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THE CHRISTIAN AND HINDU CONCEPTIONS OF SIN

BY JOHN McKENZIE

IN attempting to write about the Hindu conception of sin and compare it with the Christian conception we are faced by the difficulty that while the Christian point of view is held by Christians with some degree of unanimity, in Hinduism there is far less in the way of a body of doctrine that is generally accepted. Within the Christian Church there is, no doubt, considerable diversity in matters of belief regarding many things, sin included. Yet the things regarding which Christians agree are infinitely more numerous and more fundamental than the things regarding which they differ. The same can hardly be claimed for Hinduism. There are, it is true, beliefs and points of view that are held in common by most Hindus, but a man's claim to be called a Hindu does not depend in any way on what he believes. So, in thinking of the Hindu conception of sin we have to remember that, while it is possible to discover certain great central ideas that Hindu thinkers have conceived regarding sin, and while it is possible consequently to make certain general state-

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ments regarding the Hindu conception of sin, in an exhaustive discussion most of these general statements would have to be qualified or explained. The present article aims not at supplying an exhaustive exposition of Hindu conceptions of sin, but at setting forth some of the thoughts that in the Hindu mind have been most determinative of its attitude towards sin, and comparing them with the corresponding Christian thoughts.

One point is of importance at the outset. In Christianity sin fulfils a determining function which it does not fulfil in Hinduism. To the Christian, salvation means, in its negative aspect, salvation from sin, and it is a sense of sin that has chiefly driven men and women to seek God. To the Hindu, on the other hand, the fundamental evil has seemed to be not sin, but individual existence, and it is from this that deliverance has been sought. We shall have more to say about this later, but it is well that it should be held clearly in view at the outset, for it is of fundamental importance. The longing for God and for deliverance often finds expression in Hindu literature in words that the Christian seeker might use, but which, as used by the Hindu, have a significance considerably different from what they would have if used by the Christian. There are many passages in the literature of Hinduism, in some of the Upanishads for example, that have been regarded by some readers as breathing a spirit as pure as that found in the most beautiful Christian literature. There is no need to depreciate such passages, but it is necessary that we should be clear that in many of them the aspirations expressed are of a kind very different from those of the Christian saint or seeker, or, at best, that they represent his aspirations only very incompletely. Christianity is an ethical religion; in it religion and moral goodness are inseparably bound up together. Hinduism, on the other hand, in spite of much high moral teaching to be found in its literature, is not essentially an ethical religion.

Further, even in quarters where the highest good has not been conceived as deliverance from individual existence, the bondage from which men have sought deliverance in religion has still been the bondage of the world. Take, for example, the account that Devendranath Tagore gives of the awakening of his soul to the light of God. On the night before his grandmother's death he was seated at the burning-ghat on a coarse mat, when he heard them singing the Holy Name to her: 'Will such a day ever come, that while uttering the name of Hari, life will leave me?'

The sounds reached my ears faintly, borne on the night wind; at this opportune moment a strange sense of the unreality of all things suddenly entered my mind. I was as if no longer the same man. A strong aversion to wealth arose within me. The coarse bamboo mat on which I sat seemed to be my fitting seat, carpets and costly spreadings seemed hateful, in my mind was awakened a joy unfelt before. . . . Up to this time I had been plunged in a life of luxury and pleasure. I had never sought after spiritual truths. What was religion? What was God? I knew nothing, had learnt nothing. My mind could scarcely contain the unworldly joy, so simple and natural, which I experienced at the burning-ghat.¹

It has been claimed that we have parallels to this in Christian experience, for example in the conversion of St Francis of Assisi. Whether or not these are true parallels we need not stop now to inquire. The fact remains that we have in Devendranath's experience something that is typical of the Hindu attitude to religion, while in the case of the awakening of the soul of one who has been trained in a Christian land there is usually some sense not only of the unsatisfyingness of the world, but of positive failure or transgression in his own life. At a gathering of Christian students held recently, two students who had been converted from Hinduism to Christianity gave accounts of the circumstances under which they had been led to Christ. Both spoke of the great sense of sin under which they lived for a time before their conversion. Nearly every missionary present referred afterwards to this

¹ *Autobiography of Devendranath Tagore*, pp. 38, 39.

as something very unusual, saying that in their dealings with the people they had seldom found any deep sense of sin prior to conversion, its development usually depending on a deepening Christian experience. With the Hindu, speaking generally, religion is not grounded in the sense of the need of deliverance from sin; and in this respect the Hindu point of view is widely removed from the Christian.

The significance of this will become clearer if we consider the connotation of the term 'sin' as used by the Christian. There is no people in the world that does not recognize some sort of a distinction between right and wrong. But this distinction may be made from various points of view. We speak of crime, vice, evil and sin, and each of these terms is applied to wrong-doing as regarded from a different point of view. When the Christian uses the term 'sin' we understand him to speak of wrong-doing viewed in the aspect of its relation to God. Sin means to him essentially rebellion against God. A man may say, 'I have done wrong,' meaning thereby that he has committed an act that has in some way broken the moral order, without his ever thinking of the fundamental meaning of that order; it may be to him nothing more than a merely conventional order. But when a Christian says, 'I have sinned,' his words involve recognition of the moral order as grounded in the will and nature of God. Distinctions may be drawn between degrees of sin, but these are drawn by men discussing the situation abstractly. He who says of himself, 'I have sinned,' means when he so speaks that knowing the will of God he has done his own will, and so set the will of God at naught. Further, the rebellion against God that is signified when we speak of sin is rebellion not simply against the commands of God, but against God Himself. When we speak of the will of God, we think of it not as gathered up in a code of inscrutable commandments, but as the expression of a nature which is holy. Man is made in

the image of God and for fellowship with God, and he who sins rebels against this allegiance to God which is the end of his being. 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' The holiness of God is the motive to human holiness.

The Hindu point of view is in marked contrast to this. We have, it is true, in some of the Hindu sacred writings the idea of God as the moral governor of the universe. This is most marked in the Rig Veda, and there especially in hymns addressed to the god Varuṇa. In some hymns he is addressed as if he were the One God, omnipotent, and invested with supreme moral authority. He is spoken of as the guardian of *rita*, a term which is applied to the cosmic and moral order, as well as to correct worship of the gods. He knows all the doings of men, so that one cannot even wink without him. He sends forth his spies who watch the doings of men. By men's sins his wrath is kindled, and he binds fetters on the sinners. It is above all to Varuṇa that prayer for release from sin is made. Altogether we seem to have in this god one who does not fall far short of the Hebrew conception of God as the moral ruler of the universe. And indeed the Aryans were here on the way to a truly ethical conception of God. Varuṇa was the god who saw into men's hearts, and who hated and punished sin, and there is no hymn addressed to him in which prayer is not made for the forgiveness of sin. But he is so represented only in the Rig Veda, and chiefly in the earlier books. In the Atharva Veda and other later Vedic works 'he passes into the status of a god of night, who is both hostile and cruel.'¹ In the Rig Veda we do seem to have, in the conception of Varuṇa, God represented as a Holy Being against whose holiness men in their sinning rebelled. But the functions attributed to Varuṇa were also attributed to other gods; and there were other gods of lower character who were forgotten only while Varuṇa was being worshipped, but who

were still there, and Varuṇa in course of time was dragged down to their level. In any case polytheism does not admit of a view of sin in which sin is thought of as rebellion against what is most essential in the nature of God ; and when there are gods such as Indra who are celebrated for actions which are positively immoral the difficulties in the way of a satisfactory conception of sin become infinitely greater.

There have not been wanting in the history of Indian religion other efforts after a conception of God as one and personal, and as the moral ruler of the universe. The history of Indian theism is a long and interesting one. But it has always been difficult for the Hindu mind clearly to grasp the idea of God as essentially holy, with a holiness that is sinned against in the sin of men. Indian theism has always tended to slip back into pantheism, and the idea of God's transcendent holiness, which in Hebrew religion was the ground of the highest pre-Christian conception of moral duty, has seldom been clearly realized even by the most advanced Hindu thinkers. The union that has been sought with God has been not primarily ethical but emotional. For example, we find in a life of Rāmānuja a woman praised for committing a revolting sin in order to secure the means of entertaining Rāmānuja. 'For God Himself has said, "If for my sake thou sinnest, it becometh merit ; all merit without reference to me becometh sin."'¹ And we find the Marāṭha poet, Tukarām, with all his strong ethical sense, using words such as these, 'Unholy deeds we should commit, if they bring the possession of God ; proper actions we should give up, if they sever us from Him.'²

So far the results of our inquiry have been very largely negative. We have now to inquire more positively what sin means to the Hindu. The currents of religious and philosophical thought in India have been many and

¹ Govindacharya, *Life of Rāmānuja*, p. 117.

² *The Poems of Tukarām*, translated by Fraser and Marathe, vol. i, p. 183.

diverse, but perhaps it may be fairly claimed that two, very different in character though seldom if ever completely separated from each other, have been significant above all others. It will be necessary to glance briefly at each of these in order that we may be able to understand the meaning of sin to the typical Hindu.

Firstly, we have in the Upaniṣhads certain large principles enunciated that have become part of the philosophy of the great mass not only of the educated but of the common people of India. There are many contradictions in the Upaniṣhads, and in them a basis has been found for very divergent doctrines, but there are certain ideas that are specially characteristic. The most significant is that of the identity of the human spirit with the world-spirit. The classical expression of this idea is found in the Chāndogya Upaniṣhad in the words addressed to Śvetaketu by his father, 'Thou, O Śvetaketu, art it,'¹ which another quotation from the same Upaniṣhad will help to make plain, 'He is my self within the heart, smaller than a corn of rice, smaller than a corn of barley, smaller than a mustard seed, smaller than a canary seed or the kernel of a canary seed. He is also my self within the heart, greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than heaven, greater than all these worlds.'² The individual soul, overcome by ignorance, imagines that it possesses an existence really individual. It sees things in their diversity, it distinguishes between me and thee. So long as the soul is beset by such ignorance, the individual is entangled in meshes from which he cannot free himself. It is in such attachment to finite things that the essential evil that oppresses men consists. For it is an attachment that does not end with death. At death the individual enters upon a new life, the form of which is determined by that which he has lived. The highest good is deliverance from this round of finite existence and realization of the unity of the *Jivātman* or individual soul with the *Paramāt-*

¹ *Chāndogya Upaniṣhad*, vi, 8. 7.

² *Ibid.* iii, 14. 3.

man or supreme soul. This union obviously cannot be attained by works. Even good deeds cannot lead to deliverance, for the existence of desire and its consequent activity involve attachment. Nevertheless all deeds are not equally valueless. There are works through which the soul is helped on its way towards the stage when it can attain final deliverance. Knowledge of the identity of the individual self with the supreme self is the means through which this deliverance is attained. This is a very hasty account of the central doctrine of the Upanishads, and one that to be accurate would have to be qualified and supplemented at every point. Yet it is given thus baldly because it is a doctrine that has to an extraordinary degree influenced Hindu thought.

The second current of thought to which it is necessary to draw attention is, as has been said, of a very different character. All down through the history of Indian religion we find alongside and mingling with the deepest philosophical speculation a great deal of the crudest superstition. Sacrifice, ritual, charms and incantations, magic in all its forms, all the devices whereby through physical tricks and stratagems spiritual results may be attained—these have been studied and practised by the people of India as by few other peoples in the world. As the Upanishads are the fountain head from which the current of philosophical thought has flowed, so the Atharva Veda is, if not the fountain head, the first great pool in the stream of Indian magical thought. These two streams of thought have never been far asunder. Even in the Upanishads we find many passages that are utterly puerile in the superstition they express, while even amid the gross absurdities of the magic of the Atharva Veda we find occasional passages of real philosophical depth.

It may be claimed that these two currents of thought have influenced more powerfully than any others the religious thinking of Hindus. Just as in Christian countries certain Christian ideas belong to the very air we breathe,

so in India popular thinking is carried on in an atmosphere impregnated with these philosophical and magical ideas. Let us look at some of the ways in which their influence is seen on the Hindu conception of sin.

We may begin with one aspect of Hindu thinking regarding sin in which it allies itself with the thinking of primitive peoples. Dewey and Tufts speak of two alternatives in the judgment of good and evil. These may be regarded as having moral significance, that is, as having a voluntary basis or origin. Or they may be considered as substantial properties of things, as a sort of essence diffused through them, or as a kind of force resident in them, in virtue of which persons and things are noxious or helpful, malevolent or kindly.¹ The latter alternative exactly describes not the Hindu conception of good and evil as a whole, but an element in it, to which reference has just been made, that has entered into the popular conception, and that is to be found at least in many of the Hindu sacred writings. The *Rig Veda* is comparatively free of this element, but the *Atharva Veda* is full of it almost to the exclusion of higher thoughts about good and evil. Sin there is barely more than physical. Take, for example, the following passage chosen almost at random :

O Soma-and-Rudra, eject asunder the disease that has entered our household ; drive far to a distance perdition ; any committed sin put away from us.

O Soma-and-Rudra, do ye put all these remedies in our bodies ; untie, loosen from us what committed sin may be bound in our bodies.²

Bloomfield remarks regarding the conception of sin in the *Atharva Veda*, that 'it exists as an independent morbid substance or entity which may fasten itself upon man without his conscious participation, or at least without his choice or sanction. In this sense sin or evil . . . assumes the character of an almost physical deficiency or disease. Sin too is transferable from man to man, from father to

¹ Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, p. 457.

² *Atharva Veda*, Lanman's Translation, vii, 42.

son, yea from gods to men.¹ It would carry us too far afield if we were to attempt to show how such ideas have persisted in Hindu thought and how they enter into the very essence of Hindu ritual. It will perhaps be sufficient to point to the place that they have in the minds of the people at the present day. Every one who knows anything of Hinduism knows something of the many mechanical devices that are resorted to for the removal of moral defilement, of the place that bathing, for example, occupies in religious ritual, especially bathing in sacred rivers. There have not been wanting protests against this identification of the moral and the physical. We have such passages as these in Tukarām's poems :

What hast thou done by going to a holy river? Thou hast only outwardly washed thy skin. In what way has the interior been purified?

Again :

When the auspicious juncture of Simhastha comes, it brings fortune only to barbers and priests. There are crores of sins in the heart, but externally a man shaves the hair on the head and the beard. What has been shaved off has disappeared. Tell me what else has changed. The vicious habits are not changed, which might be regarded as a mark of the destruction of sins.²

Nevertheless these physical conceptions of sin have persisted in India, not only among the common people but among many of the educated classes. Belief in the possibility of the removal of moral stains through physical means is widespread, and breaches of ritual rules are widely regarded as involving much deeper sin than the infliction of injury upon one's fellow-men.

It is hardly necessary to point out that here we have an attitude to sin that is foreign to the Christian way of thinking. Hindus are fond of arguing that in Christian sacraments and observances there is nothing fundamentally different from what is practised in Hinduism. There are modern Hindu writers who seek to impress this by applying

¹ Bloomfield, *Atharva Veda*, p. 83.

² Translated by Bhandarkar, *Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism*, pp. 94, 95.

nearly the full range of Christian terminology to Hindu practices and conceptions. But there is an essential difference between the two points of view. It may be said that what is fundamental in the Christian religion is the principle that God is love. The relation between the believer and God is a personal one—a relation of love. Such a personal relationship cannot be disturbed by any merely physical event—an error in ritual, for example. In the Christian religion the physical aspect of religious observances is of significance only as the expression of spiritual realities. In Hinduism, on the other hand, there is much in ritual and in the significance that is attached to its right performance that is in contradiction to the idea that love is the overruling power in the universe; for the operation of spiritual forces can be thwarted by forces that are merely physical.

All through the history of Hinduism there have been some who like Tukarām have risen above this physical conception of sin. In the Sūtras of Gautama, for example, we find this statement :

He that has the forty sacraments, but has not the eight good qualities [i.e. mercy, forbearance, freedom from envy, purity, calmness, correct behaviour, freedom from greed and from covetousness] enters not into union with Brahmā. But he that has only a part of the forty sacraments and has the eight good qualities enters into union with Brahmā, and into the heaven of Brahmā.

The question naturally arises whether the content of the Hindu conception of sin when thus stripped of what is purely physical is identical with that of the Christian conception. Many writers have hastily assumed that it is.

This raises a question of some importance. The Christian believes in the reality of the soul as an individual existence; he believes that it is essentially eternal. The typical Hindu believes that the distinction of me and thee is the outcome of ignorance. To the Christian the world is real, not in the sense that he has here 'a continuing city,' but in the sense that God is

manifested in it, and that man can realize God's purposes concerning him in it. To the typical Hindu the world does not reveal God but is a veil concealing Him. The attitude of the Hindu mind to sin is closely connected with this. The Christian believes that God's will is revealed in all the variety of relationships into which he enters in the world, and that in failing to fulfil or in perverting these relationships he rebels against the will of God, and so commits sin. The Christian ideal is not withdrawal from the world, but the carrying out of the purposes of God in the world. To the Hindu on the other hand the world has seemed to be evil, and Hindu ethics is consequently to a very large extent negative in character. The problem is, in one aspect of it, not how the individual may attain a positive good but how negatively he may be least entangled with the world. Starting from very different positions the Christian and the Hindu arrive at ideas of the content of sin that to the superficial observer seem to be very little removed from each other. Take the passage just quoted from Gautama, or take the following statement said to have been made by a king :

In my kingdom there is no thief, no miser, no drunkard, no man without an altar in his house, no ignorant person, no adulterer, much less an adulteress.

We have here statements that with very slight changes might have been made by Christians. But when we go further in our study of the Hindu point of view, we find that while actions are condemned that are opposed to the moral order as the Christian regards it, there are other actions regarding which there is no such agreement. When we turn to a passage like Matthew xxv, 42-3, we find something that the typical Hindu has not grasped. He has not realized that any sin is involved in failing to minister to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner. It must not be supposed that Hindus have been lacking in qualities of kindness and sympathy, or that these have never been

regarded as duties. But the inevitable outcome of Hindu thought has been the glorification of passivity. According to one passage of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, more characteristic of Hindu thought generally than of that work in particular, the good man is one

to whom pain and pleasure are alike; who abides in himself; to whom clods, stones or gold are alike; to whom things sweet and things not sweet are equal; who is wise; to whom blame and praise of himself are equal; who is indifferent to honour and dishonour, indifferent to the interests of friend or foe; who renounces all undertakings—he is said to have passed beyond the moods.¹

The same thing is revealed by the thought and practice of the people. The sins that are most condemned are not such sins as neglect of duty, breach of faith and the like, but pride, anger, sensuality, worldliness and such other sins as involve loss of self-control or attachment of the self to the things of the world.² And these, it will now be seen, are condemned not so much as implying rebellion against God or injury to one's fellow-men, but as hindering the soul from attaining deliverance. In sinning it is against one's self that one chiefly sins.

Much of what has been said will be gathered up and simplified when we pass on to consider the Hindu conception of forgiveness. This has been touched on already, but it is necessary to consider it somewhat more closely. The Christian views sin as something that comes between him and God, marring fellowship. Sin to him does not mean a series of isolated acts of greater or less consequence, but personal rebellion against the God of love. Sin has accordingly infinite implications. Whatever view we take of the doctrine of eternal punishment, the rationale of it is clear; and in the light of this it becomes intelligible why Christian people should believe that forgiveness for sin should have been made possible at such infinite cost.

¹ *Bhagavad Gītā*, xiv, 24, 25.

² A student who was reprimanded for beating a servant expressed great regret that he should have lost his temper, but could not be brought to see that he had done anything wrong in inflicting injury on the servant.

Early in the history of Indian religion the doctrine of *Karma* was formulated, according to which each individual reaps the fruit of his acts, good or bad. The great strength of this doctrine lies in the elements of truth contained in it, but generally it has been interpreted in a purely mechanical way. A man's good or evil works have been looked upon as something that can be regarded apart from the man—after the manner of a fund, with its credit and debit sides. An illustration of this may be found in the Chāndogya Upaniṣhad, where there is a discussion of the destiny of the souls of good men. They go ultimately to the moon. 'Here they are loved by the Devas, yes, the Devas love them. Having dwelt there till their good works are consumed, they return again that way as they came.'¹ One of the outcomes of this doctrine has been that it is exceedingly difficult for the Hindu to realize that a single sin can be of any great consequence. It seems strange to him that the Christian should make so much of one sin. Further, it will be readily understood that the doctrine precludes anything closely resembling forgiveness as the Christian understands it. There can be no question of the setting right of a broken relationship. The problem is rather that of the wiping off of a debt. But even that helps one only to a certain extent, for the ideal state is not one in which no sin can be laid to one's charge, but one in which the self is freed from the fruit of works, good or bad. The great quest of the Hindu has been for a way of escape from *Karma* and *Samsāra*.

Here we are in a region where such a term as 'forgiveness' has even less applicability; in a region far remote, too, from the mechanical contrivances for the wiping away of sin. There are many ways by which one may be helped on towards the final process through which deliverance may be attained, but the process itself is a process of knowledge—knowledge of the identity of the individual self and the cosmic self. Sin then becomes meaningless.

¹ Chāndogya Upaniṣhad, v, 10, 4, 5.

‘As water does not cling to a lotus leaf, so no evil deed clings to one who knows it.’¹

The followers of the way of *bhakti* seem at first sight to hold out hope of a more satisfying doctrine. The object of devotion is conceived as endowed with personal qualities, and deliverance is supposed to be attained through a union of love between the worshipper and himself. This union has sometimes been conceived as an ethical one, involving something approaching the Christian idea of forgiveness. But the tendency has been to conceive the union as an emotional one, to which there is no ethical barrier that must be first removed. In consequence we meet with all sorts of extravagances under the name of *bhakti*. In some of its more extreme forms, ‘a single act of faith, a single sincere invocation of the name of God, cancels a whole life of iniquity and crime. Hence the importance attached as early as the Bhagavad Gītā to the last thought, and the idea of attaining complete possession of this thought by an act of suicide, of throwing one’s self into the fire after being translated to a state of grace, or drowning one’s self in a sacred river.’² And to the follower of the way of devotion, as to the follower of the way of knowledge, the state of him who has found deliverance has tended to be not one of the highest ethical beauty, but one that is supreme above distinctions of good and evil. ‘He does not distress himself with the thought, Why did I not do what is good? Why did I do what is bad? He who thus knows these two (good and bad) frees himself.’³

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¹ *Chāndogya Upaniṣhad*, iv, 14, 3.

² Barth, *The Religions of India*, pp. 227–8.

³ *Taittirīyaka Upaniṣhad*, ii, 9.