

CHRISTIANITY AND VAISHNAVISM.

The civilization of the present century has supplanted Christianity. This civilization has done much for the comforts of the body and the development of the baser passions; but it has not been able to conquer death. Death is inevitable; and that being the case, the civilization of the present century cannot do any real good to mankind.

The Hindus have been trained from their very infancy not to put any great value on things earthly. Taken any classical works of the Hindus and though they may be said to contain apparently many absurd stories, yet one idea pervades them all. It is that death is inevitable, that death means the separation of the soul which is immortal, from the body, and the true interests of man lie in the harmonious development of his soul. What is it to a man if he gets the sovereignty of the whole world, since he is to die in a few years? And what does a man care if he suffers a few years of misery on this earth, if he has been able to secure an everlasting happiness in the future?

Let us live and let others live. The word is wide enough for all of us. Let us learn to love and to be loved in return. Let us conquer all our baser facilities and develop the higher only. Let us avoid anger, vindictiveness, haughtiness, greed, sovereignty and selfishness, and let us develop our reverence for God and good will for our brethren. And surely God will not forsake him who follows the above precepts, though he may not be accepted as a good Christian by those who profess to follow Christ.

If Christianity, as taught by the Catholics, had been presented to the Hindus by Christians, the former might have accepted it without any violence to their faith and feelings. During Catholic festivals, the images of Mary and Christ were taken out of the Church and carried in procession followed by *sankirtans* and the offering of incense, just as the Hindus carry those of Krishna & c. This is all done with a view to invoke piety in the minds of the masses.

In the same manner the Mohamedans have their History, their Kerbela and other soul stirring events which gave life to their religion. It was the Protestants who really crucified Christ, that is to say, took the life out of this religion. A Messiah preaching the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, preaching love and goodwill and at last sacrificing himself to his principle, is one who is bound to move the hearts of all men. And it was thus that Christianity spread from country to country.

If Christ was presented to the Hindus as an Avatar they would have gladly given him his proper place. But the Christians forget the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, and first appeared in India with, not the Bible, but an armed force. The horrible cruelties practiced by Vasco-da-Gama defy description! Thus Christians in India came to be identified with spirituous liquor and cannon. Mr. Growse, the Christian Vaishnava, or, in other words, a pious

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Christian whose heart was large enough to be able to appreciate the beauties of Vaishnavism, writes in his valuable book on *Mathura*:-

“The esoteric doctrines of Vaishnavas generally have little in common with the gross idolatry which the Christian missionary is too often content to demolish as the equivalent of Hinduism. So far is this from being the case that many of their dogmas are not only of an eminently philosophical character, but are also much less repugnant to catholic truth than either the colorless abstractions of the Brahma Samaj or the defiant materialism into which the greater part of Europe is rapidly lapsing.

Thus their doctrine of salvation by faith is thought by many scholars to have been directly borrowed from the Gospel; while another article in their creed, which is less known but is equally striking in its divergence from ordinary Hindu sentiment, is the continence of conscious individual existence in a future world, when the highest reward of the good will be not extinction, but the enjoyment of the visible presence of the divinity, whom they have faithfully served while on earth; a state therefore absolutely identical with heaven as our theologians define it. The one infinite and invisible God, who is the only real existence, is, they maintain, the only proper object of man’s devout contemplation. But as the incomprehensible is utterly beyond the reach of human faculties. He is partially manifested for our behoove in the Book of Creation, in which natural objects are the letters of the universal alphabet and express the sentiments of the Divine Author. A printed page, however, conveys no meaning to anyone but a scholar and is liable to be misunderstood even by him; so, too, with the Book of the World, Whether the traditional scenes of Krishna’s adventures have been rightly determined is a matter of little consequence, if only a visit to them excites the believer’s religious enthusiasm. The places are mere symbols of no value in themselves; the idea they convey is the direct emanation from the spirit of the author. But it may be equally well expressed by different types; in the same way as two copies of a book may be, word for word, the same in sound and sense, though entirely different in appearance, one being written in Nagari, the other in English character.

To enquire into the cause of the diversity between the religious symbols adopted by different nationalities may be an interesting study, but is not one that can affect the basis of faith. And thus it matters little whether Radha and Krishna were ever real personages; the mysteries of divine love, which they symbolize remain though the symbols disappear; in the same way as poem may have existed long before it was committed to writing and may be remembered long after the writing has been destroyed. The transcription is a relief to the mind; but though obviously advantageous on the whole, still in minor points it may rather have the effect of stereotyping error for no material form, however perfect and semi-divine can ever be created without containing in itself an element of deception; its appearance varies according to the point of view and the distance from which it is regarded. It is to convictions of this kind that must be attributed the utter indifference of the Hindu to chronological accuracy and historical research. The annals of Hinduism date only from its conquest by the Mahomedan – a people whose faith is based on the misconception of a fact, as the Hindu’s is on the corrupt embodiment of a conception. Thus the literature of the former deals exclusively with events; of the latter with ideas.

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We must admit that there is so great a resemblance between the religion of “salvation by faith” or, Vaishnavism, and Christianity that it is but natural, the Christians with their creed of “one God and only one Prophet” should claim that the former was borrowed from the latter. But the Hindus ascribe the resemblance to other causes. They say that Vaishnavism is a revealed religion, so is Christianity; and that being the case they must resemble in their most essential characteristics. One who has studied both the religions can see at a glance that if there was any borrowing at all, it was the Christians who must have borrowed for the simple reason that the end of Christianity is the beginning of Vaishnavism, or, in other words. Vaishnavism has everything which Christianity has while Christianity has only the beginning of Vaishnavism, and not the middle nor the end.

Mr. Growse had the good luck of coming across some Vaishnavas. He was so struck with what he saw that he was led to describe them in these words:-

Many of them are pious, simple-minded men. Leading such a chaste and studious life that it may charitably be hoped of them that in the eye of God they are Christians by the baptism of desire.

These men, for whom Mr. Growse intercedes, live in jungles upon what comes to them from God, without any thought of the morrow, and worship the Father for most hours of the day, giving only few hours for sleep. Mr. Growse talks of their chastity, but they sleep on bare ground, and eat a small quantity of the coarsest food, only with a view to keep body and soul together. We wish Europe could show only one such man in the whole continent.

The Christian religion in some of its ordinary forms, says Dr. Fairbairn, is well known in India. The enthusiastic missionaries of all denominations have flooded the land with their literature, and their incessant preaching is dinned into our ears on the roadside, in the bazaar, and at the great religious fairs all over the country. But at the same time it must be observed that the Gospel so abundantly preached, has wonderfully little effect. Perhaps one should use the word ‘theology’ in places of ‘the Gospel.’ The theology of all this preaching and writing makes no appeal to the religious instincts of the people, specially of the better classes, and in India the higher castes virtually make the nation. I am aware the teachers like Dr. Barrows are far indeed from the popular Christian ideas of sin, heaven and hell, Atonement, Incarnation, and the authority of the Bible. But, naturally, they are so loyal to the traditions of the great religion they profess that they are disinclined to differentiate and teach as if they believed exactly as all Christian missionaries in India believe, and subscribe exactly to the same forms of Christianity. All educated Indians have made up their minds about the merits of current Calvinistic theology, and anyone who outwardly identifies himself with that, however eloquent or scholarly, has no chance of success in India. In the second place, it is always a dangerous thing to dabble with Oriental philosophy and religion on the part of those who derive their knowledge of Orientalism from translations of Sanskrit books. Translations by alien authors almost as a rule miss the genius of the works, specially of religious works, for the simple reason that they are more concerned with the literary integrity of their translations than the spiritual import. Then again, all Oriental systems are either not translated or not thought worthy of translation. And the doctrines which the Christian lecturer criticizes may not be the only ones

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on the subject; they may be matched by other doctrines of a contrary kind which have not been translated, or, being comparatively obscure, have escaped the notice of the lecturers. Hence his criticisms, solely based upon what he knows, fall wide of the mark. And the obscure doctrines may have a wider following in India than the celebrated ones. I will give only one instance. The Vedantic Theosophy of Sankara has the widest possible reputation in Europe. It has been criticized and killed and re-killed so many times by Western scholars that it is wonderful how the rage still remains unsatisfied to criticize and kill it again. But it may not be known to all that millions upon millions of thoughtful Hindus evidently believe in a system contrary to Sankara's Pantheism, a system of simple and deep Theism established by another great teacher named Ramanuja, which often comes up to the grandeur of David, or Isaiah, or St. Augustine. What I wish to point out is that any criticism made on the Vedanta doctrine with a view to establish the superiority of the Christian religion will not avail because the superiority claimed will quite find its match in modern Vaishnavism, and one or other of its many forms which millions of devout Hindus believe everywhere.

The true mission of Christians in India is not merely to govern the country and further their material interests. That is not the way that will further the causes of Christianity. That is not the way to better themselves and those who are in their charge. Let it be borne in mind, that a politically free man is not free at all. If England, the freest country in the world, the soldier is the slave of his Captain, so is the subordinate of his superior and the party man of his leader.

That man alone is free whose soul is free. He is the only free man who has been able to bring his passion under control, so as to enable him to cultivate his divine instincts and to make his friendship with God, from whom every man sprang and to whom everyone is destined to go. An Englishman calls himself a free-born Briton, and the Hindus his subjects. This is real love of freedom; is it not?

By a wise arrangement of Providence the Hindus have been but under a sober and steady Christian nation. The reason is that they should help one another. It is for the Christians to govern the country well, it is for the Hindus, who are, if they are anything, a religious people to spiritualize the Christians. Let the Christians study, like Mr. Growse and Dr. Fairbairn, the spiritual truths and the examples of piety that the Hindus can furnish, and they will derive much more valuable things than they can ever hope to do by exploiting the country.

In the exposition given by Mr. Growse of the philosophy of Vaishnavism, our English educated countrymen will find something which perhaps they did not know before. And in the description of the Catholic celebration the Hindus will find that there is very little difference between an ordinary Hindu and a Catholic Christian.

M. D.
