Hinduism In Japan

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In 1974 when I first set foot in Japan, the people of Indian origin living in the country numbered just a few hundred, and these included the staff of the Indian embassy and others who had been residents of the nation since before the Second World War. Despite this, Hinduism was not exactly an unknown religion to the Japanese people since almost all the Japanese had learned something about it in their school curriculum. Nevertheless, their knowledge both of the religion and of the country of its origin were exceedingly meager, to say the least. In fact, I probably would not be exaggerating if I were to say that their knowledge of Hinduism, in the vast majority of the cases, did not extend anywhere beyond certain hazy notions concerning the Hindu caste system, and the so-called 'sacred cow.' Even with regard to these two matters, I found that some of their misconceptions were truly astonishing.

Things have fortunately come a long way since then. Today the Indian population of Japan and particularly in the vicinity of Tokyo has increased by leaps and bounds, and the ordinary Japanese people too has finally come around to realizing that the nation of India had something more to offer them than just the caste system and the sacred cow. Since my return to Tokyo in 1987 after completing my studies in India, I have been in very close touch with not just the Indian but the Bangladeshi community of Tokyo, many of whom are devout Hindus. Every year around the months of October or November the Indian residents assemble together to celebrate Diwali, or the festival of lights, a festival which commemorates the victory of good over evil, and at such gatherings the number of Indians runs into several thousands. The Bangladeshis too celebrate many festivals of their own, and since there are many Hindus in their community, two of their popular feasts are those related to the Hindu goddesses Durga and Sarasvati. Although there do exist some illegal immigrants among them, the Indians and Bangladeshis living in Japan today are for the most part businessmen, company employees, or software engineers. Hailing from diverse corners of the sub-continent, they have entered the country bringing along with them

multiple facets of their local culture, their professional expertise, and what perhaps is most significant of all, their religious beliefs and practices. These multifarious elements have by degrees slowly begun to exert an influence upon the society around them, and Hinduism is increasingly beginning to make its presence felt within the nation of Japan.

Whether Hinduism can be classified as a religion or merely as a way of life is a question that has been debated by scholars all over the world. I personally have no intention whatsoever of contributing to this controversy. My personal opinion however is that more than a religion it is an astounding conglomeration of beliefs, customs, practices, and traditions, some of which have arisen recently, and some of which have been in existence since remotely ancient times. The birth of the Hindu religion itself is far from clear. The earliest scripture of Hinduism is the Rig Veda, one of the four divisions of the ancient Vedic scriptures of the invading Aryans, and yet some Indians prefer to move the origin back even further to the Indus Valley civilization. However, exactly when the Indus Valley civilization or even the Vedic civilization existed, is again a matter of controversy.

It has often been declared that the caste system forms the backbone of Hindu society. The Vedic scriptures however mention only four castes, namely the Brahmins or priests, the Kshatriyas or warriors and princes, the Vaishyas who were traders and merchants, and the Sudras who formed the lower-most category of slaves and serfs. Yet Hindu society today consists of an incredible number and diversity of castes, at times even with no clear hierarchy. Strictly speaking inter-caste marriage is forbidden, and the only means by which a person can enter the caste system is by being born into it. This would imply that no outsider can ever be converted to Hinduism, for becoming a Hindu would mean finding a niche for oneself within the caste system, something that is impossible for an outsider. Also, for many of the Hindu sects in existence today, there is no clear entrance ceremony. You become a member of the sect by associating with them and sharing in their religious activities, though even with this you will never be permitted membership in the caste system. At most perhaps, in the course of time, you and others similar to you may come to be regarded as a separate caste of your own, if there happen to be many people of your kind around.

Hinduism accepts belief in numerous deities, some of whom have been objects of worship for centuries, and some of whom have arisen in recent years. Many of these deities who enjoyed wide popularity in the past have either vanished in the course of these years, or have had their worship greatly reduced. We have for example Manasa the goddess of snakes, Sitala the goddess of small-

pox, and Shashthi the protectress of pregnant women, who have been objects of worship for centuries, yet we also have Santoshi Ma, a goddess whose worship arose just about a couple of decades ago, largely owing to a popular Indian movie. Another newly-born goddess is Ksrama Devata, or the goddess of hard work. She is portrayed as a beautiful woman dressed in a sari and having four arms. In these arms she clasps emblems such as a ploughshare and a cogwheel, and she is surrounded by people resembling doctors, peasants, and scientists, people of both ancient and modern India.

A unique feature of 20th century Hinduism is the popularity of the religious leaders or gurus. Among the gurus who have attained a degree of popularity in Japan are Satya Saibaba, Ammachi, the late Bhagawan Shri Rajneesh (although recently his popularity has greatly declined), and Guru Shri Ravi Shankar. This last guru happens to be a graduate of St. Joseph's college, a Jesuit institution located in the city of Bangalore in south India. He started a meditational movement called the Art of Living which is the fastest growing religious group in India today. All these gurus with their various teachings can be classified under the broad umbrella of Hinduism.

The group that I now like to concentrate upon is the Ramakrishna Mission. The headquarters of this Mission in Japan are located in the city of Zushi in the Kanagawa prefecture, and their chief representative in Japan during the past decade has been an Indian monk from the eastern state of Bengal, namely Swami Medhasananda. My motives for choosing this group are two. First, they are a relatively orthodox set of monks who are extremely well respected both in India and abroad, and second, they cannot be classified as just another sect or cult, such as the groups led by the gurus that I have mentioned above. Besides, they are undoubtedly among the closest friends of our Christian community in India, and I personally have had a very intimate association with them during these past many years.

The thought of Hinduism immediately brings to mind the series of dreadful anti-Christian and anti-Muslim incidents that occurred in India during the past few years. Churches were burned, nuns were attacked, and scores of innocent people such as the Australian missionary the Reverend Graham Staines and his two little sons, were brutally killed. Yet, it must not be forgotten that all such incidents were the work of just a small minority of individuals, usually disgruntled politicians or phony religious leaders. Where religion is concerned the typical Hindu is an exceptionally amicable and tolerant person, and I probably would not be wrong in saying that Hinduism as a religion could well be one of the most

accommodating in the world. Rather than confront and destroy, it has a tendency to welcome and assimilate.

The Ramakrishna Mission was born in 19th century India, and it traces back its origins to two world-renowned Indian thinkers and saints, namely Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and his disciple Swami Vivekananda. Ramakrishna's real name though was Gadadhar, and later he acquired the title 'Paramahamsa,' a word which means 'supreme swan.' Compared to other sages and mystics the uniqueness of Ramakrishna lay in the fact that he alone claimed to have had an experience of Jesus Christ, and today his disciples claim to venerate Jesus Christ just as much as we Christians do.

From his very childhood days Ramakrishna was prone to mystical experiences. He seemed to have evolved an inborn conviction concerning the unity of religions and the oneness of God, and accordingly he developed early a keen desire to experience the Supreme, not only through the paths traced out by the innumerable sects of Hinduism, but by various non-Hindu religions as well. In course of time he claimed to have experienced God by following the path of Islam, and later he developed a wholehearted interest in Christianity, largely owing to the fact that he was witness to the work done by many Christian missionaries in the country. After his experience he described Jesus as 'the great Yogi, who had poured out his life's blood for the salvation of mankind.' His experience has been described as follows.

> One day while walking under the Panchavati,[2] I suddenly noticed a marvelous god-like man. He was of fair complexion, and he was coming towards me, and looking steadfastly at me. As soon as I saw him I knew that he was a foreigner. His long eyes gave a wonderful beauty to his face. I was charmed to see that extraordinary divine expression on that handsome face, and wondered who he could be. Very soon he approached me, and from the depths of my heart suddenly came out the cry, "Jesus Christ! The great Yogi, the loving Son of God, one with the Father, who gave up his heart's blood and put up with endless tortures, in order to deliver man from sorrow and misery.[3]

His disciples affirm that Ramakrishna thereupon entered into a state of uncontainable joy, and then lost consciousness. After this incident, whenever he saw a picture of the Virgin and Child, he would instantly enter into a intense state of rapture. As a result of all these experiences he arrived at the conclusion that God was one, and that whichever religion or sect a person chose to follow, he could still attain the experience of this one God. All religions were

2 A type of tree found in India.

3 *Ramakrishna the Great Master, Volume 1*, p. 339

as branches of the same tree, or as tributaries of the same river. It therefore did not matter which religion one accepted and followed. What mattered was that the seeker followed it with genuineness and love, and that he appreciate the right of the other to follow his own path to deliverance. This is the most important reason why the followers of Ramakrishna do not agree to religious conversion, and this also clarifies the reason why when representing Jesus Christ in their Art, he is usually found seated upon the ground with his eyes shut and arms spread out, as though in profound yogic meditation.

The greatest disciple of Ramakrishna was Swami Vivekananda. Ramakrishna was a mystic who trusted in intuition, but Vivekananda was more of a rationalist and intellectual who believed in reason. Ramakrishna moreover was illiterate, while Vivekananda has been accredited as a world renowned scholar. His real name was Narendranath Datta, and he was born on January 12, 1863, in a relatively comfortable Bengali family. As a child he was reported to have been a good sportsman. He was also good in Indian classical music, and he loved poetry all his life. While in the University he studied the works of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, the philosophers of the French revolution, Kant, Hegel, and Spencer, besides the writings of contemporary Indian thinkers such Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, and Debendranath Tagore, as a result of which he was steadily drawn into a state of near agnosticism. The death of his father however created a spiritual and economic crisis for Vivekananda, and drew him to the very edge of despair. Having nowhere else to go he took refuge in religion, and searched around anxiously for some person who had encountered god, and who could provide him with an answer to his deep-seated needs. In 1882 met Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, and the meeting resulted in a powerful mystical experience which he described as follows:

> My eyes were wide open, and I saw that everything in the room, including the walls themselves, was whirling rapidly around and receding, and at the same time, it seemed to me that my consciousness of self, together with the entire universe, was about to vanish into a vast, all-devouring void. This destruction of my consciousness of self seemed to me to be the same thing as death. I felt that death was right before me, very close. Unable to control myself, I cried out loudly, 'Ah, what are you doing to me? Don't you know I have my parents at home?' When the Master heard this, he gave a loud laugh. Then, touching my chest with his hand, he said, 'All right, let it stop now. It needn't be done all at once. It will happen in its own good time.' To my amazement, this extraordinary vision of mine vanished as suddenly as it had come. I

> returned to my normal state and saw things inside and outside the room standing stationary, as before.[4]

This experience was a turning point in the life of Vivekananda. He became a dedicated follower of Ramakrishna, and was eventually made the leader of his many disciples. He spent six years in the Himalayas in prayer and meditation, and later after the death of Ramakrishna he assumed command of the disciples, and created the Ramakrishna Mission. Though he eventually became the greatest Hindu missionary, it is said that he would often exhort his disciples "to become like Jesus Christ, and to aid in the redemption of the world."

The Parliament of Religions which was held in the city of Chicago from September 11 to 27, 1893, was truly a highlight not only from the standpoints of Christianity and Hinduism, but of other religious traditions as well. More than anything else it motivated a remarkable interest among the Christians of the West towards the religious traditions of the East, causing them to realize that what they had all along regarded as nothing more than fallacy and superstition, was in reality a genuine wellspring of perception and insight. As Merwin-Marie Snell, the president of the scientific section of the Chicago parliament pointed out.

> One of its chief advantages has been in the great lesson which it has taught the Christian World, especially to the people of the United States, namely, that there are other religions more venerable than Christianity, which surpass it in philosophical depth, in spiritual intensity, in independent vigor of thought, and in breadth and sincerity of human sympathy, while not yielding to it a single hair's breadth in ethical beauty and efficiency. Eight great non-Christian religious groups were represented in its deliberations, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Jainism, Confucianism, Shintoism, and Zoroastrianism.[5]

It was at this parliament of religions that Vivekananda set into motion what we may call the primary phases of Hindu Christian dialogue. Addressing his audience as "brothers and sisters of America," he went on to thank the USA in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world, the Vedic order of Sannyasins, and introduced Hinduism as "the mother of religions, a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and acceptance." He then went on to utter a thought-provoking prayer from the Hindu scriptures, namely, "as the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take, through different tendencies, various they may appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."

4 http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/Religions/gurus/Vivek.html

5 http://www.hindunet.org/vivekananda/mm_gv.txt

Margaret Noble or Sister Nivedita as she is commonly known, an Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda, described as follows a vision which her master had reportedly encountered during his return to India from Europe in January 1897.

> One gathers that during his travels in Catholic Europe, he had been startled, like others before him, to find the identity of Christianity with Hinduism in a thousand points of familiar details. The Blessed Sacrament appeared to him to be only an elaboration of the Vedic Prasadam. The priestly tonsure reminded him of the shaven head of the Indian monk; and when he came across a picture of Justinian receiving the Law from two shaven monks, he felt that he had found the origin of the tonsure. He could not but remember that even before Buddhism, India had had monks and nuns, and that Europe had taken her orders from the Thebaid. Hindu ritual had its lights, its incense, and its music. Even the sign of the cross, as he saw it practiced, reminded him of the touching of different parts of the body, in certain kinds of meditation. And the culmination of this series of observations was reached, when he entered some cathedral, and found it furnished with an insufficient number of chairs, and no pews. Then, at last, he was really at home. Henceforth he could not believe that Christianity was foreign."[6]

The charge has sometimes been leveled against Vivekananda that what he communicated was merely Hinduism in the guise of inter-religious concord, and that his much-touted stress on the unity of religions was no more than a sugar-coated version of the fundamentalist Hindu posture. I personally do not acknowledge such a view. Vivekananda was undeniably a Hindu, born and educated within a traditional Hindu society and raised within an orthodox Hindu setting. He could no more dissociate himself from his unique cultural background, than any one of us Christian people could detach ourselves from our own. Hence, it should come as no surprise that although he exhibited in many ways an amazing broadmindedness towards other religions, yet his own frame of thinking remained Hindu to the very end. It has also been charged that although he repeatedly declared himself a dedicated follower of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, yet the teachings that he propounded were for the most part his own and not those of his master. Here again one needs to recall the backgrounds of these two men. Ramakrishna was raised in the countryside of India. He was at heart a mystic who trusted more in intuition and spurned rational arguments, and besides, he was almost totally deficient regarding any kind of western-style education. Vivekananda on the other hand

6 *The Life of Swami Vivekananda,* vol. 1, p. 413

was an educated city-dweller. He was extremely proficient in English, and relatively well acquainted with European thinking. Not only was he in close touch with the thinking of the numerous western philosophers of his time, but he greatly loved rational disputation. Also, during his years abroad, he had ample opportunity of exchanging ideas with an extensive segment of European and American peoples. It should come as no surprise therefore that despite his having declared himself a fervent disciple of Ramakrishna, he nevertheless transmitted the wisdom of his master in his own distinctive way.

Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission with the aim of diffusing to all around the teachings of his master Ramakrishna, and of educating and serving the poor of the world. In 1897 he founded a monastery near Calcutta (called in Sanskrit a matha), and traveled widely, spreading a reformed version of Hinduism. He went to Paris to attend the Congress of the History of Religions, and on his return he devoted a large portion of his time to prayer and meditation. He died on July 4, 1902 of a throat infection, and sometime before dying he washed the hands of all those standing around him, in imitation of Jesus Christ who washed the feet of his disciples before his crucifixion and death. Vivekananda was at that time forty years old, and had spent approximately four years in Europe and America.

Vivekananda believed that Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Ramakrishna, were all incarnations of the one God. He affirmed that "they were great bubbles produced on the cosmic sea," and he went on to insist that "every worm was the brother of the Nazarene." According to him, a time would soon come when "the number of Jesus Christs would be as the bunches of grapes on a vine."[7] In communicating the teachings of Ramakrishna he borrowed the techniques of the Christian missionaries, because it was his intention to create "a European society with India's religion."

The Ramakrishna Mission in Tokyo is generally referred to by the Japanese name of 'Vedanta Kyokai,' which in English would translate as the Vedantic Association. It is a group with which I personally have had a very close relationship for the past several years. As I stated earlier the present head of the Mission in Tokyo is an Indian monk named Swami Medhasananda, a native of the eastern Indian state of Bengal, who was formerly a teacher and an educationist. The Mission in Japan conducts a variety of activities, such as prayer and meditations sessions, lectures on yoga and other subjects related to Indian religion and culture, and the celebration of the principal festivals of different religions, including Christmas. On a few occasions I myself have been requested by them to give their followers talks on both Hindu and Christian spirituality. However, the

7 http://www.ramakrishna.org/inspired_talks_month.htm

most well known activity of the Mission is the celebration every year of the birth of Swami Vivekananda, a celebration which is usually organized in the months of June or July. Here one generally sees a crowd of about 300 people, both Japanese and non-Japanese, who gather together for about half a day to spend a few hours in prayer, meditation, study, and entertainment. On such occasions some outside person is usually invited to deliver a lecture on some topic of interest related to Swami Vivekananda, and on a few occasions I personally have either chaired these sessions myself, or delivered the lectures.

Of the Hindu groups I have worked with I have found the Ramakrishna Mission to be the most tolerant and amenable to dialogue, and I believe that we Christians couldn't do better, than to cooperate wholeheartedly in their efforts towards inter-religious harmony.

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