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Universal Religion in the Life and Thought of S. Radhakrishnan (1888–1975)

I

S. Radhakrishnan spoke with many voices on the question of universal religion in its broadest connotation. Moreover, his career was such a chequered one that his views on this point were expressed in many different contexts. Furthermore, Radhakrishnan was a prolific writer and speaker, so much so that the compilation of an exhaustive bibliography of his works remains an unfinished task. The discussion of the concept of universal religion in Radhakrishnan, therefore, presents special problems. The task, however, may be rendered less intractable by adopting a few preliminary clarificatory procedures. One of these would be to initially address the question of religious universalism rather than that of universal religion as such. The other would be to adopt a chronological rather than logical procedure at the outset. These two steps will enable us to follow the trajectory of his conceptualization of universal religion in such a way as to ultimately make it possible to identify that object with some definiteness, in his universe of discourse.

One may, therefore, as a first but vital step, follow the development of Radhakrishnan’s views of religious universalism through the various periods of his career. Ishwar C. Harris, in his excellent study, Radhakrishnan: The Profile of a Universalist, divides Radhakrishnan’s career into four periods. His lead is worth following in this respect: (1) 1888–1908; (2) 1908–1926; (3) 1926–1945 and (4) 1945–1967.
II

The first phase of Radhakrishnan’s life, as identified here, commences with his birth and ends with the publication of his Master’s thesis in 1908, followed by his appointment as a teacher in Madras Presidency College, in 1909. It naturally spans the period of his formal education at the Lutheran Mission High School, Tirupati (1896–1900), Voorhees’s College, Vellore (1900–1904), and the Madras Christian College (1904–1908). In one of the few autobiographical reflections Radhakrishnan permitted himself, he recalls how his Christian teachers, ‘by their criticism of Indian thought…disturbed my faith and shook the traditional props on which I leaned.’ Early in his life he had been ‘influenced by a surreptitious reading of the letters of Swami Vivekananda, with their eloquent appeal to India’s youth to evince pride and self-respect,’ but at the Madras Christian College, ‘in his lectures on ethics to the MA classes Hogg spoke rather disparagingly of the ascetic and otherworldly tendencies of the Bhagavad Gita. These remarks, as well as the general atmosphere of the college, roused Radhakrishnan to examine for himself the religious beliefs of the Hindus.’ It is worth noting here that ‘Radhakrishnan always acknowledged the permanent mark on his own mind of Hogg’s influence, in both response and reaction’.

The first movement towards religious universalism in Radhakrishnan’s thought was apparently prompted by the particularism which he encountered at the college, both in the interpretation of Hinduism and of Christianity. To appreciate this situation one must realize that ‘Especially after the revolt of 1857 the missionaries, instead of continuing to ignore the beliefs of the Indian Population as a mass of iniquitous superstition, studied them carefully – not because there might be grains of truth in them but to combat them better. A change in tactics did not involve a revision of the attitude of condescension. The clinging to the certainty of a unique revelation ruled out the acceptance of a diversity of belief. To know more about Hinduism was part of the missionary’s equipment; to show its inadequacy in face of what Christ had to offer was the missionary’s business.’

Ishwar C. Harris seems to imply that the universalism of Vivekānanda’s interpretation of Hinduism was also a strong factor in this situation but V. Gopal, his son and biographer, writes that ‘Though he had read Vivekananda, it has been the nationalist spirit rather than the exposition of religion which has impressed him.’ As Radhakrishnan’s Master’s thesis dealt with Vedānta and, as