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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

The Vedanta Philosophy and the Message of Christ

CARL KELLER

(By kind permission of the Editors of The International Review of Missions, we are printing below excerpts from an article which appeared in a recent issue of that journal. We believe that this article has not received the attention in India that it deserves. Alongside it we also publish a contribution on the same subject from an Indian Christian student of the Vedanta, and we hope that the publication of these two articles in The Indian Journal of Theology will stimulate our readers to further thinking and discussion on this important subject.—Eds.)

I

The Vedanta—that is, consistent monism—is the outstanding philosophy of India. The Vedanta, among all the philosophic systems and religions produced by the astonishingly fruitful Indian spirit, is the set of principles which nowadays still counts the largest number of adherents and in which Indian longings and views are most clearly reflected. It is the crown of Hinduism and at the same time its foundation. It is of the Vedanta that Indians think when they speak of Indian cosmology; to it they refer as India's contribution to the world. It is typical and characteristic for India in a measure that no European philosophy can be for Europe. Anyone who understands the Vedanta understands the Indian people.

Add to that another fact: this philosophy attracts not only India in an irresistible way, but the western countries as well. Many intellectuals in Europe and America find in it the answer to their life-problems and to the difficulties of the modern world. In western countries, too, the Vedanta is becoming a spiritual power to be taken seriously into account.

What is its attraction? Two characteristics must be mentioned:

In the first place, it is admirably flexible and adaptable. In distinguishing the *Aparā-Vidyā*, the 'lower knowledge'—i.e. the analysis of the world of phenomena, of the visible and the invisible cosmos—from the *Parā-Vidyā*—the knowledge of the reality, of eternal, unchangeable, unqualifiable existence, fundamental for all appearances, called the 'higher knowledge'—the Vedanta opens the way for a bifurcation of philosophic research which always makes it possible for the Vedantist to conform to the times, to be quite modern.

And there is a second valid reason for its attraction: the sublime, overpowering simplicity of that unchangeable 'higher knowledge'. It

is so simple, so absolutely above all systems and all problems, so self-evident, that one cannot but admire it. The principal thesis of the Vedānta teaches the absolute, unchangeable and simply indivisible uniformity of existence. '*Ekam eva advīdītyam*': one thing, without a second one—that is reality, Brahma, the ultimate principle of substance. This one thing, this solely existing one, must be perceived.

The question arises how the ultimate substance can be perceived; for it cannot be attained by the ordinary means of reasoning, nor can it be defined. All research, however thorough, remains imprisoned in and by the multiplicity of appearances. To put it in an Indian way: neither awake, nor in a dream, nor in dreamless sleep can men perceive the absolute, true being. There must consequently exist a fourth state, '*Turiya*', different from all the three known states of consciousness, a method of perception which aims at Brahma itself, at the ultimate substance that is to be separated from the whole world of appearances. But since this Brahma is really a 'unity' without a second thing, this way of perception must include the abolition of the twofold state of the perceiver and his object, i.e. in the suppression of duality. In other words: anyone who recognizes Brahma, the absolute one, in this way, which differs entirely from all empirical perception, is himself Brahma, himself the one, eternal, unchangeable reality. *Brahma veda brahma bhavati*: to know Brahma and to be Brahma is one and the same. '*Turiya*', the fourth state of consciousness, besides the state of waking, dream and dreamless sleep, is also called *Samādhi* or 'perfection', or else *Moksha*—redemption from the multiplicity of the world of appearances.

There is a last link in this chain of perceptions: if Brahma, the one, true being, differs from all appearances, and if the person who recognizes Brahma is himself Brahma, himself the one, true being, then the true, ultimate substance of man is in general nothing but Brahma, the absolutely one, true being. Consequently empirical man, with all that we call 'personality', 'soul', 'the spirit' of man, belongs to multiplicity as a concatenation of appearances which is just not the true, one being. And therefore any possibility of taking seriously, on the metaphysical plane, empirical man and the appearances which he perceives is ruled out: in a metaphysical sense there are no appearances nor is there a man perceiving them. In a metaphysical sense there exists only the one, indivisible Brahma, and the task of man who appears with and among these is to realize that he is Brahma and that in fact there is no such thing as man, just as the appearances in general have no reality either.

When he knows Brahma, when he has become Brahma, he will recognize everything as unreal: while thinking, he does not think; while working, he does not work; enjoying, he does not enjoy; living, he does not live and dying, he does not die. Being himself the eternal, unchangeable, true, ultimate principle, he exists beyond all human activity.

II

No further proof is needed that we are not dealing here with an ordinary philosophic system; the principle of the absolute oneness of the true substance of things is not to be grasped by intellectual deduction. We are dealing here, rather, with a knowledge that is fixed *a priori*, attested by the actual experience of those who have realized Brahma as authoritatively laid down in the Veda (the Upanishads). The

one true Brahma is therefore not a construction or projection of human reasoning; the point in question is rather a certainty, arising from a 'revelation': what is not available to reason and what in general is not perceptible is simply taken absolutely for granted. One could even go further and say: the consistent monism of the Vedanta is nothing but the all-embracing philosophic and theological evaluation of the religious fundamental phenomenon: of the experience of the 'quite different one', i.e. the experience of God. This experience of the perpetual, of the unchangeable, of the eternal origin of all things, the 'wholly other substance', is recognized as the only truth and—contrary to all appearances—made the source of all explanation of life and cosmos. And it is precisely as an interpretation of that experience of the 'wholly other' substance that the Vedanta should be utilized for theological research.

It is at this point useful to pause and glance at the development of Christian theology in India up to this time. What discussion have the Mission and the Church so far had with the Vedanta? The answer is indisputable—and disheartening.

The chorus of opinions on this question resounds pure, clear and overwhelming: this philosophy must be rejected without compromise because of its blending of God and man, its unjustifiable depreciation of creation, its ethical indifference.

In three ways Christian theology has confronted Hinduism:

1. The traditional criticism of Indian religion and philosophy is the purely negative one of aggression, contrasting the two religions. In the nineteenth century this was done simply by opposing the Christian system of thinking as the final revelation of the living God, sometimes in very bellicose fashion, to an insufficiently understood Hinduism, which was presented as a lie and a delusion of Satan, in the (of course unfulfilled) hope that the poor, erring Hindus would become aware of the imprisoning character of their thinking and would unreservedly accept the revealed system of truth.

A closer study of the Indian original writings has enabled us to see that this is not so easily done; and, since the First World War, we began to postulate the peculiarity of the Christian revelation in contrast to Hinduism, which seems, in the Christian view, to be closely self-contained. For Hinduism had noticed very quickly that in its philosophic-religious structure there was ample room for Christ, and so it had begun to assimilate Christianity.

The theological sterility of this contrasting method is obvious. Theological research consists in constantly renewed endeavour to grasp the facts about Christ to an ever deeper extent. It is a constant circling round Christ which is never completed, whereby new approaches, new points of view, new discoveries—and new experiences—throw an ever new light upon the one subject—Christ. Yet the negative-aggressive attitude to foreign religions loses sight of the purpose of genuine theological research. It even turns its back on the Centre of this work and, swinging sharply round, sees itself confronted by a fictitious attack. And that means that we are no longer circling round Christ: to meet that fictitious front, we have ourselves to form a battle line, to rely upon a system of perceptions as complete and unchangeable as possible, in order to hold our ground.

In India we must, rather, again start that circling round Christ and let new light, even from the angle of the Vedanta, fall upon Him. We cannot simply 'have' Christ in a conclusively formed doctrinal system; we can only contemplate Him—and endeavour to contemplate Him in a new way in trying to do so from an Indian point of view.

2. The second method of dealing with Hinduism differs only apparently from the first: it is the idea, classically advocated by Farquhar in his most captivating book, *The Crown of Hinduism*, that the message of Christ is the fulfilment of all genuine and true aspirations within Hinduism.

The Christian Faith can take the place of Hinduism—not as something hostile, fundamentally different, but as the fulfilment of an aspiration which Hinduism cannot realize by itself. This standpoint does not differ essentially from the traditional view described above, because the Christian truth is here also looked upon as a system of ideas that ought to take the place of the broken-down Indian system. Moreover, it is reasoned, with uncharitable and deluded contention, that the Indian system—the Indian genius—is incapable of meeting the demands of the modern world—a masterful assertion which does not betray much insight into the power of renewal innate in Indian thought. It is also typical of this school that it does not know how to handle Vedanta; but we are not astonished, when we think of its adaptability and overwhelming simplicity, that it is the Vedanta which confers unexpected strength upon Hinduism. It is not, therefore, Christianity as mentioned above, but the Vedanta, which is the crown of Hinduism.

3. There remains a third way of appeal to the heart of India: the constructive-theological method. It is represented in particular by a group of Indian lay-theologians around Mr. P. Chenchiah in Madras. We may certainly claim that here, in principle, the way has been found and entered on which has a future. For Mr. Chenchiah has understood that what is decisive in the Gospel of Christ is not an occidental-Christian-theological construction of ideas, but Christ Himself as a fact. The theological task in India, therefore, consists in giving a quite new interpretation to this all-decisive fact. And in this connexion the western interpretation of Christ will have to be considered too. But even more important as a clue to the understanding of Christ will be the Indian experience of Christ: Christ reveals himself also to the Indian who is devoted to Him, and to him, as he tries to grasp the whole importance of Christ with all the means at his disposal, it will be given to recognize and to interpret Christ in an entirely new way.

Mr. Chenchiah's programme must be appreciated in principle. In placing ourselves on the level of Indian thinking—and that means accepting the principal theses of the Vedanta as the hypothesis for research work—we must try to interpret Christ anew. In constantly circling round Christ—which we have defined as *the* theological task—we must take up the standpoint of absolute monism, so as to discover a new side in Him.

This does not imply that we recognize the Vedanta itself as such and that we blend it with the message of Christ. Our objective and aim is Christ alone, and that means Christ as He is proclaimed in the Bible. But just as no western theologian can or should deny his connexion with western philosophies, so must an Indian theologian be equally loyal to

his. We must, indeed, for once, adopt the Vedantist theories and try with their help to penetrate the secret of the Bible, i.e. of Christ.

It may be that the Vedanta provides a better method for the study of the message of Christ than our methods of thinking derived from Greece and the Renaissance. It may be that the Indian way of thinking is much nearer to the Bible's thinking than ours and therefore much better qualified to probe the ultimate depths of the Bible. Should that be so, then it might become evident that a theological method of research enriched and whetted by the Vedanta might help not only the Indian church but also Christianity everywhere.

III

We have now to show concisely how the Vedanta might, indeed, become vitally significant for theological thinking.

In what is written above we have understood the Vedanta as a remorselessly consistent exposition and interpretation of the overwhelming religious experience at its deepest level; of the practical experience of a 'wholly other' substance: the one reality, God (Brahma), differing fundamentally from all appearances. Already this starting point might be of interest for our understanding of the Gospel of Christ; it helps us to ponder, in a systematical and exegetical way, God's absolute transcendence. We learn to understand God as the opposite of all appearances, as the one who can be thought of neither inside nor outside the appearances. Should God substantially be inside or outside the appearances, it would be difficult to see how, as the Creator of things; He could at the same time be different from them. It follows, then, that God must be understood as absolutely different from all appearances. Consequently the possibility remains that God might appear in and under the form of the appearances (and indeed, the fact of this appearing is the beginning of all theology); but substantially there is no possibility of comparing God with the appearances, nor can He be metaphysically connected with them. He is the 'wholly other' one.

If this is so, then—as in the Vedanta—the question arises concerning the perceptibility of God, i.e. concerning the possibility of knowing and describing God's nature. The Vedanta will remind us that a God separated from the appearances is not to be recognized after the fashion of the appearances. Therefore the perception of God must be an event *sui generis*. We must, therefore, re-examine the numerous Biblical texts which speak of the impossibility of seeing God, that is to say, of describing Him in the forms of appearances. We must free ourselves of the delusion that a perfectly described God must be the real God. We may, indeed, describe God in His appearance—and it will be one of the theological tasks to do so. But the nature of God cannot be recognized by contemplating His appearance. One can describe God correctly in every way and to our theological satisfaction and still not know Him.

But now the event *sui generis*, in which the recognition of God takes place, will appear in a new light as Biblical 'faith'. If God differs from all appearances, no other proof is needed to state that He may only be known through Himself. In other words: the person who really perceives God is, as the perceiver, one with the God who perceives Himself. Three Biblical phenomena are useful to explain this fact:

Firstly, the very prominent mysticism, witnessed to in the Bible, which must now be taken seriously. The centre of faith, its strength and reality, is mystical. The 'resting in God', the 'we in God' and 'God in us' and many allusions of this kind need further investigation in connexion with the transcendence of the nature of God.

But secondly, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit thus comes once more into its rightful place. The neglect, so often deplored, of the fact of the Holy Spirit in Protestant theology is closely connected with the Protestant dislike of mysticism. 'Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost?', 'He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit', and other similar statements can only be fully understood when the absolute transcendence of God is fully accepted.

The third phenomenon that must be treated afresh is the often observed absence of a plainly expressed doctrine of God in the Bible. The Bible often speaks of God, but it never describes Him. The man who knows God cannot describe Him; and he needs no description of Him because it will seem to him wholly inadequate. Or, to put it in the classic words of the Upanishads: 'He who knows Him, does not know Him, and he who does not know Him, knows Him'.

That Vedantist thinking may help us to understand God's transcendence well, and with Biblical correctness, may already have become evident by the suggestions given above and will not be seriously contradicted. But the investigation of God's relation to the appearances and of the appearances themselves may be more difficult.

Because of the absolute transcendence of Brahma, the Vedanta finally rejects the ultimate reality of appearances (yet without—it cannot be over-emphasized—depriving the appearances of a provisional pseudo-reality). Before we enumerate the elements of the Biblical message which point in this direction, we must briefly show that this solution of the problem of creation seems to be satisfactory also to Christian theology.

There is no solution of the problem of creation, i.e. of the appearances, if their full reality and God's absolute transcendence of existence are taken for granted. These are questions which again and again also perplex the Indian philosopher. Somewhat simplified, the problem may be formulated as follows: if both the universe and God, who transcends it absolutely, are real—and real in the same way—then the juxtaposition of the two realities is really not conceivable. The temptation lies all too near us to substitute for God's transcendence of substance a transcendence of existence whereby God is thought of as beyond all that is created and as such to be experienced. But that, as Professor Emil Brunner points out, would lead to an extreme deism, a complete elimination of God from the creation, which is neither theologically nor philosophically conceivable. Thus an appearance of God in creation and a recognizing of God within creation become impossible. The other temptation (to which, for instance, Ramanuja succumbed within the Vedanta with his *Vishishtādvaita*) is quite as close at hand, i.e. to teach the conjunction and association of the appearances with God, who transcends them. The appearance would then be real, looked at as the modification of God, who transcends the appearance. But that would be pantheism or theopantism—a solution which, indeed, does not take God's absolute transcendence of substance seriously enough.

If one does not state, simply by affirmation, the full reality both of the appearance and of the absolutely transcendental God and leave aside their relation to each other (which does not satisfy any serious thinker), the only solution remaining is to ascribe to the appearance a reality at least different from God's reality and therefore no full reality. So the appearance is only seemingly real, a provisional reality, which veils the nature of God, who absolutely transcends the appearance. We are then invited to accept the appearance as 'creation', i.e. the sport of God which is simply to be accepted, but before all to become aware of God while being part of it.

Now it is my conviction that this is also the answer of the Bible to the problem of the creation.

Out of the many obvious hints and observations, we select four or five:

Firstly, we are reminded of the significance of God's 'Spirit' in the world of appearances. According to Psalm 104, created beings are only real in that they have God's breath of life. If that breath is taken away, then they again become 'dust'—nothingness. Koheleth, with his consistent exposition of the nothingness of creation, is on entirely Biblical ground, for this same thought of the worthlessness of the creation, if it is apart from the presence of the reality of God, has repeatedly found expression in the Christian teaching of the dependence of the appearances on God. But anything which is in such a way dependent on God can have no final reality.

Secondly, we think of many passages which—in just the same way as the *Lilā* or the *Māyā* conceptions—look at creation as God's plaything, His sport. Psalm 104 goes far in that direction by saying that God has created the huge sea monsters for His play. But God's rest in and with the completed 'good' creation on the seventh day and His walking in the garden of Eden in the cool of the day are also implied here. Finally, we think of the numerous passages which speak of God's glorification through the creation. But the God to whom the appearance is thus brought into relation is now recognized as the absolutely transcendent-one, who does not come into contact with the appearance. Creation only has reality in so far as God Himself is the appearing-one. But that can only be so in a metaphorical, provisional way.

Thirdly, we must refer here to the conviction of the omnipresence of God, as it finds its expression particularly in Psalm 139: everywhere God is found, everywhere He is powerful. Now, if the phenomenal universe is essentially filled with the real presence of the absolutely transcendent God, then the appearance which veils this presence cannot be said to be real.

Fourthly, the pseudo-reality of the appearance corresponds also to the Biblical exposition of history: it is not the appearance and its changes that are important, but the divine reality revealed in the appearance (naturally, again, only in so far as God Himself appears). In short, the Bible's wholly and entirely mythological exposition and view of 'history' is dazzlingly apparent. The changes of the appearances and thus the appearance itself (i.e. among other things, human history) are represented in the Bible as very nearly insignificant; the life element of the Bible is a thoroughly 'mythological' view of things which entirely depreciates the appearance.

Fifthly, a prominent place must also be given to Biblical eschatology as it is summarized in the passage which is often slurred over or overlooked, but still 'mystically formulated', that God 'at the End' will be all in all—i.e. with no more appearance as we know it but with everything put at His feet, without individuality, without independent will or action—that is the end, the aim. Though the appearance may at present possess a certain reality, towards the end it will recede more and more and God will be recognized as the only final reality.

Finally, we must say a word about the Biblical doctrine of sin, which has its origin in the erroneous separation of the appearance from God, in the blasphemous depreciation of God which ascribes divine nature to the creature, a final reality to the appearance.

The Biblical exposition of appearance points distinctly to a devaluation of its reality in favour of the solely 'real' reality of God.

There remains, finally, the central question of Christian theology: God's appearance in the midst of appearances—the fact of 'Jesus Christ'.

First of all, it must be indicated that, to our way of thinking, the conception of Christ as the 'Son', i.e. the 'Word' or the 'image of the invisible God', acquires a new significance. Christ is God turned towards the appearance, appearing in appearances. In Christ the absolutely transcendent God severs Himself from Himself to produce the appearance and to become appearance. Consequently all the elements of Biblical christology become decisively important.

In the first place, the message of Christ's *mediatorship in creation*, as summarized in the *Epistle to the Colossians*: 'All things were created by Him and for Him, and He is *before* all things, and by Him all things consist.' The whole universe of appearances concentrates itself in Him; He is the epitome of appearances, as He is the epitome of the appearing God.

Further, there is the message of the *Incarnation*: that is the miracle of miracles, in so far as the absolutely transcendent God has become, through Jesus Christ, part of the appearance. For this cause the appearance has reality only in relation to the appearing God. It might also be said: 'Through the Incarnation that relation has been fulfilled'.

Yet we must still consider that, in spite of it all, the divine assumption of human nature cannot obtain absolute reality. The New Testament stresses it again and again, for it is not Jesus in the flesh who is the object of our faith and adoration but the *exalted Christ*. The Incarnation has come to an end with the death of the flesh; and the Resurrection—and, as its consummation, the Ascension and messianic domination of Christ (the 'sitting at the right hand of God')—points to the fact that the appearance must and will be overcome. Therefore the Incarnation has never been understood by the Church to be a sanction of the flesh, i.e. it has never mistaken the appearance for the final reality, but sees it, on the contrary, as 'justification', i.e. the salvation of the sinner who is entangled in the appearance.

And therefore, as we do not take the Incarnation to be a final reality, the strange element of Biblical eschatology becomes comprehensible: Christ 'at the End', together with all appearances, will stand completely back: 'And when all things shall be subdued unto Him, then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him, that put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.' It is Christ who reduces the appearance

which is only provisionally endowed with reality to communion and unity with God, who is above all appearance and entirely contrary to it. It is He in whom and by whom the appearance will be reconciled with its eternal foundation, the transcendent God.

Thus I believe that I have shown that the fundamental principles of the Vedanta can, indeed, be rendered fruitful for a new interpretation of christology. It only remains strongly to underline the fact that we have not engaged in Vedantistic philosophy, but in Christian theology. Not only have we striven for nothing but the interpretation of the Bible but also, at the decisive point, for the understanding of the appearance of Christ. The enigma of appearance finds its solution in Him and, at the same time, the perception of God has become reality. He alone is the light, the truth, the life, the good shepherd, who delivers us from the unreality of appearances and unites us with the eternal, unchangeable God. There is salvation in none but Him and no other name is given to man by which to obtain that bliss.

Must we not encourage our Indian brethren to interpret Christ as Vedantists?

(Translated from the German.)

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Theological Commission on Worship

'Disunity is as manifest in the differing ways of worship as it is in disagreements concerning doctrines and institutions. Indeed it is at this point that disunity becomes explicit and the sense of separation most acute.' (Report of the Third World Conference on Faith and Order, Lund, 1952.)

Many of our readers will be aware that the East Asian section of the Theological Commission on Worship, sponsored by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, is to meet for a Conference at Bangalore on March 18th and 19th, 1955. Under the chairmanship of Principal J. R. Chandran, of the United Theological College, the Conference will listen to papers on the Indigenization of Worship and Church Unity in India, read by representatives of different church traditions. Dr. J. R. Nelson, Secretary of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, is expected to attend the Conference, and it is hoped that the discussion on the important problems involved will draw the different churches closer together in mutual understanding of one another.