

RADHAKRISHNAN - BRIDGE-BUILDER OR STRUCTURAL ENGINEER
BETWEEN EAST & WEST.
(Bishop Paul Gregories)

Sarveppalli Radhakrishnan, unlike Swami Vivekananda, or Rabindranath Tagore, really never carried the battle against Western culture into enemy territory. ^{He had a benevolent spirit, to agree with everybody. He did not force his views.} Thus it came about that Prof. C.E.M. Joad could call him Bridge-builder between East and West. The West liked "the sound of the beautifully modulated voice conveying in a series of exquisitely turned phrases an equal mastery of the intricacies of the English language and of Hindu metaphysics". That was Professor Joad's own language of praise for the young brahmin boy from Tiruttani who grew up to be a "philosophical bilingualist" (Professor Muirhead's term) that could enthrall Western audiences with a revised but not quite standard version of ancient Indian wisdom, through the painless medium of the well-medulated cadences of Oxford English.

It was the charm of his personality, ^{the warm and compassionate humanity with which he dealt with all} the conviction with which he commended Indian thought, and the gleam and polish of his language and style that made his presentation of Upanishadic thought as a form of intuitional absolute idealism, so attractively ^{and effectively} to his Western audiences.

While in one sense Radhakrishnan merits the title of Lokacharya by Indian standards, having completed his commentaries on the Prasthanathrayi (the Upanishads, the Brahmasūtra and the Bhagavadgīta), it was as a preacher of "a spiritual view of the Universe" that he commended himself to the West. The rigorous Indian logic that meticulously enunciates its epistemology before going on to the elucidation of fundamental ontology, if Radhakrishnan had presented it as it is to the West, could not have been easily comprehended by the cultured and intelligent but philosophically untrained audiences that he faced in the West.

Lokanath Bhattacharya gives us an ~~admirable~~ admirable summary of Radhakrishnan's main doctrine:

"His main and central teaching is that the spiritual should be given primacy, and reason and humanism, or science and man, should be explained in the light of the spiritual. The true Absolute is the spirit; our attempt to turn reason into an absolute has ended in some of the unhuman and inhuman results of science; and a similar view of man as an absolute has led to conflicting political philosophies and conflagrations. A true understanding of man requires viewing him from the standpoint of the spiritual".¹

1. D.M. Datta and P.T. Raju (ed). Introduction to Radhakrishnan - Comparative Studies in Philosophy presented in honour of his

That, of course, sounds more like the plea of a preacher than the premiss of a philosophy. But it was close ~~enough~~ enough to the Hegelian idealism after which the West still secretly hankered but to which it was forbidden to return. And for the weary middle-class intellectual of the West, frustrated with the incapacity of an unphilosophical bourgeois materialism to satisfy the spirit and frightened by the capacity of a ^{re-}student marxist materialism to upset his comfort and to drive him into conflict, this seething idealism from the East provided a faint glimmer of hope that all would be well and life in middle class comfort could continue unruffled.

All this is not to minimise the historical importance of India's philosopher-president, but merely to plead that the bridge he built between East and West should now be subjected to a ^othrough examination by deeper philosophical reflection, to see whether it can stand the weight of the traffic.

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Radhakrishnan could ^{see to} be a bridge-builder between East and West, because he was fortunate enough to ^{have} become well-acquainted with the thought of both. In fact it was the arrogance of the West, especially of the Protestant Christian West, that drove him to a deeper study of the Eastern tradition. The sensitive and medicative child of conservative Brahmin parents was rudely shaken up when at the Lutheran Mission High School, Tirupati, where he studied from his 8th year to the 12th (1896-1900; he was born in 1888), the missionary teachers violently abused his Hindu ~~heritage~~ heritage and commended the Christian gospel in its Lutheran form as the only absolute truth. The rude onslaught of the West continued, though with more noticeable refinement, at Voorhees College, Vellore (1900-1904). It was at Madras Christian College, under the tutelage of that missionary master-teacher, Professor A.G.Hogg, that he learned to react with equanimity to the Western heritage. For his B.A. and M.A. in Philosophy which he did at Madras Christian during the years 1904-1908, he did not need to know any Indian philosophy, for the Madras University curriculum, laid down by Europeans or ^{by}Europeanized Indians, did not regard any such acquaintance to be necessary or worthwhile. His M.A. thesis, however, was on the Ethics of the Vedanta.

It was only in April 1909, at the age of 21, when he was appointed as a teacher in the Department of Philosophy at the Presidency College, Madras, that he began a systematic study of the Indian heritage. His sensitive soul had been badly bruised by the rude affronts against the Hindu tradition that it had to bear silently

greatness that he did not grow up to be anti-Christian or anti-western. He was always the perfect gentleman, without rancor or bitterness in his soul against the West or against Christianity.

It is of course true that many westerners later did more than compensate for the rudeness of some of his early teachers. It was Professor J.H. Muirhead's invitation in 1917 to write the Library of Philosophy volume on Indian Philosophy that established Radhakrishnan's reputation in the West. A year later the 30 year-old Radhakrishnan became Professor of Philosophy in the University of Mysore, when his classmate (with whom he was bracketed as first in rank in the philosophy M.A. Class) and close friend K.C. Chacko was already well on his way to the building up of U.C. College, Alwaye.

While at Mysore, his contributions to British intellectual journals like Mind and the Hibbert Journal, made him famous in Britain, and with his appointment to the King George Chair at the University of Calcutta in 1921, Radhakrishnan's name began to stand for an acceptable version of Indian thought ^{acceptable} to the British. Unlike Tagore or the Ramakrishna missionaries, what Radhakrishnan gave to the West was in recognizably Western terms. His interpretation of Hinduism, especially in the Upton Lectures given at Manchester College in Oxford (1926), later published as The Hindu View of Life, presented Religious Experience as a universal phenomenon, self-certifying, empirical, life-transforming, insight-providing, essentially of the same kind as what John Wesley preached in terms of the Methodist Gospel. The main difference was this - the Christian Gospel was authoritarian and exclusive, the Hindu Gospel was gentler, being more tolerant and all-inclusive, generous to all forms of religious experience and accepting all of them as authentic. This was more acceptable to the almost equally all-embracing and tolerant Anglican temper than the stouter Calvinism ^{Calvinism} which excluded all other forms of religious experience.

Radhakrishnan, remaining a Hindu, was able to absorb from Barth and Tillich, from Besanquet and Carpenter, from Jesus and Mohammed, from Hegel and Bergson, and to present Hinduism as something akin to the thought of all these men.

Religious Experience was central and basic. It was one reality that all religious mystics experienced, but became ^{wse} "Religious experience is.... the presentment of the real already influenced by the ideas and prepossessions of the perceiving mind", each religious genius spells out the mystery of God according to his own endowment, personal, racial and historical"2.

What Radhakrishnan failed to do was to provide us with the criterion by which he could himself say that the conception of

2. The Hindu View of Life. cited Radhakrishna Reader p. 137.

God held by the majority of Hindus is wrong. It cannot be the case that every conception is equally right, though it can be admitted that all may be partly wrong. Radhakrishnan admitted in this Oxford lecture, that Hindus are guilty, in the name of tolerance of all forms, of protecting all superstitious rites and customs, including socially misguided ones like untouchability and Sathi. When Radhakrishnan, for example says that "it is necessary for the Hindu leaders to hold aloft the highest conception of God and work steadily on the minds of the worshippers so as to effect an improvement in their conceptions", he naturally implies the grades of higher and lower, better and worse, in the conceptions of God. He would have been philosophically sharper if he had given us a more precise indication of the standards and measuring sticks he uses or recommends for the evaluation of the varying conceptions of God.

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His ambition was of course to provide us with a "supreme spiritual ideal" that would be acceptable and applicable to East and West alike, and the bridge he sought to build was in terms of the clarification of that "supreme spiritual ideal".

Radhakrishnan, following in this regard German theologians like Adolf Harnack and Karl Barth, criticizes the Greek heritage for having misled the West in the direction of "science and the pursuit of truth for its own sake". Only those more fully acquainted with the Greek tradition could have told him that Greece too, like India, had produced a variety of views and approaches, and that there was not a single "Greek heritage" that stood for "science and the pursuit of truth for its own sake". If Radhakrishnan's associations and interests had been more with the common people rather than with the aristocratic few, he could probably have seen more clearly that greed and rapacity, bred through centuries of wars of aggression and later through the crusades and the colonial experience developing into modern capitalism, was behind the sickness of the West, rather than any so-called Greek heritage. Science and the pursuit of truth became corrupt when they were placed at the service of rapacity and greed.

Let us examine the more positive aspects of Radhakrishnan's universal creed. It has basically three elements:

- a) a unitive consciousness (vidya) based on faith (abhaya) and love (ahimsa)
- b) the unity of all Mankind and of all that exists
- c) the Primacy of the spiritual, and the universality of religious experience

Radhakrishnan opposes these to nationalist politics, humanist ethics and rationalist philosophy which characterizes the present Western civilisation, from which educated Indians have also imbibed deeply.

It is this proposed bridge of three planks that we need to examine today in closer detail and add some specifications, if the structure proposed is found to be basically sound.

There can be little doubt in the mind of most thinking people that the three elements do have, at least prima facie, a universal appeal. Many Western thinkers would today readily agree that the West has gone too far in emphasizing the individual and the objective, at the expense of the community and the subjective-objective ~~xxxxxxx~~ harmony which alone can be faithful to the demands of love. The need to transcend national frontiers and false barriers artificially created by the Western mind as for example between ~~xxxx~~ natural and supernatural, or between nature and history or again between nature and culture, is today widely recognized. The protest against materialism in both its philosophical and its pragmatic forms has also become strong in East and West.

The weakness of the structure, however, lies in the lack of clarity, philosophically speaking, of the concepts used. Radhakrishnan's use of the term 'spiritual' and 'religion' calls for a great deal of further elucidation. He has given us no adequate criterion for seeing the relationship between the material and the spiritual, between God and the universe, and between Man and the rest of reality. In failing to clarify these three fundamental points, his references to 'spiritual' and 'religious' must needs remain problematic to the philosophical enquirer.

While we can accept the basic contours of the structure proposed by our late lamented Philosopher-President, the reason why it is not taken seriously by thinking people East or West may be traced to this fundamental lack of specificity. Clarity is to be sought on the following three questions:

a) It is not possible to ~~say~~ say that all religions are equally good or equally true. We all do object to a religion which teaches fanaticism, religious wars and human sacrifice. Some religions like the new cults of ~~xxxx~~ Satanism rising in the West cannot be given such blanket approval. Gandhi himself had to fight against certain aspects of religious practice like untouchability which implies that he had certain criteria by which he could discern what was good and what was bad in any religion. We need to elucidate these criteria more carefully before making careless statements about the ^{equal} validity of religions.

b) A universal religion should be in a position to give at least a tentative interpretation of what significance man's actions in this time-world may have, apart from contributing to one's own personal salvation. Are the poverty and squalor, misery and injustice, suffering and anguish that we have all around us to be ignored, and religion be limited merely to the search of the individual for union with the supreme. the ascent of the Jivatma to the Brahmaloaka? Why are we

Is sadharmya with God to be achieved only by individuals, or are there norms for regulating the collective life of society also which ~~are~~ are related to the Bhavarupa of Isvara? Is religion's goal merely to produce siddhapurushas or does it have something to do with the structures of society also? No universal religion which does not spell out its relation to the problems of national and international economic injustice, exploitation and oppression, can have much relevance to the world of today.

c) A universal religion today should have clearer ways of conceiving the unity of mankind, and the unity between humanity and the rest of the cosmos, and be able to put the concept of ultimate reality or Brahman or Isvara or God in the context of these two basic unities. It is at this point that the criticism of scientific rationality as something which has contributed to the alienation between human persons and also between humanity and the cosmos should come in. Radhakrishnan only began that criticism in a very elementary way. We need to pursue this further, in order to call in question the fundamental axia of a civilization based on science and technology and in order to lay the foundation of another based on more adequate notions, of the unitive consciousness. We will have to do this fundamental metaphysical task with greater precision and clarity than Radhakrishnan. We will need to give more specific content to terms like "religion" and "spiritual", and relate our religious quest to the concerns and questions of liberal humanism and marxist socialism which are the ideologies in which many people have been trained and formed.

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Radhakrishnan, as a fairly competent structural engineer, with considerable experience of the British West and the Indian East, has drawn the preliminary sketch of the structure for a bridge between East and West. The specific drawings and measurements will have to be added by competent draughtsmen, but my suspicion is that when this is done, the proposed basic structure itself will call for some modifications. But Radhakrishnan's was a great effort, necessary and worthwhile for humanity. Let us now get a team of engineers and draughtsmen and carry on the project to complete its specifications. Meanwhile let us be on the look-out for the resources and devices necessary to implement the project, for that is a much more gigantic task than completing the drawings and specifications.

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