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An Interpretation of
Sri Ramakrishna's Approach to Religious Truth
and The Situation of Religious Plurality

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A man can reach God if he follows one path
rightly. Then he can learn about all other
paths.

Sri Ramakrishna
(The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 374.)

Introduction

With greater inter-cultural communication, western man has found himself increasingly to be in contact with persons who do not share his own patterns of religious piety. Because western man has tended to conceptualize his own patterns of piety as a "religion," upon the discovery of these other persons' patterns of piety, he interpreted such diversity of piety and religious customs to be a plurality of "religions." This situation of religious pluralism has been the area of concern for what has come to be referred to as the study of comparative religion. Studies in this field have revealed that persons of these "other religions" or religious traditions witness in different ways to what each considers to be a matter of ultimacy for their own existence. Comparative religious studies attempts to establish whether or not there may be some degree of mutual agreement concerning the nature of religious statements made by participants in the various religious traditions. If no such mutuality can be established, the situation of religious pluralism presents a dilemma in that there would appear to be little possibility for inter-religious dialogue.

To be sure, the differences in the various religious responses which are to be faced by any individual concerned with understanding the situation of religious pluralism are multifaceted. These differences become manifest in the doctrines, sacraments, and moral obligations of the different religious traditions of mankind. Yet underlying these differences, there appears to be a more fundamental difference concerning the nature of ultimate

reality.*

Such fundamental differences become manifest most emphatically in the various answers given to the questions "Is God personal or impersonal?" and "Is God formless or with form?" For example, a Christian may reply that God is personal and with form whereas an Advaita Vedantist monk may reply that God is impersonal and formless. It is my conviction that if, for example, the Christian and the Vedantist monk could come to a mutual understanding of the meaning of these questions, the differing answers would no longer be problematic.

*When I use the term "Ultimate Reality," I mean, for example, Godhead for the Christian, Brahman for the Hindu, Allah for the Muslim, and Dharma for the Buddhist.

Approaches to the Situation of Religious Pluralism

In response to the differing answers to these and other religious questions, a variety of approaches to them has arisen which fall into three general categories. The first category differs from the other two in its most fundamental principle. This first takes the position "My responses are true and different ones are false." Such a position can not even attempt to approach sympathetically these other responses because judgment has already been passed. Such an approach to the situation of religious pluralism serves to intensify the dilemma rather than to resolve it.

The next category is one suggested by a contemporary Indian scholar, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. He recommends that toleration is the means whereby such differences can be resolved. In reference to the Hindu tradition's quality of absorbing aspects of different religious traditions, Radhakrishnan states, "Toleration is the homage which the finite mind pays to the inexhaustibility of the infinite."¹ Furthermore, Radhakrishnan claims that toleration must not only be an inherent quality of one particular religious tradition, but must be the attitude of all religious traditions if the differences are to be resolved. I find this particular approach to be, on the one hand, puzzling and, on the other hand, inadequate. Radhakrishnan says that the Hindu tradition incorporates or absorbs aspects of differing traditions because it tolerates them. To tolerate implies recognizing and respecting the beliefs of another without necessarily agreeing with them. However, there is no reason to absorb something sim-

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ply because it is tolerated. Radhakrishnan seems to be indicating that the Hindu tradition can be understood to be finite in the same manner as are other religious traditions. His position is puzzling in that there is no reason to absorb different aspects of other traditions simply because they are tolerated (recognized, but not accepted). I may tolerate what I consider to be false beliefs held by another, but this is no reason for me to accept them for myself.

Furthermore, if not puzzling, the "toleration approach" is inadequate. If any one approach is going to be mutually acceptable, the problems that arise in the situation of religious pluralism must be mutually resolved. The principle of toleration does not meet this condition. Because toleration is the attitude taken by one tradition unilaterally in regard to another, there is nothing mutually resolved.

In defense of this position, one may argue that the idea of "mutual resolution" is applicable when the various religious traditions tolerate each other. As stated above, the idea of toleration implies that the tolerator finds something about another which the tolerator finds to be untrue or false, but does not wish to make this falsity or untruth into the basic issue. However, the case in point, resolving the traditional differences, requires that they do be made into an issue. Bringing these differences into focus or, if you will, making these differences into an issue, is the issue. Apparently, those who adhere to this "toleration approach" believe that a Christian who tolerates the non-theistic beliefs of the

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Theravada Buddhist (and vice versa) will make for greater inter-religious harmony than the Christian who condemns any notions of non-theism. This type of attitude is not intended to resolve any differences, but is intended to dismiss or forget them in the exact manner in which a housekeeper makes for a cleaner floor by sweeping the dirt under the rug. Toleration, then, fails to address these differences.

Perhaps the treatment of this idea of toleration has been too severe in that the meaning given to toleration has been absolute. Let us, for the moment, consider toleration to mean respecting the beliefs of another because these other beliefs are perhaps partially or relatively true. Or, more concretely, the Christian tolerates the non-theistic beliefs of the Theravada Buddhist not because he does not want to make the idea of non-theism into an issue, but because the Christian interprets the idea of non-theism to be true to a degree, but not as true as theism. This type of attitude may become apparent if the Christian recognizes the Buddhist notion of Dharma, for example, to approximate his own meaning of God. The case is not that the Buddhist concept is false, but that it is less true than the Christian's. Such an interpretation of toleration would make Radhakrishnan's position more plausible. This notion of relative religious truth will be examined more closely when the approach of Sri Ramakrishna is considered.

The last type of approach is the attempt to demonstrate what can loosely be called the "unity of religions." The word "loosely" has been used because those who make such an approach must first examine what they consider to be the meaning of the word "religion."

Is religion to be understood as the overt historical tradition or as something more personal? To establish the meaning of religions universally is no easy task because the meaning of religion must be acceptable to all the individuals of the differing traditions.

Attempts at establishing some essence of religion(s) have been, on the one hand, numerous and, on the other hand, to say the least, inconclusive. Perhaps because of these numerous inconclusive attempts of establishing the meaning or essence of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his book, The Meaning and End of Religion, traces the etymology of the word "religion" and concludes that as presently used, the concepts "religion" and "religions" are so ambiguous that they are no longer useful in dealing with the situation of religious plurality. Smith posits, "My own suggestion is that the word, and the concepts "religion" and "religions", should be dropped - at least in all but the first, personalist, sense. This is on the grounds not merely that it would be helpful to do so; but, more strongly, that it is misleading to retain them."²

As a pragmatic alternative to this word, Smith posits that "what men have tended to conceive as religion and especially as a religion, can more rewardingly, more truly, be conceived in terms of two factors, different in kind, both dynamic: an historical 'cumulative tradition', and the personal faith of men and women."³ For Smith, what used to be called a religion works in human history as follows: "It is a dialectical process between the mundane, and the transcendent, a process whose locus is the personal faith and the lives of men and women, not altogether observable and not to be confined within any intelligible limits."⁴ These notions of faith,

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cumulative tradition and transcendence must be investigated.

Smith defines cumulative tradition as "the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths and so on..."⁵ Perhaps this notion of cumulative tradition can best be understood as that to which a reference is made when one speaks in general terms about the "religion of the Buddhists" or the religion of any other persons involved in their religious tradition.

Smith refers to himself as an "historian of faith"⁶ because, as an historian, he has observed that religious traditions are composed by, among other elements, men and women of faith. This notion of faith is not to be confused with belief (in that the latter is oriented toward the elements of the cumulative tradition). "Faith is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbour, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing the world and of handling it; a capacity to live at a more than mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension."⁷ This quality of faith is not an inherent quality of historical cumulative traditions. Rather, faith is a quality inherent in religious persons which is expressed through the cumulative tradition. However, just as the faith of a person who participates in the Christian tradition is different from a person who participates in the Buddhist tradition, his faith is also different from that of others who participate within his own tradition.

because one's faith is one's own relationship to the transcendent dimension. In this latter case, the faith of different individuals of the same religious tradition is analogous only in that it is expressed through and nurtured by the same cumulative tradition. But, this is not to say that their faith is the same. Hence, for Smith, "there is no generic Christian faith; no 'Buddhist faith,' no 'Hindu faith,' no 'Jewish faith.' There is only my faith, and yours, and that of my Shinto friend, of my particular Jewish neighbour."⁸

Concerning this distinction between "faith" and the "cumulative tradition," Smith posits that the locus of religious truth is the person of religious faith. In his book, Questions of Religious Truth, he argues that

it is dangerous and impious to suppose that Christianity is true, as an abstract system, something 'out there' impersonally subsisting, with which we can take some comfort therefore in being linked - its efforts truth justifying us, and giving us status. Christianity, I would suggest, is not true absolutely, impersonally, statically; rather it can become true, if and as you or I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorize it, insofar as we live it out from day to day. It becomes true as we take it off the shelf and personalize it, in dynamic existence.

In other words, traditional religious propositions and ideas become true when they emerge as a means by which a person can express his faith. However, the locus of religious truth does not reside in these propositions, but resides in the person who expresses them.

Smith, as earlier indicated, points out that faith is a "capacity to act in terms of a transcendent dimension." It is curious to note that as an "historian of faith" who is engaged in the enterprise of comparative religion, Smith does not explicitly

address the forementioned question of the nature of the attributes of this transcendent dimension. In fact, in The Meaning and End of Religion, he goes so far as to say that "every religious person is the locus of an interaction between the transcendent, which is presumably the same for every man (though this is not integral to our analysis), and the cumulative tradition, which is different for every man (and this is integral)."¹⁰

The objections to Smith's position, that faith is inherent in all religious persons, are contingent on his idea that the "sameness" of the transcendent for every person is not integral to his analysis. Such objections will take the form, "how can Smith postulate that all religious persons are persons of faith when faith is the capacity to act in terms of a transcendent dimension which may not be the same for every person?" It would appear that the differing answers to the questions "Is God personal or impersonal; with form or without?" constitute the legitimate charge against Smith that because the transcendent dimension is not the same for all religious persons, the faith of individuals can not be a universal human quality.

Much time has been spent in an analysis of Smith's work because it provides a framework from which the approach of Sri Ramanakrishna can be more readily understood. It was indicated earlier that Smith's approach to the situation falls into the third category of demonstrating a "unity of religion." In order to show this unity, Smith has alleviated all reference to the term "religion" by replacing what used to be called "religion" with two concepts - faith and cumulative tradition. The apparent short-

coming of his approach is that he does not deal with the question of the nature of the transcendent dimension. If this question can be resolved, then some of the major objections to his approach will be eliminated.

Sri Ramakrishna's Variety of Religious Experiences

This paper will now suggest that the approach of a 19th century Hindu mystic, Sri Ramakrishna, addresses this question of the transcendent dimension in a manner that is consistent with Smith's position. Before delving into a more detailed account of this Hindu's spiritual experiences, it must be noted that he claimed to have experienced not only different deities in the Hindu pantheon (Kali, Rama, Brahman, Sakti), but also claimed to have experienced Jesus Christ and Allah. Ramakrishna's approach also falls into the third category of approaches to the situation of religious plurality. That Sri Ramakrishna understood there to be an essence to "religion(s)" is most emphatically emphasized in some of his more famous statements such as "All religions are paths leading to the same goal," and "Mother Kali and Brahman are One." In the first of these statements, the "same goal" refers to an awareness of what Smith has called the transcendent dimension. The questions which need to be asked are, "In what manner are religions paths to the same goal?" and "How are Mother Kali and Brahman to be understood as the same? It is a plausible argument that both of his statements refer to nothing more than the Vedantist creed "Tat tvam asi" ("That thou art"). In other words, according to such an argument, the "same goal" has been interpreted as meaning that Allah, Christ, and Kali are ultimately the same as Brahman. However, if Ramakrishna's statements are so interpreted, then the question of the nature of the transcendent dimension has not been mutually resolved because a Christian may express the transcendent dimension to be ultimately personal

and with form and a Theravada Buddhist may express the transcendent dimension to be ultimately impersonal and without form. At best, such an interpretation resolves the problems of religious plurality only for the Vedantist. The Vedantist position is analogous to the position of toleration in that the Vedantist is holding the non-Vedantist understandings of the transcendent dimension to be partially or relatively true.

Instead of addressing Ramakrishna's statements concerning the transcendent dimension as having metaphysical meaning, I contend that a fuller appreciation of his position can be attained by addressing them as having an existential meaning. There has been little previous research on Ramakrishna by individuals who have not been his followers or disciples. Previous research which can be used to document my position regarding Ramakrishna's statements is almost nil. However, one individual, Nalini Devdas, does support my claim, but does so very briefly.

In other words, Sri Ramakrishna interprets the statement: 'All religions are paths that lead to the same goal,' existentially, not metaphysically. It is the practical discipline of sadhana, not the philosophical question about the ultimate significance of particular religions, that concerns him.¹¹

In order to demonstrate that Ramakrishna did interpret this statement existentially, it is imperative that one examine the context in which he has made this and other statements.

All of his recorded statements are found in The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (recorded by one of his disciples, Marendra) in which can be found Ramakrishna's responses to the questions presented by his household disciples. The most frequently asked questions are those which were cited earlier, "Is God with or

without form and is God personal or impersonal?" To ascertain the meaning of Ramakrishna's answers, it is necessary to disclose the meaning that the question had for him. The disclosure of the meaning of the question and his answer, I hope will demonstrate how it was possible for Ramakrishna to have "participated" in the various religious traditions.

Before examining Ramakrishna's Gospel, it will be beneficial to investigate Ramakrishna's experiences of the Divine or the transcendent dimension because it was the experiences which gave rise to Ramakrishna's understanding of the Divine.

Born in 1836 to a Brahman couple, Khudiram Chattopahyaya and Chandra Devi, he was given the name Gadadhar during the Hindu sacrament of nāmakarana.* "Sri Ramakrishna's formative period was influenced to an important extent by the deeply religious atmosphere which surrounded him, both in his family and in the larger village society."¹² At the age of six, as he was walking through a rice field, Ramakrishna had his first spiritual experience. In later years he recalled:

And then a flock of cranes came flying. They were as white as milk against the black cloud. It was so beautiful that I became absorbed in the sight. Then I lost all consciousness of everything outward. I fell down and the rice [that he was carrying] was scattered all over the earth. Some people saw this and came and carried me home.¹³

Later in the same year, he began to spend much time listening to the sadhus (wandering monks)** "It may be surmised that the boy's

*This ceremony can be likened to the Christian sacrament of baptism.

**In this same year, 1843, his father passed away. Perhaps, this was the stimulus for this newly found activity.

close contact with sahus representing different aspects of the Hindu tradition (and there are many) not only sharpened his appetite for the experience of God and increased his detachment from worldly pursuits, but also permeated his consciousness with an appreciation for different modes of cultic worship."¹⁴

In 1855, Ramakrishna's brother asked him to become an assistant priest at the temple of Dakshineswar, and in the following year, he became head priest due to his brother's death. The temple deity was the Divine Mother Kali. Although his family deity was Rama, Ramakrishna had no difficulty in transferring his devotion to Kali. This phenomenon of transferring devotion is alien to Western religious history, but not so within the Hindu tradition. "For a Hindu, God is formless, nameless, attributeless, yet can take innumerable forms, names, and attributes so that his devotees can worship him according to their own particular taste and temperament. This is the Hindu position."¹⁵

While living at the temple, Ramakrishna spent most of every day engaged in service to the statue of the Divine Mother. He yearned to see the Mother face to face. "At the end of each day, with bitter tears in his eyes, he would fling himself down on the ground and roll on it in despair, bemoaning piteously the loss of one more day without attaining his object."¹⁶ Unable to acquire the vision of Kali, Ramakrishna became frantic. In his own words,

I was then suffering from excruciating pain because I had not been blessed with a vision of the Mother. I felt as if my heart were being squeezed like a wet towel. I was overpowered by a great restlessness, and a fear that it might not be my lot to realize her in this life. I could not bear the the separation any longer:

life did not seem worth living. Suddenly my eyes fell on a sword that was kept in the Mother's temple. Determined to put an end to my life, I jumped up like a mad man and seized it, when suddenly the blessed mother revealed herself to me, and I fell unconscious on the floor. What happened after that externally or how that day or the next passed, I do not know, but within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss altogether new, and I felt the presence of the Divine Mother.¹⁷

It is interesting to notice that in describing this experience he emphasized the qualities that arose within himself during the disclosure of Kali rather than the qualities of Kali herself.

After this first experience of Kali, Ramakrishna stated, "She showed me that everything was Consciousness. The altar was Consciousness. The water vessels were Consciousness. The door sill was Consciousness. I found everything inside the room was soaked with bliss - the Bliss of God."¹⁸ This "Consciousness" to which Ramakrishna referred has striking similarities with Smith's notion that faith (the capacity to act in terms of the transcendent dimension) "is the meaning that life has for him, and the universe has, in the light of these symbols."^{19*} Both were positing that the disclosure of the transcendent dimension "is in the end significant not in isolation but within a whole system of ideas, practices, values, and the like, forming a pattern of which it is no doubt the keystone but not the totality."²⁰

Furthermore, unlike most devotees of the Divine Mother, his experience was not the culmination of a highly disciplined sadhana (spiritual practice) directed by a guru. Surprisingly, he

*By the word "symbol", Smith is referring to how a person of faith speaks of the transcendent dimension; this notion will become an integral element when the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna is addressed.

practiced his sadhana without such assistance. Often times, he sought assistance from Kali in asking, "I do not know what these things mean. I am ignorant of mantras and scriptures. Teach me Mother how to realize Thee. Who else can help?"²¹

This leads to another reference to Smith's works. Smith has posited that the locus of religious truth is the person of faith, not the propositions and cumulative traditions in which the faith of others has been expressed. Similarly, Ramakrishna has turned to his own relationship to Kali to further his understanding, rather than to his tradition. Ramakrishna verified that sadhana was necessary for the vision of the Divine, but the love or craving for such a vision was of greater necessity. In his own words, "(Sadhana) are absolutely necessary for Self-knowledge," but if there is perfect faith then a little practice is enough."²² In this statement a further idea is introduced. The experience of disclosing of the Divine is in itself self-knowledge. By "self-knowledge," Ramakrishna was referring to the idea that the understanding one has of that which has been disclosed is not to be separated from the understanding of the self to which the disclosure was made. This idea will be explored more fully while attempting to clarify the meaning of the question "Is God personal or impersonal?"

Soon after these experiences of Kali, Ramakrishna retired from his priesthood because he felt that his priestly functions were interfering with his spiritual quest. Shortly after retiring, Ramakrishna desired to participate in other Hindu tradi-

tions so that he could experience what persons from these other traditions had been expressing as the transcendent dimension.

None of the works with which I am acquainted has established a plausible motive or reason for such a desire. Claude Allan Stark, in his book concerning Ramakrishna, God of All, is the only one who even addresses this issue.

It must be remembered that direct experience was the only criterion that Sri Ramakrishna used to verify the existence of God in any of his forms. In his terms of understanding religious inquiry, an aspect of Ultimate Reality exists only if, and when, it can be experienced or directly perceived.

and,

It was his peculiar nature, as has been shown, to test or verify values of the spiritual world.²³

The second of these statements provides virtually no insight into Ramakrishna's reasons for desiring to participate in other traditions. On the other hand, his first statement provides a valuable insight which Stark himself has failed to follow up. In declaring that Ramakrishna's understanding of Ultimate Reality arose when it was directly perceived, Stark has hinted at the idea that, for Ramakrishna, the locus of religious truth is the person of faith as the person "perceives" (Smith uses the words "relates to") the transcendent. Further attention will be given to this idea later, but for the present, one important issue must be kept in mind. For Ramakrishna, the question of the "truth" of the transcendent dimension is disclosed in one's relationship to it. Hence, the question of whether or not God "exists" is answered from the existential position from which a relationship is involved and not

from a position in which the relationship to God (faith) is not at issue.

His next reference of devotion was Rama, his family deity, who is considered, within the Hindu pantheon, to be a Divine incarnation of Vishnu. "Convinced that the quickest way to realize him (Rama) would be to become thoroughly imbued with the spirit of His greatest devotee, Hanuman, he took upon himself the task of reproducing as faithfully as possible Hanuman's attitude toward Rama - that of faithful servant toward the master."²⁴ The culmination of this servant-like sadhana (dasya bhakti) was a vision of Rama's consort, Sita. In his own words, "She lit up everything around her with radiance. I could see her, and at the same time I could see the trees, the Ganges, everything."²⁵ The relationship to that which was previously called "Kali" and the relationship to that which was called "Sita" endowed Ramakrishna with a disclosure of the world around him. Again, what was disclosed was not the transcendent dimension in isolation, but what the world meant in light of such a disclosure.

In the year 1859, there came to Dakshineswar a woman, Bhairavi Brahmaji, who was acquainted with both the practical and technical aspects of sadhanas. Ramakrishna welcomed her and became intrigued with a new form of sadhana, tantra, to which she introduced him. This Tantric tradition proclaims the transcendent dimension to be power (Shakti) which is embodied in the Godhead (Kali). Furthermore, the female Godhead, Kali, and the male Godhead, Shiva, "are in essence the same Reality viewed from two

different perspectives."²⁶ According to the Tantric tradition, the experience of Shakti in the form of Kali is contingent upon engaging in sexual intercourse with a female guru. The result of such sexual activity is supposedly that "the aspirant ... learns to look on the woman as the embodiment of Kali."^{27*}

Until this point in his life, Ramakrishna had expressed the transcendent dimension as being personal.** He had experienced Kali (as envisioned in the temple) and Sita to be not only personal but also to be with form. In 1865, he met an Advaita Vedantist monk, Tota Puri, who proclaimed that the transcendent dimension was not Mother Kali or Rama, was neither personal nor with form, but was impersonal and without attributes (nirguna Brahman). The Vedantist principle is that the world and conceptions of Ultimate Reality as being personal are illusions (maya). Furthermore, according to Vedantist doctrines, one's Self (Atman) is identical with nirguna Brahman, because since Brahman is all there is, nothing can possibly be other.

At the time of Tota Puri's arrival at Dakshineswar, he observed Ramakrishna dressed in his traditional loin cloth and asked him, "You look as if you were fit to practice Vedantic sadhana - do you want to?"²⁹ Ramakrishna responded that he would first have

*Ramakrishna was able to perform the sixty four tantras without engaging in the sexual union, "showing the true spirit of these practices to be symbolic union of the soul and God rather than sexually-oriented on the level of the pleasure principle."²⁸

**I realize that the tantra experience introduced him to the recognition of the transcendent dimension to be impersonal, but this impersonal "Power" (Shakti) is never separated from the personal Kali.

to ask the Divine Mother Kali. Ramakrishna returned from the temple stating that Mother Kali had told him, "Go and learn - it was to teach you that the monk came here today."³⁰ It must be noted that Ramakrishna turned to Kali (whom the Puri monk had called false or illusionary) so that he could understand the meaning of what Tota Puri had called true, nirguna brahman. As part of the initiation into the teaching of Vedanta, Ramakrishna had to cut off a lock of his hair and give up his sacred thread which were both marks of his brahmin class. Both of these measures represented vows of world renunciation known as sannyas. Implicit in this world and class denial is the renunciation of all previously conceived "truths." Both the lock of hair and the sacred thread were elements of what Smith has called the cumulative tradition. That Ramakrishna renounced these two objects in his Vedantist practice emphasizes that he like Smith, did not consider the cumulative tradition to be as significant as his personal relationship with Kali; he turned to Kali for permission to renounce elements of his cumulative tradition.

The initiation commenced that same day. In later years, he recalled,

After the initiation my guru began to teach me the various conclusions of the Advaita Vedanta and asked me to withdraw the mind completely from all objects and dive into the Atman (self). But in spite of my attempts I could not cross the realm of name and form, and bring my mind to the unconditioned state. I had no difficulty in withdrawing the mind from all objects except one, the all too familiar form of Blissful Mother - radiant and of the essence of Pure Consciousness - which appeared before me as a living reality preventing me from passing beyond the realm of name and form. Again and again I tried to concentrate my mind upon the teachings of Advaita (non-dualism), but every time the Mother's form stood in my way.

In despair I said to the guru, it is hopeless. I cannot raise my mind to the unconditioned state and come face to face with the Atman (Self)." He grew excited and sharply said, "What! You can't do it! But you have to." He cast his eyes around, and, finding a piece of glass, took it up: then, pressing the point between my eyebrows he said, "Concentrate the mind on this point!" Then with a stern discrimination I again sat to meditate and as soon as the gracious form of the Divine mother appeared before me, I used my power of discrimination as a sword and with it severed her form in two. There remained no more construction to my mind, which at once soared beyond the relative plane, and I was lost in samadhi (superconsciousness)! 31

Earlier in the paper it was noted that within the Hindu tradition there is the idea that all aspects of a personal God with form are lesser manifestations of the underlying metaphysical Oneness or nirguna Brahman. According to this Vedantist principle, once one enters into this "superconsciousness" or nivikalpa samadhi, one will recognize that nirguna Brahman is "the absolutely transcending dimension" which all other manifestations or incarnations only approximate. Furthermore, it was previously noted that Ramakrishna's statements such as "Kali and Brahman are One," were not to be interpreted as referring to this idea of nirguna Brahman. That Ramakrishna did subsequently participate in other religious traditions is one reason for not making such an interpretation.

Living at the temple at Dakshineswar was an Islamic Sufi, Govinda Rai, who "had found the hospitality of the Kali temple at Dakshineswar suitable to his spiritual practices and had made it his temporary home."³² While observing Rai in prayer and meditation, Ramakrishna felt that this man was also a seer of God. He proceeded to ask this Sufi to initiate him into the Islamic

tradition. I believe it is safe to assert that the great majority of those who have been "converted" (those who have done so for reasons of duress, are not being considered) from one religious tradition to another do so because of a recognition of some type of superiority in new found tradition or that the new found tradition provided the means whereby he could express his faith more truly. However, this claim can not be made concerning Ramakrishna; he was not at all dissatisfied with the Hindu tradition. The same impetus which made possible practicing different sadhanas within the Hindu tradition, made it possible for him to participate in non-Hindu traditions. This impetus has been referred to as his awareness of religious truth having its locus in the person of faith, not in the propositions of the cumulative tradition. This notion will soon be examined, but, for the present, it must be remembered that dissatisfaction with his own tradition was not the issue.

Ramakrishna described his initiation into the Islamic tradition as follows:

"I devoutly repeated the name of Allah, wore a cloth like the Arab Moslems, said their prayers five times daily and felt disinclined even to see images of the Hindu God and goddesses, much less worship them - for the Hindu way of thinking had disappeared altogether from my mind. I spent three days in that mood, and I had the full realization of their faith." Ramakrishna also said that he had a vision of a shining impressive personage with a long beard. This figure merged into Ishwara,* and Ishwara then merged into Brahman.³³

*"Regarding Sri Ramakrishna's second experience, that of Allah as Ishwara or Saguna Brahman, the reference here is to the formless aspect of God, yet with name, qualities and attributes as contrasted with Nirguna Brahman, or the Unconditioned Absolute beyond qualification.³⁴

The progression of the three visions (personal with form to personal without form to formless and impersonal) was similar to the procession of the visions he had while practicing the Hindu sadhanas (Kali and Sita with form to Kali as the embodiment of the formless Shakti to formless niguna Brahman). That Ramakrishna expressed his vision to have progressed in this same manner may be an indication that the religious truth of which he became aware while participating within the Hindu tradition was not other than the religious truth of which he had most recently become aware.

Eight years later in 1874, Ramakrishna desired to participate in the Christian tradition. With the assistance of one of his earlier disciples who read aloud the Bible to him, Ramakrishna had the following experience:

One day the master was in the parlour of the garden-house of Jadu Nath Malik at Dakshineswar, on the walls of which were many beautiful portraits, one of them being Christ's. Sri Ramakrishna was looking attentively at the picture of the Madonna with the Divine Child and reflecting on the wonderful life of Christ, when he felt as though the picture had become animated, and that rays of light were emanating from the figures of Mary and Christ, and entering into him, altogether changing his mental outlook. When he realised that his Hindu ideas were being pushed into a corner by this onrush of new ones, he tried his best to stop it and eagerly prayed to the Divine Mother, "What is it that Thou art doing to me, Mother?" But in vain. His love and regard for the Hindu gods were swept away by this tidal wave, and in their stead a deep regard for Christ and the Christian Church filled his heart, and opened to his eyes the vision of Christian devotees burning incense and candles before the figure of Jesus in the churches and offering unto him the eager outpourings of their hearts. Returning to the Dakshineswar temple he was so engrossed in these thoughts that he forgot to visit the Divine Mother in the temple. For three days these ideas held sway in his mind. On the fourth day, as he was walking in the Panchavati, he saw an extraordinary-looking person of serene aspect approaching him and his gaze intently fixed

on him. He knew him at once to be a man of foreign extraction. He had beautiful large eyes, and though the nose was a little flat, it in no way marred the comeliness of his face. Sri Ramakrishna was charmed and wondered who he might be. Presently the figure drew near, and from the inmost recesses of Sri Ramakrishna's heart there went up the note, "There is the Christ who poured out his heart's blood for the redemption of mankind and suffered agonies for its sake. It is none else but that Master - Yogin Jesus; the embodiment of Love."²⁹

As was the case with his assessment of Allah, Ramakrishna did not adhere to the principle of the uniqueness of Christ. Because Christian and Islamic theologies make such claims, it may be objected that Ramakrishna had not been initiated into either tradition. The following analysis of Ramakrishna's Gospel will rebut such an objection.

In the preceding section, I have offered a biographical sketch of Ramakrishna's religious experiences. I have been careful not to allude to the notion that direct experiences of the Divine alone constituted the whole of Ramakrishna's approach to what is today described as the situation of religious plurality. To the contrary, Claude Allan Stark, who is the only academician who has attempted to give an account of what constituted Ramakrishna's approach, has contended that direct experience was precisely his approach. In the introduction to Stark's book, God of All, he asserts, "This book represents an attempt to delineate one possible approach to the dilemma of religious plurality. The approach is based on the value of direct and immediate knowledge of God."³⁰ There appears to me to be a serious oversight on the part of such an analysis. The oversight is that he has not delineated exactly what the dilemma is. Stark's contention is that the "dilemma of religions is

their plurality."³⁷ Furthermore, for Stark, the dilemma is heightened by the respective claims of universality of the proselytizing religious traditions (Christianity, Islam) and, on the other hand, by the claims of the non-proselytizing traditions (Judaism, Hinduism). Hence Stark points out, "We are faced, then, with a total dilemma of religious plurality, the one group of religious traditions each seeking to include all men, the second group seeking to exclude all others."³⁸ By using the word "traditions," Stark appears to be claiming that the dilemma of the situation is to be found in the traditional historic doctrines. In setting up his argument, Stark uses the word "religion(s)" to refer to the historical tradition, but never explains what this tradition means for those who participate within it. Yet, without presenting this personal aspect, his thesis is that Ramakrishna's personal experiences of God constitute the approach to resolve the dilemma of religious plurality - "the question is set forth in this book whether the approach of Sri Ramakrishna, an approach based on the experience of God, offers a workable hypothesis toward solving this central dilemma."³⁹ However, why should experience of God (which has not even been offered as a mode of religion) solve a dilemma which has been postulated to be grounded in a pluralism of traditional religious doctrines? Actually my objection is more fundamental than this. Stark has attempted to demonstrate that Ramakrishna's approach, which Stark has determined to be direct experience of God, reconciles a problem which he (Stark) has yet to define. He concludes that "it may be suggested, on the basis of these experiences, that these divine moods or

bhavas,* which express variously man's relationship with God, are inherent in each religion. As such, bhavas may be considered universal, and represent an important aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's approach to the dilemma of religious plurality."⁴⁰ This raises two important questions. First, if personal existential experience was Ramakrishna's approach, in what manner could Ramakrishna have validated that all participants of the various religious traditions had this same loving attitude? Secondly, how could these loving attitudes be the same if the different participants of the various traditions answer the question concerning the nature of God's attributes differently?

*Bhavas are defined, by Stark, as the loving attitude which a devotee assumes in his relationship to God in order to experience Him.

Interpretations

Instead of attempting an interpretation of the experiences themselves, this paper will turn to an investigation of Ramakrishna's Gospel.* It should be pointed out that Ramakrishna does not refer to his experiences or to what the motivation was for even attempting to participate in the different traditions. Furthermore, he never suggests to his disciples that they must participate in the various traditions. That he never made such a suggestion indicates that direct experiences of the Divine while participating in the various traditions did not constitute the message of his approach to the situation which is today called religious plurality. Because much of the Gospel addresses the fundamental question which is answered differently by, for example, the Christian and Theravada Buddhist, the first point to be considered is Ramakrishna's responses to the question, "Is God personal or impersonal, with form or without?" By considering his responses, the meaning of this question will, I hope, be made clear.

It must be remembered that Sri Ramakrishna had very little formal education ("he never developed a liking for book learning."⁴¹) Furthermore, the individuals to whom Ramakrishna directed his conversations were not concerned with establishing an approach to the situation (after all, the "situation of religious pluralism" was not

*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna is the record of his conversations with his disciples from March 1882 until April 23, 1886 (Ramakrishna died August 11, 1886). M., one of the intimate disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, was present during all the conversations recorded in the main body of the book and noted them down in his diary. The Gospel was first published in five volumes in 1897. I cannot determine whether or not Ramakrishna was aware that M. was going to publish them.

that well known one hundred years ago). Thus, they had no reason to ask Ramakrishna to give a highly structured analysis when he did allude to the situation. As simple and straight-forward as his responses were, an interpretation of them does provide an insight for resolving some of the problems that arise in the situation of religious plurality.

The first mention of God in the Gospel is in a question presented by the disciple who recorded the Gospel, M..

M: "How can one believe in God without form when one believes in God with form. And if one believes in God without form, how can one believe that God has form? Can these two contradictory ideas be true at the same time?"

Master: "Very good. You believe in God with form; that is quite alright. But never for a moment think that this alone is true and all else false. Remember that God with form is just as true as God without form. But hold fast to your own conviction."⁴²

If this response is not to be interpreted as an answer which addresses the metaphysical attributes of the transcendent dimension, or God, we must examine why Ramakrishna believed that one's understanding of God did not yield any understanding of his attributes. The word "understand," for Ramakrishna, did not mean any cognitive process about God. Rather, what is meant is how one fundamentally relates to the transcendent, or God. Accordingly, in a response to a question concerning the nature of God, Ramakrishna used the following metaphor to demonstrate what he considered to be this fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension.

The one thing you need is to realize God. Why do you bother so much about the world, creation, 'science', and all that? Your business is to eat mangoes. What need have you to know how many hundreds of trees there are in the orchard,

now many thousands of branches, and how many millions of leaves? You have come to the garden to eat mangoes. Go and eat them. Man is born in this world to realize God; it is not good to forget that and divert the mind to other things. You have come to eat mangoes. Eat the mangoes.⁴³

The point is that just as one's understanding of mangoes is most fundamental when one is eating them, one's most fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension is when one is, in some manner, feeling and acting in terms of it. This acting in terms of the transcendent dimension must be such that the act is, in Smith's terms, a "total response; a way of seeing the world and of handling it."⁴⁴ Thus, one's most fundamental understanding of the transcendent is "seeing the world and handling it."

The objection to this interpretation will be that, surely, one can understand the mango as being of such a certain color and shape. And, hence, if the analogy of Ramakrishna's metaphor is to hold, one must also be able to understand the attributes of that entity in terms of which one is acting. The response to such an objection is that there are two different uses of "understanding" being presented. The understanding in the first instance refers to the most fundamental relationship between an individual and an entity. What is meant by "most fundamental" is the way one relates to an entity before one inquires thematically about the entity. For example, as I wrote the last sentence, I was understanding this pen more fundamentally, than I do as I write this sentence, because in speaking about the pen, I am making this pen into an object of thematic inquiry. Accordingly, for Ramakrishna, one understands the transcendent dimension more fundamentally as one acts in terms of it as a way of "seeing the

world and handling it" than when one makes this transcendent dimension an entity for thematic investigation devoid of the fundamental understanding. The problem of the situation of religious plurality has been formulated to be that the differing, and often times seemingly contradictory, answers, to the question of the nature of the transcendent dimension make inter-religious dialogue difficult, if not impossible. That the transcendent dimension is expressed as being either personal or impersonal is not this fundamental understanding because in so doing one has made the transcendent dimension into an entity which is talked about. A contemporary theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, echoes this idea,

For every "speaking about" presupposes a standpoint which is external to that which is being talked about. But there cannot be any standpoint which is external to God. Therefore it is not legitimate to speak about God in general statements, in universal truths which are valid without references to the concrete, existential position of the speaker.⁴⁵

Ramakrishna's metaphor indicated that one has a more fundamental understanding of the mango when one is eating it. Eating the mango, as acting in terms of it, is analogous to Smith's notion that faith is the acting in terms of the transcendent dimension. Thus, although Ramakrishna has not given the scholarly account that Smith has, he would appear to be in agreement with Smith's notion that what has been called faith is the fundamental understanding of the transcendent.

In responding to the question of the nature of the transcendent dimension, Ramakrishna stated, "Remember that God with form is just as true as God without form." What Ramakrishna means by the word "true" must be made clear in terms which will satisfy

the notion of faith being the fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension. First of all, at the moment at which he has made this statement, he has made God into a thematic entity of inquiry. In so doing, Ramakrishna's statement is not the act of fundamental understanding. Hence, the use of the word "true" to describe the attributes of the transcendent dimension after the transcendent dimension has been made into a thematic entity must not be interpreted as describing the fundamental understanding. At the another point in the Gospel, Ramakrishna says, "He who sees God knows most truly that God has form and that he is formless as well."⁴⁶ If the phrase "acts in terms of the transcendent" is substituted for "sees God" one can appreciate what Ramakrishna is saying. When one is so doing the question of the nature of God's attributes is not at issue. Hence, at that time one knows "most truly" not only that God is with and without form, but that he is also neither. Such an awareness refers to Smith's idea of religious truth having its locus in the person of faith. Speaking of his own attitude, Ramakrishna addresses this issue of religious truth,

After attaining this state (of God-realization), I told Mother, taking flowers in my hand, "O, Mother take back thy knowledge and thy ignorance, thy purity and thy impurity, thy good and also thy bad, thy virtue and thy sin. But when I said all these to Mother, I could not say, "Take back thy truth and untruth." All I could return back to Mother, but not truth."⁴⁷

He could not return religious truth because when one fundamentally understands God, religious truth is one's own.

The word "true" in Ramakrishna's statement, "God with form is just as true as God without form" does not refer to Smith's

notion that religious truth has its locus in the person of faith. Ramakrishna's statement that what is most true is fundamentally understood when one is acting in terms of the transcendent dimension is made from another context than that in which he says that "God with form is just as true as God without form." This latter use of the word "true" is a derivative of the primordial truth which has its locus in the person of religious faith as he fundamentally understands the transcendent dimension. Within the different religious traditions, the transcendent dimension is given different names (Kali, Brahman, Christ, Dharma, Allah, etc.) and recognized as having different attributes, i.e. personal, impersonal, formal, formless. If one were to ask, for example, a Theravada Buddhist, "is it true that the transcendent dimension is the impersonal Dharma," he would answer in the affirmative whereas a Muslim or Christian would answer negatively. This discrepancy over the "true" nature of the transcendent dimension lies at the heart of the dilemma of religious plurality. Although Ramakrishna was not as well acquainted with these discrepancies as is the modern student, he was aware that the different participants of the religious traditions were in disagreement with each other. In his own words,

I see people who talk about religion constantly quarreling with one another, Hindus, Mussalmans, Brammos, Saktas, Vaishnavas, Saivas, all quarreling with one another. They haven't the intelligence to understand that He who is called Krishna is also Siva and the primal Sakti, and that it is, He, again who is called Jesus and Allah.*48

*I mention this in response to the possible objection that Ramakrishna was not acquainted with and hence could not be addressing the situation which is today called religious plurality.

How can what is called "Brahman" and what is called "Kali" be both "true" and, furthermore the "same?" Ramakrishna states,

Kali is verily brahman, and brahman is verily Kali. The Reality is one and the same; the difference is in name and form. It is like water called in different languages by different names, such as 'aqua,' 'jal,' 'pani,' and so forth. All three denote one and the same thing, the difference being in name only. In the same way, some address the Reality as 'Allah,' some as 'God,' some as 'Brahman,' some as 'Kali,' and others by such names as 'Rama,' 'Jesus,' 'Durga,' 'Hari.'⁴⁹

What is the 'Reality' that all these names express? Earlier it was stated that the fundamental understanding of the transcendent is the capacity to act in terms of it. Furthermore, as soon as that in terms of which one is acting is focused upon as a thematic entity, one no longer has the fundamental understanding. These different names (Kali, Brahman, Christ and Allah) and attributes are used when different people express their own fundamental understanding. The "Reality" which these names and attributes address is not the transcendent dimension, but they are means by which the fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension is expressed. Because fundamental understanding is what Smith has called faith, it can be said that these different names and attributes are expressions of faith. Thus, the question to be asked is, "In what way are the names and attributes which are expressions of faith by different individuals the same?"

Smith points that the occasions of conflict between these different expressions arise "from attempting to take these words [Kali and Brahman] in some other way [than symbols], as if they were plain prose, and meant what they seem to say."⁵⁰ As does Paul Tillich in his use of symbols, Smith states that religious

symbols participate* in that to which they refer. In Smith's own words,

First, it [a religious symbol] is sacred; and second, it is therefore translucent. Those for whom it is sacred, when they look at it do not, like the rest of us, see it, but see through it to something beyond: something not precise, not objective, not finite: not something that they see, perhaps, so much as something about which they feel - and feel deeply.

and

A religious symbol is successful if men can express in it in terms of it the highest and deepest vision of which they are capable, and if in terms of it, that vision can be nourished, and can be conveyed to others within one's group.⁵¹

The issue of how a religious symbol participates in that which it represents has not been made clear by either Smith or Tillich. Ramakrishna's analysis does offer such an insight. Ramakrishna has stated that Brahman and Kali "address the same Reality." The "same Reality" is not the transcendent dimension, rather, it is the fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension. Ramakrishna does not elaborate on what he means by "address." A fuller appreciation of what he means by the word "address" will be attained if "symbolize" is substituted. As religious symbols, Kali, God, Brahman, etc. must not only represent that to which they refer, but in referring beyond themselves, they must "bind the presence of that reality to themselves."⁵² The Reality to which they refer or the Reality which they represent is the transcendent as disclosed in fundamental understanding. The different

*Paul Tillich uses the term 'participates' (Dynamics of Faith, p. 42.); W. C. Smith uses the term 'activates' (Religion as Symbolism, p. 438.); and Carl F. Hallenkrantz uses the phrase 'effective symbol' (New Approaches to Men of Other Faiths, p. 92.).

attributes of the various symbols (Kali as personal and with form) only represent the fundamental understanding because at the moment of saying that Kali is personal and with form, one is no longer fundamentally understanding. To recognize how the attributes given to the transcendent dimension as disclosed in fundamental understanding participate in the fundamental understanding involves a more subtle process. To do so one* must recognize one's own response as one hears the phrase "Christ is the Lord." Upon hearing the phrase, one is reminded of the means whereby one expresses one's own fundamental understanding of the transcendent without first taking the subject matter of the phrase out of the context of such an understanding. However, if there is a non-Christian who hears the same phrase and asks the Christian what the phrase means, the Christian's response can only give the representational quality because the non-Christian has asked the question from a context which demonstrates that the subject matter of the phrase is not a means by which he expresses his own fundamental understanding.

Accordingly, when a Hindu states, "It is true that Brahman is the transcendent dimension," he is only claiming that the "truth" of Brahman is that it is the means whereby he can express the transcendent dimension as he fundamentally understands it. The phrase "Brahman is true," when made by a Hindu, does not contradict or stand in conflict with the phrase, "Christ is true," when made by a Christian, because what is being expressed in both instances is

*It has been assumed that the reader participates in the Christian tradition. If not, substitute for "Christ is the Lord" whatever other phrase is appropriate.

the fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension, and not metaphysical qualities about it.⁵³ What is "true about both "Brahman" and "Christ" is that they are both means whereby the more fundamental religious truth, which has its locus in a person as he fundamentally understands the transcendent, can be expressed. For this reason, the "truth" of the symbols Brahman, Christ, Kali, etc. is derivative from the religious truth of fundamental understanding.

Religious truth, for Ramakrishna and Smith, is not the expression "Brahman is the transcendent dimension," or "Christ is the transcendent dimension." Rather, religious truth is that which makes such an expression possible. Furthermore, both Ramakrishna and Smith maintain that this religious truth is inherent in all persons. Ramakrishna states, "Truth is one; it is called by different names. All people are seeking the same Truth."⁵⁴ All people are seeking the "same Truth" in that all are seeking to act in such a way that they can "see and handle the world." The meaning of the religious symbols "Brahman" and "Christ" is the response one has to it. If upon hearing the words "Christ is the Lord" or "Atman is Brahman," one can focus on his own fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension without first making the subject matter of the phrase something which is merely being talked about, then one has understood the meaning of a religious symbol as being participatory, or "effective."

Persons within the same religious traditions do respond to the same symbols; e.g. Christians, upon hearing the phrase "Christ is the Lord," are made aware of the means whereby they ex-

press their own fundamental understanding. To assume that because the symbols are the same then the meaning of the symbols are the same is a mistake. One's own response is the meaning that a symbol has for him, alone.* The meaning of a religious symbol is different for every individual who responds to it, in the same manner that the faith of every individual is different because it is one's own capacity to act in terms of the transcendent dimension.

In concluding his section of Ramakrishna's experience of Christ, Stark proposes that he has used Smith's analysis of faith to demonstrate "Sri Ramakrishna's verification of the Christian faith...."⁵⁵ By using the phrase "the Christian faith," he has missed Smith's, as well as Ramakrishna's, primary thesis. For both Smith and Ramakrishna, faith or the fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension is inherent in persons, not traditions. Hence, Stark's claim that Sri Ramakrishna experienced

Christ does not support his thesis that Ramakrishna "verified the Christian faith" because there is no such phenomenon as "the Christian faith." What Ramakrishna's experience of Christ did verify was that, for himself, the symbol of Christ, as well as the previous symbols of Brahman and Kali, enabled him to express and elicit his fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension. His motive for even attempting to participate in the religious traditions was not to discover what the symbols meant for

*This is not to say that there can never be any shared meaning or response.

the participants of the traditions. Rather his motive was to verify that his fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension could be expressed through symbols of another tradition.

The symbol of Kali was the first means by which Ramakrishna expressed his faith or fundamental understanding. Although he expressed his faith uttering, "Kali showed that all was Consciousness," he was receptive to the idea that his fundamental understanding could be expressed through other symbols. Thus, his endeavor to participate in the tradition of Bhairvai Brammani (the Tantric tradition) was not motivated by an assumption that the transcendent was perhaps of a different quality than that of Kali. Rather, he desired to be able to express his own faith through other symbols with the equal conviction or sincerity that he had when uttering "Kali." This may appear to be a most radical idea and perhaps even heretical. However, perhaps an analogous example of a shift of symbols will show that Ramakrishna's shift of symbols is by no means so extreme. Thus far, only Kali, Bramman, Christ, etc. have been referred to as symbols. But, there are other minor symbols such as The Cross, a statue of the Virgin Mary, a carving of the Buddha, a shamanistic totem pole, etc. They are symbols because they are means by which one person has expressed his faith, and second the response to them is one of fundamental understanding or faith in that as a Christian looks at The Cross, he does not first seek any other 'meaning' than the meaning that his own response has for him. Now, if, for example, a Christian enters a Shinto shrine without any desire "to become a Shintoist" or without questioning what the shrine represents and finds the shrine to be spiritually moving, it would not

be claimed that the feeling of being "spiritually moved" was false. Yet, it was a symbol other than that of the Christian tradition that elicited such a response. When questioned as to what this feeling was, the Christian would perhaps respond something like, "I felt the presence of Jesus Christ," because "Christ" is the means by which the Christian could most adequately, most truly, express this feeling. What is most striking or radical about Ramakrishna's expressions of his experiences was that he could express them with different symbols with equal conviction. It may be interjected that this phenomenon is merely a function of his Indian heritage in that Hindu tradition has the concept of Istadevata, or the desired form of God.* But there is no application of this idea for symbols outside the Hindu tradition.

It was noted earlier in the essay that one may object to the idea that Ramakrishna had participated in the Christian and Islamic traditions because he did not adhere to the uniqueness of Christ or Allah as set forth in most Christian and Islamic theologies respectively. That objection can hereby be resolved. Instead of referring to Ramakrishna's claim of experiencing Christ and Allah as a claim of "participating in the traditions," one needs to recognize Ramakrishna's claim as a shift in symbols used to express his fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension. During the experience of Christ, Ramakrishna said that he "prayed to the Divine Mother, but in vain. His love and regard for the

*This concept was implied earlier in the section of Ramakrishna's experiences, p. 14.

Hindu gods were swept away by this tidal wave."⁵⁰ The praying was in vain because he could not express his fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension through the symbol of Kali any longer. The symbol through which he could express his fundamental understanding was that of Christ. If such an interpretation is made, then he had adhered to the uniqueness of Christ. This idea of a shift in symbols and consequently a denial of previous symbols is apparent in the nirvikalpa samadhi experience as he said, "as soon as the gracious form of the Divine Mother appeared before me, I used my power of discrimination as a sword and with it severed her form in two;"⁵⁷ and in the Islamic experience as he said that he "felt disinclined to see images of the Hindu gods and goddesses much less worship them, for the Hindu way of thinking had disappeared altogether from my mind."⁵⁸

Furthermore, in examining Ramakrishna's accounts of his experiences, it will be noted that he more frequently depicts the feelings he had rather than a description of that which induced such feelings ("I felt the presence of the Divine Mother;"⁵⁹ "I felt three days in that mood and had the full realization of their faith;"⁶⁰ "from the inmost recesses of Ramakrishna's heart went up the note, 'There is the Christ who...'"⁶¹) This is indicative of the idea that the fundamental understanding one has of the transcendent dimension is the acting in terms of it and not any "knowledge" one has apart from such acting. To articulate these feelings or fundamental understanding, he had to use the symbols of Kali, Brah-Christ, and Allah. In the Gospel, Ramakrishna briefly summarized these experiences and said, "I would see God in meditation, in the state of samadhi, and I would see the same God when my mind

came back to the outer world. When looking at this side of the mirror, I would see him alone, and when looking at the reverse side I saw the same God."⁶² The phrase "seeing the same God" is what this paper has presented as fundamentally understanding the "same God." For Ramakrishna, his religious experiences were of the "same God" because although the means of expression were different, the fundamental understanding, or the capacity to act in such a way that he could "see and handle the world," was not. To fundamentally understand the transcendent dimension has been depicted as being in religious truth. Accordingly, Ramakrishna states, "Truth is one; only it is called by different names."⁶³

Both Ramakrishna and Smith have depicted the situation of religious plurality as a situation of a plurality of persons of faith who express their fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension differently. That the different individuals express their fundamental understanding differently has occasioned a dilemma in that, for example, the Theravada Buddhist has interpreted a Christian's response to the question, "Is God personal or impersonal and with form or without?" as contradicting his own answer. To resolve this apparent problem, one must ascertain what meaning the question can possibly have. The question can not be addressing one's fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension because the fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension is the capacity to act in terms of it without first making the transcendent dimension an entity for thematic

inquiry. Rather, the question can only address the issue of how one expresses his fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension. How one expresses this fundamental understanding is through symbols. Smith has posited that to ask questions about the faith of another is "in itself to raise questions about one's own faith."⁴ Because one's own fundamental understanding or faith is expressed through symbols, to ask questions about the symbols of another is contingent upon raising questions about one's own symbols. One's own symbol is most fundamentally understood when one is responding to it and when using it to express one's own faith. Thus, the means whereby one can appreciate, but not fundamentally understand, the symbols of another is by observing the situation in which another responds to or expresses his faith through a symbol. Even this must be transcended, however, because to observe these situations with the overt intent of arriving at some type of appreciation corresponds with Ramakrishna's metaphor about the mango tree. However, in this instance, one is going to the garden, not to count the branches, but to watch another eat the fruit.

The disciple who asked Ramakrishna, "How can one believe in God without form when one believes in God with form?" was in the same predicament as he who is questioning the symbol of another. Ramakrishna's answer is by "holding fast to your own convictions." One's "own convictions" refers to what has been called faith or fundamental understanding. In saying "hold fast to your own convictions," Ramakrishna is implying that at times an individual's faith is not as firm or rich as it is at other times. In the dis-

ciples's question, "God with form" and "God without form" are two symbols used by individuals whereby each expresses "his own convictions" or faith. Thus, Ramakrishna is saying that the fullest appreciation of what a symbol means to another will arise when one's own faith is most intense. Because one can appreciate the meaning that a symbol has for another when one's "seeing and handling the world" is most acute and because faith is the capacity to act in terms of the transcendent dimension, appreciating the meaning that a symbol has for another will arise as a mode of this capacity.

I can not end with a dogmatic assertion as to how this coming to have an appreciation of another's symbols is a mode of the capacity to act in terms of the transcendent dimension because there are as many capacities as there are individuals. I can say that one who desires to appreciate the meaning that a symbol has for another will have that appreciation as one looks to oneself. Turning to oneself is the means by which Ramakrishna approached the situation of religious plurality in that instead of asking another what his symbol meant, Ramakrishna turned to his own fundamental understanding of the transcendent dimension in an attempt to discover if he could express his fundamental understanding through these different symbols. As to the question of whether or not one is expressing his fundamental understanding correctly, Ramakrishna asserts it is not within our capacity to demonstrate or ascertain that possibility.

If there are errors in other religions [symbols], that is none of our business. God, to whom the world belongs, takes care of that. Our duty is somehow to visit Jagannath.⁶⁵

I have attempted to interpret Ramanishna's approach to the situation of religious plurality. I do not hope that my interpretation has answered all the questions concerning faith, religious truth, and the transcendent dimension. Rather, I hope to have gone in a direction which can raise a few new questions. The situation of religious plurality demands at least that much.

Notes

¹Claude A. Stark, God of All, (Cape Cod, Massachusetts; Claude A. Stark, Inc., 1974), p. 188.

²Wilfred Cantwell Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, (New York, New York; Mentor Books, 1964), p. 48.

³Ibid., p. 175.

⁴Ibid., p. 168.

⁵Ibid., p. 141.

⁶Smith, "The Bible," from the Richard Lectures, February 25-27, 1975. Also, Smith will use the title of "Historian of Faith" for his proposed lecture to be given at the Symposium, "Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World," which will be held at Washington and Lee University, April 22-24, 1976.

⁷Smith, "Religious Atheism: Early, Buddhist and Recent American," p. 6.

⁸Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, p. 172.

⁹Smith, Questions of Religious Truth, (New York, New York; Scribner's, 1967), pp. 67-68.

¹⁰Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, p. 168.

¹¹Nalini Devdas, Sri Ramakrishna, (Bangalore, India; The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1966), p. 107.

¹²Stark, God of All, p. 12.

¹³Christopher Isherwood, Ramakrishna and His Disciples, (New York, New York; Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1959), p. 29.

¹⁴Stark, God of All, p. 20.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁶Hardas Bhattacharyya, ed. The Cultural Heritage of India, (Calcutta, India; S. Antool & Co. Private Ltd., 1956), p. 602.

¹⁷The Life of Sri Ramakrishna, 6th. ed. Mayavati, (Almora, Himalayas; Advaita Ashrama, 1949), p. 71.

¹⁸The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Translated with an Introduction by Swami Nikhilananda, (New York, New York; Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942), p. 15.

¹⁹Smith, "Religion as Symbolism," for Propaedia: Outline of Knowledge, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th ed., p. 500.

- ²⁰Ibid., p. 479.
- ²¹Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 15.
- ²²Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna, 7th. rev. ed., (Madras, India; Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1949), p. 184.
- ²³Stark, God of All, p. 37.
- ²⁴The Life of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 21.
- ²⁵Isherwood, Ramakrishna and His Disciples, p. 71.
- ²⁶Stark, God of All, p. 44.
- ²⁷Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 21.
- ²⁸Stark, God of All, p. 46.
- ²⁹Isherwood, Ramakrishna and his Disciples, p. 116.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 117.
- ³¹Swami Ghananda, Sri Ramakrishna and His Unique Message, (London; The Ramakrishna-Vedanta Centre, 1970), pp. 62-63.
- ³²Stark, God of All, p. 74.
- ³³Isherwood, Ramakrishna and His Disciples, p. 124.
- ³⁴Stark, God of All, pp. 75-76.
- ³⁵The Life of Sri Ramakrishna, pp. 253-255.
- ³⁶Stark, God of All, p. 5.
- ³⁷Ibid., p. 1.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 2.
- ³⁹Ibid., p. 2.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., p. 103.
- ⁴¹Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna, The Great Master, Translated by Swami Jagadananda, (Madras, India; Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1952), p. 59.
- ⁴²Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 80.
- ⁴³Ibid., p. 672.
- ⁴⁴Smith, "Religious Atheism? Early Buddhist and Recent American," p. 6.

⁴⁵Rudolf Bultmann, Faith and Understanding, (New York, New York; Harper and Row, 1966), p. 53.

⁴⁶Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 191.

⁴⁷Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 317.

⁴⁸Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 423.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 135.

⁵⁰Smith, "Religious Atheism? Early Buddhist and Recent American," p. 17.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 17.

⁵²Carl F. Hallencreutz, New Approaches to Men of Other Faiths, (Geneva; World Council of Churches, 1970), p. 92.

⁵³See John Hick, ed. Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth Claims, (Philadelphia, Pa; Westminster Press, 1974), p. 156.

⁵⁴The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 423.

⁵⁵Stark, God of All, p. 86.

⁵⁶Life of Sri Ramakrishna, pp. 253-255.

⁵⁷Ghananda, Sri Ramakrishna and His Unique Message, pp. 82-83.

⁵⁸Isherwood, Ramakrishna and His Disciples, p. 124.

⁵⁹Life of Sri Ramakrishna, pp. 253-255.

⁶⁰Isherwood, Ramakrishna and His Disciples, p. 124.

⁶¹Life of Sri Ramakrishna, pp. 253-255.

⁶²Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 545.

⁶³Ibid., p. 423.

⁶⁴Smith, The Faith of Other Men, (New York, New York; Harper & Row, 1963), p. 82.

⁶⁵Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 559.

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