

A Thomist Approach to the Vedanta

By
Bernard Kelly

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Editor's note: *The distinguished Thomist metaphysician Bernard Kelly (1907-1958) was a collaborator of Eric Gill and Walter Shewring and for many years a correspondent of Ananda Coomaraswamy. Bernard Kelly was unique in that he was not only well versed in scholasticism, but also knew and loved Vedanta and Sufism. By kind permission of Blackfriars Publications and Mrs. Brenda Kelly, we reprint below the text of a lecture given by Bernard Kelly to the Aquinas Society of Cambridge on 26th October 1955 and subsequently published in BLACKFRIARS in January 1956.*

WHEN I was asked to read a paper to this Society on some aspect of the Eastern religions I was glad to accept, not because I have the kind of scholarship I think would be necessary to speak about so vast a field, but because I have been engaged in what may be called the border-problems, the problems connected with the approach of a Thomist to the truths expressed in, e.g. the Hindu or the Moslem traditions, for some considerable time, and am quite sure that it would be a benefit to myself to discuss these problems in such company as this Society affords.

The plan of this paper has therefore two ends in view: to ventilate the problems connected with our approach to Eastern religions, and to attempt that approach in the case of some essential aspect of an Eastern tradition so that the discussion of the approach problem should not be left floating in the air. That appears to be the requirement of the task and I beg you to be patient with me, for it is nothing if not difficult.

The choice of Hinduism and, in particular, of the approach in the Vedanta to God as the Self, was made because it seems to me that this represents a key difficulty without tackling which one gets nowhere. It has the advantage of being so well known that little or no time need be spent in searching out and imparting information. We can set to work straight away in trying to understand what is known to every-body. From my own point of view I must broach this problem if I am to defend at all the position I am just about to outline in the approach of a Christian to other traditions.

I take it that the serious interest of, e.g. Hinduism is its truth. Its truth rather than its difference. Here a preliminary attitude of *crede ut intelligas* is I think necessary, and if this seems to be begging the question I can only insist that unless at least you do not disbelieve you can never hope to make the transition even momentarily from a Western to an Indian point of view. The differences involved are much deeper than differences of language but they are not the primary concern of the serious interest I assume.

As a practical observation I would say that an approach of Christians to Eastern religions which involved our being satisfied with a classification of each according to its specific difference would condemn us from the outset to an external and superficial point of view, a point of view which might even—in fact must to some extent—reflect back on our own world-view and theological attitude. To the extent that it would then be in the

light of what we might take to be the *difference* of the Christian revelation that we should tend to view revealed truth as such, as well as the revelations, if we allowed them that term, on which other traditions are founded. From this point of view it is not the primordial revelation to mankind, in which in their origins other traditions may be deemed to share, which is the vitalizing source of light to us, but uniquely the historical canalizing of this revelation towards the fulfilment of all revelation in Christ. The differences of other traditions are from this point of view their straying from this source of light and life.

But the truth of a given tradition is the measure of its not straying from Christ.

If it is the truth of Hinduism that one is looking for, one can set no limit at the outset to what one is going to find. It will require from us an interior rather than an external approach and will set in a very different light the question of differences.

For any here who are not Christians I should perhaps explain that the reference of the truth of other traditions to the truth of Christ does not mean that I propose to judge those other traditions by a limited truth external to them, but that I refer them to the illimitable radiance of Truth itself.

For a Christian it seems to me that a certain theological emphasis is required by this approach on the supernatural truth implicit in the primordial revelation to mankind of which we have a record guaranteed to us in the first chapters of Genesis—an emphasis wholly consonant, as far as I am aware, with patristic and liturgical tradition. The consequences of this may be very far-reaching. As I see it the present availability to us of the light of other traditions does and must revive the interest of Christian thinkers in a vast field of truth to which they may have become accustomed to give a less than central importance.

When I say the truth of other traditions requires of us an interior rather than an external approach I mean that neither that truth nor the mind understanding it may be separated from the truth of Christ, and until we have got it and see it in that perspective we may be only chasing a will-of-the-wisp. To seek the truth of another tradition as something extrinsic is to run after strange gods and to make divisions in Truth itself.

As something intrinsic to Truth itself, the truth of Hinduism for example is the making explicit of depths available to us in principle in the Truth of Christ but relatively inaccessible in the circumstances of our place and time without the stimulus and discipline of finding them in strange forms. I do not doubt for a moment that the availability of the scriptures of other peoples made so indiscriminately easy by modern publication, is for our education—not in encyclopaedic knowledge, but in Truth.

What is called in question by such an approach is not the uniqueness of Christ but may well be our understanding of that uniqueness. One has not gone far on this path before the words "only," "alone," "unique" and the rest, as so often used nowadays defensively by Christian writers in the context of Eastern religions, evoke in the mind a somewhat hollow response. Indeed there is a question which haunts the mind in seeking to understand the truth of Hinduism: "What do you mean by another?" We shall return to it.

It is a commonplace that the Indian tradition is metaphysical. This is true not only of the dialectical exposition of Vedanta which you get in the commentaries upon commentaries on Shankara's commentary on the Brahma Sutras, but it is true too of the way in which a Hindu student learns grammar or dancing. Those who have seen Ram

Gopal on the London stage explaining as he performs them the beautiful gesture-figures of Indian dance will have an inkling of that unfolding of truth by dancing which takes place when the student understands his art by a participation in the analogy of the cosmic dance of God. It is said that it takes twelve years to learn Sanskrit under an Indian teacher, but by the end of that time the student will not only compose grammatically but will also have been introduced into the understanding of the metaphysical tradition. Indian metaphysics is not thought of, as ours tends nowadays to be, as a special department of abstract thought; rather abstract thought, so far as it is true, together with the art of weaving, the unfolding of flowers and the spiritual attainments of the *yogi* are special applications or realizations of metaphysical truth.

I make these remarks in view of what I believe to be a current assumption that although Indian metaphysics are false they may yet vehicle, or be the oblique expression of, a genuine mysticism. Of a tradition to which direct metaphysical insight is an occasional and fortuitous thing I could understand such an assumption being made, but of Hinduism in which the direct metaphysical insight is central and essential, vivifying everything else, I confess I find it quite unintelligible. Such an assumption may seem to convey something to us because of the extraordinarily restricted sense we give to the word "metaphysics," meaning by it an ontology drawn by abstraction from the world of our daily experience and safeguarded rather than interiorly lit by the light of faith. From an Indian point of view such a metaphysics suffers from a poverty of means, implied in an over-valuation of the merely abstract or conceptual reaches of the mind, and it suffers too from not drawing its light directly from revelation. From an Indian point of view it would, I think, be evident that the first chapter of Genesis is more metaphysical though it is obviously less dialectical than the metaphysics of Aristotle.

If it is possible for us to adjust ourselves to this point of view, and I think it is possible if we free the metaphysical principles of St. Thomas from the limitations imposed by the textbook, we may attempt to explore a position which is a commonplace in the Vedantic writings but, I think, always rather shocking to us: the approach to God as the Self. Our reaction is at first, I think, either to regard the position as out-and-out pantheism and so to have nothing to do with it, or else to think that it may contain a valuable truth provided it does not mean exactly what it says. Then commences the task of adaptation of possible meanings which may take us upon a long and interesting philosophical journey but one in which we have no sure guidance and certainly no authority. On the contrary however there is no aphorism in the Vedic tradition which enjoys greater authority than "That art Thou." It represents not a philosophical opinion—not indeed a human opinion at all—but the realization in a given subject, which by that very realization is the transcendent subject, of the purity and fullness of primordial truth.

It is closer, very much closer, to this of St. Paul, "I live now, not I, but Christ liveth in me" (in which statement an Indian would at once recognize the utterance of a *jivanmukta*—one liberated already in this life) than to any position attainable to Western pantheism, solipsism, idealism or the individual opinions of philosophers. But it is one thing to say this, another to realize that it is so. The context of grace and of the supernatural virtues in St. Paul assures us of the authenticity of his statement even apart from the other argument of its truth: that it forms part of the inspired word of God. We recognize in it that mysterious transference of subjectivity in Christ which is a principal element of the theandric life.

And that, perhaps, is precisely what we miss in the Vedic affirmation. We miss the mediation of Christ in which we could recognize at once the possibility of its truth. We lack context to validate it, and to assure ourselves of the kind of affirmation it is.

This difficulty is pressed even harder in another Vedic affirmation: Brahmasmi—"I am Brahman." We could only translate it "I am the Godhead." As with the affirmation of our Lord, "Before Abraham was made I am," none but Christ could make it—and yet, you know, these affirmations are current in Indian writings and in the lives of Hindu saints as what everyone is born as a human being in order to verify.

It would be quite impossible in a paper like this to build up a sufficient background from Indian sources to show at all adequately the context of these affirmations. For one thing I lack both the knowledge and the art to do it. Rather I would refer you to anything you can get of the works of Ananda Coomaraswamy, particularly the beautiful essay on Hinduism in his *Hinduism and Buddhism*: that, together with René Guénon's *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta*, of which Coomaraswamy wrote that it is the best exposition of Vedanta yet written in any European language. What can, and I think must, be attempted is to construct from positions traditionally known to us certain lines—rather of metaphysical meditation than of argument—which brings us within sight of the truth as it is affirmed in the Vedanta.

For us it would appear at first that subjective transcendence is a contradiction in terms. The relation of subject, whether of substance to accidental determination, of prime matter to the forms of material things or of the thinking subject to the intellection which takes place in it, is a relation of potency to act. Transcendence, the ascent beyond nature to a higher degree of being and of knowing, is possible in virtue of what already is—"in act"—at that higher degree. Transcendence, i.e., is by way of act, and so far as we are subjects it is effectively in virtue of the objective actuality of God.

It involves in us the elevation of the subjective principle to a higher order of receptivity both of being and, in consequence, of knowing and of loving—what is wholly equivalent to a rebirth—but transcendence by way of potentiality, of passivity, alone is inconceivable.

Much of what is presented in the Upanishads in what may be called the argument towards sameness does strongly suggest to the Western reader the recession into the indeterminacy of the material and potential principle.

In the instruction to Svetaketu we find:

"Just as by one piece of clay everything made of clay may be known . . . the reality is just clay. Just as by one copper ornament everything made of copper may be known . . . the reality is just copper . . . so, my dear, is that teaching."

But we have to note that the teacher here is correcting the vanity of Svetaketu, his complacency in various achievements. He goes on:

"In the beginning this world was just Being, one only, without a second."

In order to realize that primordial Being as the Self it is necessary to turn away from accidental determination and from every particular intellection of the mind—to what? Maritain appears to be on the right lines when he suggests that the Hindu approach to God is by way of recession into the substantial *esse* of the soul. For that would satisfy the

turning away from particular actualizations to a central abiding "act." In the nature of the case I do not think this suggestion goes or can go far enough. It is Thomists with the boldness and paradox of Eckhart who could set these lines in a dimension in which they really arrive where Indian metaphysics are situated. Nevertheless we may note a possibility of transcendence in the very immediacy of God's presence imparting being—esse—to the soul.

Although the images in the passage I have quoted suggest to us a recession into the material principle, there is in the Indian doctrine no transcending of the individual ego by way of passivity: rather by way of act. Not however, act in the sense of action: and not (and this goes a good deal deeper) by way of *act* understood by the direct analogy of action. None better than the Hindu understands the passivity which is at the heart of action as such. It is by way of *esse in actu primo* that the supreme Principle in the Upanishad I have quoted is to be approached. That supreme reality transcends distinction.

Pure and self-subsistent *Being—esse* in the illimitable and absolute sense in which it is applied by St. Thomas to the Divine Essence—transcends distinction, as we know, in that each divine perfection, known to us analogously by the distinct perfections of creatures is, in God, nothing else than the Divine Essence. But with regard to the transcendence of distinction there is this consideration too: difference between things is relative to their being components, if you like, of the same world. Without a common ground in which they participate things cannot be said to differ. All things are intrinsically related to God, but God is not related to his creation. If God then is said to be distinct from the creature this distinction is of another order than any distinction of creatures among themselves. To content oneself with expressions which are admittedly little more than babbling, God's transcendence is infinitely more than any difference and because it is infinitely more it is also in some sense infinitely less.

The creature is distinct from God, yes. But God is not another.

These two propositions contradict each other because there is a shift of the sense of "being" between the one and the other. We may note that St. Thomas is often at pains to insist that the Divine Being is determinate, definite, even individual—in order to underline that It is not vague or indefinite in the ordinary sense of those terms, and that It is not a logical abstraction. But in principle this way of speaking is concessive to a point of view (not a voluntary point of view but our own natural mental disposition) which is situated in the midst of the distinction and variety of creatures and with difficulty transcends that situation by means of analogies drawn therefrom.

And if it is true, so far as we may presume to speak so of the Divine Essence, that God is qualified by no otherness—for the Divine *Esse* is unqualified pure actuality—then it is also true that there is something in the creature not so far as it is particular and limited but so far as it is—which corresponds to, reflects if we may use the word—not just the limitation of actuality which establishes it in the rank and variety of creation but that unqualified actuality of God himself. According to Genesis it is in Man that this correspondence is primarily to be found, so far as man is created in the Divine Image. The primordial light of other traditions confirms this even sometimes in language remarkably akin. In Hinduism one encounters in Shankara, for instance, in Ramakrishna and more or less passim the insistence on the inestimable privilege of being born a human being, for it

is from the human position—in all the vastness of Hindu cosmology—that liberation from the chain of causation (*mukti*) is to be attained.

So far as we are not God, our approach to God is to a principle outside ourselves. In him, not in ourselves, is the perfection, the Truth, the Good we seek, for God is absolute plenitude of being in whom all perfection resides.

Ultimately we are not God so far as we are not. *Non potest esse quod ens dividatur ab ente in quantum est ens.*¹

If, when we speak of the creature we mean what is not God, then precisely to that extent the heart, the self of the creature is a nothingness. The realization of this nothingness—not merely the theoretical assent to it—is fully equivalent to a death.

It is said of Shri Ramana Maharshi—a saint of the Hindu "way of knowledge," *a jnani*,—that the question which possessed his childhood was this, "Who am I?" At length, as a very young man he left his home and, taking nothing with him, lay on a tomb determined not to get up until he had verified the answer to his question. He never came back.

Mystical death—to discuss this as experience is to discuss it under the aspect in which it is not death. It has been said that into the depths of God none but the very dead can enter. And in this context mystical death is incommeasurably more decisive than the death of the body. When this death is accomplished there is nothing left but God—nothing that is not God.

We know that this death and this entrance into the depths of God are available to us in Christ "who through his own blood entered the Holies." His blood being the torrent of the Divine Essence.

In this Indian way of knowledge which most troubles us by its directness which goes beyond the personal relation to God we miss the subjective transference from the individual human subject "in itself" to human subjectivity in Christ made possible by the economy of grace. It is true that we find frequent reference to grace (*prasada*) where the personal God is in question, e.g. in the devotion to Rama or Krishna, and in the Gita itself, but it is not here that the full resource of Indian metaphysics is brought to bear in what I should call a central way.

That central approach baffles us by transcending any point of view possible to the individual as such.

So long as the creature is understood as what is not God, the immediacy of creator to creature, of the first cause to its effects, is understood as presence, as of one to another; the theandric life as a receiving and a giving as between two. But if we attend to the reality into which that giving and that receiving introduces us, what is present to us here is, in that reality, neither, to speak properly, present nor absent; but an unqualified and unconditioned plenitude of being: what is given to us here is, in him, what can be imparted to no other and what no other can receive. It is an eternal Self-abiding which for us indeed is transcendent Gift, because it is the transcendent Self.

¹ St. Thomas in *Boethium de Trinitate*, IV, art. 1