

incarnate in the world; are human beings born again and again on earth; is the Bible, or the Koran, or the Bhagavad Gītā the Word of God? If what Christianity says in answer to these questions is true, must not what Hinduism says be to a large extent false? If what Buddhism says is true, must not what Islam says be largely false?

Let us begin with the recognition, which is made in all the main religious traditions, that the ultimate divine reality is infinite and as such transcends the grasp of the human mind. God, to use our Christian term, is infinite. He is not a thing, a part of the universe, existing alongside other things; nor is he a being falling under a certain kind. And therefore he cannot be defined or encompassed by human thought. We cannot draw boundaries around his nature and say that he is this and no more. If we could fully define God, describing his inner being and his outer limits, this would not be God. The God whom our minds can penetrate and whom our thoughts can circumnavigate is merely a finite and partial image of God.

From this it follows that the different encounters with the transcendent within the different religious traditions may all be encounters with the one infinite reality; though with partially different and overlapping aspects of that reality. This is a very familiar thought in Indian religious literature. We read, for example, in the ancient Rig-Vedas, dating back to perhaps as much as a thousand years before Christ:

They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuna, and Agni
And also heavenly, beautiful Garutman:
The real is one, though sages name it variously.

We might translate this thought into the terms of the faiths represented today in Britain:

They call it Jahweh, Allah, Krishna, Param
Atma,
And also holy, blessed Trinity:
The real is one, though sages name it
differently.

And in the Bhagavad Gītā the Lord Krishna, the personal God of love, says, "However men approach me, even so do I accept them: for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine."

Again, there is the parable of the blind men and the elephant, said to have been told by the Buddha. An elephant was brought to a group of blind men who had never encountered such an animal before. One felt a leg and reported that an elephant is a great living pillar. Another felt the trunk and reported that an elephant is a great snake. Another felt the tusk and reported that an elephant is like a sharp ploughshare. And so on. And then they all quarrelled together, each claiming that his own account was the truth and therefore all the others false. In fact of course they were all true, but each referring only to one aspect of the total reality and all expressed in very imperfect analogies.

Now the possibility, indeed the probability, that we have seriously to consider is that many different accounts of the divine reality may be true, though all expressed in imperfect human analogies, but that none is "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." May it not be that the different concepts of God, as Jahweh, Allah, Krishna, Param Atma, Holy Trinity, and so on; and likewise the different concepts of the hidden structure of reality, as the eternal emanation of Brahman or as an immense cosmic process culminating in Nirvana, are all images of the divine, each expressing some aspect or range of aspects and yet none by itself fully and exhaustively corresponding to the infinite nature of the ultimate reality?

Two immediate qualifications however to this hypothesis. First, the idea that we are considering is not that any and every conception of God or of the transcendent is valid, still less all equally valid; but that every conception of the divine which has come out of a great revelatory religious experience and has been tested through a long tradition of worship, and has sustained human faith over centuries of time and in millions of lives, is likely to represent a genuine encounter with the divine reality. And second, the parable of the blind men and the elephant is of course only a parable and like most parables it is designed to make one point and must not be pressed as an analogy at other points. The suggestion is not that the different encounters with the divine which lie at the basis of the great religious traditions are responses to different parts of the divine. They are rather encounters from

different historical and cultural standpoints with the same infinite divine reality and as such they lead to differently focused awareness of the reality. The indications of this are most evident in worship and prayer. What is said about God in the theological treatises of the different faiths is indeed often widely different. But it is in prayer that a belief in God comes alive and does its main work. And when we turn from abstract theology to the living stuff of worship we meet again and again the overlap and confluence of faiths.

Here, for example, is a Muslim prayer at the feast of Ramadan:

Praise be to God, Lord of creation, Source of all livelihood, who orders the morning, Lord of majesty and honour, of grace and beneficence. He who is so far that he may not be seen and so near that he witnesses the secret things. Blessed be he and for ever exalted.

And here is a Sikh creed used at the morning prayer:

There is but one God. He is all that is.
He is the Creator of all things and He is all pervasive.
He is without fear and without enmity.
He is timeless, unborn and self-existent.
He is the Enlightener

And can be realised by grace of Himself alone. He was in the beginning; He was in all ages.

The True One is, was, O Nanak, and shall for ever be.

And here again is a verse from the Koran:

To God belongs the praise. Lord of the heavens and Lord of the earth, the Lord of all being. His is the dominion in the heavens and in the earth: he is the Almighty, the All-wise.

Turning now to the Hindu idea of the many incarnations of God, here is a verse from the Rāmāyana:

Seers and sages, saints and hermits, fix on Him their reverent gaze,

And in faint and trembling accents, holy scripture hymns His praise.

He the omnipresent spirit, lord of heaven and earth and hell,

To redeem His people, freely has vouchsafed with men to dwell.

And from the rich literature of devotional song here is a Bhakti hymn of the Vaishnavite branch of Hinduism:

Now all my days with joy I'll fill, full to the brim

With all my heart to Vitthal cling, and only Him.

He will sweep utterly away all dole and care;

And all in sunder shall I rend illusion's snare.

O altogether dear is He, and He alone,

For all my burden He will take to be His own.

Lo, all the sorrow of the world will straight way cease,

And all unending now shall be the reign of peace.

And a Muslim mystical verse:

Love came a guest
Within my breast,
My soul was spread,
Love banqueted.

And finally another Hindu (Vaishnavite) devotional hymn:

O save me, save me, Mightiest, Save me and set me free.

O let the love that fills my breast Cling to thee lovingly.

Grant me to taste how sweet thou art;

Grant me but this, I pray.

And never shall my love depart Or turn from thee away.

Then I thy name shall magnify And tell thy praise abroad,

For very love and gladness I Shall dance before my God.

Such prayers and hymns as these must express, surely, diverse encounters with the same divine reality. These encounters have taken place within