

SABDA/SAKTI AND WORD/SPIRIT

A SURFACE ANALYSIS OF TWO CONCEPT SYSTEMS

(Paulos Mar Gregorios)

Scholars are sometimes besieged by an often unjustified desire to find too easy parallelisms between surface-similar concepts in two radically different thought systems. As an instance of the perils of this temptation, we shall look briefly at two such concept clusters in Ancient Indian and in Mediterranean Christian systems of perceiving and articulating the nature of Reality: **sabda/sakti** and **word/spirit**.

The concept of Sakti is definitely pre-Brahmin in its origin in India. Most of our very ancient systems of reality-perception in India are sakti-based in one way or another, parallel to **mana** and other similar notions in all ancient cultures. We see marks of this ancient concept of Sakti in current Shaivite as well as Tantric traditions. **Sakti** is the coiled serpent - the **kundali** or **Kundalini** - waiting in the lowest **chakra of the subtle body**, the **muladhara**, to be awakened, and once awakened, to pass through the various **chakras**, ultimately leading to self-realization and bliss.

Sabda on the other hand seems more distinctively Brahmanic, best exemplified in the concept of **nadabrahma**, the original cosmic vibration of sound that creates, holds up and guides the universe.

Both **sakti** and **sabda** have their parallels in the Judaeo-Christian tradition of West Asia. The **sakti** concept is central to that awesome name of God - Yahweh-Tsebaoth, often translated "LORD of the Hosts", but literally the "He-Who-is of the Powers". Sometimes these powers or **sakties** of Yahveh can be personalized, but in essence, the Powers are in plural, and always attached to the One God-Creator. The powers, sometimes also called the principalities, can be opposed to the will of God and have in the end to be brought to subordination and control by Christ himself. If at times the Powers can revolt, in Judaism and Christianity, they are always subject to the authority and control of God. They have no independent existence as in some forms of Hinduism.

In the Indian tradition Sakti is a single power latent both in Nature and in the Human body-soul, the latter being a microcosm of the former. It is a goddess, the passive power, waiting for the union with the active power in the **Sivalinga**. For the Hebrews on the other hand, 'Powers' are always multiple, and have no independent role or existence.

The concept of **sabda** however reveals more thorough-going parallels between the two traditions. **Sabda** is Brahman; **sabda** is with Brahman from the beginning; without the **sabda** nothing at all can come into existence. It is like the Hebrew **dabar** and the Greek **logos** in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. It is God or Brahman giving birth to Himself, in order to create the universe; but even after giving birth to that which is perfect, the original begetter remains perfect and undiminished:

Poornamadah; poornamidam
Poornad poornamudacyate
Poornasya poornamadaya
Poornamevavasishyate

Wholeness there; wholeness here
This wholeness arises from that Wholeness
Take away wholeness from Wholeness
Wholeness alone remains.

In the Christian scriptures, the relation between **Theos** and **Logos** is largely analogous, though the terms used to denote that relation are noticeably different. The **logos** is **Theos** (**Theos en ho logos**); the **logos** is also ever existent face to face with **Theos**. The author of the Epistle to the Colossians (2:10) puts it this way:

In Him dwells the whole fullness of Godhead bodily
En autoi katoikei pan to pleroma tes Theotetos somatikos.

We should not forget, however, that in the Indian tradition, the word **sabda** is used in two different meanings. The technical meaning of **sabda**, apart from its ordinary meaning of just 'sound', is that of one of the four **pramanas** (**pratyaksha**, **anumana**, **upamana** and **sabda**), especially in the Navya Nyaya tradition. Here **Sabda** can mean the scriptures, the words of the Guru, and even a good saying by any Sage (**Apta-vacana**). In this usage **sabda** simply means spiritual testimony, wherever it comes from.

The more metaphysical sense of **sabda** occurs in the concept of **nadabrahma**, which literally means 'sound god'. This need not mean sound made by the 'word'; it could be, as in later iconography, simply the drum-beats of the **Siva-tandava**, the cosmos-creating dance of Siva. It could also explain the significance of the chanted Vedas and other mantras, which get part of their efficacy from being in consonance with the original sound-wave which constantly creates and sustains the universe.

Bhartrhari (d.651) in his **Vakyapadiya** expounds this doctrine of **sabdadvaita**, and develops a new non-dualism based on the concept that the original creative resonance is the only reality, from which everything else has come to be. It is

that same original resonance which then reverberated in the Vedic chants, and would re-echo the original creative **sabda** if properly recited today.

The Tantric tradition also attaches great importance to various sounds, some of them somewhat rough and crude, as necessary for self-realisation. It seems thus that the concept of creative **sabda** is shared by both Vedic and Tantric traditions.

A surface-similar concept in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is Word, **logos** in Greek, **dabar** in Hebrew, as we have already noted above. **Dabar** in Hebrew, normally means both the word and the thing signified by the word. In Greek, **logos** becomes a term deeply philosophical in meaning. The Christians, in saying that **logos** is God, had to speak however of the Father as God, as distinct in Person from the **Logos** who was identified with the Son, with Jesus as the once-for-all incarnation of the Eternal Only-Begotten.

The Hindu tradition speaks of two aspects of the Brahman, the Sagunabrahma as Iswara, and the Nirgunabrahman as the predicateless Absolute who is conceptually beyond comprehension. But there is no possibility of two distinct persons, one **saguna** and the other Nirguna. Brahman is one without a second - **ekamadvitiam**. Nothing like the three-in-one God of Christianity, nor the concept of the once-for-all Incarnation of the Only-Begotten Son, would be compatible with the Hindu tradition, or with most other religious traditions like Islam or Buddhism.

Attempts to paste over this unbridgeable gap between the two traditions have failed to withstand rigorous examination. One can find many parallelisms between the concept of Brahman and the concept of God the Father. Both are beyond being and beyond comprehension.

Christian Fathers put a high emphasis on the "incomprehensibility of God", a somewhat central concept in Eastern Patristics. But then they went on, paradoxically enough, to talk about Three Persons in the Trinity, one in their is-ness or **ousia**, but distinct in their personhood. If they had not, we could at least have argued that since both Brahman and God are beyond being and beyond concept, they are in fact identical. Both Christians and Hindus, after having asserted the incomprehensibility and indescribability of the Absolute, go on to give conceptual qualifications to that Unqualified One. The differences begin to appear at this level of qualifications of the Unqualified One.

The same would apply to concepts like **sabda** and **logos**. One can find many parallelisms, but the concepts belong to two different worlds of discourse and should not be too easily identified with each other without reference to the

world of discourse in which each concept receives its particular shade of meaning.

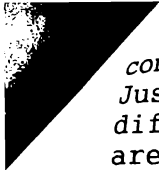
The situation is about the same if we try to compare the concepts of **sakti** and **pneuma** or spirit. The spirit in Hebrew is **ruach**, in Greek **pneuma**. Both literally mean breath or wind. The Spirit of God, Ruach-Elohim, which was brooding over the primordial waters of chaos in Genesis 1:2 is the same Ruach-Peh, or the Breath of His Mouth which in Psalm 33:6 is the Creative Word. The Pneuma Hagios, or Holy Spirit is the same as the creative **logos Theou** or Word of God. While the Father, the Son or Word, and the Spirit are three distinct Persons, none of them exist or act without the others.

The teaching about the Trinity, and the teaching about the Incarnation or permanent Man-becoming of the Son of God are the two keys to the Christian world of discourse. When seeking parallelisms with concepts from other worlds of discourse, care should be taken to see the extent to which these concepts fit into the Trinity-Incarnation paradigm. Indian thought, on the other hand, has many worlds of discourse: samkhya, yoga, vedanta, visishtadvaita, dvaita and so on in Hinduism alone. Buddhist thought is even more pluralist and diverse and developed many worlds of discourse, as is the case with Jaina thought.

Sometimes parallelisms are too facilely identified with each other, without taking into account the world of discourse from which the two surface-similar concepts have been taken. It seems wiser to leave these concepts as similar in some ways, but still radically different when one takes into account their respective paradigm structures. It does not take us very far if we keep on trying to prove the ancient false dictum that all religions teach the same thing in essence; the differences are vitally important sometimes. And it seems God has ordained it that way. The tragedy occurs when these differences are used by the religions to pillory and calumnify each other.

It is interesting however, to note that the differences always occur at the conceptual level, and not at the primordial, trans-conceptual. Even **sunya** becomes problematic when conceptualised, even in negative terms.

Differences arise from conceptualisation, and belong at that level. However since most of our discourse has to be at the conceptual level, it may be unwise to ignore them or wish them away in the interest of a false dictum about the essential identity of all religions. The conceptual differences not only divide people, but even become bitter bones of



contention among rival factions of one and the same religion. Just ignoring them does not work. Once the sub-surface differences, as well as differences in the worlds of discourse are properly recognized, it should be possible to go beyond these differences, to find that abiding Unity in the One Who is beyond all form and concept.

It is to this end that Mataji's commendable effort ultimately draws our attention.