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Dr. Radhakrishnan's view on religious experience

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Abstract

Religious experience is present in every religion. Since Dr. Radhakrishnan was born and brought up in an atmosphere where religion was dominant, he could associate himself with this thought from a young age. He was born in a dominant Hindu family but was brought up in a missionary school where he was taught christianity is dominant and most powerful. This dual training from a young age made him aware that the core content of all religions is the same. Difference lies only in the form of interpretation. This is exactly what Dr. Radhakrishnan endorsed when he refuted the supremacy of christianity. In this paper it is discussed how Radhakrishnan categorically refutes the special status of Christianity by taking the help of the arguments forwarded by the German Philosopher Schleiermacher.

Keywords: Dr. Radhakrishnan, religious experience, christianity

Introduction

Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan was born on 5th September, 1888 at Tiruttani, forty miles to the north - west of Madras. His early life was spent in Tiruttani and Tirupati, both famous as places of pilgrimage. In 1909, he was appointed as a teacher of philosophy in Madras Presidency College and then his academic activities started. In 1918 he was appointed Professor of Philosophy in the University of Mysore. In 1921, he was appointed to the most important chair of Philosophy in India, the King George V chair of mental and moral philosophy in the university of Calcutta. He was invited to Oxford in 1926 to give a Upton Lecture on Hindu View of life and from then on his lecture assignments abroad followed one after another. During this period he founded the Indian Philosophical Congress, with other eminent men of philosophy in India.

According to Radhakrishnan, philosophy is a way of understanding life and his study of Indian Philosophy served as a cultural therapy. He interpreted Indian thought in Western terms and tried to show that it is full of reason and logic. This observation of Radhakrishnan gave Indians a new sense of self-esteem because at this time the Indians were under imperial forces. The imperial forces casted inferiority complex on the Indians. Radhakrishnan's philosophy stands on ancient philosophy, particularly the Vedantic tradition. His approach was that he presented such ideas with the help of idioms and models of western thought. He presented old and traditional ideas in a refreshingly novel manner. His effort, therefore, was to build a bridge between the traditional wisdom of the east and the new knowledge and energy of the west.

Radhakrishnan spent his childhood in a place of Hindu pilgrimage. It is therefore natural that he got attracted towards religion. He had his school and college education in Christian Missionary Institutions. Here he came across the main teachings of Christianity and also with the critical remarks of the Christian missionaries regarding the Hindu way of life. This led him to undertake the study of Hindu scriptures. In this paper I would highlight the arguments that Dr. Radhakrishnan presented to establish his view regarding religious experience.

Radhakrishnan used the notion of religious experience as advocated by the German Philosopher Schleiermacher. He used this as a weapon to fight against Christianity. Schleiermacher believed in the personal experience of Jesus Christ. He described the feelings of dependence and union with the ultimate reality which men experience from time to time. He argued that these experiences had more authority than reason. Radhakrishnan thought India faces this problem in the acute form. When western missionaries first arrived in India, Hindus tried to deny the truth of christianity and defend traditional hinduism.

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Slowly they accepted christianity as a valid type of religion but they strongly objected to its claim for uniqueness. Radhakrishnan used Schleiermacher's defense of religious experience as a tool to fight against Christianity. His arguments can be stated in the following four propositions.

The first is that religious experience is both real and universal. The Muslims pray in mosques, the Hindus rapt themselves in meditation by the banks of the Ganges, the christian mystic finds solace in the silence of his meetings. These are all religious experiences. In the words of Schleiermacher they all have a feeling of dependence and a sensation of union with the infinite. But it is a matter of fact and no one can deny that people from all religions have had similar experiences in India for thousands of years before and after Christ. So, this religious experience is not unique to christianity alone.

Radhakrishnan's second proposition is that all religions are based on the religious experience of their founder. For example, Buddhism began when Buddha found enlightenment under the pipal tree, Islam originated when Muhammad responded to Allah and began receiving his revelations, the Gospels describe Jesus' religious experience at his baptism and this was immediately followed by his temptation and three years of preaching.

The third point is that we must make a distinction between the religious experience of these great men and the interpretations which they and their disciples have added. The point is that the religions are basically one in their experience but contradictions appear when their theology is written. Religious experience is so deep and indefinable that even two people belonging to the same culture and age will express it differently. Therefore it is obvious that there shall be variations in the explanation of theologians scattered across continents.

The fourth point that Radhakrishnan points out is that every true religious experience is a sense of unity with the Absolute. All saints, sages, prophets and mystics have spoken about their feelings of being taken out of themselves into one-ness with God. Jesus himself speaks of this experience when he says that he is one with the Father. According to Radhakrishnan, the simplest and most universal statement of this experience is found in Vedanta Hinduism. Here the one-ness of man and God is asserted and the way to this unity is provided through the Yoga discipline.

By following the analysis of Radhakrishnan it can be said that there is nothing unique about the religious experience in Christianity. There are many Christians and theological teachers who have conceded these arguments of Schleiermacher and Radhakrishnan and are of the opinion that missionaries should concentrate on discovering and sharing the religious experiences of different religious groups. But before coming to this conclusion let us scrutinize the arguments a little deeper.

As we begin to talk about religious experience, the first thing that comes to mind is "Religious experience of what?" if for example someone makes a statement about the reality and universality of love, the question that needs to be asked is love of what? Or what kind of love are we talking about? This is because love is of different kinds. For example, Mothers' love is different from lustful love and the love of God. All the different types of love needs to be named scientifically before we start discussing any of them. After

labeling and carefully defining each kind of love, it would then be proper to discuss their value for different purposes. Similarly a blanket statement about religious experience is valueless and usually mischievously misleading. Unfortunately the basic scientific work of observing, cataloging and comparing the different types of religious experience has hardly begun.

If we take one particular area of religious experience we will find that a subdivision is necessary. Within mysticism for example, we must distinguish at least three completely different varieties.

Nature mysticism has a feeling of oneness with the life of the universe. In vedanta mysticism there is a loss of identity in a sense of oneness with the Absolute. The third variety is Christian mysticism which is always an 'I and thou' conversation where the christian remains very much a person and has personal contact with a supremely personal God. Therefore, it is not good logic to begin a discussion on religion with a statement about the reality and universality of religious experience. Religious experiences are of at least a dozen different and contradictory kinds.

Radhakrishnan's third point was that we must make a distinction between the genuine religious experience of a religious leader and the theological explanation which he and his disciples formulates. This is obviously true in some cases but we cannot use it to assert that the religious experience of a Christian and a Hindu Vedantist are the same though their theology may differ. If there is difference between the basic experiences then the theological views will also be different.

Dr. Radhakrishnan's fourth point seeks to imply that the only genuine type of religious experience is the monistic experience described in Hindu Vedanta. If man is truly religious he will lose his personality in a sense of oneness with World Soul. If God is merely a World Soul, or the life principle of the universe then a sense of merging with this principle is all man can aspire to. If on the other hand, God is supremely personal and wants man to know and love him, then the monistic experience is personality suicide.

Therefore, in conclusion it can be said that whether we approach the question from the point of view of metaphysics (nature of universe) or theology (the nature of God) or ethics (the nature and end of man) or as in this case religious experience, philosophy forces us back to the same basic choice. Either man has ultimate significance as a person or he is essentially not a person.

Man can be a person in true real sense only if there is a personal God who helps to continue his true personality. True religious experience is therefore a vital experience with a personal God.

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