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The Trinity and Saccidananda

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It has frequently been remarked that all great living religions describe the Supreme Reality as Tri-une or as possessing three principal attributes. I have elsewhere been at pains to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is *the* supreme Christian doctrine. The purpose of this article is to discuss the relationship between the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the Hindu conception of Brahman as Saccidananda, in the light, in particular, of two previous attempts to do so.

In the later Upanisads it is common to find Brahman described as *sat* (reality), *cit* (intelligence) and *ānanda* (bliss), so much so that the *Vedāntasāra* of Sadānanda can open with these words: 'I take refuge in the Self, the Indivisible, the Existence-Knowledge-Bliss (*saccidānanda*) Absolute . . . for the attainment of my cherished desire', and can elsewhere say: 'Reality is Brahman which is without a second and is Existence, Knowledge and Bliss' (*Vedāntasāra* of Sadananda, edited by Swami Nikhilananda, 1 and 33). Thus the single phrase *saccidānanda*, composed of the three words, *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda*, is regarded as the most complete description of Brahman that can be given; and because it has a three-fold form, it is said to express a conception of God similar to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

THE ECONOMIC TRINITY AND SACCIDANANDA

On the surface we may certainly see a similarity, for if we think of the Tri-une God and His relations with the world (that is, the Economic Trinity), Saccidananda is somewhat like our doctrine of the Trinity. For we also believe that God really exists and gives a real existence to the men who live in the world; thus for the Christian to describe God as *sat* is to think of Him as Creator. We Christians also believe in the Wisdom of God and in the Word of God, two ways in which the Bible speaks of the Divine Intelligence in action, and we believe that as Wisdom, as the Word, He gives intelligence and light to mankind (so John 1:9; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16); thus for the Christian, to describe God as *cit*, is to think of the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son or the Word of God, through Whom God enlightens the world and reveals Himself (John 1:1-14). The Bible also associates joy or bliss with the Holy Spirit; thus 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy . . . (Galatians 5:22; cf. Romans 14:17; 1 Thessalon-

ians 1:6; Acts 13:52); thus for Christians to describe God as *ānanda*, is to think of God the Holy Spirit who gives joy and bliss to believers. Thus we can say that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity corresponds roughly to the idea of Saccidananda, in that we can think of God as One who imparts existence, intelligence and bliss to men.

It is in some such way as this that Keshab Chandra Sen, the famous leader of the Brahma Samaj, attempted to relate the doctrine of the Trinity to Saccidananda; since his attempt is remarkable for its spiritual insights as well as its affinities to Christian teaching, it may be as well to consider it more fully at this point. In 1882 Keshab Chandra Sen delivered a lecture on *That Marvellous Mystery—the Trinity*; this lecture, reprinted in *Lectures in India* (pages 455–491) gives us Keshab Chandra Sen's final thoughts on the person of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity (he died in 1884). We shall summarize his teaching about the Holy Trinity largely from his own words:

'Here' (in the realms of eternal silence) 'the Supreme Brahma of the Veda and the Vedanta dwells hid in Himself. Here sleeps mighty Jehovah, with might yet unmanifested . . . If Divinity there was, it was the divinity of darkness and silence.' There is here clearly no idea of the eternal Trinity. Keshab then goes on to describe the creative process in evolutionary terms. 'The silent Divinity began to speak, and His speech, His Word, a continued breathing of force is creation . . . The Hindu too, like the Christian, believes in the continual evolution of the Logos, and its graduated development through ever-advancing stages of life . . . The Logos was the beginning of creation, and its perfection, too, was the Logos—the culmination of humanity in the divine Son. We have arrived at the last link in the series of created organisms. The last expression of creation, so far as we have been able to trace it, is Sonship. The last manifestation of Divinity is Divine Humanity.' But the Sonship of One is not the final word in God's creative purpose, for He wishes that *all* men should become sons; it is here that Keshab finds the work of the Holy Spirit. 'We need only the Holy Spirit to complete the picture of the Trinity . . . We have seen the descent of Divinity on earth through humanity. Now all humanity must be raised up to heaven in order that the purpose of Providence, the redemption of mankind, may be fully achieved. Jesus Christ has shown us the way. But where is the power to follow? . . . The way to do it, that is Christ. The power to do it—that is the Holy Ghost . . . Christ is but an example in history, an objective portraiture of faithful Sonship . . . It is only the Holy Spirit that can convert outward truth into inward purity. It is this Spirit that makes Christ, otherwise a mere historical character, a sanctifying power within us.'

To illustrate his conception of the Trinity, Keshab used the picture of a triangle. 'The apex is the very God Jehovah, the Supreme Brahma of the Vedas. Alone in His eternal glory, He

dwells. From Him comes down the Son in a direct line, an emanation from Divinity. Thus God descends and touches one end of the base of humanity, then running all along the base permeates the world, and then by the power of the Holy Ghost drags up degenerated humanity to Himself. Divinity coming down to humanity is the Son ; Divinity carrying up humanity to heaven is the Holy Ghost . . . God coming down and going up—this is creation, this is salvation. In this plain figure of three lines, you have the solution of a vast problem. The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost ; the Creator, the Exemplar, and the Sanctifier : I am, I love, I save ; the Still God, the Journeying God, the Returning God ; Force, Wisdom, Holiness ; the True, the Good, the Beautiful ; *Sat, Cit, Ananda* ; “ Truth, Intelligence, Joy ” . . . Thus the Trinity of Christian theology corresponds strikingly with the *Saccidananda* of Hinduism.

I have quoted Keshab Chandra Sen fairly fully here because, although there is clearly an inadequate Christology in his teaching, yet it seems to me that there are insights in his teaching which are of interest to us in our approach to the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, we may notice his distinction between the objective example of Christ and the subjective work of the Holy Spirit. Christ is the objective example of perfect sonship, according to Keshab ; he does not go as far as the Christian, for the Christian would say, following Galatians 4:4-6, that our Lord Jesus Christ not only gave us an example of sonship, but made it possible for us to be sons by removing the barrier to sonship which was between us and God our Father. It is the Holy Spirit, according to Keshab, who enables man to follow this example of sonship ; the Christian would quote St. Paul here : ‘ God commendeth His own love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us ’ ; ‘ the love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Ghost which was given unto us ’ ; ‘ ye received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father ’. As Hendry has neatly said in *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology*, ‘ The Spirit is the subjective complement or counterpart of the objective fact of Christ, and it is the function of the Spirit to bring about an inner experience of the outward fact in the hearts of men ’ (page 25).

None the less, although we may recognize that Keshab Chandra Sen had some interesting insights in the doctrine of the Trinity, it seems to me clear that he has not in any real sense related together the Trinity and *Saccidananda*, for there seems to be no real correspondence between all the different triads which he brings together in the passage last quoted ; in what way, for example, can we say that the Creator, the Exemplar and the Sanctifier correspond to *Sat, Cit* and *Ananda* ? We can without much difficulty understand that ‘ I am ’ corresponds to *Sat*, but how does ‘ I love ’ correspond to *Cit*, or ‘ I save ’ to *Ananda* ? The correspondences either do not exist or are too tenuous to be of any real value.

Perhaps even more important than this is the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity as well as the concept of Brahman as Saccidananda are both intended to describe not God's relations with the world, Brahman as *saguna*, but God as He is in Himself, Brahman as *nirguna*. Keshab Chandra Sen appears to accept something like an economic Trinity, but does not admit an essential Trinity, a Trinity within God Himself; 'the true Trinity', he writes, 'is not three Persons, but three functions of the One Person'. To confine either the doctrine of the Trinity or the concept of Brahman as Saccidananda to God's dealings with men reveals an inadequate understanding of both the Trinity and of Saccidananda; for both the Trinity and Saccidananda are attempts to describe God as He is in Himself.

More helpful in this respect is the attempt of a former pupil of Keshab Chandra Sen who became a Roman Catholic, Bhawani Charan Banerji, more familiarly known as Brahmabandhav Upadhyay. He edited a paper called *Sophia* from 1894 to 1900, in various numbers of which he expounded his views as a Christian on the Trinity and other theological subjects; and although these were not acceptable to the Roman Catholic hierarchy, they have value because they are a real attempt to expound Christian doctrine in Vedantic terms. In a note in *Sophia* (June 23, 1900), we find as follows: 'Looked at from the standpoint of relation He (the Supreme Being) is *sagunam*. He is *Isvara*, Creator of heaven and earth, possessing attributes relating Him to created nature. Then He is not only being (*sat*) but Power; He makes other beings to endure. His self-knowledge (*cit*) is then manifested as mind, knowing the universe and making designs for its preservation and perfection. On the relative plane His bliss (*ānandam*) shines as Love and Holiness; here, not only does He repose with complacency upon His Self, but He takes delight in creatures made after His likeness.' Clearly this is a much more valid attempt to relate the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to the Hindu conception of Brahman as Saccidananda, and what he says here could be accepted by many Christian thinkers. But Upadhyay realized that both conceptions are ultimately concerned with God as He is in Himself; and it is to this that we must now turn.

THE ESSENTIAL TRINITY AND SACCIDANANDA

In a previous article in this journal (*The Indian Journal of Theology*, Volume Three, Number Two) I attempted to draw out some of the implications of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and to show that these in fact demand the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and imply that God is not merely One Who acts in three ways among men, but One Who is Three *within* Himself. Since Saccidananda is chosen expressly to describe the Supreme Being, Brahman, as He is in Himself, as *nirguna*, it might be thought that it corresponds closely to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

We shall see how far this is so by looking at the three words separately as we find them in the Upanisads.

Brahman is *sat*, reality. But to call Brahman reality does not help us greatly; for according to Hindu thinking, if we describe the world as *sat*, we must describe Brahman as *asat*, and if we describe the world as *asat*, we must describe Brahman as *sat*. The fact is that when we describe Brahman as *sat*, we are meant to understand either that He is neither *sat* nor *asat* but higher than both (so Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad IV.18), or that He is both *sat* and *asat* and therefore transcends both reality and unreality (so Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad II.2.1; Taittirīya Upaniṣad II.6); thus Brahman can best be described as the reality of reality (*satyasya satya*, as in Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad II.1.20). What we are meant to understand when Brahman is described as *sat* is that He really exists in a way that is beyond human understanding; He is in fact self-existent. Such a conception would of course be acceptable to Christians.

Brahman is *cit*, intelligence. We may notice that it is said that He *is* intelligence, not that He *has* intelligence. The difference is important because to say that Brahman has intelligence implies both that He can exercise His intelligence on other objects, and that He Himself can be the object on which others may exercise their intelligence. Both these ideas would, apparently, be contrary to Hindu thinking which insists that Brahman is pure intelligence. A good illustration of this is to be found in Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad II.4.12, where we read: 'As a lump of salt thrown in water becomes dissolved in water and there would not be any of it to seize forth as it were, but wherever one may take it is salty indeed, so verily this great being, infinite, limitless, consists of nothing but knowledge (*vijñāna*).' This would not, however, be entirely acceptable to Christians, for we believe that God is Three 'Persons' within Himself, and that therefore He can both know Another within Himself and also be Himself the object of Another's knowledge or intelligence. As is well known St. Augustine uses the self's knowledge of itself as a valid illustration of the Trinity; and Upadhyay appears to have the same insight, for he writes (*Sophia*, July 28, 1900): 'How can a Being act upon itself? . . . A self-act, that is, acting upon one's own self, is self-knowledge . . . Then the Self-existent Being acts upon itself by intelligence. Its act is self-knowledge. For it to be is to know. It is related within the term of its own being as subject and object.'

Brahman is *ānanda*, bliss. Here again we have to note that Brahman is said not to *have* bliss, but to *be* bliss. There are many passages where Brahman is described as 'that which transcends hunger and thirst, sorrow and delusion, old age and death' (Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad III.5.1); and such a state of bliss, a state that is of freedom from the disabilities of ordinary human life, may be rightly allowed to the God Whom we Christians worship. But the type of bliss which is Brahman is said to

be far deeper than this for it is a bliss 'without the fruition of happiness'. It is illustrated best by likening it to the state of deep, dreamless sleep, in which the sleeper is conscious of nothing at all and is unable to distinguish between subject and object (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad VII). To describe Brahman as bliss is therefore to say that He exists conscious of nothing outside Himself, unaffected by good or evil, undisturbed by anything whatever, self-sufficient unto Himself. Such a description would hardly be possible for the Christian, yet Upadhyay suggests that with some qualifications there is no reason why we should not describe God as *ānanda*—'supremely happy in His self-colloquy' (*Sophia*, June 23, 1900), a phrase which he expounds later as follows: 'What is bliss? It is the complacent repose of a being upon its own self or its like. The Infinite knows itself and naturally and necessarily takes delight in the objective self projected by thought . . . The Supreme Being reposes with infinite delectation on its perfections and is imitably satisfied with the harmony and beauty of itself' (*Sophia*, July 28, 1900).

It would be presumptuous in one who has no knowledge of Sanskrit and very little knowledge of Hindu thought to pass judgement on such views; he can only remind readers of attempts that have been made in the past to relate the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to the Hindu concept of Brahman as Saccidananda, and hope that others will be able to use the material here supplied, and perhaps baptise Saccidananda into the Christian faith. We may conclude with Upadhyay's Sanskrit Canticle to the Trinity which he published in *Sophia*, October 1898, with the following preface: 'The Sanscrit canticle . . . is an adoration of that ancient Parabrahma, the Supreme Being, whose eternal act finds, according to Catholic Faith, an adequate resultant within His own self, who is not obliged to come in contact with finite beings for the sustenance and satisfaction of His nature. His knowledge is fully satisfied by the cognition of the Logos, the infinite Image of His Being, begotten by Thought, and mirrored in the ocean of His Substance. His love finds the fullest satisfaction in the boundless complacency with which He reposes on His Image and breathes forth the Spirit of Bliss. The canticle sings of the Father-God (Parabrahma), the Logos-God (Sabda-Brahma) and the Spirit-God (Svasita-Brahma).'

I ADORE

The Sat, Chit and Anandam: the highest goal which is despised by worldlings, which is desired by *yogis*:

The supreme, ancient, higher than the highest, full, indivisible, transcendent and immanent:

One having triple interior relationship, holy, unrelated, self-conscious, hard to realize:

The Father, Begetter, the highest Lord, unbegotten, the root-principle of the tree of existence:

The cause of the universe, one who creates intelligently, the preserver of the world :

The increate, infinite Logos or Word, supremely great :

The Image of the Father, one whose form is intelligence, the giver of the highest freedom.

One who proceeds from the union of Sat and Chit, the Blessed Spirit (breath), intense Bliss.

The sanctifier, one whose movements are swift, one who speaks of the Word, the Life-giver.

CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions may be drawn from this brief and slight study of two attempts to relate the doctrine of the Trinity to the concept of Saccidananda ?

1. Any attempts to relate two apparently different concepts can only be done by one who has a thorough knowledge of both Christian and Hindu thought. He who knows Vedantic thought thoroughly but has not grasped the essentials of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity will tend to assume that the latter is concerned only with God in His dealings with men (as Keshab Chandra Sen apparently did); while he who understands thoroughly the Christian doctrine of the Trinity without a good grasp of Hindu thought will tend to assume an equivalence in Hindu and Christian terms which does not exist.

2. It is essential to realize that both the doctrine of the Trinity and the concept of Brahman as Saccidananda are concerned primarily with God as He is in Himself, Brahman as *nirguna*. Ultimately, therefore, the relationship between the two concepts must be determined by the doctrine of God in Christianity and in Hinduism ; how far can a concept which is used to describe an impersonal or super-personal Brahman be used to describe the personal God of Christianity ?

3. If we accept Upadhyay's attempt as valid, it will be clear that the meanings of all three terms, *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda*, as understood in the Upanisads, will have to be modified if they are to be pressed into the service of Christian theology. This is primarily because the doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine of relationships within the Godhead, and not just three aspects of the Godhead ; for example the term *ānanda* when applied to the Trinity must imply relationship (as it does in Upadhyay's canticle) and not merely describe the Absolute.

4. Since for Christians the key to the doctrine of God is to be found in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, it will be clear that modifications in the meaning of the three-fold term Saccidananda will ultimately depend on our understanding of the person of Jesus Christ ; this is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ'.