HINDUISM

R. C. ZAEHNER

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Hinduism

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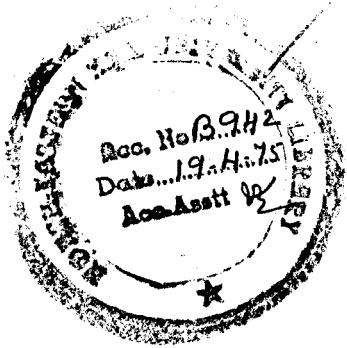

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To

CHARLES MONTEITH

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND PRONUNCIATION

So far as possible diacritical marks except the long sign (-) have been avoided and the latter has been omitted in such well-known names as *Gandhi* (for *Gāndhī*). There remain only *ṁ*, *ṛ*, and *ś*. *ṁ* represents the nasalization of the preceding vowel, *ṛ* was originally a vowel but now approximates to *ri*, while *ś* is a sibilant half-way between English *s* and *sh*, being rather nearer to the latter. No distinction has been made between the different *'l*'s in Tamil (*l*, *ḷ*, and *ḻ*), nor has the series of 'cerebrals' in Sanskrit (*ṭ*, *ḍ*, *ṭh*, *ḍh*, *ṇ*) been differentiated from the pure dentals (*t*, *d*, *th*, *dh*, *n*).

C is pronounced as English *ch* in 'church', the remaining consonants as in English. The vowels are similar to those of Italian. Apart from *sh* pronounced as in English the *h* of the aspirated consonants proper (*kh*, *gh*, *ch*, *jh*, *th*, *dh*, *ph*, *bh*) is clearly heard as in such English words as 'dog-house', 'pothole', 'mad-house', and 'top-heavy'. *Th* is never pronounced as in English.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

'HINDU' is a Persian word: it means simply 'Indian'. Hinduism is thus the '-ism' of the Indian people. The suffix '-ism' is rarely affixed to the name of a people, and the only examples that readily come to mind are 'Hellenism' and 'Judaism', the first denoting a way of life and the second a national religion. Which is the more apposite and the more true in the case of Hinduism? Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan who has devoted much of his life to interpreting his country's religion and culture to the Anglo-Saxon world entitled one of his books *The Hindu Way of Life*, not *The Hindu Religion*, and this would imply that to him at least Hinduism was a 'Hellenism' rather than a 'Judaism', a way of life characteristic of a whole people, an intangible though none the less real national ethos rather than a religion in the Western sense of the word, that is, obedience to a revelation believed to be God-given and the worship of God in accordance with the content of that revelation. Judaism is, in addition, also a rigorous and refined system of God-given *law*.

Hinduism is, in fact, both a Hellenism and a Judaism: it is both a way of life and a highly organized social and religious system, but unlike Judaism, the essence of which is submission to the One God who is personal, transcendent, and holy, who reveals himself in history and acts in history, Hinduism is quite free from any dogmatic affirmations concerning the nature of God, and the core of religion is never felt to depend on the existence or non-existence of God, or on whether there is one God or many; for it is

perfectly possible to be a good Hindu whether one's personal views incline towards monism, monotheism, polytheism, or even atheism. This is not what ultimately matters. If, then, God or the gods are not central to this strange complex of beliefs, what is?

The Hindus themselves call their religion the *sanātana dharma*, 'eternal *dharma*'. And here, at the very outset of our inquiry, we are faced with the difficulty of finding an adequate translation for words embodying concepts that elude precise definition. No word is more important or more omnipresent in the sacred texts, yet these very texts warn us time and time again that this *dharma* is 'subtle' and 'very difficult to know'. Indeed it is the very ambivalence of this key concept that both gives to Hinduism its distinctive flavour and sets up within it a tension that is never wholly resolved.

The word *dharma* is used in two distinct general senses in the great Hindu texts. It means first what is set down in the sacred texts themselves, and particularly in the texts dealing with Hindu customary law. In this usage it corresponds approximately to what we call 'canon law', a 'law' that is clearly defined, refined, and ever more minutely explained in the legal treatises themselves. By extension it is used to represent the religious assumptions on which these laws are based. *Dharma* in this sense is not at all 'difficult to know', for it is formulated at enormous length throughout the huge corpus of Hindu sacred literature, and is therefore, in its broadcast connotation, best translated as 'religion'. It is, then, both 'law' and 'religion'.

'Law' and 'religion' are, however, only expressions of something far more fundamental, and that is the eternal law that governs all human and non-human

existence, what we would understand by 'natural law': and it is this law that is 'subtle' and almost impossible to know. In the natural order there is no difficulty, for it means no more than the laws that operate in nature and are nowadays the subject-matter of the natural sciences. But how do things stand in the moral order?

Etymologically the word *dharma* derives from a root *dhṛ-* meaning 'to hold, have, or maintain'—the same root from which are derived the Latin *firmus*, 'firm', and *forma*, 'form'. *Dharma* is, then, the 'form' of things as they are and the power that keeps them as they are and not otherwise. And just as it maintains the whole universe in being in accordance with eternal law (*sanātana dharma*), so, in the moral sphere, does it maintain the human race by eternal moral law. But here a dilemma creeps in, for law exists on two levels: on the one hand it is written down in the sacred texts, on the other it is inscribed in the hearts and consciences of men. Sometimes the two exist side by side in harmony, sometimes there is tension and conflict.

Hinduism is a vast and apparently incoherent religious complex, and any writer on Hinduism who accepts the Hindus' own definition of their religion as *sanātana dharma*, 'eternal *dharma*', must make up his mind which of the two aspects of *dharma* he considers important to emphasize. And here he too is in a dilemma, for if he tries to compress the whole of Hinduism's four thousand odd years of history into some two hundred pages, the reader will be utterly confused by a mass of apparently self-contradictory detail and will fail to descry that which is eternal and unchanging in this *dharma* he is studying. If, however, he picks out and etches in high relief what seems to him to be the essence of this subtle something so 'difficult to know', he may

well be—and rightly—accused of presenting a picture of Hinduism that is neither scholarly nor objective. He must choose between producing a catalogue or school text-book which will give the student the maximum number of facts within a very limited compass, or he will attempt, at his peril, to distil from the whole mass of his material the fine essence that he considers to be the changeless ground from which the proliferating jungle that seems to be Hinduism grows. This is the course the present writer proposes to follow for reasons that will very soon become apparent.

Hindus sometimes pride themselves, with some truth, that their religion is free from dogmatic assumptions, and that, this being so, their record in the matter of religious persecution is relatively clear. They do not think of religious truth in dogmatic terms: dogmas cannot be eternal but only the transitory, distorting, and distorted images of a truth that transcends not only them but all verbal definition. For the passion for dogmatic certainty that has racked the religions of Semitic origin from Judaism itself, through Christianity and Islam, to the Marxism of our day, they feel nothing but shocked incomprehension. This large tolerance and this antipathy to 'creedal' religion as such was noticed by the first Muslim to make a thorough study of the phenomenon of Hinduism at a time when Islam was making its first sanguinary incursions into India. Writing in the eleventh century A.D. Al-Bīrūnī, the great Muslim encyclopaedist wrote:

They [the Hindus] totally differ from us in religion, as we believe in nothing in which they believe, and vice versa. On the whole there is very little disputing about theological topics among themselves; at the utmost, they

fight with words, but they will never stake their soul or body or their property on religious controversy.

This is broadly speaking true, but the absence of dogma in Hinduism can be over-emphasized; for there are certain presuppositions in post-Vedic Hinduism which are rarely, if ever, disputed. The chief of these is the doctrine of the transmigration of souls or rebirth which all sects and all philosophical schools accept not so much as a revealed dogma as a self-evident fact of existence. This doctrine itself presupposes the further doctrine that the condition into which the individual soul is reborn is itself the result of good or bad actions performed in former lives; and these actions and the modifications they produce in the myriad sum-total of ever-reincarnating souls from eternity without beginning to eternity without end themselves constitute the stuff of the moral as distinct from the natural universe. Yet no hard and fast distinction can be made between the two, for the same ineluctable law of cause and effect rules both. This is the law of *karma* ('action'), the law according to which any action whatsoever is the effect of a cause and is in its turn the cause of an effect. The whole process goes by the name of *saṁsāra*, the 'course' or 'revolution' to which all phenomenal existence is subject, and which is itself subject to and conditioned by an endless causal past, the *dharma* of the universe.

To this *dharma* there is neither beginning nor end, neither for the sum-total of existence (the macrocosm) nor for the individual soul (the microcosm): everything is in bondage to the fetters of Time and the fetters of desire—the desire above all to live and the desire to do (*karma* = doing). Time itself is a revolving wheel

returning ever again to the point from which it started, and in it there can be neither purpose nor salvation. So much is taken for granted by very nearly all the Hindu sects and philosophical schools, and all of them find their common presuppositions profoundly unsatisfactory and disquieting.

This being so, it is the aim of each and all of them to escape from the wheel of Time and of action which is itself conditioned by Time, but that such an escape is possible is affirmed by all: it is called *moksha* or *mukti*, and is variously translated as 'escape, release, liberation, or emancipation'. It is not unlike what we in the West call the freedom of the Spirit. The manner in which this blessed state can be achieved—whether it can be achieved by the individual's own unaided efforts, or whether he must rely on the grace and assistance of a higher power—and the nature of the condition of the soul that has fought itself free from the fetters of Time and the desire to live on in time, these are matters about which the Hindus differed profoundly among themselves, however much some of them may try to blur the distinctions now. On three basic assumptions, however, they are all at one, namely (i) that the universe is governed by cyclic Time, (ii) that the individual soul as microcosm is governed by the same law of cause and effect as is the macrocosm, and (iii) that release from this constantly changing form of existence is ultimately possible for all.

The reader will now be familiar with four technical terms that will be constantly recurring throughout this book—*dharma*, *moksha*, *saṁsāra*, and *karma*. There is one more which it may be convenient to introduce at this point: and that is *brahman*.

This term will form the subject-matter of our second

chapter, and a proper understanding of it will lead to a proper understanding of Hinduism as a whole, for 'classical' Hinduism, the basic presuppositions of which we have baldly outlined above, is also called 'Brahmanism', the religion of *brahman*: and *brahman* can either mean the eternal substrate of the universe from which the 'eternal' *dharma* proceeds, or it can mean the spiritual prerogative of the Brāhman caste which is the cornerstone on which the whole Hindu social edifice was built. There is, then, a causal link between the eternal *brahman* which is the ground of all existence and the Brāhman caste, and it is for this reason that the Brāhmans were regarded as gods upon earth. We shall have to return to this relationship in a later chapter: for the moment we must confine ourselves to the term *brahman* alone.

In the earliest texts *brahman* can be roughly equated with 'the sacred'—sacred formula, sacred chant, sacred action. Later, since the 'sacred' as manifested in ritual was felt to be the bond that linked temporal man with what is eternal, it came to be used to represent both the eternal as it is in itself beyond space and time and as it manifests itself in the phenomenal world. It is, therefore, in the terminology of classical Hinduism, both the *state* that is natural to the liberated soul (*moksha*) and the source from which all phenomenal existence derives its being; it is the link between the world of *saṁsāra* which is conditioned by space and time, cause and effect, and *moksha* which transcends all four: it is both eternal Being and the unchanging source of all change. It is *moksha* and it is the 'eternal' *dharma* too, for this *dharma* is the law which both has its roots in the eternal and governs the world of *saṁsāra* made up, as it is, of the numberless individual *karmas* or actions of individual men.

Brahman—dharma—moksha—saṁsāra—karma: these are the key concepts of classical Hinduism. None of them corresponds at all to what we call God, and it was not without reason, then, that Al-Bīrūnī, the great Muslim polymath who had made a thorough study of Hinduism in the original Sanskrit, declared that the Hindus 'differ totally from us in religion, as we believe in nothing in which they believe and vice versa'; for Islam, against the background of which Al-Bīrūnī wrote, was itself a branch sprung from the Judaic stem for which the whole of religion was summed up in awed obedience to One holy and transcendent God who was totally other than all he had created. For the Hinduism with which Al-Bīrūnī made contact the nature of God and even his very existence were matters of secondary importance.

Historically Hinduism may be divided conventionally and conveniently into four distinct periods. The earliest of these, of which the principal literary monument is the Rig-Veda, is frankly polytheist and clearly akin to the religions of other Indo-European nations. This then develops into a pantheistic monism in which the All is seen to be centred on the One or is wholly identified with the One: in its extreme form the individual human soul is identified with the Absolute. In effect this means that the gods are dethroned and the human soul is set up in their place. This is the form of Hinduism recently revived both in India itself and far beyond her borders in the Western world which lays all its stress on *moksha*, the liberation of the human soul from time, space, and matter. This, for many, constitutes the highest religious truth of which all forms of religion, both Hindu and otherwise,

are but imperfect and impermanent manifestations.

The third phase, which is perhaps the most important, is the development within Hinduism of strong monotheistic trends on the one hand and the crystallization and ossification of the caste system on the other. Preoccupation with the liberation of the soul from the bondage of time and matter gives way to a rapt adoration of God, that is to say, of the great traditional gods, Vishnu and Śiva, now regarded by their devotees as the supreme Reality and absolute Lord. This religion of loving devotion or *bhakti* became the real religion of the mass of the people and has remained so ever since. It was not easy to fit into the general scheme of classical Hinduism with its almost deterministic view of the phenomenal world and its stress on *moksha* as the final end of man. How it was done we shall see in the sequel.

It has too often been said that Hinduism as such regards the world as an illusion. This has never been true of Hinduism as a whole but only of one (though at present predominant) school of Vedānta philosophy which is itself only one among six philosophical schools: it has never been true of the sacred writings themselves nor of popular religion. Nevertheless it is true to say that there is and, except in the very earliest period, always has been a double tension within the Hindu religion—the striving after liberation from this world which all admit to be the final goal of man on the one hand and man's obligation to do what is right *in* this world on the other, the tension between *moksha* and *dharma*—and in the second instance the tension of two types of *dharma*, the *sanātana dharma* or absolute moral order which can never be precisely defined yet is felt to have absolute validity, and the *dharma* of

caste and canon law as laid down in the various law-books. These tensions are most plainly exhibited in India's Great Epic, the *Mahābhārata*, which sums up within its vast bulk every shade and nuance of classical Hinduism, both its orthodox formulations and the outraged protests that these evoked.

Hinduism is, or was, as much a social system as a religion. Its primary presuppositions of transmigration, the wheel of birth, death, and rebirth, and the hope of liberation from this bondage have already been touched upon. This is the ideological framework in which it moves. Its social framework has from very early times been the caste system, and this has, until very recently, become increasingly rigid, increasingly complicated, and increasingly identified with Hinduism as such. Indeed until a century or so ago the acceptance of the caste system was considered by the orthodox to be the sole effective criterion of whether one was or was not a Hindu. In matters of belief it mattered not at all whether one believed in one god or many or in none at all, nor did it much matter on how one interpreted 'liberation' or whether one rejected it outright so long as one fulfilled the duties prescribed for one's caste. This was one of the hallmarks of the Hindu; the other, much less rigid because much less detectable, was that one should recognize the Veda as revealed truth. To ignore caste or to reject the Veda was to put oneself outside the pale of Hinduism. This it was, and not his philosophical views, that excluded the Buddha and the *dharma* he founded from the Hindu fold.

The fourth phase of Hinduism we are living through today: it is the denial of its formal self and the reassertion of its spiritual essence. This revaluation of

Hinduism was prepared by the reform movements of the nineteenth century, but only reached and touched the hearts of the entire Indian people with the advent of a saint who seemed to incarnate all that was best in Hinduism, Mahātma Gandhi. For it was he who lent his enormous prestige to the onslaught on what all that was finest in India had for centuries felt to be a canker in the very heart of their religion, the caste system itself and its ugly corollary, the creation of a disfranchised religious proletariat, the outcastes or untouchables. Gandhi exposed the glaring discrepancy between the two *dharmas*, the 'eternal law' that is so 'difficult to know' but which was inscribed on India's social conscience and what was now seen to be a man-made *dharma* which gave its sanction to a social system which had developed into something monstrously unjust. The tension that through the centuries had existed between the two *dharmas* was brutally exposed to the light of day; and it is no accident that Gandhi met his death at the hand of an orthodox Hindu.

Thus while it was once possible to define a Hindu as one who performs his caste duties and accepts the Veda as revealed truth, this simple formula can no longer satisfy, for Hinduism is today, more than any other religion, in the melting-pot: what were once considered to be essentials are in the process of being discarded, but the hard core remains, and it is with this core that this book is principally concerned.

The corpus of sacred literature in Hinduism is enormous. It is divided into two distinct categories of greater and lesser sanctity—*śruti* and *smṛti*. The first of these words means literally 'hearing', the second 'memory'. *Śruti* comprises the Veda itself, and this is considered to be eternal, the eternal 'word' heard by

the *Ṛshis* or 'sages' of immemorial antiquity: it is eternal truth, eternal 'wisdom' or 'knowledge', for that is what the word *veda* means. The Veda as we have it is historically divisible into three strata—the *Saṁhitās* or 'collections' of hymns and formulas, the *Brāhmanas* or sacrificial texts, and the *Āranyakas* or 'forest treatises' which culminate in the *Upanishads*, esoteric treatises which seek to interiorize the symbolism of the sacrificial ritual.

The Veda as a whole reflects the first two phases of Hinduism we distinguished above. Of these the first is now of historical interest only, for the *Rig-Veda*, the oldest of the Saṁhitās or 'collections', represents an extraverted and life-accepting type of religion which was very soon to be submerged in an introverted and esoteric form of religion which constitutes one of the essential ingredients in all the subsequent developments of this many-sided religion. The turning-point is reached with the Upanishads and their dual search for the eternal 'self' (*ātman*) within man and the eternal ground of the universe outside him (*brahman*). This aspect of Hinduism, its 'pantheistic monism', has perhaps been over-stressed in modern times, for, though certainly important, it is only one strand among many that go to make up the rich tapestry that is Hinduism; for with the Upanishads *śruti* ends and *smṛti* begins.

Smṛti, 'memory', does not in theory rank with *śruti* as eternal truth: it is what is 'remembered' by the race and transmitted down from generation to generation. What exactly ranks as *smṛti* has never been defined with the same rigour as has been done in the case of *śruti* which comprises the Veda and nothing else. *Smṛti*, on the other hand, is generally understood to

comprise the *Sūtras* (aphorisms, usually philosophic in content), the Law Books (books on *dharma* in the narrower sense), the *Purānas* (long mythological works in verse extolling one or other of the great gods), and last but not least the two epics, the Mahābhārata and the *Rāmāyana*.

Tucked away in the middle of the Mahābhārata is the most important, the most influential, and the most luminous of all the Hindu scriptures, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* or 'Song of the Lord'. This marks a turning-point in Hinduism, for here for the first time a totally new element in Hindu spirituality makes itself felt—the love of God for man and of man for God. The Rig-Veda had known many gods, but none of them attained to undisputed pre-eminence as did, for instance, Zeus in Greece and Jupiter in Rome. On the contrary, the old myths lost their savour, and in their place appeared impersonal concepts like *brahman* which came to mean both the ground of the universe and what is immortal in the human soul. True, in the Upanishads the first glimmerings of a theistic interpretation of the universe begin to appear, but it is only in the Mahābhārata, and more particularly in the Bhagavad-Gītā, that God slowly disengages himself from the universe of which he is still the material as well as the efficient cause, and confronts man as person to person. The Bhagavad-Gītā is thus the watershed that separates the pantheistic monism of the Upanishads from the fervent theism of the later popular cults. Though not ranking as *śruti* it is nonetheless the focal point around which all later Hinduism was to revolve, and so all-embracing is its appeal that it has commanded not only the allegiance of the orthodox but also that of modern and modernist Hindus, and not least of Mahatma Gandhi himself.

It is the sacred fount from which the popular cults of rapt devotion to God (whether it be Vishnu or Śiva) naturally flow. From the time of the Gītā on, Hinduism becomes increasingly monotheistic, though the pantheistic flavour remains and is still very much alive in modern times.

Quite apart from the Gītā, however, the Mahābhārata, India's gigantic Epic, of which the Gītā is but a tiny part, comprises within itself the whole of Hinduism as no other book can hope to not only because whole slices of it are devoted to purely religious discussion but also because its hero, Yudhishthira, incarnates the Hindu's dilemma between the two *dharmas* that we have sketched out above. His dilemma is all the more poignant in that he is himself the son and embodiment of the god Dharma who presides over righteousness and truth. Yet ever again he is forced against his will and his better judgement to do things he knows to be wrong because either they form part and parcel of his religious duty (*dharma*) as a warrior or because he is bidden to do so by Krishna who is himself the Supreme Lord incarnate and whose commands it would be blasphemous to set aside.

It is often said that Hinduism is so obsessed by its quest for 'liberation' that it has very little to say in the matter of day-to-day morality and of man's relations to his fellow. This is partly due to what appears to be a lack of proper perspective among many modern Hindu apologists themselves as well as to an overemphasis on the philosophical side of Hinduism which, though important, does not touch the heart of or evoke a religious response from the average Hindu. It is due too to a tendency to stress the Upanishadic element in Hinduism at the expense of the more mundane and

this-wordly side we find in the Epics. For whereas, in the Mahābhārata, we have the whole of Hinduism in all its myriad aspects *in parvo*, in the Rāmāyana we are shown what the Hindus conceive to be a perfect life—the life lived by the God Vishnu in his incarnation as Rāma. Thus it is to the Epics that we must turn if we would understand the Hindu concept of *dharma*—'righteousness', 'morality', or 'virtuous conduct' as applied to this world. The tension between *dharma* and *moksha* is perhaps never resolved, but at least in the Great Epic we sense that the two concepts were felt to be two facets of the same thing, that *dharma* in the sense of 'right action' was the corollary and the prelude to participation in the infinite.

The Epics and the Purānas are the great store-houses of devotional Hinduism, and they mark the end of the 'classical' period in which Sanskrit remained the language of holy writ. Official Hinduism, with the Veda as its sacred book and sole source of infallible wisdom, had become increasingly identified with the caste system, itself originated and buttressed by the highest caste, the Brāhmans, and it was only the three 'twice-born' classes that had access to this saving wisdom. The lowest class, the Śūdras, were forbidden all access to the Veda, as were also women and, of course, outcastes. It was, then, largely to satisfy the needs of these religiously disfranchised persons that purely devotional religion developed in the *smṛti* literature, for this, since it did not share the absolute sanctity of the Veda, was open to all and, together with it, the message of God's love for all men irrespective of caste differences.

Because this new type of religion addressed itself to all men and was not confined to the superior castes

alone, an extensive literature began to develop in the various vernacular languages of India much as vernacular hymn-writing developed in Protestant Europe after the Reformation. Sanskrit, indeed, retained its special position as the sacred tongue *par excellence*, but what was most vital in Hinduism now found expression in languages that all could understand. This, the triumph of *bhakti*, the loving adoration of a personal God, constitutes the third phase of Hinduism, and it is reflected too in the theologies of the later Vedāntin philosophers who rejected out of hand the classical monist ontology elaborated by the great Śankara in the ninth century A.D.

The last phase dates from the British occupation and culminates in a determined attack on the whole system of caste to which Gandhi, in his later period, lent the whole weight of his immense moral authority. Thanks largely to the activities of Christian missions Hinduism became increasingly interested in the right ordering of society—in social *dharma*—and therefore in social service and the redress of gross social inequalities based on immemorial taboo and sanctioned by the authority of religion. The struggle between the old and the new in which it seems the new must in the end triumph, however protracted and bitter the struggle, is still going on. Hinduism is living through a time of crisis which threatens the very presuppositions on which it has hitherto been built, and it is too early yet to see how and in what direction it will transform itself; but transform itself it must since in the highly industrialized society which is already beginning to engulf India, the taboos associated with caste cannot survive, nor would many today, except the most rigidly orthodox, wish to retain them. This will not

mean that the *sanātana dharma*, the eternal *dharma* that is the especial property of the Indian people, will disappear; for this *dharma*, though it may be 'subtle' and 'difficult to know' is what gives Hinduism in all its phases its peculiar bitter-sweet flavour—the flavour of self-forgetfulness and renunciation certainly, but the flavour too of a thirst for righteousness in an unrighteous world and a constant yearning for truth wherever it may be found. This flavour is embodied as nowhere else in the legendary figure of Yudhishthira, the gentle and compassionate 'King of Righteousness' and in the historical figure of Mahātma Gandhi who declared that Truth was God.

Chapter One

VEDA

THE sacred language of the Hindus is Sanskrit, and Sanskrit is itself a development and formalization of the more ancient 'Vedic' in which the Vedas were composed. It is an Indo-European language with very close links with the Iranian group of languages spoken throughout the first Persian Empire. The Indo-Iranians formed the most easterly group of the Indo-European people, and both Indians and Iranians spoke of themselves as *āryas* ('Aryans'), a term that later came to mean 'nobleman' or 'gentleman' in contra-distinction to the conquered populations. Just when these Aryans invaded India is anyone's guess, and scholars have dated this event anywhere between 4000 and 1000 B.C., though the consensus of opinion would now appear to be settling on the second half of the second millennium B.C.

The only datable inscription concerning these remote times comes not from India or even from Iran, but from a Turkish village in Eastern Anatolia called Boghaz Köy. Here was discovered the text of a treaty between the Hittite king Shuppiluliumash and the king of Mitanni, Mattiwaza. The name of the latter is Indo-Iranian, and he was a worshipper of Indo-Iranian gods. This treaty dates from the earlier half of the fourteenth century and in it are mentioned four gods (in a slightly differing form) prominent in the Vedas—Varuna, Mitra, Indra, and the Nāsatyas. The presence of this Indo-Iranian people in Eastern Anatolia

Chapter Two

BRAHMAN

THE world of the Rig-Veda was still the world of Indo-European mythology, and the rise of Indra to his position as 'king of the gods' at the expense of Varuna is closely parallel to the ousting of Kronos by Zeus in Greek mythology; and just as Zeus was to maintain his predominant position in later times, so was Indra to remain the undisputed prince of the celestials throughout the classical period. His victory, however, turned out to be nugatory, for with the close of the Rig-Vedic period the gods, whose importance had always been bound up with the sacrifice, were rapidly subordinated to it, and the sacrifice itself, which was conceived of as being not only the ritual representation of the ordering of the cosmos, but also as the necessary concomitant of that ordering, without which the cosmos itself would fall apart, lost its hold on men's thoughts. The old myths and rituals associated with them began to lose their savour: the gods had failed, and there were as yet no new gods to set up in their place.

There is a tendency (which we were unable to avoid in our last chapter) to isolate the Rig-Veda from the rest of the Vedic scriptures and, therefore *a fortiori* from the scriptures (*smṛtis*) of classical Hinduism; and to some extent this is unavoidable. But for the Vedic Indians themselves the importance of the Rig-Veda, like that of the other Vedas, lay not so much in itself as in the use made of it in the sacrifice.

Chapter Three

MOKSHA

WHAT most sharply distinguishes Hinduism, like its offshoot Buddhism, from the religions of Semitic origin, is its unquestioning acceptance of the doctrine of rebirth, reincarnation, or the transmigration of souls. Of this there is no trace in the Saṁhitās or the Brāhmanas, and it is only when we come to the Upanishads that we first meet with this doctrine which was to become central to all Hindu thought. In the Rig-Veda the soul of the dead is carried aloft by the fire-god, Agni, who consumes the material body at cremation, to the heavenly world where it disports itself with the gods in perfect, carefree bliss. As in the Iranian tradition the joys of the soul are conceived of in material terms: the soul receives a new, more 'subtle' body, and its life is a replica of human life on earth, though freed from all the imperfections that are inseparable from it here. There will be eating and drinking of heavenly food and drink, reunion with father, mother, wife, and sons, the enjoyment of the delights of love, eternal light and movement unrestrained, soft, cooling breezes, and swift, refreshing waters, soft music and streams of milk, Soma, honey, and wine (AV, 4.34.5–6). There will be neither rich, nor poor, neither powerful nor oppressed, nor will there be sickness, old age, or deformity of any kind. The joys of the blest will be a hundred times greater than the highest bliss on earth. So much is allotted to the righteous dead.

Chapter Four

GOD

MOKSHA means 'liberation, freedom, release'. As a snake is 'released' (*vimukta*) from its old skin, so is the arrow of the Ātman released from the bow of the mystic syllable *Oṁ* into the target of Brahman (MundU, 2.2.4): it is freedom to range at will as a bird flies freely through the unobstructed air or as a fish swims through the boundless ocean (MBh, 12.328.30–31); it is freedom from the body and the trammels of space and time which fetter the body, freedom to laugh and play in the infinite, as the *Chāndogya* Upanishad puts it. Only in the Advaita Vedānta and the Sāṁkhya-Yoga does *moksha* imply the total isolation of the soul within itself, whether this isolation is interpreted as that of the Absolute or simply of one individual soul.

In the Upanishads there are two trends of which the drift towards monism is one. The other is a trend towards a more or less clear-cut form of theism. We have no space to trace this tendency in detail here, but must be content to say that the Brahman-Ātman is spoken of not only as the imperishable, the All, and so on, but also as the Lord and king of all, the 'Inner Controller' who indwells the cosmos yet is other than it. The shift towards theism becomes more marked when we find the authors of the Upanishads using once again the term *deva* 'god', but not now in the sense of *a* god as in the Rig-Veda, but of 'God', the omnipotent, omniscient ruler of the universe. This tendency culminates in the *Śvetāśvatara* Upanishad

Chapter Five

DHARMA

BETTER to do one's own duty (*dharma*) though void of merit than to do another's duty, however well performed. Doing the works (*karma*) that inhere in one's own condition (*svabhāva-niyata*) one remains unsullied. One should not lay aside the works that are inborn in each of us, even though they involve demerit (*sadosha*), for all enterprises are associated with demerit as is fire with smoke (BG, 18.47–48).

Karma, though it must be transcended by a total detachment from its 'fruits', is, nevertheless, inherent in the very nature of things: *sannyāsa* ('renunciation' or 'abandonment') does not necessarily mean opting out of the world in fervid, selfless, and yet selfish asceticism, but rather living in this world in the sublime consciousness of not being *of* this world. Though the soul be not yet free (*mukta*, 'liberated'), it should behave in the body *as if* it were free and cultivate the virtues of dispassion that are natural to the liberated man. In this a man would simply be doing what God does, for Krishna says in the Gītā:

I need do nothing at all in the three worlds, nor is there any goal that I have not attained, and yet I am engaged in the doing of works (*karma*). For were I not to engage in works tirelessly, all men would follow my example, and these worlds would fall into ruin were I not to perform works. Then would I be a worker of confusion and a destroyer of these [my] creatures (BG, 3.22–24). The system of the four great classes was generated by me together with the virtues (*guna*) and

Chapter Six

BHAKTI

'SUCH glory do I nowise covet for which I must renounce a creature loyal to me,' Yudhishthira had told the great god Indra as he reached the doors of paradise, and Indra had reproved him for still being subject to human love, for in *moksha* there is no love.

Yudhishthira's dog was *bhakta*, 'loyal and devoted', and *bhakti* is the term used for a type of religion that seems to have originated in the Dravidian south; later it was to sweep the whole of India and utterly transform the face of Hinduism. In the Bhagavad-Gītā three paths to the Absolute are offered to the man who seeks liberation—the path of 'knowledge' (*jñāna*), the path of action (*karma*), and the path of *bhakti*. By 'knowledge' is understood not simply book-learning which, according to the Upanishads, leads you nowhere, but the intuitive apprehension of Brahman—a term which is variously interpreted by the philosophers but which in the Gītā means the direct apprehension of timeless Reality and the interconnexion of all things as cohering in the 'Great Self' and therefore also in the individual 'self' once it is liberated from its mortal bonds. To speak of a 'path of action' as far as the Gītā is concerned is misleading, for this does not mean that the active life, as against the contemplative, has value of its own, but that it is possible and desirable to pursue the life of contemplation while still engaged in an active life, be it the sacred ministration of the Brāhman, the warfare of the Kshatriya, the business

Chapter Seven

ENCOUNTER

WHEN the British made their appearance on the Indian scene in the eighteenth century, they found a sub-continent politically disunited and religiously split in two. The religious split, however, did not altogether follow territorial lines. The north-west, it is true, had in the course of centuries become predominantly Muslim, but Muslims were also scattered throughout the rest of India, being thinnest in the south. As a reaction against Muslim predominance and Muslim proselytism Hinduism turned in upon itself. Despite the affirmation of the *bhakti* reformers that salvation was open to all, irrespective of creed or caste, and despite their efforts to break down the barriers in their own communities, caste not only persisted but grew more rigid. But caste in the eighteenth century was something very different from the *varnāśrama-dharma* we outlined in Chapter V. At the beginning of this century there were 2,378 castes in India, and these castes formed closed communities which had no social contact with each other. It was not permissible to marry outside one's own caste or for members of one caste to eat, drink, or smoke with members of another. Each caste was governed by a caste council which jealously guarded the caste rules and punished those who infringed them. In extreme cases a man could be outcasted permanently, which meant that not only were all ties with his own caste severed, but that he would be treated as a pariah by

Chapter Eight

YUDHISHTHIRA RETURNS

BEHOLD, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

Mahātma Gandhi was no Christian, and the Christians were amazed that this should be so, for never in modern times had they seen any man tread more faithfully in the footsteps of Christ. Whence did he derive his astonishing strength, and how was it that he alone could transform a 'nation of slaves' into one of free, self-confident, and self-sacrificing men? For Gandhi did not see himself primarily as the architect of Indian independence from British rule but as the liberator of the Indian spirit from the fetters of greed and anger, hatred and despair. In his frail person the ancient ideals of renunciation, 'harmlessness' (*ahiṁsā*, translated by him as 'non-violence'), and truth met. He described himself as a *sanātanī* Hindu, one who follows the *sanātana dharma*, the 'eternal law' once embodied in the *dharma-rāja*, Yudhishthira. And Gandhi's dilemma was the same as Yudhishthira's: what and where *was* the *sanātana dharma* he claimed to follow? Was it in his heart or was it in what the Brāhmans proclaimed?

The Christian missionaries had many faults—'I miss receptiveness, humility, willingness on your part to identify yourselves with the masses of India,' he had told them in Calcutta—but they had pointed accusing fingers at abuses that shocked the conscience of the

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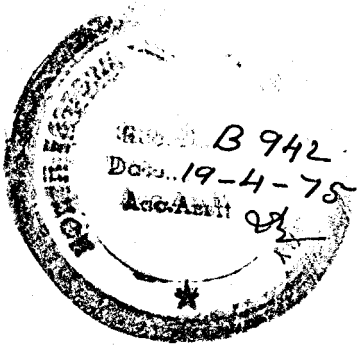

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