

## REINCARNATION AND PERSONAL IMMORTALITY

### *The Circle and the End of History in Hinduism*

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To speak and write on such a vast subject is an uphill task, which I am attempting in a short discourse. First of all, I must state that Hinduism is not a monolithic religion like Judaism or Islam. It is difficult to define who a 'Hindu'<sup>1</sup> is, because Hinduism has no fixed doctrines, no prophets, no holy book, and no organised church acceptable to all the believers of that religion. Even the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is not holy text for all Hinduism; Saivism, for instance, does not recognize it as such, though most Hindus hold its ideas in reverence. Broadly speaking, there are three perspectives from which we can deal with the problems in the title: i) the religio-philosophical point of view, as can be gathered from texts like the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, and the texts of the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy and their commentaries; ii) the popular religious perspective, which is derived from the mythological and epic sources, from the *Purāṇas*, local spiritual lore, and the *Itihāsas*, like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, which have the character of spiritual histories (or *Geistesgeschichten*, as Germans would call it); and iii) the Hindu view of life as stated in the legal and social codes of India, the *dharmaśāstras*, as they are called,<sup>2</sup> the most important of which is the *Code of Manu*.

In the succeeding pages, I shall attempt the difficult task of elucidating and synthesizing all of these perspectives, so as to give a total picture of reincarnation, personal immortality, and the destiny of man vis-à-vis the Hindu conception of history. These points of view are more divergent than is generally sup-

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<sup>1</sup> Most Indian thinkers would like to avoid the use of the term 'Hindu,' as there is no such word anywhere in the ancient literature of India. It possibly came into vogue during the Islamic conquest of India, when the invaders called the local inhabitants 'Hindus' (originating from the river Indus, Sanskrit '*Sindhu*'). For want of a better term, I shall use the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' to denote the traditional peoples and doctrines in vogue in the subcontinent of India.

<sup>2</sup> The *dharmaśāstras* have been challenged by many Indians today, especially by the so-called *dalits*, the ex-untouchables, who under the constitution of India have been fully integrated into Indian society, and even given preferential treatment. But the *dharmaśāstras* have enjoyed a high and authoritative position, not only in India, but in several parts of South-Asia, such as Thailand and Cambodia (where they are called '*Thammasat*' – see George Coedès, *Les États Hindouises d'Indochine et d'Indonesie*, Paris, 1964).

posed and, therefore, it is difficult to reconcile philosophical Hinduism with popular Hinduism based on the *Purāṇas*.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, we shall take into consideration all three of these perspectives in our exposition and discussion of the three problems stated above.

### 1. The Problem of Rebirth according to Different Schools of Indian Philosophy

Most religions of the world, including Hinduism and Buddhism, accept the belief that life in this world suffers from serious deficiencies and that the fullness of a spiritual being can be realized only in the transcendental realm. In popular Hinduism, we find the conceptions of heaven and hell, to which one goes after death, the exact destination being determined by the deeds one has performed in the present life. Yama is the god of death and he appears invisibly when one's time to die has come. In Indian mythology, we have the story of Sāvitrī, who, upon the death of her husband Satyavān, successfully enters into a dialogue with Yama to bring back the soul of her husband, which had been snatched away. Another story of conquest of Yama or the god of death appears in the philosophical text *Kaṭhōpaniṣad*, where the youth Naciketa enters into a dialogue with Yama, in order to learn the secret of life and death.<sup>4</sup> The souls thus transported to heaven (*svarga*) or hell (*naraka*) enjoy the merits and demerits of their good or bad actions in the earthly world by happiness or by torture by demons and are reborn in this world, taking on another body. This is a popular belief based on mythology, which in many respects is akin to the Greek mythology of death and the survival of the soul after death.

Most of the philosophical systems deviate from the view of popular Hinduism, which owes its origin to the accounts in various *Purāṇas*. The Mimāṃsā system, however, does talk of accumulation of merit (*puṇya*) and sins (*pāpa*), and the resultant reward or punishment in the world hereafter, and also rejects the hypothesis of God or any divine agency, which ensures such results. It instead posits a transcendental law, *karma*, which by its unseen force (*apūrva*) operates in ensuring the results of men's actions. Its entire philosophy is devoted to investigation into the nature of *dharma*, which in the context of Mimāṃsā refers only to ritualistic performance, for which the interpretation of the vedic passages is important. The law of *karma* determines the fruit of our actions, and God is not necessary; the Mimāṃsā system is openly atheistic, and subordinates

<sup>3</sup> There are eighteen *Purāṇas* (or mythological texts): *Brahma*, *Padma*, *Viṣṇu*, *Śiva*, *Bhāgavata*, *Nārada*, *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Agni*, *Bhaviṣya*, *Brahmavaivarta*, *Linga*, *Varāha*, *Skandha*, *Vāmana*, *Kūrma*, *Matsya*, *Garuḍa*, and *Brahmāṇḍa*. See V. Mani, *Puranic Encyclopaedia* (Delhi, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> *Kaṭhōpaniṣad*, Chaps. 1-4. For translation and commentary, see S. Radhakrishnan, *Principal Upanishads* (London, 1953) and R. E. Hume, *Thirteen Principal Upanishads* (Oxford, 1949).

the human being to the dictates of the eternal law of *karma*. All systems of Indian philosophy (excluding the materialistic Cārvāka, but including Canonical Buddhism and Jainism) recognize the law of karma, even if not in the rigid form of the Mimāṃsā system. In the philosophy of Śaṅkara, the main exponent of Advaita Vedānta, the non-dualistic idealism which is as claimed by it, is an all-inclusive philosophy, in the sense that it includes but transcends all other systems. *Karma* is an empirical phenomenon and has to be transcended by *jñāna*, or knowledge and wisdom. Seen empirically, *karma* binds us to the world by its apparently inescapable force; but we can escape from bondage to *karma* and the empirical world by transcending it. One of the many ways of attaining this transcendence is the performance of duty, without any attachment to the empirical humdrum world, which can only lead to rebirth over and over again. Most human beings are in bondage to this world (called *samsāra*), because they do not realize the need for spiritual fulfilment, which has greater – inestimably greater – value than that of the ordinary empirical life of action and reaction, of rewards and punishments, of sensuous and materialistic enjoyment and bodily suffering. Śaṅkara calls liberation from this state *mokṣa* or *mukti*. It is also somewhat akin to the Mahāyānist ideal of *nirvāṇa*, though in the latter case philosophers desist from any verbal explanation or even description of what it is. In Advaita Vedānta, liberation is realization of the hidden higher Self, which is possible only for specially disciplined beings.<sup>5</sup>

Rāmānuja's Vedānta (which is called Viśiṣṭādvaita, a theistic form of monism) does not agree with Śaṅkara's point of view, and puts forth devotion (*bhakti*) and self-surrender to God. Rāmānuja's form of Vaiṣṇavism (called 'Śrīvaiṣṇavism') reconciles itself very consistently with the popular beliefs regarding rebirth, the conception of liberated souls attaining happiness in heaven and evil-doers being tormented in hell, etc. Souls can attain Godhead by intense devotion and performance of the rituals prescribed by the *Vedas*. The Vaiṣṇavaite (like the Śaivaite) literature is well-known for some of the finest religious poems in Tamil, rich in depth and symbolism, being highly emotive.<sup>6</sup>

Like Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and ten other Vedānta philosophers also wrote commentaries on the three basic texts of the Vedānta: the *Brahmā-Sūtras* of Bādarāyaṇa, the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. In my view, Rāmānuja is fairer to the theistic point of view of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* than Śaṅkara – the

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<sup>5</sup> Śaṅkara's distinction between the empirical (*vyāvahārika*) and the transcendental (*pāramārthika*) is sometimes compared to the same kind of distinction in Kant and German idealism and is also to be found in Nagarjuna, the Mahāyāna-Buddhist philosopher, who preceded Śaṅkara by 400 years. Śaṅkara seems to affirm that *jñāna* or higher wisdom is not for ordinary mortals, who are condemned to rebirth, but meant for practice by a few gifted men. *Karma* (action) and *bhakti* (religious devotion), on the other hand, can be practised by all.

<sup>6</sup> See translations by G. E. Phillips, *Hymns of the Tamil Saivites* (Calcutta, 1921) and A. K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva* (Baltimore, 1973).

latter being more metaphysical, places more stress on *jñāna* or philosophical wisdom. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* itself attempts to reconcile all the three of the paths to liberation, namely *jñāna*, *karma* (moral and ritualistic action), and *bhakti* (devotion to God).<sup>7</sup> According to Śaṅkara, the highest reality is not God, but a metaphysical Absolute called Brahman, which is better expressed by the neuter 'It' than by the masculine 'He.' The latter is not accessible to ordinary people in everyday life, as it cannot be realized either by sense perception or by reason. The higher reality, the Brahman, is a spiritual being of the nature of consciousness, and is hidden within us. Because of ignorance (*avidyā*), we fail to understand that the world we live in is phenomenal and is merely an appearance (*Māyā*). Theology cannot but distinguish between God and the souls, between God and the world, and between souls and the world; dualism is innate to the religious point of view and stands in the way of a monistic understanding of reality.

This in brief is the point of view of the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara. Rebirth, transmigration of souls, etc. are but phenomenal and do not belong to the realm of the Absolute, which is one and is identical with universal consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

One should not get the impression that the whole of Hinduism and its philosophy are represented by Advaita Vedānta, or for that matter by the whole of the Vedānta, which is but one school of thought among the many within Hinduism. It is admitted, however, that most of the Indian thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Radhakrishnan, and K. C. Bhattacharya were influenced by Śaṅkara's Vedānta.

Vedānta has so dominated Hindu thinking for the last 150 years that one would think that it is synonymous with Hinduism; this being the case, one has lost sight of the fact that non-metaphysical Hinduism forms the core of popular Hinduism, and the sources for this belief have to be found in *Purāṇas*, *Itihāsas*, and *Dharmśāstras*. However, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* synthesizes the Vedānta, Sāṃkhya-Yoga, and popular Hinduism based on the *Purāṇas* and *Itihāsas*, which form the core of Indian spiritual history (or *Geistesgeschichte*, there being no exact equivalent in English for this unique term). The *Bhagavad-Gītā* is held with great reverence by most Hindus (exceptions being the Śaivaites). Therefore, we shall give emphasis to it in our discussion of the three problems stated at the beginning.

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<sup>7</sup> *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Ch. XII.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Deussen, who did pioneering work in interpreting the Vedānta in Germany, attempts to reconcile it with Hegelianism. Friedrich Max Müller also gave more importance to the Vedānta. See P. Deussen, *The System of the Vedānta*, trans. C. Johnson (Chicago, 1912); and F. M. Müller, *Vedānta Philosophy* (Calcutta, 1954 (reprint)).

## 2. The Points of View of Various Systems of Indian Philosophy regarding Rebirth and Liberation, as Distinguished from the Religious Perspective

Sāmkhya, Yoga, and the Advaita Vedānta are the three systems of Indian philosophy, which can be said to complement each other in their philosophical quest for truth and reality. The Sāmkhya and Yoga systems have contributed a great deal towards developing a philosophy of the human mind and the self. Of course, the concept of *puruṣa* in Sāmkhya is not the same as that of *ātman* of the Vedānta, although one definition of the Sāmkhya is that it is the spiritual knowledge of the pure self.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, however, Sāmkhya speaks of the plurality of *puruṣas* or selves. But Sāmkhya is silent about the existence or non-existence of God. Its investigations stop with the discovery of the pure self and its modes. By implication, it is atheistic, but at the same time spiritualistic. But the *Yoga-Sūtras* do mention God (Īśvara) at two places (1.23 and 1.25).<sup>10</sup> But Sāmkhya and Yoga agree on the nature of human bondage. Bondage is only of an illusory nature; we become deluded because we are bound to nature and are prevented by it from attaining purity of the self. For Advaita, however, bondage is real and rebirth and transmigration through several bodies is also something from which we must be liberated. These are some of the basic differences between Sāmkhya and Yoga on the one hand, and Advaita Vedānta on the other.

In spite of these differences, there is also some agreement: 1) The world is the stage where successive births of human beings takes place, each human being passing through several bodies, including those of animals. 2) The law of *karma* operates, determining in what body the human being, or rather his soul, manifests itself. This law ensures that the soul, in the case of good deeds in the present life, takes on the body of a higher being in the following life. (This explains why there is such a wide gulf in the status of human beings in this world, and why some people suffer more than others.) 3) Liberation means, according to some schools of thought, that we have to escape this rigid application of the law of *karma*, and escape from the chain of repeated transmigration of our souls. 4) It is not clear from the texts of various systems of philosophy (except the *Bhagavad-Gītā*) what role God plays in the operation of the law of *karma*. The moral argument for the existence of God, which we find in the philosophy of Kant in the West, is also to be found in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, where God is the arbiter of human destiny in this life and in the life hereafter.

No particular school of Indian philosophy and religion, however, can be cited as representative of the 'Hindu' tradition. And with regard to the questions about reincarnation, the immortality of the soul, and ultimate human destiny,

<sup>9</sup> "Suddhātma-tattvavijñānam Sāmkhyam iti abhidhīyate" (Aniruddha).

<sup>10</sup> Vacaspati Mishra, one of the most versatile scholars of Ancient India (c. 11th century A.D.), has tried to reconcile the claims of these three systems in his famous work *Tattvavaisaradi*. Also see Gaspar M. Koelman, *Pātanjala Yoga* (Poona: Papal Athenaeum, no date given).

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