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Margaret Chatterjee

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# Reflections on Religious Pluralism in the Indian Context\*

**Prof. Margaret Chatterjee**  
Westminster College, Oxford

**DOES PLURALISM** IN aesthetic and religious judgements necessarily lead to relativism? The writer takes the view that (a) religious pluralism does not only reveal itself in diversity of *judgements* but in other diversities as well; (b) such diversities suggest relativity rather than relativism. The pluralities invite not aggregation or toleration so much as understanding.

Religious plurality is adjusted to, most of all, *behaviourally* in the Hindu context. The two major strategies adopted are (a) assimilation and (b) the water-tight-compartment response. Because Hinduism is a non-institutionalized religion it does not face the problem of defining itself *vis-à-vis* "the other".

On the ideational side there are certain philosophical concepts, especially that of unity, which could provide a "ground" for plurality. The concept of karma, however, discourages curiosity about "the other" since each is reckoned to be on his/her own causal track.

Among reformers/thinkers three are briefly treated in the paper, Raja Rammohun Roy, Gandhi, and Radhakrishnan. The first of these brings together the concerns of the scholar and the reformer. His somewhat futuristic conception of a new age, in which each religion would be regarded as *the* truth ethnically expressed, brings him rather close to Sri Aurobindo. Gandhi is discussed here as an example of the adjustment to pluralism under the general umbrella of nationalism.

The nationalist motif continues in Radhakrishnan's thought, underpinned by a Vedantic worldview. The importance of particularity, however, sits uneasily within the Vedantic framework. In the system where plurality as a metaphysical principle has perhaps been most recognized, that is in Jainism, there has scarcely been much interest in the question of religious diversity, either in the past or now.

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## I. Some Theoretical Considerations Concerning Pluralism and Relativism

I begin with some theoretical considerations, largely to deal with the question: if pluralism in aesthetic and religious judgement is considered legitimate, especially in cross-cultural contexts, how can a pernicious relativism be avoided? There are two points here that could give us pause, the notion of "religious judgement" and the concept of "pernicious relativism". I have gone into the question of "religious judgement" elsewhere<sup>1</sup>. So I turn to the idea of "pernicious relativism". Relativism is a position which has been held especially with reference either to what is "right" or to what is "true", the former giving rise to ethical relativism and the latter to cognitive relativism. The phrase "religious relativism" has been somewhat neutral between these two, some users being worried about the diversity of ethical precepts in different

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religions (something always underplayed by “universalists”) and others getting het up over diversity of truth claims. At first sight the former has a more pragmatic air about it than the latter in the sense that what is enjoined or forbidden has *prima facie* a more immediate bearing on what we do than “beliefs” purporting to reflect “the truth”. Anthropologists, rather unfairly I think, have been credited (or discredited) with providing grist for relativisms of various kinds. It is all to the good, in my view, if it is recognized that rationality, truth, rightness and wrongness and so on, are all concepts that come in multifarious cultural garbs. It is often the juxtaposition of the familiar with the “other” which brings about change. If constant reassessment goes on – as I think it does and should – the polarity between absolutism and relativism assumed to obtain by philosophers may in fact hardly obtain in the real world. Another way of putting it is to say that relativity is inevitable, and relativism is not. When pressed as to the difference I would say something like this: to admit relativity is to admit the partiality of all finite viewpoints and not to bewail this; to concede relativism is to admit partiality and to lament it. The self-confessed relativist is usually pushed into this regret by the absolutist. There is of course another sort of relativist who is tough-minded about his relativism. Such a position involves maintaining that the values/institutions etc. of each culture are self-validating and that there the matter ends. At any rate the terms relativism and absolutism can only survive in tandem.

I do not think, however, that the term “relativity” is subject to any such qualification, and I believe that recognition of diverse cultural baskets, between which family resemblances may or may not obtain, *does* involve admission of relativity. Since some of the viewpoints in these baskets are incompatible with each other, aggregating their fragmentariness will not produce a whole, although this position is taken by some, but will further underline their

diversity under the capacious umbrella of what being human can encompass. In short I am not at all sure that relativism *can* be pernicious. If relativism involved saying that *no* evaluation, whether self-evaluation or otherwise, is possible, this would be wrong-headed rather than pernicious. And, as far as relativity is concerned, I do not think the admission of it lends itself to the charge of being pernicious. Nobody can see an elephant from every point of view simultaneously, no matter how good their vision might be. Phenomenalism comes to the rescue perhaps, but not entirely. The plurality of viewpoints to a large extent has to be taken on trust since we are familiar largely with our own. But, whereas it is perfectly possible for me to look at the table from this or that place, and no position is *ipso facto* excluded from my view, is this the case with the hypothetical religious stances?

What I mainly noticed about the absolutist position when I encountered it was that it revealed on the part of the speaker a kind of “block” rather than a conviction of the other’s wickedness or ignorance or being wrong etc. But to notice this kind of block provides a caveat. This caveat is as follows. Religious standpoints are not disinterested and this is at least one major way of distinguishing them, say, from perceptual perspectives. But religious standpoints are not unique in not being disinterested. They share this characteristic, for example, with political and ethical stances and judgements that stem from them. Although the phrase “blind faith” is commonly used by critics of religion, the kind of phenomena to which oblique reference is thereby made is also found outside religion. For example, the insider/outsider distinction can be quite sharp in the domain of political allegiance.

The pebble I would like to drop into the pool of discussion at this point is the question whether religious plurality is more challenging than the other sorts of plurality which every-day experience and the more specialized data provided by cultural

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anthropologists furnish us with. What are those who speak in terms of challenge referring to? Here are some possible answers:

1. The Christian feels challenged by the sight of the Buddhist "measuring" his full length round the stupa at Sarnath on the ground that "His religion costs him something. What does ours cost us?"

2. The theologian might feel "challenged" by what he sees as "rival truth claims" and some of these might come from *within* his own tradition.

3. There might be a sense of "offence" that others are "outside the fold" leading to a challenge to convert.

4. The challenge to find some deeper unity could arise from several sources, e.g. the need for peace, the desire to globalize or universalize theologizing, or from some rather more philosophical consideration of a monistic kind. In other words it is not patent that the challenge should be regarded in one way. In some historical contexts the relevant "word" might be "threat" rather than "challenge" where certain communities have faced the possibility of annihilation by those of a persuasion different from their own. There are still parts of the world where the whole question presents itself in terms of survival.

## II. Religious Pluralism and Hinduism

It is usually the case in the collective sphere and where collectivities coexist (I use this word in a factual sense and not with the evaluative connotation often used in India) that the presence of "others" serves to promote a sharpening of self-definition, an "in-gathering", a focusing of identity. A comment<sup>2</sup> made by the late Professor J.L. Mehta is significant in this connection. He writes of the Indian cultural tradition that "it has at no time *defined itself* in relation to the other, nor acknowledged the other in its unassimilable otherness, nor in consequence occupied itself with the problem of relationship as it arises in any concrete encounter with the other". Religious

plurality, in such a view, does not present itself as a problem to the Hindu, but something which in India has always been primarily *a fact*, a matter which poses adjustment at the behavioural level rather than provokes intellectual exchange of ideas in the realm of theorizing. Whether this has been an advantage or not I am unable to say. Successive waves of invaders entered the Indian sub-continent and the Hindus reacted in diverse ways – the Hindu community itself, we must not forget, being highly differentiated. As mentioned earlier, the two major strategies were (1) assimilation and (2) the water-tight-compartment response. Sometimes one can detect both going along together, paradoxical though this may seem. What I mean is that certain cultural traits were sometimes assimilated along with a thus-far-no-further reaction to the rest of the cultural complex. Hindu society has in this respect shown both openness and accommodation as well as resistance.

Hindu philosophical life has traditionally been associated with disputation about matters of theory, especially focusing on whether or not systems or particular tenets were in line with the canonical literature. A system such as *Advaita Vedanta* has acquired the status of religion, whereas one could not conceive of Platonism or Aristoteleanism becoming such. It is also interesting to note that within the philosophical systems the issue of God's existence or non-existence never had pride of place, the question of how bondage was to be overcome being deemed far more important. The majority of the systems are not theistic. And yet non-theism was by no means thought to be incompatible with a religious outlook.

The rise of cults as a phenomenon in Hindu religious life hardly promoted dialogue since it had always been recognized that there are many paths to the Divine and that each must find the way which suits them best.

Hinduism includes the *istadevata* (favourite god) idea. This is the particular form which henotheism takes in India, the

validity of all allegiances being taken to be perfectly compatible with individual allegiance to a particular deity, the latter being regarded as a manifestation of a moral general principle. What is perhaps even more interesting, in contrast to the commitment models in the Semitic group of religions, is the phenomenon of multiple allegiance.<sup>3</sup> This is based on the idea that various sources of enlightenment and consolation are open to one, and availing oneself of one source does not preclude another. For example, one may combine attendance at discourses on the *Gita* in the local park with participation in Durga Puja and visits to Sri Aurobindo's ashram at Pondicherry. The coexistence of diverse forms of observance has always been contexted by common rites of passage, places of pilgrimage and various ritual observances governed by brahminical ruling over the centuries. Differences are not correlated with "rival truth claim" and are even regarded as "not mattering", i.e. differences do not surface in a sense that "I am right and you are wrong". It can also be mentioned that cultic observance of a particularistic kind has gone along with belief in *Bhagwan* (literally God) without any incongruity being felt. Another word in common use is *Paramatma* (literally the supreme soul). All this is based on the presupposition of the infinity of the Divine, something which provides ontological warranty for the diversity of ways of approaching Him/It. It can be seen that the notion of commitment sits uneasily in such a way of thinking. And it is the idea of commitment and the assumption that commitment and belief are inseparable that has made the whole project of interreligious dialogue challenging.

The points detailed so far have concerned the way in which diversity is tackled *within* what the Indian theologian Devanadan calls "the Indian family of religions". When we come to the relation of Hindus to communities outside the Hindu fold we find here too a largely behavioural

adjustment. Hindus in north India often prefer to have their family weddings solemnized in *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples), for Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, is much revered by all communities. Hindus and Muslims visit the shrines of saints and pirs alike. Muslim workmen in some parts of India make the "idols" used in Hindu worship. Again, the musicians who accompany dancers of classical dance forms (which usually have themes from Hindu mythology) are commonly Muslim. There is also another phenomenon which could be classified under the general heading of "secularization" if we are considering Hindu religious behaviour. Seasonal village fairs still provide important markets for local craftsmanship and industry and help to connect the economic life of diverse communities with religious concerns. Pushkar Fair, which takes place in Rajasthan around the time of the full moon in November, has a religious focus in a temple consecrated to Brahma, the earliest deity in the Hindu trinity. But who is to say which predominates, the occasion for religious ritual or the economic significance of the large cattle fair which takes place at the same time? An equally intriguing case is that of the Kathak dance form which originated as a temple ritual around the myths and legends about Radha and Krishna. But it came to its height in the nineteenth-century courts of the nawabs of Oudh who were, of course, Muslims. Can we say that aesthetic considerations overrode the religious? This would be too simplistic. What is perhaps more the case is that if the religious elements in cultural patterns in India pervade them in a subtle manner, it is no less the case that the economic and the social and the aesthetic pervade whatever be commonly recognized as "religious". The appropriate language is not that of encounter or dialogue so much as that of mutual adjustment and sometimes integration.

Hinduism, being a non-institutionalized religion, is free of dogma.<sup>4</sup> As a concomitant of this there is, for example, no

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word for “heretic” in Sanskrit. The non-orthodox, i.e. those who do not accept the authority of the Vedas, are in a different category. Their views are not anathema. What we do find, however, in different periods of the Indian history of ideas is a sequence of philosophical concepts which are often vaguely formulated and more commonly just invoked, and which in sedimented fashion have become part of the ethos of the country. One of the earliest of these is the concept of *unity* which was probably born out of a cosmic consciousness which was part and parcel of an agricultural way of life. Its most abstract formulation is the *Brahman-ātman* equation of the Upanishads (expressed in the aphorism *tat tvam asi*). This should presumably extend to all wherever they may be. Although one might imagine that a highly humanistic philosophy would evolve from a worldview of the unity of all souls deriving from a metaphysic of identity, it was not until Swami Vivekananda that this implication was drawn out. Lofty though the Upanishadic metaphysic may be, no dialogic possibility can be read off from it, but only the conception of realization of the unity of mankind at a level which we are not commonly aware of in everyday life. Swami Vivekananda saw its potential as a consciousness-raising, even conscience-raising, concept (to use contemporary language) and, to his credit, advocated a program of action which would concretize its intent.

Philosophical appeal to the idea of unity apart, there is another purely epistemological gambit which these days is sometimes cited as a characteristically Hindu way of coping with diversity – I refer to the gambit of initial refutation of the viewpoint of the opponent (*pūrvapakṣin*) approach in various other ways, of which these are some. Toppling the other’s viewpoint first could be taken as a sign of discourtesy rather than tolerance. Or, alternatively, if all standpoints are taken to be defective in some manner or other, the exercise takes on an *artificial* air,

remaining, as it seems to do, at the mere level of debate. In fact the technique seems to have been prevalent particularly where *epistemological* issues were concerned.

As far as religion is concerned, there is another part of Hindu tradition which positively discourages debate/argument and this is the communication of teaching by the guru to the pupil, in a form specific to the needs of the pupil, with various pupils being instructed in separate ways.<sup>5</sup> One might throw in an oblique reflection here. A great part of Hindu prescription in the Dharmasastras concerns, basically, the avoidance of conflict. *Lokasamgraha* could almost be said to be defined by a kind of prosperity which was free of conflict and did not invite it. A prosperous society of this type would have to be strictly ordered and virtually closed to threatening/tantalizing influences from outside. Intellectual venturing therefore had to be within well-understood bounds. The concept of *svadharma* in this context exerts a tempering or limiting influence (depending on how one views it) on the scope of verbal interchange. If doing another’s duty offends against the *svadharma* principle and can bring danger, presumably entertaining another’s viewpoint also carries the possibility of danger. *Paradharma* is not sinful, it is important to note, but is likely to bring about social disharmony and is therefore bad. Over the centuries it was found that in order to neutralize alien influences and virtually rob them of their sting, no method is as effective as that of assimilation, for diversity ceases to be diverse and the original tradition can henceforth claim the merit of “already having” the “new” element.

Now let us see which way the concept of fragmentariness of the truth – which underpins metaphysically the *istadevata* idea and in Jainism provides a ground for radical pluralism and belief in non-violence – leads. While this could make for a sense of the complementariness of diverse visions and appreciation of others’ points of view, in fact other elements in the Indian worldview

have pulled in rather a different direction. To take an instance, if one adheres to a theory of separate karmic lines, this goes along with stressing the individuality of *svadharma* (individual personal destiny) and therefore suggesting the non-relevance of others' insights to one's own personal path. As far as religious affiliation is concerned, the karma theory reinforces radical diversity, since a switching of causal lines is ruled out. Thanks to the past causal efficacies we have no alternative but to be as we are, religiously.

Let us move on to another characteristic which is deeply embedded in the Hindu ethos, the sense of life as a continuum extending beyond the bounds of humanity to the animal kingdom, and beyond the present generation to past and future generations. Gandhi made issue with the utilitarians not only because of their espousal of the majority principle, which left out of account the minorities, but because they conceived of welfare only in human terms. In effect this sense of a continuum finds voice in an awareness of *heritage*. It is, in other words, not something which intrinsically makes for a curiosity about "otherness". It is necessary to note too that by and large in cultures where "otherness" has been experienced through conquest or economic infiltration, this in itself is a strong disincentive to dialogue. The culture which is "invaded" naturally reacts in a defensive manner so as to preserve its own identity. Hindu society has carefully safeguarded itself against "the other" by a network of taboos regarding pollution which only began to be broken down thanks to the attraction of economic betterment. I offer only one example. When Beta Company first established their factory in Bengal, an anthropologist who was collecting data about the caste composition of the workers found a large number of Brahmins working there. On asking one of them how this could be reconciled with his brahmanical status, he was told: "The machine handles the leather. I handle the machine". As the century approaches its end

no such apologia would probably be given today. *Lokasamgraha* means prosperity; whatever brings about prosperity is acceptable. This example illustrates the continuity over centuries of the Hindu legitimizing of practices which lead to prosperity. Oddly enough Hindu society has also legitimized just the opposite as well: practices which lead to poverty – the whole renunciatory style of life amounting to just this. Contradictions don't invite sublation but acceptance as facts of life.

We have, however, yet to take into account the impact of certain nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomena on the Hindu perception of religious diversity, for while what happened reinforced many of the traits sketched above, new factors broke up the old rural economy with which traditional Hinduism, for all its inner diversity, had been for generations inextricably linked. For reasons of time and space I shall make brief reference to only three thinkers (there are of course many more, to say nothing of the movements founded by various reformers) – namely Raja Rammohun Roy, Gandhi and Radhakrishnan.

### Raja Rammohun Roy

Raja Rammohun Roy is the first of these chronologically and, apart from the usual way of situating him within the context of the Brahmo Samaj, it is worthwhile seeing how his contemporaries viewed him. His friendship with Unitarians was well known. Also well-known were the things he denounced, for example idolatry and atheism. It is rather less easy to pin down exactly where he stood vis-à-vis the pluralist environment in which he himself lived. Kissory Chand Mitter wrote<sup>6</sup> that the *Tohufut-ul-Mowah-edeem*<sup>7</sup> "discloses his belief in the unity of the Deity, His infinite power and infinite goodness, and in the immortality of the soul". The constant references to the "One True God", brotherhood and equality, all show a strong Islamic influence. The Raja's own familiarity with Persian, his style of dress,

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and the social circles in which he moved confirm the importance of this influence. In Bengal this occasioned less alarm than it might have done elsewhere. If it was his Unitarian friends who disposed him against the Trinity, it must have been his Muslim associates who reinforced his dislike of idolatry.

Hindus saw him each in their own light. Bipin Chandra Pal spoke of him as a believer in *nirguna Brahman*, reading into his writings a penchant for an impersonal absolute which could scarcely have provided a focus of Brahmo Samaj *upāsana*. Members of the Hindu Theophilanthropic Society in the 1830s were delighted that the Raja castigated sceptics even though the latter's rejection of superstition brought them far closer to him in viewpoint than to the "average Hindu". His contemporaries seem to have been worried about his critique of tradition, his apparent rapprochement with Christians and Muslims and the critical way in which he regarded the rituals and observances which have always for the Hindus remained at the core of their form of life. If he alarmed his fellow Hindus he did not greatly please his non-Hindu friends either. His rejection of Christology could not but dismay all non-Unitarian Christian missionaries. His impatience with miracles and anything that savoured of myth once more disposed him towards Muslims, and among them especially the rationalist Mu'tazilah, those who called themselves "*ahl al-taw'īd wa al-ad*" (people of unity and justice).

The Raja's attitude to religious pluralism needs to be understood, it seems to me, both as an outcome of his travels, for he seems to have found people "agreeing generally" about the notion of one Being, and in relation to his near-futuristic sense that a new age would recognize each religion as *the* truth specially and ethnically expressed. The booklet called *The Universal Religion*, published in 1829, looked forward to the convergence of the historic religions to a centre which was the ideal of "Universal

Religion". As a reformer he believed this convergence would be promoted by the pruning and purifying of each tradition so that superstition, prejudice and tāmasic ritual would be minimized. When pressed as to how the extremes of abstract universalism<sup>8</sup> and idolatry were to be avoided, the Raja identified himself with what was common to almost all reformist Hindus then and since, namely reliance on ethical precepts as a means of securing peace and happiness. The latter goals of course neatly tie up Hindu *abhyūdaya* and Unitarian welfare. The "purer form of religion" which he looked to would highlight both belief in one God and promote the service of humanity. This was a programme for the future, no doubt.

Raja Rammohun Roy's approach to religious pluralism, rooted in his own position in space and time as it was, puts me in mind of the comment of a philosopher from another continent and who philosophizes a century and a half later. A couple of years ago H.D. Lewis made the following comment:<sup>9</sup> "We need the varieties as well as different ways of closing the gaps where possible". The Raja recognized the discreteness of separate historic traditions but thought that the gaps between communities could be bridged by each putting their own house in order (a phrase Gandhi used a century later) and by concentration both on the ethical core of each religion and worship of the "one True God". The bridges constructed by the Raja included his scholarly work as a translator of classical texts as well as his role as a demythologizer. The latter involved not only a going back to roots but owed a lot to cross-fertilization. He moreover shared two vital beliefs of those who speak of crossing the Rubicon of separation today, namely a conviction that a transcendent mystery lay behind *all* religious traditions, and that religious *praxis* (which he interpreted in an ethical rather than a ritualistic manner) must serve the betterment of the everyday life of humankind. The Raja's recognition that the intolerable must be avoided and the



multiplicity of religious experiences be recognized has a very contemporary ring to it.

### Gandhi

If scholarship and a reformist temper provide the key to Raja Rammohun Roy's response to religious pluralism, it was the day-to-day experience of living in a religiously plural environment and especially an awareness of the potential for conflict that this contained, which shaped Gandhi's response.

His first biographer, Joseph J. Doke, refers to Gandhi's sympathies being so wide that he seemed to have reached a point where the formulae of sects had no meaning for him. Gandhi was not interested in rival truth claims because he understood truth very differently. It was treated by him in three ways, as I have considered elsewhere<sup>10</sup>, ontologically as *Sat*, existentially (almost à la Tillich in the sense of being "seized" by), and empirically through exploration and discovery. But because it was his habit never to separate religion from economics, politics and all that concerned both the individual and society, this provided for him multiple entry points into the lives of people outside the Hindu community. He never ceased to add to his scholarly base in the study of other religions, something embarked on in London and continued to the end of his days. This study was not undertaken through mere curiosity but came from a desire to learn more about what "mattered" to his friends. The business acumen and honesty of the Muslim merchants brought them close to one who immediately recognized their "bania" virtues. His behaviour in a religiously plural world can be seen in the light of his common-sense realization that people belonging to different communities do not encounter each other in theologically charged contexts but in day-to-day living. The daily round and common task sometimes provides occasions of friction, as he found during his leadership of the

nationalist movement. There were mainly two prescriptions for that, dealing with the economic problems which invariably lay beneath the friction of groups, and bringing diverse elements together in the service of a common cause. In this way Gandhi developed a sense of when the "religious" elements in a situation provided the clue to action, and when other elements (especially the economic) needed dealing with. An example of the former is found in his comforting a Muslim woman demented by grief at the killing of her son with the words "Allah gave him to you and it was His will to take him from you", a message which immediately got through to her in her grief. In East Bengal one day an explosive situation was defused by his pointing out that the problem that faced those who lived there was economic and not communal (in the Indian sense of that term) since 80% of the land was owned by 20% of the population.

Like other Indians from Rammohun Roy onwards, Gandhi was inclined to set store by the common ethical values which seemed to go along with diverse religious beliefs. But he was too realistic to rely on what is after all a somewhat theoretical point since centuries' long lip-service to a host of ethical precepts has not prevented violence from dogging the entire history of humankind. Gandhi therefore cast about for new experiments in living, consciously bringing together people of different communities in these experiments. The common observance of festivals, avoidance of food that gave offence to others, attempting to *value* what others valued, instituting a common prayer meeting for all – these were some of the ways in which Gandhi responded to a religiously plural situation. On his return to India, all these experiments fit under a larger umbrella, that of nationalism.

Gandhi, it seems to me, had an uncanny awareness of the *barriers* to interreligious understanding. Of these barriers, which he had himself come up against, I mention just

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a few – doctrine, ritual, specific practices and situations seen as provocative. The doctrine of the Incarnation, ritual in temples to which Harijans were denied entrance, practices regarding the slaughter of animals, the playing of music in front of mosques – all these were occasions of offence to some community or other. These examples bring out the inadequacy of injunctions about tolerance, equality or underlying unity, for these worthy concepts are all abstractions and therefore lack the power to defuse the inherent violence which Gandhi found so very near the surface in the pluralist societies he was familiar with.

Gandhi was too much of a realist to set much store by either an original Alpha ground or an Omega point of ultimate convergence. Common imperfections, he believed, were balanced by common positive powers for good. His own methods of cultivating the latter were the self-purification of the individual and the practical experience of constructive work. Rapport with those of other faiths, he thought, could not be attained by “dialogue” per se, nor in any case could it be made a specific object of search. In this, I believe, his instinct was on the right lines. It is in the context of *work* that we are in contact with “others” whether these be of other faiths or of our own. Gandhi’s idiosyncratic use of the distinction between masses and classes might be recalled in this connection. Like Mao he understood by “masses” the peasantry. He had found that there may well be more in common, say, between a Hindu and Muslim villager than between either of these and a member of the upper classes. Amity is these days associated by anthropologists with kinship groups, but amity also comes about between those of different kin and different religious allegiances. It is out of such rock-bottom amity that sometimes in spite of, and more rarely *because of*, different religious allegiances, a fraternal association can be built up. In the meantime no one has a right to interfere with the fragmentary vision of

others, for our own vision is no less fragmentary. This is the content that Gandhi gives to the concept of the *validity* of various religious paths. The validity stems from our common humanity and our common imperfection. The non-violent person is the one who has understood this validity. The sacred cannot be avoided since the demarcation of sacred and profane is as foreign to the Hindu way of thinking as it is to the Muslim. Gandhi finds this not a drawback but a source of strength. But it can only be such if social and economic injustice is tackled first, for in all societies where such injustice prevails, violence is bound to be endemic. If his own personal asceticism enables him to nourish himself through diverse traditions, this prefigures a possible further development, beyond reconciliation to sharing. But reconciliation must come first.

**Radhakrishnan**

The comment just made about the sacred and the profane can provide an introduction to Radhakrishnan’s thinking about religious pluralism for he would not have agreed with it. In 1939 he wrote:<sup>11</sup>

Real religion can exist without a definite conception of the deity but not without a distinction between the spiritual and the profane [...]

Religion is not so much a revelation to be attained by us in faith as an effort to unveil the deepest layers of man’s being and get into enduring contact with them.

In contrast with what we found in Gandhi, Radhakrishnan’s writings have a strictly philosophical perspective in favour of which he used to cite well-known passages from the R̥gveda, Upanishads and Gīta. The above quotation throws interesting light on some of the issues. Radhakrishnan’s distinction between spiritual and profane (N.B. not sacred versus profane) is linked with the Sankarite distinction between the *vyavahārika* and the *paramārthika*. The

various expressions of truth to be found in diverse religious traditions are at the former level. The goal, however, is not the path but what lies beyond the path. This can, in contrast, be set alongside Gandhi's stress on the continuity of means and ends, which sees the *vyavahārika* as precisely the arena where the spiritual battle occurs, and where also, of course, our relations with those of other faiths take place. To see the religious quest as "an effort to unveil the deepest layers of man's being" recalls the *mahavākya* of the Upanishads, but also recalls the language of a purely clinical discipline, namely depth psychology. The method of cultivation of inwardness common to both the atman and anatta traditions is reckoned to take us beyond "otherness" so it can hardly provide us with that *appreciation* of otherness which we are seeking.

Our special difficulty in interpreting Radhakrishnan's line of thinking is that his writings and speeches veer beyond what is strictly philosophical and what is more popular. Speaking philosophically he refers to<sup>12</sup> "different religions not as incompatibles but as complementaries, and so indispensable to each other for the realization of the common end". Addressing a Japanese audience decades later he said:<sup>13</sup>

All the religions of mankind under the stress of modern thought are moving forward to a realization of the spirit of religion, reaching forth to the fundamental and lasting verities of truth and love.

In his public pronouncements his focus was, not unnaturally, on peace. At times he was confident that religion was gradually being purged of "superstition, ritualism and obscurantism" and at others he said that this is what *ought* to be the case. While public pronouncements may serve to give a positive and optimistic orientation to thinking and project a healthy image abroad, the philosophical issues must be given due attention.

The validity of religion, for

Radhakrishnan, seems to have an instrumental value, its instrumentality in achieving "realization", a word commonly used by Vedantins when they express themselves in English. Now, if the various traditions cloud the truth in the very process of diversifying it, it follows that the aspirant for such realization will find in religion as ordinarily understood not so much a path as something to be transcended. And if the path is to be eventually left behind we can scarcely find herein the motive for exploring, however sympathetically, the path of another. The target is the "realization" of spirit and not the rapport between one human being and another. It is perhaps difficult for any form of idealistic monism to grant adequate status to plurality. Furthermore the target is an experience, albeit of a highly rarefied kind, and which has no necessary bearing on our relations with our fellows. In any case if the Real is neither personal nor impersonal, this is yet another reason why it can scarcely have any bearing on the life of human beings.

But there are other strands in Radhakrishnan's thought. It was noted earlier that both Rammohun Roy and Gandhi attached importance to the idea of reforming the tradition, putting one's house in order. Radhakrishnan also spoke in these terms. For example, he wrote:<sup>14</sup>

We can so transform the religion to which we belong as to make it approximate to the religion of the spirit. I am persuaded that every religion has possibilities of such transformation.

There is an addendum written elsewhere that if such transformations do not occur in the religions we know "we may anticipate a better one".<sup>15</sup> Perhaps indeed it was the latter that he was at bottom advocating, "the religion of the spirit", maintaining that it had an ancient lineage in the wisdom of the sages. The problem is that religion so conceived seems indistinguishable from the kind of mysticism that takes flight from the actual world including the people in it. It

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must be conceded that Radhakrishnan's utopian thinking on the above lines, however, coexists with much that uses a language more geared to the facts of plurality, namely, "meeting", "friendship" and "fellowship". His hardcore philosophical work, however, continued to speak of a unity, whether originary or otherwise, with which plurality can hardly be reconciled, for philosophies of plurality take their stand on the primacy of the particular. In this case the particularity concerned is both that of the diverse religious traditions in all their specificity and the particular individuals who have allegiance to them.

A sense of history predisposes one to take plurality seriously; for although the metaphor of diverse paths can suggest a single destination, it can, with equal facility, suggest diverse destinations. To understand the other as sympathetically and seriously as possible, to avoid conflict and promote concord, to awaken common involvement in the struggle for justice are targets which are enough to get on with. Recalling whence we have come in this discussion, the question is still open whether the *study* of religion can be as disinterested as we usually think it should be. The *relationship* with individuals who profess different faiths quite clearly cannot be disinterested. If it is a caring relationship, then the gulf often experienced between the insider and outsider can narrow. The nature of the further shore becomes clear only as the journey continues.

## Notes

1. "Does the analysis of religious language rest on a mistake?", *Religious Studies*, Vol.10, pp.469-78.
2. Frank Whaling (Ed.), *The World's Religious Traditions, Essays presented to Wilfred Cantwell Smith*. T.T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1984.
3. Vide Ch.VI on "The concept of multiple allegiance" in my *The Religious Spectrum*. Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1984.
4. I do not think that what the Indian sociologist Veena Das calls the "semiticization of Hinduism" is actually taking place. Hindus have never been worried about their absence of creeds. The present proliferation of gurus is not at all concerned with creeds and it is this proliferation plus politization (no connection between the two) that are the two chief characteristics of the present Indian "religious scene".
5. The person conducting such sessions is likely to be someone learned in the scriptures or epics, but not a priest.
6. *Calcutta Review*, December 1945.
7. Published in Persian in 1803.
8. A phrase used by Bipin Chandra Pal in 1901.
9. In an interview by Janusz Kuczynski in *Dialectics and Humanism*, No.4/1987, p.14.
10. *Gandhi's Religious Thought*, London, Notre Dame: Macmillan, 1983.
11. *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.21.
12. *The Hindu View of Life*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1927, p.43.
13. At the International Congress of World Fellowships of Faiths, Tokyo, October 1956.
14. *Recovery of Faith*. New York: Harper, World Perspectives, 1955, p.204.
15. *East and West in Religion*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1958 edn., p.19.