the idea of an Impersonal God; he may insist on a Personal God and wish to keep up his own identity and individuality, whatever he may mean by that. But his ideas of ethics, if they are really good, cannot but be based on the highest self-abnegation.'<sup>4</sup> The meaning here seems to be that service to others in the end helps one to realize the *Vedantic* ideal, the ideal being the annulment of individuality and the false notion of self-identity and the attainment of *Brahman*-consciousness—*Aham Brahma asmi*—I am *Brahman*. This becomes more obvious as we go through the later portions of his '*Karma-yoga*'. The Swamiji says that good works or deeds of mercy in truth help neither the world nor other people in any real sense; their only value is to help the individual who engages himself in them by eliminating eventually all sense of individuality. To quote him again: 'Our duty to others means helping others; doing good to the world. Why should we do good to the world? Apparently to help the world but really to help ourselves. We should always try to help the world, that should be the highest motive in us; but if we consider well, we find that the world does not require our help at all. This world was not made that you or I should come and help it. I once read a sermon in which was said: "All this beautiful world is very good, because it gives us time and opportunity to help others." Apparently this is a very beautiful sentiment, but is it not a blasphemy to say that the world needs our help? We cannot deny that there is much misery in it; to go out and help therefore, is the best thing we can do, although in the long run, we shall find that helping others is only helping ourselves. As a boy I had some white mice. They were

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<sup>1</sup> 'Karma-yoga' by Swami Vivekananda: Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, U.P.

<sup>2</sup> 'Karma-yoga': Swami Vivekananda, page 76.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, page 89.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, page 90.

kept in a little box which had little wheels made for them, and when the mice tried to cross the wheels, the wheels turned and turned and the mice never got anywhere. So it is with the world and our helping it. The only help is that we get moral exercise.’<sup>1</sup>

(3) For the reason that eventually the value of altruistic motive and of help rendered to others is the elimination of the false sense of individuality and self-identity, the three *yogas*, namely, *Karma*, *Bhakti* and *Jnana*, are ultimately one. Vivekananda says, ‘Although a man has not studied a single system of philosophy, although he does not believe in any God and never has believed, although he has not prayed even once in his whole life, if the simple power of good actions has brought him to that state where he is ready to give up his life and all else for others, he has arrived at the same point to which the religious man will come through prayers and the philosopher through his knowledge; and so you may find that the philosopher, the worker and the devotee, all meet at one point, that one point being self-abnegation.’<sup>2</sup> ‘The worshipper, by keeping constantly before him the idea of God and surrounding good, comes to the same point and says “Thy will be done” and keeps nothing to himself. The philosopher with his knowledge sees that the *seeming self is a delusion and gives it up*; it is self-abnegation. So *Karma*, *Bhakti* and *Jnana* all meet here . . . .’<sup>3</sup>

(4) In his last lecture on *Karma-yoga* the Swamiji says that freedom for the individual is gained only when the individual has succeeded in annihilating his individuality and personality. To quote him, ‘That little personality which he had before is now lost to him for ever; he has become infinite and the attainment of infinite expansion is indeed the goal of all religious, all moral and philosophical teachings. The personalist when he hears the idea philosophically put gets frightened.’<sup>4</sup> As we have seen earlier, to the *Vedantin* Reality is one and impersonal and the highest spiritual aim of man is to realize that the notion of plurality is contrary to truth and that he being one always in his essence with this Reality should dispel those cob-webs of ignorance which in his empirical existence make him think he has a separate existence of his own. The recovery of ‘identity consciousness’ or ‘*Brahman*-consciousness’ is the *summum bonum* of his life. This can be gained by *Jnana* most surely but *Bhakti* and *Karma* also help in so far as they inculcate the habit of self-abnegation. As a matter of fact, the Swamiji goes to the extent of saying that to realize the freedom of self-abnegation there is no need to believe even in a God. He says, ‘The *Karma-yogi* need not believe in any doctrine whatever. He may not believe even in God, may not ask what his soul is, nor think of any metaphysical speculation. He has got his own special aim of realizing selflessness; and he has to work it out himself. Every moment of his life must be realization, because he has to solve by mere work, without the help of doctrine or theory, the very same problem to which the *Jnani* applies his reason and inspiration and the *Bhakta* his love.’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘*Karma-yoga*’: Swami Vivekananda, pages 75 and 76.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, page 92.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, page 93. Italics ours.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, page 129.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, page 132.

## Conclusion

It is possible for a *Vedantin* of Swami Vivekananda's type to accept a complete separation, if necessary, of religion and deeds of mercy. So the Hindu in asking the Christian missionaries to engage themselves only in humanitarian work does not think that he is asking anything really difficult from them. We imagine he thinks that it is possible for a Christian missionary to be perfectly loyal to his call even when he is doing only deeds of mercy without talking to people of Him whose greatest deed of mercy, namely, the sacrifice of His life on the Cross for a sinful humanity is the motive and inspiration of all his humble deeds of mercy.

It is not possible in a magazine article to examine the validity of the position of the Hindu as outlined above. Such an examination in addition to involving a certain amount of technical discussion would take up far too much space. The motive in writing this article has been to show to our readers what the Indian Christian is up against. He has to contend not merely with irrational prejudices which are prepared to use political power to thwart the missionary activity of the Church. Such irrational prejudices are there. But if such alone is the estimate of our difficulties, we will be sorely disappointed. We may win our battle on the political front but will still be confronted with opposition and resistance. The Christian Faith confronts a religious philosophy which is the negation of many of its fundamental claims. We need in India in the future a new type of Christian apologetic—a Christian apologetic that will examine rival philosophies not by any criteria foreign to them but on their own merits, for we believe that *Vedanta's* weaknesses cannot be exposed by comparing it with the Christian Faith but by a critical examination of its own grounds and assumptions. We desperately need in the Indian Church today scholars who can undertake this work. And our theological colleges ought to give greater attention to this need of the present time.



The Christian consciousness cannot suffer anything which questions the uniqueness of Jesus. This feeling is well expressed by Dr. Denney, 'Christ has done something for us which gives Him His place forever as the only redeemer of men, and, no matter how thoroughly under His inspiration we are changed into His likeness, we never cease to be the redeemed nor invade His solitary place.' It is for this reason that we cannot be satisfied with the thought that the death of Jesus is merely one of many martyrdoms, and it is not in this way that the New Testament looks at it. Such expressions as 'He bore our sins' or 'He suffered for sins once, the just for the unjust' or 'He is the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world', all assume, says Dr. Denney, in the death of Jesus a relation to sin which has no parallel in martyrdom.—W. Fearon Halliday in *Reconciliation and Reality*, page 179.