

**STUDIES
ON
SRI RAMAKRISHNA**



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The articles included in this book study Sri Ramakrishna and his message from different angles. Six of them date back to 1937, for they are adapted addresses given by eminent Indian and foreign scholars at the Parliament of Religions held in 1937 as part of the celebrations of the birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna. The other articles are by present-day scholars. The book is thus representative of how scholars have viewed Sri Ramakrishna's message and its impact on society over the past fifty years and what present-day scholars think about his significance today. Somehow or other, Sri Ramakrishna's appeal is as strong as ever.

We hope the book will be welcomed by the public because of the various viewpoints it presents about Sri Ramakrishna himself and the movement that has grown centering round him.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Page
Biographical Sketch of Sri Ramakrishna —Swami Lokeswarananda	
I. Centenary Tributes	
SRI RAMAKRISHNA : ABOVE TIME, ABOVE SPACE —Brajendra Nath Seal, Kt., M.A., Ph.D., D.Sc. <i>Ex-Vice-Chancellor, Mysore University,</i> <i>General President, Parliament of Religions,</i> <i>1937</i>	3
SRI RAMAKRISHNA: THE GREATEST SAINT OF MODERN INDIA —Swaini Abhedananda <i>A Direct Disciple of Sri Ramakrishna</i>	11
SRI RAMAKRISHNA: THE MESSIAH OF SPIRITUAL DEMOCRACY —Swami Paramananda <i>Head of the Vedanta Centre, Boston, U.S.A.</i>	17
SRI RAMAKRISHNA: APOSTLE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY —Sir Francis Younghusband, KCSI, KCIE <i>Chairman, Society for Promoting the</i> <i>Study of Religions, London</i>	22
SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S GOSPEL OF HARMONY —Prof. Batuk Nath Bhattacharya, M.A., B.L. <i>Ripon College, Calcutta</i>	25
SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM —Dr Gaultherus H. Mees, M.A. (Cantab), L.L.D. (Leyden), Holland	32
SRI RAMAKRISHNA: A STUDY IN SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS —Dr Mahendranath Sircar, M.A., Ph.D. <i>Presidency College, Calcutta</i>	39
II. Sri Ramakrishna and Universal Religion	
SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND UNIVERSAL RELIGION —Swami Ranganathananda <i>Trustee, Ramakrishna Math,</i> <i>President, Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad</i>	53

STUDIES ON SRI RAMAKRISHNA

	page
SRI RAMAKRISHNA: THE UNIVERSAL MAN	61
—Dr Margaret Bedrosian, Ph.D.	
SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND THE UNITY OF RELIGIONS	75
—Swami Tejasananda	
<i>Principal, Vidyamandira,</i>	
<i>Belur Math</i>	
III. Sri Ramakrishna Viewed from Other Religious Angles	
RAMAKRISHNA AND CHRIST	89
—Francis X. Clooney, S.J.	
<i>Department of Theology,</i>	
<i>Boston College, Massachusetts, U.S.A.</i>	
RAMAKRISHNA FROM ISLAMIC STANDPOINT	99
—A. J. A. Tyeb	
<i>Chairman, Public Service Commission,</i>	
<i>West Bengal</i>	
SRI RAMAKRISHNA FROM THE CHRISTIAN STANDPOINT	106
—The Rt. Rev. John W. Sadiq	
<i>Principal, Bishop's College, Calcutta</i>	
RELIGION AS INTERPRETED BY SRI RAMAKRISHNA	112
—Hossainur Rahman, Ph.D.	
<i>Hooghly Mohsin College, West Bengal</i>	
IV. Sri Ramakrishna and the Nineteenth Century Awakening in India	
THE BRAHMO MOVEMENT AND SRI RAMAKRISHNA	117
—Swami Prabhananda	
<i>Assistant Secretary,</i>	
<i>Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission</i>	
SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHTS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY	146
—Amalek Tripathi	
<i>Formerly Professor of History,</i>	
<i>Calcutta University</i>	
RAMAKRISHNA AND INDIAN RENAISSANCE	154
—Donald H. Bishop, M.A., Ph.D.	
<i>Professor of Philosophy,</i>	
<i>Washington State University,</i>	
<i>U.S.A.</i>	

CONTENTS

	page
ROLE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AWAKENING	163
—Papia Chakravorty <i>Reader in History, Jadavpur University</i>	
V. The Ramakrishna Movement and its Message to the Modern Man	
THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT	183
—Swami Lokeswarananda <i>Secretary, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture</i>	
THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT : THE QUESTION OF ASSESSMENT	193
—Trevor Oswald Ling, M.A., B.D., Ph.D. <i>Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion and Honorary Fellow. University of Manchester</i>	
SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND HIS MESSAGE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY	214
—Nemai Sadhan Bose <i>Vice-Chancellor, Visva-Bharati</i>	
THE RELEVANCE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA FOR MODERN MAN	234
—Debiprasad Bhattacharyya, M.A. <i>Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University</i>	
SRI SRI RAMAKRISHNA KATHAMRITA AND ITS MESSAGE FOR THE MODERN AGE	247
—R. K. Das Gupta, M.A., Ph. D. <i>Formerly Director, National Library</i>	

INTRODUCTION

RAMAKRISHNA

Swami Lokeswarananda

RAMAKRISHNA was born Gadadhar Chatterji, the youngest son of a poor Brahmin couple, Khudiram and Chandramani, of Kamarpukur in Hooghly district of Bengal, on 18 February, 1836. Kamarpukur can now be reached from Calcutta by public transport in about three hours' time. When Ramakrishna first came to Calcutta, as a lad of sixteen in 1852, he walked most of the way, taking approximately two days. The distance is less than 100 Kms.

Khudiram originally lived at Dere, a village, not too far from Kamarpukur. He was quite well-off, but he had to leave that village a pauper because of the ire of an influential man who wanted him to give false evidence in his favour in a court of law which Khudiram refused to do. A friend invited him to come and settle at Kamarpukur, offering him some land for housing and also a small paddy field. The small mud huts that Khudiram built still stand, a witness to his austere life at Kamarpukur. Ramakrishna, however, reports that both his parents were content with whatever they had. Khudiram spent most of his time worshipping the family deity, Raghuvira; Chandramani, simple as a child, did her household chores, but a thing she never missed was feeding guests who called at meal times. Khudiram was the most respected man in the village. People would stand aside with folded hands when he walked along the village path.

As a child, Ramakrishna was the beloved of the whole village. Women brought sweets to feed him with their own hands. As he grew older, his popularity also grew. He had many artistic gifts. He could sing, dance, and act; he could also carve images; he often told jokes which made people roar with laughter. He was, however, averse to formal schooling. He said it did not give the kind of knowledge he was seeking; it

taught only how to earn money. He loved Nature. A flight of white cranes against dark monsoon clouds once sent him into ecstasy. He had similar trances on more than one occasion when his religious emotions were deeply stirred. He was often found roaming the fields, alone or with friends. He preferred the company of monks who often stopped in his village on their way to Puri. He heard their religious discussions with rapt attention. He also served them.

At seven, Ramakrishna lost his father. This made him a bit serious but his attitude towards school did not change and his ways and habits also remained the same. A conflict started between him and his elders when the time came for him to wear the sacred thread. He insisted that he would have his first alms from a non-Brahmin lady to whom he had given word that he would do so. This was repugnant to brahminical traditions, but Ramakrishna was adamant. He said, 'What sort of brahmin shall I be if I do not keep my promise?' Finally, the elders had to give way.

Ramakrishna did not go to school but he knew the epics and the Purāṇas well. He had a good memory and a strong common sense. Once at a meeting of scholars, a debate had started over a certain religious issue and though there were many hair-splitting arguments flying back and forth, no solution was in sight. Ramakrishna, a mere boy, was watching the proceedings with his teen-aged friends. He offered a solution which was found to be the only possible one. The scholars were impressed by Ramakrishna's originality.

Ramkumar, the eldest brother of Ramakrishna, ran a small Sanskrit school in North Calcutta. He also performed priestly duties. Ramakrishna, his younger brother, who stayed at home, did more or less similar work. The money the two brothers earned between themselves did not add up to much. The family had difficulty in making both ends meet. Ramkumar brought Ramakrishna to Calcutta, hoping he would be able to make him learn Sanskrit from him. He also hoped he would help him with his priestly work, thus adding to the family income. Ramakrishna, however finally declared that he was not interested in either. He made it clear that his sole

INTRODUCTION

aim in life was to know the Ultimate Reality in the world commonly called God. He did not care for money, power or position. Right from boyhood, he had a mind of his own and once he had set his heart on something, nothing could deflect him from it. Surprisingly, he was also wise and sound far beyond his age. When he spoke of life's purpose and how to attain it, no one with the least knowledge of the scriptures could refute him. Ramkumar felt helpless in the face of his brother's obstinacy. From now on, he practically left his brother free to do whatever he pleased.

Meanwhile, Rani Rasmani, a rich non-Brahmin woman, had founded a huge temple complex at Dakshineswar in the northern suburb of Calcutta. She was looking for a suitable priest for Mother Kālī, but no one was willing to serve as a priest in a temple owned by a non-Brahmin. Someone advised Rasmani to approach Ramkumar. At first Ramkumar was unwilling but finally agreed subject to certain conditions. Ramakrishna followed him after a few days. With much reluctance, he also agreed to help with dressing Mother Kālī. After a few years' work in this capacity, Ramkumar retired due to frail health.

Ramakrishna had at last found his vocation. While worshipping Mother Kālī he must have felt that here was his chance to fulfil his life's ambition to realize God. With him, Mother Kālī was not just an image but a living presence. But how could he claim that Mother Kālī accepted his worship? He worshipped Her with all his heart but there was no response from Her side. This made him restless. What, was he worshipping a mere stone-image? Or was he so worthless that Mother would give him no indication that she was pleased with him? But there have been devotees like Ramprasad who have received Her grace in an ample measure. Why should he not receive it, too? Why should she be so unkind to him? As evening came, he would cry out, 'Mother, another day is gone, yet you have not granted me a vision of yours. How can you be so unkind?' Sometimes he would roll on the earth and rub his mouth on it till blood came out. The bystanders thought he was crying because he had lost his mother.

He grew emaciated because he would not eat and sleep properly. But for the care his nephew, Hriday, took of him, he would have died. At night he would retire into a nearby forest and spend the whole night meditating. Even while worshipping, he would sometimes break out into loud moaning. One day he grew so impatient that he decided to commit suicide. He picked up the sword hanging on the inside wall of the temple and was about to hit himself with it. What followed he thus describes, '... I saw an ocean of the Spirit, boundless, dazzling. In whatever direction I turned, great luminous waves were rising. ... They broke over me, they engulfed me. I was suffocated. I lost consciousness and I fell. ... Round me rolled an ocean of ineffable joy. And in the depths of my being I was conscious of the presence of the Divine Mother.' From this point onwards, Ramakrishna's story takes a new turn: he was a child entirely dependent upon Mother Kālī. Like a petulant child, he would not let Her go out of his sight even for a moment. Worship, usually a formalized affair, became in his case a sport between mother and son. Shocked by the blasphemous conduct of the priest, the temple staff reported to the authorities that the priest was no longer a normal man. To ascertain the truth, Mathur personally came and watched how Ramakrishna conducted his worship. He was convinced, so far from being mad, Ramakrishna had now reached the point where man was closest to God. He issued orders that Ramakrishna was never to be interfered with in the matter of his worship of Mother Kālī.

But soon Ramakrishna began to have long spells of ecstasy, losing complete consciousness about his surroundings. It was no longer possible for him to look after himself, leave alone perform priestly duties. Some thought he had gone completely mad, some thought he was suffering from hysteria. Word spread to his village. Naturally his mother was upset and urged him to return home which Ramakrishna did. Mother Chandramani found nothing wrong with her son. Yet her neighbours suggested marriage as a steadying influence. At first, Chandramani was apprehensive that Ramakrishna would reject the idea outright. But when he came to know of the

move, far from opposing it he began to take interest in it. He even said where the suitable girl was to be found. The suitable girl was Sarada, the daughter of Ramchandra Mukherjee from a neighbouring village, Jayrambati. The marriage took place, Ramakrishna twenty-four and Sarada seven.

After the marriage, Ramakrishna went back to Dakshineswar. Mathur was happy to have him back, for he looked upon Ramakrishna as his spiritual guide. Though many years younger, he used to address him as 'Father'. On return to Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna immediately plunged into his spiritual practices. He had his Mother Kālī granting him visions as and when he wanted, but this was not enough. He told Mother Kālī that he wanted to know what other ways there were to realize Her (i.e. God). In later years, Ramakrishna used to say, 'I've had occasion to try various paths to reach God'.

As if in answer to his prayer, one teacher after another came, each representing a way. They came, searched him out and enquired if they could teach him the mystique of the disciplines in which they had specialized. Often Ramakrishna's reply was, 'I've to ask Mother'. He meant Kālī but the teachers might have thought he meant his human mother. One of the teachers was a woman mendicant, a *Bhairavī*, a wandering nun following the *Tantra*. Basically an expert in the yogas and tantras, she had personal experience of a wide variety of religious disciplines. She was also well versed in the scriptures. Right from the beginning she began to treat Ramakrishna as her son. Perhaps she was also conscious that she had an extraordinary son to take care of. She taught him with meticulous care. There were Tāntric lessons which Ramakrishna found revolting. But she would not hear of any excuse, he must go through with it fully, just as the scriptures prescribed. One chapter after another, one phase after another—thus the lessons progressed. The Bhairavi was amazed at the speed with which Ramakrishna mastered the lessons. She, a great spiritual person herself, detected in Ramakrishna signs only the past incarnations had displayed. Once convinced that Ramakrishna was an *Avatāra*, she had no hesitation in declaring

the fact. She wanted the public at large to know this, for how else could the purpose of the advent of an *Avatāra*'s be fulfilled? Ramakrishna was quite intrigued when he heard her mention this. He passed it on to Mathur, his disciple and caretaker both. Mathur simply brushed it aside. He told Ramakrishna, 'Father, how can that be possible? We already have had ten incarnations, we can't have another.' Ramakrishna, as if it did not concern him at all, conveyed it to Bhairavi. This was an insult to Bhairavi's scholarship. Quoting the *Śrīmad Bhāgavat* she said there could certainly be more incarnations; no limit could be set to the number of incarnations who came and went as the religious situation demanded. She said, 'Let Mathur call a meeting of scholars. I'll prove my point.' As if to save his teacher's honour, Ramakrishna began to press Mathur to invite scholars to a meeting. Mathur knew his Master well. He was a child who would never accept a refusal once he wanted something done, specially if it was something to settle a religious dispute. A meeting was called and some outstanding scholars, who were also well-known for their spiritual attainments, came. Bhairavi started arguing. She argued with vehemence, with sound logic, with ample quotations from the scriptures. She said given the spiritual symptoms Ramakrishna had, he could not but be an *Avatāra*. Ramakrishna sat there an interested listener. The only comment he made now and then was to corroborate when Bhairavi referred to various manifestations that had taken place in his body and mind—all mystical. It was expected that, as characteristic of them, the scholars would first start arguing against Bhairavi and then argue against each other. Instead, they readily agreed with Bhairavi and also with each other. One went a step further: he composed a hymn on the spot in praise of Ramakrishna and began to recite it. The result pleased Bhairavi. It must have left the rest of the people present amazed. Most amazed was perhaps Mathur. But what about Ramakrishna? He was least concerned.

The next important Guru to arrive was Tota Puri, a wandering monk of the Order usually described as *Nāgā* (i.e., *Nāṅgā*, naked). He was a strict non-dualist who did not recognize this

world as a reality. To him the only Reality was Brahman, the Self. He had perhaps been visiting Bengal to have a bath at the confluence of the River Ganga and the Bay of Bengal like holy men do at the time of *Makara Samkrānti* (usually in January). Who directed him to Dakshineswar? It is difficult to tell. Tota Puri arrived by boat. At the ghat, there were many people, but one young man among them attracted his notice—Ramakrishna. He was struck by his spiritual potential. He proposed that Ramakrishna received from his instructions in non-dualism and also vows in monasticism. Ramakrishna said, 'I've to ask my Mother.' It is doubtful if Tota Puri realized that Ramakrishna was referring to the Divine Mother. He said, 'Ask whoever you want to, but be quick. I'm not going to stay here too long.' Eventually, Ramakrishna did take lessons in non-dualism from Tota Puri. The lessons are complete only when you are able to see your Self as the Self of all. This happens only through a transcendental experience known as *Nirvikalpa Samādhi*. This experience reveals to you the oneness of things. You realize that all that exists—man, animal, plant, the entire universe—is really one, its nature being Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. The diversity that you see is only in terms of names and forms. Beneath these names and forms there is a basic unity which is always the same, unchanging and unchangeable. This basic unity is the common Self of all, the Ground on which the world of diversity, the world of names and forms, rests.

Nirvikalpa Samādhi marks the summit of all spiritual attainments according to non-dualism. Few really attain it. Those who attain it are seldom able to return to the level of dualism. They return, if at all, only with the wish to share their experience with others. One night Tota Puri took Ramakrishna into a hut and started giving him lessons in non-dualism. He asked Ramakrishna to shift his mind from dualism to non-dualism. It was a question of withdrawing the mind from the world of names and forms, the world of sense experience, to the world where there was only the Self, the Self as Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. In fact, what exists there no one can tell. It is beyond speech, even beyond thought. Knowledge, known,

and knower, all merge into one. The fact is that the division between subject and object disappears, so who will speak about what?

Ramakrishna had no difficulty withdrawing his mind from the world of sense experience. His difficulty was with Mother Kālī. Again and again, she began to thrust Herself into his consciousness. With great effort he was able to push Her aside and reach the world of formlessness. Here he was with his self only; duality disappeared, there was only unity. Many merged into one. Ramakrishna plunged into *Nirvikalpa Samādhi* and stayed in that state for three days and nights. Tota Puri was amazed. He himself had attained that state only after forty years of efforts. How was it possible that his disciple reached that state at the first attempt? Wonder of wonders, he stayed in that state for three days and nights without showing any sign of life! Was it not a miracle? He now began to worry lest Ramakrishna should return to the ordinary level of consciousness. If he did not, that would be death. A worried Tota Puri now tried everything known to him to make Ramakrishna return to normalcy. When Ramakrishna did at last regain consciousness, he had difficulty realizing where he was and why he was where he was. It is said that Tota Puri gave him the name 'Ramakrishna' and also the surname 'Paramahansa', (the Great Swan). There is, however, some doubt about this. More likely, only the surname was given by him, considering its significance. The surname applies to one 'who is in the world but not of it.' Truly enough, from now on Ramakrishna was free to travel between dualism and non-dualism at will. At first sight, he was like anybody else, but how different he was from others: His mind reeled constantly on God. If he took any interest in the world around, he did so only to the extent that he saw it only as a manifestation of God. It was with difficulty that he was able to keep his mind down to the world as such. His body and mind both revolted against anything that stood between him and his God. He was in constant communion with God. A mere hint about God was enough to push him into *Samādhi*.² He would show

INTRODUCTION

no sign of life but his face would beam with joy and there would be a beatific smile playing around his mouth.

But Ramakrishna did not stop making experiments with religion. Be it crooked or straight, broad or narrow, he wanted to try every path trod by holy men to reach God. Invariably the appropriate Guru arrived just when he needed him. He was thus able to cover the entire field of religion, starting from fetishism to non-dualism. In his one single life, he repeated every step man has taken in the whole course of his journey to God. There was not an inch of ground in the religious world which was not familiar to him. Having tried Hinduism in all its aspects, he tried Christianity and Islam. In both cases he had experiences which religions foresee. He found the essence of each religion was the same, however different it might look outwardly. In each case, the goal was the same, the transformation which it brought out in character was also the same. This was why he used to say later that religions were like so many paths leading to the same goal—God. He held all religions in equal respect.

Because of the austerities Ramakrishna practised, he had become very frail of body and needed constant care. In the earlier years, his nephew, Hriday, looked after him but he had to leave Dakshineswar because of an indiscretion on his part. Ramakrishna sent word to Sarada Devi asking her to come soon and she came. She had come at intervals earlier also and had stayed with him. She had found in him a loving friend and guide, intelligent, sensible, and humorous, quite contrary to the rumour she had heard back at home that he was insane. She herself was intelligent, full of common sense, and with great spiritual qualities, not acquired but inborn. In this matter, she was exactly like her husband. Yet, when she arrived at Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna asked her, 'Do you wish to bring me down to the plane of worldliness?' 'What makes you think so? I wish to help you along your spiritual path', was her reply. And that is exactly what she did all her life. Ramakrishna was conscious of her great spiritual potential. He lost no time to start teaching her everything he felt she should know, temporal or spiritual. And what an apt learner Sarada Devi was !

She absorbed everything as quickly as her husband had at one time done, if not more. Her apprenticeship complete, Ramakrishna now worshipped her as Universal Mother. Why did he do that? Obviously, to awaken her dormant divinity so that she could stay on that level always. That she did not disappoint him in this was testified by Ramakrishna himself. She became a goddess in human form. Ramakrishna always respected her, but now he respected her more. He warned others to be careful not to give her any offence. Now and then he would hint about her divine personality. Ramakrishna wanted that she should do her share of work as a spiritual guide. But she always preferred to remain hidden. Many even did not know that Ramakrishna was married and Sarada Devi was living on the same premises with him.

Soon word spread around about Ramakrishna's extraordinary spiritual attainments. One of the first who talked about him to his students was Principal Hastie of General Assembly, now known as Scottish Church college in Calcutta. But the man who gave the widest publicity to Ramakrishna and his teachings was Keshub Chandra Sen, then leader of the Brāhmo Samāj and the idol of the younger generation. Slowly Ramakrishna became a popular name among the intelligentsia of Calcutta. Many came to see him, he also went out to see many. Those who came to see him were of two classes: people who had adopted western ways of thinking (Ramakrishna used to call them 'Englishmen' or 'Young Bengal') and people who were seekers of God and wanted some guidance. The second group included both monks and householders. They had heard of Ramakrishna as being one who lived in constant communion with God. They wanted to see if he belonged to their own school of thought or to some other school. Listening to his talks they felt he knew more about their paths than anyone else they knew of. This happened to followers of many diverse schools of religious disciplines. To them he was the ideal man they were looking for. It is said that once a Christian declared that to him he was Christ himself. Ramakrishna himself, however, remained the humblest man possible. He often resented any attempt to ascribe divinity to him. Nevertheless, he at-

INTRODUCTION

tracted people of different religious persuasions—Hindus of every shade but also non-Hindus. There were the Brāhmos who were Hindu only nominally, for they drew their inspiration more from Christianity than from Hinduism. There were also Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians. He received all cordially and made everybody feel perfectly at home as he himself felt perfectly at home in their company. The others he himself went and met were people who had the reputation of being socially and otherwise important. He met Devendranath Tagore, father of Poet Rabindranath, for instance. He also met Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the universally loved and respected man of the time. Among other important men he met, by arrangement or by accident, were Bankim Chandra Chatterji, the famous literateur, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the Poet, and Pandit Sasadhar Tarkachudamani, the most forceful exponent of Hindu orthodoxy, and Swami Dayananda, founder of the Ārya Samāj who believed more in rituals than in philosophy. He met also many people whose social standing was high by virtue of their wealth and philanthropic activities. Some of them treated him as their personal friend, some even as their mentor though he was a mere temple priest with little education and no material possessions. The question is: why did he meet them? One reason must be that he wanted that the truths he had discovered must be taught and taught specially to persons of influence so that they could slowly percolate to the popular level. India was then caught in a dilemma: on one side, was the pull of western influence which wanted to demolish everything of age and replace it with the western model; on the other, was the traditional Hindu idealism which insisted on clinging on to everything of the past, irrespective of its relevance in modern situations. Ramakrishna was not concerned to save the old or create the new. He was no religious or social reformer. If anything, his only concern was to point man to his highest moral and spiritual possibilities. He perhaps foresaw that an age of great material achievements was coming; he perhaps also foresaw that it was going to be accompanied by much conflict and tension, both at the individual and collective level. He welcomed progress but the progress

must be both internal and external. According to him, man's destiny was not merely physical, but also spiritual. He himself was an example of what spiritual development could lead to. If life was to be enjoyed it could best be enjoyed at the spiritual level. Man is at his best when he is spiritual. Without getting into any argument with any point of view, he kept harping on man's spiritual destiny.

Ramakrishna's circle of admirers began to grow with the passage of time. Surprisingly, it is the so-called 'Englishmen' who formed the bulk of his admirers. Ramakrishna also found pleasure in meeting and talking to them. There were some young men in whom he found great spiritual promise. He would seek their company just as much as they would seek his. Chief among the latter was Narendra Nath Dutta, later famous as Swami Vivekananda. Ramakrishna singled him out as 'the future educator of mankind.' Naren, a student of western philosophy and also a member of the Brāhmo Samāj, was not one who would accept any viewpoint unless he found it logically sound. He often clashed with Ramakrishna, but secretly admired his character. He was not impressed by Ramakrishna's mystic experience which he thought were mere hallucinations. Yet Ramakrishna, the man, attracted him most. The purity of his character, selflessness, humility, love for each and everybody, and his wise talks made it clear to him that Ramakrishna was in a class by himself.

Ramakrishna was always surrounded by religious seekers. He answered their questions and also sang and danced with them. But a small band of young men interested him more, for he had noticed their spiritual promise and decided to train them. They did not know each other, but Ramakrishna fell ill and they came together to nurse him and, in the process, became great friends. It was detected that Ramakrishna had throat cancer. Dr Mahendra Lal Sarker began to treat him. Dr Sarker was an M.D. in Allopathy but had switched over to Homeopathy despite much opposition from his friends. He was a man who never deviated from what he thought was right. A pioneer in scientific research, he had founded the first research academy in India, Indian Association for the Cultivation of

INTRODUCTION

Science. Surprisingly, he fell under the spell of Ramakrishna. Having come to see him he would spend hours listening to his talks. This affected his practice but he did not mind.

Ramakrishna's condition began to get worse day by day. Dr Sarker suggested that he be removed to Calcutta so that doctors might reach him quickly as and when necessary. He was removed to a fine garden house at Cossipore in the northern suburbs of the city. He stayed here the last eight months of his life. This was the most fruitful period of his life. He was supposed not to talk because of his cancer in the throat but he talked ceaselessly. But what did he talk about? He talked about God, about how one was to cry for Him, how instead of arguing about what God was like one was to try to get a vision of Him. His approach was practical and not theoretical. He did not believe like many people did that religion was scholasticism. Religion, according to him, was being filled with God, being God Himself.

Among his disciples there were elderly people like Girish Ghosh, the playwright and actor, Ramchandra Dutt, the medical practitioner, Surendranath Mitra, officer of a British business house, Mahendranath Gupta, more popularly known as 'M', the teacher who chronicled with meticulous detail everything Ramakrishna said and did, and a few others. They raised funds from among themselves to pay for Ramakrishna's treatment. But there were the young men like Naren (later, Vivekananda, as already stated), Rakhal (Brahmananda), Tarak (Shivananda), Sarat (Saradananda), Sashi (Ramakrishnananda), Kali (Abhedananda) and a few others who devoted all their time taking turns to serve their Master. If they were not serving him at a given moment, they would then be seen meditating, alone or in groups, reading holy books, singing hymns and songs together or arguing religious issues. They had by now understood that the goal of life was to realize God and they did not want to waste a single moment doing something not connected with that goal. They also knew that the Master was leaving and they wanted to make the best possible use of the time that he was still with them, trying to carry out the instructions they had received earlier and were still receiving. Ramakrishna sometimes

taught them separately, sometimes in groups. While teaching them separately he would ask what their experiences so far had been and if they had any problems. He would guide each according to his needs. He was a hard taskmaster. He would demand that they work themselves to death in trying to reach God, and nothing short of that would satisfy him. He urged that they never return home and embrace monasticism. As if to put a seal of finality on this, he gave each of them a piece of *geruā* (saffron) cloth and sent them to beg. When they returned with the alms they had received, Ramakrishna partook of it with great eagerness saying that it was holy food. United in their common aims, these young men grew into a compact body with Ramakrishna's love and care. This was the genesis of what later became the Ramakrishna Order. Swami Vivekananda, the most talented among them, was chosen by Ramakrishna to lead this group. He was often seen closetted with Ramakrishna receiving instructions about how they were to conduct themselves in his absence. Ramakrishna was happy to see determination among his young admirers to pursue the ideals he had placed before them. He was also happy that Vivekananda had understood his mission and was prepared to carry it out to the best of his ability in collaboration with his brother-disciples. He still felt his task was not complete. He turned to Sarada Devi and begged that she continue the work he had begun to teach mankind the real meaning of life—attaining the highest spiritual development possible for man. At first she begged to be excused but later she kept quiet indicating her concurrence. Ramakrishna was now ready to go, satisfied with the knowledge that both Sarada Devi and Vivekananda would do their best to teach mankind the highest value of life, one by her own example and the other by preaching as well as by his own life, making full use of the talents with which he was born. Ramakrishna breathed his last on 16 August, 1886. His last message to humanity which he delivered on 1 January 1886 when he met his disciples in a body for the last time was—‘ May you attain Supreme Knowledge! ’

For some time after Ramakrishna's passing away, the young disciples were confused about what should be their next move.

INTRODUCTION

The problem was solved when Surendra (alias Suresh) Nath Mitra offered help towards the starting of a monastery. An old dilapidated house was rented at Barahnagar and the first monastery of the Ramakrishna Sangha was founded there the same year. Physically Ramakrishna might not have been present, but he was very much present among them in spirit to inspire them. The life the young monks lived is a saga of constant prayer, hardship, and mutual love. A detailed account of their activities may be found in the appendix to M's *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. The monastery was later shifted to another rented house at Alambazar. The present site of the monastery, Belur Math, was acquired in the year 1898. Sarada Devi visited the site and liked it. Meanwhile, Swami Vivekananda had become famous through his activities in the East and the West. Through him the Ramakrishna Order, still in an embryonic stage, had also become famous. It has since grown much and it still growing. Today the world recognizes it as a movement of great significance.

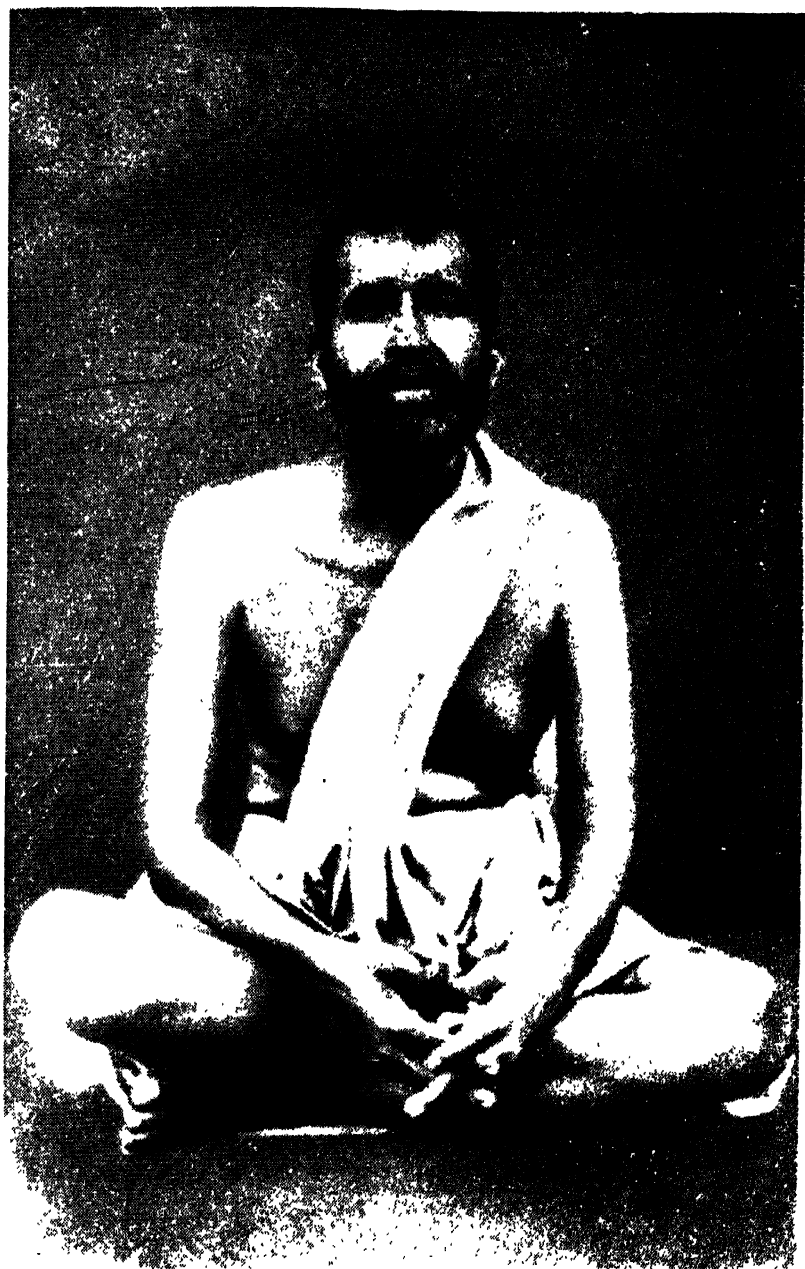
What exactly did Ramakrishna teach ? He taught no sectarian religion ; he taught Religion Eternal which is another name for Truth. Hindus call it Hinduism, Moslems Islam, Christians Christianity. He preached no particular creed or dogma ; he rejected none, either. Every belief, every practice, every ritual was acceptable to him, but none was to him the only true and valid one. No prophet, no holy book exhausts Truth, but can reveal only a part of it. Truth is Being. Thought or speech can never express It, or express It only partly, if at all. All that exists is a manifestation of this Being. All is, therefore, divine and holy. Nothing man does is secular, it is spiritual. Life itself is nothing but a prolonged act of worship.

Ramakrishna saw God everywhere but most of all in man. That is why he was moved by the sight of famished men and women at Deoghar. He threatened to cancel his pilgrimage if no relief was given to those people. But if he served man, it was with humility and reverence, for he was serving God Himself. It is a new meaning he gave to service. To him meditation and service were equally important. In meditation you see God within, in service you see Him without. Respect for religions

different from one's own was central to Ramakrishna's message. According to him, the basic truth in all religions was the same.

The Ramakrishna Order stands for peace and harmony. The Order is still small in size, but it has in its ranks people of all races and religions. It also commands respect from all, because it stands unique with its breadth of vision, insistence on moral values, and the high quality of its work for the benefit of the weak and the backward. Its significance lies in its combination of all that is best in man's idealism and action.

CENTENARY TRIBUTES



SRI RAMAKRISHNA

SRI RAMAKRISHNA : ABOVE TIME, ABOVE SPACE

Brajendra Nath Seal

THE successive stages in the growth and development of Ramakrishna's religious life are well-known and have been thus summarized:

(1) In his early boyhood, he took part in popular shows and exhibitions such as *Kṛṣṇaṭilā* and *Gājan* songs. He would play the part of Kṛṣṇa or Śiva in these popular shows.

(2) On the death of his elder brother, he became priest at Dakshinেশ্বর *Kālī-Bāḍī* (Temple of Kālī). He wanted to see *Kālī*, the Divine Mother, and he threatened to stab himself to death if *Kālī* would not deign to appear. He was half-mad and at last he had, as he thought, a vision of *Kālī*.

(3) He now began to practise austerities. He took on himself a vow to abjure woman and gold (*kāminī* and *kāñcana*). Taking gold in one hand and mud in the other, he would mutter, 'gold is mud and mud is gold.' In the same way he conquered all cravings of the flesh and in the end he revered every woman as mother.

(4) Now came to him a youthful and beautiful woman who initiated him into Tantric Practices (*sādhana*). Lying on her lap he meditated on *Kālī*. She was a *vāmācārīnī*, using wine and flesh in the rituals of worship. He worshipped her as a naked goddess, and all sensual cravings were thus seared and burnt up in him.

He sought to experience each religion in its entirety in *sādhana* or spiritual discipline. Now he would be a Moslem *fakīr*, with appropriate rituals, attitudes, and garb, and now a Christian neophyte, stricken with a sense of sin and crying for salvation. There was nothing of mere pose or mere imagination in all this. Here was an individual soul who would enrich

himself with all human experience in religious life and history. And precious elements were thus added to his Hindu heritage—the sense of human brotherhood and equality from the Moslem faith, and the need of salvation from sin from Christianity. In the same way, *Vaiṣṇava saṅkīrtana* and music were added to his religious exercises. These became elements (*aṅgas*) of his *sādhana*.

EARLY PERSONAL INFLUENCES

One of the early personal influences on Ramakrishna was that of saint Dayananda Sarasvati who took his stand on the Vedas as teaching the one Universal Religion and fought all idolatry in a militant mood. But his influence could not be lasting or deep. Ramakrishna's genuineness led him to revolt against Hindu practices. He would repudiate caste and even serve the *methar* (sweeper), which could hardly have been pleasing to the orthodox Vedic brotherhood. He felt himself drawn to Tota Puri and other Indian saints and his experiences prepared him for his mission in life. It was Tota Puri who initiated him into *sannyāsa*.

He came under the influence of the Brāhmo Samāj, and probably this deepened his sense of divine motherhood which his worship of *Kālī* had instilled into him. The New Dispensation as preached by Brahmananda Keshabchandra broadened his religious outlook by giving him a keen sense of certain social evils and immoralities which had corrupted later Hindu religious practices.

HIS MYSTICISM

Ramakrishna, like Rammohun himself, was a composite personality. In contemplating truth from the absolute (*nirupādhi*) point of view, he negated all conditions and modes (*upādhis*), but from the relative or conditional (*sopādhi*) point of view he worshipped *Kālī*, the Divine Mother, as well as other modes and adumbrations of the Deity. He worshipped the one in all, and the all in one, and he saw no contradiction but only a fuller reality in this. So also he reconciled *sākāra* and *nirākāra upāsanā* (iconic and aniconic worship). For him there was

nothing in the form of the Deity but God manifesting Himself. The antagonism between matter and spirit no longer existed for him.

What he refused to delude himself with was that he was above all conditions and all infirmities of the flesh. But in his trances (*samādhi*) he developed ecstasia in its purest form, such as has been rarely witnessed in the West in the religious world since the days of Eckhart and Tauler.

Like most Hindu saints, he had an inexhaustible store of homely sayings, adages, metaphors, allegories, and parables which could bring spiritual truths home to the meanest understanding and even to the child.

A COMPARISON

Rammohun Roy, the precursor and in a very real sense the father of modern India, sought the Universal Religion, the common basis of the Hindu, Moslem, Christian, and other faiths. He found that each of the national religions was based on this common faith with a certain distinctive historical and cultural embodiment. It is fundamental to note that Rammohun Roy played two roles in his own person: (1) As a Universalist, he formulated the creed of what was called Neo-theo-philanthropy ('a new love of God and Man') on positive and constructive lines. He construed the *Gāyatrī* on this basis. And, strange to say, this Hindu became one of the four fathers of the Unitarian creed and worship in the West, the other three being Price, Priestley and Channing. (2) As a Nationalist Reformer, Rammohun had a threefold mission: (a) As a Hindu Reformer, he gave a Unitarian redaction of the Hindu *śāstras* from the *Vedānta* and *Mahānirvāna Tantra*. (b) As a Moslem defender of the faith, he wrote the *Tuhfatul-Muwahhidin* and *Monazaratul Adiyān*, which were polemical works. (c) As a Christian, he gave a Unitarian version of the entire body of the scriptures, old and new, in his controversies with the Christian missionaries. Rammohun was thus in himself a universalist and three nationalists all in one.

Maharshi Devendranath organized the creed, rituals, and *anuṣṭhānas* (observances) in the Ādi Brāhmo Samāj on a Hindu

Upaniṣadic basis. The work of formulating Universal Religion, free from Hindu or Christian theology, fell to Brahmananda Keshabchandra, who attempted this on an eclectic basis, and thus organized rituals and modes of worship. In his earlier days, Keshab made Christianity the central religion, but in later life he was drawn more and more to Vaiṣṇavism for emotional religious exercises. This was selective eclecticism. He thus variegated and fulfilled religion and religious experiences, as well as concepts, rituals, and worship in a way never attempted before. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Vaiṣṇavism, not to mention other religions, each contributed its essence and substance to Keshab's religion of the New Dispensation, and what was new was the eclectic cult and culture. The next step (and it was indeed a fundamental innovation) was taken by Paramahansa Ramakrishna. The Paramahansa would experience each cult and religion in its totality or as one whole experience.

KESHABCHANDRA'S VIEWS

Keshabchandra would emphasize the central essence of each religion and acknowledge its truth. In this sense Brahmananda Keshab would say, 'It is not that every religion contains truths, but every religion is true.' But as there are different religions, it follows that they convey different aspects of truth. They transcribe not a part but the whole of life, each from one fundamental standpoint. But the religions contend with one another. Each claims that its positive standpoint is the only true standpoint and all other standpoints are erroneous. But Keshab differed. He viewed life from all these different standpoints eclectically. He selected from each religion what he considered its essence, both theoretical and practical. He formulated a collation of all these partial aspects in the Brāhmo faith and more especially in the New Dispensation creed. Put more briefly, Keshab's view is that every religion as represented by its central essence is true. But it does not contain the whole truth, which can be viewed only from an eclectic standpoint. The New Dispensation would select the distinctive central essence from each religion.

But Keshabchandra must not be misunderstood. He believed with Rammohun in the unity of all religions, but, as he said, he meant not the collection of Truths but the unification of truths in one ideal. Unity and universalism must, therefore, qualify eclecticism and secure an international expression of religion. This was Rammohun's Universalism. There were later developments of the New Dispensation creed, and the final phase was reached in the conception of a harmony of religions in the form of a synthetic faith and their 'amalgamation in a beautiful synthesis.' This synthesis is, of course, entirely different from a synthesis of cultures. Finally, it should be noted that the foundations of the New Dispensation were laid in 1879-1882 after the *Sādhārāṇist* schism, and that subsequent developments of the doctrine came to light (1) under Pratap Chandra Majumdar's lead in favour of an oriental version of Christian faith (Oriental Christ), and (2) under Gour Govinda Upadhyaya's lead in favour of a Veda-Vedānta-Purāṇic version of the New Dispensation. The New Dispensation creed, as it stands now, is an amalgam of all these three phases.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S STAND

Subject to those qualifications, Keshab's creed was eclectic. Here it was that Ramakrishna differed from Keshabchandra. Indeed, he differed from his predecessors in two essential respects: (1) He maintained that the practices of each religion with its rituals and disciplines give its essence more really and vitally than its theoretical dogmas or creeds; and (2) It is not by selective eclecticism but by syncretism and the whole-hearted acceptance of a religion that its full value and worth could be realized and experienced.

Ramakrishna held that selective extracts would kill the vital element in each religion. He would be a Hindu with the Hindu, a Moslem with the Moslem and a Christian with the Christian in order to experience the whole truth and efficacy of each of these religions. But he would not practise different religious disciplines or hold different creeds at one and the same time. The observances, practices, and rituals of each religion are organic to it. He would tentatively accept the whole creed and ritual

STUDIES ON SRI RAMAKRISHNA

of the Moslem (or of the Christian Catholic), in order to experience its religious efficacy and truth. In all this there might be temptations or pitfalls, but one must be as an innocent child or babe, and pass unscathed through fire. It was thus that the Paramahansa passed successively through Christian and Moslem experiences. Such was the Paramahansa's Syncretism.

ASCETICISM AND CELIBACY

The great founders of Religion have been *sannyāsins* or ascetics. Such were the Buddha and the Christ. Such were also St. Francis of Assisi, Caitanya, and Ramakrishna. Most of them forsook their wives or mothers for bringing redemption to mankind. The wives and mothers of the saviours of mankind have thus suffered vicariously. Celibacy was the ideal of these religious teachers. Chinese and Greek teachers of mankind as well as the Indian *R̥sis* of old did not forsake the life of the world. This is also the case with Gandhi. This also the modern ideal.

COSMIC HUMANIST

Ramakrishna was thus a cosmic humanist in religion and not a mere nationalist. He gave the impulse and initiative and this must be completed in our age. One such characteristic note of our day, derived from Christianity, is faith in a suffering God, the faith of the dispossessed millions as well as of the outcasts of Humanity. And not in religion only, as religion is ordinarily understood. Humanism has now various new phases and developments. Leaving out Compté's positivistic humanism with its worship of the '*Grand Être*' (Great Being) and Babism, with its offshoot, Bahaim, the religion of human brotherhood,—we may turn to later phases such as the new concepts of religion without a God (as in Julian Huxley and many others of our day). This is not all. Impersonal ideals of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness have sometimes replaced the old faith in a personal God. And it is not merely the religious sentiment which claims its own pabulum in our day. A passion for science, for philosophy or for scientific philosophy, a passion for art or for *rasa* (aesthetic sentiment) in general is the badge of modern-

ism in our culture and seeks to displace much of the old religious sentiment. Herbert Spencer's agnosticism, Darwin's characteristic impassiveness which is only the Baconian drylight of old, and John Stuart Mill's atheism which would conserve the value of religion without its beliefs, with agnosticism and Zoroastrian dualism as occasional variants—all these are only examples in our day of the man in quest of a God.

Our present quest is for a Parliament of Religions, a quest which we seek to voice in this assembly. But this is only a stepping stone to a Parliament of Man or a Federation of World Cultures.

Articles of faiths, creeds and dogmas divide man from man. But we seek in religion a meeting ground of Humanity. What we want is not merely Universal Religion in its quintessence, as Rammohun sought it in his earlier days,—not merely an eclectic religion by compounding the distinctive essences, theoretical as well as practical, of the different religions, as Keshabchandra sought it, but experience as a whole as it has unfolded itself in the history of man, and this can be realised by us, as Ramakrishna taught, by syncretic practice of Religion by being a Hindu with the Hindu, a Moslem with the Moslem, a Christian with the Christian and a Universalist with the Universalist, and all this as a stepping stone to the ultimate realisation of God-in-Man and Man-in-God.

NEW ORDER OF HUMANISM

Religion in its broader sense, as distinguished from religions in the concrete, is a force that organizes life and life activities. All cultures and all concepts, in fact, are dominated by the idea of religion at this stage. Food, sex-relations, the family, tribal life and warfare are all regulated by the religious ideal. Empirical science and the folk-life are grouped round the central idea of the religion of a race or people. And, in the course of progress, the higher religions are evolved, and the Parliament of religions is the apex of this ascending course of religious evolution.

But the religious expression is not the only expression of the ultimate experience. We have also science, philosophy, or (better) scientific philosophy, art or the aesthetic sensibility,

rasa (sentiment) or *rasānubhūti*, or again mystical experience, all these being phases of Humanism. And the consummation is to be found in cosmic Humanism which frees Humanism from its limitation of outlook by finding Man in the Universe and the Universe in Man. And we must seek to be free not of this or that state but of the solar system, and the stellar systems and beyond, in one word, of the Universe.*

SRI RAMAKRISHNA : THE GREATEST SAINT OF MODERN INDIA

Swami Abhedananda

TO establish righteousness and to destroy evil, the Almighty Lord manifested Himself in the form of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna. The present upheaval of the spiritual tide, the waves of which traversing nearly one half of the world have touched the shores of America, was produced by the Christ-like character and divine personality of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna who is recognized throughout India as the greatest saint of modern India, and revered and honoured today by all classes of Hindus as the Ideal Manifestation (*Avatāra*) of the Divine glory. His life was so wonderful and unparalleled that within ten years after his departure from this earth, it attracted the admiration, respect, and reverence not only of all classes of the people of India, but also of many of the distinguished English and German scholars of the nineteenth century, who happened to know something about him.

REAL MAHĀTMAN

A short account of the life of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna appeared for the first time in the January number of the *Imperial and Quarterly Review* of 1896 under the title of 'A Modern Hindu Saint'. It was an able article penned by Prof. C. H. Tawney who was for many years the Professor of Sanskrit in the Calcutta University and the distinguished Librarian of India House in London. This article aroused the interest of a great many European scholars, among whom the late Prof. Max Müller showed his appreciation by publishing in the August number of the *Nineteenth Century* of 1896 a short sketch of this Hindu saint's life, entitled 'A Real Mahātmā'. In this celebrated article, which was for some time the subject of the most severe criticism both in England and in India among many of the Christian missionaries and the Theosophists, the noted Professor showed the difference between the imaginary *Mahātmans*

STUDIES ON SRI RAMAKRISHNA

of the Theosophists and the *Real Mahātman* or the great soul of India, who had reached God-consciousness and had manifested Divinity in all the actions of his daily life. He gave a brief account of the extraordinary life of Sri Ramakrishna paying him the highest tribute of honour and respect that a Christian scholar could give to a Divine manifestation in the so-called heathen land. Later, in 1896, he compiled and published *Ramakrishna, His Life and Sayings*, collecting more facts about the life and sayings of this exemplary character perfumed with Divine personality.

UNIVERSAL TEACHINGS

The Vedanta Society of New York, U.S.A., published in a separate volume the sayings of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna in 1903 and the *Gospel of Ramakrishna* with an introduction by Swami Abhedananda in 1907. The unsectarian and universal teachings of Sri Ramakrishna attracted the attention of the sincere and earnest seekers after Truth among the Christians of America and Europe; and the same *Gospel of Ramakrishna* (New York edition) was translated into Spanish and was published in Buenos Aires in South America in 1915. It was also translated into Portuguese and published from Brazil, South America. In Europe it was translated and published in Danish, Scandinavian and Czechoslovakian languages. The well-renowned artist, the late Frank Dvůrák of Prague, Austria, after reading this *Gospel*, was so deeply impressed that he painted a life-size portrait of Sri Ramakrishna.

In 1925 *The Life of Sri Ramakrishna* with an introduction by M. K. Gandhi was published by the Advaita Ashrama of Mayavati in India. Later on, the celebrated French savant Romain Rolland wrote *The Life of Ramakrishna* in French in 1928, which was translated into English by E. F. Malcolm Smith and was published by the Advaita Ashrama in 1930. In this volume Romain Rolland said: 'Allowing for differences of country and time Ramakrishna is the younger brother of our Christ'. (p. 13)

UNSECTARIAN SPIRIT

The late Prof. Max Müller was deeply impressed by the

originality of this great saint and real *Mahātman* who was not brought up within the precincts of any university and who drew the waters of his wisdom neither from any book or scripture, nor from any ancient prophet, but directly from the eternal fountainhead of all knowledge and wisdom. He reached the goal of all religions, not by following the path that was laid down by any religious prophet or spiritual teacher of any country, but by following a path which was original and untrodden by any of the Saviours of the world. The late Prof. Max Müller was also struck by the broad, liberal, and absolutely unsectarian spirit which pervades the utterances of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna. Indeed, the life and sayings of the Bhagavan have given a death-blow to the sectarian bigotry and fanaticism of the so-called religious world. Whosoever has read his sayings is impressed with the universality of his spiritual ideals which embraced the ideals of all mankind.

ONE UNIVERSAL GOAL

From his childhood, Sri Ramakrishna fought against all sectarian doctrines and dogmas ; yet at the same time, he showed that all sects and creeds were but the paths which lead sincere and earnest souls to the one universal goal of all religions. Having realized the highest ideal of every religion, by following the methods and practices of the various sects and creeds of the world, Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna gave to humanity whatever spiritual experiences and realizations he had acquired through *sādhana*. Every idea which he gave was fresh from above and unadulterated by the product of human intellect, culture or scholastic education. Each step of his life from babyhood to the last moment was extraordinary. Every stage was like the unfoldment of a chapter of a new scripture, especially written out by the unseen Hand to befit the minds of the East and the West and to fulfil the spiritual needs of the twentieth century.

DIVINITY CAN BE REACHED

This great sage showed in his life how to cultivate the search after God and proved, by his example, that wherever there is

extreme longing to see God, there is the nearness of the realization of the Absolute Truth. The life of this great '*Real Mahātman*' has been the grand testimony to the fact that even in this age Divinity can be reached and that Divine perfection can be acquired by those who are pure in heart, chaste, simple, and who can devote their whole heart and soul to God for spiritual realization alone, and not for any material gain.

We have neither seen nor heard of a character purer, simpler, more chaste, and more godly than that of this ideal *Mahātman*, Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna. He was the personification of purity and chastity, and embodiment of truthfulness. His life was a life of absolute renunciation and he never cared for the pleasures and comforts of earthly existence. The only comfort, pleasure, or happiness which he felt in his life was at the time when he was in the blissful state of *samādhi* or God-consciousness—when his soul, being liberated from the bondage of physical body, soared high in the infinite space of the Absolute and entered into the abode of Everlasting Peace and Blessedness. He could separate his soul from the cage of the physical organism at his will, and he had perfect control over this great *yoga* power (*vibhūti*). He never recognized earthly relations, but God was his father, mother, brother, sister, and everything.

RESPECT FOR WOMEN

Ramakrishna taught that every woman, old or young, was the representative of the Divine Mother on earth. He worshipped God as the Mother of the Universe, and the Divine Mother, as he often used to say, showed him that all women represented the Divine Motherhood on earth. For the first time in the religious history of the world, this idea was preached by a Divine Incarnation and upon it depends the salvation of men and especially of women of all countries from immorality, corruption, and all other vices which prevail in a civilized community. It was Ramakrishna who by his own example established the truth of spiritual marriage on the soul plane alone, and not on the physical, even in this age of sensuality. He had a wife whom he always treated with reverence and whom he always

looked upon as the representative of his Divine Mother. He never had any sex relation with her, or with any woman, on the physical plane. His wife, the Blessed Virgin, Sarada Devi, lived like an embodiment of Divine Motherhood with innumerable spiritual children around her. She, in turn, always regarded the Bhagavan as her Blessed Mother Divine in a human form. Up to the last moment of his earthly career the Bhagavan was absolutely pure, chaste, and a perfect child of his Divine Mother of the Universe. Furthermore, he uplifted the ideal of womanhood on the spiritual plane by accepting his *guru* in the form of a woman. No other saviour or spiritual leader has ever given such an honour to womanhood in the annals of religious history.

DIVINITY INCARNATE

The mission of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna was to show by his living example how a truly spiritual man, being dead to the world of senses, can live on the plane of God-consciousness ; it was to prove that each individual soul is immortal and potentially Divine. His mission was to establish harmony between religious sects and creeds. For the first time it was absolutely demonstrated by Ramakrishna that all religions are like so many paths leading to the same Goal, that the realization of the same Almighty Being is the highest Ideal of Christianity, Mohammedanism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, as well as of all other religions of the world. Sri Ramakrishna's mission was to proclaim the eternal Truth that God is one but has many aspects, and that the same one God is worshipped by different nations under various names and forms ; that He is personal, impersonal, and beyond both ; that He is with name and form and yet nameless and formless. His mission was to establish the worship of the Divine Mother and thus to elevate the ideal of womanhood into Divine Motherhood. His mission was to show by his own example that true spirituality can be transmitted and that salvation can be obtained through the grace of a Divine Incarnation. His mission was to declare before the world that psychic powers and the power of healing are obstacles in the path of the attainment of God-consciousness.

Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna possessed all the *yoga* powers, but he seldom exercised those powers, especially the power of healing diseases. Moreover, he always prevented his disciples from either seeking or exercising those powers. But one power which we have seen him frequently exercise was the Divine power to transform the character of a sinner and to lift a worldly soul to the plane of superconsciousness by a single touch. He would take the sins of others upon himself and would purify them by transmitting his own spirituality and opening the spiritual eyes of his true followers.

The days of prophecy have passed before our eyes. The manifestations of the Divine powers of one, who is worshipped today by thousands as the latest Incarnation of Divinity, we have witnessed with our eyes. Blessed are they who have seen him and touched his holy feet. May the glory of Sri Ramakrishna be felt by all nations of the earth, may his Divine power be manifested in the earnest and sincere souls of his devotees of all countries in all ages to come, is the prayer of his spiritual child and servant.*



HOLY MOTHER SRI SARADA DEVI

SRI RAMAKRISHNA : THE MESSIAH OF SPIRITUAL DEMOCRACY

Swami Paramananda

SRI Ramakrishna's greatest contribution to the modern world of religious thought was to bring into it a note of definiteness. Our present age of multiple theories and intellectual speculation had set the hearts of men adrift in regard to God and the ultimate realities. Here we find Sri Ramakrishna rising like a star of hope in the midst of chaos and confusion. His equipment and self-expression did not lie in erudition and intellectual cleverness but in direct vision and perception. When we approach him, he does not try to confuse our mind with theological doctrines and metaphysical implications ; instead, he gives us this unique and convincing statement, ' Yes, I have seen God and known Him, and furthermore, I can help you to see and know Him. '

DIRECT PERCEPTION

It was this definiteness of the Master that captivated his disciple, Swami Vivekananda, who had explored restlessly and tirelessly, and in so doing, had acquainted himself with all the contemporary teachers of Sri Ramakrishna's time. Nowhere did he find any positiveness until his good fortune led him to the illumined Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

The Master was an untiring explorer in the realm of spirit. His mind was peculiarly bent upon practical demonstration in regard to what is ordinarily termed 'the Unseen'. He never wanted to accept anything without definite proof. In this respect, his mind is comparable to the minds of the scientists, and his apparent lack of learning was an asset rather than a handicap, because it was entirely uncoloured and unbiassed. No hazard was too great, no self-sacrifice too difficult for him. He gave himself wholly and completely for the purpose of discovering the end of all religions and by so doing made himself a channel through which the infinite power flowed with unalloyed

clarity. As a result of his exploration in spiritual realms, he brought back the definite revelation that each religion, sincerely lived and practised, leads to the same goal of *Sat-Cit-Ānanda*, Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute.

I like to call Sri Ramakrishna the Messiah of Spiritual Democracy. An orthodox Hindu coming to the Saint found in him all the marks of his chosen *Avatāra* (Incarnation). A follower of Mohammed saw in him all the characteristics of his prophet; while a Christian recognized the very Spirit of the living Christ.

NOTHING BUT UNITY

He demonstrated by his life and example that there is nothing but Unity, that all men are the product of the same Substance whether it be called Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Kālī, Allah, Jehovah, Father in Heaven, or in the terms of the monists, the Absolute, the One, the Eternal Brahman. Names make no difference, for they cannot alter the immensity and allness of that one Supreme Reality.

There are many illustrations of the genuine catholicity that pervaded Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual consciousness. Certainly, there is nothing so needful for the endless and multiple diversity of these modern times as unity in diversity. It is the only foundation for universal tolerance based, as it is, upon wisdom and truth. Although Sri Ramakrishna did not claim to be a social reformer or religious agitator, he offered as the fruition of his spiritual contemplation some vital principles, equally applicable to the social, moral, and spiritual needs of mankind.

GOD IN MANY WAYS

Sri Ramakrishna was not satisfied with one-sided attainment. He wanted to enjoy God in many ways—through devotion, through prayer, through songs, through whole-hearted concentration, in the rapture of meditation, and sometimes by plunging deep into *samādhi*, when he became entirely oblivious of his physical existence. This trait in his nature unfolded itself through his remarkable harmony of spirit which was not merely

tolerance but the ability to find the same essence existent in every expression of religion.

How refreshing to find in this world of dissension and conflict, one who is the living example of God-concentration and one who makes his spiritual realization include the wholeness of divinity and the allness of humanity. His life, his spiritual aspirations and his *sādhana's* (methods by which he sought to attain his goal) are profoundly helpful to the modern man. He does not denounce anything or anyone, but he offers a spiritual hypothesis for the remedy of all evils. He proves in his own life that high ideals can be lived on earth in the flesh even in this so-called materialistic age. His silent life of dynamic force laid a firm foundation for ideal democracy, since it brought forth the truth that every man is fundamentally a part of the Divine Essence, and that in spite of all differences, dogmatic variation, and barriers of caste and nationality, man is a child of one indivisible, Absolute Being. The realization of this fact provides a solution for the social, political, and religious evils that rend the skies of the world with the lightning of dissension, and the thunder and havoc of war.

MYSTICISM AND IDEALISM

Sri Ramakrishna's mysticism proves that not only super-men may attain the highest but even a common man may unfold his divinity. His methods are entirely unlike those of most reformers. He does not strike; he does not denounce; but by gentle, unaggressive and unpretentious means, he clarifies the whole atmosphere of doubt and fear and fills the mind with positive thoughts. He is the veritable fulfilment of his own remarkable parable that if a piece of alum is dropped into muddy water, the mud settles in the bottom of the vessel and the water becomes clear. Intellectual scepticism and denunciation never produce anything constructive.

Sri Ramakrishna's practical idealism may be expressed in the words of the Nazarene, 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.' Also, 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?'

In spite of the beauty and appealing idealism of these utterances, man has found it difficult to put them into practice, owing to his fear of personal loss. Despite his intellectual achievements, man has formed the habit of looking on religion with suspicion, fearing that it may deprive him of earthly gain. For this reason, when we see the great ideals of Jesus of Nazareth, of Gautama Buddha and of the Aryan *R̥sis* manifested in the life of an exalted being, we believe that God and man are not separated by a vast expanse but are linked together through transcendental consciousness. We also see that God may become a living Reality in the life of man : that we may not only aspire to know Him but that we may live with Him, talk with Him, walk with Him, and be wholly guided by Him in every hour of the day. When we are able to perceive this, then alone are we convinced of the eternal value of Truth and God.

Again, may I call Sri Ramakrishna the Messiah of Spiritual Democracy. He never forgets that his *Iṣṭam* is the same in essence as the chosen Ideal of all other existing forms of thoughts and beliefs. We can readily understand his tolerance for India's multiple faiths, but it is more unusual that he should reach out to know and understand the basic principles of Christianity, Mohammedanism, and other religions of the world. Is not water known by many names? One calls it 'water', another '*vāri*', and a third '*aqua*', and a fourth '*pānī*', yet it remains ever the same substance. In like manner, the one Absolute Being-Intelligence-Bliss is invoked in different ways by some as God, by others as Allah, Hari or Brahman.

NO NEW SECT

The mission of Sri Ramakrishna was not to create another new sect in the already overcrowded religious atmosphere of India and of the world at large. His rare gift to mankind cannot be over-estimated. His mode of living, his simplicity of conduct, his naive, child-like parables, dynamic with the force of Truth, disarmed every one completely. To unveil the illumined life of Sri Ramakrishna is to venture to portray the invisible spirit. May his passion for humility and service,

sanctity and ecstasy of God, stimulate our minds so that they may reach out and attain the unattainable.

It is our great good fortune that we may, today, pay our humble tribute to the Saint of Dakshineswar, who has brought us together under this one roof. May his beneficent spirit shower upon us his divine love. May he help us to abolish all our differences and dissensions and fill our hearts with gladness and peace.*

* Adapted from the address at the international Parliament of Religions held on the occasion of the first birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna in 1937—vide *Religions of the World* (RMIC, 1938), Vol. II, pp. 583-89.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA : APOSTLE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY

Francis Younghusband

I have travelled all the way from England to attend the celebrations of the centenary of Sri Ramakrishna because of the very great and deep regard which I have had for many years for the great work of Sri Ramakrishna. I was first drawn to him, because he, more than any other man, expounded the great yet simple principle of not merely tolerating other religions, but deeply appreciating them and penetratingly entering into them. I speak as a Christian, and what profoundly moved me was the way in which that great Saint entered into our Christian religion, entered into the very simple life and teachings of Christ. In a way, we Christians were able to understand our own religion better by the way in which he had entered into it. I think you must all remember the story of how when Sri Ramakrishna was shown the picture of the Madonna and the Child, he was so deeply impressed—he was very sensitive by nature—that he forthwith went into a trance. He saw that picture and by contemplating it, he realized not only the Fatherhood of God but also the Motherhood of God. And then you know, so the story says, he lived all by himself for six months, devoting all his time and all his concentrated attention, with all the intensity of his feeling, to entering into the spirit of Christ. That deeply moves us, Christians, because we feel that here was a Hindu, and although he was a Hindu of Hindus, yet at that time he did become a Christian of Christians.

Not only has he affected the Christians, he has also affected the Mussulmans and the Buddhists. It is a very great and simple principle—here my view and your view also, I think, must be the same—that we of different religions should be brought together. We know from the long history of mankind that at the present time when there is so terrible an amount of disunion amongst us, it will be exceedingly good for men of spirit and men of religion to come together and meet together

and see in what way they can bring into the life of the world that spirit of which Sri Ramakrishna was the apostle.

INSPIRATION THROUGH DIALOGUE

Now what I gather as the most important thing is that when we do meet together on occasions like this we get mutual help. We met together in the same fashion in London last year at the Congress of Faiths. Each one of us retained his own religion and each one of us was convinced—at any rate I was—that his own religion was the best ; yet by meeting one another, by spiritual contact with one another, we got inspiration to be better Hindus, better Mussulmans, better Buddhists, better Christians. We, each of us, were forced down to the very fundamentals of our faiths and each of us was made to aspire to the very highest ideals of his faith. That is a very, very important point. All mankind is very greatly indebted to Sri Ramakrishna for having spread and intensified this doctrine and lived up to it in his own life. In this doctrine we come across one great principle which is a very simple principle too, by which the whole universe is governed, and that is of the ‘Unity in diversity.’ The diversity will always exist, and each one of us is different from the other, as each particle in the universe is different from the other. We have to maintain our own individuality, but we should also realize that deep down there is this fundamental unity which unites us all.

Well, now, I would like to say just a few words and that is this. Great men like the Saint Sri Ramakrishna come into this world from time to time, and we humbler individuals have to make the most of this great privilege of knowing their worth, knowing their life, and we have to look to them and try to enter into their spirit, but we must not stop there. We must not be always looking into the past. As one of the speakers in the first greetings said, we are made up by our past, the present and the future. While we look to the past, we should look to the present and to the future also. We must realize that the future will entirely be of our own making and we must determine that the world of the future should be the better for our living in it.

STUDIES ON SRI RAMAKRISHNA

While we like Sri Ramakrishna, we look also far into the future and hope that there shall be men greater than even Sri Ramakrishna produced in the future. That is the message that I have to give you.*

RAMAKRISHNA'S GOSPEL OF HARMONY

Batuk Nath Bhattacharya

THE life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna have a two-fold significance, as affecting the land of his birth and the world at large. But in both these aspects he shines forth by his Gospel of harmony. As an Indian saint, he stands for the synthesis of the ideas and principles of his predecessors. World history is viewed comprehensively by some modern thinkers as a continuous economic struggle between the haves and the have-nots, as a ceaseless class war against the vested interests—forces, numbers, and fight being the decisive factors. Swami Vivekananda gave a nobler aspect to the strife when he said, 'It is the privilege of every aristocracy to dig its own grave.' In the religious sphere at any rate, self-denial and sacrifice have been the motives of liberalization rather than compulsion. And the ethos of every race has produced timely personalities who by their noble suffering and all-embracing love turned exclusive cults and expensive rituals into simpler forms available to larger and yet larger sections of the people. The religion of the *New Testament* replacing sacrifices by faith and penitence, and stern law by free grace has been cited as an instance.

BROADENING RELIGIONS

India also has witnessed the same process of broadening and popularization of religion and its observances. The emphasis in Vedic religion is on *Śrauta-karma*, i.e. on sacrifices, expensive, elaborate, various, and on a social structure of the privileged three *varṇas*. Buddhism and Jainism were early manifestations of a natural reaction. The cults of the *Smṛtis* and *Purāṇas* which were followed were the outcome of the forces of conservation and adaptation. But the antique social order was largely

modified and changed by the absorption of the aborigines and non-Aryan tribes under genealogical fictions and legends. New gods and new forms of worship were evolved while preserving an appearance of continuity with the past. The last supreme effort to revive and strengthen the Vedic religion and social order was made by Kumārila and Śaṅkara—the two granite pillars of Hindu faith. But the growing menace of foreign invasion and the varied aspirations of a vast mixed population before long turned their projects into a mere cry of the heart and an unrealized dream. Our social history since the first millennium is a record of the rise of successive religious teachers—chiefly Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite—who by their powerful ministry have helped to bring the essentials of faith and spiritual endeavour to the hearts and lives of the masses and thus to fulfil the ultimate destiny of Hinduism which is the leavening of the entire population of India. These devout God-intoxicated souls under the urge of a generous love of their own kind dedicated themselves to the noble work of spreading the light and joy of true spirituality over the widest commonalty. Vallabhācārya declared *puṣṭi* or grace to be the way of salvation. Śrī Caitanya held devotion to the Lord Kṛṣṇa to be the purifier of every kind of sin and uncleanness, and in his overflowing love for man disregarded the distinctions of caste and with open arms embraced men of other faiths. And Śrī Rāmānuja proclaimed that *prapatti* (*śaraṇāgati*) i.e. self-surrender to the Lord as the sole refuge is the privilege of all, high and low, regenerate and unregenerate alike. Rāmānanda held initiation as the mighty lever which raised even the untouchables and the degraded to an equal footing with Brahmins. Nāmadeva, the devotee of Viṭṭhaladeva of Pandharpura, upheld pure theism. In one of his *bhajans* he sang :

‘ The pitcher is filled and the water brought to bathe the god.
There were forty-two hundreds of thousands of animals in it.
There was Viṭṭhala already in them, whom shall I bathe ?’

Tukaram was an outspoken opponent of ‘ Brahminolatry ’. He says in one of his utterances : ‘ He who calls himself a Brahmin

and goes on in his usual way should not be spoken to and is a buffoon.'

ADVENT OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

It is an irony of fate that every saint and reformer ends by founding a new sect and the spirit of intolerance which he seeks to kill is quickened into new life by the jealous adherence to his own doctrines. And so India had need of a prophet to trumpet forth the basic truth of all religions and the spirit of largest tolerance as essential to peace on earth and goodwill among men. It was destined for Sri Ramakrishna to glimpse this great need of India which was also the need of the world. He came to fulfil and not to destroy. Learning did not unfold her ample page to his eyes and science and philosophy were to him a sealed book. In undated antiquity the Vedic seers had looked into the heart of Reality and bodied forth their inspired experiences in the Upaniṣads. To the Paramahansa as their true scion came the vision of the highest Unity through the traditional unwritten wisdom that passes current among Indian monks and *sādhus*—an unsunned, unsuspected treasure which the seekers of knowledge have not yet explored or appraised. Golden aphorisms, gems of apologues that dart light into the mystery of human nature, rules of behaviour and forms of greeting and benediction that make the whole world kin—these are the secrets of their power over men. The essence of sacred books permeates their talks, the conclusions of philosophy are imbedded in their familiar maxims together with the truths of mystic experience. Of this rich stream Sri Ramakrishna had drunk deep and hence the enthralling quality of his own discourses aptly called the *Kathāmṛta*—the Elixir of sayings.

TEACHINGS OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

But still greater is the value and significance of his teachings to humanity. For the acceptance of this message the world had been prepared by history, sociology, and comparative ethics and religion. All these have joined to discount racial pride and arrogance and to prove the sameness of human nature irrespective of age, clime, and race. Every spin of the

globe brings us to a clearer perception of the truth that our differences are superficial but our likeness is essential. Comparison and analysis reveal the basic oneness of the race. The mists are rolling away and we see before us under the white light of Truth the limbs and organs, powers and faculties of this marvellous handiwork of the Creator—the ends of whose being reach out to the plant, the bird, the ape, the brute, and the angel, who is a pilgrim between birth and death, who is rooted to his small plot of land and forgets himself in a moment and again in thought wanders through eternity and to the limits of space; who is of the earth, earthly and again of heaven, heavenly; who is weaker than a worm, minuter than a grain of sand and yet by his Reason and Knowledge comprehends the whole Universe and looks into the very thoughts and purposes of the All-wise and All-powerful Maker.

AWARENESS OF TRUTH

The sacred books of all ages in the East and in the West have sought to keep man conscious of this truth. The aim of civilization is to achieve unity in the midst of diversity. For, by nature, men are like the unnumbered grains of sand on the seashore, each discrete and separate from the rest. Each follows his own whims and impulses, seeks his own safety and interest. Social institutions tend to remove this isolation of man from man. The family, the clan, the tribe, the community, the nation—each step in this series points to a larger association. Parties and schools of thought, religion and state all promote the work of unification. The most potent of these instruments of unification, however, is religion which rises above racial prejudices and communal narrowness and tends to gather all into a brotherhood by stimulating enthusiasm for some sublime ideal.

FUNCTION OF RELIGION

But when we speak of religion and its function, by the peculiar cast of our minds, we think of the several historic religions and the parts they have played in the evolution of the races of men. And we picture to ourselves rivalry and con-

fight among the faiths like the struggle for existence in the animal world. And the same law seems to rule the spiritual world as the sphere of war and politics and commerce—only conversion and compulsion instead of conquest and annexation. Such at any rate is the outlook of the two great proselytizing religions of the present day—Mohammedanism and Christianity. Each cherishes the dream of being one day the Church Catholic, of claiming the allegiance of all mankind and guiding and moulding their spiritual interests and aspirations. But the religions of a still older date—Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are without this aggressive energy and no longer strain after this world-vision. Nevertheless, each claims to be the one true path leading to the highest spiritual well-being. And thus the hubbub grows—the discord of slogans and the clash of dogmas and in the midst of it, the still sad music of True Religion grows faint. And, distracted by the rank foliage, mankind misses the balm that heals the sores of the spirit and the fruit that gives life.

GOSPAL OF HARMONY

To a world sick of this strife of faiths, Sri Ramakrishna brought his Gospel of Harmony—a reiteration of the ancient Hindu wisdom—that the paths men follow are numberless but their goal, the ultimate principle in which they end and merge is the same even as the rivers of the earth discharge themselves in the boundless ocean. Herein he was truly the son of the Great Mother that he worshipped. No mother even delights in the fights of her children. And the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna if laid to heart in the right spirit will yet knit into a brotherhood men of diverse sects and religions, however formidable the barriers that sever them now. The message of the Paramahansa is the message of India—India which in her palmy days had dispensed to the countries of Asia not merely food for the body but also out of the overflowing joy and light in her soul the living bread for the spirit. She sent her sons across her borders not in armed legions but as ochre-clad missionaries of faith to preach to the peoples the sanctity of all life, the mystery of being, and the supreme value of love, peace, and goodness.

AN INCARNATION

Is Sri Ramakrishna an *Avatāra* ? To believers and unbelievers alike it is a silly question. To the former it admits of no doubt. To the modern mind it is hardly worth serious attention. The Hindu not lost to the traditional mentality of his race feels no surprise to learn that the Lord hath once again manifested Himself in His living temple. To him the history of his own land, nay of the whole world, is spanned by the shining figures in whom Boundless Grace has chosen to reveal Himself from age to age to mitigate the woes and to redeem the souls of His creatures. And the series will continue till the last sinner is saved and the last worm attains divinity. To him the world-drama is a progressive revelation and countless are the incarnations of God.

To a layman likely to be befogged by the subtleties of the schoolmen, the strongest proof of the Incarnation is the living miracle that the Man was. For

What is the course of life
Of mortal men on the earth ?
Most men eddy about
Here and there—eat and drink,
Chatter and love, and hate,
Gather and squander, are raised
Aloft and hurl'd in the dust,
Striving blindly, achieving
Nothing ; and then they die,
Perish—and no one asks
Who or what they have been
More than he asks what waves
In the moonlit solitudes mild
Of the boundless Ocean, have swell'd,
Foam'd for a moment, and gone.

A searching self-analyst like Marcus Aurelius may well ask :

‘ Whose soul do I properly possess ? A child’s or a youth’s ?
A woman’s ? Or a tyrant’s ? Some brute’s or some wild beast’s ? ’
And the muddy vesture of decay may well make him exclaim :
‘ How base and putrid every common matter is ! Water and

dust and, from the mixture of these, bones, and all that loathsome stuff that our bodies do consist of; so subject to be infected and corrupted.'

BEATIFIC TRANCE

What a contrast to this life of the multitude was the beatific trance in which the Paramahansa passed his days on earth! Though in the flesh, he with his every breath hungered and thirsted for God and never had a doubt of the reality of his Divine Mother Whom he worshipped with such passionate adoration, even more than he had of his own existence. Like the flame of the candle that in still air steadily rises skyward, like the magnetic needle that unfailingly turns towards the Pole, his soul ever pointed Heavenward. Rank and power, love and wealth, after which the world runs had lost all relish for him and were replaced by poignant yearnings, visions, raptures and exaltations that had their source in the unapparent Reality. No wonder the voice of scepticism was silenced, and unbelief shamed in his presence. His teachings harmonized while upholding the two imperishable ideals of life—the domestic and the ascetic—which have their roots deep down in human nature. A householder to outward view, he was yet the prince of ascetics—*Yatirāja*—at heart. And it is no mere coincidence that his blessed name that is on the lips of millions today joins the two divine persons who vitally influence life and character in Hinduism more than any other of the numerous gods that make up the Hindu pantheon—Rāma the ideal son, brother, husband and father, and Kṛṣṇa who has been described by Swami Vivekananda as 'the great illustration of non-attachment'.*

*Adapted from an address at the international Parliament of Religions held on the occasion of the first birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna in 1937—vide *Religions of the World* (RMIC, 1938), Vol. II, pp. 515-26.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM

Gualtherus H. Mees

IT is one of the supreme achievements of Sri Ramakrishna that he opened the eyes of the nineteenth and twentieth century world to the deep significance of religious symbolism and that he demonstrated that symbols are not mere empty forms, but partake of divine life in all its fullness. Symbols and, in particular, religious symbols, are not mere objective pictures, but are highly subjective in that they form the most sacred and intimate part of our being. In them we live and move, and have our being, and in truth they hold more reality—if I may use this expression—than we do ourselves in our surface consciousness.

NEW RELIGION

When a new religion is born, that is, when a renewed impulse comes from the depths of the soul to the surface of mind, the divinity of form, the life in form, and the significance of this life are again realized. And as a result, a revolution takes place in the mental and social life of the people. When a religion is getting old and stale, its forms lose their significance. They seem to have lost their life. Gods become mere images. Rituals become mere mechanical usage. Not only is the meaning lost, but the soul seems to have become dissociated and flown away. The life of the symbol has again retired to the deepest recesses of mind, and become so secret that it is not even known to exist, and the form of the symbol has become commonplace.

ADVENT OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

When Sri Ramakrishna came on the religious stage in India, religion had become very much like that. The Mother Kālī had become a mere image to the greater part of the people, a form which was mechanically served, or for the most not understood. The same was true as regards other deities. But the great Saint of Dakshineswar could not be satisfied with mere lip-worship, with mere play with formula and ritual. His soul thirsted for

realization. Was the Mother Kālī a reality, was She God indeed ? Or was She a mere form-relic of the past without significance ? Years passed in a most intensive striving for realization. The depth of desire for truth, the depth of suffering because of the lack of knowledge, we can hardly understand. Sri Ramakrishna was like a drowning man, to whom a breath of air was the one and only necessity. He was one of the few true *bhaktas*. Nārada says that true *bhakti* is the feeling of the deepest misery when God is temporarily lost. Ramakrishna had really known God from the very beginning, for if this had not been the case, he would not have been able to experience this infinitely deep suffering and longing for realization.

Everybody who is searching for something, knows what he is searching for, otherwise he would not search. Similarly, every religious seeker really knows God, otherwise he would not trouble to seek God. But he desires to bring God near. From the distance of the objective he wants to bring Him to the nearness of the subjective. From the depths of the unconscious he wants to bring Him to the surface of the conscious. The door between the infinitely great world of the unconscious and the little world of the conscious requires to be opened, so that at any time life may pass to and fro. When I use the word unconscious I mean it in the sense of the latest school of psychology. It is everything which is not conscious in us at the moment and which is yet our psychological heritage. It is not quite correct to say it includes the superconscious as well as the subconscious, unless we remember that the superconscious may be conscious as well as unconscious.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SYMBOLISM

Few people as yet realize the supreme significance of symbolism in their life. They do not realize that even the words we speak are symbols for inner states. Language is a process of symbolism. Certain simple symbols are easy to learn. That the word 'hunger' for instance is a name or sound-symbol for an empty and craving state of the stomach, everybody will understand. But the symbols for spiritual hunger and spiritual appeasement are very difficult to understand. Man became

what he is through language which enabled him to talk about his varied experiences with his fellows. But a great deal of misunderstanding in history and at the present day has arisen through language. I do not mean through ignorance of the various languages of the nations, but through lack of contact by means of the underlying and universal language of the collective symbols.

It is clear that there are symbols connected with all our senses. There are sound symbols, visual symbols, olfactory symbols, gustatory symbols, and touch symbols. Our 'feelings' are rendered in the language of touch or taste. It is interesting that symbols are always connected with the senses. Even things that are far above the senses and beyond contact with the senses are expressed and symbolized by sense symbols, simply because there is no alternative. We think in symbols, we act in symbols, we live in symbols, we learn in symbols.

* * *

It is said that this supreme symbol was known to many peoples. The Egyptians held that the secret name of *Rā*, the *Sun-god*, was *Ammon*. Later, it became a commonplace as *Ammon-Rā*, just as the sacred word of the Hindus is now on the lips of many without being understood. In Syria the word '*Amen*' was used. At first it was uttered at the beginning and at the end of prayers. Christians still use it and put it at the end of a prayer, where it is thought to mean: 'So be it'. Surely it means something like 'so be it!' in the deepest sense of supreme creative energy. In the Gospels and in other scriptures we read that 'in the beginning was the Word!'

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PSYCHIC STOREHOUSE

The 'Collective Unconscious' is the great psychic storehouse of humanity. All human experience is laid down in it, from the very beginning of the human race. It is our heritage, and much of it is at our command. Our individual unconscious lives and moves in this collective unconscious, just as our conscious self lives and moves in conscious contact with others in society. If

we read books of Eastern psychology, we are struck by the number of gods and demons that are mentioned. Most interesting is, for instance, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, so ably edited by Dr Evans-Wentz. The pleasant and wrathful deities represent different mental states. Modern psychology takes those psychological entities very seriously. In some abnormal cases it happens that a human personality becomes subverted, his conscious becomes unconscious, and a part of his unconscious takes conscious control. In the East one would say: Such a man has become possessed by a devil. In the West he is nowadays not exorcised by a priest, but dealt with by the psycho-analyst. Our so-called 'enlightened age,' which has now luckily come to an end because scientists have begun to realize they hardly know anything yet, had neglected and ignored all these powers in our unconscious. When no explanation can be found it is always easiest to deny things. This ostrich policy in science is now dying out.

DEITIES OF THE SUPERCONSCIOUS

The deities of the superconscious, as well as the devils of the subconscious, are collective symbols, built up by many generations of God-worshippers and devil-fearers. Great persons, teachers, and prophets became such living symbols in the Collective Unconscious. They are, of course, not a product of the human mind, they have life and soul of their own. They are unseen personalities moving in the collective unconscious world, and appearing to the conscious personality in messages from the Unseen—in dreams and visions.

The Divine Mother appears to persons all over the world, and has appeared in all ages. Her form and special attributes may vary according to the religion and the period in which the beholder lives, yet She is the same Divine power in the soul of all people and in the heart of humanity. The same applies to the other great deities. In the dreams and visions which grant us a glimpse into the deepest layers of our being, where form ceases to be, lie the great realities in symbolic form, realities 'more real' than the fleeting show of 'real life'. The deeper we dig into the soul, the more universal, the more real, the

substance which we find. All details of the individual lives, the little fames, glories, vanities, and beauties, will all pass away but the great deities in the very bottom of the soul will not pass away, for they are eternal. Civilizations may come up and go down, ages may pass, and everything on the face of the earth may be changed, yet man will always again worship the Mother Goddess, he will always again bow to the Divine Teacher in the deepest recess of his heart. To the deities in the soul of man, because they are great realities, will eventually always be the victory, though the screen of night is sure to hide the light from time to time. The dark forces in the unconscious—death, ignorance, and *adharma*—will masquerade each time in the history of the world as well as in the life of the individual, in a different form, but the light at the centre of the universe, that is, in man's heart, will always be one and the same, bound to pierce its blessing rays from time to time through the gloom. In the words of the *Gītā*: 'Whenever *adharma* prevails and *dharma* declines, then I manifest myself in a human form to re-establish *dharma* and to destroy evil'. Saints like Sri Ramakrishna come on the crest of the Divine wave, which is bound to come from time to time, welling up out of the depths of the soul of mankind.

LESSER DEITIES

The importance of the lesser deities and of the demons that appear to our inner vision must not be overrated. The great mystics as well as the students of psychology warn against this. We must not be swept off our feet by them, but realize that we, as individual souls with the grace of God, are masters of our fate and of our ultimate goal. In the course of time nothing can hinder our progress without our will. If we strive towards the very highest we must aim to be free both of the entities of our subconscious and of the beings in the superconscious. The latter may seem strange. At the end of the third book of Patañjali we read that response to the overtures of Divine shapes which appear to us in meditation, is a sure means of preventing us from attaining the highest spiritual goal.

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ALL RELIGIONS ARE ONE

Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated that all religions are fundamentally one. They are like so many roads leading to the same—one-goal. They may err in some minor points of theology or in some of their methods of achievement, but in their basis they are one. Psychology has come to the same conclusion, in the first place, not by way of personal realization, but by comparative studies and by the ordinary methods of science. The study of the collective unconscious proves the unity of religious experience beyond any doubt. The same laws apply to the mind and the heart of the European or the Asiatic, and what is more, the same laws apply to his soul. Deep down in the soul there is no East or West, there is only humanity. Deep down in the soul the quarrels of the religions as to their supremacy cease. There is only truth. This does not mean, of course, that there ought to be only one religion. The various religions of the world supply various psychological needs. We cannot require all people to believe the same things and to act in the same manner, as we can want them to eat the same things and to wear the same dress. Unity is a blessing, uniformity may be a curse.

UNITY OF SPIRIT

Another of the great achievements of Sri Ramakrishna is that he was a herald of the unity of spirit and matter. The last century was the close of a period of dualism. Materialism and spiritualism fought for supremacy. It was difficult to be at one and the same time a materialist and a believer in spirit. Sri Ramakrishna realized that spirit and matter are one. It is even wrong to mention two names, two words ! Matter is the expression of spirit, is a symbol of spirit, nay, more, is spirit.

We are living now in a period in which science is once again dealing with religious experiences without cutting them up into pieces. Now psychological science is no more engaged in spiritual vivisection, but serving its purpose by explanation and solution of psychological knots. Sixty years before modern science in its latest achievements in the persons of physicists like Eddington and Jeans, and psychologists like Jung and Maeder

signed the peace treaty between religion and science, Ramakrishna Paramahansa proclaimed to the world their essential unity.

Sometimes it is enlightening to study the root of symbols, to find the origin of the meaning of words. For instance the word matter. What does it mean? It means materia, the Latin word for matter, derived from mater, mother. Matter is the mother. Matter-energy is a symbol of the Mother Goddess. In ancient Christianity the Holy Ghost was synonymous with the Mother. The Holy Ghost or spirit was the divine creative energy as embodied in matter. Its symbol was a dove. It was something like Sakti. And instead of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost there was often mentioned the Father, the Mother, and the Son, not unlike Śaivism. Science seems to have given up the causalistic view of the universe. By giving up determinism it has opened the door to the indeterminism of spiritual phenomena. By doing this, science has entered on a new era. The period of materialism is finished, at least as a philosophy.

In any case, more than fifty years before science began to confirm such views tentatively, Ramakrishna realized these truths in his own being and gave them to the world. He is a great prophet who ushered in the new age some time before the doctrines and the structures of the age of duality began to give way and break down.

Ramakrishna himself is a symbol—a symbol of such richness and depth that he has to be realized to be understood. No man can bring him to us. He himself only can make us know him. May his words go home to the hearts of the men and women of today, may his example be followed, may his love inspire, may his realizations cause realization, and may his message go all over the world, for the good of many ! So be it. *

* Adapted from an address at the international Parliament of Religions held on the occasion of the first birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna in 1937—vide *Religions of the World* (RMIC, 1938), Vol. II, pp. 560-75.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: A STUDY IN SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Mahendranath Sircar

SERIOUS mistakes are committed in our effort to understand Sri Ramakrishna and his teachings in terms of intellect and to draw intellectual philosophy out of his sayings. It has been indeed the practice of ages to thrust an intellectual construction upon the sayings of the great spiritual teachers, like Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, Mahomet, and Christ, but in this attempt the dignity of their lives and the sublimity of their teachings have not been clearly realized. Intellect is an inefficient organ to understand spiritual truths. Intellect has its forms, and generally human mind finds a relief when it can put the teachings of a great teacher under a construction, and it is why, that of matters spiritual, there emerge so many constructions, often varied and diverse, when their profound realizations of spirit are understood by intellect. The human intellect works under limitation, and there rises a great demand in us to get beyond the limitations to enjoy the movement of life and consciousness in its unfettered freedom and wideness of expression.

LIMITATIONS OF INTELLECT

Spiritual life is still shrouded in mystery, because man has not still outgrown his conceptual habits of thoughts and cannot read the intimations of spirit independently of thought. The finer ascents of the soul are not accessible to intellect; intellect even here schematizes and makes forms, but the movement of life in its radiance and fragrance is still missed. Kant has usefully pointed out the limitations of intellect, but he has not gone far beyond the moral values which are true in the realm of will. The finer urge of spirit is not known to Kant. It goes beyond the movement of will or reason. The defect in Kant becomes glaring in the incompatibility between moral life and happiness, and to make up this the hypothesis of God is introduced. Spiritual life outgrows the implications of moral thought and

consciousness and unless we are bold enough to soar beyond, it remains a closed chapter to us. To get a clue to the spiritual mysteries and truths in the movements of thoughts will always end in dismal failure. Spirituality has its own expression and movement, it may inspire our being—intellectual, moral, and aesthetic—but it is not solely confined to them; and its true expression and law cannot be discovered in them. This has been the fundamental teaching of the great spiritual masters.

AN APPEAL AND INSPIRATION

Sri Ramakrishna is an appeal and inspiration, he makes a unique start and approach. His approach is completely spiritual. His uniqueness lies here. He has this advantage in his nature and being that he can go at once beyond the mazes and intricacies of thought and start with a spiritual yearning which appears to intellectual men as wild phantasy but which can wake up and move the psychic being in man, disclosing supramental truths beyond the reach of intellect and thought. Ramakrishna is often, therefore, a puzzle to many who want to find logical consistency in place of spiritual felicity in his teachings.

The greatness of Ramakrishna lies in this that he could at once feel the fine dynamism of spirit not known to Kant, functioning through the psychic and cosmic forces. His *sādhana* consists in completely removing consciousness from the scaffoldings of vital and mental life and opening it to the supramental fineness and transcendental reaches. Ramakrishna discovers the natural gravitation of life to spirit. The beauty of mystic life lies in discovering the thread of connection that runs through the heart of existence. It becomes quite easy when this subtle thread of life is realized and its functioning definitely understood through all the grades of existence. The spiritual flame is quite ablaze in the Mystic and in it the doubts of an intellectual mind are vanished. It is this fine spiritual appeal that makes Sri Ramakrishna's life at once an attraction and a wonder.

TĀNTRIC DISCIPLINE

To all the world Sri Ramakrishna is known to have been a worshipper of Mother-spirit on the basis and on the lines of

the Tantras. Doubts are even today entertained by the puritans about the spiritual efficacy of the Tāntric form of worship and discipline. And it is natural, for the Tantras are so vast in their literatures and so diverse in their disciplines and practices that it is not unnatural to entertain a doubt about their efficiency and efficacy as helpful spiritual guides. The truth is that few can approach the disciplines who have not the finest spiritual aspiration and psychic opening. The Tāntric discipline takes its start in this psychic dynamism of our being and unless the psychic being could be brought to the front nobody could with advantage follow the Tāntric path and envisage its complete fulfilment. In the complex composition of man the vital and the mental work along with the psychic and the spiritual, and in most people the vital being, the vital desires, and the vital feelings are very strong. They rush up to the front when a little pressure descends down into the man from his finer being and nature. In such circumstances the intervention of the psychic is helpful and unless the psychic being be active, nature cannot open completely and make an offering of it to the divine. The value of mystical approach lies in submitting all the parts of our being to the influence of spirit. Mysticism makes all the parts of our being elastic and responsive, and unless the grossness of the lower part can be eliminated the higher forces cannot work with advantage, and occupy with full force our complete being and move it with spiritual harmony.

HARMONY OF VITAL AND MENTAL BEING

Deep-laid harmony in vital and mental being can be the condition of success in spiritual life. But where the aspiration is deep rising from the total self it naturally moves the whole being in harmony. It starts radiant psychic forces which introduce almost a Divine Peace and a Blessed beatitude. Sri Ramakrishna had to his advantage the intense aspiration for the Divine. He is the personification of this aspiration. It is this God-ward bent and flight of his being that secures for him fine psychic opening and the move of psychic forces. The psychic luminosity can trace the spiritual being in man and its direct connection with the Divine life that saturates the whole

existence with its benign peace. In the Upaniṣads and in the *Yoga Darśana* emphasis has been laid on concentration on the heartcave as spiritually the most sensitive spot in our being. When the concentration on this centre becomes continuous, a fine current of spiritual force is generated which presses upwards and unites the vital knots of our being allowing the cosmic will and consciousness to play in us. This is the path to the sacred and secret wisdom. It is fully developed in the Tantras. It opens out vast spiritual possibilities and gives immediate awareness and direct vision. It often appears as an arduous task, for our consciousness is centred in the tide of events and gets entangled in the stream of movements. It takes long to rise to that height when it stands freed from all the intricacies of life.

GOSPEL OF FREEDOM

Vedanta gives the gospel of freedom, and a philosophic understanding of it. But the Tantras show the way to attain it not by a philosophic dissertation but by a spiritual aspiration and opening. In one way it is more appealing, for it acquaints us with the psychic framework of our being and the subtle knots which impress upon us the sense of individuality and which disappear like a mist before the sun-rise when the cosmic vibrations start in us and direct us from the limited to the wide opening of consciousness initiating radiant feelings, luminous thoughts, and vaster knowledge.

The adept passes through a delightful procession of experiences and feelings too deep for words. Such penetration lays bare to us the immanental immensity of the Divine life through the orders of existence and strikes us with its sublimities, dignities, and beauties at every point of its expression. These ideal experiences are not the only things that attract us while on the path. They are indeed pleasing and attractive but the greatest attraction which almost becomes spontaneous after some time is the realization of the vastness and wideness of our being, its transparency and luminosity. A point may be reached in the realization when we overcome the concentration of our being to a certain area with its play in impulses and feelings

and may rise to the height of cosmic consciousness embracing the totality of existence, gross and subtle, and at the same time, far exceeding it in its reaches. Few can stand in equilibrium at this stage for it means a high pressure on the psychic being and almost a complete inhibition of a normal functioning of the faculties and a stupendous silence.

NATURE OF SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Spiritual consciousness is most interesting, arresting, and educative because it gives more than what ordinary intellect can conceive. Its wisdom is beyond all imagination. Its possibilities are infinite. Generally men seek spiritual life because of the inherent demand of a finer and wider existence and the pressure of this demand does not stop unless the widest reach of being is attained where a sense of harmony prevails along with supreme puissance. There is a tendency in us to pass into silence in the dark night of the soul, into that height of consciousness which is cut off from our limited vision. In spiritual life no possibility is thought higher than this for it releases us from the entanglements of life and affords a clear realization of consciousness freed from all limitations.

Some find access into this height of existence and become dead silent to all the concerns of life and pass into the calm. Others are there who, after the great consummation, make a re-orientation of life, to start a new cycle in thought and expression. They can see the Divine purpose in life, the beauty of the illuminated life, its holiness, and its majesty. They concentrate themselves to work out the Divine plan in life and defeat the forces of darkness and ignorance which stifle the Divine unfolding, the sharing of the Divine joy of life. The life-lessons of the great spiritual teachers are the secret message of this Divine solicitude; for, the original limitation of creation is to be set aside, if life is to be divinized. And the sacrifice of the great spiritual teachers of their lives for the uplift of mankind exhibits that there is in the Divine life a constant effort to eliminate the inertia and stir life in such a way as can best imbibe the Divine freshness into it and make the Divine life manifested in Earth consciousness.

STUDIES ON SRI RAMAKRISHNA

INNER TEMPLE OF SILENCE

This task is really reserved for a few elects. Many make adventures in spiritual life and find in the loneliness of contemplation the higher and loftier ranges of being and consciousness open unto them; the delight and the joyousness become so absorbing that they do not allow them to be disturbed in their silence and become completely hidden in the mood of thought. They become for ever buried in the inner temple of silence.

There are a few indeed, who are privileged enough to enter into the vortex of life to elevate humanity and to scatter the Divine peace and the Divine aroma of life by radiating a spiritual current from them. They scatter light, joy, peace, and power. They descend from the tower of silence to meet a definite problem in a particular epoch of civilization.

There is great joy and relief in individual redemption. There is greater blessedness in the liberation of the collective humanity. This is the Divine plan. With the growth of spiritual susceptibilities, the plan becomes evident, for the law of spiritual affinity consciously or unconsciously helps the uplift of the whole humanity whenever the earth-conditions become such as can react to the ingress of spiritual force. The lives of the great Masters in spirituality are interesting studies illustrating the great spiritual truth that humanity through its pangs, trials, and sufferings gets occasional glimpses into the Divine solicitude for its finer spiritual evolution—the God appears also as a struggling God against the forces of darkness and in the struggle the most human side of His nature is manifested. The first one appeals by the depth of wisdom, the second one by the moving picture of the struggle of God against the enveloping darkness and ignorance and there lies the hope of the whole humanity. Humanity need only to understand the sublimity of this conception to feel its spiritual potentiality and attractiveness and realize the beauty of struggle for instilling the Divine aroma of life. The first movement in spiritual life may be to taste the blessed privilege of freedom and unbounded expression of being, the second movement in spirit is the expression of Divine love and sacrifice for the suffering humanity.

SPIRITUALITY AN ACTIVE FORCE

Spirituality is an active force in life which is more than of academical interest, because it is the most effectively shaping force which consciously or unconsciously guides us in cosmic affairs. It brings down higher inspiration and fills the earth-consciousness with them. A spiritual force takes us unawares but spreads its influence most gently but surely. This accounts for the tremendous influence which a spiritual genius imparts during his life time. He often energizes and guides the thoughts of generations to come. What is more, he creates a psychic atmosphere which unconsciously helps the fine formation of spirituality. The greatest redeeming feature of a spiritual genius is that he unconsciously directs the thought-formations of ages to come. However original people may think themselves, their thoughts are indeed comments upon the sayings and expressions of spiritual geniuses. We need eyes to see and receptivity to feel their influence. And it is indeed amazing that they do more by their personal influence than by their teaching. Because they are centres which can directly visualize the Divine order of things and feel inspired to help humanity. The Divine influence works through them directly. They can create a spiritually charged area. The influence of a Buddha, a Kṛṣṇa, a Mahomet, and a Christ has been unmistakably and immeasurably greater than the influence of a Kant, or a Fichte, because they are living in constant touch not with the fringe but with the very centre of cosmic consciousness.

Indeed, because of the difference in the responsiveness of the parts of being, the spiritual expression in the lives of the great teachers has not been uniform. The concrete spiritual life, therefore, exhibits apparent differences. They are not really differences, they are matters of accents and emphasis. Love, knowledge, compassion, and power are the inestimable privileges of the Divine life, and when the chords of being are vibrated, they become the natural possessions of the seeker.

PHILOSOPHY AND SPIRITUALITY

In India intellectual philosophy has not been separated from spiritual philosophy. The great teachers of thought have been

the great teachers of spirituality. Philosophy, rightly understood, is the search and the discovery of spirit. There is a great demand in man to achieve immediate awareness and feel directly the movement of spirit. We can hardly, therefore, confine ourselves to dialectics of thought. The divergence that is felt between philosophy and life in the West is not felt in India. The great teachers do not only illumine thought, they also inspire life. In the texture of our being, thought and life are set together and in the unfoldment they help each other for thought is the reflection of life. Whenever thought has been cut off from the inspiration of life it suffers in elasticity. Even where the men of spiritual genius have not given out a systematic thought, they have influenced life and started finer oscillations of being which help direct and immediate realization. A spiritual force is a tremendous influence upon life and helps its unfoldment in such a way as can in the final reach vouchsafe the transcendental truth. It is this silent influence of the soul and the Divine magnetism that differentiate the truly spiritual genius from the leaders of thought. The passionate zeal of the men of thought often stops with system-construction but more often the forces which really give power and influence to spiritual genius remain inactive in them. It is this mysterious influence of their personality which explains the initiation of new life current which spiritual men usher in. They have the advantage of seeing the Divine forces at work through the different layers of existence and they can rise so high and grow so much spiritually sensitive as to be able to catch the spiritual currents that emit from the centre and be ultimately identical with it. This is their special privilege by their special fitness. Spiritual geniuses have, therefore, before them a living influence which in many cases escapes the notice of great thinkers, for they cannot rise above the logical mind to invite the kindly way of light that does not deceive. They not only receive the Divine forces but they transmit the Divine influence through human society. Sri Ramakrishna scatters such a silent influence.

INSPIRATION OF NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

But where and to what end ? He is the forerunner and inspirer

of a new consciousness that has become imperatively necessary today for the fostering of a new understanding, the initiation of a spiritual force, the awakening of a wide catholicity in spirit which could see the beauty of every faith and realize its spiritual potentiality. To Ramakrishna there has been only one gospel of faith. Faith is the stirring of the integral consciousness to realize the commonalty of spirit in its widest extension and the deepest intensity. It is the impelling force to rise above all narrow considerations of life and to invite life in its redeeming grace and uplifting influence. Faith is a moving power and in an age when the forces of different civilizations are meeting one another, an understanding and inspiration of the kind that Ramakrishna left for us is greatly helpful to the cementing up of the differences that divide us and to the realization of an integral divinity in integral humanity. Humanity's finest aspirations and noblest hopes have been almost identical. It has been left to Sri Ramakrishna to go through the whole orbit and circuit of spiritual life, not in its abstract philosophy but in its concrete making up and declare that the spiritual composition of our being is identical. The differences in creeds are more superficial than real and they rise from the traditional acceptances and timidity of our nature and its refusal to go through the whole range of life and its experience.

EXPRESSION OF SPIRITUALITY

Spiritual demand and its concrete expression in every age have not been the same, for the formative forces in the epochs of civilization have been different—each age has its special spiritual necessity and time-force has its unique individuality. Though the Truths of the spirit are widely universal, still every one of them does not get identical expression all the time, for in the concrete life, all of them cannot be equally active. And if one follows the evolution of spiritual ideas through the advent of great teachers, the truth stands revealed that spiritual ideas find progressively effective expression through the course of civilization, for whatever the spirit may be in its transcendence, it has varied phases of expressions. Sri Ramakrishna represents the force of spiritual harmonization by recognizing that the

living faiths have the same aspiration and the same objective—the active union with God. He seems to have stressed the universal element in spiritual life by freeing faiths from their creeds which instead of providing us with true spiritual fervour in its widest commonalty introduces mental constructions which can only touch the fringe of spiritual life, but cannot enter into its central reality. The note of division becomes prominent when the spirituality is sought to be understood, but not actually felt, or lived. Spirit is the essence of our being and in its ascent through the wider stretches of consciousness, it can realize its own play, its notes and its vaster amplitudes, for spiritual life not only impresses us with a wider mental horizon, but actually passes beyond the mentalized consciousness and acquaints us with our potential divinity. Nay, in all forms of spirituality, the limitations of our mental being are transcended. The touch of spirit gives us cosmic feelings, cosmic intuitions, and cosmic movement. Spirituality is not a study of ordinary psychology and many confusions and conflicts in spiritual life can be set aside, if the spiritual reactions can be studied in themselves without the imposition of the mental laws upon them. Ramakrishna is a study in the fine dynamism of spirit energizing the mental and the vital life without sharing their limitations.

TRUTHS OF THE CHURCH ETERNAL

Spiritual truths lie often dormant in our consciousness and the fellowship with teachers impresses upon us the value and the presentation of a particular expression. Naturally when a dispensation is established, attention is narrowed down to the person and his memory but not the influence that he generates and the teachings that he imparts. The Church Universal is lost in the master individual. It is indeed difficult to separate the teaching from the medium through which the truth becomes dynamic, but unless we are awake to truths which are more actively fruitful in enlarging our consciousness and in widening our being, the fondness and adoration to the memory of a master has the effect of gradually directing our energies into questionable channels. Churches in the East and the West have

hardly been able to save themselves from this kind of influence and have not been able to invite the living inspiration from every faith and realize the great truth of the Church eternal. The specific notes of every faith add to the richness of life if they are properly received and appreciated, for religious ideas are expressions of some truths deeply laid in some parts of our being. This universal sense and this wide acceptance are generally lost upon us if our being is not spiritually well strung, for it is not infrequent that some parts of our being make response and some other parts remain irresponsive. A theoretical and an academical acceptance of the truths of faiths can give a momentary illumination and an intellectual expansion but this does not carry us enough to generate that sympathy which can inwardly enjoy the beauties of faiths, the richness of life and the inspiring influence of great teachers. Sri Ramakrishna demonstrates the great truth that every faith has its saving power, each its Divine inspiration, a spiritual attraction and beauty. Their living inspirations can be felt if we follow them to the end. It is not only that Ramakrishna felt in actual life this redeeming power of faiths and envisaged the invisible but the eternal church of God and the eternal religion of spirit in place of denominational churches and their credos. Ramakrishna lived to realize this truth and passed it on to the future humanity that it might foster a nobler understanding and a spiritual friendship and save humanity from confusion and from the forces of fanaticism. Ramakrishna has given the gospel of spirit more than any theological creed or any philosophical theory. He stressed the movement of spirit and its expression through the finer rhythm of the heart, the diviner movement of the will and through the luminous intuition of intellect. Spirit takes possession of every organ of the human mind; and because it took possession of the full being of Ramakrishna, therefore, that the spiritual expression in him had been varied—there were deep intensity of feeling and spiritual emotion verging on a psychic inequilibrium, and easy access into the transcendental reaches of consciousness, and a ready will to serve the suffering divinity in the shape of man. Every chord of his being used to vibrate with spiritual currents but his fragile body was too weak

for the spiritual surging. Ramakrishna opened the flood-gate of spiritual currents and the whole humanity today is enjoying the fruits of his *tapasyā*. Surely the men of God do not live alone for themselves, they are instruments which remind us of the living presence of God in our heart and the possibility of Divine life and lift up the course of evolution to a higher plane. Men of God always live for this consummation.*

* Adapted from an address at the international Parliament of Religions held on the occasion of the first birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna in 1937—vide *Religions of the World* (RMIC, 1938), Vol. II, pp. 602-13.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND UNIVERSAL RELIGION



HE HOME OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA AT KAMARPUKUR : THE TEN
STANDS AT THE PLACE WHERE HE WAS BORN

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND UNIVERSAL RELIGION

Swami Ranganathananda

IT is an undeniable fact of history that one of the most potent factors in the evolution of humanity has been the force which manifests itself as religion and the religious impulse. From earliest times it has supplied the motive for social cohesion and social progress. Besides satisfying the individual's spiritual needs, it has also been the power to unite individuals into groups and communities. But it is a strange paradox that this same impulse which has contributed to human unity and welfare has also been the cause of much strife and disunion among mankind. It seems as though religions are closed systems and the only relation they can have towards one another is that of antagonism. The powers for blessing which they exhibit in their narrow spheres of sect and community turn into curses when applied to the larger world outside. Every system has appealed to the religious susceptibilities of its votaries to goad them either to war, persecution, or murder. Thus some of the most atrocious crimes and inhuman practices in all history have been perpetrated in its name. These are some of the blackest pages of all religious history. Whatever blessing it has conferred in private has thus been nullified in public.

INDIAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT: ITS UNIQUE FEATURE

The only country where religious wars and persecutions have been comparatively negligible is India. This, let us note, is not because there is no deep religious feeling in India, as some critics would think, to whom love for one's religion is achieved only by hating other religions ; neither is it due to any absence of variety in the religious outlook. History shows, and even to-day it is a fact, that both in point of spiritual fervour and the variety of its expression, India stands foremost in the world. The science of comparative religion tells us that the evolution of religious ideas has been, to a great extent, identical throughout the world. But whereas outside India this evolution stopped at

the tribal stage and the monotheistic conception, Indian spiritual genius soared higher and yet higher and discovered the Unity behind all the gods. This is a great landmark in the history of religions in general, for it marks the stage at which religion turns out to be the messenger of *all* peace and *all* blessing to the *whole* of humanity instead of being partially good and partially evil, as it has been in its earlier stages. For India herself, this discovery was momentous; for through this she has been spared from endless travails of religious persecution. This idea carries with it a certain universal outlook, being based on a highly rational philosophy, which later Vedic thought, especially the Upaniṣads, developed into its logical conclusion by discovering the Unity behind all existence.

SECTARIANISM

The relationship between religion and religion has been anything but happy. Religions which seemed to have worked well in the places of their birth are found to be failures in their careers outside. Sentiments like love, brotherhood, and peace give place to those of hatred, scorn, and strife. In the name of religion, countries have been devastated, great cultures have been destroyed, and masses of men have been massacred—all with the 'pious' idea of extending the empire of the 'one true God'. Little does the fanatical religionist realize that that is not the way to establish the 'Kingdom of Heaven' on earth. There is no doubt that the destruction of old cultures like those of Peru, Mexico, etc. really leaves such a 'Kingdom of Heaven' poorer in spiritual content. The sectarian spirit of religion is manifestly antagonistic to the very spirit of modern times which is scientific through and through, and which appeals not to sects and sections but to humanity at large. Consequently, the prestige of religion itself has suffered much in modern times. If religion is to be a living force in the modern world and contribute its share for the ushering in of a future civilization of humanity, it requires to be restated and cast into rational and scientific moulds. The solidarity of mankind is the ideal for which science stands. The immense possibilities which the scientific advancement of the last three centuries holds in its bosom for the realization of

the great hopes of poets and philosophers of the past ages, require for their consummation a new spirit, a new outlook, and a new message, universal in its appeal, which will mediate between religion and religion on the one hand, and science and religion on the other. Where is this message, this quickening impulse, to come from? To this insistent question, the eager minds of thinking men, both in the East and the West, turn towards India and the invaluable treasures of her spiritual and philosophic thought.

VEDANTA: ITS CONTRIBUTION

This is no audacious claim. We have seen already how Indian thought took a great step towards religious harmony when it discovered the One God of whom all other gods are but manifestations. This is the great idea embodied in the famous verse of the *R̥g-Veda*¹: *Ekam sat viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti*—‘Truth is One; sages call It by various names’, such as Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, etc. Not only this; no new thought has ever suffered suppression in India—be it in science, religion, or philosophy. Where all knowledge is held as sacred, how is it possible to suppress any aspect of it? The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*² speaks of the *parā* and *aparā* kinds of knowledge: *dve vidye veditavye iti ha sma yad brahmavidō vadanti parā caiva aparā ca*. All sciences including even the holy Vedas are only *aparā* knowledge. Let us note, in this connexion, that *aparā* does not and cannot mean here anything inferior in kind. That knowledge which is derived from human experience in parts and aspects is *aparā*, while that which is the fruit of a study of experience as a whole, of life in its totality, is *parā*. And all knowledge of the *aparā* kind is only an expression of the *parāvidyā*, philosophy. This is the same as *Brahmavidyā*, Brahman standing for the totality of existence and experience. This is the famous Vedanta philosophy, which is the very kernel and core of Indian culture, the fairest flower of its thought—the one which has given Indian culture its distinctive character and uniqueness. It is the spirit of Vedanta which has moulded all forms of Indian life and which has mediated between sect and sect, imparting to the rich variety of Indian thought its synthetic unity. This is the mes-

merism of Indian thought which is slowly gripping the minds of many a serious thinker of the West. Those who speak of Hinduism as a bewildering mass of confused religious and social ideas and practices have not yet grasped Vedanta. To understand India and Hinduism requires, first of all, an intimate acquaintance with the spirit of Vedanta. It is in virtue of this Vedanta that we are enabled to speak of the fundamental unity of India. It will be in virtue of this same Vedanta that we will be enabled not merely to speak about, but achieve, the fundamental unity of humanity itself. And if religious harmony, social progress, and national solidarity are lacking in presentday India, the quickening impulse must come from this Vedanta alone, for it is the storehouse of all wisdom.

INDIAN THOUGHT AND SRI RAMAKRISHNA

The oneness of all existence is the message which Vedanta teaches. The immediate implication of this message in life and thought is another great idea which seems to run counter to the very spirit of religious sectarianism, but which breathes truly the scientific spirit. As Swami Vivekananda expresses it, "To the Hindu, man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth"³. If truth is like a pyramid, the philosophical understanding of Unity is its apex. Viewed from this supreme height, no aspect of life or effort can appear as false or erroneous; for truth itself is the goal of all paths. It is chiefly in the application of this great idea to the pressing problems of modern life that the life and message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda are supremely significant. Through them we find Indian thought, especially Vedanta, speaking to the modern world for composing its distractions and ushering in on earth an era of what the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*⁴ calls: *Satyātma prāṇārāmaṁ manānānam, śāntismṛddhamamṛtam*—"Truth, the solace of life and bliss of the mind, exuberant with the wealth of peace and immortality."

UNIVERSALISM: OLD AND NEW

The idea of universal religion is not something new in the

world. There have been two senses in which it has been understood. When a religion steps out of its local boundaries and starts on a career of conquest and annexation, adding new recruits, much in the same way as an empire extends by the accession of new territories, it styles itself a universal religion. Such a religion keeps before itself the alluring ideal of becoming a world-religion sooner or later and believes itself to be the only fit candidate to that estate. The outstanding examples of this type are Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. The last one differs from the other two both in its methods and motives of such extension. Unlike Christianity and Islam, the spread of Buddhism has been singularly characterized by a spirit of peace and non-violence. This is undoubtedly due to the influence of Indian thought, wherein Buddhism has its roots and from which it has sprung. Christianity and Islam, on the other hand, have followed a relentless course of destruction and persecution with the ostensible purpose of 'saving' the 'damned souls'. Now this idea of universal religion is self-destructive. Not through conquest and the use of might is the way to universal religion. It breathes the spirit of the Old Testament, where, when a tribe conquers another tribe, it also destroys the latter's god and imposes its own god over it. It is this same spirit which is working now when, in the place of tribes, we have alien cultures and religions. And when there are two claimants, both equally strong, zealous, and fanatical, this idea of universalism is seen to defeat itself. The fact is, there is a world of difference between the two assertions—'My God is the only true God and you must accept Him' and 'My God and your God are one and the same, differing at best only in name.' When a single religious belief, sincerely held, is disturbed and destroyed, the purpose of universal religion defeats itself.

The second idea of universal religion is seen expressed in the eclecticism of Akbar and some modern sects and movements. Eclecticism is like a bouquet of choice flowers, and like a bouquet it has no enlivening principle in it and is bound to wither away. A still greater criticism is that it has a tendency to become a closed system in itself, which defeats its very purpose. It says, 'There is so much sectarianism in the world; it

must be destroyed ; so let us start a new sect'. This sounds like the famous wartime sentiment—a war to end all wars. But just as not one among the older sects is entitled legitimately to claim universality, by the same inexorable logic, no new sect also can lay claim to that position.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S IDEAL OF UNIVERSAL RELIGION

From the previous analysis we have come to this—that no religion can aspire individually to become universal. Unity in variety is the test of universality and not a dull and dead uniformity. In sharp contrast to the previous two conceptions stands Sri Ramakrishna's ideal of a universal religion. The very first principle of this ideal is: 'If one religion is true, then by the very same logic all other religions are also true', the verification of which is found in the fact that 'holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character'. Hence this great teacher left every religion undisturbed ; neither did he start a new religion. Yet his life was the greatest vindication of true religion. Nay, it was a veritable Parliament of Religions. He traversed the various paths of the Hindu Faith and attained perfection in each. Not content with this, he lived the life of a pious Christian and a devout Muslim reaching the goal of the respective paths. As a result of all his experiments, he realized that all religions are at bottom one, they all teach the same truth and lead to the same goal. In his own words :

'Many are the names of God, and infinite the forms that help us to know Him. By whatsoever name or form you desire to know him, in that very form and under that very name will you see Him. Different creeds are but different paths to reach the one God ; various and different are the ways that lead to the temple of Mother Kālī at Kalighat (in Calcutta). Similarly, various are the paths that take men to the house of the Lord. Every religion is nothing but one of these paths.'⁶

Again :

'As a mother in nursing her sick children gives rice and curry

to one, sago and arrowroot to another, and bread and butter to a third, so the Lord has laid out different paths for different men suitable to their natures.”

What follows? To quote Sri Ramakrishna again:

“Every man should follow his own religion. A Christian should follow Christianity, a Mohammedan should follow Mohammedanism. For the Hindu—the ancient path, the path of the Aryan *ryis*, is the best. A truly religious man should think that other religions are also so many paths leading to the Truth. We should always maintain an attitude of respect towards other religions.”

Thus, in Sri Ramakrishna’s view, the existence of many sects and religions not merely does not stand as obstacles in the way, but actually helps the realization, of universal religion. Let sects multiply until each individual will have a religion for himself. As no two individuals can be exactly similar in respect of taste, outlook, and capacity, so no one religion can perfectly satisfy the needs of all. Thus sects ought to multiply until they coincide with humanity itself. But sectarianism will disappear. And with its disappearance will be realized the ideal of a universal religion. In fact, it is already existing, no one has to create it, only each one has to discover it for himself. But its symphony is marred and distorted by the sharp and dissonant note of sectarianism. And sectarianism will disappear only when the world understands this new ideal of religious harmony taught by Sri Ramakrishna, when men will learn to see truth in every sect, when men are taught to sympathize with and appreciate every sincere longing of the human heart, knowing it to be an urge towards light and truth.

CONCLUSION

This ideal of universal religion accords most with the modern spirit and temper. It enables religions to work for human welfare as co-operating parts instead of remaining as colliding units. And religious fellowship will bring in the sense of human kinship and brotherhood and enable the collective wisdom and

-STUDIES ON SRI RAMAKRISHNA

effort of man to work towards the evolution of a complete civilization of humanity and a world culture.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA : THE UNIVERSAL MAN

Margaret Bedrosian

Ah, my God, I see all gods within your body ;
Each in his degree, the multitude of creatures ;
See Lord Brahma throned upon the lotus ;
See all the sages, and the holy serpents.

Universal Form, I see you without limit,
Infinite of arms, eyes, mouths and bellies—
See, and find no end, midst, or beginning.¹

The task of every world teacher is to unleash a torrent of spiritual truth to wash away the ignorance that blights the world. As the asceticism of the mythic saint Bhagiratha demonstrated, the Absolute must be manifested with the offerings of an utterly purified heart, totally dedicated to the welfare of the entire creation. Once this discipline is perfected, there is no limit to the boons God will bestow on His parched creation. Ramakrishna's life provides a modern analogue of this timeless work of the Spirit: his *līlā* in the midst of nineteenth century British India gave the land of his birth a desperately needed model of hope. Cleansed by his devotion to truth and tolerance, the subcontinent was inspired to achieve renewed self-respect and autonomy. But like the Buddha and Christ, Ramakrishna asserted an impact that extends beyond India. Rising from the soil of his native ground, his teachings have become a tree under which all humanity can rest and be nurtured. A 'universal' man in every sense, endowed with a faultless sense of the transcendent dimension in every human act, Ramakrishna achieved his God-realization through the impetus of a singularly creative sensibility. This creativity was reflected in every facet of his life, encompassing his willingness to plunge into *samādhi* in its various forms, to express the Self in each thought and action, to harmonize the dualities of life with the aesthetic grace of a born artist.

CREATIVE APTITUDE

Describing the essential nature of creative aptitude, the American psychologist James Vargiu states that one of its basic characteristics 'is its orientation toward universality, the overcoming of successive boundaries toward ever-growing expansion, inclusion and identification.'² Others, such as, the psychologist Abraham Maslow have referred to the creative insight as 'an isomorphism,' wherein the creative agent and the world come together in a complementary manner, each moulding itself to the other until perfect fusion occurs. Indeed, thinkers as diverse as Teilhard de Chardin, Sri Anurobindo, and Henri Bergson have agreed that behind the diversifying evolutionary thrust of nature, 'there must be an underlying unifying principle such as a universal creative field.'³ This unifying impulse of the creative field explains why the greatest artists, scientists, and religious teachers have described their highest insights in the most coherent terms: discovering the thread of unity which graces any system of thought or creative work with coherence and wholeness.

Turning from these general observations to their specific manifestation in Ramakrishna's life, we see that the source of his spiritual power was a meticulous and creative discipline in which nothing was left to chance and each theory was tested to the end. Given his comprehensive orientation, it is no wonder that his teachings impress us with their crystalline beauty, projecting the timeless wisdom of the Absolute through the medium of language and imagery exactly suited to his time and place.

In fact, one of the secrets of Ramakrishna's continuing potency, a key that unlocks energy in any sphere of activity, was that he entered deeply into the specific needs, challenges, and demands of his life's work. In this sense, he exemplified the counsel Kṛṣṇa gave Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra :

A man's own natural duty, even if it seems imperfectly done, is better than work not naturally his own even if this is well performed. When a man acts according to the law of his nature, he cannot be sinning. Therefore, no one would

give up his natural work, even though he does it imperfectly.⁴

EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Moving to Calcutta from the village of his birth in order to serve as a priest in the newly built Kālī Temple at Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna (then known as Gadadhar) entered into a milieu tailor-made to bring his life into focus. Biographers are quick to point out that as a child he had shown a natural aptitude for the 'work of the spirit.' His aesthetic bent, delight in spiritual drama and pageantry, openness to the elemental wisdom of nature—all of these predilections suggested that the priestly vocation would channel his unique abilities.

But significantly, the more deeply he became involved in the actual demands of the work—service and worship of an enigmatic goddess—the more quickly Ramakrishna approached what in the West is called the existential crisis. In this transition stage of personal growth, the Higher Self begins to pull the personality toward Itself; the old life and values no longer hold meaning and the human being feels the tension of not yet knowing where new values will emerge from. Thus, facing the static form daily, confronting the limits of his work, Ramakrishna was driven to question its validity, its worthiness as a field for his energies. In the now-famous episode from his life story, at the peak of his crisis, Ramakrishna even clutched the sword kept in the temple and vowed suicide unless the goddess would reveal her transcendent truth. So intent was he to discover the underlying meaning of the priesthood, that his commitment magnetized the Divine: Kālī unveiled herself, and thereby fulfilled the *dharma* of her priest. Of course, the deeper dynamics of this episode consists in Ramakrishna's *absolute* willingness to communicate with the Higher Self within; until he showed himself ready to forfeit his life, if necessary, Kālī represented a blocked will to meaning, her sword the reminder of a life *cut off* from its source. But once Ramakrishna's focus on Kālī cut through the illusion of her limited power, a power confined to a lifeless image, Kālī as the Divine Self within and without showered her boons.

What this incident teaches us in the twentieth century is that any action or work is potentially holy, a doorway through which the Infinite can enter the finite. Ramakrishna's initial provincialism, his thorough familiarity with the customs and traditions of his native ground, his devotion to the fearsome deity—all of this paradoxically paved the way toward his universality. He proved beyond doubt that the Divine is ready at any time and place to bless human existence if we will trace the particulars of lives to their root.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

The immediate and long-term effect of such a complete surrender to the Absolute is psychological transformation. The range and depth of Ramakrishna's *samādhis*, his unshakeable tolerance of the sincere devotee of whatever religion, his abiding distaste for whatever reinforced partial knowledge—what he termed 'women and gold'—suggest that his heart had been stripped to its essence. Here was no limitation in depth of experience or understanding as the *Gospel* demonstrates through countless passages; here was a sensibility that could immediately place each person and event in their truest context.

But having restated this much, one seeks a deeper appreciation of the dynamics that governed this extraordinary man's consciousness. To discover these—short of actual realization—one must speculate further on the physical and emotional effects of the non-dual experience on the human nervous system, effects that restructure the normally fragmentary world into a luminous whole. Only by accounting for this basic shift in identification and perception can one fathom Ramakrishna's power and magnetism. Writing of the culmination of spiritual practice, Swami Paramananda describes the superconscious vision in the following manner:

'Instead of centering our consciousness in our little being or in one little group, we begin to feel the pulse of the universe. The Heart of the universe takes possession of our heart and the great cosmic Life begins to surge through our life. This is the mark of genius everywhere.'⁵

DIVINE LOVE

Of course, the agent of such expansion is Divine Love, the pulsing energy that directs even the little heart. But the critical factor that seems to trigger the shift in identity is the devotee's vision of the magnificence of the Creative Field, the universal form that projects all gods and creatures. Sensing that whatever he feels, thinks, or does is a direct expression of that fundamental Self, the devotee finds his mind, heart, and senses unified in the cleansing surrender to the larger whole. Compared to the fluid delight of the superconscious, our waking experience is as concrete : thus, describing his initial vision of Kālī, Ramakrishna reported :

‘I saw a limitless, infinite, effulgent Ocean of Consciousness. As far as the eye could see, the shining billows were madly rushing at me from all sides with a terrific noise, to swallow me up! I was panting for breath. I was caught in the rush and collapsed, unconscious. What was happening in the outside world I did not know ; but within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss, altogether new, and I felt the presence of the Divine Mother.’⁶

This ‘steady flow of undiluted bliss,’ the Descent of the Ganges over the human heart, permanently opens up the inner eye—it ‘rewires’ the human nervous system, so to speak, sensitizing it to the touch of the Ātman in all creation.

If the import of this and the *samādhis* to come had been confined to the transformation of one priest in a Calcutta temple, there would be no need to continue with this discussion ; the purpose of Gadadhar's personal life would have been completed. But the perfection of Self-knowledge doesn't merely fulfil the individual life quest ; instead, realization becomes one of the most effective means by which the Divine re-orders the relative world, and the transcendent vision of the God-man becomes the polestar that re-aligns the consciousness of those who come in contact with it. And as the change in his name points out, over the coming decades of Ramakrishna's life, this is exactly what

happened: filled with a perpetually replenished light, he stripped away the partial truths that kept his devotees in bondage and led them to wholeness by his example.

PROPHET OF NEW INDIA

As Romain Rolland describes them in *Prophets of the New India*, Ramakrishna's physical traits complemented his emotional and spiritual authority:

His mouth was open over his white teeth in a bewitching smile, at once affectionate and mischievous. Of medium height, he was thin to emaciation and extremely delicate. His temperament was high-strung, for he was supersensitive to all the winds of joy and sorrow, both moral and physical. He was indeed a living reflection of all that happened before the mirror of his eyes, a two-sided mirror, turned both out and in.⁷

'Affectionate and mischievous'—an apt combination of traits for 'a two-sided mirror,' he was aware of the suffering that fuels the world of *māyā* as well as the play of the Divine such suffering veils. But again, the imagery of this description captures more than the personal charisma of the saint; it also hints at the distinguishing feature of the modern hero-deed. In Joseph Campbell's words, this task is the 'questing to bring to life again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul.'⁸ And here, Ramakrishna can be readily seen as a world teacher specially charged with the mission of putting the modern world in order, adjusting our perceptions by way of his two-way vision. As Campbell rightly notes, the problem facing the contemporary world is to make it possible 'for men and women to come to full human maturity through the conditions of contemporary life.'⁹ Ramakrishna would have readily agreed with this analysis, for his attention was consistently focussed on balancing the secular and the holy, the provincial and the universal. He acted out his teachings every step of the way, illustrating through his willingness to marry and enter into the demands of a householder's

dharma, a commitment to tasting the breadth of human experience. Indeed, reading his instructions to Holy Mother as he trained her in her duties, we get an endearing sense of his respect for detail in all its forms as well as the method he used to 'co-ordinate' the soul:

'... in regard to such practical matters as travelling, he asked her always to be the first to get into a boat or a railway compartment so that she could occupy a good seat, and to be the last to come out so that she might not, in her hurry, forget her luggage. He taught her that in arranging objects of domestic use one must think out beforehand where particular articles were to be kept. What was frequently required must be kept near at hand and other things at a distance. . . . He repeatedly told her to fit her conduct to the time, place, and circumstances, and the nature of the people she had to deal with. He asked her not to hurt anyone's feelings. "If you see a lame person," he taught her, "do not directly ask him how he became lame. You may ask him why he walks that way." ⁷⁰

The thoughtfulness of this advice implies that ultimately Ramakrishna saw no distinction between the monastic and domestic disciplines; both paths demand alertness and a respect for other people.

METHOD AND PLANNING

This seemingly innocuous series of precepts emphasizes another aspect of the spiritual life as well: its attention to method and planning. Though Ramakrishna could and did melt into *samādhi* at the merest mention of Mother's name, his ecstasies were cushioned by an orderly mode of day-to-day living. Arranging the silverware in the drawer and the spices on the shelf according to their frequency of use may not seem of

spiritual significance at first. But in the context of training and purifying the mind during meditation, a day spent rummaging for articles through an ill-kept kitchen can destroy inner peace for hours, betraying an insensitivity to the law of harmony in practice.

Similarly, though Ramakrishna owned little and drew back from covetousness and hoarding in any form—his disgust with attachment to a green shawl a classic example of such vigilance—he did take responsibility for the care and maintenance of what was his. Not the least of his duties was the direction of a wife to whom he had opened his heart and accepted into his unique life. Though his marriage was circumscribed by the traditions of Hindu culture in general and his commitment to spiritual practices, in particular, his respect and love for Sarada Devi are obvious, a love nurtured and purified by their spiritual equality—the *Ātman* being beyond sex identification.

EXAMPLE TO MODERN WORLD

The reminder of his example to the modern world has wide-ranging implications, just as it must have had for a wakening India. Greed and acquisitiveness only weight down the luggage; it is harder to get off the train when one is overloaded, to say nothing of transcending *māyā*. Hence, in this age glutted with possession and bent over with ownership, what to own and how much to own are two of the most crucial questions we have to ask ourselves. In political context, too, Ramakrishna's teaching would help shape the eventual stand India took toward the British empire: there are limits to how much a state as well as a person can or should be responsible for. Violation of this limit entraps one in excess, devitalizes the inner life, whereas keeping within one's means can train the mind for higher purposes. And finally, on the level of personal relationships, the same principle of care—now expressed as faithfulness and recognition of the core identity of one's spouse—guarantees that love will permeate the bond, enabling husband and wife to escape the emotional dissipation spurred by a demanding, spoiled ego.

In another area, too, Ramakrishna helped ripen both India and the modern world for spiritual fulfilment through his unfailing

love of the essential human being. Later, Swami Vivekananda would transform his teacher's sensitivity into the battle cry of *Sevā-Yoga*, the *yoga* of service to the God within man. But the inspiration for Swamiji's message of global transformation initially came from Ramakrishna. Hearing of Calcutta's poor, witnessing their misery on visits outside Dakshineswar, his perceptions were clear and heartfelt as usual. How can anyone pursue the goal of Oneness isolated from the struggles of the rest of humanity? Constantly aware of this challenge from the Divine Mother, Ramakrishna never forgot the social context of his realization, and some of the most moving incidents in the *Gospel* voice his compassion for the needy, as the following passage from the Introduction shows:

'[Sri Ramakrishna] accompanied Mathur on a tour to one of the latter's estates at the time of the collection of rents. For two years the harvests had failed and the tenants were in a state of extreme poverty. The Master asked Mathur to remit their rents, distribute help to them, and in addition give the hungry people a sumptuous feast. When Mathur grumbled, the Master said: "You are only the steward of the Divine Mother. They are the Mother's tenants. You must spend the Mother's money. When they are suffering, how can you refuse to help them? You must help them."²¹

This attention to the welfare of the poor doesn't reveal a naive tender-heartedness. Especially in the twentieth century, when the material and social barriers between the well-to-do and the poor solidify, it becomes increasingly important for our sense of human interrelations to share wealth thoughtfully. The point is not that we will thereby eradicate poverty—perhaps the poor must always be with us—but rather that our openhandedness enables a larger portion of the world to satisfy its basic needs and to grow beyond these into wholeness at every level.

HARMONY OF RELIGIONS

Closely related to his love of the essential human being was Ramakrishna's devotion to the harmonization of religions. As more time passes, this latter point of emphasis may prove his major contribution to world civilization, a message never needed so fiercely as now, when the human community embraces the entire world. Much has been written of Ramakrishna's practice and realization of *samādhi* through the paths of Islam, Christianity, and various schools of Hinduism. Encapsulating his thoughts on the subject, the Master insisted:

... dogmatism is not good. It is not good to feel that my religion alone is true and other religions are false. The correct attitude is this: My religion is right, but I do not know whether other religions are right or wrong, true or false. I say this because one cannot know the true nature of God unless one realizes Him.¹²

This caution to any would-be dogmatist warns us all to label others with care. Ultimately, no label except the unifying 'human' does justice to the soul. But the underlying message of this passage stresses a more basic point: as the twentieth century American writer Ralph Ellison has stated, 'Those who know their culture and love it unchauvinistically are never lost when encountering the unfamiliar.'¹³ Ramakrishna extended this principle to include the knowledge of God; it was, in fact, the supreme mark of his universality. Having touched the base with the depth of his own culture and religion, he paradoxically validated all other *dharma*s as well. In the process, he also reminded us that the true merit of a religion or way of action lies in our willingness to test and follow the path to the end, until it opens into the universal.

Thus, living in the midst of the nineteenth century, a period in which colonialism was carving the world into antagonistic empires, when the modern consciousness was about to be fragmented as evolution, communism and relativity theory turned traditional views of our place in the cosmos topsy-turvy, leaving

millions confused and rootless, this madman of Dakshineswar jolts us with his sanity and rootedness. Studying his picture, whether in the yogic posture or standing with his hand raised to teach, one knows he was never lost or confused by the turmoils of theorizing. Neither was he perturbed by speculation regarding the non-essential, quibbles over abstractions that only raise barriers between people and block perception of the living Truth. Instead, he persistently peeled away layers of ignorance that kept the disciple separated from the Self. So masterful was he that even Narendra, a model of cosmopolitan brilliance, bowed before his teacher's skill.

UNIVERSAL SELF

From the highest perspective, Ramakrishna's successful harmonization of religions signified the Universal Self operating through him, as he confirmed toward the end of his life when he confessed to Sri M., 'It is God alone who has kept this *vidyāmāyā* in me, for the good of man, for the welfare of devotees.'²⁴ His comment suggests that in surrendering to Mother Kālī, his own Higher Self, he literally gave his consent to the organizing forces of the universe to do their will through him. And since the deepest 'desire' of the Self in its creative aspect is to bring the diversity of existence into a harmonious unity, to shape a true universe—'oneness-in-motion'—it follows that Ramakrishna would embody this desire in terms most suited to the age, those centring on bringing divisive creeds and '-isms' into concord.

WORLD UNITY

Whereas the message of harmony feeds the fragile plant of world unity, the model of Ramakrishna's surrender to God sustains an equally vulnerable hope: that human beings can render their lives spiritually meaningful at a time when a narrow and short-sighted focus on hedonism has blurred the divine image within. What is required is recognition and dedication to the one supreme value, the ever-evolving, yet ever-abiding Truth, not escaping into an isolated asceticism or passively accepting the falsities of the world, but rather living with the tension be-

tween what *is* and what must come forth through human effort. Perhaps it is more than coincidental that while Charles Darwin was completing *The Origin of Species* (1859), a work that forced the scientific community to re-evaluate natural unfoldment and the presence of transcendent purpose in evolution, Ramakrishna had plunged even more resolutely into his spiritual disciplines, tangibly demonstrating the heights toward which all nature reaches.

Hence, though Ramakrishna managed to discover what perennially 'is,' he took the necessary step further, helping to chart the path toward planetary evolution. The most concrete proof of his mission is his prolonged and eager vigil as he awaited the coming of disciples; no single passage from his life is more moving than his own account of this period, his desire to share and give so overpowering that in his words:

'I would climb to the roof of the kuthi in the garden and, writhing in anguish of heart, cry at the top of my voice: "Come, my children! Oh, where are you? I cannot bear to live without you." A mother never longed so intensely for the sight of her child, nor a friend for his companions, nor a lover for his sweetheart, as I longed for them. Oh, it was indescribable! Shortly after this period of yearning the devotees began to come.'⁷⁵

Like every other discipline in his life, Ramakrishna's preparation as a teacher had been meticulous; he could quickly discriminate as to who the purest disciples were. Explaining his devotion to them, he once said, 'I know these youngsters to be Nārāyaṇa Himself.'⁷⁶ The secret of Ramakrishna's continuing power lies in this human legacy. The 'youngsters' were intelligent, idealistic, of spotless character—vessels perfect to receive the Teacher's overflow. Being young, they were relatively free of emotional and ideological bias and open to the current of love that came from Ramakrishna until each reverberated with the initial fervour of their Master's *sādhana*. In time, this core of adolescent disciples matured into a constellation of spiritual heroes, the

biography of each reflecting the same beauty and soul-force as Ramakrishna's and inspiring thousands to the service of humanity. Once more, the Self had irrigated its thirsting creation.

PERFECT SYNTHESIS

As to the lasting impact of Ramakrishna's life, he carved new chambers of compassion and sacrifice for the human heart to inhabit. He knew that we are born to navigate the highest states of consciousness and that this exploration delights God. But he also knew that until the personality and spirit unite in purpose, the soul will never take flight. Sensitive to the subversive power of the ego, he repeatedly urged that humanity is not the centre of the universe, but as one modern thinker has expressed, 'the pivot point, the bridge, the lifeline, the agent through whom the energy of the universal creative field can flow, and by means of whom one day all, including the least significant element in the universe, will be integrated into one perfected synthesis, with the Source.'⁷ Tracing the imagery and symbols of his native culture to this Source, Ramakrishna became such a lifeline, lifting humanity to a new vision of its destiny.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND THE UNITY OF RELIGIONS

Swami Tejasananda

IT is an oft-repeated phenomenon in the economy of Nature that the various religious systems bequeathed to humanity by great spiritual geniuses more often than not lose their original freshness and vigour, purity, and simplicity in the hands of their followers through the accretions of ages. Truths get institutionalized, and innumerable usages and customs, dogmas and ceremonials overlay the shining gems of spiritual truths in the process of time. A Christian mystic pertinently remarked: 'If you study the history of any religious movement, you will trace three stages, three periods during which the true becomes corrupted, the good becomes vicious. The first period is the period of the Teacher, the Reformer, the Prophet. The function of every spiritual Teacher is a twofold one: first, to expose the corruption of religious creeds, and secondly, to teach the way of the Inner Soul Life. Then comes the second period: after his death, the true disciples, apostles, pupils, try to systematize the teachings and to promulgate them as faithfully as possible by repeating what the Teacher gave or recorded. In the third period the priest comes to the fore and organizes out of the teachings another religious creed !'

That is why the illuminating gospel of a Buddha or a Christ, a Mohammed or a Caitanya is not found today to prevail in its pristine purity and integrity in the land of its origin or elsewhere. Innumerable sects, each with its own creed and formula, have sprung up in the fold of every historical religion. And so long as human nature continues to be what it is, nobody can prevent the growth of such sects or religious bodies in the world. These diversities are a psychological necessity. Rightly does Swami Vivekananda say: 'You cannot make all conform to the same ideas... I am glad that sects exist... If you and I and all... were to think exactly the same thoughts, there would be no thoughts for us to think... It is the clash of thought, the differentiation of thought, that awakes thought... Whirls and

eddies occur only in a rushing, living stream. There are no whirlpools in stagnant, dead water. When religions are dead, there will be no more sects ; it will be the perfect peace and harmony of the grave.'

DIVERSITY IS THE SCHEME OF PROVIDENCE

In fact, these varieties of thoughts, and different methods of approach to truth, must exist so long as the world lasts. There is no harm in having different sects, different religions, each with its individual dogmas and ceremonies, philosophy and ideal, provided they all agree to live with fellow-feeling and mutual goodwill. Dr S. Radhakrishnan emphasizes this point in his book *The Future of Civilization*: 'The Supreme presents itself in a variety of aspects to the human mind. The bewildering variety of Hindu theism and pantheism, the Buddhist developments of an impersonal law and a personal saviour, the old classical paganism with its personal gods and goddesses, the Hebrew faith in an inflexible Lord or righteousness, the Catholic Christianity with its somewhat distant personal deity and more immediate minor divinities from the Madonna to the Patron Saints, . . . and the Muslim creed of one and only God are the different ways in which men have tried to orient their relations to the Unseen Reality conceived as something higher, better, and more sovereign than the individual self. If we admit the diversity of human nature, we can easily understand this variety of the appeal of God to it and the utter futility of reducing all dogmas to one. Underlying all the diversity of dogmas is the undefined and indefinable conception of an Ultimate Reality.'

H. H. Wilson also sings to the very same tune when he remarks in his *Essays and Lectures*: 'Contrarieties of belief and diversities of religion are part of the scheme of Providence ; for, as a painter gives beauty to a picture by a variety of colours, or as a gardener embellishes his garden with flowers of every hue, so God appointed to every tribe its own religion that man might glorify Him in diverse modes, all having the same end and being equally acceptable in His sight.' As a matter of fact, an iron uniformity of thought or religious ideal is unthinkable

in view of the diversities of human nature. If we want to prevent the sterilization of the mind and the stagnation of the soul of humanity, we must not repudiate or refuse recognition to any of the historical religions or sects. The passion to impose one's own opinions on others belongs only to selfish tempers, and is in most cases the fruitful cause of all atrocities and hostilities in the world.

LINK OF UNITY

It is interesting to note that the great spiritual geniuses of the world have never failed to discover the underlying link of unity in the bewildering variety of apparently contradictory thought-systems. The Brahman of the Vedantins, the Ahura-Mazda of the Zoroastrians, the Buddha and the Law of the Buddhists, the Jehova of the Jews, the Father-in-Heaven of the Christians, and the Allah of the Muslims are different names of the same eternal Principle. The Vedas have declared: 'The Truth is one; sages call It by various names' (*Rg-Veda*, I. 164. 46). In the Koran it has been said: 'Say thou, "I worship not that which ye worship, and ye do not worship that which I worship; neither shall I worship what ye worship; neither ye worship what I worship—to you be your religion; to me my religion"' (*Sura*, 109. 1-6). 'Our God and your God are one God, and after Him we all strive' (*Sura*, 29. 45). So has one Urdu poet sung:

Only names differ, Beloved,
All forsooth are but the same.
Both the ocean and the dew-drop,
But one living liquid frame.

Similar is the case with Christianity. St. Peter also accentuates the same thing when he says, 'Now of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation, he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted by Him'. Even in Virgil's *Aeneid* (VI) we find the same spirit of unity eloquently expressed in a magnificent verse:

One life through all the immense creation runs,
One spirit is the moon's, the sea's, the sun's;
All forms in the air that fly, on the earth that creep,

And the unknown, nameless monsters of the deep,
Each breathing thing obeys One Mind's control,
And in all substance is a single soul.

UNIVERSALITY OF TRUTH

Thus when properly studied, comparative religion increases our confidence in the universality of truth and our respect for all forms of religions extant in the world. As already stated, Religion is one; only its manifestations vary. Swami Vivekananda has significantly remarked: 'Then arises the question, How can all these varieties be true? If one thing is true, its negation is false. How can contradictory opinions be true at the same time? . . . But I will first ask you, Are all the religions of the world really contradictory? I do not mean the external forms in which great thoughts are clad. . . . But I mean the internal soul of every religion. Every religion has a soul behind it, and that soul may differ from the soul of another religion; but are they contradictory? Do they contradict or supplement each other?—that is the question... I believe that they are not contradictory; they are supplementary. Each religion, as it were, takes up one part of the great universal truth and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth. . . . System after system arises, each one embodying a great idea, and ideals must be added to ideals. And this is the march of humanity. Man never progresses from error to truth, but from truth to truth; from lesser truth to higher truth—but it is never from error to truth. The child may develop more than the father, but was the father inane? . . . Your present stage is the knowledge of the child plus something more.

'Then, again, we also know that there may be almost contradictory points of view of the same thing, but they will all indicate the same thing. Suppose a man is journeying towards the sun, and as he advances, he takes a photograph of the sun at every stage. When he comes back, he has many photographs of the sun, which he places before us. We see that not two are alike, and yet, who will deny that all these are photographs of the same sun, from different standpoints? Take four photographs of this church from different corners: how different they

would look, and yet they would all represent this church. In the same way, we are all looking at truth from idfferent stand-points, which vary according to our birth, education, surroundings, and so on. We are viewing truth, getting as much of it as these circumstances will permit, colouring the truth with our own heart, understanding it with our own intellect, and grasping it with our own mind. We can only know as much of Truth as is related to us, as much of it as we are able to receive. This makes the difference between man and man, and occasions, sometimes, even contradictory ideas ; yet, we all belong to the same great universal truth.'

Endowed with such a width of vision and depth of understanding, it is no wonder that a great soul like Swami Vivekananda would declare: 'I accept all religions that were in the past and worship with them all. I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan: I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix ; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of every one.

I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future. . . . The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. . . . We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future.' This synthetic vision of the Swami raised him far above the ordinary limitations of human nature and enabled him to proclaim to the world the ideal of religious harmony, which he received as a sacred legacy from his Master, Sri Ramakrishna.

MESSAGE OF HARMONY

It is well known that Sri Ramakrishna explored in his own life all the varied approaches to the supreme realm of eternal wisdom. There is practically no religion he did not live, and no truth he did not realize. Every form of religious faith unfolded

to his vision a new world of spiritual significance. We find that in the Vedānta all religious ideals and aspirations of humanity have been generalized into three principal systems, viz. dualism, qualified monism, and absolute monism, according to the graduated scale of spiritual experiences in the lives of different individuals. In the life of Sri Ramakrishna also, we witness an eloquent vindication of this very fact; for he realized that these three orders of metaphysical thought are stages on the way to the supreme Truth; that they are not contradictory, but rather, when added the one to the other, are complementary. For all religions alike, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, are but so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the Infinite, and in these three systems, we find nothing but a gradual working up of the human mind towards higher and higher ideals, till everything is merged in that sublime unity which is reached in the highest spiritual experience.

It is needless to point out that in this world of multiplicity one single system of thought can hardly fit into the diverse mental aptitudes of mankind. Every one is born with his own individual fund of ideas and mind-stuff, and naturally it would be an impossible feat to prescribe the same ideal or the same method of approach to Reality for all and sundry. That is why numerous systems and paths have come into being to allow all types of minds infinite scope and freedom for their unfoldment according to their respective traits and lines of growth.

The great synthesis, as presented by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā*, received an added light and life in the modern age in the many-sided personality of Sri Ramakrishna, who looked upon all religions as but so many paths for the realization of the Supreme. He declared that, when followed with steadfast zeal and sincerity, each and every path would eventually lead the aspirant to the same goal, and no colour, caste, or creed would be any the least bar to the sacred temple of self-realization. A Hindu and a Muslim, a Christian and a Buddhist, a Jain and a Parsi—were to Sri Ramakrishna but pilgrims following different trails according to their individual predilections to reach the same holy land of Truth. For, does not the scripture also say, 'Like different streams coursing through straight or crooked

channels and losing themselves eventually in the one fathomless deep, men treading the various paths of religions, according to their individual tastes and mental make-up, ultimately reach Thee, O Lord, who art the resort of all' (*Śivamahimnaḥstotra*, 7)? Similarly does the *Gītā* sing, 'Even those devotees who, endowed with śraddhā, worship other gods, they, too, worship Me alone, O son of Kuntī, but without knowing the proper method' (IX. 23). 'Whosoever comes to Me through whatsoever form, I reach him. O Pārtha, all men are struggling through pathis which in the end lead unto Me' (IV. 11).

ONE GOD IN MANY NAMES AND FORMS

The message of harmony or the unity of religions thus delivered by Sri Ramakrishna at the present age to bring about peace and goodwill amongst the different sects and creeds of India and of the outside world is reflected in most of his illuminating and inspired utterances. He says, 'God is one. He differs only in names and forms. He reveals Himself unto a devotee in whatever form he wishes to see Him'. 'God with form and God without form are not two different beings. He who is with form is also without form. To a devotee God manifests Himself in various forms. Just think of a shoreless ocean—and infinite expanse of water—no land visible—blocks of ice formed by intense cold. Similarly, under the cooling influence, so to say, of the deep devotion of His worshipper, the Infinite reduces Himself into the finite and appears before him as a Being with form. Again, as on the appearance of the sun, the ice melts away, so on the appearance of knowledge, God with form melts away into the Formless.' 'As the same fish is dressed into soup, curry, or cutlet, and each has his own choice dish of it, so the Lord of the universe, though One, manifests Himself differently according to the different likings of His worshippers, and each one of these has his own view of God which he values most.'

Sri Ramakrishna illustrated this variety of expressions of the same eternal Being with a beautiful parable: A chameleon lived on a tree. One person came and saw it was green, a second man saw it red, a third one, yellow. In this manner, a number of

persons saw it as of different hues. Each of them was disputing the other and saying that the animal was green, red, yellow, and so on. At last, they went to the man who had been sitting under the tree. He said, 'I live under the tree night and day. I know it is a chameleon; it changes colour every moment. And sometimes it has no colour at all.'

'Various are the paths,' says Sri Ramakrishna, 'that lead to the ocean of Immortality. Life is blessed, no matter by whatever means you get into it.' 'Different creeds are but different paths to reach the one God. Various are the ways that lead to the temple of Mother Kālī at Kalighat.

Similarly, various are the ways that lead to the house of the Lord. Every religion is nothing but one of such paths that lead to God.' In fact, what Sri Ramakrishna demanded from the aspirants is not mere lip-homage to their respective religions, but a deep-seated loyalty to their ideals, a crystal sincerity of purpose, and a spirit of love and respect for the faiths of others. The trouble arises when each one claims his own method as the only true one.

AS MANY FAITHS, SO MANY PATHS

Some say that only in a Siva temple is communion with God possible; others declare that the Viṣṇu temple is superior. There are Muslims who believe salvation to be possible only through their Prophet, while amongst the Christians there are persons who believe that Jesus is the only door. To these zealots Sri Ramakrishna replies, 'Be not like frogs in the well. It knows nothing bigger and grander than its well. So are all bigots, they do not see anything better than their own creed'. 'A common man through ignorance considers his own religion to be the best and makes much useless clamour, but when his mind is illumined by true knowledge, all sectarian quarrel disappears.' 'When one is sincere, one can realize the Lord through whatsoever path one proceeds. God is Infinite; so are the paths leading to Him.' 'I had to practise all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity. I had to come through all paths—Sakta, Vaisnava, and Vedantic. I have realized that God is one, and all are coming to Him through these different paths.'

It is wrong to imagine that a deep-seated love for one's own religion must spell a corresponding hatred and ill-feeling towards the faiths of other communities. On the other hand, as the life of Sri Ramakrishna conclusively shows, deepest spirituality and broadest catholicity are not contradictory, but can stand synthesized in one and the same personality. In matters religious, the more one's mind is chastened through spiritual practices, the more comprehensive becomes his outlook on life, and as a result, the blind forces of bigotry and fanaticism get attenuated, and ultimately yield to the compelling spirit of love and respect for all, irrespective of caste, creed, or colour. It is only the half-religious and the irreligious that fight, and not the truly religious. For the more religious one grows, the more tolerant of diversity one becomes. Higher intuition takes account of the natural differences of things and seeks to combine them in the ample unity of the whole.

Sri Ramakrishna therefore urged that to realize God an aspirant must stick to his own faith but at the same time look upon all other faiths as so many paths, and shall never dogmatize that his is the only true faith, and all else is wrong. He even did not allow his disciples to cherish hatred towards the secret cults followed by some esoteric societies of the Saktas and Vaisnavas. 'There are many diverse entrances to a house', he used to say, 'the front gate, the backdoor, and the door for the scavenger who comes to clean the dirty places in the house. Know these cults to be akin to this last-mentioned door. No matter through which door one enters; when once within the house, all reach the same place. Are you therefore to imitate these people or mix with them? Certainly not. But do not hate them in any way.' In fact, to a seer of Light all apparent contradictions melt eventually into a stream of harmony.

LOVE AND RESPECT FOR ALL FAITHS

It must not be forgotten that every religion is an expression of the mental and social evolution of the people who adopt it. The peculiarity of Hinduism lies in the fact that it has ever kept its door open for all men of all grades of cultural equipment and religious instincts. It has, in fact, maintained since hoary anti-

quity a religious atmosphere permeated by the highest philosophic wisdom to suit the temper and genius of the men of diverse religious calibre and as such it has no word of condemnation for any form of religious faith. It recognizes that even the crudest religion has its place in the cosmic scheme ; for does not a gorgeous flower justify the muddy roots from which it springs ?

The crude conceptions will give way in slow degrees before earnestness and sincerity, and the duty of the true reformer is not to supplant the existing beliefs by new ones, but only to improve the mental and moral outlook of men so as to make them fit for receiving higher and higher ideals. So did Swami Vivekananda emphatically declare: 'If anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance, "Help and not Fight", "Assimilation and not Destruction", "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension". Man, born in a particular church, hardly realizes the saving truth that the aim of every religion is to teach its votary to outgrow its external forms through a natural process of mental evolution. It is indeed good to be born in a church, but to die in it is a mark of moral stagnation and lack of spiritual illumination.'

With the gradual unfoldment of his inner being, the aspirant after Truth must outgrow the limitations of his church, however indispensable they may be at the initial stage, attain to a universal outlook through an intensive process of spiritual culture, and learn to view with love and respect all the faiths extant in the world. In the significant words of Count Keyserling, no partial view will then be falsely taken for an all-embracing view, any non-central position will be abandoned, every spiritual formation will be put in its astrologically exact position, and at the same time understood as the correct expression of the creative significance which animates it. It is in this way that all religions may, as comprehension of significance advances, remain in principle, on the plane of this life, what they were previously, and yet may nevertheless signify something absolutely new. It

would simply bestow on them a fresh significance which would transfigure them. This, in short, is the crowning realization of a true Advaitin (a monist) to whom toleration is a religion in itself. But to tolerate them merely in a non-committal or patronizing spirit would be an impiety, and to revile them would be diabolical.

It will not be out of place to mention in this connection that a purely ethical principle is quite inadequate to establish harmony in the realm of faiths. It is, on the other hand, as already shown, the recognition of 'all individual selves being the one self' which is the *raison d'être* of the ideal of religious harmony and toleration. This is the dictate of Indian philosophy, and it is on the bed-rock of this transcendent idealism that the great edifice of human unity and harmony of religions is to be built. The greatest day in world-religion, as Dr Cousins observes, will be that on which the religions that are separated because of differences of names and local terminology will hear the one voice in whatever name it spoke through in various times and places, and will continue in one aspiration for purity and illumination, and in one power against evil, unclouded by mental and emotional non-essentials, unweakened by erroneous enmities and superstitions.

UNBIASED STUDY OF EVERY RELIGION

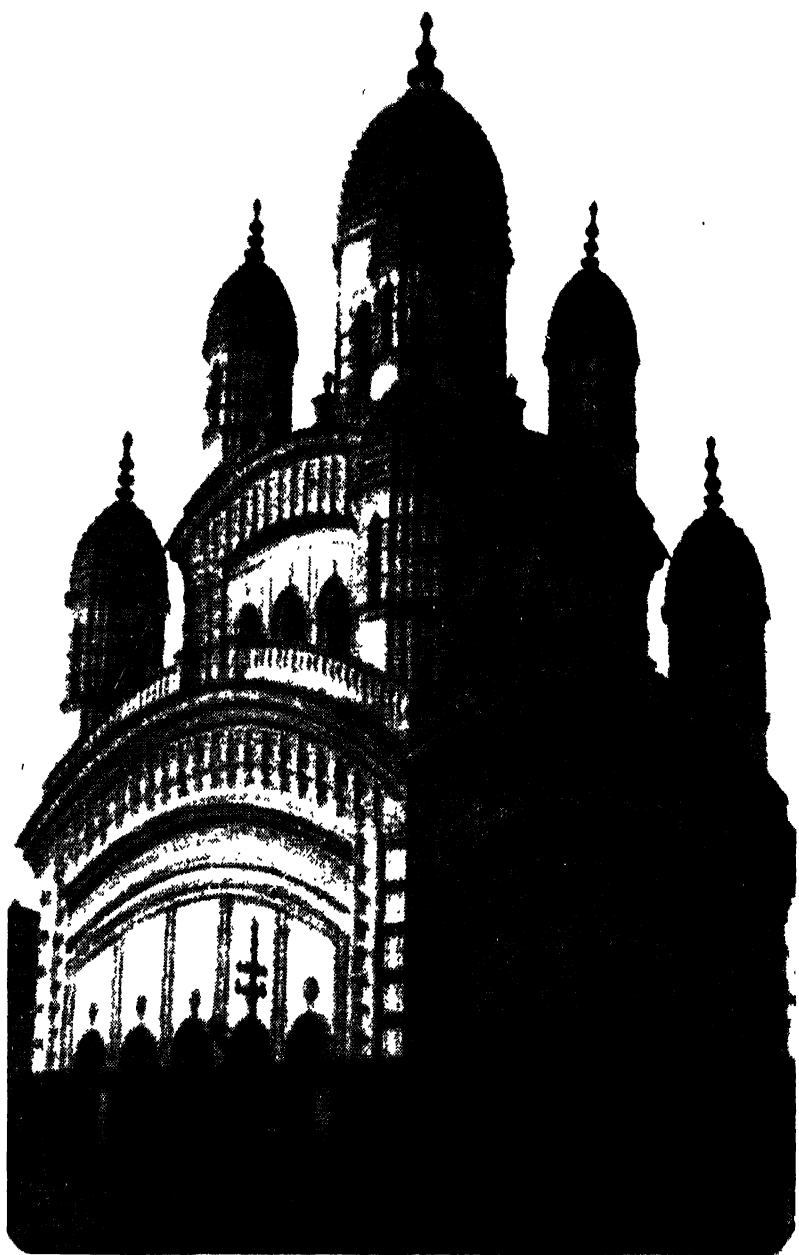
What is needed is to make a reverent and unbiased study of the essentials of every religion. Instead of allowing ourselves to be swayed by silly sentimentalism and influenced by the seeming differences palpable on the surface, it must be the lookout of every religious-minded man, to whatever church he may belong, to cultivate a spirit of respect for every faith, and to find out the underlying link of unity in the substance and soul of all the religious systems of the world. The message of religious harmony delivered unto humanity in the latter part of the nineteenth century by Sri Ramakrishna is still a living force today, and it is steadily functioning through innumerable fields to create an atmosphere of peace and goodwill among the different faiths existing both in India and the outside world.

With the achievement of independence, the voice of India has once again leaped into the full flame of life, and is being heard today with love and reverence by the thinking section of humanity. The first message that Independent India brings to us at this hour of triumph is: 'Peace be unto all and all religions.' It is indeed refreshing to find that this message of the unity of religions promulgated to us by Sri Ramakrishna in the serene peace of Dakshineswar has been integrated in this secular state into the framework of her administrative system as the golden means to allow all religions to co-exist in a spirit of fellowship. In fact, this co-existence of all faiths in this secular state forms the basic principle of the modern political *Panchasila* of India, viz. the co-existence of states in a spirit of friendship, even though they profess different political ideologies.*

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SRI RAMAKRISHNA VIEWED FROM OTHER RELIGIOUS ANGLES





BHAVATARINI (KALI) TEMPLE AT DAKSHINESWAR

RAMAKRISHNA AND CHRIST

Francis X. Clooney, S. J.

I am privileged to contribute to this volume in honour of Ramakrishna, because I am a Roman Catholic priest and member of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). 'Because' and not: despite the fact that 'I am not a Hindu nor in search of a new faith—because Ramakrishna's example has taught me a great deal about how a believer can go about appreciating the religious experiences of other people. He challenges us to go beyond simple and safe exhortations to dialogue, to realize that when in some way we experience another religion, we ourselves are afforded the possibility of a true religious experience. Because Ramakrishna has challenged us in this way, I wish to honour his memory here. In particular, I would like to show how Ramakrishna's extraordinary claim to have met Christ shows Christians like myself a way to respond to the mystery, beauty, and holiness of non-Christian religious experiences.¹

ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST

Ramakrishna had his encounter with Christ in 1874, when he was completing his effort to confirm his fundamental religious experience of his divine Mother by finding her in as varied a set of situations as possible. His description of the event, as recounted by Swami Saradananda in *The Great Master*, is a simple story told without unnecessary ornament and without speculation as to how the encounter was possible, or about what it meant. Since I presume that most readers of this volume are familiar with the story, I will not reproduce it here, but simply recall the key features in sequence:

1. Ramakrishna hears some readings from the Bible, which instill in him a great desire to know Christ.
2. One day he sees a small picture of Jesus and his mother, meditates on the image, and is infused with its radiance.
3. For three days he avoids the temple and a great faith and reverence for Jesus and his religion occupies his mind, and begins to show him Christian *padrees* offering incense and light before the image of Jesus in the Church. . . .’
4. At the end of that period, he is walking in a garden when he sees a fair-skinned, highly attractive foreigner with (what he later learns are) Jewish features coming towards him ; Ramakrishna greets him as ‘ Jesus the Christ, the great Yogi, the loving Son of God, one with the Father,’ the one who suffered to save men from ‘ sorrow and misery ’ through his blood.
5. Christ embraces Ramakrishna and enters him ; Ramakrishna becomes ecstatic, and ‘ remains identified for some time with the Omnipresent Brahman with attributes.’

Several features of this description are most interesting. First, Ramakrishna is here imbued with that same remarkable fervor he exhibits in his other religious experiences, the same child-like and uninhibited joy in the presence of the divine. He does not react to this particular encounter in any unusual fashion—or, I should say, in anything but his ‘usual extraordinary’ fashion.

Second, the account is innocent of academic artifice: Ramakrishna does not pretend to be a ‘scientific’ observer or a scholar writing on inter-religious dialogue. Christ, while new to his experience, is intelligible to him precisely because attention to this ‘newcomer’—sparked, interestingly enough, through meditation on *Mother and Child*—occasions another in his own series of personal explorations into the innumerable sacred possibilities of human experience: meeting Christ is meaningful because it

confirms and yet enriches what he knew already, that his own Mother was everywhere.

When he describes Jesus, Ramakrishna balances the language of Tantra/Vedanta—which he must use because it has structured his own lifelong experience—with language intended to stress how new Jesus was to him. Thus he uses a familiar Hindu term, ‘the great *yogi*’ and, as Swami Saradananda suggests, concludes with the very Vedantic ‘Brahman with attributes.’ But these are balanced with terms from the Christian tradition: ‘the Son, one with the Father, who suffered,’ ‘salvation through blood,’ etc. Likewise, Jesus approaches and enters him, but is still a foreigner when he does so, not simply a projection of what Ramakrishna knew already. He is left situated in a Christian environment described as concretely as Ramakrishna can manage (given his necessarily limited knowledge of historical Christianity), by the mention of ‘*padrees*,’ the incense, the Jewish features.

RAMAKRISHNA’S UNIQUENESS

A claim underlying the whole scene is that Ramakrishna—as holy person, as exemplar of Tantra (‘all experiences are religious’) and Vedanta (‘one transcendent reality underlies all experience’)—really did have access to all religious experiences; this encounter with Christ intends to validate Ramakrishna’s own uniqueness as a transcultural figure. But Ramakrishna does not seem, as far as I can see, to be attempting to make a significant new statement *about* Christ, or about how Christians should experience Christ.

Christians such as myself need to take seriously this account of an extraordinary religious experience which crossed the conventional boundaries between religions; and equally importantly, we must appreciate that he made this claim without uprooting himself from his native tradition and its vocabulary, and without denigrating those who experience Christ within their own native Christian environment. *Because* and not despite the fact that he remained thoroughly Hindu and not Christian, Ramakrishna crossed the religious boundary in a non-

threatening, non-violent fashion: he made his claim without questioning the possibility of other, different experiences.

Now another difficult issue of misinterpretations must be raised, as a problem which presents itself to me as a Christian, but which may also arise for Hindus as well. For there are two common, immediate reactions to the scene I have been considering. First, some look at it as a mere 'Hinduizing' of Christianity, an unwarranted subjective claim made by someone who—even if holy, sincere, etc.—had not studied Christianity, did not know of the historical Jesus, and who in the end missed the main point by thinking he could meet Christ and *still* return to being a Hindu. These people tend to see Ramakrishna's experience as a concealed argument for the relativization of religions.

Second, some contend that Ramakrishna's encounter admirably points to the universal unity underlying the apparent differences among religions; a unity beyond their superficial differences of concepts, words, rites, institutions, etc. These people hold that a true religious genius like Ramakrishna could cross the religious boundaries (or go beneath them), while it is the narrow sectarians who keep on insisting that the boundaries between religions are quite significant spiritually.

Both views (even when considered in versions more nuanced than the simplifications I have presented) are disappointing to me, first of all because they are insensitive to the tone and nature of the event itself. They thrust Ramakrishna's joyful, ecstatic experience into the midst of the ancient, sad 'competition of religions,' making it simply one more bit of testimony to be accounted for, or rebutted, or used to prove certain position and disprove others. The struggle to take possession of it in support of the various positions robs it of its primary, central meaning: it was a definite, concrete experience that did happen to one person, Ramakrishna.

But on a more fundamental level, these reactions misunderstand what I understand to be Ramakrishna's own intention in recounting his experience. As we have seen, he was effectively (and implicitly) guided by what might be expressed as 'two golden rules': 1. Speak unambiguously from your own experience in the language of your own tradition, when you des-

cribe what something from another religion means to you. 2. When describing that other element 'in itself', speak as reverently and carefully as possible of it, in the terms and with the nuances preferred by the believers of that community; do not obliterate the 'other' with what is familiar to you, even if you surround it with the familiar. As we have seen, Ramakrishna makes the extraordinary claim that he met Christ, but *preserves* the extraordinariness precisely by showing that he himself was a Hindu, and that Christ something other than a Hindu deity or symbol of a Hindu value: something truly new was thus allowed to happen.

INTERRELIGIOUS BOUNDARY

When we see that Ramakrishna's experience is guided by these rules, both of the described reactions lose their force. The experience itself did not Hinduize Christ, nor did it relativize religions, nor did it 'prove' that 'narrow' sectarians are in error. In his experience, Ramakrishna crossed the perceived boundary between Christianity and Hinduism, and his crossing over has been a tremendously fruitful illumination for many people in many lands. What exactly it is supposed to mean today to the Christian or Hindu theologian is something else again, which we may debate in good faith; but let us not confuse the experience with these interpretations, lest we lose sight of it altogether!

TWO QUESTIONS

I wish now to raise and answer directly two related and pertinent questions: Can the Christians (assuming, for brevity, that the Hindus will have less difficulty in this regard) admit that Ramakrishna's experience was a real, supernatural experience of Christ? And if then we can all acknowledge its religious importance, what is it supposed to mean for us, Hindus and Christians who still live in various specific faith traditions?

In answering the first—as a Christian and thinking of many Christians I know—it is well for us, Christians to keep in mind that it is a solid part of our tradition that God can offer private communications of Himself to individuals, even if such visions,

sensations, etc. remain private or personal and usually do not become authoritative for the whole community. New, unprecedented spiritual experiences of God are possible and may take place all the time ; but they do not formally add anything to the revelation found in the Bible, and do not require any formal dogmatic approval by the Church. They may reveal new insights into our faith, and may prove to be rich sources of inspiration and encouragement for many people ; but they need not 'change the religion.'

If God can communicate Himself in these unexpected and personal ways, and if we are willing to respect the unconditional and unlimited nature of divine freedom, there does not seem to me to be any *a priori* reason in Christian theology why a non-Christian could not have an authentic, personal, supernatural experience of Christ.

This is so even if some Christian who reads the account might think that Ramakrishna was perhaps not familiar enough with Christianity, or seemed in a way to be repeating earlier spiritual experiments, or even if such a Christian might wonder how someone could meet Christ and not become a baptized Christian. People seriously involved in their own religion naturally and properly raise such questions, but they need not be permanent obstacles to an appreciation of what others have experienced. One might add that it is of course proper as a general rule to identify some minimal prerequisites which mark a true religious experience—e.g., personal morality, holiness, charity, the good influence of the person on others, etc. ; but such criteria would be no problem here, given the edifying and charitable witness offered us by Ramakrishna and his followers easily meets such standards. There is no good reason then to deny the *possibility* that Ramakrishna could have had such an experience. Let us assume, for the sake of this reflection and in keeping with my tentative and personal opinion, that it is probable that he indeed encountered Jesus Christ.

Regarding the second question, What such an experience is supposed to mean for us today ? let me suggest the following here, somewhat boldly. I presume to speak not only to the

Christians but also to my Hindu readers (hoping that they will understand my perspective). We Christians will be unsettled by Ramakrishna's claim only insofar as we fail to realize that his Hindu vocabulary does not, and was not meant to, determine conclusively and finally *the* meaning of the experience for whoever reflects on it. I, a Christian, must meditate on Ramakrishna's experience in my own thoughts and then say something about it in my own words. The Hindus in turn need not determine Ramakrishna's Vedantic vocabulary to be an absolute, essential feature of any and all appreciations of his experience and its reality. Nor need any one among us think that the terminology of Vedanta captures exhaustively and absolutely the whole meaning of Christ, or of Ramakrishna's encounter with Christ, or even of what the Vedantic explanation of religion itself is supposed to mean for the Christians (one does not have to be a Vedantin to experience its truth !) Suppose we all agree that even our personal experiences of God are not exhaustively explained through the particular words we use, and that the usefulness of this or that system of thought in talking about God does not *prove* that those systems are 'right' as God is 'right,' nor give them a validity separable from the authority of God's own presence: then on the one hand we (for the most part, the Christians among us) can stop being uneasy about the alleged 'relativizing' implications of this non-Christian experience of Christ, and on the other hand we (for the most part, the Hindus among us) can also stop using it as a 'proof' for statements about an underlying, timeless truth of religion being beyond particular religions.

Ramakrishna's experience of Christ asks us to realize that the set of religious experiences available to believers within various traditions is much more extensive, more astonishing, than we usually think: we can have religious experiences which go beyond what, by any normal, orthodox standard, is available within one's own tradition. For if this Hindu seems indeed to have had an authentic experience outside his own tradition, an experience he could talk about it in terms meaningful to himself while yet recognizing it as 'foreign' (i.e., as truly 'Christian,' not 'Hindu'), then it must also be true that

a Christian, in likewise graced, supernatural circumstances, can experience some of the profound mysteries of Hinduism (such as those of Tantra and Vedānta) without becoming less a Christian or more a Hindu—and without imagining oneself to be disclosing, through some added Christian insight, *the* true meaning of the Hindu mystery (as if it were previously unknown to the Hindus).

RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Recent centuries have been characterized by the encounter of religions and cultures, people travelling back and forth across the world, scholars studying the images, rites, texts of other religions, etc. Much indispensable knowledge has been gained and, indeed, even today a great deal of the talk about the dialogue of religions would be greatly enriched by a few facts about actual other religions ! But too often we have allowed this necessary intellectual work to predetermine the religious possibilities of this still-developing new world situation, wherein the many religions and religious people are more than ever before acutely and personally conscious of one another. Ramakrishna reminds us that certain new experiences may precede the formulation of correct terms in which to speak about them, and may have to be described in a somewhat unrefined fashion and in a mixture of terms from various sources (as does Ramakrishna himself in describing his Christ experience); there may be times when we simply have to note that certain religiously significant things have happened—even if no one is quite sure what to say about them.

Like Ramakrishna, we have and express our religious experiences through the medium of the concepts and words available to us. The Christian who experiences some Hindu mystery (or, the Hindu experiencing the Christian mystery) will probably have this experience in terms which confirm his or her original faith—and not in terms which lead to a change of religions. Thus, the Christian who reaches into the profoundest depths of meditation will probably recognize in Brahman the transcendent holiness of God; the Christian who feels attracted to the divine lover Kṛṣṇa will in some way fil-

ter that attraction through the *Song of Songs* and the tradition of the soul as the 'bride of Christ'. Such discoveries will certainly not be what the Advaitin or Kṛṣṇa devotee had in mind, but this fact does nothing to invalidate or subordinate either set of terms objectively: God speaks in our language, God appears in our images, whoever we happen to be.

But this position too can become a bland, thoughtless benevolence, if its implications are not pursued as radically as Ramakrishna pursued the implications of his experience of his Mother. If the divine is revealed in the religious and theological languages which structure (even if not completely) how we experience things, we are not at liberty to ignore or gloss over parts of our beliefs and their expressions. For instance, it would be a great misunderstanding of what the Christian experience means for Christians should a Hindu declare the ideals of the Sermon on the Mount to be the essence of Christianity, while passing over without mention the command of Christ to preach the Gospel to all nations, 'baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.' If God is present in the Bible, God is present everywhere there, in every word: by picking and choosing, such a Hindu might gradually forget that God is present in *all* the elements of human religious experience, and thus fall short of Ramakrishna's rigorous standard. Such a Hindu might interpret the command to preach the Gospel differently than does a Christian, but would miss something, I think, he or she overlooked its importance for Christians, and centrality to Christianity as Christians live it.

FUTURE OF WORLD RELIGION

Likewise, a Christian who is impressed by the Upaniṣads' emphasis on meditation and self-knowledge but who sees in them only some pale reflection or pre-evangelical hint of Christ, or who blithely claims that 'Brahman really means *God*' (as Christians mean 'God'), is not, in my view, taking the Upaniṣads very seriously as a specific, radical, and profound entrance into the divine. This Christian would miss something of the uncompromising essential power of those an-

cient texts, and would be unable to live out fully the implications of Ramakrishna's experience.

In brief: Christians will have to find Christ present in what might seem at first sight to be the relativizing and supra-personal aspects of Vedanta, and Hindus will have to find the divine present in what might seem to be the intrusive missionary impulse of Christianity. We must do so if any of us are to be true to the radical heritage of Ramakrishna. If we seek to make the meeting of religions something more than words, more than the revision of old concepts revered but inadequate to what we actually experience today, his gentle, joyful balance of ecstasy and sensitivity in the presence of the divine must be allowed to guide us, taking precedence over the sometimes too narrow and sometimes misplaced structures our minds tend to establish. Ramakrishna can tell us a great deal about the future of world religion, if we listen to him—and, even better, do as he did; I, for one, have learned much from him—about Hinduism, but also about Christ and being a Christian.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA FROM THE ISLAMIC STANDPOINT

A. J. A. Tyeb

THE basis for all religions is threefold: (1) tradition, that is, what we learn from our predecessors; (2) reason, by which we reach truth for ourselves with the help of our intellect; and (3) inner light which comes immediately of itself. This inner light is another name for the mystic experience which is initially acquired in a state of trance. This trance can be experienced only after a man has been able to purify his soul. According to Ghazzali, the manner in which the soul can be purified is that the aspirants to Sufihood must first cut himself off from all forms of worldly ties and attachments. He should then retire into seclusion and so concentrate himself in his meditation on God that no other thought can enter his mind. It is only after he has achieved this concentration that he can have and does have intuitive perceptions and trances.

GOD EVERYWHERE

Common people derive their belief that God is present everywhere either from a blind acceptance of the statements of others or through a process of cold reasoning. As against this, the Sufi discovers this knowledge through meditation and contemplation. In other words, he literally beholds God all around him. As a result, a state of mind in which the chief traits are humility, submissiveness, trust, and obedience is permanently produced in him. In our daily converse how often do we not assert that God is the only Provider of sustenance? Yet we remain locked with one another in a feverish struggle for what we understand to be existence. On the other hand, men who have reached a high degree of spiritual development acquire such a trust in the providence of God that whether they are in a vast and desolate desert or in the midst of the din and bustle of modern city life, they enjoy an undisturbed tranquillity. The Sufis hold that God, the One Reality, desires to share His Reality with others whom He has created. This means that the

glory of God can be found in all things. He manifests Himself everywhere, not the least in the human soul.

DIRECT EXPERIENCE

Mysticism is a vital element in all religions. In Islam, mysticism is the revolt of the soul against all formality and spiritualism. The Sufis establish a direct relation with God—not through the senses, nor through the intellect, but through meditation and contemplation. A man who is capable of this direct experience must have in him an element of the Divine. Man's soul is so made as to mirror the splendour of God. It cannot, however, do so except by purification of the self, and the self can be conquered by means of a greater love than self-love. The Sufis have been the lovers of God seeking the consummation of their love in union with the 'Beloved'.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S EARLY ECSTASIES

I shall now recount some of the experiences of Sri Ramakrishna in the above context. He was born on 18 February 1836. At the age of 6, on a day in June or July 1842 he was for the first time seized with ecstasy. He was going to the fields and was following a narrow path. As he raised his eyes, he saw a great black cloud spreading rapidly over the sky. Suddenly, at the edge of the cloud a flight of cranes passed over his head. The contrast was so beautiful that Sri Ramakrishna's spirit wandered away and he fell unconscious to the ground. He was transported beyond himself by the delight he felt in beholding the beautiful face of God in this scene. At the age of about nine, while acting the role of Śiva in a dramatic performance he went into a trance—his second such experience. Sri Ramakrishna was a mystic from his very childhood. In fact, spirituality was his birthright. His father Kshudiram Chattopadhyaya was a man of great spiritual stature. His mother Chandramani Devi too was a paragon of womanly virtues. Tradition has it that this pious couple had divine visions before Ramakrishna's birth.

The proper environment for the full development of Sri Ramakrishna's personality was provided by the Kālī temple at

Dakshineswar which he entered in the year 1855 at the age of 19. Hence he spent his time in meditation and in singing devotional songs. Already he felt that true worship does not consist in a rigid observance of rituals but in developing almost a personal intimacy with the object of worship, that is, in realizing the Deity in the worshipper's soul.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

The first flash of illumination—the first glimpse of the Ocean of Intelligence, as he called it, came to him at Dakshineswar. However, he soon found that this experience of the Divine presence was intermittent. He craved ardently for a continuous experience of the Divinity. The intensity of the urge was so great that he lost all consciousness of the external world, and without any thought of food and drink remained engrossed in the contemplation of the Divine Mother. He found it no longer possible to perform the daily rituals associated with the worship of Kālī.

TWO TEACHERS

In 1861 came a turning-point in Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual career. From this time onwards he came into contact with a number of spiritual teachers. The first of them was Bhairavi Brahmani. She was of a noble family—a devotee of Viṣṇu. Like a child Sri Ramakrishna confided in her and told her all about his experience, of his *sādhana* (spiritual discipline), and also about the miseries of his bodily and mental sufferings. He told her that many thought he was mad. The Brahmani comforted him and assured him that he had reached one of the highest stages of *sādhana* by his unguided efforts. A born *sādhu* (holy man) as he was, Sri Ramakrishna had, nevertheless, to put himself under a guide. 'She made him in broad daylight go back over the road of knowledge, which he had already traversed alone and blindfold in the night.' It was with her help that Sri Ramakrishna underwent all the spiritual practices of the Śākta cult. He soon reached the state of *savikalpa samādhi* (communion with God in which the distinction between the subject and the object is retained). The

ultimate goal of all *sādhus*, as of all Sufis, is to be so filled with the love of God that there is no room for anything else. The material world disappears from their consciousness. They attain a state of superconscious ecstasy. This state is called the *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the final union with Brahman. The Sufis call this state '*baqa*' which can be achieved by passing through different stages. These stages lead to the knowledge of God (*Marifa*), his gift which enables the mystic to contemplate Him. The end of the mystic path is reached when after crossing the stage of '*fana*'—the passing away of self—the Sufi enters into the state of '*baqa*'—a ceaseless existence in God. 'The traveller', as a Sufi is called, must, however, place himself under the tutelage of a *Murshid* who will guide him aright to his mystic destination. Under the guidance of Bhairavi Brahmani, Sri Ramakrishna attained the state of *savikalpa samādhi* which in Sufism is called the state of *Marifa*. It was left to another spiritual preceptor, Tota Puri, to initiate Sri Ramakrishna into the secrets of Advaita Vedānta—absolute non-dualism in which all distinctions between the 'object' and the 'subject' are annihilated. Tota Puri taught Sri Ramakrishna to detach his mind from all worldly objects and to plunge himself into the heart of the Ātman. Despite all his efforts Sri Ramakrishna could not cross the bounds of name and form. The door leading to the last stage—the *nirvikalpa samādhi*—was opened with great strain and infinite suffering. In the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* nothing remains but Brahman. Dualism is blotted out. Sri Ramakrishna now attained Brahman, which, in the language of the Sufis, is called '*baqa*'.

TWO SCHOOLS OF VEDANTA

There are two Vedantic schools—one of Śāṅkara which is the pure Advaita school and the other of Rāmānuja which is the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* school. The absolute non-dualist considers the universe unreal and the Absolute the only reality. The second school which is relatively non-dualist recognizes Brahman as the only reality, yet looks upon the world of phenomena as radiant with the attributes of Brahman. Sri Rama-

krishna did not ignore the objects on which the Absolute—the Sun—shines. In recognizing the significance of the phenomenal world, while at the same time emphasizing the non-duality of the Absolute Truth, he came very close to the Sufis who look upon God as transcendent and immanent at one and the same time.

‘AS MANY FAITHS, SO MANY PATHS’

In 1864 Sri Ramakrishna met Tota Puri and in 1866 he received initiation in Islamic spirituality from a Sufi ascetic named Govinda. Some time later he meditated on Christ and his ideals. It was in this way that Sri Ramakrishna discovered that the paths followed by different religions ultimately lead to the same spiritual realization. This led him to proclaim: ‘As many faiths, so many paths.’ At the same time, he recognized the pluralistic make-up of the human mind, each man or group representing one of the different stages in religious evolution. The long period of Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual practices came to an end in 1872. The phase of his life as a *guru* now began. For the next fourteen years till his passing away on Monday, 16 August 1886 he lived the life of an illumined teacher.

PARALLELS BETWEEN RAMAKRISHNA AND THE SUFIS

I shall now try to show how the utterances of Sri Ramakrishna regarding the manner in which a true devotee should conduct himself were not unlike those of the Sufis.

After his first vision of the Divine Mother, Sri Ramakrishna became so sensitive that he avoided all contacts with men. At night, when everyone was asleep he would arise and go out, returning after the day-break. The plot of land lying to the north of the temple was a dense jungle. This jungle was known to have been a graveyard. Sri Ramakrishna chose this place for his spiritual exercises and he spent his afternoons and nights there. A similar experience was undergone by a Moslem saint of Bengal of the latter part of the nineteenth century. He was born in Midnapur and lived in Calcutta. His name is Sayed Sah Murshid Ali Quaderi. He lost his father when he was 16. The death of his father wrought in him a

great change. He now passed his days absorbed in meditation and shunned human company. At night he would sit awake at the shrine of his father and in the morning would retire into the solitude of the forest not very far away from the town. Without sleep at night or rest by day, with but casual food to break his fast, he lived in the woods for forty days at a stretch. All this was a preparation for assuming the spiritual mantle of his father.

Praying to the Divine Mother, Sri Ramakrishna would cry: 'O Mother, have pity on me; reveal Thyself to Thy unworthy son. I do not want comfort, nor do I hanker after wealth or prestige. I only want Thee and Thee alone.' Compare this to the prayer of Rabia who is described as 'a woman who lost herself in union with the Divine'. She used to say that the best thing for the servant who desires to be near his God is to possess nothing in this world save Him. She prayed: 'Oh my Lord! If I worship Thee from fear of hell, burn me in hell and if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me thence; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine eternal beauty.' Al Muhasibi, a ninth century Sufi of Baghdad, spoke of meditation much in the same way as Sri Ramakrishna himself did. Muhasibi said: 'Meditation is the gate of knowledge of God'. Though the servant were to serve God with outward acts of devotion for a thousand years and a thousand years again and then were not acquainted with the practice of meditation, all his service would increase his distance from God. The chief part of the recollection of God is keeping close to Him.

THE DEMOCRACY OF RELIGIONS

Sri Ramakrishna was a believer in the equality of faiths: they are equally valid in leading to God. He could say to his disciples: 'I have practised all religions, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. . . . I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths. You must try all beliefs and traverse all the different ways once.' He has established the democracy of religions.

He said: 'As you rest firmly on your own faith and opinion, so allow others also equal liberty to stand by theirs.' He felt God as the centre of an illimitable variety. Although Ramakrishna is no longer in the flesh, he is watching us from above. Let us practise in letter and spirit what he has taught us, if we have to earn the privilege of being his true followers.

OUR HOPE OF SALVATION

The saints do not die. On discarding their bodies at death, their souls enter the realm of immortality and continue to influence and inspire men on earth. In each individual there is a flowing current of love. It may not find an outlet for a long time. But it never loses the tendency to run toward the infinite ocean of eternal love. Herein lies our hope of salvation.*

SRI RAMAKRISHNA FROM THE CHRISTIAN STANDPOINT

The Rt. Rev. John W. Sadiq

IT has been well said that man is incorrigibly religious and that he is a worshipping animal. This may sound odd in an age which is increasingly critical of the traditional religious ways of life and thought. But, if we ponder deeply over what religion really stands for, namely: faith in, and commitment and devotion to, the Spirit pervading the material world, we find that all that has happened in the unbelieving world is that the centre of faith, commitment, and devotion has, for many, shifted from the ultimate Reality we call God to something else. It could be the self, a country, or an ideology. Some people even worship their doubts and beliefs. Man has to believe in something or someone. His very psychological make-up makes this inevitable. The real problem in the modern age thus lies not in scepticism or lack of faith, but in the focus of such faith and commitment. When it comes to faith in God, there is no doubt that for an increasing number of people, though their number is small, God not only does not convey any meaning but also has, in fact, become irrelevant. Even within the Christian Church there is a school of thought which preaches the death of God, although this does not necessarily imply atheism, but a denial of the traditional concepts of God. Nevertheless, for millions of people all over the world, God is a living Reality. But a quiet, normal life does not hit the headlines of the newspapers, whereas a scandal in a married life does. So, for millions, faith in and commitment to the ultimate Reality, that is God, remains the dominant undercurrent of life.

Why has faith in God waned for even the few in this age? Perhaps the major reason is the stress on material objects which science has been analysing and harnessing. Mankind, at least a section of it, has become so obsessed with the advance of science that spiritual realities and moral values have taken

a second place. Secondly, the changes which have taken place in this century, or even during the last fifty years, are greater than those brought about in all the centuries before. In a world of flux and change, the unchanging Reality of God appears difficult to grasp. Thirdly, man is so impressed by power and dimension that the gentle voice of God is drowned by the noise of machines and the marvels of atomic power.

**A HOST OF SAINTS: SRI RAMAKRISHNA IN THE
FOREMOST RANK**

The silent and quiet ways of God are not understood by the material, sceptic, hectic world. But in the midst of all that makes faith in an ultimate Reality difficult, are born from time to time men and women who by their life and experience stir up in the heart of their fellow men and women the dormant embers of faith and set them on the road to spiritual discovery, on to a voyage into that unseen ocean of Love which lies behind the created universe and makes it go round.

India, as religious mother of half the mankind, has produced a host of such saints. It is not necessary to mention them, but it is in the foremost rank of this host that we should count Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

The birth of Sri Ramakrishna, known in his early life as Gadadhar, is surrounded by stories which to a prosaic mind appear fanciful. Any miracle is questioned by persons with a pseudo-scientific outlook. To the eyes of the faithful the miracle lies, in the words of a writer, not in survival but arrival of such souls; the very advent of such spiritual giants is a miracle. The birth of Jesus was such an event, as was Sri Ramakrishna's.

The boyhood of Gadadhar was marked by an intuitive love for God. He cared little for formal education and revelled in the divine beauty of nature. This again takes us to the boyhood of Jesus when at the age of 12 he was found in the temple at Jerusalem sitting among the doctors. And when asked by the anxious parents why he behaved that way, the answer came: 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house (or,

as another translation puts it, about my Father's business)?' And then He, later in His teachings, went on to point to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

An intense craving for the vision of God led Gadadhar to strange ecstasies and privations which, to an ordinary devotee, would have proved fatal. But as the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament (11:6) says: 'Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek Him.' Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' Truly blessed was Gadadhar who saw God face to face. When Narendra asked Him 'Have you seen God?' his answer was: 'Yes, I see Him more clearly and intensely than I see you.' Very few can claim such direct experience. With this indelible experience, Sri Ramakrishna started a movement which will go on, for, as St. Augustine has said in his Confessions: 'O God, thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts find no rest until they rest in Thee.' Through *bhakti* (devotion), *jñāna* (knowledge), *yoga* (concentration), and *karma* (work) Sri Ramakrishna had found the goal of human longing and now he was ready to return to the world of men to remove from their life the illusions of transient existence.

Having found the goal of his soul's desire, Sri Ramakrishna propounded that real experience of God was impossible for men unless they were freed from the shackles of poverty, hunger, and ignorance. However, it was left to his disciple, Narendra, who later took the monastic name of Swami Vivekananda, to start the Ramakrishna Mission which is doing so much to enrich men's soul through the removal of these hurdles to spiritual progress.

REVERENCE FOR WOMANHOOD

Another aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's character for which, as a Christian, I feel thankful to God was his reverence for womanhood. It was through the motherhood concept of God and his devotion to Kālī that he developed a new perspective

on woman. This again reminds me of the attitude Jesus took towards women. He not only accepted their ministry but made a woman the first witness of His resurrection. Gandhiji brought women out in the stage of political life. But it is to Sri Ramakrishna that we must trace this reverence for womanhood.

THE HARMONY OF RELIGIONS

There is one other aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's inspiration which I must mention namely the harmony of religions as a basis for human understanding. To him, from his own personal experience of Islam and Christianity, all religions were true, being different roads to the same goal. Like the Quakers he saw 'that of God in every man'. How badly the world needs a fresh understanding of the fellowship of those who are pilgrims on the path to God ! It is this concept which has inspired the 'secular' character of the Indian Constitution in which all religions are equally treated and liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship are guaranteed.

TALES AND PARABLES AS THE MEDIUM OF SPIRITUAL TRUTHS

Like Christ, Sri Ramakrishna conveyed the highest spiritual and moral truths through tales and parables. The fine collection of these published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Madras, has added much to the spiritual treasure of mankind. Among his sayings two have appealed to me particularly. Given by Max Müller in *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings* they are as follows:

'Man is like a pillow case. The colour of one may be red, another black, but all contain the same cotton. So it is with man—one is beautiful, one is black, another is holy, a fourth wicked; but the Divine dwells in them all.'¹

'So long as the bee is outside the petals of the lotus, and has not tasted its honey, it hovers round the flower, emitting its buzzing sound; but when it is inside the flower, it drinks its nectar noiselessly. So long as a man quarrels and disputes about doctrines and dogmas, he has not tasted the nectar of true faith; when he has tasted it he becomes still.'²

ATTITUDE TO SIN

There is, however, one aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching which I find difficult to grasp—his attitude to sin.³ With his own heights of perfection perhaps it was difficult for him to see the havoc which sin plays in your life and mine—all the bribery and corruption, exploitation and violence, which have become such a threat to our national life. It is wonderful for man to realize the Divine in him, but he must also know there is a devil to be cast out. Most of us are like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. The very presence of sin prevents us from realizing our kinship with God. This is why in the Christian faith such a central place is given to the Cross which deals with the problem of sin. However, Sri Ramakrishna's emphasis upon the Divine is also essential, because it is only when this happens that man can realize how far he has fallen away from his true destiny.

EXAMPLE OF LIVING FAITH AND LIMITLESS LOVE

Romain Rolland called Sri Ramakrishna 'the younger brother of our Christ'. I shall conclude by joining hands with Mahatma Gandhi who in his foreword to *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* published by Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, wrote:

'In this age of scepticism Ramakrishna presents an example of a bright and living faith which gives solace to thousands of men and women who would otherwise have remained without spiritual light. Ramakrishna's life was an object-lesson in Ahimsa. His love knew no limits, geographical or otherwise. May his divine love be an inspiration to all who read the following pages.'*

* *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture*, September 1975.

NOTES:

¹ First Indian Edition, 1951, p. 101.

² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³ Sri Ramakrishna's attitude to sin is expressed in the following words: 'Once someone gave me a book of the Christians. I asked him to read it to me. It talked about nothing but sin. . . . The wretch who constantly

RELIGION AS INTERPRETED BY SRI RAMAKRISHNA

Hossainur Rahman

SRI Ramakrishna was by upbringing a Brahmin priest, by conviction a humanist, by instinct a born teacher, by accident a brilliant conversationalist. Ramakrishna was more personal than formal, more emotional than theoretical. His only justification for speaking to us on the vast subject of man and God was that he cared about man-God relations more, I think, than anything else.

His God was next of kin. To him spirituality was a compulsive necessity and not a fashionable craze, nor a pursuit of magic. His was a religion—all permeating, all pervading. His communion with Goddess Kālī was a fact felt, a fact proved by Him. Yet he would talk of daily normal things most intensely. His discourse? Always illuminating—world's greatest revelation. As he lived, wept, loved, he gave lucid exposition of the mystic. In his whole life the search for relevance became a major mark of religion. Therefore, he could always keep the necessary balance between the two poles—the personal and the social. His religion was not merely knowing the truth, but embodying it, living it, giving 'himself unconditionally to it'.

Obviously he attacked rigid religious tradition. He replaced rigidity by 'unfettered spontaneity'. Earthly life for him became the occasion for only spiritual striving and practice. He helped intellectuals, common men, believers, atheists, playwrights and even prostitutes to see the relativism of all moral codes. His greatest message was that mankind needed a primarily man-bound religion. He delved deep into other religions to achieve this omega point. He experienced Islam. The experience imbued him with a degree of optimism about religious affairs that he was never to lose. As a matter of fact, he propagated the idea of comparative religion much before his European counterparts could even think of that. Surprisingly, a man having no formal education could declare that 'exclusiveness leads to fossilization'. His life and activity taught us that the prospect of mankind

lay in the context of some spiritual principle which can transcend human differences. Also, he proved that rationality is one thing and reasonableness is another. He opted for reasonableness. He could well perceive that man can talk of rationality while ending in utter unreasonableness. The whole of the twentieth century is a case in point.

In his thought processes there was no room for violence and intolerance. His faith in non-violence and love was a rock-bottom reality. Thereby he absorbed India's wit and wisdom into his psyche, giving it a modern texture, finally making it a viable practical religion. His originality consisted in the capacity of adapting the ancient Indian inspiration to its modern needs, of re-creating it in its present garb, and of rejecting the inessentials. Ramakrishna gave us a New Testament.

Still His idea of religion was that mankind is still evolving. His message was that religion stood for the extension of outlook embracing mankind. His religion envisaged that 'All or the whole, and God are identical'. To speak in today's language, Ramakrishna was a keen believer in the acceptance of pluralism; the establishment of relevance and participation in a varied universe. What Ramakrishna understood by religion has been well explained by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan: there had never been such a thing as a uniform, stationary, unchangeable Hinduism, whether in belief or in practice, but that development had occurred through the centuries. 'Hinduism' Radhakrishnan wrote, 'is a movement, not a position; a process, not a result; a growing tradition, not a fixed revelation'.

Ramakrishna therefore did not pretend to purity. On the contrary, he stood for comprehensiveness, 'not to an intensity but to a largeness of spirit'. Ramakrishna knew more than anybody else that 'Man needs a faith, a hope, and a purpose to live by and to give meaning and dignity to his existence.... Above all, he yearns for love and relatedness to other persons; he wants to gain and to hold his self-respect, and if possible the respect and admiration of others. For this respect and self-respect, he may forgo pleasures and accept pain and ordeal.' Ramakrishna's involvement in man was unique. I place Rammohun, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Rabindranath and

Gandhi in one single category. Of course, they had their own individualities, their own perspectives, their own limitations. Yet, in essentials, they were in a single family. They were the sponsors and leaders of the Modern Indian Renaissance.

Ramakrishna's greatest projection was Swami Vivekananda who brought his Guru's ideas to fruition. To him a healthy India was a craving above all else. India free from poverty, untouchability, caste system and Hindu-Muslim enmity—was his only dream. His religion was enriched by the Himalayas, the Ganges, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. His religion was further strengthened by the Vedānta, the Purāṇas and the Upaniṣads. And he visualized that mankind would some day or other abandon formal religion and ask for a new spiritual venture and vision. Mankind would come to realize: 'Religion may be a stone thrown into the world; but it must be a palpable stone and some one must throw it'. I therefore conclude with Rudlof Bultmann: Now it is either/or! Now the question is whether a man really wants God and His kingdom or the world and its goods; and the decision must be made radically.

**SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
AWAKENING IN INDIA**

THE BRAHMO MOVEMENT AND SRI RAMAKRISHNA

Swami Prabhananda

THE nineteenth century witnessed the interplay of complex historic forces which led to the emergence of a resurgent India. Among these forces, three religious groups—the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian—were vying with one another for predominance. Again, there was bitter wrangling over the beliefs and practices in the same fold and the question was how to find a point of rapport and concord among these heterogeneous elements. Even the tide of reformation and growth which had begun to flow from the synthetic ideas of Hindu and Muslim geniuses of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ceased, being clogged with the mud of backlash of medievalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Consequently, stagnation had set in and its worst victims were the Hindus. 'It seemed as if there was a paralysis of moral sensibilities and utter lack of humane feelings among the Hindus, or at least quite a large section of them.'¹ It was in these dark days of struggle of the Hindu society for survival that there appeared Sri Ramakrishna whose life and work stood out as a rare phenomenon in the history of the country. Earlier, the Brāhmo movement, an offspring of Hinduism but trying to alienate itself from the latter, had played a vital role in the Indian awakening. But Sri Ramakrishna is always remembered in the context of the Brāhmo movement, not so much for his being contemporaneous with it as for the great impact he had made on the Brāhmo movement and its exponents.

RAMMOHUN ROY

The first sign of this ferment was noticed with the appearance of Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), who belonged to the 'lineage of India's great seers'² and is remembered as the 'inaugurator of modern India.'³ Though Rammohun had not been without fore-runners⁴, his life and works gave severe jolts to the age-old traditions and faiths of a section of the Hindus and the Hindu society began to show signs of radical change.

Born on 22 May 1772 of a noble and well-to-do family of Radhanagar in the district of Hooghly, Bengal, Rammohun Roy died on 27 September 1833 in Bristol with the sacred thread on his breast and the sacred syllable 'Om' on his lips. He was married very early but his wife died; his father got him married to two more wives in a year's time. Both of them lived in his village home and seem to have never come out of purdah. He studied Bengali in his village home, Persian and Arabic at Patna, and Sanskrit in Benaras. At twenty-two, he started learning English and subsequently mastered Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and a little French. When about the age of sixteen, he composed a manuscript questioning the validity of image worship and credal superstitions of the Hindus. It upset his father so much that he drove out the youth from home.⁵

In his autobiographical letter he wrote, 'When I had reached the age of twenty, my father recalled me, and restored me to his favour; after which I first saw and began to associate with Europeans, and soon after made myself tolerably acquainted with their laws and form of government. Finding them generally more intelligent, more steady and more moderate in their conduct, I gave up my prejudice against them, and became inclined in their favour, feeling persuaded that their rule, though a foreign yoke, would lead more speedily and surely to the amelioration of the native inhabitants; and I enjoyed the confidence of several of them even in their public capacity.'⁶

In 1803, he lost his father, and the next year he published a short Persian treatise, called '*Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin*' or '*A Gift to Monotheists*', making a strong plea for a rational approach to the study of religion and for shedding sectarianism. Therein he tried to lay a common foundation of a Universal Religion in the doctrine of the Unity of the Godhead. By this time he had joined the service of the East India Company in the Revenue Department.

ATMIYA SABHA

At the age of forty-two, Rammohun settled down in Calcutta where he purchased two big houses, one at Chowringhee and the other at Manicktola. The next fourteen years saw his vari-

ous experimental efforts for religious and social reformations in the country. While he tried to bring religious principles to bear upon the needs, conditions, and problems of the people, his dynamic personality and vigorous imagination served as a potent force for revitalization of social, political, and religious values. His rational and resolute approach based upon devotional elements endeared him to the intelligentsia. Founding the Ātmiya Sabhā in 1815, he devoted himself to the worship of God, the one and indivisible. Here the members discussed the futility of image worship, evils of caste system, the barbarous practice of *satī*, etc.

After he had settled in Calcutta, 1815 Rammohun published some original texts of Vedānta and five principal Upaniṣads (*Īśa*, *Kena*, *Kaṭha*, *Muṇḍaka* and *Māṇḍūkya*) as well as their translations in vernaculars and in English with his preface and comments. His belief about the unity of Godhead and condemnation of idol-worship were, in his opinion, in conformity with the spirit of these ancient scriptures of the Hindus. Their publication soon produced an intense and widespread stir in Indian society the like of which had seldom been witnessed in Bengal. Great Sanskrit scholars like Subrahmanya Sastri, Sankar Sastri and Mrityunjay Vidyānāṅkar got involved in religious controversies with Rammohun who in his arguments effectively employed both reason and the authority of the scriptures in support of his views. Rammohun's conception of the Eternal, Unsearchable, and Immutable Being is similar to that of Saṅkara's, *nirguṇa* Brahman. But, unlike Saṅkara's, Rammohun's Brahman may be termed as the 'Vedāntic doctrine of concrete monotheism.' 'His emphasis on Īśvara made his monism synthetic, concrete, and practical.'⁷ In his 'pure and rational theism', he was widely influenced by the Mutazales and monistic Vedānta, as well as by Locke, Rousseau, Hume, and the Encyclopaedists. At all events, he studied the major religions and searched out the element common to them all, viz. the Unity of God.

MORAL PRINCIPLES

In 1820, Rammohun created an uproar by publishing a new book, *The Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happi-*

ness'. By that time he had become an admirer of Unitarian Christianity; for, according to him, 'Unitarians believe, profess, and inculcate the doctrine of the divine unity—a doctrine which I find firmly maintained both by the Christian scriptures and by our most ancient writings commonly called the Vedas.'⁸ However, he questioned the central Christian doctrines, such as Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the Resurrection and thereby got involved in religious controversies with the missionaries of Serampore, led by Marshman and Carey. Curiously enough, Rammohun failed to find out a sound rationale of morality in Hinduism and unhesitatingly declared, 'The consequence of my long and uninterrupted researches into religious truth has been that I found the doctrines of Christ more conducive to moral principles, and better adapted for the use of rational beings, than any others which have come to my knowledge.'⁹

BĀRĪMO SABHĀ AND DHARMA SABHĀ

In 1825 he established the Vedānta College for helping his countrymen to adopt 'pure and elevated theism', and eventually in 1828 he founded the 'Brāhmo Sabhā' open to all men, irrespective of colour, caste, creed, or faith. Though he claimed himself to be a propounder of 'universalism', this can hardly be accepted in its full and literal meaning, for Rammohun excluded from it all forms of polytheism, from the highest to the lowest.¹⁰

The Brāhmo Sabhā attracted a number of people and in two years enough fund was raised to purchase a house. The Sabhā's viewpoints as well as its proceedings and the excesses of 'Young Bengal' ignited the wrath of the orthodox Hindus. They organized in 1830 a rival association called Dharma Sabhā which generated a counterthrust. Radhakanta Deb (1783-1867), a famous classical scholar and a patron of Hindu College, led the opposition. In this atmosphere surcharged with hostility and hatred, Rammohun opened his new Church in a newly purchased house on 23 January 1830 (11 Māgh, 1237 B.S.). The trust deed executed by Rammohun envisaged that the building of the Samāj was to be only a meeting-house and congregation hall for the worship of the one Universal God, and that no graven image, statue, or sculpture, carving, painting, picture, portrait,

or the likeness of anything shall be admitted within. The ruling idea was that a man might be Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or Jain, and yet join in communion with the brethren of other faiths. In practice, however, the congregation of the Samāj turned out to be a congregation of Hindu theists. The five elements of worship, namely awakening (*Udbodhana*), adoration (*Ārādhana*), meditation (*Dhyāna*), prayer (*Prārthanā*), and sermon (*Upadeśa*) attracted some educated people to the congregation. Rammohun had tried to work out a rational synthesis between the higher elements of the Śāṅkara and the Rāmānuja schools of thought.¹¹ Nevertheless, the historian, Pandit Shivanath Shastri, observes, 'He (Rammohun) could not do much towards building up a constructive theism ... In fact, the mission of Rammohun was a simple one, namely to call his countrymen to discard idolatry and come to the worship of the one true God ... His work was mainly negative and reformatory and not positive and constructive.'¹² Though the activities of the Samāj were mainly spiritual and 'his aim was to reform Hindu religion,'¹³ Rammohun and his followers actively strove to cure the social malaise deeply rooted in Hindu society. Rammohun's 'social model, the Brāhmo Samāj, was but a faint external replica of the universalism he had realized in his own person.'¹⁴ His religious and social reforms attracted a few influential and educated men who, even if appreciative of the precepts, did not practise them in life. And Brāhmoism came into existence as the mouthpiece of the religious beliefs of the new aristocracy of Bengal.¹⁵

HINDU RELIGION INADEQUATE

Besides anything else, Rammohun found the prevailing system of religion of the Hindus outmoded and inefficacious. He wrote in a letter, 'The present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well-calculated to promote their political interest. The distinction of caste has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling and the multitude of rites and ceremonies have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprise....It is necessary that change should take place in their religion.'

Though Rammohun took some lessons in spiritual practices under the guidance of *Tāntrika* Hariharananda Tirthaswami, he was neither a divine nor a spiritual personality charged with the message of God and surcharged with that mystic inner urge which characterizes all the great religious divines of history. He evidently failed to realize that Hinduism was not a monolithic structure but 'a league of religions with a rather loose federal structure, and with no strong central authority.'¹⁶ Moreover, his intellectual approach, bereft of expressed emotional elements, had little appeal to the common people 'who were roused and agitated but were not drawn into the movement.'¹⁷

NO NEW RELIGION

Nevertheless, he never intended 'to constitute an ideal faith of a new religion which would do away with the evils of all sectarianism.'¹⁸ To the Hindus overridden with tradition, orthodoxy, and misguided beliefs, Rammohun brought their scriptures, interpreted them, and gave repeated warnings about the derogatory effect of the difference that existed between the profession and practice of the Hindus.¹⁹ Evidently, his main aim in even reforming Hinduism was to create social and political opportunities for his countrymen. As to the eclectic nature of his faith, 'it would probably be true to say that he got his moral inspiration from Christianity, his metaphysical background from Hinduism, and his theological tendency from Muhammedanism.'²⁰

The future of the Brāhmo movement was threatened when Rammohun left Calcutta on 15 November 1830 and landed at Liverpool on 8 April 1831. In England he gave religious discourses and did some valuable work both for his country and for England. And an overworked Rammohun died in 1833. Evaluating Rammohun's contribution, C. F. Andrews observed, 'But even more important than these signal changes, great as they were, was the new reforming spirit, the new outlook upon Christianity and Western civilization, which Rammohun Roy introduced to his own fellow countrymen in India. This spirit, which connoted a new moral

fervour and a new intellectual freedom, has been the main cause ever since of the liberalizing and humanizing of Indian thought and life. . . . It has helped to remove that crushing burden of convention which more than anything weighed down the life of India and prevented it from becoming creative and original in the past.²¹

Naturally, when the dust of controversies subsided, the historically persisting values survived and, indeed, reasserted themselves. In the meantime, the rational idealism interspersed with occasional blind Anglophilism, particularly open disavowal of time-honoured social customs by the ultra-radicals who were inspired by the tradition of the French revolution and English radicalism and the Anglo-Indian leader, Derozio (1809-1831), had created some consternation. But they failed to excite any appreciable interest outside their charmed circle and to build up a sustained reform movement. On the other hand, David Here (1775-1842), one of the contemporaries of Rammohun and a free-thinker, inspired generations of educated Bengali youths to acquire modern education and outlook. These enlightened English-educated youths raised their voice of revolt. And almost simultaneously, the Hindu revival movement defending Pūrāṇic religion and Hindu orthopraxis was championed by orthodox scholars like Pandit Shashadhar Tarkachudamani, Krishnaprasanna Sen, and Shibchandra Vidyarnaba. The moderate movement rallied around the towering personality of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891). And the writings of Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Ramesh Chandra Dutta, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Nabin Chandra Sen, and Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay contributed to the growth and strengthening of the spirit of reawakened Hindu religion, culture, and tradition.

TATTVABODHINI SABHĀ

When Rammohun passed away, his brain-child, the Brāhmo Samāj, was perhaps a little more than a dream. The most faithful of his followers, Ramchandra Vidyavagish (1786-1845) kept the lamp burning, but the decline of the Samāj was visible and the cause seemed gradually to languish. Debendranath

Tagore (1817-1905), son of prince Dwarakanath Tagore (1794-1845), a close ally of Rammohun, revitalized the Brāhmo Samāj from its moribund condition. Though Debendranath had his education at the Anglo-Hindu School, he had sharply alienated himself from 'Young Bengal'. Turning away from the life of luxury which surrounded him in his paternal mansion, Debendranath gathered around him kindred spirits and founded in 1839 the Tattvabodhinī Sabhā which played a significant role in stimulating the cultural life of mid-nineteenth century Bengal.

Along with nineteen associates, Debendranath was solemnly initiated into Brāhmo faith according to the newly drawn up Brāhmo covenant on 7 Pous, Śaka 1765 (1843). His entry breathed a new life into the languid Brāhmo Samāj. The resuscitated Samāj took up the cause of the reformed religion but laid emphasis on the essence of the traditional culture. In 1844 Debendranath established the Tattvabodhinī Pāṭhśālā, a theological school, and in the following year sent four students to Benaras to study the Vedas. The anti-proselytization campaign of the Samāj brought its members closer to the Hindu conservatives. Nevertheless, Debendranath, like Rammohun, did not believe in asceticism, renunciation, and pilgrimage, long cherished by the Hindus. Among the close associates of Debendranath, Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820-1880) served as the 'conscience' of the Brāhmo Samāj and engineered an intellectual revolt against the Brāhmo orthodoxy leading to some radical changes in the religious ideas of the Brāhmos.

In order to popularize Rammohun's works on Brāhmoism and to enhance the knowledge of the people, a Bengali monthly, *Tattvabodhinī Patrikā* with Akshay Kumar Dutta as its editor was started on 16 August 1843. When Alexander Duff of the Presbyterian Church bitterly attacked Hindu religion and culture in his book *India and Indian Mission*, Debendranath put up a formidable opposition by writing a rejoinder *Vaidāntic Doctrines Vindicated*. It could hardly silence Duff who severely criticized the Brāhmos for their belief in the infallibility of the Vedas. The ultra-radicals too criticized Brāhmoism as a 'half-way house' and the Brāhmos as 'hypocrites'. About

this time, in 1846, Debendranath's father died, and he was practically excommunicated for his refusal to perform the *Śrādh* ceremony according to traditional rites. In 1847 the four scholars he had sent to Benaras returned and submitted that the doctrine of the Vedic infallibility was not tenable. At a general meeting of the Brāhmos it was agreed that the holy texts like the Vedas and Upaniṣads were not to be accepted as infallible guides and that reason and conscience were to be their supreme authority.²² Himself steeped in the Upaniṣads, an inspired Debendranath, nevertheless, made in three hours a compilation of select passages from the Upaniṣads upholding the truth of monotheism. This volume called *Brāhmi Upanishad* or *Brāhmo Dharma* (first published in 1850) contained the *vīja* or 'seed', a brief outline of the Brāhmo doctrine in four statements, the *Brahmopāsanā* or order of service, and select passages from the Hindu scriptures. Consistent with the principles of natural theism, Debendranath framed a new covenant. Gradually he also worked out a philosophical foundation of Brāhmoism which was later published in three books, *Ātmattatvavidyā* (1850-51), *Brāhmo Dharmer Mat O Biswās* (1859-60) and *Brāhmo Dharmer Vyākhyān* (1860-61). This work of philosophical reconstruction must be regarded as one of Debendranath's greatest achievements.²³ But shorn of Vedic authority, Brāhmoism had now to fall back upon natural religion; its truths depended on self-realization (*ātmapratyaya siddha*), pure heart, and rationality. Debendranath wrote in a letter, 'Brāhmoism came into being along with the creation of the human soul. That is why Brāhmoism is the eternal spiritual religion... The more a soul will be advanced, the more the higher aspects of Brāhmoism will be revealed to him.'²⁴ However noble and pure Brāhmoism might have become, Ram-mohun's original doctrine was changed beyond recognition. In his attempts for consolidation and propagation of the Brāhmo movement, Debendranath upheld that Brāhmoism represented the highest form of Hinduism, and that its mission was chiefly religious as distinguished from social reform.²⁵ Pursuant to this ideal, he, however, endeavoured hard to protect Brāhmoism from idolatry, Christianity, and Advaita Vedānta.

PROTESTANT HINDUISM

However, playing the role of Protestant Hinduism, Brāhmoism alienated itself from Hinduism for sometime and discarded Vedānta. On this Pandit Sitanath Tattvabhusan, in his '*Autobiography*', published in 1943, wrote, '... the discarding of Vedāntism by the Brāhmo Samāj under the Maharshi was a great mistake, — one which has done and was doing a good deal of harm to the Brāhmo Samāj. It had led to neglect, on the part of the Brāhmos, of our ancient scriptures, and was thus discouraging scholarship and causing spiritual sterility. It has also created an unnecessary gulf between the old and the new society, leading many Brāhmos to call themselves non-Hindus and cease from taking a just pride in the glorious literary and spiritual achievements of the Hindu race.'²⁶

While Rammohun was a rationalist to the core, Debendranath often swung from reason to intuition and back again to reason. Debendranath was a mystic too, and on several occasions he got illuminating experiences from intuitive knowledge. Divine orders (*ādeśa*) played an important role in his spiritual life as well as in the development of the Samāj during his time. Henceforth such living communion with God became an important principle of Brāhmoism.²⁷

KESHUB CHANDRA SEN

When the Brāhmo Samāj was about to fall into stagnation, again it was whipped up and organized into a powerful movement by Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-1884), who belonged to an influential family of the Vaiṣṇava sect. Initiated into *Harinām* at the age of five²⁸, Keshub was brought up in an English school. Christ had touched his heart and ever since he remained a champion of Christ. Debendranath inducted him into the movement in 1857. Debendranath had deep affection and admiration for this gifted young man, while Keshub Chandra regarded Debendranath with love and reverence. Thereby a new life was infused into the movement and it became a real power in the land and attracted bright young men into the Brāhmo movement as never before or ever since. Keshub

Chandra organized a Brāhmo Vidyālaya in 1859, ran a Sangat Sabhā for religious discourses from 1860, and founded the important English journal, *Indian Mirror*, in 1861 and the Bengali journal, *Dharmatattva*, in 1864. Dictated by his inner voice in 1862, Debendranath appointed Keshub Chandra an *Ācārya*, the first non-Brāhmin in the post, and conferred on him the title of Brahmānanda. While Rev. Lalbehari Dey admitted that Brāhmoism was a revolt against superstition, he simultaneously asserted that the role of Brāhmoism as regards the interest of the sinners was of no worth at all.²⁹ The Christian missionary critics like him and Rev. Mr Dyson were, however, silenced by Keshub Chandra's celebrated lecture 'The Brāhmo Samāj Vindicated' (1863). It was here that Keshub proudly declared, 'the Brāhmo Samāj bade farewell to Vedāntism.'

In 1864 and 1865 Keshub Chandra undertook missionary tours in Madras and Bombay and was received with great honour and enthusiasm. Soon the movement assumed an all-India dimension and as many as fifty-four branches were established all over India. Brāhmo preachers, particularly Bijaykrishna Goswami (1841-1899), created unprecedented enthusiasm among the youth of erstwhile East Bengal. The Christian missionaries, too, reckoned the movement as a 'power of no mean order'.

Debendranath had clung to the traditional Hindu ritual practice against which radicals like Keshub Chandra raised their voices. They demanded of Debendranath, the *pradhānācārya*, that the Brāhmo preachers must discard the Brāhminic symbol of sacred thread, that inter-caste marriage should be promoted, and that women should be allowed to join the church congregation. These were not acceptable to Debendranath. He disliked any change in the Brāhmo customs unless it was absolutely necessary. In fact, 'the temperaments of the two men differed too widely to allow of a permanent co-operation.'³⁰ The mystique of power built around Keshub Chandra over the years, suspicion, and persistent misunderstanding widened the rift between the two groups with the passage of time and a split became unavoidable. The last stroke was Keshub Chandra's lecture on 'Jesus Christ, Asia and Europe' (1866). Following bitter criticism from the elderly people of the Samāj,

Keshub Chandra broke away from the original church and founded the 'Brāhmo Samāj of India' on 11 November 1866, while the original Samāj came to be known as 'Ādi Brāhmo Samāj'.

BHAKTI ELEMENT

Paradoxical as it may seem, Keshub Chandra's joining had been the delight and despair of the Brāhmo movement in the years beyond sixties. Admirers of Keshub Chandra appreciated not only his dynamism but considered the reformation movement under his leadership as the panacea for all the existing social and political ills. Brilliant and colourful, he had attracted a number of outstanding personalities. Following a deep study of the Bible, the works of Theodore Parker, Prof. Newman, Miss Cobb, and others, there had developed among Keshub Chandra and his close followers a spirit of repentance and devout prayer. Under his guidance his followers attended daily prayer with fervour. The infusion of *bhakti* element found easy expression in prayer, *saṁkīrtana*, and *utsava*. A systematic liturgy for the service of the Samāj was introduced. *Brāhmotsava*, *Māghotsava*, *Bhādrotsava*, and other festivals added life and colour. The newly constructed 'Brāhmo Mandira' was opened in 1869. Keshub Chandra wanted to establish a national religion³¹ based on faith in 'a living God of Providence'. Simultaneously his longing for fellowship with God led him to retire occasionally and spend time in spiritual practices.

Keshub Chandra gathered round him young scholars and reformers who soon outstripped him in radical thinking and became critical of his undemocratic management of the Samāj, his doctrine of *ādeśa*, and his attitude towards restricted freedom of women. In 1867 God was announced as the President, Keshub Chandra as the Secretary and Pratap Chandra Mozoomdar as the Assistant Secretary of the Samāj. The rebel group publicly criticized in the newly started monthly, *Samadarśhi*, the Brāhmo Samāj of India and its leader Keshub Chandra. Now a depressed Keshub Chandra led his close followers to a new ascetic life with fresh vows of poverty and began living in a garden named Sādhana Kānana. Some days later, he stream-

lined his followers into four specialized groups of *Yoga*, *Bhakti*, *Jñāna*, and *Sevā* depending on their personal approach to spiritual practice. These innovations, however, failed to bring the opposition back to allegiance. Many Brāhmos could not reconcile with his doctrine of Great men, *bhakti* and *vairāgya*, and *ādeśa* and special dispensation. The difference between the two groups grew apace.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA ON THE SCENE

In the meantime, there had appeared Sri Ramakrishna on the scene. Ever since Sri Ramakrishna and Keshub Chandra came to know each other on 15 March 1875, sketches of the saint and his teachings were published in the Brāhmo journals. To the Christian missionaries, Sri Ramakrishna 'was a half-crazy ascetic, unlearned, but with some poetic talent and personal magnetic influence.'³² Sri Ramakrishna's idea of God 'seems crude and thin to a Christian',³³ whereas Sri Ramakrishna, the 'sweet-souled devotee', was an enigma to the progressive Brāhmos. Observed the Brāhmo leader Pratap Chandra Mozoomdar: 'Thus, though a Hindu of Hindus, Ramakrishna was not a Hindu of the ordinary type. He was not a Śivite, not a Śākta, not a Vedāntist; yet he was a totality of all these. He worshipped Śiva, he worshipped Kālī, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, he was a confirmed advocate of Vedāntic doctrines. He was a believer in idolatry, and yet a faithful and most devoted meditator of the perfections of the Great Formless One, Whom he called *Akhaṇḍa Satchidānanda*. This strange eclecticism suggested to Keshub Chandra's appreciative mind the thought of broadening the spiritual structure of his own movement.'³⁴

About Keshub Chandra's achievements, Sri Ramakrishna observed, 'He (Keshub) couldn't achieve very much because he wanted to satisfy both God and the world.'³⁵ Nonetheless, Sri Ramakrishna's influence brought significant change in him. Sri Ramakrishna reminisced, 'Keshab Sen used to come here frequently. As a result, he changed a great deal. Of late, he became quite a remarkable man.'³⁶ Though he started with a large fund of public sympathy and co-operation of his brilliant colleagues, Keshub Chandra failed to stave off another split.

The final open schism came over the marriage of his minor daughter with the prince of Coochbehar under the old rites and it proved to be a fatal blow to the Brāhmo movement itself. The radical Brāhmos, a large body of intelligent, dedicated young men, founded the 'Sādhāran Brāhmo Samāj' in 1878 with a catholic approach and democratic constitution. Though its Bengali organ solemnly declared in 1882 that the Brāhmo ideals included religious radicalism and the universal liberation of all people, yet they had 'very little theological difference of a substantial nature with the immediate followers of Keshub Chandra Sen.'³⁷ Philanthropic activities and democratic organization were the salient features of the Samāj. A new *mandira* in Cornwallis Street was opened on 22 January 1881. The Samāj considered the communion with God an important mode of spiritual culture, but it was against mediation between God and men. But too much emphasis on democratic Church government, intellectual pursuit, and philanthropic activities gradually dried up the sap of spirituality.

NEW DISPENSATION

Considering himself a 'singular man' and a chosen vessel for revealing His will, Keshub Chandra formally announced his Navavidhān or 'New Dispensation' during the anniversary festival of 1880. Standing at the threshold of a new career with the shadow of Jesus on the one hand, and the shadow of Chaitanya on the other, Keshub Chandra was strongly influenced by Sri Ramakrishna so much so that in 1879 he had spoken of a revival 'on the lines of a new revelation, a new life, altogether a new departure.' On 1 February 1880 Keshub Chandra, nonetheless, announced in the *Sunday Mirror*, 'Let our readers accept the cheering message. A new dispensation has come down upon the Brāhmo Samāj which proclaims a new programme to India.' His 'New Dispensation' was to embrace the unity of all religions, all scriptures, and all prophets in God.

Personal differences and rivalries brought about a new *Samāj*, but very much less a religion with a new content as was claimed by the 'New Dispensation'. Despite his increasing differences with the new radicals, Keshub Chandra was hungering for spi-

ritual realizations and his close contact with Sri Ramakrishna had opened up before him a new vista. Admiring the Brāhmic approach, Sri Ramakrishna told Keshub Chandra and other Brāhmos, 'Yours also is the path of devotion. Blessed you are indeed that you chant the name of Hari and sing the Divine Mother's glories. I like your attitude. You don't call the world a dream, like the non-dualists. You are not Brahmajñānis like them; you are *Bhaktas*, lovers of God. That you speak of Him as a Person is also good. You are devotees. You will certainly realize Him if you call on Him with sincerity and earnestness.'³⁸ A direct impact of Sri Ramakrishna became evident in Keshub's adoring God as Mother. Though Keshub Chandra used the term 'motherhood of God' thirty-two times before meeting Sri Ramakrishna,³⁹ the 'sympathy, friendship, and example of the Paramahansa converted the Motherhood of God into a subject of special culture with him.'⁴⁰ However, an analysis of Keshub Chandra's religion shows that it was a sort of conglomerate of Brāhmo rationalism, Vaiṣṇava emotionalism, Christian supernaturalism, and Vedāntic mysticism.⁴¹ The 'New Dispensation', like a string, sought to bind together all religions into an all-comprehensive eclectic religion. Thereby Keshub Chandra dreamt of bringing all nations of the world into one great brotherhood. 'Eclecticism was superficially easy, but it covered a mass of potential discord between seemingly opposed factors like science and religion. Christianity and Hinduism, asceticism and worldliness, which only gained cohesion from the force of Keshub's personality.'⁴² Nonetheless, his messianic zeal at one time evident in the country's history of social and religious upheaval only proved that Keshub Chandra was 'the truest and noblest result of his own religion. Outside himself, the result was disappointing.'⁴³ But 'his friends understood him very little and the public not at all,' opined his nephew P. L. Sen.⁴⁴

Besides Keshub Chandra's rich contribution in the field of journalism, education, social reform, religious reform, and national awareness, his significant contribution lay perhaps in his teachings on the threefold communion with God through Nature, through Self, and through History or Humanity with their necessary corollaries and implications.⁴⁵ Also, he enriched the

Brāhmo mode of spiritual culture by developing an elaborate system of worship comprising *ārādhanā* (adoration), *dhyāna* (direct communion), and *prārthanā* (prayer). Though nurtured in this atmosphere, his disciple and heir apparent Pratap Chandra Mozoomder (1840-1905) turned into a Brāhmo-Christian. Pratap Chandra, the author of 'Oriental Christ', written in 1893, led his followers to observe Good Friday in 1901 and to celebrate 'Christian Utsab' in 1903 at Bankipur, Bihar. After Keshub Chandra's passing in 1884, the spirit of the Brāhmo movement was focussed mainly by the Sādhāran Brāhmo Samāj.

AN ASSESSMENT

Now, to assess the Brāhmo movement's contribution to the religious history of India, we may refer to D. S. Sharma who observes, '...in spite of all the invaluable work it has done by way of social reform and in spite of the many distinguished men which it had in its fold, it has remained a mere speck on the waters of Indian religions. It has remained a rather high-brow religion whose pieties are often somewhat inflated. Its sermons are eloquent and flamboyant, but they frequently jump into vacuity.'⁴⁶ Along with this we may quote Swami Vivekananda, who in his letter of 24 May 1894 addressed to Dr J. H. Wright of Harvard University, wrote, 'The Brahmo Samaj like Christian Science in your country spread in Calcutta for a certain time and then died out.... It has done its work, viz. social reform. Its religion was not worth a cent, and so it must die out.... I am even now a great sympathizer of its reforms; but the 'booby' religion could not hold its own against the old Vedānta.'⁴⁷

Although Rammohun wanted that 'some change should take place in their (Hindu's) religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort',⁴⁸ he failed to offer any appreciably concrete programme of social reform. Debendranath lacked enthusiasm for social reform, but Keshub Chandra brought man's social life within the domain of his religious duty. Besides its fight against caste prejudices, early marriage, *kuṭin* polygamy, and the ban on widow marriage, the Brāhmo Samāj

from the time of Debendranath rendered valuable social services in the field of education, particularly among women. Some members of the Sādhūran Brāhmo Samāj even participated in active politics. It must be admitted that 'at least from the sixties of the nineteenth century, it (Brāhmo Samāj) consistently advocated a policy of social reform and acted as a pressure group, trying to modify the age-old caste practices of the Hindus and to popularize ideas of emancipation of women and reformed family life among the latter.'⁴⁹ More significant, however, is the fact that the Brāhmo movement did never have a mass base nor did it ever try to achieve it. Rather its despise of the folk religion was too evident.⁵⁰ Even as Hindu protestantism, it failed to stir the heart of the nation and its hold remained limited to a few persons brought up in a closed and particular atmosphere. The Brāhmo movement's intolerant and iconoclastic attitude, insistence on monotheism, doing away with the principle of mediation between the finite and the infinite by rejecting the doctrine of *Āvatāra*, lack of any accepted and authoritative religious canon, propagation of social reform modelled on Western liberalism, etc. failed to strike roots in the heart of the common people.

Hinduism's unique capacity for self-adaptation to new demands made the Brāhmo Samāj appear no longer as exalted as it seemed in the beginning. In fact, Hinduism, in the meantime, had gradually absorbed much of its protestant elements within its fold. Besides, the Brāhmos failed to rise above sectarian squabbles to fulfil the aspiration of the nation which was about to shake off its long persisting inertia. Thereby, the Brāhmo movement practically withered into insignificance by the test of so short a time, whereas the renascent Hinduism quickly adjusted itself to the liberal scientific thoughts of the West and was welcomed by the nation.

RELATIONS WITH SRI RAMAKRISHNA

While Debendranath estimated Sri Ramakrishna as nothing more than a mad priest, Keshub Chandra had the tenderest of relations with Sri Ramakrishna; Bijaykrishna revered him al-

most as his *guru* but Shivanath could never make up his mind about him. But Sri Ramakrishna's contact with the eminent men, particularly some of the pioneers of progressive thoughts, made him aware of the inadequacy of their achievements as well as their unsatisfied aspirations and the void he was to fill in the soul of India. The educated people were floundering through the cross-currents of India's glorious heritage and the Western rationalistic thoughts. An atmosphere of uncertainty was prevailing when Sri Ramakrishna had stepped in. Amidst the confusing thought currents, Hinduism welcomed him as a rock where she could lie in anchor. Sri Ramakrishna with his fresh and vast spiritual experiences could dispel the gathering mist of doubts, rediscover the basic truths, and employ them to meet the contemporary challenges. These spiritual truths, though eternal in essence, had to be revalidated and redemonstrated in order to solve the manifold problems the nation was beset with. Moreover, as his was the voice of realization, it went into the heart of the nation and restored it firmly on its feet.

LIFE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

Born in 1836 in a village called Kamarpukur, about seventy-five miles north-west of Calcutta, Sri Ramakrishna spent the first sixteen years of his life in the parental home. His prodigious memory, sharp intellect, fine artistic sense and aptitude and, above all, his credulous nature endeared him to all the villagers. At seven, his father died and the mirthful boy now turned sombre, thoughtful, and reserved. The mystic experience he had of the Divine Mother at the tender age of eight opened up a new course of life for him. Circumstances led him to accept for some time the job of an assistant to his elder brother, Ramkumar, at the Kālī temple of Dakshineswar. There he spent almost thirty years of his life, subjected himself to many spiritual disciplines, realizing God in various stages and having spiritual experiences of both the orthodox and unorthodox types. He did not stop even there. Whenever he heard of a new religious movement, he took the earliest opportunity to meet its exponents and study it. As a result,

his religious activity and experiences were, in fact, comprehensive to a degree that had perhaps never before been attained by any other religious genius, in India or elsewhere.⁵¹ At twenty-four, he had married Sarada, the six-year old daughter of Ramachandra Mukherjee, but led a life of utter renunciation. The austerities had left his physical frame shattered but there was in his face a fullness, a childlike simplicity, a saintly humbleness, and an unspeakable sweetness of expression. He not only demonstrated himself as the most shining spiritual luminary in the nineteenth century religious firmament but also embodied in himself the modern method and model of dialogue among men and women of divergent religious beliefs and practices. While the non-conformist conscience of the Brāhmos barred many from joining the congregations of their various sects, the liberal and enlightened outlook of the saint and the catholicity that pervaded the atmosphere Sri Ramakrishna breathed, drew around him one and all. Having had in him the makings of an illumined seer, he seldom, if ever, entered into philosophical speculations and academic controversies; he voiced his illuminating experiences through a language and in metaphors as charming and attractive as they were communicative.

Like Rammohun, Debendranath, Dayananda, and many other religious leaders, Sri Ramakrishna, perhaps unknowingly, strove to find a viable religious perspective that retained what was true and best of India's past and also made room for modern knowledge; but unlike others, his perspective covered the whole gamut of Indian religious tradition including all forms of polytheism from the highest to the lowest. This perspective helped, through the process of encounter, adoption, assimilation and acculturation, the high spiritual flights of Advaita Vedānta as well as the low concepts of idol-worship of the Hindus, the agnosticism of the Buddhists, the atheism of the Jains, and the theism of the Brāhmos, each and all to get absorbed and assimilated into the body of the mother faith Sanātana Dharma, with Sri Ramakrishna on top of the upsurge. The divine urge in Sri Ramakrishna also carried him through non-indigenous spiritual disciplines. He turned to Islam and was initiated by,

a Mohammedan teacher. Following three day's meditation upon the sacred formula that was given him, he realized God through this approach. Similarly, in his experiments with the truth of Christianity, he became convinced that Jesus Christ was an incarnation of God. Thereby, he discovered for the first time in religious history the underlying truth of all religions and declared that the different approaches to God are all true. And pointing out the difference existing between the Brāhmos and Hindus, Sri Ramakrishna remarked, 'There is not much difference. In the serenade we have here, one flutist plays a note all along while another plays the various melodies. The Brāhmos play one note, as it were; they hold to the formless aspect of God. But the Hindus bring out different melodies; that is to say, they enjoy God in His various aspects.'

Sri Ramakrishna's all-encompassing approach gave once again the religion of the Hindus a moral sanction, a philosophical basis, and a new dimension to the spiritual values treasured by them. Thus emerged neo-Vedānta which brought all the sects of the Hindus as well as other religions together in a golden bond of understanding, love, and sympathy. Therein Sri Ramakrishna gave the much needed synthesis, and no eclecticism or syncretism. This synthesis is the fusion of conflicting ideas. 'To use Hegelian terminology, the reforms inaugurated by the Brāhmo Samāj may be taken as representing the Thesis, the Hindu Revivalism the Antithesis, and the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda doctrine, the Synthesis. It combined the best elements of both and ensured all-round progress of Hindu religion and society without destroying its spiritual basis and essential spirit, and saving it from destruction by the reactionary elements.'⁵² Whereas the Brāhmo movement had tried to assert the right of individuals over the society, Hindu revivalism, exerted to reassert the might of the society and scriptures over individuals, but the Ramakrishna ideal struck a balance between individual freedom advocated by the Brāhmos and the excessive power of the society and scriptures asserted by the Hindu revivalists. The caste system, whatever its original character might have been, was 'simply a crystallized social institution,'⁵³ which had served as a baneful and divisive force in the Hindu society, separating

the privileged and the unprivileged sections. To fight this pernicious system, Sri Ramakrishna advised that all human beings, being the devotees of God, should be looked upon as belonging to a single class. By cultivating genuine devotion to God and thereby inculcating loving concern for fellow beings, devotees can help rid the Hindu society of this harmful social practice. Whereas all the leaders of the Brāhmo Samāj implicitly, if not always explicitly, had attacked Hindu religious tradition, particularly the ritualized, externalized Hindu orthodoxies and the dominance of the priestly class, Sri Ramakrishna, being aware of the fact that the masses needed a religion rich in miracle, mystery, and myth, simply tried to do away with their ill effects by strongly fostering the spirit behind all such religious practices. For he believed from his personal experience that once true spirit thrived, the meaningless practices would wither away. He always taught more by what he was than by what he uttered and what he uttered carried redemptive power mostly by what he was. As he lived the life of a common man and spoke the common man's language which carried the weight of the experiences of his own life, the repository of India's vast spiritual heritage, his life and deeds had a great mass appeal pregnant with the possibilities of bringing about radical changes in men and society. In this way, the task of Rammo-hun and his followers of rejuvenating Indian society was considerably advanced by Sri Ramakrishna and this he did by the reorientation of the age-old principles of Sanātana Dharma. More than this, the confusion regarding Vedāntic monism that was raging the nineteenth century intellectuals including Dayananda, Devendranath, Vidyasagar, and Bankimchandra, and the drifting of the Brāhmo philosophy from the monism of Rammo-hun to the intuitionist dualistic theism of Devendranath found a rational solution when Sri Ramakrishna reinterpreted Vedāntic monism in the context of contemporary needs and aspirations.

Moreover, being aware of the fact that it is very difficult for even the most thoughtful men and women in any country to fully understand and accept monism, Sri Ramakrishna strongly recommended the graded steps of dualism, qualified monism,

and monism in the upward spiralling path of the human mind.

DEEP CONCERN FOR MEN

Besides, Sri Ramakrishna's deep concern for men demanded a change in the contemporaneous society's outlook on man. Though he did not consider the individual in isolation as some of the ancient Indian seers did, his stress was on the individual rather than on the society. He was essentially a believer in human development, material development only coming in as an adjunct to the development of man. He aimed at the growth of the goodness inherent in man leading him to the realization of the divinity already in him. Despite his apparent indifference to social reform, political activities, and things like that, Sri Ramakrishna's teachings have turned out to be the most dynamic social philosophy of the age and this has created for him a position among the greatest remarkers of mankind.⁵⁴ Thus he played a catalytic role in shaping the ideological content of the emerging new India. Before his passing away in 1886, he implanted his virile thoughts in the souls of his immaculate wife, Sri Sarada Devi, and a few disciples, chief among whom was Swami Vivekananda and in their lives blazed the flames of the truths realized by Sri Ramakrishna with all their living spontaneity thereby giving birth to the Ramakrishna Movement. The characteristic of this new Movement has been, according to Sri Aurobindo, 'a very wide synthesis of past religious motives and spiritual experiences topped by a reaffirmation of the old asceticism and monasticism, but with new living strands in it and combined with a strong humanitarianism and zeal of missionary expansion.'⁵⁵ To this Movement Sri Ramakrishna bequeathed his noble ideas, the following four of which have great significance for the future.

RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

History reveals that the vision of the Brāhmo leaders could not meet the challenge of the dilemma of religious plurality. Nowhere perhaps has the purpose of the Brāhmo movement been more sadly self-defeating than in the claim of religious harmony and universalism made by every faction of the

Brāhmos even when they were engaged in unending inter-sect feuds. Along with confusion of ideology, mounting misunderstanding continued to dominate the Brāhmos for long. Pandit Shivanath Shastri attempted to offer the best possible explanation of the Brāhmo stand, when he said, "The theism of the Theistic Church of India is not un-Hindu but something more than Hindu, as the word Hindu originally means. . . . It is not Christianity but something more than Christianity. . . . It is not the monotheism of Islam, but something more. . . . It is the aim of modern Theism to combine in itself the best spirits of these three forms of faith ; and infuse into them the spirit of universal religion."⁵⁶ As Sri Ramakrishna had perceived the same ultimate reality through different windows of the mansion of God, he could easily solve the problem of rapport between contradictory religious doctrines. His religious genius not only discovered the underlying unity and harmony behind the apparent multiplicity of gods worshipped by the Hindus, but also underlined, on the strength of his experience with the major religions of history, the essential harmony among different faiths of mankind and the validity of all these paths. He repeatedly pointed out that God was one, but was worshipped in different ages and communities under different names and aspects. He illustrated his own belief and practice when he advised the Brāhmos, "When you mix with people outside your Samāj, love them all. When in their company be one of them. Don't harbour malice towards them. Don't turn up your nose in hatred and say: "Oh, this man believes in God with form and not in the formless God. That man believes in the formless God and not in God with form. This man is a Christian. This man is a Hindu. And this man is a Mussalman." It is God alone who makes people see things in different ways. . . . The cowherds take the cows to graze in the pasture. There the cattle mix. They all form one herd. But on returning to their shed in the evening they are separated. Then each stays by itself in its own stall. Therefore, I say, dwell by yourself in your own chamber."⁵⁷ These concepts and the insights and the experiences of Sri Ramakrishna provide perhaps the only solution to the warring religious faiths and their different sects, which the Brāhmo

movement failed to solve. Assuring the people of different faiths, Swami Vivekananda said at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, 'The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet prove his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth'.

UNITY OF EXISTENCE

Secondly, Sri Ramakrishna realized the unity of existence as Spirit and Consciousness pervading the whole universe and also transcending it. This experience of unity is the spiritual foundation of all moral precepts. It demands that man should love his neighbour because he is not only his brother but his own self. An illumined person like Sri Ramakrishna regarded happiness and unhappiness in others as his own. And this realization provided a sound rationale of ethics as well as a basis on which the edifice of universal brotherhood can be built. From this standpoint, Sri Ramakrishna 'was perhaps more universalist and Brahmo than most of the Brahmo ascetics, who were narrowly Vaisnava.'⁵⁸ Even among his other contemporaries Sri Ramakrishna was a great universalist but unlike others his universalism was something unique. Truly observed Bipin Chandra Pal, 'He (Sri Ramakrishna) was a true universalist, but his universalism was not the Universalism of Abstraction. He did not subtract the particulars of different religions to realize his universal religion. With him the Universal and the particular always went together like the sun and shadow. He realized therefore the Reality of the Universal in and through the infinite particularities of life and thought.'⁵⁹

GOD IN MAN

Thirdly, Sri Ramakrishna urged the spiritual aspirants to serve man, the highest temple of God. To him God resided in every being, *Jiva* is *Siva*. 'The body is a mere covering like a lantern with a light burning inside.'⁶⁰ This *Jiva-Siva* concept clearly shows how to reshape human relationship and conduct man's dealing with his fellow beings. Contrary to secular humanism preached by the Brāhmos, Sri Ramakrishna's spiri-

tual humanism offered a dynamic religion in place of static piety. This viewpoint gives man tremendous strength, love, and humanistic impulses, and a sense of dedication. Appreciating this unique spirit of Sri Ramakrishna's life's mission, Will Durant remarked, 'He (Sri Ramakrishna) tolerated sympathetically the polytheism of the people, and accepted humbly the monism of the philosophers; but in his own living faith God was a spirit incarnated in all men, and the only true worship of God was the loving service of mankind.'⁸¹

SPIRITUAL IDEALISM

Fourthly, Sri Ramakrishna upheld spiritual idealism as the goal of man and his society. Never was he weary of pointing out that realization of God was the essence of religion and the aim of human life. With the rise of materialism, religion was about to lose its hold on society, when Sri Ramakrishna by his life and precepts brought home, once again, to the modern world the relevance of spiritual life. He demonstrated by his life that God, the ultimate reality, can be realized and then only human life becomes really meaningful. The innermost longing in man's heart for complete freedom, for unalloyed bliss, for eternal life can be fulfilled only by realizing God. Thus Sri Ramakrishna freed the human mind from the morass of secularism, in which the Brāhmo movement was almost stuck up, and led it along the path of spiritual idealism, and helped in making human life and its progress secure and sound.

SPIRITUAL MOORINGS

The religious upheaval from Rammohun to Ramakrishna shows that any reorientation of Indian thought which attempts a break with its spiritual moorings cannot go far, for spirituality constitutes the bed-rock of the collective psyche of Indians. The wisdom of India's seers proclaiming man a spiritual entity with a spiritual objective has been revalidated by Sri Ramakrishna. It has to be vigorously applied for upholding the nation's ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity so that the nation may successfully overcome the confusion created by the rise of scientific and techno-economic cultures. And the Rama-

krishna Movement, already deeply rooted in the national consciousness, has taken upon itself the onerous task of leading the nation in this direction.

Some claim that the Ramakrishna Phenomenon was not a renaissance but a revivalism⁶² of Hindu thought and tradition. Some others, on the other hand, assert that the Movement associated with Sri Ramakrishna was nothing short of a revolution, a break with the past. But none can deny that by suitably reorienting the Sanātana Dharma to meet the challenge of the age, Sri Ramakrishna leavened the course of India's religious history, like the gentle dew silently helping the fairest of roses to bloom, and thus, ushered in a new age. In fact, in the confusing turmoil of today, Sri Ramakrishna shines as the pole-star and guides every man to the goal of fully manifesting his potential divinity and beckons the whole of mankind towards liberation from the fetters of material affliction.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHTS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Amales Tripathi

TO Max Müller he was a Mahatman; to Romain Rolland, 'the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people'. To Śrī Mā [Holy Mother] he appeared as Kālī, to Brāhmaṇī as Chaitanya in Nityananda's frame. To Vivekananda he was *avatāravariṣṭha* (the foremost of divine incarnations), to Aurobindo, 'God manifest in a human being'. But to us, men of commoner clay, helplessly tossing on the sea of *samsāra* (world), he is simply Thākur (God). We give him a name reserved for God because it sounds so dear and so homely. In fact, he is to us as Kālī was to him.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: A PHENOMENON

How does one explain such a 'phenomenon'? A happy phrase of Isherwood, it contains many undertones and overtones. Other Avatāras were better placed than this poorest of the poor son of the soil without inherited wealth or acquired scholarship. He was not born a prince like Rāma. He had not the beauty and power of Kṛṣṇa. He did not possess the intellectual acumen of the Buddha. How can so unsophisticated a soul rise to such spiritual eminence all by his yearnings and exertions, guided by his own innermost self? We know that gurus came later to initiate him into this or that *sādhana* (spiritual discipline) but these were no more than a formal recognition of his previous experience of *aparokṣānubhūti* (direct experience), the highest goal of *sādhana*. Why, again, would he experiment with all modes of *sādhana*, while one had been enough for his predecessors? Why, after repeated attainment of *samādhi* (communion with God, union with the supreme Self), would this liberated soul choose to pass his days in the precincts of a crowded city, visiting and receiving all kinds of men, teaching them gently but firmly to renounce their craze

for matter (*kāma-kāñcana* [lust and greed]) and fill their emptiness with love of God? He would not be a recluse like Śuka. He had his wife live near him in constant attendance to test how far he had conquered lust. Yet, after an easy victory, he did not turn sour in repression. He would not be a dry *sunnyāsin*. He prayed to Mother to keep him in a state of *rasa* (joy). He would commune with God through dance and song and ecstasy. The Upaniṣads define Him as *ānanda* (bliss). Dasharathi calls Her *Ānandamayee*. How could a child of joy remain joyless? He would talk endlessly of God, mostly in parables, homely metaphors, even rustic anecdotes, but these contained the essence of all Śāstras. Above everything shone his daily life—'broad as the sky, deep as the ocean, strong as adamant and pure as crystal'.

RELIGION FOR A NEW AGE

An avatāra, yes, for he came to re-establish religion on new foundations appropriate for a new age. He was born in the midst of the greatest crisis of Hindu identity. The crisis had begun before the British conquest, which through an alien mode of government, a colonial form of economy, and a rationalist-utilitarian pattern of culture, precipitated it further. By the eighteenth century the Vedas and the Vedānta were not studied east of Vārānasi; Sanskrit learning was confined to Nyāya (logic), Smṛti (law), and Kāvya (poetry); Nadia, the seat of learning since the fifteenth century, languished (31 *tols*, 747 scholars according to Ward). Half-baked pundits could hardly defend their ancestral faith at the bar of Christianity or science or radical western thought. Hinduism spoke in a babel of tongues, according to the tenets of sects and castes. Hindus worshipped a bewildering variety of gods, ranging from monotheism. Religion, once called *sanātana* (eternal), was confused with *deśacāra* and *lokācāra* (traditional rituals and customs). It had lost its human context and social dimension. The new schools and colleges purported to give a secular education, which only destroyed the mystic-spiritual wisdom of the East, without replacing it with the scientific practical knowledge of the West.

Rammohun Roy alone realized that the spring of renewal lay in Indian tradition. He found in a syncretic combination of the ideas of Vedānta, Islamic Mwahidin tradition, and western rationalism a sanction for a universal, unitarian theism which could purify and unify the Indian religious medley. However, to purge it of what he called 'perverse Brahminism', he dropped from Brāhmodharma *sākāra* worship (worship of God with form), *avatāravāda* (concept of divine incarnation), and many hallowed myths and symbols, derived from Purāṇa and Tantra, which carried religious appeal for the masses. Although it provided for devotionism in prayer, the main emphasis was on *jñāna* (knowledge). It was too intellectual for the many, too eclectic for the knowledgeable. Its ethical code, borrowed from Christianity, and Benthamite temper, calling for far-reaching social reforms, seemed to be an alien threat. If indiscriminately imposed, it would distort normal growth from within.

YOUNG BENGAL

The Young Bengal, without any roots either in the eastern or in the western thought, totally denounced the Indian tradition. They had no respect for, as they had no understanding of, the Vedānta and the *Gītā* which still inspired the Brāhmo Samāj. They swore only by the hedonist and sceptic or agnostic thought of the West.

T. S. Eliot's description of the western predicament fits nicely with the Indian in the mid-nineteenth century.

Knowledge of speech, but not of silence ;
 Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
 All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance

* * *

Where is the life we have lost in living ?
 Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge ?

* * *

The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
 Bring us further from God and nearer to the Dust.

CHALLENGE TO SRI RAMAKRISHNA

The challenge to Ramakrishna, then, was that man had lost God for other gods or no God—professing first reason, then money, and then power. Ramakrishna's greatest contribution was that he made us aware of, and then brought us nearer to, God, again. The supreme mission in life, he proclaimed (as well as showed in his own conduct), is to experience God and love Him more than earthly possessions, human relations, and even body and ego. For He alone is eternal—all else are a passing show. Secondly, he also made an intellectual response to the anarchy of religious ideas current in his day. The former was easy, all the medieval saints—Kabir, Dadu, Mira—had asserted it. The latter was difficult, as it involved a struggle with not only the old scholastic theology but the so-called modern, rationalist, progressive views. Yet the way he reconciled God with impersonal Brahman, described the nature of Śakti (Primordial Energy), related God with *Jīva* (living being), and integrated different approaches is worthy of the most subtle and supple dialectician. Thirdly, he did this not through any jugglery over texts and commentaries, which he had not even read, but through reference to his own unique direct perception, followed by disciplined experiments. He sounded more real because he did not have to bolster it by borrowed authority. He recognized none but Mother as his teacher. The others, Bhairavi or Tota Puri, came more to confirm and assure rather than to instil or indoctrinate. Saradananda tells us how a young *sannyāsin* used to come out of his body to give his spiritual lessons. He wished to experience direct perception in Sāstric manner only to test the validity of what he had already known. This is what all scientists do—formation of a hypothesis and then testing its reliability through experiment. Ramakrishna was the scientist of spirit *par excellence*.

Fourthly, this is to be a comparative science. Ramakrishna started with *śakti-sādhana* as a result of which he experienced what mystics call illumination (*jyotirdarśana*). He passed through intense pangs of separation and unbearable urge for union as all mystics do. This is called *divyonmāda* or *mahā-bhāva* (the most intense ecstatic love of God) in Vaiṣṇava

parlance. Thence he went to Tantra and finally to Advaita. At the end of each came *aparokṣānubhūti*—direct perception and sense of unity. This led him to proclaim *yata mat tata path* (there are as many ways as there are points of view), one of the *mahāvākyas* (great propositions) of modern religion.

VARIED EXPERIENCE

What is more important, he interpreted the experience of each mode in his own and not in the received sense. For example, after practising sixty-four Tantras current in India, he concluded that *pañcamakāra* (wine, meat, fish, cereals, and sexual union) was not absolutely necessary—these were practised only by people without self-control. He never hankered after psychic powers (*siddhāi*) and warned his disciples against their obvious appeal. He derived from Tantra one great realization which was that Mother was in all women. This had for us considerable social significance. In fact, Vivekananda underlined the importance of Ramakrishna's *nāribhāva* (attitude of a woman), acceptance of *strī-guru* (woman teacher), and *mātṛ-sādhanā* (worship of God as Mother) as uplifting the weaker sex in society. Similarly, having very high regard for *madhurabhāva* (the mood of looking upon God as one's sweetheart) of Rādhā (he talked again and again of *premābhakti* [ecstatic devotion] and *rāgānugābhakti* [supreme devotion] in which Chaitanya was immersed in the last phase of his life,) Ramakrishna considered it to be too painful, and, for unfit people, even dangerous. Like Tantra it, too, can be abused. *Rasa* (Joy), therefore, must always be controlled by *vaśa* (restraint), *bhakti* (devotion) by *jñāna* (knowledge). If Chaitanya is *cātaka*, ever yearning, Ramakrishna is *haṁsa*, ever happy in union. If the former is Shelley's skylark, Ramakrishna is Wordsworth's, ' true to the kindred points of heaven and home '. He preferred *vātsalya* and was contented to be a child of the Mother. A child is not subject to any *guṇa* (quality, attribute). He advised many women disciples to worship Child Gopala. *Dāsya* (the mood of looking upon God as one's master) is best for common people. If ego (*āmi*) would not go, let it remain as the ego of the servant of God (*dāser āmi*).

DOCTRINAL DISPUTES

Yet *madhurabhāva* was just next to Advaita. In fact, the distinction between God and a *bhakta* (devotee) like Rādhā was so minute that Chaitanya called it *acintya*, beyond imagination. As Rāya Rāmānanda said, '*Na so ramaṇa nā' ham ramaṇī* (Neither is He a male, nor am I a female).' However, the distinction between the devotee and God almost disappeared; almost, not totally. The highest stage of realization is this loss of self in *nirvikalpa samādhi* (highest spiritual state in which one realizes total identity with Brahman). Tota Puri was instrumental in leading Ramakrishna to it, but while it was a short experience for the teacher, it was a six-month affair for the pupil. *Bhāva samādhi* (ecstasy in which the devotee retains his ego and enjoys communion with the Personal God) became a frequent state for Ramakrishna.

Advaita is no new doctrine. We can trace it from the Vedas, Upaniṣads like the *Māṇḍūkya*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, and Gauḍapāda's and Śaṅkara's commentaries. Its ideas permeated most of the Indian metaphysical systems and even Indian mode of thinking. Yet Dvaita in its different forms can also be traced from the Śruti [Vedas]. The *Svetāśvatara* and *Kaṭha* led the way to the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata*—the highest achievement of *bhakti*. All medieval saints, especially Chaitanya, spread it among the masses. Śākta tradition flowed in the same channel and its finest expressions were the songs of Ramaprasada and Kamalakanta. If we carefully analyse M's *Gospel* [*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*] we will often find Ramakrishna singing their songs into ecstasy. But, here, too, he showed his individual genius. He cut incisively through the maze of doctrinal and sectarian disputes of both Advaita and Dvaita to conclude, 'I tell you, I clearly find He is the whole and I am His part. Again sometimes I think that He is I and I am He.' Metaphysicians, enamoured of splitting hair over words of the Śruti, have forgotten that no words can express the Brahman—from Him words recoil and mind boggles (*Yato vāco nivartante* etc.). In Ramakrishna's inimitable words, 'He is *anucchiṣṭa* (undefiled by the tongue).' 'He is one'

and many and who knows what else ?' After all, no doll of salt (*nuner putul*) can ever relate what its experience of the sea is. The same person may have need of the many, the two, and the one at different stages of *sādhana*. He himself delighted in roaming from pole to pole—ascending and descending the chords of octave from 'do' to 'do', for he would like to test reality in variety as well as unity. On the question of immanence and transcendence, he would reconcile various statements of the Upaniṣads to say that Brahman has become this world, entered this world, encompassed the world, and transcended the world. It is a play of Nitya (the Absolute) and *leelā* (the relative). The manifest world is the manifestation of the Unmanifest. The relative is the relative of the Absolute. Māyā to him was more than *avidyā* (ignorance)—it was Mahāmāyā, the *Śakti* of Brahman, the dynamic aspect of the eternal static. *Sākāra* (God with form) and *nirākāra* (God without form), *jñāna* and *bhakti* were not contradictory. In a telling metaphor he related how the same water of *Akhaṇḍa Saccidānanda* (Indivisible Existence-Consciousness-Bliss) freezes into ice (form) in the cold wind of *bhakti* but melts into its original shape (*nirākāra*) when the sun of *jñāna* rises. Both are necessary as they are complementary.

WHOLENESS OF REALITY

Thus he was trying to realize the wholeness of reality from every angle, in all aspects, and not in bits and pieces. We should remember that even the greatest sage of the Upaniṣads, Yājñavalkya, came to the conclusion that though It is not this, not that, not anything subject to time, space, and causation, yet It sustains the universe, in It 'space is woven, warp and woof'. *Etasya vā akṣarasya praśāsane Gārgī sūrya-candramasau vidhṛtau tiṣṭhataḥ*—Under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gargi, the sun and moon are held in their positions (*Br. Up.* III. 8. 9).

From such a supreme height all roads lead to the same goal. From truths to higher truths we proceed and, as even the lowest religious form contains a grain of truth, it has possibility of further evolution. Sectarianism is ruled out. It becomes 'a

drunken man's view'. This is why he never imposed his vision on others. *Bhāvamukhe thāk* (Remain in *bhāvamukha* the exalted state of spiritual experience in which the aspirant keeps his mind on the border line between the Absolute and the relative)—another *mahāvākya* for us—indicates development of spirituality on individual psychological basis. From each according to his power, to each according to his need. Salvation cannot be claimed as a matter of right, it is *anekajanmasam-siddhaḥ* (perfected in the course of many births). But there's no harm in trying and God's grace is always blowing to give wind to our sails. Let us begin here and now, with as simple as recitation of His name, and place ourselves in His hands till our time arrives. The only conditions are *tyāga* (renunciation) and *anurāga* (love of God).

ALL-COMPREHENSIVE FAITH

An all-comprehensive faith like this cannot ignore man. *Jīva* is *Śiva*, Ramakrishna affirmed, only he knows it not, *avidyā* veils it from his view. It is a trick of the Mother—playing a game of kites with us. The guru can only put the disciple on the road to *vidyā* (wisdom)—to awaken the latent divinity. It can be done through Karma-Yoga, he assures worldly men, if *karma* (work) is non-attached and selfless, if it becomes a *yajña* (sacrifice) in the modern sense. His disciples took up the work of *sevā* (service) of *Śiva* in *Jīva*. Soon they would be purified and pass on to the higher reaches of *viveka* (discrimination), *vairāgya* (renunciation), etc. At the end of the journey in this Divine Comedy the Mother waits for them. She will open the door to the supreme Reality. The drop will be seized by the sea, the atom by the infinity.*

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RAMAKRISHNA AND THE INDIAN RENAISSANCE

Donald H. Bishop

THE Indian Renaissance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is one of the most important periods in Indian history. It begins with the great figure of Rammohun Roy and includes such notable persons as Keshub Chandra Sen, Ramakrishna, Rabindranath Tagore, Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and that great champion of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi.

MEANING OF RENAISSANCE

Before discussing the contributions of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda to the Indian Renaissance, let us be clear as to what a Renaissance is and what its causes are. The term 'Renaissance' consists of the Latin *re plus nasci*, meaning 'again' and 'to be born'. Thus a Renaissance is a revival, a rebirth, a renewal. It is a resurgence of certain features of the past—beliefs, attitudes, practices, truths—which have been lost or covered over for the time being, but then are discovered and revitalized. There is a second aspect to a Renaissance, however. A Renaissance is not only a rebirth but a purification as well. A Renaissance involves a sorting out process in which the old is purged of its dross or its impurities so that only that which is the best is carried over to make up the new. That which is no longer relevant, no more of value or meaning in the new conditions is discarded or left behind so that a new and better era may come into being.

When we ask what the causes of a Renaissance are we can specify at least three. One is internal factors. A second is external forces, and a third is the arising of new conditions. A Renaissance in a given culture or nation is a result of internal conditions which can no longer be tolerated. It is a result of that culture or nation being confronted by ideas, beliefs, or practices different from its own which come in from the outside. And it stems from new conditions which have come about because life itself is constantly undergoing change and

history is itself a process of coming into being and going out of existence.

The Renaissance in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provides a good example of this thesis. For it was both a renewal and a purification and its stimulus was both internal and external, and historical. The Indian Renaissance was a result, first of all, of internal social, economic, political, and religious conditions which had developed over a long period of time and which, because of their negative and destructive nature, could be tolerated no longer.

HINDU SOCIETY

These conditions have been vividly described by many authors. Maganlal A. Buch, for instance, wrote that 'Hindu society had sunk to almost its lowest point during the eighteenth century. With a few intermittent periods of revival, it had become a huge, static, fossilised organisation. The customary morality and customary responsibility were still there; patient acquiescence in all sorts of evil was there; but there was no life, no capacity for progress. The Brahmins maintained a vigorous control over people's lives, and all powers of independent thinking and activity had gone. The caste system, with its endlessly growing ramifications, its increasing rigidity in matters of inter-dining, marriage and other customs, stifled in its death-like embrace the lives, hopes and aspirations of individuals and classes.' Of religion in this period Rammohun Roy himself writes that the state of influence of its leaders over their followers and their submission to them have reached such a degree that some people, having a firm belief in the sayings of their leaders, think some stones and plants or animals to be the real object of their worship and that to the belief in these two indispensable doctrines (of the existence of the soul and the next world), hundreds of useless hardships and privations regarding eating and drinking, purity and impurity, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, etc. have been added; and that they thus became cause of injury and detrimental to social life and sources of trouble and bewilderment to the people, instead of tending to the amelioration of the,

condition of society. Another statement by D. S. Sarma gives us a picture of the nineteenth century conditions in India. He writes : ' Her own civilization and culture had been at the lowest ebb for over a hundred years from about the middle of the eighteenth century. In that dark period nothing of first-rate importance was produced in any language, there was no new development in Hinduism and almost all indigenous arts languished and died owing to lack of patronage and even of appreciation and many old works of art disappeared owing to the ignorance and carelessness of the people and the rapacity of foreigners who carried them away. The inrush of a totally different civilization put an end to all creative work for a time and uncritical admiration for all things western took possession of the mind of the educated classes coupled with contempt for things of native origin.'

LACK OF NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

These and other statements give us a picture of conditions in India in the nineteenth century which stimulated or necessitated a revival. For a long time India had been politically a subject country, lacking in national consciousness and unity. The presence of castes and a multitude of subcastes resulted in social divisions, distinctions, and disunity. She had become an impoverished country economically. Education for the masses was minimal. The status of women left very much to be desired. Religion was characterized by superstition, sectarianism, idolatry, authoritarianism, and a narrow orthodoxy.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

As to the external causes which brought about the Renaissance, the major one is well known to us. It was, of course, the impingement of the West and the introduction in India of nineteenth-century British liberalism or liberal philosophy along with Christianity in both its orthodox and unitarian forms. That liberalism emphasized individual liberty and rights, democracy as a political institution, the concept of equality, freedom of choice, and the inherent dignity and worth of all persons. John Stuart Mill was the chief architect of this liberalism and

his works became widely read by Indian intellectuals in this period. Rammohun Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen, the Tagores, and others admit to the influence of this philosophical liberalism and humanism.

NEW INFLUENCE

A new influence, of course, was modern science and the scientific method. As in the West, it brought about great changes in India, of both a mental and physical nature. In the case of the first, it led many persons to adopt an attitude of scepticism and disbelief. And in regard to the second, it led to a technological revolution which gave rise to industrialization and urbanization and all of the problems which followed in their train.

RAMAKRISHNA: WHAT HE WANTED

Renaissance leaders like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were very much concerned about the results of these new forces and attitudes which were becoming prevalent in India. And the general solution suggested by Ramakrishna was a return to those aspects of the past which he believed would be helpful and relevant to the present. I would like to discuss three of them.

NON-ATTACHMENT

First is the philosophy of non-attachment, which Ramakrishna found in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. There we are urged to work but without attachment to the fruits of our labour. Life forces us to work, to be active. Work is a necessity, but the important question is the spirit in which we work and what or whom we dedicate our labour and its fruits to. When the *Gītā* exhorts us to work without attachment, what it is saying to us in contemporary terms is, I believe, the following: Do not have profit or reward as the only or major motive for working or doing good. For if you do, you will only do good when you will profit from it; and this is not genuine virtue. Instead, be more inclined to do good for the sake of goodness and work for the sake of work, or for the joy which working brings. Be glad to

have work to do and do not look upon it as drudgery no matter how lowly it may appear to be. Further, see work as a means of self-discipline. Work because work is good for you and beneficial to your character, while idleness is not. The *Gītā* teaches also that we should work unselfishly. Do not work for yourself alone. Be willing to share some. Have an attitude of sharing. That is to say, work for the good of all and not just your own. Be as much concerned about the common good or well-being as you are about your own. For when individuals are oriented thus, social harmony and justice is much more likely to be achieved. Finally, the *Gītā*, Ramakrishna reminded his followers, urges us to dedicate our work and the fruits of our work to Brahman. What this means is to be more God—and not so self-oriented or centred. See yourself as a steward of all the good things God has given you, all that the Divine has placed before you on this earth for your welfare. Filled with this perspective of stewardship, you will be less greedy, less self-centred, less given to quarrelling and fighting over the bounties God has placed before us.

MEANING OF RELIGION

The two other beliefs which Ramakrishna turned to the past for and declared to be true and useful for the present are the definition of religion as realization and the truth of all religions. The first belief in religion as realization he found in the ancient Vedas and elsewhere. These early scriptures declare God is a being to be realized internally. He is the spiritual essence latent in the individual, which the individual perceives in the inner self and brings to the surface when the Divine becomes a part of or infuses all our thoughts and outer activities. Ramakrishna believed that each person is divine and the task of religion is to help each individual to recognize or realize that he or she is divine and to make that inner divinity or spirituality the centre or driving force of all we think, say, and do. It is this definition of religion which led Ramakrishna and Vivekananda to oppose the excessive, meaningless, and stultifying ritualism which, they found, characterized so much of the Hinduism of their day. Such ritual, Ramakrishna believed, was of little or

no use in carrying out the true function of religion, which is the realization of the God within, making the Supreme so much a part of oneself that one's total being and doing is infused with the Divine.

RELIGION IS UNIVERSAL

The third ancient belief Ramakrishna revived is that religion is universal and that there is truth in all religions because each is a particular manifestation in time and place of that universal religion and the universal and eternal Brahman. God has revealed or incarnated himself in numerous times and places and the various religions are a result of those incarnations. Each religion is a particular path or way to God. There is no one way which is the only true or right way. All lead men to Brahman, and each person should go on the way which best suits himself or herself. Thus we should respect and revere other religions while holding firmly to our own. We should not attribute truth to ours and falsity to others. We should not proselytize or insist that others accept our way but instead encourage each one to live up to the best in his way or religion. We should recognize that all people have the same end or goal, the union of self with Brahman, *ātman* with *Ātman*, and the union of men with their fellow men.

METAPHYSICS OF THE UPANIṢADS

This view of Ramakrishna's is grounded metaphysically in the Upaniṣads, which hold reality to be one in essence and a plurality in appearance. It is supported by that magnificent verse in the *Gītā* which declares that whenever goodness has grown weak and evil strong Brahman makes Himself a body and comes down to overpower evil and set goodness on the throne once more. It is reinforced by traditional Indian psychology with its *guṇas* thesis. And it was in keeping with the liberal philosophy of the West which emphasized individual differences and freedom of choice. Thus it was that Ramakrishna denounced the religious sectarianism, narrowness, fanaticism, exclusiveness, and bigotry which characterized much of the Hinduism of the day. He urged people to free themselves from

such limitations so that religion could once more realize its true function of promoting peace, harmony, and understanding between the people of the world.

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

When we turn to Vivekananda, we see that there are at least four ways in which he furthered the Indian Renaissance. The first was his accepting and stoutly promoting the last view of Ramakrishna's. Vivekananda also believed that all religions are true or contain truth. He opposed sectarianism and wanted religion to take the lead in bringing mankind together and creating a peaceful world.

Secondly, Vivekananda stressed that religion is dead as much as, if not more than, creed. Religion may involve a set of beliefs but, if those beliefs are not realized or carried out in practice, we only have a religion which is limited and sterile. One must not only be spiritual within; that spirituality must manifest itself outwardly in deed and action. Prayer and meditation may be helpful in drawing one closer to Brahman. But they must be followed by actions of kindness, compassion, and justice if persons are to be drawn closer to each other. Vivekananda was aware that religion had been used often to support evil means and ends. He asserted that true religion demands not only inner spirituality and purification but pure and good deeds as well. We are all aware of how this emphasis by Vivekananda led to the initiation of many commendable and valuable activities carried out by the devotees of Ramakrishna. The Ramakrishna Movement has become noted for its many charitable and beneficent enterprises aimed at social advance and uplift. They reflect Vivekananda's basic teaching that religion is deed as much as creed.

One of the major contributions of Vivekananda to the Indian Renaissance was his success in awakening a national consciousness or a spirit of nationalism or national unity among his compatriots. Politically at this time India was factioned and divided. Provincialism and regionalism predominated. A sense of nationhood was both lacking and sorely needed. To overcome such a condition Vivekananda made a number of stirring

speeches from one end of India to the other, in which he urged Indians to rediscover their heritage and see its value and greatness. Every nation has a heritage of which its people should be proud, and India is no exception. Indians should look to it and stop aping the West, especially in some of its worst aspects, Vivekananda told his listeners. By turning to the best in its ancient heritage, India could become great again, proudly taking its place in the parliament of nations. Vivekananda's appeal was not to a boisterous chauvinism or an unpurified ethnocentrism. He believed there was much of worth in the Indian tradition to be brought out. He believed India had its special contribution to make to the world, but that gift could be given only when Indians became a united and self-conscious people again.

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

At the same time Vivekananda urged his fellow men not to turn their backs completely on the outside world. 'Do not be so proud', he said in effect, 'as to believe you can learn nothing from others. Instead, take from the West, for example, the best it has to offer and use or apply it here whenever possible.' We see in this open-mindedness and universality of Vivekananda's a basic characteristic of the Renaissance man. It led him to urge his fellow Indians to accept from the West science and the scientific method so that the technological fruits of science might be enjoyed by the people of India as well. Vivekananda urged his listeners not to fear science and scientific method. His view was that science need not necessarily lead to scepticism and atheism, although in the case of many it had. This was because such people did not see far or deeply enough. They failed to recognize that science deals with only one type or realm of reality and that there are other modes or levels of reality beyond the material or scientific. Religion is or deals with one of them and thus there need be no conflict between science and religion, because they are concerned with two different realities.

Another aspect of Vivekananda's view toward science was that it could bring much good but its good results must be

shared in by all. In this respect we see both traditional Indian and western liberal influences at work on Vivekananda. Both led him to emphasize the need for a sense of fair play and justice. Both traditions impelled him to stress that we are a part of each other, that we must share with each other, and that when science and technology results in a few having much and many only a little, trouble is inevitable.

In this presentation I have suggested that Ramakrishna contributed to the Indian Renaissance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by reviving three beliefs he felt were relevant and needed in his time: the philosophy of non-attachment, religion as realization, and the truth of all religions. Vivekananda contributed to the Renaissance by associating religion with deed, by arousing a sense of national identity among his countrymen, and by urging the acceptance of western science and the sharing of the fruits thereof. The contributions made by other Renaissance leaders are beyond the scope of this paper. We might close by posing the central question of how much the hopes and ideals proclaimed by the leaders of the Renaissance have been realized. The Renaissance leaders presented us with a blueprint for a better society, a more wholesome world, and fuller lives as individuals. They gave us ideals to put into effect to make their dreams a reality. To what extent have we realized those ideas? Is the Renaissance a completed event in India's history, or is it a process which continues today and which must continue for many days to come if the goals of its leaders are to be reached?*

ROLE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AWAKENING (1836—1886)

Papia Chakravarty

THE nineteenth century was the age of awakening in India essentially because it marked the transition from self-oblivion to self-consciousness; a new spirit sprouting first at individual level, gradually clustered and consummated into the consciousness of an emerging nation. Both individualism and corporate consciousness, growing out of a search for identity, developed in the face of a material and ideological challenge from the West. The slanders of the evangelists, the contempt of the utilitarians, the proselytizing zeal of the Christian missionaries, together with the powerful impact of the European Enlightenment and the French Revolution with their emphasis on rationalism, scientific spirit of enquiry, and humanism confronted the decadent but ancient civilization of India. The ensuing admiration, resistance and assimilation, the urge for conservation as well as that for reformation ended the amnesia. The shock of new ideas indirectly helped the rediscovery of similar values in India's own tradition and brought home the need for their readjustment in a changing environment. A reassessment and not total rejection of indigenous tradition was the hallmark of the nineteenth century progress; a symbiosis of old and new, East and West leading to a synthesis marked the first step towards Universalism or world consciousness which remains an essential component of modern life.

DOUBTS OF THE NEW AGE

The first response to rationalism, humanism, and universalism came from Rammohun Roy, who founded the Brāhmo Samāj in 1830. It was expressed in terms of Vedāntic revival. He restored to Hinduism some of its lost strength and met the challenge of Christian proselytism. The social reform movements of Vidyasagar or the writings of Bankimchandra in their own ways helped the work of resurrection. Yet, in the seventies

the needs of the age were only partially fulfilled; even new problems were created which threw fresh challenges to the very basic values that lay at the root of the awakening. Torn by two schisms, the Brāhmo Samāj came to be divided into several distinct sects. Rammohun's drive towards reformation of Hinduism and propounding a World Religion suffered a setback. Moreover, Keshub Chandra Sen soaked 'the very core of the Brāhmo creed with Christians ideals'.¹ It made the Brāhmo Samāj more and more alien to the Hindu tradition. Proliferation of religious groups and societies, Hari Sabhās and Brāhmo Sabhās, Tarkachudamanis and Acharyas turned religion into polemics. There were acrimony and controversies instead of harmony and synthesis. Moreover, the reformist urge cocooned since the days of Rammohun within urbanity and intellectualism could not effectively reach out to the masses. Even though there were signs of a growing nation-consciousness, religious and ethnic antagonism impaired true national integration. In short, the awakening of the Western model, spear-headed by the English-educated classes, only partially revived the form but not the spirit of the Indian tradition. So far, the Vedāntic revival had been theoretical and not practical. The reform movements only superficially changed the face of the society. They neither touched the soul of the nation, nor helped the inner growth of individual and social organisms. Doubts of the new age had undoubtedly helped to end the stagnation of the preceding century. But men who sought to propel the changes by means of religious reforms and reinterpretation of religious tradition, had no direct experience of God or Absolute Truth. The outcome was never-ending doubts leading to fresh cleavages and a whirlpool of controversies threatening the individual as well as the society with disintegration.

NEED FOR MAN OF DIRECT PERCEPTION

So it was time to resolve controversies and turn the mind inward. Self-realization was needed to provide a solid ground, a definite and consistent indigenous ideal to the rejuvenated so-

ciety and the nascent nation. For reaching this goal, the guidance of a man having direct perception of Absolute Truth, not mere bookish knowledge, was essential. Self-surrender and faith as an antidote for an overdose of reason were required to restore the balance. Such a man was Gadadhar Chattopadhyaya or Sri Ramakrishna.

From outward appearance, he was a rustic temple-priest, having little formal education—practically an antithesis of Calcutta Babus. Born in the rural environment of Kamarpukur, he attained enlightenment at Dakshineswar in the outskirts of Calcutta. At the same time, he had contact with the metropolitan society and the educated middle classes. His contempt for 'the rice and plantain bundling', that is bread-earning, education was the first spark of a spiritual renaissance. He preached with the help of parables and analogies couched in homely Bengali that still smelt of the rural soil. These were faithfully recorded by Mahendra Nath Gupta, the 'peacock' who visited Dakshineswar regularly for his share of 'opium'. This Gospel or *Kathāmṛta* is unique in the literature of hagiography. Never had the small events of a contemplative daily life been described with such a wealth of intimate detail.

Ramakrishna believed in a power extraordinary as the guiding force of the universe. Realization of this power, according to him, was the primary mission of human life. This direct experience of God destroys all doubts. Ramakrishna said, 'By reading the scriptures one may feel at the most that God exists. But God does not reveal Himself to a man unless he himself dives deep'. So he advised the Brāhmos, 'Plunge into divine love'. As Ramakrishna said, 'Almanac records that rainfall will reach twenty *āḍās*. But wring the almanacs, not a drop will come out'.

Ramakrishna had little to do with lectures and theories; he held out his own life as an example of religion in practice. His message was expressed in action. 'His personal integrity ... his personality, the corroborative statement of third party witness, and his subsequent ability to impart God-consciousness to his disciples' are the factors which authenticated his claim of direct experience of God. Narendranath Datta asked

Ramakrishna whether he had seen God. Ramakrishna not only replied in the affirmative but also said, 'I will put you in the way of seeing Him too'. He also said, 'Only a man living under the tree where a chameleon lives knows that it has different colours at different times and that it is sometimes colourless'. Neither any religious man (or religious reformer) had such supreme conviction nor could any one communicate that conviction to others with such simple truth and boldness. This realization was a sharp departure from the hitherto élitist and intellectual approach that characterized the Hindu society in the nineteenth century.

REASON AND FAITH

The uniqueness of Ramakrishna lay further in his instructing his disciples not to accept anything on trust: He laid bare his own method and invited others to test his truth empirically, 'Test me as the money changers do their coins,' he told Narendrab¹⁰. He advised Jogindra (later Yogananda), 'Before you accept anyone as your guru, you should watch him by day and by night'¹¹. It may be pointed out that even his most favourite disciple Narendrab tested him on several occasions before finally accepting him as guru. Ramakrishna could strike a balance between reason and faith, free will and self-surrender. The nineteenth century was noted for its scientific outlook; so Ramakrishna's integration of scientific and spiritual approach was in tune with its time-spirit. He could separate religion from 'the legendary and hocuspocus'¹². Mahendralal Sarkar, an eminent physician, with all his scepticism and scientific knowledge, could not deny the veracity of his spiritual experience.¹³

This uniqueness of Ramakrishna answered the query of the educated society of the nineteenth century. As Pratap Chandra Mozoomdar, the Brâhmo leader, wondered, 'Why should I wait long hours to attend him? I, who have listened to Disraeli and Fawcett, Stanley and Max Müller and a host of European scholars and divines?'¹⁴ Ramakrishna used to ask Narendrab and Mahendra Nath Gupta to argue in English in his presence, but it was impossible for the latter to argue any

more before him¹⁵. Keshub Sen, the great orator, became tongue-tied in his presence¹⁶. Ramakrishna, in fact, brought the silence of the 'full pitcher'¹⁷. Narendranath's journey from the Sādhāran Brāhmo Samāj to Dakshineswar, melting of his scepticism into self-surrender, was an index to the way of filling up a prominent gap in the nineteenth century awakening. There is no denying that the Brāhmo Samāj had rendered valuable service to the nineteenth century society, had effected a compromise between God and the World. But by the mid seventies, as a religious mission, it had outlived its purpose. Bulk of the indigenous society—the élite as well as the masses—needed something deeper, more spontaneous and comprehensive, yet, easily intelligible, that would modify and complement, but not contradict the rational spirit of the nineteenth century. Ramakrishna's introduction to the metropolitan society of Calcutta by Keshub Chandra Sen in 1875 was therefore symbolic and significant.

RENAISSANCE OF SPIRITUALITY

Ramakrishna gave the Indian awakening a proper spiritual content it lacked. So, the relevance of Ramakrishna in the nineteenth century can be explained, in the first place, in terms of renaissance of spirituality in an absolute sense. This was the core of his sayings. At the same time, his spiritual experience resulted in a practical philosophy applicable to day-to-day life. He made it clear that through the changeable phenomenal world one must feel his way up to the unchangeable. Staircase leads to the roof but both are made of the same material.¹⁸ This fusion of the Absolute and the Relative makes his ideas attractive even to a Sociologist or Historian not caring much for religion or spirituality. Modern sociologists are concerned not only with religious beliefs, but with how people 'act individually and collectively upon' these beliefs.¹⁹

However, as Swami Vivekananda has pointed out, Ramakrishna was like the sun, each one viewing him through different kinds of coloured glasses. 'Each devotee colours Sri Ramakrishna in the light of his own understanding and each forms his own idea from his peculiar standpoint'.²⁰ Consciously

or unconsciously, Ramakrishna threw profound hints, but his simple words had the potentiality of being developed into ideologies with modern orientation in the hands of posterity.

In fact, we notice a blending of apparent contradictions in Ramakrishna's thought. On the one hand, there is disappearance of the 'salt doll' of the individual soul into the unfathomable ocean of the Absolute²¹; on the other, there is scope for the fullest development of the nineteenth century individualism. Ramakrishna offers a solution to many problems of the phenomenal world. However, he made it clear that our real individuality is found when we are one with Him. 'Seeing Brahman or God in all things is the last word of *sādhana*'²².

DIVINITY OF MAN

This takes us to his dictum—Divinity of Man, which was but reassertion of the age-old truth of Vedānta. This aphorism is impregnated with multidimensional implications. In the first place, by underlining the unity of existence, it strikes at the root of privileges and offers a panacea for the strife-ridden world.

Secondly, it leads to the conclusion reached by Swami Vivekananda that the goal of religion is to manifest the Divine within, 'by controlling Nature external and internal...'²³. Through self-control, discipline, and self-purification man can realize his divine nature. By this method even the most degraded can be pushed towards perfection. The *Brahma-cārin* in Ramakrishna's parable urges the wood-cutter to 'go forward'.²⁴ This continuous process of inner growth towards perfection is the essence of practical Vedānta. Here religion ceases to be a mere static piety and amounts to Being and Becoming. At the level of relativity, it can become an instrument for building up perfected individuals as the basis of a sound society and nation. As Vivekananda said, 'No nation is great or good because Parliament enacts this or that, but because its men are great and good'.²⁵ It led to his call for man-making religion. Subhas Chandra Bose, like many other national leaders, found elements of character-building in general, and spiritual uplift in particular in Ramakrishna's sayings.²⁶ This

process of introspection also helps realization of the potentialities of individuals and groups, generates confidence and arrests imitation. If the self is divine, lack of faith in the self amounts to atheism. Relevance of this connotation at least in the modern world cannot be denied. One may have lost his faith in institutionalized religion, but not in oneself, in the God within. It is interesting to recall here Julian Huxley's observation that man's more comprehensive aim is not mere survival or numerical increase or control over environment but 'fuller realization of more possibilities by the human species' collectively and individually; it called for, according to Huxley, a science of human possibilities²⁷. Besides, self-knowledge and self-assertion are also steps to self-rule (*swarāj*).

NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Ramakrishna said not a word against the British; he had nothing to do with the national movement. But his simple words lent strength to the minds of many, and in the process, silently unleashed a feeling that if a nation builds up its strength from within it could meet squarely all its problems including political bondage. It was this spirit of self-confidence that was articulated by Vivekananda with profound political consequence. Ramakrishna's ideas provided the much-needed spiritual content to the cult of self-help which originated in the Hindu Mela and developed further during the *Swadeshi* days. Ramakrishna indirectly prepared the ground for the man-making, nation-building ideologies of the twentieth century. Uttered significantly at a time, when the nation was on the threshold of a political awakening, his words had the potency of rousing the Leviathan; if these were not fully utilized the fault was not his.

GOD-CENTRIC HUMANISM

'If God can be worshipped through a clay image, then why not in man?' asked Ramakrishna²⁸. So, he forcefully asserted that service to man was the highest form of worship. This God-centric humanism was unique, being different from the

Christian charity, or Vaiṣṇava kindness or Buddhist compassion.²⁹ Ramakrishna said to his devotees, 'An insignificant being thyself, how canst thou show mercy to God's creatures?'³⁰ He recognized selfless social service as a way to God-realization. He, therefore, did not hesitate to greet Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, who perhaps was an agnostic, as an ocean of milk (*Vidyā* or knowledge) and not an ocean of salt (ignorance)³¹. But he discouraged philanthropy of the self-lauding type. Ramakrishna refused to go to Benaras until and unless Mathura Nath Biswas, the son-in-law of Rani Rashmani, agreed to provide the famine-stricken people in a village near Deoghar with food and clothes, for, he saw *Śiva* in them.³² The same feeling was echoed by Vivekananda when he said, 'The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted—let these be your God'. Suggestions that the inspiration behind Vivekananda's burning concern for suffering humanity was Carlyle's ideas or the Social Gospel Movement of the West, are to say the least, ridiculous.³³ Today there is a growing concern for human rights. Ramakrishna had taught to respect the rights of others, and what was more important, to respect the dignity of man. He revived the traditional Indian ideal of duty and service.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS EVIL

Ramakrishna's absolute faith in the Divine Will did not amount to condoning evil. The idea of self-purification implicit in the 'Divinity of Man', while countering the Christian concept of sin, also met the ethical challenge of Christianity. Ramakrishna helped many to get rid of human failings. Symbolically, he was instrumental in helping Tota Puri to get over his anger,³⁴ Rama Chandra Datta his miserliness³⁵, Monomohan Mitra his conceit³⁶, and Surendranath Mitra his intemperance.³⁷ He fondly helped Girish Chandra Ghosh to discover himself and his creative faculties.

Ramakrishna's Gospel did not profess an empty idealism. 'Divinity of Man' did not necessarily mean a complacent attitude towards the wicked. In one of his parables the disciple of a holy man had to pay dearly for standing in the way of an 'Elephant-God' (*Hāthi Nārāyaṇa*) ignoring the warn-

ing of the 'Mahout God' (*Māhout Nārāyaṇa*)³⁸. Vivekananda explained that it was a wonderful solution to the controversy over personal effort and God's will³⁹. Ramakrishna laid emphasis on the need for shunning the company of the wicked and on the right of self-defence. However, this was not paying back evil for evil. The Brahmachāri reprimanded his disciple, a venomous snake, who had given up violence, for failing to defend itself against the cow-herds: 'I asked you not to bite, but I did not forbid you to hiss', he said.⁴⁰ Weakness or timidity had no place in his precepts.

IMAGE WORSHIP

In the nineteenth century, image worship of the Hindus had been subject to criticism not only by the Christian missionaries but also by the reformist Hindu organizations like the Brāhmo Samāj and the Ārya Samāj. But it is part of the cultural heritage of India and its vindication was necessary for ideological self-assertion of the growing nation, the bulk of which were Hindus. Besides, this idiom is easily understood by the masses. While engaged as the priest of the Kālī temple in Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna had the vision of the Divine Mother, only with the help of his longing heart, without the external aid of a formal *sādhana*. The important thing is sincerity, a yearning such as 'a kitten has for the mother cat'⁴¹. It is this that enables the devotee to project the consciousness of his inner self into image; it enables him to realize the spirit within and beyond the image. Without this, image worship degenerates into idolatry and feeds mercenary priestcraft. Ramakrishna held his hand near Kālī's nose, 'I actually felt her breathe on my hand',⁴² he said. When Jayanarayan Banerjee asked him, 'Is Govinda of the temple broken?' Ramakrishna replied, 'Can the one, who is an indivisible whole, be broken?'⁴³ For the ordinary, who were incapable of receiving higher training, he prescribed Narada-like devotion. Under his influence, Keshub Sen's views on image worship underwent modification. 'Hindu idolatry', he wrote in the *Sunday Mirror*, 'is not to be altogether rejected or overlooked—it represented millions of broken

fragments of God. Collect them together and you get the indivisible Divinity’.⁴⁴

SYMPHONY OF INDIA

Ramakrishna traversed all the different paths of Hindu *sādhana* (Tantra, Vaiṣṇavism, etc.) and attained perfection in each. Then he experienced the Absolute in *nirvikalpa samādhi* by following the Vedāntic method. He synthesized devotion and ‘discrimination’. He emphasized the unity behind the apparently conflicting *sādhana*s of the Hindus. So, he declared emphatically, ‘God is both with and without form’. Here he brought in the analogy of ice and water. The Divine Mother advised him not to be lost in the featureless Absolute, but to remain in *bhāvamukhe*, that is on the borderline of the Absolute and the Relative for the sake of humanity. He bridged the gulf between the Personal and Impersonal, the immanent and the transcendental aspects of Reality; it is a unique experience in the recorded spiritual history of the world.⁴⁵ Ramakrishna told Vidyasagar that although God is immanent in all, creatures vary in endowments and power.⁴⁶ So Hinduism prescribes different methods for persons at different stages of spiritual and intellectual growth; ‘Mother cooks different dishes to suit the different tastes and power of digestion of her children!’⁴⁷ The synthesis of Yoga, Knowledge, Devotion, and Action enunciated in the *Gītā* was effectively preached and practised by Ramakrishna. As Romain Rolland said, he represented ‘the symphony of India’⁴⁸. Before Ramakrishna, the reformers lacked the comprehensive vision of this panoramic religion and therefore failed to move the Hindu society at large and ‘had to step aside with a handful of followers’⁴⁹. Ramakrishna spoke to each in the language he understood. By his life he not only explained the whole scope of Hindu thought and aspirations but also limitations of the Brāhmo movement, though he had not a word of condemnation for any one. He had nothing but love for the Brāhmo leaders. When he heard of Keshub Sen’s illness he felt distressed and said, ‘... if something happens to Keshub, with whom shall I talk in Calcutta?’⁵⁰ The traditional religion in its entirety was restated. But a new

spirit and strength were infused, and it catered to the need of the contemporary and future world. It was not 'Hindu Revivalism' in the usual derogatory sense of the term. It raised Hinduism in the estimation not only of its adherents but also of its critics.

QUEST FOR UNIVERSALISM

Ramakrishna's perfection in the Vedāntic discipline of non-duality logically led to his stand against religious exclusivism. He insisted on perception of Truth from different angles and perspectives. He practised the disciplines of Islam and Christianity, forgetting Hinduism for the moment, and reached their goal. He accepted divinity of the Buddha and respected the Tirthankaras of the Jains and Gurus of the Sikhs. So he said all religions are not partly but wholly true, for they lead to the same goal. He realized that religions of the world are different manifestations of one Eternal Religion. Ramakrishna's experience strengthened all religions. This was the climax of the nineteenth century quest for universalism. It was not eclecticism. Ramakrishna was against amputing limbs of one and grafting them on another's body, for, that kills vital elements in each religion. He felt that every religion should grow according to its normal law of growth retaining its own individuality. This was the difference between Ramakrishna's synthesis and Keshub Sen's Nababidhān. Ramakrishna did not uphold uniformity but unity in diversity. He discouraged conversion, established absolute freedom of thought and broke down barriers of dogmas and sects. There could be no better exposition of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Ramakrishna, the 'Cosmic Humanist'⁵¹, sternly told his disciples, 'Never get into your head that your faith alone is true and every other false'⁵². This is not toleration but total acceptance of others' point of view. Ramakrishna practised ecumenism, long before Pope John gave official blessing to it.⁵³ He offered a solution to the dilemma of religious plurality. Is not this a clue to national integration and international co-operation? Incidentally, we should remember that the nineteenth century awakening was handicapped by a widening cleavage between the,

Hindus and the Muslims. While meditating under the banyan tree Ramakrishna had the vision of a Mussalman with a long beard⁵⁴. He came to him with rice in an earthen plate. He fed some Mussalmans and also gave him a few grains to eat. The Mother showed him that there existed only One and not two.⁵⁵ The purport of this was that the Vedānta which taught the unity of the *Ātman* did not recognize any distinction between man and man. A sincere belief in such a doctrine would have eradicated all cleavages and helped establish true harmony.

SOCIAL REFORM

Ramakrishna was no social reformer. Rather, he discouraged conventional social reform ideas and preached through practice. He behaved like an ordinary mortal—one having human imperfections and groping his way into light. In the nineteenth century, the caste system was criticized as a divisive force in the society. In his early life Ramakrishna showed a strict conformity to caste rules. He was at first opposed to his brother's acceptance of the assignment in the Kālī Temple of Dakshineswar built by Rani Rashmani who belonged to the *śūdra* caste. He also refused the cooked offerings of the temple. But after his spiritual realization, he ate the leavings from the leaf plates of the poor after they had been fed at the temple.⁵⁶ He cleaned a privy himself.⁵⁷ Vivekananda said 'One ounce of practice is worth twenty thousand tons of big faith'⁵⁸. So Ramakrishna showed that rituals, pilgrimages, and caste rules were non-essentials and would wear off with the growth of real knowledge. 'When the fruit appears, the blossom drops off', he told Shashadhar Tarkachudamani, the orthodox Hindu Pandit.⁵⁹ Ramakrishna believed that, 'the caste system can be removed by one means only, and that is love of God. Lovers of God do not belong to any caste. Through *bhakti* an untouchable becomes pure and elevated!'⁶⁰ It is reminiscent of Sri Chaitanya.

EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

The central theme of the nineteenth century social reform

movement was emancipation of women. It will be wrong to represent Ramakrishna as a misogynist, though translation of *Kāminī-Kāñcana* as 'woman and gold' may lead one to think otherwise. His stricture on these was a warning against increasing lust and greed in the face of imported hedonistic values of the period. In the case of a householder, it did not mean a complete shunning of woman and gold⁶¹. Ramakrishna scolded his disciple Hari (Swami Turiyananda) who expressed contempt for woman⁶². He saw in every woman, from his own wife to the common harlot, the embodiment of the Divine Mother. He maintained filial attitude towards women even while practising the Tāntric mode of worship. The *Indian Mirror* observed that the place which Ramakrishna assigned to women was 'far higher than which the passions of men might reach'⁶³. Besides, he accepted a woman (Yogeswarī) as his Guru. He practised spirituality both in male and female garb, which may also be taken to signify women's equal status in the spiritual sphere. Ramakrishna correctly understood all the moods of women. The sight of fasting women pained him deeply⁶⁴. Through his consort Sarada Devi, Ramakrishna presented his own ideal of womanhood—an asset in household and a partner in higher avocations. Ramakrishna recognized the value of marriage in spiritual evolution.

KNACK FOR DETAILS

Ramakrishna's ideas did not contradict the spirit of life-affirmation that distinguished the nineteenth century. Escapism had no place in his *Gospel*. He saw God as Truth and Truth could be realized by steadfast devotion to an ideal and duty. He had two different sets of prescriptions—one for the *sannyāsin* and another for the householder. In his own life he combined the two. He considered men who had left their wives for the sake of religion, without making provisions for their livelihood, as 'abominable wretch'⁶⁵. He also made it clear that no spiritual practice would bear fruit unless the parents were pleased⁶⁶. In spite of his intense contemplativeness he was meticulous about small details. He would keep a thing in its proper place, take care of the articles of daily use.

He instructed the Holy Mother, 'At the time of getting into a carriage or a boat, go and get into it first, and when leaving it, get down last after examining whether anything has been left behind'⁶⁷. He reproved Jogindra for being cheated by a shop-keeper who sold him a cracked pan. He said, 'Just because you are a devotee, that's no reason to be a fool'⁶⁸. So his ideas contributed to personal and social orderliness. He, however, held up before the householder the ideal of King Janaka. The emphasis was on renunciation and detachment which are integral parts of Indian heritage. Detached action, instead of breeding passivism, enables one to face boldly problems of day-to-day life by imparting peace, order, and strength to the mind. He used to say, 'One should live in the world unattached, like a maid-servant in a rich man's house'⁶⁹. In order to cultivate these virtues, a householder should keep his mind fixed on God. 'Rub your body with turmeric, before plunging in a sea full of alligators'⁷⁰. He advised Nag Mahashay, 'Do your duty with one hand and with the other hold to God. After the duty is over, you will hold to God with both hands'⁷¹. This takes us back to the very heart of Ramakrishna's teaching with which we began to assess his historical importance. Ramakrishna gives us a complete philosophy of life. In his ideas there is no essential difference between the secular and the sacred. The nineteenth century awakening was characterized by vernacularization and democratization of the scriptural learning. Far more than Rammohun's translations of the Upaniṣads, it was the *Gospel* (*Kathāmṛta*) of Ramakrishna that made the Vedāntic truth the property of every household.

PROPAGATION OF IDEAS

Ramakrishna himself arranged for the survival and dissemination of his ideas. It was he who really laid the foundation of his order when in January 1886, he distributed the ochre wearing cloths among his eleven disciples. They were Narendra (Vivekananda), Rakhal (Brahmananda), Jogindra (Yogananda), Baburam (Premananda), Niranjana (Niranjana), Tarak (Shivananda), Sarat (Saradananda), Shashi (Ramakrishnananda), Gopal (Advaitananda), Kali (Abheda-

nanda), Lata (Adbhutananda). It was a social and cultural necessity in the nineteenth century which faced the diverse challenges to Indian tradition. The Vedāntic synthesis between contemplative individualism and social responsibility, as reasserted by Ramakrishna, was expressed in the motto of the order *Ātmano Mokṣārtham Jagaddhitāya ca* (For the salvation of oneself and welfare of the world). However, remaining true to Ramakrishna's principles, the movement thus initiated, never created a cult of itself.

MESSAGE OF HUMANISM

Intrinsic spiritual awakening, which is the essence of Ramakrishna's life and teachings, instead of acting as opium for the masses could encourage resistance to all sorts of wrongs and exploitations. It amounted to expansion of life both in the relative and the absolute sense. It complemented social reform movements and social legislations of the nineteenth century. Ramakrishna said categorically, 'Religion is not for empty stomach'⁷² which formed the bedrock of Vivekananda's philosophy. Ramakrishna once said 'the two brothers make a partition of their land, the Lord smiles and says, "*The fools see not that every bit of the ground belongs unto me*"'⁷³. One is tempted to read in it a flash of socialistic principles, though Ramakrishna had no direct contribution to the ideas of economic and political freedom. But without a moral and spiritual foundation they are only 'half a loaf' in a country like India. Ramakrishna rediscovered and revitalized India's eternal message of humanism and universalism and made it a property of mankind. In him we find the complete success of India's search for identity in the nineteenth century. Arnold Toynbee has pointed out in the Foreword to the book '*Ramakrishna—His Unique Message*', that in the Atomic Age when western skill 'has armed the people of the world with weapons of devastating power', 'the whole human race has a utilitarian motive for following this Indian way'⁷⁴. Ramakrishna's ideas were relevant not only for the age in which he lived, but he left these as legacies to the post-war modern world marked by co-existence of atheism, materialism, as well as baseless super-

stitutions and religious formalities. Besides, he expounded the true significance of the Indian Renaissance in the world perspective. As Aldous Huxley puts it, the 'accidents' of Ramakrishna's life were intensely Hindu, but the 'essence' was mystical and universal⁷⁵. His whole life offers a decisive answer to the question posed by the Indian intelligentsia at the turn of the last century, and is still being asked today, 'is it possible that a man may be great and yet not a scholar?'⁷⁶

**THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT AND ITS MESSAGE
TO THE MODERN MAN**

THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT

Swami Lokeswarananda

RUSKIN once said, 'An idea is more powerful than an army'. There must be much truth in this, else it is difficult to explain the influence Ramakrishna had over his contemporaries. He was an humble man without anything to commend him to the sophisticated, English-educated intellectuals of nineteenth-century Bengal, yet we find the best of them falling under his spell. Take first the case of Principal Hastie: a Christian Missionary deeply rooted in Western traditions and an outstanding teacher of Western philosophy, he was among the first from the intellectuals of his time to have met Ramakrishna. He was so fascinated by his personality that he could not help mentioning him and his mystic experiences to his pupils at Scottish Church College. And what an inscrutable quirk of fate that among those pupils was Narendranath Dutta, who later became famous as Swami Vivekananda and was Ramakrishna's chief disciple. Keshub Sen is another case in point. He was himself a great religious leader, indeed so great that the British press welcomed him as 'the second Christ from the East' when he visited England on a lecture tour. Even Royalty held him in high esteem, for it is said that Queen Victoria herself invited him to dinner and once also attended his lecture. Curiously enough, this great man too was attracted to Ramakrishna from his very first meeting with him and remained one of his ardent admirers to the last day. He was more a Christian than a Hindu, yet it was he who first introduced the idolatrous Kālī-worshipping Ramakrishna to the intelligentsia of Calcutta by writing about him in his journals. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that though he himself was a great orator, he was very shy before Ramakrishna and once when pressed by the latter to make a speech, he excused himself by saying that to speak before him would be like carrying coal to Newcastle. All available records show how his religious thoughts under-went a marked change since

he came in contact with Ramakrishna, how his rigid attitude on religious matters gave way to a spirit of humility and how he found it possible to see sympathetically many of the current practices in Hinduism (or for that matter, in other religions) he had till then rejected out of hand.

IRRESISTIBLE APPEAL

In a remarkable tribute paid to Ramakrishna, we find Pratap Chandra Mozoomdar, another sophisticated product of English education of the time and also an influential religious leader, asking: 'Why should I sit long hours to attend to him, I who have listened to Disraeli and Fawcett, Stanley and Max Müller and a whole host of European scholars and divines?'

Thus we watch with amazement Ramakrishna drawing to himself outstanding men of his time, men who were his anti-theses in many ways. How can we explain this? The only explanation possible is Ramakrishna himself—Ramakrishna the man and his message. There was something about him which had an irresistible appeal to people. This 'something' was the ideas he preached, ideas which he himself best illustrated in his life. People were thirsting for those ideas and when they came to know of them and what is more, see them exemplified in him, they inevitably flocked towards him in spite of their initial dislike for a man who, according to their westernized tastes, was only a rustic.

DIRECT KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

What were those ideas? First and foremost, Ramakrishna taught that mere argumentation about God would not serve any purpose but that one ought to concentrate one's efforts on God-realization. He preached this at a time when scholars were trying to decide what God was like—was He a Being or a Thing? Did God have a form? If He had, what was His form like? Was God benevolent and just? If He was, how was it that people suffered so much, often for no fault of theirs? How was it that good people often suffered more

than bad people? And so on and on. People quoted different scriptures and different authorities and argued with much heat. In the midst of this verbal clash which often led to much acrimony, Ramakrishna preached that all this attempt to describe God was futile. It was like a salt doll trying to measure the depth of the sea. Can a finite thing say anything about what is infinite? Those who pose they know about God really know nothing about Him. They often talk glibly about Him, but the fact that they do so clearly shows that they are completely ignorant about Him. Either they are suffering from self-delusion, or they are mere pretenders. Anyone having any direct knowledge of God finds his experience so overwhelming that he finds any comment on the subject impossible. As a parallel Ramakrishna used to refer to the process of an empty vessel being filled in with water. So long as the vessel is not filled in it emits a gargling sound, but when it is full, it is silent. He would also cite the example of the bee which hums so long as it does not find a flower to sit on. When it finds one and starts sucking honey, it keeps quiet. This, he said, would happen to the person who has found God.

He would also say that only when one has a direct experience of God, one knows what God is like, what it means to be in His presence or what transformation takes place in one's nature. Short of direct experience, one can only guess, and as God is unique, any guess about Him is bound to prove wide of the mark. This is why he used to insist that seekers of God concentrate on their search for God rather than waste time merely talking about Him.

RELIGION IS REALIZATION

Having declared God-realization as the supreme goal of life, Ramakrishna said that man should try to reach that goal by whatever means he has at his command. It is wrong to quarrel about the means, for these are bound to vary from individual to individual, seeing that we are different from one another in backgrounds, tastes and capabilities. What is im-

portant according to him is sincerity. When a man is sincere and seeks God earnestly, he will succeed even if he chooses a wrong path to begin with. Being sincere, he will soon find out, may be with others' help, the right path and being earnest, he will make quick progress, making good the loss he may have suffered because he had initially chosen a wrong path. According to Ramakrishna, it is not right for others to interfere, for what is good for one may not be good for another. Religion is difficult as it is, but what makes it more difficult is that there are too many people claiming to know more about it than they really know and also trying to impose their ideas upon others. When a blind man tries to lead another blind man, there is a disaster. Similarly, in the religious field nothing good can come out of a man knowing nothing about God himself but trying to teach others. It was necessary for him to give this caution, for there were too many people in those days as perhaps always, trying to teach religion to others without themselves knowing anything about it. Many equate religion with scholarship, but religion is 'realization', direct and firsthand experience of the Godhead.

COMMON TRUTH BEHIND ALL RELIGIONS

Another idea Ramakrishna preached was that it was wrong for anyone to claim that the religion he believed in was the only true religion and all other religions were false. According to him, religions are so many paths leading to God, and a seeker can choose from among them the one that he thinks the best. He also stressed the idea that religions looked different on the surface, but underlying all of them was a common truth, which was their core. It was this core which mattered and not the accretions which might have gathered over it. Ramakrishna asked people to fix their minds on this core, ignoring everything else.

The next important idea Ramakrishna preached was that one should treat one's fellow-men with the same respect and affection as one treats God, for, according to him, there is divinity in everybody, be he low or high. Respect for his

THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT

fellow-men and service to them with humility became a corner-stone of his dealings with others.

SYNTHESIS OF ALL

What Ramakrishna taught was simple and striking, but it was his personality that gave his ideas the force they carried. He was the best example of what he taught and he was more than what he taught. People loved to hear him because he spoke with the authority which comes from personal experience. If what he said was simple and clear, it was, because he did not guess like other people, or depend upon second-hand information. Being in his presence was itself a spiritual experience. Reading anything about Ramakrishna is like walking with God. Mahatma Gandhi describes the experience as to 'see God face to face'. No wonder therefore, that people of all creeds flocked to him—Hindus, Moslems, Christians. They found intricate questions about God raised in scholarly books, but Ramakrishna always had the right answers to them. His answers left people wondering about the depth of his scholarship. They found it difficult to believe that he had no formal schooling and had not read many books, either. What is interesting is that he did not seem to contradict anybody, but only reminded people that the real goal was further ahead from where they were and they must always keep moving forward. Elsewhere, religion might be merely polemics but with him religion was 'living', 'being and becoming'. This is why people of all denominations flocked to him for inspiration and guidance. Hindus thought he was the best Hindu that had ever walked the earth; strangely enough, Moslems, Christians and members of other religious groups also thought he was one of them, one who represented the best of their prototype. In this respect, Ramakrishna was indeed a unique person. As Sri Aurobindo said, 'Shri Ramakrishna represents a synthesis, in one person, of all...'. Thus Ramakrishna became in his own life-time the focal point of a new movement which synthesized conflicting viewpoints in religion and also revitalised different religious traditions. Thus he himself may be

said to have initiated what is known as the Ramakrishna Movement.

DISSEMINATION

Ramakrishna was not looking for laurels but for men, who would understand his message and try to live up to it. To the good fortune of future generations, such men arrived headed by Naren, who later became famous as Swami Vivekananda. They were barely a dozen or so, but Ramakrishna selected them out of the big crowd who came to him. Having selected them he trained them with great care so that they might absorb the great ideas that he represented. Did he visualize that someday those ideas would have a great impact on the religious thought of the world ? Perhaps he did. His conversations such as are recorded in his *Gospel* are interspersed with hints about such a possibility. The young men he chose for the preservation and transmission of his ideas were apparently very ordinary, but he had great faith in them and later events proved that his faith was not misplaced. Within seven years of his passing away, his name was known throughout the western world—first through his disciple, Swami Vivekananda and next through Prof. Max Müller. Swami Vivekananda, as we know, created a sensation in the U.S.A. as a delegate to the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. He literally stormed through America so that the press of that country dubbed him as 'the Cyclonic Hindu'. He preached Ramakrishna's ideas first in America and later in England and the Continent. Churches, Universities and learned societies of all kinds threw open their doors to him and considered themselves honoured if he chose to speak to their audiences. He seldom mentioned his Master's name, but Ramakrishna became known all the same. But if Swami Vivekananda was reluctant to disclose the source of his inspiration, Prof. Max Müller had no such inhibition. He wrote an article entitled 'A Real Mahatman' in the '*Nineteenth Century*' dwelling upon Ramakrishna's life and teachings. Coming from the pen of so great a scholar the article naturally drew the attention of the entire scholastic world, eastern and western. Overnight Ramakrishna became a subject for study and research among scholars.

THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT

People recognized that a great star had risen in the religious firmament which needed watching.

INDIA REGAINS HERSELF

Meanwhile, significant repercussions had started in India following Swami Vivekananda's success in the West. For the first time, India had become conscious of the great wealth of her philosophical thought. She realized that she had no reason to feel ashamed of herself. She might not possess the military and economic power of the West, but she possessed intellectual and cultural powers which were second to none in the world in their depth and grandeur. This discovery was like a tonic to the dropping spirits of India. There followed a wave of enthusiasm in the country which was unprecedented in scale. This was the beginning of a true renaissance in India, which was later strengthened and brought to fruition by men like Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo and Nehru.

One of the first things Swami Vivekananda did on coming back to India was to found the Ramakrishna Mission. It is an organization specially intended for the study and practice of Ramakrishna's ideas. When it started in 1897, it consisted of a dozen monks or so and had practically no assets. Even now it is small compared with the Christian organizations, but it is a name that commands respect all over India and even outside. Its monks are spread all over the world, either occupied in humanitarian work or in preaching Ramakrishna's message (which happens to be India's message also). To name some countries outside India where they are working: England, France, Switzerland, the U.S.A., Malaysia, Fiji, Ceylon, Rhodesia and Bangladesh. There are other countries (to name one out of many, Japan) wanting to have them, but there is so much to do in India that even though they would like to spread out to as many countries as possible, the Mission has to keep many countries on the waiting list. What is intriguing is that the call always comes from those countries—it is not that the monks go to those countries on their own. What is more, so long as they work in those countries, they are sup-

ported by the people there. There is no question of any Indian money being spent on their work.

THE MISSION AND THE MONKS

What exactly do these monks do in India or abroad? It must be made clear at once that the Ramakrishna Mission does not believe in conversion in the sense of the word as understood in common parlance. If anything, these monks try to make 'a Hindu a better Hindu, a Moslem a better Moslem, a Christian a better Christian' and so on. In other words, they ask people to go to the root of religion, which is trying to reach God somehow or other and not merely talking about Him. They quote different prophets and different scriptures to show how in essence they preach the same thing. Their language differs, but their purport is the same. They do not want to replace any system but want to draw attention to the fact that there is much in common between one system and another. In all matters of religion, their approach is one of respect and understanding. Because of this approach, they feel as much at home among non-Hindus as among Hindus. Because of this approach, non-Hindus also feel at home in their company; as a matter of fact they like these monks and often invite them to their services. Today ecumenism has become an active force in the Christian world. It must not be forgotten that long before Pope John gave official blessings to this, Ramakrishna had preached and practised it. His ecumenism was much broader though, for it embraced not some denominations but all denominations of all religions.

GREAT POWER FOR PEACE

Today the Ramakrishna Movement has become a great power for peace and happiness in this country as well as outside. In India where different religious sects and communities live, the idea of tolerance and brotherly feelings towards each other has great relevance. Another factor which contributes much to its popularity is the rational approach it brings to bear upon every vital problem of life. People who are influenced by Ramakrishna believe religion to be a kind of science

open to study and investigation. They do not agree that religious truths have to be accepted on trust; they rather declare that nothing need be accepted as final unless it has been tested and found true. Experience, personal and immediate, is the only acceptable proof of religion.

The fact that the Movement lays great store on selfless service as a means of God-realization also attracts many people. The service it gives is open to all, irrespective of caste or creed or language. Not only the Ramakrishna Mission but hundreds of institutions which have sprung up all over the country to-day give this kind of service. Since the time of Buddha this is almost without parallel in India. What is significant is that most of them bear the name of Ramakrishna and draw inspiration from him.

As time passes, the Ramakrishna Movement is growing from strength to strength. People all over the country want the Mission to open more branch centres—schools, colleges, hospitals, orphanages etc., for they know that the quality of service they will get from the Mission will be better than what they may get elsewhere. Their requests are almost always accompanied by offers of money, land, and buildings, but the Mission proceeds cautiously and avoids proliferation unless there is a compelling reason in its favour. Apart from the fact that it suffers from shortage of manpower, it prefers that people themselves come forward to start such institutions, imbued with the spirit of selfless service. Happily, the present trend clearly shows that this spirit is fast spreading.

As the Movement spreads the attitude of the common people towards religion is also changing. Previously, religion was equated with rituals, but now people realize that religion is essentially a science of 'being and becoming', something that concerns man's inner nature. The habit of prayer is good but if this is not accompanied by a corresponding improvement in one's nature, it is not worth much. Another change that is noticeable today is respect for religions other than one's own. There was once much arrogance in the attitude of people towards the religions of others, but there is now humility and a spirit of enquiry if not also reverence.

STUDIES ON SRI RAMAKRISHNA

The strength of the Ramakrishna Movement is not in money or men or organization but in the ideas it tries to present. These ideas are fast spreading, and wherever they are spreading they are producing a great impact. Silently but inevitably, they are changing the minds of the people who come under their influence. They act like a catalytic agent transforming their personalities.

Thus, the ideas that Ramakrishna left are now reaching out to the far corners of the world, not because of any patronage from any quarter, but because of their inherent strength. A new turn has come in the religious outlook of man since the day he was born. It is a turn that makes for unity, peace and blessedness.



SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT : THE QUESTION OF ASSESSMENT

Trevor Ling

WITHOUT Swami Vivekananda there would have been no Sri Ramakrishna Movement. It would certainly not have been the Ramakrishna Movement as it is and as it has contributed to modern Indian history. But equally, without Sri Ramakrishna there would have been no Swami Vivekananda. Certainly there would have been no Swami Vivekananda as he is known to us, an undoubtedly charismatic personality, and a man overpowered by the personality and presence of Ramakrishna. There would, of course, have been Narendranath Dutta, a member of a Calcutta *bhadralok* family, a brilliant young student, well-acquainted with the works of the major contemporary European philosophers, and an eloquent and accomplished speaker, a young man destined no doubt to play an outstanding part in the nationalist struggle against British imperial rule in India. But there would have been no Swami Vivekananda. One famous participant at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 would, in that case, have been unknown, and the event itself by now have been virtually forgotten. Certainly it would have been a duller and less famous event than it was in fact, from the moment Swami Vivekananda began to make his distinctive contributions.

It is, of course, idle to speculate in this way. Such speculation amounts to a futile attempt to imagine history re-written. The point being made here is that whatever is said subsequently in this paper, which is concerned principally with Vivekananda and beyond, it must be understood that although the reference is to one outstanding figure of modern Indian history, behind him is always seen another figure, who is the embodiment of the spirit of India. One thing is clear: if we do not keep Sri Ramakrishna in view we shall not understand Vivekananda.

PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN ASSESSMENT

It would not be difficult to assemble any number of appreciative assessments of the Ramakrishna Movement. Testimonials to the widespread value of the work of the movement, in all the many aspects of its activities, can readily be found. Stephen Hay declares that amid many self-conscious efforts of Hindu revivalists in mid-nineteenth century to check the advance of Christian influence, 'Hindu society suddenly discovered in its midst a genuine saint and mystic' and that in the end 'Sri Ramakrishna's simple devotion to the traditional concepts and deities of his faith proved a more effective force than all the oratory of his predecessors'.¹ An academic philosopher, Benoy Gopal Ray, writes of the work of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, commending its programme of social service, its 'work for the uplift of backward classes and tribal people', and so on.² The universal character is emphasized by one of its own members, Swami Ranganathananda, who observes that, true to the spirit of Sri Ramakrishna 'the Mission is not a proselytizing body, nor a sect within Hinduism itself. The work of the Ramakrishna Mission outside India is merely the propagation of the universal principles of Vedanta and the spreading of true ideas about India and her catholic culture.'³ The educational aspect of the movement is commented upon by Amiya Kumar Mazumdar: 'Various methods have been used to raise the masses in different ages and in different countries. Vivekananda's method of uplifting the masses was the most constructive, practical and comprehensive. Education is the vital chord, and the Swami touched it and made it living... The Swami regarded the uplift of the masses through proper education as of topmost priority in the programme of national resurgence in India.'⁴

On the other hand, there have been some adverse assessments. Some of these are concerned with Vivekananda's fund raising activities in the United States. Niranjana Dhar's comment is that 'so far as Vivekananda the prophet was concerned, he was America's contribution to India...a predominantly financial mission took him to America [the reference

is to the visit of 1900].... The Americans were a rich and charity-minded people and always ran after novelties.' According to Dhar, it was Vivekananda's preaching of Vedanta that Americans found attractive. But since it is Vedanta that Dhar himself finds unacceptable, his main objection to the Swami's activities is 'the import the message had for the future of this country [i.e. India]. In fact, it created a far greater impact upon the mind of a subjugated nation like the Indians than upon that of the religious-minded Americans, and henceforward Vedantism ceased to be the mere personal philosophy of this or that individual. It was no longer the class ideology of the Indian feudalists.'⁵ A further criticism, voiced by Niranjan Dhar is that 'following the Christian Socialists he called his movement Vedantic Socialism or Practical Vedanta'.⁶ In concluding that the 'inspiration behind Vivekananda's conception of Practical Vedanta was undoubtedly Christian'⁷, Dhar was particularising what has been found in other quarters as a more general view of the work of Vivekananda, that it was heavily influenced by Christian missionary activity, and to some extent in that respect imitative.

INTERPRETATION

This leads the present concern with assessment into the arena of interpretation. Assessment of the Ramakrishna Movement must depend on how it is interpreted. A variety of interpretations is available. Associated with the idea of Christian influence is the view of the movement as a continuous interaction and dialogue with Christian religion. This leads to an interpretation of it as the *Christianising* of Indian religion. But if the arena is widened somewhat, to include aspects of life other than those of institutional religion, another interpretation of the Ramakrishna Movement which has been made is one in terms of *Westernization*. Closely related to the concept of Westernization is another, namely *modernization*, which is sometimes preferred as an explanatory device by observers who are themselves non-Western; that is to say, such change can be seen as modernization and thus escape the

charge of cultural imperialism on the part of the West, and cultural subservience on the part of the recipients. One step further in this direction and one arrives at nationalism, and at the kind of change which is characterized as *nationalistic*. Each of these commonly used terms has been employed, at some time or another, to interpret the nature of the Ramakrishna Movement. Any attempt at assessment must therefore take each of these concepts into consideration and decide whether or not it is appropriate. These by no means exhaust the possible modes of interpretation, however. Others, which relate more specifically to *religious* movements are religious reform, religious renaissance, and religious revitalisation. In effect, therefore, we have a set of secular concepts, and a set of religious concepts by means of which to interpret the nature of this movement and to arrive at an assessment. Even the primarily secular concepts can also be used in a specifically religious context, if one decides that is the appropriate context in which to view the Ramakrishna Movement: that is, one might conceivably see it as 'religious Westernization', (that is, without wider reference) or as 'religious modernization', or even as 'religious nationalism' (as distinct from how it has sometimes been seen, that is, as political nationalism). Finally, there is yet another possible kind of interpretation, beyond these various concepts of change in an already existing tradition, and that is *innovation*. 'Every social institution is a field of innovation, no matter how conservative its intent, and how standardized its techniques and procedures.'⁸

The interpretative possibilities are thus quite wide and varied. The difficulty involved in making the attempt to apply them and test them for relevance in the case of the Ramakrishna Movement within the confines of an essay such as this is obvious. The aim of this essay will therefore be to provide some tentative pointers, and leave to the reader the actual use of these pointers in assessing the movement. The present writer will, in fact, adopt *one* of the modes of interpretation which are available, but it will be for the reader to decide whether this interpretation is appropriate, or whether some other would be better.

INTERPRETATION IN TERMS OF 'CHRISTIANIZING'

It is certainly not unheard of for the Ramakrishna Movement to be accused or complimented (according to the standpoint of the observer) on account of its alleged 'Christianizing' of Indian religion. It is not unheard of, but where it is heard it is usually unsubstantiated. The idea seems to arise out of a confusion: the Ramakrishna Movement is seen to have adopted *methods* similar to those of the Christian missions, such as the setting up of schools, medical missions, and social relief work, and such activity is interpreted as necessarily due to Christian influence. From this it is a simple matter to assume that such activities indicate the 'Christianization' of an Indian movement.

To an influential Christian missionary writer, however, this was not how it appeared. For, J. N. Farquhar, a professor in a Christian missionary college, and one who knew Calcutta well in the early decades of this century, gives the following account of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda:

'Ramakrishna's indiscriminate acceptance and uncritical defence of everything Hindu expanded in his disciple into unbounded laudation of everything Indian; and while Vivekananda himself bears witness that his master was genial and kindly, and condemned no one, the disciple, not unnaturally, was led by his unmixed praise of everything Hindu to the most violent and unjust condemnation of everything Western.'

He adds in a later passage that together with Dayananda, the Theosophists, Nivedita, and all that followed them, Vivekananda 'talked in the wildest and most extravagant way in praise of Hinduism and Indian civilization and in condemnation of Christianity and the West', and that they 'actually led the average educated Hindu to believe the doctrine that everything Indian is pure, spiritual, and lofty, and that everything Western is materialistic, sensual, devilish.'¹⁰ Whether this is an accurate account or not makes little difference to the fact that to a Christian who lived and travelled in Bengal and elsewhere in India in the early days of the Movement it did

not appear that Hindu tradition was being Christianized by Vivekananda and his followers.

It has often been mentioned that for Vivekananda religion was regarded as the 'innermost core of education'¹¹. It is also well known that Vivekananda was an admirer of the Buddha and of Buddhism. Thus, the setting up of schools certainly, and social relief work possibly, could have had their inspiration (if it had to be from some other source) in the Buddhist tradition, where the monastery was also the village school, and where the social welfare of the people is a continuous thread running through the discourses of the Buddha, and the works of Ashoka to the famine relief work of the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta in 1891.¹² In 1898 a new order of monks was seen in the streets of Calcutta, in April, amid the panic caused by plague: the monks of the Ramakrishna Order were putting teaching of Vivekananda into practice as they tended the sick, removed the dead bodies and swept the streets, after visiting the homes of the local people and giving help and encouragement.¹³ As Swami Lokeshwarananda comments concerning this episode, it was a novel sight for the inhabitants of Calcutta¹⁴. It was an aspect of the *change* that was inevitably occurring with the rise of the Ramakrishna Movement; who can say that it was not a tradition of ancient India that was being rediscovered?

THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT AND THE CONCEPT OF MODERNIZATION

Was that ancient tradition therefore being 'modernized'? It now has to be considered whether the concept of *modernization* is the most appropriate explanatory device for understanding the Ramakrishna Movement. Aghenananda Bharati has argued that it is.¹⁵

According to Bharati, 'modernized Hinduism' is 'most comprehensively propounded by Vivekananda'.¹⁶ 'The speeches and writings of Swami Vivekananda', says Bharati, (together with Aurobindo and other writers whom he mentions) 'are the corpus of modern Hinduism'.¹⁷ He goes on to argue that an 'important feature of the modernization of Hinduism is its

boundless eclecticism'.¹⁸ In Bharati's view, 'The village Hindu, not touched by modernism and the Renaissance, has a far more coherent and complex theological view than the hypertrophically eclectic modern Hindu in the city.'¹⁹ He offers no empirical evidence in support of these and other vast generalizations, so they must be accepted for what they are; presumably, emotively expressed general impression. The disapproval of 'modernized Hinduism' appears to be a way of expressing disapproval of Vivekananda. If that is the intention, it would have been better expressed directly, rather than by means of the inaccurate use of this particular sociological concept, and one which is ill-defined and over-worked. It is tempting, it must be admitted, to characterize the work of the Ramakrishna Movement as one of 'modernization', even from a somewhat different perception of it from that which appears to underlie Bharati's words.

The use of the concept of modernization is approached more carefully by Yogendra Singh²⁰. Examining the processes of cultural change in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he identifies two major types: first, 'reforms which called for changes in the cultural practices and values of Hinduism on the pattern of the primordial tradition of the Vedas,' and second, 'reforms which postulated synthesis of new norms and cultural themes with traditional themes'.²¹ Within the first type he includes the name of Vivekananda. Among the second type, whom he calls 'the apostles of *modernization* in India' he includes Nehru. Significantly, therefore, he does *not* characterize Vivekananda's reforming activity as 'modernization'. The latter term, in the sense he uses it, entails the combination of new norms and new cultural themes with the traditional Hindu culture of India. On the other hand, he notes that 'in their appeals for reform in the Hindu cultural tradition neither Dayananda nor Vivekananda nor Gandhi rejected the basic ideal-typical cultural themes of Hinduism'. He adds that 'Vivekananda and Gandhi did not plead for deliberate hostility or rejection of the non-Hindu cultural values and religious beliefs, yet their interpretation of Hinduism and their formulation of the cultural policies for Hindu society itself were such

that it came as a sharp contradiction to the Western or modern way of life and its basic value premises'.²²

MEANING OF MODERNIZATION

Reference has already been made to the fact that some non-Western writers prefer not to describe the changes which have characterized their societies in recent times as 'Westernization', but choose instead to use the more neutral-sounding term: 'modernization'. This also, however, is not without its chauvinistic overtones and assumptions. Moreover, as David Mandelbaum points out, the use of the term 'Westernization' to refer to adopted ideas and practices which originated outside India, mostly in Europe, is nowadays often inappropriate, since many 'of the patterns of government, technology, and communication that were first brought in by Europeans' are now part of the accepted Indian world, and have been so for some generations. He suggests that the term 'modernization' avoids 'the unwarranted implications of "Westernization" provided it is not taken as a slogan of invariably good and desirable progress'.²³ The danger is that the term 'modernization' can too easily lead in that direction, where the assumption begins to be made that whatever now exists must be better than what used to exist. For there is no well-marked frontier in history, where everything that happened antecedently was 'traditional' and everything that happened afterwards is 'modern'. The idea that everything that belongs to the period before the industrial 'revolution' is different in kind from (and probably inferior to) whatever belongs to the period after the industrial revolution is already beginning to wear very thin, now, in the space age, the computer age, the age of the micro-chip. There is a kind of arrogance about the use of any point in time a little earlier than our own lifetime as marking the beginning of what is 'modern'. Change is seldom entirely absent from social and cultural situations; in some cases it is occurring more rapidly than in others. Situations that are *entirely* static can be very few, and are likely to be found only in extremely isolated areas of the world. The characterization of social, political, or religious events and trends in terms of *change* is less likely to ap-

pear in a few decades as outdated than their characterization as contemporaneous with the writer as 'modern'. Indeed, the concept of modernization has been described by Detlef Kantowsky as 'a secular eschatology', consisting, as it often does, in the idea that all national histories must move inevitably towards the great goal of industrialization as in the Western model. He quotes Gandhi's plea of 1928: 'God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million [India in the 1920s] took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.'²⁴ It might be difficult to regard Vivekananda's work as one of modernization, once the implications of this term are exposed. More than a decade ago Daniel Bell's book pointed to *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*.²⁵ If therefore 'modernization' has no absolute point of reference in time, in the industrialized society, it is evident that the term can only be a synonym for the idea of 'now' as opposed to 'formerly'. And that idea is perfectly well conveyed in the term change, or *anicca*, which in the Buddha's teaching is one of the three basic marks of all mortal existence.

But if the word 'Modernizer' may be understood *without* the implications of an arrogant secular eschatology, and bearing only the sense of 'bringing up to date', or 'making contemporary', or giving a contemporary bearing, then in *that* sense the Ramakrishna Movement stands in a modernizing relationship to Hindu tradition²⁶; it may be understood strictly in that sense of the word and in that sense only.

NEED FOR BEING 'HUMAN'

Now in this view of the matter, where it is accepted that to modernize does not *necessarily* entail industrialization of the Western kind, nor indeed Westernization in the cultural sense, there is less reason to regard it as remarkable that Indian society and culture could be modernized without becoming less Indian. Admittedly, the greatest need in the present world situation is to lay more em-

phasis upon what it is to be *human*, rather than upon any of the other separate and divisive cultural and ideological identities, such as being European or American or Russian or Chinese or Indian or African. These other labels can, in everyone's interests, safely be relegated to the realm of those things that are of only secondary importance. Nevertheless, such cultural identities cannot be denied or regarded as though they did not exist, or were of no importance at all. What is important is that they do not need to be abandoned, because 'Indian' (or Chinese or African etc.) can instead be understood as 'modernized Indian' (etc.), and 'modernized Indian' may be understood to mean the expression in contemporary terms (that is, terms understood elsewhere in the world) of what is nevertheless essentially Indian. And a good case can be made out for saying that this is what the Ramakrishna Movement has for some time been engaged in doing, in its various religious, educational, cultural and humanitarian activities. It need not be assumed that this is the only way in which what is essentially Indian can be expressed in contemporary terms, but it is *one* way, and to consider it in this light is one way of interpreting and assessing the Movement.

From this vantage point it can be seen that the interpretation of the Ramakrishna Movement that it was a 'Christianizing' of indigenous Indian culture is unnecessary in view of other and more convincing explanations. For what would constitute a clear case of such Christianizing? To be convincing, as beyond ambiguity and alternative explanations, it would have to mean the introduction into Indian religion of elements which were entirely characteristic and distinctive of the Christian religion and entirely uncharacteristic of Indian religion. We have already noted that it is not enough to have adopted *methods* which were used by some Christian groups in India, since Christians have no monopoly of the use of education in the promotion of religious ends. For example, the Buddhists have from the earliest days of the institutionalization of their tradition had an interest in the promotion of literacy and in higher educational studies pursued in what today would be the equivalent of universities.²⁷ And it cannot be maintained, as an in-

terpretation of the Ramakrishna Movement, that it consists in the use of practices and ideas entirely characteristic of Christian religion which were hitherto entirely uncharacteristic of Indian religion. Any position short of this is necessarily ambiguous, and the best that can therefore be said of the interpretation of the movement on such grounds is that it is controversial. Moreover, the temptation to explain religious similarities in terms of contact and diffusion, strong as it sometimes may seem in the study of religious history, has to be regarded with suspicion as pointing to the obvious and easy explanation. The present writer's experience, in the comparative study of European and Asian religious history²⁸, is of being powerfully impressed by the occurrence of similar religious phenomena appearing simultaneously in places so far removed from each other in terms of world geography that diffusion must be regarded as highly unlikely.

THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT, NATIONALISM AND NATION-BUILDING

Another interpretation of the Ramakrishna Movement is to closely associate it, if not actually to identify it, with Indian nationalism. This view is read often as the uppermost in the speeches and writings of Swami Vivekananda, and is entirely consistent with the view of the Movement as one of Indian modernization, if by that is meant the expression in contemporary terms of attitudes and a world-view that are essentially Indian, as has just been argued. In this sense of the term 'modernization' as a characteristic of the Ramakrishna Movement would, under British rule in India at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, be bound to appear as nationalism. In this sense, and during that period, the movement can, therefore, be deemed as nationalistic in function.²⁹ The question then arises: What of the period after Independence had been gained? How would this same concern with expressing in contemporary terms what is essentially Indian appear in the new India when anti-British nationalism had achieved its purpose? One possible answer is that modern-

ization in the sense that has been identified continued to characterize the movement's activities in India after 1947, and has led the movement in the direction of nation-building. Any assessment of the role of the Ramakrishna Movement in nation-building in India must begin from an appreciation of the enormous task which India's leaders faced in 1947. Only a hundred years before had the British Indian empire reached its final, full extent (apart from Burma), and the territory that was inherited by India's political rulers, even with Pakistan carved out of it, was far from being in any sense an integrated national state. Covering a land area comparable with that of Western Europe and having a considerably larger population, India has more than a dozen different major language groups and a large religious minority of well over 50 million Muslims as well as a wide range of different tribal peoples. It is not surprising that twenty years after independence it could be said by a well informed and judicious observer that 'India is still very far from being an integrated and consolidated nation, despite its initial advantages and the highly successful functioning of its government immediately after independence'³⁰. While there may be some sense of national community at the level of the educated bourgeois élite, the main obstacle to a sense of nationhood in India is 'the wide social and economic cleavages among the people and the accompanying inequalities of welfare and opportunity'³¹. It is not only the stark contrast between luxury and debilitating poverty, between an educated élite and an illiterate majority of the uneducated, low social class and tribal peoples that makes national consolidation difficult, but the great physical size of the country, in conjunction with all these economic, linguistic, and social disparities that would seem to defy the growth of any sense of common nationhood.

NATION-BUILDING WORK

However, if in 1947 Indian nationalism was largely the nationalism of an élite class, the work of the Ramakrishna Movement since that time has been as clearly in the direction of nation-building as in the pre-independence period it was in

a nationalist direction. Nor is this a narrow nationalism, for the horizons could hardly be wider. To maintain those wide horizons, to preserve the unity of India and to develop a sense of nationhood has an importance in the contemporary world which can be understood by comparing the Indian situation with the Balkanized nature of a comparable region, that of mainland South-East Asia, and the international problems which that has produced.

As an illustration of the scope of the Movement's work in the sphere of nation-building, as well as in the service of human need, the whole spectrum of its educational and social relief and development work would need to be considered. In a sense such work arose out of the deep concern which Vivekananda felt (with an intensity sometimes amounting to anger) at the degradation of the Indian masses, and at the exploitation of the many by the privileged few who, in particular, monopolized the educational field. It is beyond the scope of an essay such as this to survey the whole range of the Movement's contribution to nation-building. One particular illustration can, however, be offered of the genuinely *catholic* (that is, comprehensive and all-round) vision the Movement has of the nature of what is *Indian*. It is often a pious claim that the Indian view of things is wholly comprehensive; but the Indian social reality is often one of exclusiveness. The particular illustration that indicates the wider concern of the Ramakrishna Movement's activities is that of its work among the Khasis of Meghalaya. In the past the 'comprehensiveness' of Indian culture and the opportunity of all to share in its benefits on an equal basis had stopped well short of application to 'tribal' people, perhaps on the grounds that they are not really 'Indian'. The grounds on which they would escape such discrimination would be by conversion to 'Hinduism'. The Ramakrishna Movement, following Vivekananda, finds conversion meaningless. Instead, its work among the Khasi people provides an illustration of a different principle in operation. A brief account of this work should serve also to answer the question as to whether the Movement is properly characterized as '*Hindu reform*', '*Hindu renaissance*' or '*Hindu revivalism*'.

THE KHASIS AND THE RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT

The tide of Indo-Aryan language and culture, flowing eastwards across the plains of the sub-continent lapped at the foot of the Khasi Hills for many centuries, leaving the uplands untouched. Just over a hundred years ago W. W. Hunter noted, concerning the Khasi people, that 'by their language and other national characteristics, they stand out in marked contrast to the various peoples by whom they are surrounded'. He adds that 'perched on the precipices and plateaux of their native hills, they have preserved a grammatical form of speech which philologists are unable to classify, and a political constitution to which there is no analogy in the rest of India'. They were ruled, not by hereditary *rājās* or military generals, but by elective chiefs, each of whom presided over a small democracy. Another of their distinctive features is 'the importance attached to female descent and female authority'.³² The most recent accounts of the Khasis, based on a wide range of sources, confirm these earlier observations.³³ It was noted also by Hunter that 'female education has made more progress among the Khasis than perhaps in any other part of India'.³⁴

The Khasis began to be drawn into the wider life of India from 1833 when the Khasi Hills became a Political Agency of the East India Company, which had acquired the *diwānī* of Bengal in 1765. Modern education was introduced in 1842, when Thomas Jones, a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionary opened a school at Mawsmāi, near Cherrapunji³⁵, and by 1874 there were 73 such schools with an average of 22 pupils per school.³⁶

There was, however, by the end of the nineteenth century, a growing apprehension among the Khasis that their culture, religion, and traditions were being threatened by western and Christian activities. This is seen from the setting up in 1899 of an organization called *Seng Khasi*, which was formally registered in the name of all the 'sub-tribes'. Its aims were the preservation and promotion of the Khasi cultural heritage, and 'the all-round development and welfare of Khasi population'.³⁷ Other movements of a similar nature followed. In the early

1920s there were still many among the Khasis 'who were anxious to have some society start schools in their hills to which they could safely send their children without any danger of their being exposed to the propaganda of the existing schools' (managed by Christians).³⁸

Thus it was that in September 1924 a young man of twenty-two arrived at Shella, in the southern part of the Khasi Hills. He had come from the Ramakrishna Mission branch in Dhaka. His name was Ketaki, to be known later also as Swami Prabhananda. The story of what he achieved in building a centre of educational and welfare work among the Khasis, by the time of his death in 1938, is available elsewhere. Since his death the work has continued to grow, in Shillong and Cherrapunji also, so that there are now more than forty schools in the Khasi Hills, with a high school at Cherrapunji, which has a high reputation throughout Meghalaya and Assam,³⁹ and can count some of the most distinguished public men and some ministers of the state of Meghalaya among its alumni.⁴⁰ Books in the Khasi language are published from Cherrapunji, and weekly classes in Khasi religion and culture are held in Khasi at the Ashrama. Various rural industries are organized in conjunction with the *Khadi* and Village Industries Commission.⁴¹

In this all-too-brief summary of the Ramakrishna Movement's work among the Khasis of Meghalaya can be seen an example of the way in which the sharing of the benefits of Indian culture has *not* stopped short (as so often before) at the frontiers of what are condescendingly called 'tribal' people. It is a Khasi writer, B.M. Pugh who, in telling the story of his life, confesses that he did not know he was something called 'a tribal' until the Constitution of India was being hammered out. 'I know of course, that I am a Khasi; but that to me, was the same thing as a Bengali knowing that he is a Bengali, or a Punjabi that he is a Punjabi. That is, I never knew or rather I was never conscious that I was different from any other son or daughter of this country.'⁴² In this respect, in regarding all other citizens of India, whether plainmen or hillmen, Bengalis or Punjabis or Khasis or whatever, as his fellow-citizens and comrades, he goes beyond many of those who would place so-

cial or political barriers between different kinds of human beings in India. It might almost seem to suggest that the *most* important work of nation-building needs to be undertaken elsewhere than in the Khasi Hills. However, while the work of social healing and conciliation may need urgently to be done in the cities and great centres of population, there is undoubtedly great value in the contributions that can be made in the quiet places of the country, the places where constructive work of enduring value will, far more than the stirring up of conflict in the cities, contribute to the strength and stability of a great nation.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY

A recent anthropological study undertaken in the Khasi Hills by Nalini Natarajan emphasizes the contribution made in this direction by the Ramakrishna Mission.⁴³ She notes that one of the first effects of the early work of the Ramakrishna Mission in Shella, Cherra, and Shillong was that it 'restored the confidence of the Khasis in their own religion and culture, and, further, dispelled suspicion and antagonism towards the plainsmen'.⁴⁴ When the time came for administrative changes in the hill areas of the North-East, a peaceful democratic change was possible in the Khasi Hills and its adjoining hill areas, where Meghalaya was created, even though in other areas such as Nagaland and Mizoram the change was marked by violence. 'Many mention the role of the Ramakrishna Mission in building up a sense of nationalism, and preaching, like the unitarians, the universal brotherhood of man. Thus the Khasis learnt to think beyond their own religion and of a much wider horizon'.⁴⁵ Elsewhere in Natarajan's work, mention is made of the fact that the Mission 'had done good work in the Khasi Hills by preaching a secular outlook and inculcating a sense of nationhood'.⁴⁶ 'Secular', in this context refers, of course to the principle of acknowledging all religions to have equal rights in terms of citizenship and none to be in any specially privileged position vis-a-vis the State.

The *Seng Khasi* movement which arose out of the anxiety felt by leading Khasis concerning the inroads made by western

influences into their traditional culture itself had the effect of mellowing the attitude of Christian missionaries, while the Ramakrishna Movement assisted 'in the process of inculcating a broader religious outlook and a sense of being part of the large nation'. In this way, comments Natarajan, 'the Khasi ethos and world view have been greatly enriched'. In addition, there has been a movement towards 'Indianization resulting from the efforts of the Ramakrishna Mission.'⁴⁷

RENAISSANCE, REVIVALISM, AND NATION-BUILDING

It is in the light of this evidence concerning the nation-building effects of the Ramakrishna Movement that the characterization of the Movement as 'Hindu renaissance' or 'Hindu revivalism' is best considered. Farquhar⁴⁸ clearly regarded the Movement, at the time when he was writing (at the beginning of the First World War in 1914), as one of 'Hindu revivalism' that is to say, very largely a Hindu reactionary movement. It has of course, often been argued that under British rule at that time any protest movement, even though intrinsically political in nature, would have to present itself in religious guise. It is clear that Farquhar regarded the activities and influence of Vivekananda as 'the religious aspect of anarchism', and as historically and logically connected with 'political anarchism.'⁴⁹ The difficulty with this kind of assessment is that it appears to imply a negative, rather than a positive direction. In the light of subsequent developments of the nation-building kind, the movement may be regarded as having had a positive and constructive character, although in the circumstances of the time, under British imperial rule, it might have seemed negative to those who were unable to see beyond the immediate horizon.

Even now, nearly forty years after Independence, the full significance of the nation-building work of the Movement may not have been fully appreciated. For when, in previous Indian history, was the task ever faced of building a nation so extensive and populous as India is today? The task is a new one, for the situation is unprecedented in scale and intensity. It is therefore appropriate to consider whether the most fitting mode of characterization and assessment of the Ramakrishna Move-

ment is not that of *innovation*. It may be true that in one sense, the sense of innovation which was quoted earlier, in which 'every social institution is a field of innovation...', the Movement is almost inevitably innovative in *some* sense or another. But in the circumstances of the new India that emerged in 1947, a movement of the type of the Ramakrishna Movement, exerting a nation-building influence of the kind that has been observed to have been characteristic of it, must be regarded as qualifying for description as a movement of innovation in a very positive sense.

'The optimal conditions for innovation are a certain flexibility and readiness in the organic pattern of a society itself. These develop as a rule more easily in new societies, where a fresh start is being made; they develop also during a crisis such as war, a profound business depression, a natural catastrophe or a revolution. At such times, playing upon a ground of fear and uncertainty, is a feeling of the significance of the social adventure.'⁵⁰

'Flexibility and readiness' in its own organic pattern; a society 'where a fresh start is being made'; a 'feeling of the significance of the social adventure': these features of innovation exactly fit the case of the Ramakrishna Movement since Independence.

However, in characterizing the Movement as innovative, simply, one might incur the criticism that an important, stabilizing factor had been overlooked, and that is the extent to which the Ramakrishna Movement, besides the innovative character of its nation-building activity, also emphasizes certain traditional elements in Indian culture, most notably Vedanta. The Movement's ability to meet in a constructive way the totally new situation presented by Independence and the coming into being of an India that has no precedent in any historical period, renders assessment in terms of 'revivalism' inappropriate. For what is 'revivalist' simply re-affirms received tradition, without adapting that tradition to the changed circumstances of a different time. The Ramakrishna Movement, however, appears instead to have affirmed certain aspects, of re-

ceived Indian tradition, but also to have adapted that tradition to the circumstances of a new, enlarged, and much more diverse India than was known previously. Such *adaptation* of tradition to meet the needs of a newly emerging social and cultural situation is properly characterized as one of *revitalization*.

It may seem that this conclusion brings us back very close to the concept of modernization in the sense in which it was discussed above, a sense freed from the idea of inevitable 'Progress', or a 'Brave New World' form of secular eschatology. In reaching the tentative conclusion that the Ramakrishna Movement could be characterized as a *modernizing* movement we have emphasized that this is subject to the use of the term in that strict sense only. It is possible that to characterize the Movement as one of 'revitalization' would be preferable, in that the undesirable associations of the idea of 'modernization' would not be present. Assuming that the sense in which the Movement is to some extent a *religious* movement is included in the wider term 'cultural', the conclusion is therefore suggested that the Ramakrishna Movement may be characterized as a *movement of Indian cultural revitalization*. It is for the readers to decide whether this is a characterization which both they, and those who inspired and initiated the movement, would wish to accept.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND HIS MESSAGE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY

Nemai Sadhan Bose

RELIGIOUS toleration and respect for various modes of worship had been features of Hinduism through the ages. This had struck foreigners even in the period before the advent of Sri Ramakrishna. One of them wrote, 'As to the spirit of toleration in religion, for which the Gentoos (Hindus) are so singularly distinguished it is doubtless owing to their fundamental tenet of it, of which the purpose is that the diversity of modes of worship is agreeable to the God of the Universe ; that all prayers put to him from man, are all equally acceptable and sanctioned to him.' In 1840 H. H. Wilson wrote that according to the Hindu view of religion, every form of religion had equal merit and 'God appointed to every tribe its own faith, and to every sect its own religion, that man might glorify Him in diverse modes, all having the same end, and being equally acceptable in His sight.'¹ Max Müller also pointed out that Ramakrishna was 'merely echoing the thoughts' of the ancient sages of India, but he won the heart of the people by his originality in expressing it in novel language and refreshing it with new spiritual power. The world was beginning to doubt whether the advent of such sages and saints was possible in the modern age. 'Ramakrishna's life', wrote Vivekananda, 'was a reply in the affirmative to such a question.'²

IMPACT OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

Ramakrishna's reassertion of the very essence of Hinduism in his own unique way and the supreme importance given by him to the truth that all religions are not partly but wholly true and they lead to the same goal, which is God, were unquestionably his most significant contribution to the cultural renaissance in India. The immediate as well as the far-reaching and everlasting impact of Ramakrishna's teachings has to be understood in the historical context of an age that witnessed

endless strife and bickerings on religious doctrines. 'God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. . . . Every religion has errors. Everyone thinks that his watch alone gives the correct time. . . . Suppose a man has several sons. The older boys address him distinctly as "Baba" or "Papa", but the babies can at best call him "Ba" or "Pa". Now, will the father be angry with those who address him in this indistinct way? The father knows that they too are calling him, only they cannot pronounce his name well.'³ 'It is not good to feel that one's own religion alone is true and all others are false. God is one only, and not two.'⁴ 'Truth is one; only It is called by different names. All people are seeking the same Truth; the variance is due to climate, temperament, and name.'⁵ Because people do not realize this truth they 'injure and kill one another, and shed blood, in the name of religion. But this is not good. Everyone is going toward God.' Simple but dynamic and heart-piercing messages such as these were more important than the life of Ramakrishna as an individual or as a saint. Swami Vivekananda put far greater emphasis on spreading the teachings of his Master than on his life.⁶ Why?

PRACTICAL VALUE

The teachings of Ramakrishna transcended religious barriers. Their relevance did not remain confined to religion or religious life only. The doctrine he preached was applicable to every sphere of life. Its practical value in a multi-cultural and multi-religious country like India was inestimable in his times. Perhaps it is of greater relevance and value today. Cultural integration has been a major problem in modern India. In a fully integrated culture there are 'no significant contradictions between people's beliefs and their actions, or between one set of actions or beliefs and another'.⁷ Hindus and people of all other religious faiths in India have failed to resolve such contradictions. Ramakrishna's life and teachings not only exposed that contradiction but also showed the way to resolving it. Ramakrishna's role was also immensely important in terms of cultural relativity. A major threat to cultural (also national) integration is the tendency of making judgements and evaluations

concerning the standards and 'correctness' of particular patterns of behaviour. The question becomes very perplexing especially in the context of religion. 'Is there one true form of religious belief, or do all the world's religious faiths have equal validity? ... Cross cultural studies that compare and contrast the standards of different cultures are not concerned with questions of right and wrong. They prove only one thing, namely, that whatever the individual's beliefs ... his convictions are by no means subscribed to by all mankind.'⁸ It is amazing that the question that has been raised by eminent western sociologists today, and the answer that they have been looking for, was posed and convincingly answered by Ramakrishna more than a century ago.

There is another crucial significance of Ramakrishna's message of religious harmony and acceptance of the truth of all religious faiths. Secularism is one of the main foundations and accepted ideal of the Indian Republic. Ramakrishna was a religious man and essentially a so-called idolatrous Hindu religious teacher who practised the orthodox Hindu religious rituals. God-consciousness and realization of God were the very core of his physical and spiritual existence. The word 'secularism' was unknown to him as it was to most of the people of his age both in India and abroad. Yet, it would not be unhistorical to assert that Ramakrishna made the single most important contribution to the eventual wide acceptance of the ideal of secularism in a country where an overwhelming number of the people are Hindus.

ALL ARE CHILDREN OF GOD

This was because to Ramakrishna there was really no Hindu, no Mussulman, no Christian. All were children of God and in every one of them dwelt the same Divinity. Describing his experience of Brahman, Ramakrishna once told Mahendranath Gupta, who wrote *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Kathāmrta* under the pseudonym 'M', 'One day I had the vision of Consciousness, non-dual and indivisible. At first it had been revealed to me that there were innumerable men, animals, and other creatures. Among them were aristocrats, the English, the Mussalmans, my-

self, scavengers, dogs, and also a bearded Mussalman with an earthenware tray of rice in his hand. He put a few grains of rice into everybody's mouth. I too tasted a little."⁹ A more moving, more touching, and more powerful exposition of the equality of men and futility of class, caste, and sectarian differences could not be made or even visualized. Ramakrishna demonstrated, as his disciple and biographer Swami Saradananda writes, that 'although there existed a mountain-like wall of partition between the Hindus and the Muslims on account of mutually contradictory social manners, customs, etc., the religious faiths of both were true; that though worshipping the same God in different ways and going forward along different paths, both of them could, in the course of time, be one in love, forgetting the age-long quarrels'.¹⁰ The teachings of Ramakrishna and the inimitable way in which he underlined the hollowness of communal dissension provide a solid bedrock on which the edifice of secularism can effectively be built up in modern India.

PLACE OF WOMEN

Nineteenth-century India witnessed a number of social reform movements and efforts at eradicating many of the social evils. The worst to suffer from the social evils and prejudices were the women and consequently most of the principal social reforms had the common objective of their emancipation. Among other social reform movements was the one against caste system and caste restrictions. Social welfare and philanthropic activities also constituted a significant plank of socio-cultural life. Ramakrishna was by no means a social reformer in the conventional sense of the term. There is very little evidence of his deep and abiding interest in the social reform movements of the age. Yet, his concepts of women's position in the household and in the society, social duties and responsibilities of each individual and, above all, of human dignity were strikingly original and left a permanent imprint on Indian social ideas and public welfare missions. Time and again Ramakrishna said that every woman, even a prostitute, was a mother to him. Women are, all of them, the veritable images of

Shakti.⁷¹ 'It is the Primal Power that has become women and appears to us in the form of women.'⁷² Admittedly, it is very difficult for most ordinary mortals to conceptualize women in the way Ramakrishna urges on them. But the deep sense of respect for women that he sought to inculcate was an essential precondition for the success of any effort aimed at the elevation of women's position in society. The genuine reverence for womanhood preached by Ramakrishna was intrinsically a superior social attitude to compassion, pity, and a sense of male superiority and righteousness that motivated most of the advocates of social reforms.

There is a common misunderstanding of Ramakrishna's frequent use of the term 'woman and gold' (*kāminī-kāñcan*) which, he warned, were the biggest impediments to spiritual progress. This has appeared derogatory to the womenfolk in general and contradictory to the spirit of the modern age with its emphasis on women's progress and equal rights. The misconception was sought to be removed long ago—in the explanatory notes added to *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by Swami Nikhilananda. He wrote, 'By it (*kāminī-kāñcan*) he meant only "lust and greed", the baneful influence of which retards the aspirant's spiritual growth. He used the word "kamini", or "woman", as a concrete term for the sex instinct when addressing his men devotees. He advised women, on the other hand, to shun "man". "Kanchan" or "gold", symbolizes greed, which is the other obstacle to spiritual life. Sri Ramakrishna never taught his disciples to hate any woman, or womankind in general.'⁷³ Ramakrishna was a man of practical wisdom who drove home the plain and simple truth effortlessly. Asked by a Brāhmo to explain who was really a 'bad' woman, he said, 'As there are women endowed with *vidyāśakti*, so also there are women with *avidyāśakti*. A woman endowed with spiritual attributes leads a man to God, but a woman who is the embodiment of delusion makes him forget God and drowns him in the ocean of worldliness.'⁷⁴

SOCIAL REFORM

Ramakrishna welcomed social reform movements but did not

consider them as end in themselves. He told Vidyasagar, 'The activities you are engaged in are good. It is very good if you can perform them in a selfless spirit, renouncing egotism, giving up the idea that you are the doer. Through such action one develops love and devotion to God, and ultimately realizes Him.'¹⁵ Ramakrishna greatly admired the lion-hearted Vidyasagar's humane qualities and his great compassion and concern for suffering people. Vivekananda's deep veneration for Vidyasagar, for whom his respect was only second to the one he had for his Master, is to be understood in this context. Ramakrishna's attitude to the social reform activities of the Brāhmo Samāj was consistent with his own concept of achieving social progress. Asked about his views on the preachings of the Bhāhmo Samāj about freedom of women and abolition of the caste system, Ramakrishna replied, 'Men feel that way when they are just beginning to develop spiritual yearning.' But then he added that nothing could be accomplished by mere lecturing. Caste distinctions could only be removed by love of God. 'Lovers of God have no caste. Through this divine love the untouchable becomes pure, the pariah no longer remains a pariah. Chaitanya embraced all, including the pariahs.'¹⁶ His intense dislike for casteism and untouchability becomes clear when one recalls that Ramakrishna mentions caste, pride, and secretiveness along with shame, hatred, and fear as the obstacles which obscure one's vision of God.¹⁷ It may be relevant to point out that several decades after Ramakrishna's death Gandhiji described the so-called 'untouchables' as 'Harijan' or 'Children of God' and he used this term as a powerful instrument in his movement against the curse of untouchability. But the description of the backward classes by that name was criticized by many people, including B. R. Ambedkar, who felt that by describing a particular section of the people as 'Children of God' Gandhiji tacitly marked them out as separate from the general mass of the people. But to Ramakrishna one and all were 'Children of God' and being so there was no room for caste distinctions and practice of untouchability. It was only this realization that was needed to eradicate such social evils and abuses. In this respect Rama-

krishna's social ideas were far in advance not only of his own age but also of a much later period.

Swami Vivekananda once described Ramakrishna as 'the Saviour of women, Saviour of the masses, Saviour of all high and low.'¹⁸ Sceptics would take it as an adulation of the Master by his most favorite disciple. Even conceding that for argument's sake, one has to probe very carefully the purport of Vivekananda's observation. Swamiji said what he intensely felt and believed. It was not an irrational outburst of sentiment. It is well known how Ramakrishna had strongly reacted to the idea that one should have 'compassion' for all beings and said, 'Talk of compassion for beings'! Insignificant creatures that you are, how can you show compassion to beings? Who are you to show compassion? You wretch, who are you to bestow it? No, no; it is not compassion to Jivas but service to them as Siva.' It was only Narendranath who had realized the 'hidden import' of Ramakrishna's words. He pledged, 'If the divine Lord ever grants me an opportunity, I'll proclaim everywhere in the world this wonderful truth I have heard today. I will preach this truth to the learned and the ignorant, to the rich and the poor, to the Brāhmaṇa and the Chandāla.'¹⁹ Vivekananda was true to his words and the foundation of the Ramakrishna Mission (1897) was the fulfilment of that pledge. The Mission was founded for the service of men and women, high and low, for the masses irrespective of any barrier or distinctions.

The foundation of the Ramakrishna Mission and its multifarious social, cultural, educational, philanthropic, and humanitarian activities since its inception are a testimony to Ramakrishna's significant and lasting contribution to the Indian awakening. The Mission has successfully demonstrated the spiritual value of 'the novel method of divine worship through service of suffering humanity.'²⁰ His initiating a band of young men into the vow of *Sannyāsa* (or the renunciation of all self-centred values) and thus founding a brotherhood for propagating his own novel, liberal doctrines to the world was rightly identified by Swami Saradananda as one of the major acts of Ramakrishna.²¹

The foundation of the Ramakrishna Mission, its character,

ideals, and the nature of its activities are historically significant from different perspectives as well. C. H. Heimsath, generally appreciative of the impact of Ramakrishna on the social ideas of his followers in later generations and Hindu society as a whole, has written that Ramakrishna had 'nothing to recommend' so far as 'practical measures for social amelioration' were concerned. 'Furthermore', Heimsath writes, 'the direct knowledge of God's immanence in the world as well as in man denied to Ramakrishna that awareness of evil which, in varying degrees, gripped many bhaktas and pervaded their social messages.' Heimsath concludes that Ramakrishna's influence on social reform after his death (1886) 'was a curious mixture of traditional and modern ideas.' The Ramakrishna Mission had the dual purpose of contemplation and social action. The first aspect, Heimsath believes, was inspired by the tradition of mysticism and devotion, and the second 'by Western philanthropy and social work'.²³ Heimsath's misperception of the real essence of Ramakrishna's social message and his belief that the social action of the Mission was inspired by western philanthropy only reveal the myopia and a kind of intellectual fixation from which most western and some Indian historians suffer. A more glaring illustration of this kind of error is the one made by Richard Lannoy who goes so far as to suggest that the Ramakrishna Mission was influenced by Christianity and the 'historical movement of universalization which included attempts to transform Hinduism into a unified monotheistic religion' began as a basically westernizing movement. Lannoy implicitly considers the Ramakrishna Mission as a part of this movement and believes that 'the alternative to a ritual-oriented hierarchy under Indian conditions can only be secular in character'.²³ Leaving aside its ambiguity, such analysis reveals the author's inability to study the developments in modern India outside the rigid framework of western concepts of progress, social reforms and changes, secularism and modernization. Heimsath apparently considers 'practical' social amelioration measures as the only effective means to combat and eradicate social evils. This is typical western liberal view on social reform which gripped Indian social reformers in the nineteenth century. But the limi-

tations of such efforts, however commendable, were brought out by the limited success of the movements in the last century and more glaringly in the twentieth century, for instance in the case of the movement against untouchability, caste restrictions and casteism, and injustice to women. It is now admitted both in the East as well as in the West (e.g. in the case of religious and ethnic minorities in Europe and America, the Blacks in the United States) that mere legislative actions and agitations cannot bring about any real social change unless there was a genuine change of heart and change in social attitudes among the people. Ramakrishna's emphasis on the concept of 'Jiva is Siva (every creature is God Himself)' and 'service not compassion' struck at the root of the social evils and exposed the absurdity of one man's superiority to another. The Preamble to the Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations on December 10, 1948, states that 'recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'. Many years earlier Ramakrishna had propagated the same idea in his own unique way.

YOUNGER BROTHER OF CHRIST

The belief that every human being has dignity and worth even when he is so old and ill that he can no longer contribute to the society is considered as one of the main features of western culture.²⁴ Such belief has been an integral part of Indian culture for centuries and Ramakrishna articulated it with such deep conviction and grace that he gave the whole concept a new dynamism and potency. The belief that the Ramakrishna Mission's foundation and its social action programme was influenced in any way by western philanthropy or Christianity is totally erroneous. There is a fundamental conceptual difference between the Christian missions and the Ramakrishna Mission. While the Christian missionary activities are primarily inspired by the Christian concepts of charity, piety, and compassion, the Ramakrishna Mission's activities are based on Ramakrishna's concept of divinity of man. Not charity or compassion but only the spirit of service is the guiding principle of

the Mission's activities. Yet when Mother Teresa, engaged in her mission of serving the forsaken suffering poor, appeals to the heart of the people by saying that she sees in the poor the face of Jesus, one finds the echo of Ramakrishna's message. The latter reminded Mahendranath Gupta that people can love God 'only if they see Him in a human form; only then can they show their affection for Him as their Brother, Sister, Father, Mother, or Child'.²⁵ It only reaffirms what Romain Rolland has written for the western readers of his *The Life of Ramakrishna*, 'Allowing for differences of country and of time, Ramakrishna is the younger brother of our Christ.'

RATIONAL APPROACH

Rationalism of the West was a marked characteristic of the educated Indians in the nineteenth century. It has been considered one of the major gifts of English education that was a driving force behind the various movements of the last century. Ramakrishna, who had no English education whatsoever, had no opportunity of imbibing the imported rationalism of the West. Yet, the 'illiterate' priest of Dakshineswar had a critical mind and practical wisdom that more than matched the spirit of the age. His highly rational teachings left a deep impression on the people who came to see him and also on later generations. He had learnt to make the best use of his eyes and other senses in making correct observations. He urged his disciples to develop similar faculties and stressed the need for applying reason before performing any action. Reason alone, he believed, could enable a man to judge the merits and demerits of things. A devotee was not to be a fool. He firmly told his disciples 'Don't be onesided and fanatical; that is not the attitude of "this place"'.²⁶ He plainly told the Brāhmos and other western educated men who came to see and listen to him that they should never accept uncritically whatever he said. They should only accept those ideas which suited them after eliminating 'the head and tail'.²⁷

ATTITUDE TO EDUCATION

It was this rationalism and practical wisdom that lay behind

Ramakrishna's utter dislike for bookish knowledge that was a major shortcoming of the intelligentsia of the nineteenth century and continues to be so even today. Time and again he warned his disciples and visitors against this common failing. In his boyhood Ramakrishna had been sent to the village school for education. But he soon lost interest in the school because he felt the uselessness of the education imparted there. He asked 'What purpose will it serve—this hard study, this sitting up late at night, this rumination of the glosses and commentaries?' Education of this type, Ramakrishna felt, was a heavy useless burden 'like that of an ass carrying sandalwood'. His mind said to him, 'There is no need for that bread-winning education which enables one only to "bundle up rice and plantain"'. Go rather for that supreme education which will enable you to realize the whole truth, the hidden mystery of human life.'²⁸ It will possibly be an overstatement or exaggeration to describe Ramakrishna as an education reformer. But his attitude to the type of education imparted in the school in those days was strikingly similar to that of young Rabindranath a few decades later. Also, his description and denunciation of bread-earning education anticipated the main arguments of the protagonist of national education by quite a few decades, and that of the celebrated Education Commissions of the post-independence years by several more decades.

SECTS BUT NO SECTARIANISM

Every society and even every family has a distinctive sub-culture. It is imperative to recognize this truth. As Geoffrey Vickers writes, 'No one can live for long in any culture without noticing that he and his fellows differ widely.... These differences in human excellence, however, are crossed and sometimes masked by cultural differences.' Value systems and social process and progress are dependent on finding answers to such questions as 'How appreciative are we expected to be of significant forms of various kinds? How sensitive to each other?'²⁹ These questions and their answers are especially crucial to a country like India which has a pluralistic and diverse society and culture. She has grappled with these ques-

tions through the ages to achieve unity in diversity. The progress had been faltering and the success only mixed till the age of Ramakrishna when the need to resolve the questions became urgent and of supreme importance. The life and teachings of Ramakrishna was a shining illustration of the only course left to the nation to achieve that unity and integration. He showed that in India there was room for all kinds of sects but not for sectarianism. Diversity in faith and culture was a welcome adornment but narrow spirit of divisiveness was a curse. Respect for one's own faith was a sign of strength but disrespect for others' beliefs was a sign of weakness of character and mental make-up. The relentless preaching and practising of these precepts must be considered Ramakrishna's most abiding contribution even by men who may choose to ignore the other aspects of his historic role and impact.

WISDOM FROM GOD

The century did not produce any other historical personality who enjoyed as much respect and exercised as much influence on all sections of people, who came in touch with him, as did Ramakrishna. His charm, sweetness, grace, and unbounded love cast a hypnotic spell on his visitors. Even for his adversaries and critics he had nothing but love. He never taught, preached, or gave sermons but only through conversation, simple stories, and parables explained the most difficult and intricate questions on philosophy and religion, and brought home to people's minds his message of love, devotion, and purity. Averse to mere bookish knowledge, Ramakrishna was aware of the futility of pedantic lectures and sermons. He told Shashadhar Tarkachudamani, an ardent preacher of orthodox Hindu revivalism, 'You may deliver thousands of lectures, but they won't make the slightest impression on worldly people. Can one drive a nail into a stone wall? The point of the nail will sooner break than make a dent in the stone. What will you gain by striking the tough skin of the crocodile with a sword?'³⁰ What was then the secret of a successful teacher? Ramakrishna himself provided the clue. 'When the lamp is lighted the moths come in swarms. They don't have to be in-

vited. In the same way, the preacher who has a commission from God need not invite people to hear him. He doesn't have to announce the time of his lectures. He possesses such irresistible attraction that people come to him of their own accord. . . . Does the magnet say to the iron, "Come near me"? That is not necessary. Because of the attraction of the magnet, the iron rushes to it. Such a preacher may not be a scholarly person, but don't conclude from that he has any lack of wisdom. Does book-learning make one wise? He who has commission from God never runs short of wisdom. That wisdom comes from God; it is inexhaustible."³¹

A devotee of Ramakrishna would see in the above the Master making a self-revelation. Others would perhaps interpret it as Ramakrishna, knowingly or unknowingly, making a self-estimate. The difference between the two is immaterial. It is Ramakrishna's mesmeric appeal and attraction that is really the most important consideration for historians. His influence on such Brāhmos as Keshab Chandra Sen, Shivanath Shastri, Pratap Chandra Mozoomdar, Vijaykrishna Goswami and a host of others is too well known and needs no elaboration. The *Mahabodhi Society Journal* agreed with Max Müller's view that Ramakrishna's life was absolutely pure and original and his devotion, purity, and renunciation were unparalleled.³² The *Madras Times* welcomed Max Müller's book on Ramakrishna's life and teachings. The latter's name was held in veneration by thousands of educated Hindus throughout India though his mind was 'never drilled and disciplined according to the recognized method of our age.'³³

MESSAGE OF UNIVERSAL ENLIGHTENMENT

The singular importance of Ramakrishna's teachings and the practical necessity of understanding what they really signified had been stressed by Max Müller. The latter had written that a better knowledge of Ramakrishna's messages seemed desirable 'whether for the statesmen who have to deal with the various classes of Indian society or for the missionaries who are anxious to understand and to influence the inhabitants of that country, or, lastly, for the students of philosophy

and religion who ought to know how the most ancient philosophy of the world, the Vedānta, is taught at the present day by the Bhaktas, that is "the friends and devoted lovers of God". Enthusiastically endorsing this view expressed by Max Müller, Sister Nivedita, in an unsigned review of the book published in the editorial page of *The Statesman* (18 February, 1899) underlined that in India, like many other countries, religious myth had exercised as its 'supreme function—the overcoming of diversity of races, and welding men of scattered or opposing origins into a whole'. Nivedita pointed out that the value of a book like Max Müller's was great to the British rulers in their own interest. For the 'mask' that appeared 'impenetrable' in the case of the Indian subjects was 'not really so... it would probably disappear at a moment's notice in answer to a sincere expression of sympathy or respect for the thing that is dearest to them—a religious belief'.³⁴

Why did Max Müller attach so much importance to Ramakrishna's life? What lent him such unique significance? The answers to these questions may be found in contemporary newspapers. For instance, the *Times of India* in an editorial (28 January, 1899) described Ramakrishna as a pure Indian *Rṣi* (sage) the story of whose life helped one to realize the extent of religious inspiration in modern India.³⁵ The *Hindu* (23 January, 1899) pleaded that much wider publicity should be given to the Paramahansa's saying 'in the interests of humanity'. The paper hoped that the book by Max Müller will serve that purpose and Ramakrishna's sayings 'will be soon broadcast in all countries where his (Max Müller's) book is read, and will become a living power of moral and religious enlightenment in countries separated from India by thousands of leagues of sea and land'.³⁶ Besides his originality, purity, and the gifted ability to bring about a moral, social, and spiritual enlightenment, Ramakrishna represented two essential elements of culture.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Culture is the social heritage of a society and culture represents man's solutions to problems. 'Because each generation

passes on to its offspring the design for living that it acquired from its forebears, man is relieved of the necessity for working out all over again the solutions to innumerable recurring problems.³⁷ It is amazing how Ramakrishna was almost tailor-made to fit in this role of upholding, expanding, and elucidating the cultural heritage of India. The only key to the solution of the problems, Ramakrishna incessantly kept on saying till his death, was respect for all, faith in equality, and recognition of the dignity of man. Even to an atheist or secularist, the essence of Ramakrishna's message was invaluable. He spent hours, day and night, listening to the sorrows of innumerable men and women who came to him for solace and comfort and by his sympathy, love, and message he relieved them of their distress and sufferings. Recognizing this aspect of Ramakrishna's contribution William Digby wrote in his *Prosperous India* (1901) that not even the best intellectuals of the West could present God to the people as effectively as the 'uneducated' Ramakrishna did to the tired and despondent multitude.³⁸ These men came from all walks of life and all sections of the society. Ramakrishna reached their hearts and captivated their minds because he himself appeared to them as 'the commonest of the common. He came from the people, he smelt of the earth, and he talked like the peasant'.³⁹

REASSERTION OF HUMAN DIGNITY

A salient feature of Ramakrishna's historic role in nineteenth-century India was that it was totally free from the intellectual élitism of most others who spearheaded the Indian renaissance. As D. P. Mukherjee writes, 'No petulant aversion from Western materialism, no sophisticated defense on rationalistic grounds, no intellectual pride of heritage ever dictated his spirituality.' In Ramakrishna there was 'no snobbish attempts at equality with the powerful nations of the West by fictitious claims for religious superiority, no dissent, *qua* dissent, no rehash of Comte, Mill and Hamilton, no loss of breath in trying to keep pace with the progress of the world. . . .'⁴⁰ Yet, the contribution made by this very 'common', 'unmodern', 'illiterate' priest to the rejuvenation of Hinduism, the restoration of lost

faith in Indian culture, and reassertion of human dignity was unmatched by any other luminary of the century.

Some western historians have acknowledged the 'immeasurable' impact of Ramakrishna on Bengali thought and on the growth of 'self-consciousness' among the Hindu.⁴¹ It has been pointed out that if Ramakrishna is viewed only as a Hindu mystic or saint then the true depth of his vision with its meaning and cultural impact would be completely missed.⁴² But there has been a general failure on the part of both Indian and foreign historians to evaluate Ramakrishna's role and his inestimable contribution to the modern world in general and India in particular. Richard Lannoy for instance, clamps together Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Mahatma Gandhi as the 'modern equivalent of the *bhakti* saints', and cites 'anti-intellectualism, other worldliness, emotionalism, and lack of historical consciousness' as the shortcomings of the Bhakti movement as a force for social cohesion. He views *bhakti* as 'an accurate reflection of the chronic helplessness of the Indian masses'.⁴³ Even a perceptive historian like Percival Spear has only a short paragraph on the Ramakrishna movement in his well-known book on India and he criticizes the disciples of Ramakrishna for being 'too absorbed in the individual'.⁴⁴ Many 'progressive' Indian historians have also made little serious study and efforts to assess the overall meaning and impact of the ideas of Sri Ramakrishna and have cursorily mentioned him in connection with the Hindu revival movement. One such recent book on the history of modern India has only one single sentence about Ramakrishna and his 'spell over Calcutta's sophisticated intellectuals precisely through his eclecticism and rustic simplicity'.⁴⁵

ABIDING IMPACT

The underlying reasons behind the inability of these historians to make a proper evaluation of the life and teachings of Ramakrishna in the perspective of the Indian awakening are not difficult to explain. Most western historians seek to analyse the process of the making of modern India and the Indian socio-religious life through the prism of western concepts, values, and experiences. Universalism, modernism, and pro-

gress are implicitly or explicitly taken as the golden fruits of western civilization. Historical developments in the non-western world are judged by the yardstick of these sets of values and concepts. To the 'progressive' Indian historians religion, especially Hinduism, is an anathema. It is diagnosed as the main hindrance to progress and social changes. Any historical figure primarily connected with religious movements and seeking to bring about an all-pervasive, deep, and fundamental change in Indian life has little attraction for them. Personal angularities have blurred their vision of history. The other difficulty is that Ramakrishna's impact on the Indian mind and his contributions to the Indian renaissance are not as easily visible as in the case of others. His abiding impact has been mainly on the realm of ideas and on the moulding of one's attitude to life, duties as a householder, as a man, and a member of the human family. It is one of realization rather than enumeration. Yet, the external evidence of Ramakrishna's rich contribution to different facets of life and thought in India is not scanty. The stamp of originality is unmistakable not only in Ramakrishna's role as a spiritual preceptor but also in his views on social reform, education, welfare activities, human relations, and the purpose of human life. Above all, the evolution of young Narendranath Datta into Swami Vivekananda was Ramakrishna's greatest contribution to India and the world. The Ramakrishna Mission is a monument to his social philosophy and his concept of service to mankind. It may also be pointed out that the fascinating life of Ramakrishna contributed to the enrichment of the Bengali literature. The rich harvest which began with Mahendranath Gupta's *Śrī Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa Kathāṃṛta*, described by Aldous Huxley as a unique book in the literature of hagiography, and Swami Saradananda's *Śrī Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa Līlāprasāṅga* has been a continuing process for nearly a century.

SYMBOL OF AWAKENED INDIA

Great leaders of India have acknowledged the inspiration of Ramakrishna. To Mahatma Gandhi the story of Ramakrishna's life was 'a story of religion in practice' which enables one to

see God face to face. He was, Gandhiji writes, 'a living embodiment of Godliness' who gave solace to thousands of men and women who would otherwise have remained without spiritual light.⁴⁶ In his boyhood Subhaschandra Bose was stirred by Ramakrishna-Vivekananda's mission of service to men.⁴⁷ Subhaschandra found the vision of Indian independence in the messages of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. He said that it was the religion of the Master and his disciple that found reflection in philosophy, literature, and in other spheres of the Bengal renaissance, and helped spread the message of Hindu-Muslim fraternity.⁴⁸ In 1936 Subhaschandra wrote in a letter that till the last day of his life he would remain an admirer and adherent of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.⁴⁹ Many other makers of modern India have expressed their indebtedness to Ramakrishna in the moulding of their lives. But far more important than the testimony of any individual, however great, is the fact that there would have been no renaissance in the nineteenth century if the age did not see the advent of a man like Ramakrishna. It would merely have been a story of the swamping of Indian culture and heritage by the western civilization as it had happened in other parts of the world. The Indian renaissance was possible because along with the western learning there was a renewed interest in and awareness of the largely forgotten Indian culture and tradition. India rediscovered herself and withstood the sweeping tide of westernization. The most shining example of her true spirit and heritage was Ramakrishna. He was the symbol of India's quest for reassertion and embodiment of all the best that India had to offer to the world.*

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STUDIES ON SRI RAMAKRISHNA

THE RELEVANCE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA FOR MODERN MAN

Debiprasad Bhattacharyya

ONE may or may not hold with Arnold Toynbee that of the twenty-one civilizations that have emerged so far, the Western civilization is the only one that is still fully alive, and possibly in its phase of vigorous growth. The fact, however, stares one in the face that the Western civilization has become by now a literally global phenomenon, that the modern man, no matter where he happens to be born, is now either Western or predominantly Westernized in his way of life, modes of thought, and general cultural ambience.

This literally world-wide expansion of Western civilization is of course due to that stupendous phenomenon, industrialism. Every human society today is either industrialized or in the process of being rapidly industrialized; so much so, indeed, that the very term 'development' has come to mean industrial development.

It would be a mistake to suppose that industrialism, being a material phenomenon, operates primarily on the material plane, and has little impact on the more ethereal spheres of culture, religion, and morality, in short, on the realm of spirit. 'A material revolution', as Huxley remarks, 'is never merely material. It begets parallel revolutions in many other realms—social, political and economic revolutions. revolutions in philosophical and religious thought, revolutions in ways of life and modes of individual behaviour.'¹ No material revolution in the history of man, since the discovery of fire and the invention of the wheel, has been so far-reaching, so all-embracing in its effects. The change this time involves the whole being of man. What then is the nature of this change that has come over the modern man?

Now, change or *pariṇāma* is a very old and very important concept of Indian philosophy; it is the central characteristic of the phenomenal world, *jagat*, a Sanskrit term which literally

means 'that which moves'. But the change that has overtaken man since the rise of modern science about three centuries ago and culminated, on the material plane, in the technological revolution a century later, has a very special significance. Science has changed, in various degrees, the mind of man; technology, his life; and the change, unlike the *pariṇāma* which is natural or cosmic, is entirely the creation of man—the Western man.

Life, in modern society, is changing with a rapidity unexampled in history. And the tempo of this change is getting faster and faster. But the subconscious psyche of man, as Toynbee justly points out, is slow to move; it is impossible for it to catch up with the break-neck pace of modern life; so it is continually lagging behind with fatal consequences for the moral and spiritual health of man. And it is not only the accelerating pace of modern life, but the complexity as well; the combined effect of the two has resulted in a chronic state of tension. No wonder then that millions of men and women of our age are trying frantically to look for something that is not subject to change, something that has at least a reassuring semblance of permanence. This yearning for something that is changeless in the midst of ceaseless movement, the perpetual flux of phenomena, is perennial in man. To think, as some influential leading lights of our time do, that the modern man has at last got over this romantic and irrational craving would be a grave mistake. So far from being fatuous, this yearning for the Absolute, for something changeless and permanent is what distinguishes man ultimately from his other fellow creatures; for it demonstrates, more than anything else, his essentially spiritual nature. No amount of material well-being can satisfy this spiritual hunger of man for the Absolute. Neither material affluence nor intellectual enlightenment can be a substitute for man's spiritual nourishment. To believe that this can be provided plentifully by the modern social ideologies and their triumphant prophets is sheer delusion, whose disastrous effects are all around us to see.

EASTERN WISDOM

Let us begin, after these preliminary observations, by quot-

ing a passage from an excellent modern Western scholar, P. J. Saher, about the central message of Eastern Wisdom.

‘Eastern wisdom is not something in which theories, schools, and ideas can come and go out of fashion. Its cardinal problem is the purpose of human life ; the goal to be achieved by this opportunity of having been born in a human body.... Eastern wisdom argues: this goal, which every living being has to strive for, does not and cannot change with the passage of time. If philosophy merely means finding out what the purpose of human existence is, then, according to Eastern wisdom, this has already been discovered and there is nothing new left to contribute.’²

Then a little further on Saher writes :

‘One of the peculiarities of Eastern wisdom is that it sounds fresh in spite of countless repetitions. It is capable of consoling doubt-ridden, anxious men by diverting their attention from the uncertainties of change to the certainty of the changeless. No reasonable person can expect much consolation from a statement which is subject to alteration in the future. If Eastern wisdom is to offer mankind a rock to lean upon, it must offer what is not alterable with time.’³

SRI RAMAKRISHNA—EMBODIMENT OF EASTERN WISDOM

This, it should be noted, is written by a modern Western man, that is, the modern man par excellence, who was deeply inspired by the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and speaks about him at length and with profound respect. Sri Ramakrishna is in his eyes the supreme embodiment of Eastern wisdom in modern times. The purpose of human life, Saher rightly and emphatically maintains, can be one, and only one ; and this cannot change from age to age, from country to country ; indeed this changelessness constitutes, according to him, the central criterion of the validity of this final goal of man.

What, then, is this supreme aim of human existence? This is Saher’s answer: ‘All human life has a goal to strive for, compared to which all other human goals are subordinate if not irrelevant.’⁴

This one and only purpose of human life is, in the words of Sri Ramakrishna, to 'realize God'; and in declaring this goal he goes, with his characteristic thoroughness, even beyond Saher's bold statement which says that compared to this 'all other human goals are subordinate if not irrelevant'. For Sri Ramakrishna, these other human goals simply do not exist; as for irrelevance, well, everything else, from this ultimate point of view, is utterly irrelevant.

If that be the case, if nothing is of the slightest consequence except the Divine, and man's relation with the Divine, then, one may well retort, we had better stop at this point; for, after this, to talk about the relevance of Sri Ramakrishna to the modern man is pointless and futile; he can have no conceivable relevance for modern man.

Such a retort, even if it is an angry one, is not difficult to understand; it is even natural. This view—that the Divine is all that matters to man and that nothing else does; and finally, that to know Him and thus become one with Him is the only purpose of human life—is undoubtedly alien to the modern mind, for many reasons. But before we go into them there is another crucial question to be settled. It is this:

This view of Sri Ramakrishna's concerning man's sole reason for existence, his only purpose in life, is, let us admit, thoroughly uncongenial, if not positively distasteful to the modern mind. Does it follow that he can be dismissed outright as irrelevant? Certainly not. In the spiritual history of man the most important men have seldom been those who appeared to their fellow men as pleasant, sensible, and perfectly intelligible; on the contrary, they have been frequently provoking, even challenging in their words and deeds. Socrates is an obvious example; so is the Buddha, Christ or Chaitanya, and in modern times, Sri Ramakrishna. There was something in every one of them that made them in their lifetime either incomprehensible or strongly provoking to those who knew them, though they themselves were quite innocent of the effect they were producing.

There have been great religious teachers in modern India besides Sri Ramakrishna. Among them there are some whose spi-

ritual teachings are apt to be appealing to enlightened moderns both in India and elsewhere. The reason is that these great men of modern India were modern in their education and culture ; and their spiritual message was expressed in an eminently modern Western medium : the English language, through concepts that were of Western origin. As a result, they could reach a wide circle of cultivated readers both in India and the Occident. This was unquestionably a very remarkable cultural achievement, one of the greatest of modern India.

PURE SPIRITUALITY

When we come to Sri Ramakrishna, the picture is very different. In him, more than in any other famous Indian of modern times, we witness that rarest of all human phenomena : pure spirituality almost untouched by modern culture. It found its embodiment in a simple, almost illiterate village Brahmin who nevertheless, thanks to a splendid memory and a remarkably clear understanding, was familiar with all the important concepts of ancient Hindu scriptures.

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, therefore, contains all the important terms, in Sanskrit, of Indian spirituality. The language is simple, colloquial Bengali, the very antithesis of cultivated, literary Bengali ; yet the result is a supreme work of art. Our point, however, is not the literary charm, singular as it is of the *Gospel*, but the fact that here is an authentic record of the utterances of a spiritual Master of modern India in which there is no attempt at all to commend itself to an enlightened modern mind, in which there is hardly a single concept which is modern, that is, Western ; and yet, this very work when translated into English, immediately found its way to the hearts and minds of thousands of Western men and women who were poles asunder, in their culture and temperament, from this simple child of the Divine Mother. To give a recent example : Colin Wilson, one of the most brilliant and stimulating among the young English intellectuals of the fifties and the sixties, tells us that as a young man he used to carry in his pocket a copy of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* !

This is remarkable when one considers that the *Gospel* is a

supreme expression of spirituality in its absolute, pristine purity, and that pure spirituality is for Western man a very baffling phenomenon. What I mean by pure spirituality can be best expressed by an amazing utterance of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*: Know that *Ātman* alone; give up all other talks (*tamevaikaṁ Jānatha ātmānam anyā vāco vimuñcatha*). And this, expressed in almost the same language, is the keynote of the *Gospel*.

But why, it may be asked at this point, should this be so violently alien to the modern mind? The answer is this: in this central message of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* as in that of Sri Ramakrishna there is complete silence on society and those vast corporate entities in industry, administration, and political organization that control and dominate the life of the individual man everywhere in the modern world. Ideologies and huge organizations, industrial, political, and social, are the most cherished as well as dreaded objects of the modern man's idolatry; there is no place here for either the individual soul or God.

Now institutions and organized bodies are necessary; they are indeed indispensable in the increasingly complex structure of an industrialized society. And yet, as Tounbee rightly observes, they are from the spiritual point of view an evil, though a necessary evil. This is one of the main reasons why we need so badly in our midst today a great spiritual Master like Sri Ramakrishna who can proclaim, with a sublime unconcern for man-made institutions, the supreme intrinsic value of the individual soul whose real business on earth is to find out who he really is and what the nature of Reality is and how the two are related. In this supreme quest nothing, not even the society, should be allowed to intervene between the individual man and the object of his quest—the Divine Ground of all Being; the only mediator, in this tremendous confrontation, is the guru, the spiritual Master.

RELEVANCE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

The truth is that a spiritual teacher whose ways and views are in perfect accord with the dominant trends of his age, with

the *zeitgeist*, is very unlikely to be of real value to modern man. A great spiritual presence like that of Sri Ramakrishna must be for modern man a profoundly disturbing phenomenon. It should be remembered in this connection that the first encounter with Sri Ramakrishna very often turned out for the visitor at Dakshineswar to be a very disconcerting experience that caused a sudden and violent jolt to the latter's self-complacency, his deep-seated habits and mental attitudes (*samskāras*); even some eminent personalities of the day had had a similar experience. It was not a shock of disappointment—though that too happened sometimes—but a moral and spiritual disturbance that led, slowly and imperceptibly, to a profound spiritual transformation.

Sri Ramakrishna, in other words, is supremely relevant to us, moderns, not because he bears a striking resemblance to us but because he is so radically different. He had neither the wish nor the need to adjust himself to his age. The ideal of a 'well-adjusted' human being is a modern concept which was utterly alien to him. He too was supremely 'well-adjusted' but not in our sense of the term. When we speak of adjustment it is in terms of human beings, individual or corporate: the office boss, the party chief, the trade union, and so on up to the society, nation, and the State. With Sri Ramakrishna and the great theo-centric saints and mystics of the world, adjustment, if the term has to be used at all, has one and only one possible meaning: adjustment with the entire cosmic order, and through it, the Divine Ground of all Beings. From this ultimate point of view it is we, with all our sanity, balance, and adjustment, who are misfits, not the saints and mystics who are in complete harmony with the highest order of Being.

It would be interesting at this point to refer to a highly intelligent and cultivated German who visited India in the fifties and recorded his impressions in a remarkable book *Indien ist Anders*—'India is Different'—(1964) which has not yet been translated into English. The object of his visit, he tells us, was to find out '*der alt-Indische Geist*' the spirit of old India. Towards the end of the book, a fairly large volume, he passes in review all the prominent Indians, including the leading spiri-

tual figures of modern India. He finds something to admire in each one of them, and then, finally blurts out the truth: he found in none of them what he had been searching for: *der alt-Indische Geist*. There was one exception, however, and only one: Sri Ramakrishna.

The great Indians of modern times failed to impress our distinguished German visitor, Maximilian von Rogister, because he thought what is modern in India is *ipso facto* Western, and he came to India in search of what is essentially Indian, which is *ex hypothesi* old *not* modern. He found this in Sri Ramakrishna, and in him alone.

I mention this interesting recent example of encounter between the East and the West to show that in order to be interesting and relevant an Indian religious teacher has no need to be modern. There are signs everywhere in the world today that the modern man is no longer satisfied with everything that is modern. The modern Western man is turning more and more to the East, to India above all, not because he is fascinated by the old as such, but because he is in search of the *philosophia perennis*, the perennial philosophy. An excessive preoccupation with history and what is called the historical approach combined with a widespread and persistent belief in evolution and progress has made it difficult for the modern man to see that there can be a perennial philosophy and that what is perennial can be very, very old; for it is by definition that which cannot change with the passage of time. If it does, it ceases to be perennial, and becomes ephemeral; and it follows, further, that which doesn't change must be very, very old. (This close relationship between the two, the old and the perennial, is beautifully suggested by the Sanskrit word *purāṇa*, which means 'old' and also eternal, beginningless.) Hence Herr Rogister's frantic approach for *der alt-Indische Geist* which he found at last in Sri Ramakrishna, whose *Gospel* is one of the most beautiful formulations in modern times of the *philosophia perennis* expressed in terms that are all very old, going as far back as the ancient *ṛṣis* (sages) of the Upaniṣads.

The celebrated French philosopher, Henri Bergson, observes that 'the true mystics reveal themselves as great men of action

(*ils se révèlent grands hommes d'action*)'. It is a mistake to think, he adds, that mysticism is nothing but 'vision, transport and ecstasy (*vision, transport, extase*)'. Then, in a beautiful sentence he tells us that what they feel within themselves is a mighty flood that must overflow to reach their fellow human beings (*gagner les autres hommes*); this urge to spill over what they have received they experience as an impulse of love (*le besoin de répandre autour d'eux ce qu'ils ont reçu, ils le ressentent comme un élan d'amour*).⁵

This, it must be admitted, is an astonishingly appropriate description of Sri Ramakrishna, who felt, as we all know, an intense, almost intolerable urge to give to others what he had received, to communicate what he felt within himself; and what prompted him to do this was an overwhelming, torrential movement of love and compassion for suffering fellow mortals.

But is it true, as Bergson affirms, that the true mystics are always 'great men of action'? In making this sweeping generalization, Bergson seems, notwithstanding his profound understanding of the essence of mysticism, to betray his age. Now Bergson believed in evolution, 'creative evolution', as he called it, and like all evolutionary philosophers of our times, he exalted dynamism and action. This characteristic *penchant* for action as opposed to contemplation comes out clearly in his criticism of Plotinus, the great Greek neo-Platonist philosopher, whose philosophy is so astonishingly close to Vedānta. 'Action' (*praxis*), says Plotinus, 'is a weakened form (*asthenōsōsis*) of contemplation (*theōria*)'.

Bergson doesn't agree. Plotinus, he admits, reached the very summit of mystical experience—ecstasy, but stopped there; he was too much of a Greek intellectual to get beyond that to an even higher state of spiritual perfection where contemplation merges into action, and thus 'the human will becomes one with the divine will (*la volonté humaine se confond avec la volonté divine*)'⁶.

This is entirely in consonance with the ancient spiritual philosophy of India, according to which *samādhi*, even the highest form of *samādhi*, *asamprajñāta*, has to be transcended in order to attain final enlightenment, *ātma-jñāna* or *kaivalya*. When

that supreme state is attained, the liberated soul (*jīvanmukta*) has no longer any need for solitude or meditation; he can then return to the world, which he usually does, to the immense spiritual benefit of fellow human beings.

But he also may not return; it is all as the Divine wills. There simply cannot be any 'must' here; for one who has realized the Self there does not exist, as the *Gītā* says, any duty to perform (*tasya kāryam na vidyate*). And even if he plunges into vigorous action, it is action in our eyes; for him, it is all play (*līlā*), or if one prefers the term, 'play-acting'.

As for Sri Ramakrishna, he was very far from the modern man's—and Bergson's—ideal of a 'man of action'. He did of course a lot of little things that were destined to have far-reaching effects later on. I said 'little things', for so they were: an amusing little anecdote, a joke, a song, a smile, a glance, and on very rare occasions, a touch: that was all, and that was all that was needed for changing radically, almost magically, the whole course of life of a few people; and what these few, mostly young men, did later on the world has witnessed since; the world is doing so even now.

Had Sri Ramakrishna been known to us only as the holy man at the Kālī temple at Dakshineswar and a simple, devout man of faith, he would have had little, if any, relevance to the modern man. For a modern man the most impressive, the most striking things about the man is not his devotion and ecstasy, but the light of knowledge that shines through his fascinating talk, and illumines, in a flash, every aspect of reality, including the supreme Reality.

And behind this marvellous light, stands the man himself. Even hardened sceptics and scoffers who met him—and they were many—were struck by a remarkable feature in the man's character: his scrupulous, intense, almost fanatical adherence to truth, the literal truth. Here was a man in whose life not even the most critical of observers could detect a single instance of the slightest discrepancy between speech and act, theory and practice.

Theory, however, is hardly the right word. We, moderns, are in the habit of dividing knowledge into the theoretical and

the practical, especially in science. This distinction, however, is inadmissible in the realm of spiritual knowledge—*viññāna*. Theory, as we use the term, is an academic concept; in science, it is often no more than a working hypothesis. In this sense, there is not a single theory in the whole of the *Gospel*; what may appear to us as a theory was for him an immediately felt reality, a fact of direct experience. Like the sages of ancient India, he was a 'seer' in the literal sense of the term. He only saw things; or, as he himself would prefer to put it, the Divine Mother made him see the truth.

Add to this profound spiritual insight of the man, his intense concern for the exact truth, his 'literalness', as Christopher Isherwood aptly calls it; one can then judge for oneself how far it would be wise, even for an enlightened modern mind, to reject outright anything this man affirms to be the truth. Wouldn't it be rash even for the most sneering of modern sceptics to dismiss any statement made by such a man as mere fancy or delusion? When such a man tells us something about the mysterious mechanism of the *kuṇḍalinī*—the serpent power—for instance, in clear and vivid terms, wouldn't it be right and rational to think that there may be more in this than an ingenious fancy of Tantra and Yoga?

Even on the purely intellectual plane, therefore, Sri Ramakrishna deserves to be treated with respect by a rationalist modern mind. And above all, even more than his unchallengeable moral and intellectual integrity, even more than his unquestionable spiritual insight, is the singular charm of the man himself. During his lifetime, men, even intelligent young men who were utterly different from him in their temperament and outlook, found him interesting and profoundly attractive; they started by being mildly amused and ended by falling in love with him even when they found themselves unable to accept his views or believe all that he said.

But, it may be asked at this point, to find Sri Ramakrishna interesting, even attractive and lovable—is that all that is needed for his full relevance to be felt by a modern man? The answer is: Yes, Just as the *bhakta*, when he feels strongly drawn to the object of his devotion, attains, through Divine

grace, supreme knowledge—*tattvajñāna*—so does a man who, through supreme good fortune, finds himself drawn to a divine man. As far as the spiritual consequence is concerned, there is absolutely no difference between the two. Love and attraction, directed towards a man of such supreme spiritual status as Sri Ramakrishna, must inevitably lead to knowledge, and through knowledge, to belief. If belief comes before knowledge, very good; if not, there's no harm; for spiritual contact with a holy man has a naturally purifying effect. It is a central concept of Eastern wisdom that knowledge is essentially a function of being. If the mind or *buddhi* becomes pure, that is, attains the state of *sattva*, it reflects, like a clear mirror, the truth.

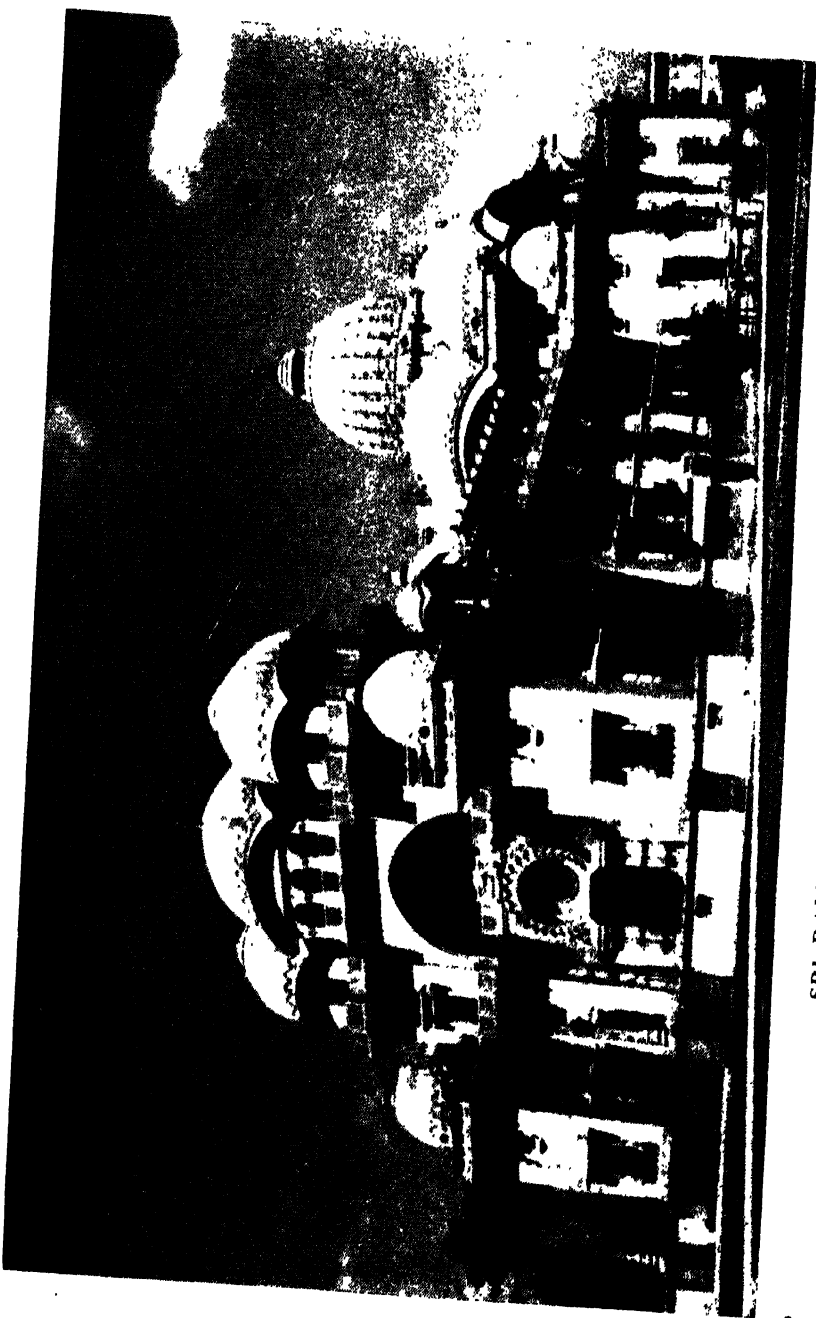
I have described briefly what happened during the encounters between Sri Ramakrishna and his contemporaries. It is the same today, almost a hundred years since he left his mortal frame; the same experience repeats itself today, after every fresh encounter with this Master, even with the modern Western man. It would, however, be too much to expect a modern Western man to respond to him in the same manner as a Christopher Isherwood, a Romain Rolland, an Aldous Huxley, or P. J. Saher would do. It would not be at all fanciful, however, to think that a modern man, no matter where he happens to be born, will respond to the tremendous impact of the Master in much the same manner as those who met him physically did a hundred years ago. They will begin—one can almost visualize the scene—by being mildly amused, then, as they proceed, feel more and more interested in what he does and says, and finally, almost without their being aware of it, end by falling in love with the man.

It is unlikely, as I have said, that modern men and women, Eastern no less than the Western, will be able to believe, far less follow, all that Sri Ramakrishna has revealed to us in his infinite loving-kindness for his suffering fellow mortals. But that is not necessary. Even if one can accept and earnestly follow in one's life only a part of what he has given us in such divine abundance, the whole course of one's life may be changed. 'For even a little of this *dharma*', as the Divine

STUDIES ON SRI RAMAKRISHNA

Teacher boldly reassures us in the *Gītā*, 'saves us from grave peril (*svalpamapyasya dharmasya trāyate mahato bhayāt*)'.[°]

[°] *Bulletin* of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, March 1981.



SRI SRI RAMAKRISHNA KATHAMRITA AND ITS MESSAGE FOR THE MODERN AGE

R. K. Das Gupta

FOR most of us *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Kathāmṛta* has become a part of our life and we think that the best gloss on its text is the text itself. And the text is lucid like a moon-lit sky, the simplicity of its language being comparable with that of the authorized version of the English Bible. We can consider *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Kathāmṛta* as a religious classic only when we assume that our modern languages too have produced classics. But T. S. Eliot creates another difficulty for us when we proceed to consider this work as a religious classic, because Eliot believes religious literature is minor literature. I think one can no more affirm that religious literature is minor literature than one can affirm that religion represents a minor side of our life. The great truths of life which sustain the religious life of a whole people are embodied in works which are usually valued as great literature, like the Upaniṣads, the *Dhammapada*, the Avesta, the Bible, and the Koran.

RELIGIOUS BOOK OF SPECIAL KIND

But even when we consider a great religious book as a religious classic, another important question remains to be answered. That question is whether a religious book which is not a canonical text can be given the status of a classic. It is commonly believed that a vernacular work, that is, a work written in a vulgar tongue, can deal with a religious subject, but it cannot be a sacred book. But the *Kathāmṛta* is a religious book of a special kind. Its author took care not to own it as a work produced by him. Sri Ramakrishna's words are the substance of the book, but we cannot mention him as its author. Sri Ramakrishna never wrote a book. Nor did he intend to write one. In the New Testament we read the words of Christ although he never wrote them. Christ spoke the words which

the apostles, St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John recorded and the gospels which they so wrote down are called by the Christians 'The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'. *Srī Srī Rāmakṛṣṇa Kathāmṛta* too is mentioned in English as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. If Sri Ramakrishna's words are Gospel in the theological sense of the word, as it is used in the English language, they are indeed God's words as Christ's words in the New Testament are God's words. The *Kathāmṛta* then is a Revelation, as the Bible is a Revelation and its words are therefore spoken by God through His chosen spokesman. And it is legitimate to admire God's words as it is legitimate to gaze at and admire his magnificent creation.

INCARNATION OF GOD

I look upon Sri Ramakrishna as an incarnation of God and I value his words as a Divine message. Swami Vivekananda not only accepts Sri Ramakrishna as an *Avatāra*, he also believes, as he says in one of his letters dated 27 April 1896, that the 'previous incarnations... have been synthesized in the person of Ramakrishna'. Sri Aurobindo too says in one of his letters on Yoga that Sri Ramakrishna was certainly as much an *Avatāra* as Christ and Chaitanya ! In the tenth chapter of the appendix of the fifth volume of the *Kathāmṛta* 'M' (Mahendranath Gupta) records Ramakrishna's words saying: 'He is none other than Rāma and Kṛṣṇa appearing as Ramakrishna for the sake of his devotees.'

In incarnation God willingly enmeshes Himself in māyā to fulfil some historic purpose and when God descends into time He must not escape the laws of temporal existence. Sri Ramakrishna speaks of this human aspect of the *Avatāra* in a conversation that took place on 2 June 1883 (vide part VI, chapter 1 of the fifth volume of the *Kathāmṛta*.) 'The avatars', he says, 'enter into the world of maya for divine play. See, how much does Rama weep for Sita. Even Brahma cries when he is caught into the net of the five elements.' An incarnation then is also a human drama and in the *Kathāmṛta* Mahendranath is a witness of that drama and to that extent his work too is also a human document.

Mahendranath himself looked upon Sri Ramakrishna as an incarnation of God and as such he compared him with Christ and Sri Chaitanya. In the course of his conversation with his Master on 28 July 1885, i.e. more than a year before the end of Sri Ramakrishna's life on earth (vide chapter 1 part XVIII of the third volume of the *Kathāmṛta*), Mahendranath says: 'I feel that Christ, Chaitanyadeva, and yourself, all three are one and the same.' Hearing this the Master said: 'Yes, yes ! One ! It is indeed one. Don't you see that it is He alone who dwells here in this way ?' Mahendranath records that 'as he said this, Sri Ramakrishna pointed with his finger to his own body'.

NEW TESTAMENT AND KATHĀMṚTA

There is, however, an important difference between the apostolic narrative of the life of Christ in the New Testament and that of Sri Ramakrishna in the *Kathāmṛta*. The four apostles present the entire life of Christ while Mahendranath is concerned with the last four years of his Master's life. The conversations of his Master he records in the *Kathāmṛta* cover the period between 26 February 1882 and 24 April 1886. About why he did not include in his work his Master's life till its end on 16 August 1886 we can only make our guesses. Mahendranath thought that what his Master said in the last four years of his life on earth and how he revealed himself through movements and gestures within this period constituted the essence of not only his wisdom but of his whole being. Let us then consider Mahendranath as an apostle of Ramakrishna and his work in the *Kathāmṛta* as apostolic work and its quality is to be judged as such.

Reading the *Kathāmṛta*, we feel that it is something more than a record of Sri Ramakrishna's words. It reveals him to us not only through the words he spoke but also by presenting to us all that he was and meant to be, his laughter and his tears, his eloquence and his silence, his conviviality and his trances, his grave utterances and his jokes, his deep concern about a poor man's material fortune and about the life of an earnest disciple. Mahendranath discovered his Master not only in his words, although they had for him an incantatory charm, but

in the whole atmosphere of his being including the beauty of the trees and the plants, the flowers in bloom or in bud, the Ganges flowing with a gentle murmur and the temples and the bells that rang within them. He thought there was a kind of profoundly absorbing human drama in the divine life of Sri Ramakrishna, that his divinity glowed through an earthliness which gave him an ecstatic sense of harmony with the created universe. It seemed to him that this latter-day *līlā* (divine play) of the Supreme Spirit gave the world of *māyā* a spiritual meaning. To realize this mystery of the life of Sri Ramakrishna was needed a state of mind which alone could give him an apocalyptic vision of the Divinity working in history and fulfilling a divine purpose. Mahendranath did not simply hear and record the words of Sri Ramakrishna: he saw the Word made flesh, to speak in terms of Christian theology, and presented in his work not only the message but the whole drama which made that message a living reality. Mahendranath told Swami Nityatmananda that the *Kathāmṛta* combined *devadr̥śya* (divine environment) with *devavāṇī* (divine words). For him it was a kind of continuous epiphany and continuous revelation and in both the natural and human environment and the gestures and movements of the Master were as eloquent as his words.

It is this dramatic quality of the *Kathāmṛta*, its vivid delineation of an intensely human situation revealing the highest truths of life, which Christopher Isherwood emphasizes in his observations on the *Kathāmṛta* in his *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* published in 1965. 'If I had to use one single word to describe the atmosphere of the Gospel narrative,' Isherwood says in this book, 'it would be the word Now.' This *nowness* is perceived in the dramatic moments immortalized in the work. And these dramatic moments are to be found not only in Ramakrishna's homely parables, they are to be found also in the human situations which prompt the Master to speak in these parables.

We can turn to some of the examples of this episodic character of the work for a proper appreciation of the human drama which it presents almost in every page. In the course of a conversation held on 5 March 1882 (vide first volume of the

Kathāmṛta, part 1, chapter VI), Ramakrishna asked Narendra: ‘What would you do if people malign you?’ ‘I will think dogs are barking,’ answered Narendra. Ramakrishna said with a smile that this would be going too far when God existed in all beings. But Ramakrishna wanted to qualify this absolutist view by way of making room for human judgement in human dealings. To explain this he told the parable of the young boy and the rogue elephant. The young man was told by his preceptor that God existed in all, and when he heard an alarm that a rogue elephant was around he did not run away and greeted his Nārāyaṇa (God) in the wild beast. The beast mauled the young man and threw him away. The preceptor arrived on the scene and asked his pupil why he had not listened to the warning of the *māhout*. The pupil said that he did not run away because he had been taught that Nārāyaṇa existed in all. The preceptor said that it was strange that he respected the Nārāyaṇa in the wild beast and ignored the Nārāyaṇa in the *māhout*. His listener had a hearty laugh and we now see the whole comedy of misunderstanding the Vedāntic monism in its application to the affairs of our social life.

No less hilarious is Ramakrishna’s story of Keshub’s sermon on *bhakti* (love of God). In a conversation that took place on 26 September 1884 (vide the second volume of the *Kathāmṛta*, part 15, chapter 2), Ramakrishna says that Keshub once lectured at his house that he and other devotees should be drowned in the river of *bhakti*. At this Ramakrishna, pointing to the ladies behind the screen, asked with a smile: ‘What would happen to these poor people if you are drowned?’ Even Keshub enjoyed the joke and understood what it meant. Ramakrishna wanted to say that it was possible for a householder to have devotion to God if only he could shed his lower ego.

SIMPLE WORDS WITH DEEP MEANINGS

One has to read the *Kathāmṛta* to seize meanings which lie deep under its words although the words are very simple. For the situations as they come one after the other are very natural situations and what is natural is often very unintelligible and ambiguous. The truth of nature is not easy to understand.

Neither Sri Ramakrishna nor Mahendranath invents any occasions to hang on them some sermons. The occasions take place rapidly and unpredictably and they have their paradoxes and ironies and they bring into the narrative an element of inconsequence and incoherence. But as you go deep into their significance you discover that some unexpected light illumines all that seemed unintelligible or ambiguous. Of the innumerable instances of such occasions through the work, one of the most striking is to be found in Ramakrishna's conversation with Narendra on 9 May 1885 (vide the third volume, part 15, chapter 2). Ramakrishna recalls that one day Narendra had told him that his (Ramakrishna's) vision of the forms of God was nothing but hallucination. To this Ramakrishna had replied that he even heard them speak. Narendra insisted that even this could be but some delusion. Narendra's obstinate unbelief was a great disappointment to Ramakrishna who then cried and asked the Mother why this should be so. Instantly he had a revelation. The divine form said to him: 'If your words are untrue, how is it that they tally with the facts?' This made Ramakrishna so unhappy that he shouted at Narendra and said: 'You wicked boy, you were about to destroy my faith, get away from here and do not come here again.' We would wonder at a situation like this and be puzzled by what it means. But episodes like this give the *Kathāmṛta* its uniqueness as a testament of the Lord. Here the humanity of Ramakrishna brings the truth of his divine life in touch with the inescapable facts of human history. When everything is sacred in a sacred story its sacredness would seem incredible. In the *Kathāmṛta* the truth of God works through the maze of human errors and eternity shines through the dark places of profane time.

INTIMATE DIALOGUES

How Sri Ramakrishna's words are not sermons from the mount but intimate dialogues with persons who are around him is obvious to all readers of the *Kathāmṛta*. It is yet to be realized that Sri Ramakrishna's style of speaking to his disciples is something unique in the history of scriptures. He spoke in

an apparently trivial manner to convey truths of tremendous significance and we have to pick up the pearls of his wisdom from amongst his jokes. Sometimes his jokes are marked by sarcasm and have in them that element of satire which Bergson has called an intelligent criticism of the incongruous.

But the question of the readers of the *Kathāmṛta* is, what is the achievement of Mahendranath as the author of the work? His achievement is the fulfilment of a great apostolic task, the task of presenting Sri Ramakrishna as a living being, articulating his wisdom in an idiom which his listeners may call their own, and showing him appearing to us in his minutest lineaments. In a letter to Mahendranath, Romain Rolland thanked him 'for having transmitted the benefit of the benign smile of the Master'. The very sensitive French savant realized that in the *Kathāmṛta* the Master's smile is as eloquent as his sermon. Actually Mahendranath did not contemplate his work as a string of sermons: he contemplated it as a full revelation in which words were part of an elaborate apparatus of communication in which a God-man is as much human as he is divine and promises a heaven without negating the earth. In his preface to the 436-page authorized edition of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* published by the Vedānta Centre, New York, on 15 December 1907, Swami Abhedananda says about the work that 'for the first time in the history of the world's great Saviours, the exact words of the Master were recorded verbatim by one of his devoted disciples'.

DIVINELY INSPIRED

In the history of religious literature there is a tradition that apostolic or evangelical work is a kind of prophetic activity and, therefore, it is divinely inspired. As we read the *Kathāmṛta* we feel that its author was an inspired listener of Sri Ramakrishna's words and an equally inspired watcher of his movements and gestures. We can consider the work of Mahendranath in the composition of the *Kathāmṛta* in terms of this idea of prophetic or apostolic work. When Swami Vivekananda read the second part of the pamphlet *The Gospel of Sri Rama-*

krishna published in Madras in 1897, he wrote to Mahendranath a letter dated 24 November 1897: 'It has been reserved for you, this great work. He is with you evidently.' I think these are very significant words about the *Kathāmṛta*, more significant than what Swami Vivekananda had said about Mahendranath's work after reading a part of it published in a Bengali journal in his letter dated 7 February 1889. Swamiji says that the great task of presenting the message of Sri Ramakrishna was reserved for Mahendranath and adds that Sri Ramakrishna is evidently with him in the accomplishment of this great task.

As a book of revelation, the *Kathāmṛta* is singular in world literature. I doubt if Mahendranath thought of any established literary genre when he proceeded to work on the *Kathāmṛta*. Nor did he make any great writer in English or in any other language of Europe or in his own language his master or guide in respect of the form and style of his work. Perhaps he had in mind the Gospels in the New Testament and the biographies in verse of Chaitanya. But it is extremely unlikely that he thought of making either class of writing his model. For one thing the Gospels in the New Testament narrate the entire life of Christ although they naturally deal more with Christ's teaching than with the details of his early life. Another important difference between the Gospels and the *Kathāmṛta* is that in the latter there is more of the human side of the Master's life, more of its varied environment, more of that which is not apparently relevant to his teaching but is woven into its texture than what we find in the Gospels. That is, the *Kathāmṛta* is more dramatic than the Gospels. In the Gospels Christ's words are spoken mostly as sermons, while in the *Kathāmṛta* Sri Ramakrishna speaks in the course of an intimate conversation which is made more intimate by the Master's wit and his sense of fun. Moreover, in the Gospels Christ communicates only through his words while in the *Kathāmṛta* Sri Ramakrishna communicates only through his silences, his laughter and his tears, his trances and his songs. There is no formal preaching in the *Kathāmṛta*, no hortatory eloquence. In no religious book of the world does religion ap-

pear in such earthly robes, or its essence presented in such homely words. But there is a striking similarity between the Gospels and the *Kathāmrta* in their use of parables. The parables of the *Kathāmrta* have, however, a human and episodic interest of their own, while in the Gospels they are important only as a means of effective moral instruction. The Biblical parable is essentially an extended metaphor; a rhetorical device for forceful preaching. I doubt if the stories which Ramakrishna tells to illustrate his moral are, strictly speaking, parables as they are used in the New Testament. Actually, in the *Kathāmrta* there is an abundance of similes, metaphors, and anecdotes which give it a note of intimacy and homeliness which one does not expect from sermons given in parables. This intimacy seems to dissolve the distance between the Master and his disciples or listeners and this is a unique feature of the work as a religious classic.

TRUTH OF EXPRESSION

The only principle of composition which Mahendranath must have decided to follow was the principle of authenticity, or truth of expression, which is something deeper than what Romain Rolland has called 'exactitude...almost stenographic' in his remark on the 'Discourses' in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* included in his bibliography in *The Life of Ramakrishna* published in 1929. Mahendranath wanted to be exact not only in recording what his Master said but also in his presentation of his entire personality, of his inner being as reflected in his gestures, the movement of his limbs, responses to his human and natural surroundings. Mahendranath does not simply transmit his Master's smile, he transmits all that he saw in him and all that he was to him. The *Kathāmrta* is not only a Revelation of Sri Ramakrishna's wisdom: it is also a Revelation of his whole being. In this respect, the *Kathāmrta* is particularly distinguishable from *Chaitanya-Charitāmṛta* in that the one presents Sri Ramakrishna in his own words while the other presents Chaitanya in the words of its author. All other differences between the two works follow from this basic difference. Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja is the poet-philosopher of Vaiṣṇavism:

Mahendranath is not in this sense a philosopher of any religious doctrine. He is only an inspired revealer of his Master, his only object being to record faithfully what he saw and heard in the four years of his company with him.

I look upon the *Kathāmṛta* as a new *Bhāgavata* because its subject, Sri Ramakrishna, is a new and unique incarnation of the Deity whose life on earth presents the message of our old *Bhāgavata* in a new language. In an article entitled 'The Way Sri Ramakrishna has Shown Us' published in *Vedānta Kesari* in May 1947 C. Rajagopalachari says: 'You will find that the whole book (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*) from page one to the last page is a living commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the Upanishads.' But in what sense is Sri Ramakrishna a unique phenomenon in the world's religious history? In what sense is he different from the other incarnations of the Deity? For the first time in our spiritual history is the whole faith of a people, its philosophy and its ethics, its theology and its metaphysic, presented in the plain vernacular of the common man. To understand the Upanishads you must have a special education and you must possess special intellectual powers. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* is in simpler Sanskrit but to master its message you need a cultivated and refined intelligence. The *Brahma-Sūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa is too abstruse a text for the common reader. The great commentators of the Vedānta like Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja are again unintelligible to men of average intelligence and education. When the vast literature of *bhakti* (love of God), the Vaiṣṇava and Śākta songs and the Vaiṣṇava biographical literature, emerged in the Middle Ages, the common people had a chance to share the finer things of their great religious tradition. These songs too, whatever be their cultic affiliation, were found to be a lyrical expression of Vedāntic philosophy. Early in the nineteenth century the Bāul poets of Bengal gave *bhakti* literature a new dimension and a new depth through the catholicity of their spiritual temper which knew no frontiers between religious communities and their Upanishadic ring too was unmistakable. At about the same time the Brāhmo Movement preached a severe form of monotheism

which repudiated all cults and beliefs and looked upon popular Hinduism as a gross form of idolatry.

HISTORIC RENEWAL

At this hour was needed a historic renewal of our religious life not through new commentaries on our ancient texts, nor through changes in doctrine and ritual, but through the living word of a living God coming in the midst of the common people in the form of the commonest of men. He must not be another Moses proclaiming a new faith and opposing all old faiths. He must not speak in polemical language wherewith to refute the doctrines of others to establish his own. He will not establish a new sect or a new cult. He is to speak to our common people in their idiom and make his highest wisdom appear as but common sense. He is not to destroy the old but give a new life and a new meaning to the truths of an ancient faith. He is to establish the truth of the spirit by making his own life a living example of that truth. Mahendranath found in Sri Ramakrishna a living embodiment of the essence of the Vedānta—the word made flesh in a God-man whose tangible life on earth was not to be distinguished from the wisdom he spoke. His words, therefore, are not abstractions, they have the liveliness of their speaker, as he smiles or is in tears, as he is joking with his disciples or is immersed in a trance, as he is visiting a theatre or worshipping in a temple, as he is singing and dancing or is meditating in silence in the midst of a crowd. This is Divinity in the widest commonality spread; God speaking to you not from the high heavens but from the most unlikely corners of your home. And when he speaks you are not struck by the novelty of what he says; you seem to hear something that you must have heard long ago but forgot, something coming upon you with the force of a new experience and a new meaning. In his book called *Hinduism* published in 1962, R. C. Zaehner says: ‘It is true that he (Ramakrishna) said nothing new (for it is difficult to say anything new in Hinduism) but everything he said sounded new since he was a master of the homely phrase and had an unerring touch when it came to driving a point home to simple and not so simple minds in words

they could readily understand.' But it is not Sri Ramakrishna's mastery of the homely phrase which gives power to his words. His words work on our mind because they do not just express ideas: they transmit experiences. With his words Ramakrishna gathers us into himself and makes us share his feelings. Mahendranath saw this mystique of Ramakrishna's communication and he took care to preserve this element of intimacy between the Master and his disciples in his record.

I look upon the *Kathāmṛta* as a unique creation in the world's religious literature because never before was Divine wisdom presented in such an intensely human environment. The religious books of the world are generally books of a forbidding seriousness. Whenever I read the *Kathāmṛta* and reflect on its uniqueness, I remember the memorable words in a not so well-known English poem bearing the title 'The Incarnate One'. The poet says that the word made flesh is made a word again in our religious works where we see the name of God 'written with an iron pen' and where the 'Mystery is impaled and bent into an ideological instrument'. Here the mystery glows till we seem to see its meaning in words spoken in a mood of cheering confidence by one whom we can call our own. The line in the English poem which I would like to put at the top of anything I write on the *Kathāmṛta* is: There's better gospel in man's natural tongue. It is the natural tongue of the speaker in the *Kathāmṛta* and the absence in it of the grave manner of Sāstric writings which has made the *Kathāmṛta* such a popular religious classic. I go back to the poem to listen to what its author has to say about the modern man's predicament in respect of his religious books:

'The fleshless word, growing, will bring us down,
Pagan and Christian man alike will fall.'

The poet predicts a danger to the religious life of the modern man who has to depend, to sustain that life, on the fleshless word. The *Kathāmṛta* is not a fleshless word. Here the speaker of the word throbs with life and seems to keep time with the beatings of your heart and take you by his gentle hand to show you your path.

CATHOLICITY

In the West *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* has been so valued mostly for the broad catholicity of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual temper, his gentle and humane approach to the great questions of man's spiritual life. Writing in the Weekly Book Review Section of the *New York Herald Tribune* for 1 September 1949, Thomas Sturgue says: 'The English version is a triumph of creative translation. . . . If we may venture an honest conviction of ours, firmly implanted in us by whatever little understanding we have of the spiritual situation of modern humanity, the Gospel will become in time the authoritative basis of a broad conception of religion demanded by the present age.'

RENEWAL OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

But what makes the *Kathāmṛta* a document of such a religion for the modern man? I think Mahendranath too discovered in the life of his Master something that promised a renewal of the modern man's religious life through a renewal of the religious life of his own people. Swami Vivekananda too saw this and then took upon himself the task of making the world understand the meaning of that renewal. Sri Ramakrishna was not a scholar-philosopher such as Śaṅkara or Thomas Aquinas and he would never think of producing a kind of *summa theologica* for his people. And yet what he said was the distilled essence of our spiritual tradition and he was capable of placing that essence before his disciples in a language they could understand. And to this realization of the central truths of Hindu religious philosophy he added his sense of what the modern man needed throughout the world, a contented sense of harmony in the life of the spirit. Sri Ramakrishna did not think of devising neat oecumenical arguments for such harmony, no laboured synthesis of diverse doctrines to liberalize religious opinion because he knew that liberalization of religious opinion could be achieved at the cost of religion itself. He wanted to take man to the very centre of his spiritual being and spelt out in simple terms the moral requirements for the fulfilment of that being. He summoned his disciples, and all who would listen to his words, to a passionate love of God which was to

resolve all doctrinal disputes and he was himself that love incarnate. He seized the central meaning of the Upaniṣads and of the entire spiritual inheritance of India out of some spontaneity of spiritual consciousness which itself is a miracle and the *Kathāmṛta* in this sense is the story of a miracle, that is, a revelation. Vivekananda once said: 'I, through the grace of God, had the great good fortune to sit at the feet of one... whose life, a thousandfold more than whose teaching, was a living commentary on the texts of the Upanishads, was in fact the spirit of the Upanishads living in a human form.' '... came one whose life was the explanation, whose life was the working out of the harmony that is the background of all the different sects of India, I mean Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.' Vivekananda thought that Ramakrishna combined in himself the head of a Śaṅkara and the heart of a Chaitanya and he thought this made him the spiritual liberator of the modern man. Mahendranath too discovered in his Master the divine speaker of the new message which was but the old truths spoken in a new and lively accent.

KATHĀMṚTA : SINGULAR AND UNIQUE

I may now compare the *Kathāmṛta* with some other religious classics of the world. And when I say that I consider the *Kathāmṛta* as something singular or unique I do not mean to suggest that most other religious classics are in any sense inferior to it. To say so would be to go against the very spirit of the work we are talking about. And when I say that the *Kathāmṛta* is incomparable I do not mean to say that it is obviously the greatest religious book that has ever been produced. I call it incomparable because other great religious books of the world are not of this kind or nature. It is incomparable because it is so far the only example of this kind of religious work—a work written in vernacular, a work which combines profundity with a good deal of fun, in which the highest truths about the life of the spirit are expressed in the simplest of languages and, above all, a work in which the life of the incarnate Deity is presented as the life of a common man with unpredictable outbursts of Divinity in his demeanour.

Ramakrishna is a Vedāntic monist and yet he can worship his Mother with the passion of one who must not dissolve himself in sugar so that he may taste its sweetness. His God is formless and yet he adores a clay image of his Mother. He looks upon his God as Mother and yet the name of Kṛṣṇa brings tears to his eyes. He believes in one God and yet he does not dismiss those who worship many gods and goddesses. He has himself renounced the worldly life and practised the severest form of asceticism and yet he affirmed that the householder too could have a life of the spirit and have an intense love for God. He shunned the life of action and yet he called his disciples to a life of action for the amelioration of the human condition. When we think of Ramakrishna at this distance of time we wonder that such a man ever trod upon this earth, knew about its joys and its sorrows, its laughter and its tears. And we have an image of him in the pages of the *Kathāmṛta* and if that image is now imprinted in our minds it is due to the influence of that work on our life.

DEVOTIONAL MANUAL

It is said that in the West the most popular religious book after the Bible is *The Imitation of Christ* which is attributed to Thomas Kempis, a Dutch mystic of the fifteenth century who wrote his great work in rhythmical Latin prose. Many of us have read this great religious classic in L. Sherley-Price's English translation published as a Penguin book thirty years ago. In point of style and mood it has some similarities with the *Kathāmṛta*. Its language is remarkably simple which reflects what has been called the transparent sincerity of its author. But its anti-worldliness may repel those who find both beauty and grace in man's earthly life. Even as a layman, I look upon the *Kathāmṛta* as the most reliable devotional manual although I know it has much profounder things to offer to men and women who have a sense of the higher life. As one who would be called in the Christian world an idol-worshipping Indian of the Lower Gangetic Delta, I have my own questions regarding duality and non-duality, between the severe monism of Śaṅkara and the popular Dvaitavāda of the average Hindu. I remember,

while attending a public lecture of Professor R. C. Zaehner at Oxford, this question created an embarrassing situation for me when the speaker affirmed that Vedānta was the very breakdown of religion in so far as it negated any relationship between God and man. Professor Zaehner was then Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford and I had gone to his lecture on Vedānta in the hope that he would go deep into a philosophy which was the greatest achievement of the higher intelligence of India. Obviously as an Indian undergraduate of the University I was excited about an occasion like this where I thought I would listen to a modern western appreciation of what I thought was the very essence of our religious philosophy. Instead I heard the incumbent of a prestigious Oxford chair, and a successor of Radhakrishnan in that academic position, dismiss the Vedānta as an anti-religious doctrine. I thought Professor Zaehner's view of the Vedānta was not different from that of the Christian missionaries in India who found in our religious tradition either polytheism or atheism or a gross form of pantheism. When Professor Zaehner answered some questions I discovered that he had not read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* which I thought was the first enlightened exposition of the Vedānta for the modern man, but when later Zaehner read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* he was in my view too committed a catholic Christian theist to understand the meaning of Sri Ramakrishna's explication of the Vedānta which affirms its unmistakable theistic foundation. When a few years after this lecture Professor Zaehner acquainted himself with *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* he said in his work called *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* published in 1957 that Ramakrishna appears at one time as a monist and at another as a pantheist, more often as the latter. What Professor Zaehner failed to see is the fact that Ramakrishna would never put on any kind of doctrinal strait-jacket and that duality and non-duality were the warp and woof of the spiritual fabric of a true theist. In a work published five years later Professor Zaehner said: 'Ramakrishna was by nature a *bhakta*, not a *jnānin*, a worshipper of God rather than an introspective seeking the One within himself.' But this is not the Ramakrishna Mahendranath presents in the

Kathāmṛta where the Master strikes us as a living example of the Upaniṣadic doctrine of *Tat tvam asi* (That thou art). And he is so both on the plane of logic and of personal experience.

NOBLEST DRAMA OF HUMAN SPIRIT

Sri Ramakrishna had no intellectual pretension and he avoided showing any kind of dialectical prowess. But there is a hard core of logic in what he says in his homely phrases. The validity of that logic is assured by the truth of his experience. For the first time in the spiritual history of man, the *Kathāmṛta* presents the highest truths of religion in terms of a personal experience and this gives the *Kathāmṛta* its uniqueness as the noblest drama of the human spirit. As you see the logic of what he says through his experiences as you can at all witness them, you realize that the clarity of his ideas is due to the depth of his experience. When on the question of form and formlessness of God, that is, on impersonal Brahman and personal God he uses the metaphor of the ocean where water sometimes assumes the shape of ice you feel that it is a metaphor used by one who has gone deep into that water. At the same time, when you receive this wisdom you feel that it has become a part of yourself. You do not think that what has come to you is something so new that you must make an effort to master it and make it your own.

MESSAGE TO MODERN MAN

The power of the *Kathāmṛta* is in its capacity to gather its readers into the fold of its wisdom. Its many songs seem to dissolve into its prose as its prose seems to melt into its songs. The *Kathāmṛta* faithfully presents, all the shades and hues of Sri Ramakrishna's experience of God and communicates the message to the modern man. Sri Ramakrishna is unmistakably modern in rising above all questions of sect and doctrine, of priestly or scriptural authority and, above all, in exhibiting an oecumenicity of spiritual temper which makes him the most universal amongst the Men of God in the world's religious history. The clarity of thought in Sri Ramakrishna's words is only an expression of the purity and intensity of his experience

and together they give his message the precision of science, and makes it the science of the spirit. What we call Sri Ramakrishna's mysticism has a firm logical foundation and one can therefore work out its metaphysics, its psychology, and its ethics.

What makes Sri Ramakrishna the most modern amongst the great seers is that he could make his own life an empirical evidence of the spirit within. Sri Ramakrishna does not preach religion: he is religion incarnate: in him we see the spirit in the flesh, the spirit moving in our midst. When we speak of Sri Ramakrishna's message we do not remember only his words profoundly significant as they are, we also contemplate his living presence as made vivid to us in the pages of the *Kathāmṛta*.

But the idea of modernity as it applies to the modern age, the twentieth century, stands for an intellectual climate where faith is in retreat, where the life of the spirit is a logical absurdity and God is but a hypothesis of the intellectually unregenerate. The modern age is the age of anxiety, of uncertainty; it is an age which repudiates religion as the opium of the people and looks upon morality as but a convenient instrument of social peace. Spengler saw this age as the age of the *Decline of the West* as the title of his great work would show. The mood of the age is reflected in the well-known poem of T. S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men' in these words:

We are hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw, Alas!
 Our dried voices, when
 We whisper together
 Are quiet and meaningless
 As wind in dry grass
 Or rats' feet over broken glass
 In our dry cellar.

We cannot say this sense of spiritual and moral hollowness has not touched our people. It has cast its shadow on a large

section of our educated classes living in urban centres. And even in our rural areas large masses of people are being taught to rest their faith in some Godless doctrine to ensure their economic and social salvation. I have myself met not a few amongst our intellectuals who believe that the Indian people are in this abject plight because of their superstitious faith in some Reality that transcends the empirical world and that we are failing to improve our lot on this earth because of our fatal desire for some unearthly bliss.

What then is Sri Ramakrishna's message to an age which has lost its faith in the higher life and has only a severely utilitarian and politico-economic approach to the problems of our society? Let us consider their arguments in support of their view. They will ask: What has Sri Ramakrishna to say about the question of attaining political freedom? They will ask: What are Sri Ramakrishna's views on the most important economic and social questions of the day? Coming to the burning problems of these later days, they will ask: What relevance has Sri Ramakrishna's message to the question of nuclear disarmament and world peace? You will search the five volumes of the *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa kathāmṛta* or the two volumes of *Līlāprasaṅga* in vain for Sri Ramakrishna's answers to these questions. You will not find answers to these questions in the New Testament either, and the *Dhammapada*, the sacred book of the Buddhists, is also silent about them.

But are these really the vital questions of our life, even of our life on this earth? Are these the most fundamental questions about the condition of mankind today? Do these questions go into the very foundation of human action and human motive? They are certainly causes of anxiety, they are certainly very important concerns for the modern man. The West has been putting to itself the most important of political questions and it has also answered those questions in various ways. But has the accumulated political wisdom of the West assured it a political paradise? Very profound answers to man's economic questions are now more than hundred years old, but have those answers brought about our economic salvation? Differences in political and economic ideas are causing greater dissensions in

the modern world than differences in religious ideas. The modern man has at his disposal more knowledge about his material environment, about nature and its behaviour than at any time in human history. He has practically conquered nature and there seems to be nothing that he cannot do to get it to serve any of his material ends. And yet man is now stricken with a terrible fear, the fear of a nuclear war that may destroy the human race and wipe out all traces of human civilization.

IN SEARCH OF UNIVERSAL PEACE

We must then ask ourselves if our science and technology, our politics and our economics can really save us from this dire fate of universal extinction. Can the most sagacious diplomat bring peace between two countries? Where then must we go to have that peace, a peace not between two countries, but universal peace? Are we not gradually realizing that we cannot have world peace till we have attained peace in our individual soul, that we cannot put an end to evil in the external world till we have dethroned evil within ourselves. The most vital, the most fundamental questions of human life, of the individual and of society, relate to the condition of the human soul, the ground of all human thought and action, the ultimate source of all our energy and strength. Care for the world's physical safety is a puerile care even when that safety is needed for the preservation of the great values of human civilization and of its manifestations in art and letters. Such collective concern for peace proceeds from individual fear of loss and of death. It is essentially a selfish desire, a rich man's anxiety about the safety of his treasures.

MESSAGE OF UNIVERSAL LOVE

Sri Ramakrishna shows us the way to peace and it is not the way we try to find for ourselves in disarmament conferences. We will not have peace if peace alone is our goal. Peace will come to us only as the consequence of something that is more precious than peace. Sri Ramakrishna's way to peace is the way of love. You cannot have peace in a loveless world, a world

stricken with hatred and suspicion. Sri Ramakrishna's message to the modern man as embodied in the *Kathāmṛta* is the message of universal love, and the ground of that love is the love of God. Even the ideals of justice and righteousness will seem empty when you enter deep into the mystery of this love.

But the modern man with his scientific temper will ask—why should we induct God, something which we have never seen, into this idea of universal love? Sri Ramakrishna never enters into this question in any of his conversations as recorded in the *Kathāmṛta*. God was not with him a matter of belief or a theological question: God was his very being, the very breath of his life. If you would ask him whether universal love was the sum of the love of all persons for all persons of the world he would certainly say that such arithmetic of addition could not be the foundation of the infinity of love. On the contrary, it confines within space and time what transcends both. God is that infinite, the Absolute who is capable of descending into the world of the relative as a devotee's personal Deity. If human love is not a part of this divine love it is worthless and cannot sustain us for long. Sri Ramakrishna's love of God is the guarantee of the endlessness of his love. Love that is not love of God, that is, divine love, is uncertain and ephemeral. It lacks a foundation which never wears out and therefore can never assure you your immortality. This love of God with all its infinitude is the ground of all human virtues, individual and social, and of everything that assures individual and collective happiness. The *Kathāmṛta* records a conversation that took place on 8 April 1883 in the course of which Sri Ramakrishna says: 'There are certain signs of God-realization. The man in whom longing for God manifests its glories is not far from attaining Him. What are the glories of that longing? They are discrimination, dispassion, compassion for living beings, serving holy men, loving their company, chanting the name and glories of God, telling the truth and the like.' Virtues like rightmindedness, self-control, compassion, truthfulness are only the consequences of love of God, they are the necessary adjuncts of that love. When such virtues are pursued as but ethical principles they are liable to be tarnished by a loveless ego. One can be proud of such virtues and value

them as one values gold. But when these virtues arise out of a boundless love of God they become a part of one's being, a natural expression of his soul.

PHILOSOPHY OF DIVINE LOVE

In the fifth chapter of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* Prajapati instructs his pupils, gods, men and demons three virtues: self-control, charity, and compassion. But you can practise these virtues properly only when you have realized the inexhaustibleness of Brahman and have been a partaker of His fullness. The first verse of this chapter of the Upaniṣad is about this inexhaustibleness of Brahman.

*Pūrṇamadah pūrṇamidaṁ pūrṇāt pūrṇamudacyate ;
Pūrṇasya pūrṇamādāya pūrṇamevāvaśiṣyate.*

(That is full, this is full. From fullness fullness proceeds. If you take away fullness from fullness even fullness then remains.) Sri Ramakrishna called us to this sense of fullness to be attained through love of God. The disturbing ego which separates us from others and which obliges us to see everything in fragments is dissolved in this sense of fullness and when it is so dissolved we have the right motive for good action. Or else all our actions are but expression of our abounding egotism; they are so even when they are apparently directed towards some social good. This is the essence of the philosophy of *anāsakti yoga* or *niṣkāma karma* as Lord Kṛṣṇa presents it in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Sri Ramakrishna did not work in the social field or political field. But he did work by way of accomplishing a great task. That task was to vivify to his disciples and through them to the posterity the meaning of the philosophy of divine love and of right action in a spirit of non-attachment. Non-attachment will be an ethical abstraction and a principle impossible to practise unless it is brought about by our attachment to something higher and greater than ourselves. Non-attachement is not a negative virtue: we express the idea through a negative prefix by way of explaining how our lower or individual ego is burnt in our love of God. We are happy

witnesses of that extinction of the lower self because it brings us something that we must exalt above everything else. Renunciation then is not self-deprivation: it is a means of Self-realization: it is removing the dross from the gold so that we can preserve the true treasures of our soul which time cannot destroy. The *Kathāmṛta* records another conversation of Sri Ramakrishna which took place on 5 August 1882: 'What is the significance of the Gītā?', asked the Master. And answering the question himself in his inimitable simplicity of style, he said: 'It is what you find by repeating the word ten times. It is then reversed into "Tāgi", which means a person who has renounced everything for God. And the lesson of the Gītā is: "O man, renounce everything and seek God alone." Whether a man is a monk or a householder, he has to shake off all attachment from his mind.'

Apparently, it is an ambiguous or even absurd philosophy. We have our innocent attachments to our near and dear ones, to this beautiful world, to our important work. Let us love God and let us make him supreme in our life. But why should we take ourselves from the grand feast of life which God himself has offered us? For those of us who enjoy this life on earth as God's grand feast there is no need for renunciation; for they can so look upon life only when they have renounced the ego. But for most of us life is not God's play or *līlā*: it is a play of our own ego where we strut and fret our brief hour and then we are heard no more. Even our apparently good actions are marred by this irrepressible ego.

Amongst European poets, it is T. S. Eliot who, obviously under the influence of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, has shown the working of the ego even in what is intended to be an act of sacrifice on the part of a man of religion. In his drama *Murder in the Cathedral* Becket realizes to his dismay that he is about to give his life for the sake of the church out of a desire, desire for the glory of a martyr: Becket's words at this hour of spiritual crisis in his life are an excellent gloss on the doctrine of *niskāma karma* of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* as explained by Sri Ramakrishna in his dialogues.

To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

.....
Ambition comes behind and unobservable.
Sin grows with doing good.

.....
For those who serve the greater cause may make the
cause serve them,
Still doing right: and striving with political men
May make that cause political, not by what they do
But by what they are.

PROBLEMS OF THE MODERN AGE

The modern age is an age where sin grows with doing good. Perhaps this has been so throughout human history. But in our age humanity has a choice between a heroic survival and the most shameful universal doom. It is a pity that we are steadily proceeding towards the latter. And yet the international political scene presents a spectacle of competitive benefaction, of self-regarding gestures of peace which is only belligerence in disguise. Sri Ramakrishna has a definite message for the modern man conveyed through the *Kathāmṛta*. It is a message of divine love which alone can be the basis of a universal fellowship and universal peace. This was his message to the India of his own times too. He was concerned more with what people were than with what they were doing. While it is true that he did not involve himself directly in the social and political affairs of his time, he knew what was happening in the country and what was being done by what kind of people and with what motive. He suspected that a good deal of the reformist activity of those days was tarnished by egotism and we can have no doubt that when he talked about the strong element of the *tamas* in human conduct he had in mind the self-seeking men of affairs who were perhaps themselves unaware of their doing the right thing for the wrong reason.

VOICE OF HOPE

If the cry of the modern age is a cry for universal peace and human fellowship, Sri Ramakrishna's voice is a voice of

hope for all who are raising that cry. In his brief essay on *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Christopher Isherwood says: 'The more I think of Ramakrishna and his disciples the more I am aware of a growing conviction that sooner or later, by some route or other, this is the way we all must go.' I do not suppose Isherwood is here speaking of man's spiritual salvation. I think he is speaking of some change in the affairs of the world which according to him can be brought about by Sri Ramakrishna's gospel of divine love as the only instrument of human good. Sri Ramakrishna had a profound sense of history and of human fate although in his talks he never directly mentioned anything relating to either. All his remarks on the ethics of human action as we find in the *Kathāmṛta* have relevance to a world where enterprises of great pitch and moment are wrecked by clash of egos. And today all violence within a nation and on the international scene may be attributed to individual or collective ego. In this country our egos are inflating faster than our currency and yet we do not realize how we are being ruined by competing plans for our survival. How deeply was Sri Ramakrishna concerned about this fatality in human affairs and how he wanted to save us from it we can see from his idea about Swami Vivekananda. And this would also show how Sri Ramakrishna's mysticism did not negate life or the world for the sake of some private heaven. The *Kathāmṛta* records a conversation that took place on 9 August 1885 in the course of which Sri Ramakrishna describes his vision of Narendra: 'Seeing him absorbed in meditation, I called aloud, "O, Narendra!" He opened his eyes a little. At once I said to the Divine Mother: "Mother entangle him in Maya; otherwise he will give up his body in *samādhi*."' This is indeed Sri Ramakrishna's testament for his dear disciple, for his age and for humanity. He had a profound solicitude for the human fate in the world and it was his conviction that the world could be saved only by world-losers and world-forsakers who can fulfil themselves only through renunciation. Arnold Toynbee somewhere says that Ramakrishna's teaching is right 'because it flows from a true vision of spiritual reality.' We will begin to understand the meaning of this vision for the modern age as

portrayed in the *Kathāmṛta* only when we discover the emptiness of the grossly utilitarian, humanistic approach to the human condition and regain our faith in the life of the spirit. *

