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Universal Religion in the Life and Thought of Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahamsa (1836–86)

I

The meaning usually associated with the term ‘universal religion’ is that of ‘one religion to which everybody subscribes’.¹ Similarly, a meaning often ascribed to universalism is ‘the belief that all men will ultimately be saved’.² In Rāmakṛṣṇa we encounter the paradox of a person who did not believe in a universal religion, but who, at the same time, was a religious universalist – who believed that all human beings will be saved!³ But then, the position of Rāmakṛṣṇa on the question of universal religion, in its broadest connotation, is replete with such subtleties. The phenomenon of Rāmakṛṣṇa is perhaps the most significant in the context of the concept of universal religion in modern Hindu thought. And this significance is manifold.

II

Rāmakṛṣṇa was perhaps the only one among all the religious figures of modern India who actually claimed that he had had the direct experience of God. This sets him apart in a class by himself. This claim on the part of Rāmakṛṣṇa has become legendary. It was made to his would-be disciple Vivekānanda, who was in the habit of asking the religious leaders he encountered: ‘Sir, have you seen God?’⁴ Vivekānanda himself was to describe the incident subsequently as follows: ‘I thought “Can this man be a great teacher?” – crept near to him and asked him the question which I had been asking others all my life:
"Do you believe in God, Sir?" "Yes", he replied. "Can you prove it, Sir?" "Yes", "How?" "Because I see Him just as I see you here, only in a much intenser sense". That impressed me at once. For the first time I had found a man who dared to say that he saw God...".5

The significance of Rāmakṛṣṇa’s claim of having experienced God does not end with this statement. Rather, it begins with it, for he went on to claim:

I had to practise all the religions once, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, and I have walked the paths of the different denominations of Hinduism again – of Shakra, Vaishnava, Vedanta and other sects. And I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are travelling, only they are coming through diverse ways.6

The significance of this statement lies in the claim that it is experiential rather than speculative in nature. It is, of course, possible to question the authenticity of the claim, but the point is that no one, apart from Rāmakṛṣṇa, it would appear, is on record as making this claim on the basis of experience. That the nature of his experience, or of religious experience as such, may be questioned or be questionable is a distinct issue in and of itself. The point to note here is the uniqueness and ultimacy of the claim, whose authenticity, like that of all religious claims, may be doubted. It is remarkable, however, that even those who interpret Rāmakṛṣṇa’s experiences psychologically rather than phenomenologically accept his ‘universalism’, although they attribute it to his ‘Hindu religious heritage’.7

It would be tedious to document in detail Rāmakṛṣṇa’s spiritual practices in relation to the various denominations within Hinduism and of religious traditions outside of it. This task has been performed painstakingly by his biographer chronologically,8 and the data has been examined by several scholars analytically.9 A statement elaborating Rāmakṛṣṇa’s central position must suffice here:

God has made different religions to suite different aspirants, times and countries. All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself. Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with whole-hearted devotion. One may eat a cake with icing either straight or sidewise. It will taste sweet either way.

As one and the same material, water, is called by different names by different peoples, one calling it water, another eau, a third aqua, and