

DAYA KRISHNA

God and
the Human Consciousness

Offprint DIOGENES 117

GOD AND THE HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

To talk of God is almost a presumption, for who can say with any certainty that it is or if it is, in what sense of "is" it is, and what is its nature. And, perhaps, of all those who talk of God, the philosopher is the least qualified, as by temperament and training he lives in a world where concepts and arguments and ratiocinative thought are more real than anything else. And God, whatever it may or may not be, is not an idea or a concept or the conclusion of a well-reasoned chain of argumentation. Nor is it even a hypothesis to be tested or a necessary postulate without which our experience would make no sense and life cease to have a meaning.

Yet, however presumptuous it may be, talk of God we must, for in a sense it is the concomitant of self-consciousness which characterises human consciousness in a necessary manner. To be conscious, for man, is to be self-conscious and to be self-conscious is to be aware of the "other" in relation to which one becomes aware of oneself. The other in its totality, a totality which is neither additive nor constructed, is paradoxical in the sense that though preeminently real as the ground of all the differentiated "others" of which I am aware, it yet appears to be

God and the Human Consciousness

the most unreal as it can hardly be characterised as “this” rather than “that”. For any such characterisation would tend to exclude that which, from the nature of the case, cannot be excluded at all. This, as everybody knows, has led to the denial of any exclusive predication with respect to the ultimate “other” as “not this”; “not this” repeated infinitely or treating it as possessing simultaneously all possible attributes is unsatisfactory to the intellect. For if every attribute has to be denied of ultimate reality then it is no better than Nothing, and if every attribute has to be affirmed, then “other” comes to possess contradictory attributes, which is unacceptable to thought.

The other paradox which arises with the notion of an all-comprehending “other” of which one becomes aware in self-consciousness, derives from the fact that the all-comprehending “other,” if it is really “all-comprehending,” must comprehend me as well; a situation which is impossible if the “other” is really “the other.” Either the “other,” then, is not really “the other,” or it is not “all-comprehending,” as it excludes the consciousness that apprehends the “other” as a necessary correlate of its self-consciousness.

It has been sought to resolve the paradox in diverse ways, as is well known to all who are even slightly familiar with the history of philosophy. Yet, it is equally obvious that all these attempts have proved intellectually unsatisfactory, however much they may have seemed satisfying to those who believed in them. It has been sought to explain the situation by indicating the intrinsic inability of thought to deal with ultimate questions. Because of its very nature, it may meaningfully deal only with determinate, limited objects encounterable in sense experience or at least related to it to some extent. Kant’s is, of course, the classic example of such an attempt, but it can be found in analogous form in other thinkers as well.

The problem has been seen in a slightly different way by thinkers, such as K. C. Bhattacharyya, who see the essential indeterminateness in the structure of self-consciousness as providing the grounds for the realisation of alternative possibilities inherent in the situation envisaged as alternative ways of self-consciousness.¹ The logical way out, by postulating a theory of types to solve the analogous paradox arising out of the notion of the

class of all classes, is closed for the philosopher as he is forced to take the totality into account whether he likes it or not.

Still another paradox which self-consciousness encounters in its situation relates to the fact that it can doubt everything that is presented to it in any way whatsoever and that it finds no way out of this situation except by relapsing into the unconsciousness of mere consciousness or of sleep or of death. The relapse may, of course, take other forms such as plunging into practical activity or taking drugs or just filling oneself with sensations or emptying oneself of all thought by any means whatsoever. But, except for death, the escape is only temporary and the Cartesian *Dubito* returns with renewed vigour and certainty—the illusory certainty of itself and the certain certainty of everything that it can think of being dubitable in essence and principle.

Does, then, “the other in its totality” escape this taint of doubt, this infection which inevitably affects anything that appears as “object” just because it appears as object? Descartes used the ontological argument to disinfect and immunize the idea of God from the all-infecting *dubito* without seeing that the ontological argument applies and can apply only to the self and not to anything else. The existential certainty of the self, is not, as Descartes thought, the identity of “thinking” in “I think,” but rather that of “I” in “I think” as will be evident from the essential and inalienable dubitability to a purely cognitive consciousness of “He thinks” or “You think.” Whether the other thinks or not can always be doubted, but whether we may doubt the “otherness” of the other is a different question.

The awareness of God, however, is not the predicative awareness of the other; it is not the awareness of a “this” rather than “that,” but rather of that which envelops and transcends each determinate “other” we encounter in experience. And, not only this, it is that which abides and persists through the coming into being and passing away of each of them. It is, in a sense, the indefinite and ever-receding horizon in which all the “others” I encounter are enveloped and dissolved. This transcendent “other” is the ever-present horizon of my self-awareness and to doubt it is as difficult as to doubt my own “self-awareness.”

The distinction between “appearance” and “reality” is the heart of the cognitive consciousness, but are there not cases

God and the Human Consciousness

where appearance *is* the reality? The appearance of pain *is* pain and the appearing of the “other” is the other. Further, the question of truth or falsity may be raised only with respect to determinate “others,” for in their case, to use an old-fashioned terminology, the “what” may be distinguished from the “that” and thus be wrongly classified or categorised. But “the other in its totality” is only a “that” which has no “what” except in a metaphorical or figurative sense.

God, to use the modern terminology, is not a name, or a definite description, or a rapid designator, but just a blank, which each one has to fill, and necessarily so, for himself or herself; and this, not once and for all, but continuously, amending, erasing, changing, altering, in the light of one’s own experience and its myriad shades, nuances, varieties. It may therefore have as many names as you please, as many descriptions as you like, yet none of these is or can be rigidly designating or uniquely referential. And it is because of this that the awareness of the “other” in its transcendent indetermination, is as indubitable to self-consciousness as its own appearance to itself.

Of course, in a sense, consciousness too is a blank, a hole, that is filled in by each and every object that appears without losing its character of being a blank, of being fillable for ever and ever by any object whatsoever. Yet there is a difference in that it has a felt, lived quality which one only wishes and hopes for with respect to the “other,” of which one is aware as the inevitable correlate of one’s self-consciousness. This, in fact, is the heart of the religious aspiration: it wants to feel the “other” as it feels itself—with the same immediacy, intimacy and indubitability.

But the self-consciousness we are aware of is, in a sense, only a series of consciousnesses, each with its own nuance and shade of felt experience, incommunicable except perhaps through music or the literary skill of a great master. Yet, in and through these Humean or Buddhist flows of perpetually-changing self-awarenesses, we are also aware, however dimly, of that which not only envelops and transcends each of them but also abides their rising and falling, coming-into-being and fading-into-non-being.

Thus, the intention of self in self-consciousness seems on a par with the intimation of the “other” which is also found in it. Both are embedded in self-consciousness which all human

beings possess and which, as far as we know, is the distinctive characteristic of their order of being. Further, both are paradoxical in a peculiar way; they seem to be about that which, by the very nature of the case, should be the nearest and the most intimate to us and yet, in reality, they appear only as the farthest and most distant possibilities, almost incapable of actualisation in the present state of our being.

The twin poles whose awareness self-consciousness generates and which, in their own subtly different ways, gently, yet insistently, demand attention so that they may be at the center and not at the periphery, come, in a certain sense, into being through this process of attention itself. Yet, however much attention moves into the center that which was at the periphery, not only the periphery always remains but it is also always the more important of the two. The ever-receding horizon of the poles gives a tantalizing feeling which is never able to decide whether what it is pursuing is a mirage or the innermost reality of oneself and the world.

The impossibility of the decision defines, in a sense, the human situation at its deepest core. There are, of course, those who claim they have made the decision, but a closer look—not at what they *say*, but *do*—would reveal the facts to be otherwise. Also, the history of man shows no decisive evidence either way; and the mirage which makes one move and thus discover new realms of being which one would not have known otherwise, can hardly be considered a “mirage” in the deeper sense of the word. If the movement were to result in perpetual frustration, increasing thirst and painful death, then certainly the mirage would be a mirage. But if there is the joy of discovery and the increasing fulfilment of being, and the pain mingled with deeper moments of happiness and death apprehended as part of life and invested with deeper meaning, then the mirage is not just a mere mirage but a deeper possibility of being, dimly and vaguely apprehended, leading one on out of the confining certainties of the present.

The awareness that brings these two poles of self-consciousness into being also posits the problem of the relationship between the two and of the direction that self-conscious attention has to take in bringing that which is peripheral to the center of

God and the Human Consciousness

awareness. The solutions have ranged from radical identity to radical difference, and the religious and spiritual traditions of the world may be ranged along the continuum formed along these poles. Similarly, the preferred direction of attention has ranged from an increasing inward deepening of self-awareness along with the exclusion or even denial of any "other," including the total and transcendent "other," that is, God, as the complete abnegation of the self before God who alone is regarded as real and thus the sole object of all one's activity whether it be that of knowing, feeling or willing. Adoration, absolute submission to the will of the Lord and constant reflection on his infinite attributes, each infinite in its own nature, constitute the essence of this God-centered alternative that the increasing awareness of the "other" may take.

The two major alternative directions emanating from the polar awareness present in self-consciousness may be called "self-centric" and "other-centric." The terms should be treated more as pointers towards a direction rather than as designating something substantive. The former, for example, would include the Buddhists, even though they deny the substantiality of the self. Similarly, the latter would include almost everyone who is prepared to conceive of the "other" in its unity and totality and tries to become centrally aware of it in some form or other. Normally, the term "God" is used only in the context of the pre-eminent direction that the second alternative emphasizes, and even there it is primarily restricted to certain forms in which the "other" is conceived. Yet however natural the usage and the restriction may seem to those brought up in the Western tradition, it would be seen as a cultural limitation if non-Western traditions of religion and spiritual seeking are also to be taken into account. It is well known that large parts of Hinduism along with the whole tradition of Buddhism and Jainism do not believe in the primacy of the "other" in the sense in which Judaism, Christianity or Islam do. Similarly, to believe that when Einstein said "God does not play dice with men," he was using the term only metaphorically, is not only to do injustice to the integrity of his intellect but also to show a parochial narrowness with respect to the concept of God. One may be asked to recall Spi-

noza's notion of God, if one does not see the relevance of this remark.

In fact, no contemporary thought about God may even begin unless it recognises the parochial character of most such conceptions which, however self-evident, obvious and absolute to those who have been born and brought up in them, fail to appear as such to those who have not had the good fortune to be born and brought up within communities where those conceptions were held. The days of mass conversions are over, and even the dream of one's religion becoming the dominant one in the whole world is being given up, however reluctantly, by most religions. Yet the deeper, though rarer, realisation is not only that the reign of one's religion is no more feasible but rather that it is not desirable either. To realise this, however, is to realise the *alternative validity* of a religion other than one's own or of a spiritual practice which one does not pursue oneself. But the realisation of an *alternative validity* implies the giving up of the claim to the absolute finality of one's own revelation and the acceptance of the concept of multiple revelations of God in history. And this not only in terms of the past, but also in terms of the future, for once the claim to the final revelation is given up, the doors of the future are opened to perennial possibility giving rise to hope in the human breast that all that was to be has not already been and that man's encounter with God and the seeking of his true self is as unending as the search for truth or the realisation of beauty or the actualisation of good. The reason for this lies in the simple fact that all realisation or actualisation is determinate and limited, though what it seeks to embody and encompass is the infinite and the unlimited.

The consciousness that becomes aware of the "other" in its transcendent totality is, however, not just a knowing or witnessing consciousness. It is also, and perhaps even more primarily, a feeling and a willing consciousness. And, thus, the relationship with the "other" is modulated in terms of these modalities also. Any conception of God which is formulated in terms of the knowing consciousness alone may appear satisfying to philosophers but is bound to appear inadequate to others. Yet, any attempt at formulating a satisfactory interrelationship between the different conceptions of the "other" in its totality arising

God and the Human Consciousness

out of these different relationships seems almost an impossible enterprise. But its impossibility is perhaps of the same order and emanates from the same sources as that of having any integrated view of the unity of self which encompasses all these different modalities of the dimensions of its being. The seeking for a unified self is perhaps as much an ideal seeking of man as that of having an integrated, unified relationship with the "other."

The openness to future revelations, then, has to be accepted as a perennial feature of the human situation and seen as resulting from its very structure. Yet the denial of such an "openness" has been the central feature of all religions up until now. The absolute finality of the specific revelation on which a particular religion is based is the foundation on which all religions rest, and though some may show a more tolerant attitude than others to revelations earlier than their own, none shows it to revelations later than its own. In fact, the very possibility of any revelation occurring after the revelation on which one's own religion is based, is intrinsically unacceptable to all religions. This, in fact, is as much true of those religions which are non-revelatory in the sense that they do not believe in any God or divine agency which reveals to man as is claimed in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Buddhism and Jainism are the classic examples of such religions. Even Hinduism, which in many of its forms is not supposed to be a revelatory religion on the pattern of Judaism and Christianity, believes in the finality and infallibility of the *Vedas*, at least in its orthodox form. It will be difficult, in fact, to find any religion—major or minor, primitive or advanced—which does not subscribe to this tenet. And yet, if we are to reflect on the contemporary scene and the history of each of the contemporary religions, and move into the future, we have to give up this basic tenet which is held by each of them as the basic article of faith on which they rest.

The claim to finality is defended on the ground that what religion deals with is essentially atemporal and thus not subject to the distinction of past, present, and future or other such distinctions which are based on time. But it is well known that truths of logic and mathematics are also atemporal, yet this does not ensure for them the same status which is claimed by religions for their revealed truths. In a sense, of course, every truth

claims a finality for itself, as the finality of the truth-claim does not depend on the temporality or atemporality of the subject-matter about which the truth-claim is being made but on the fact that it *is* a truth-claim. It is, therefore, not the claim to finality but the claim to *completeness* which differentiates religion from all other realms. But a lack of completeness affects the finality-claims of each truth also, for truths are not separate, isolated, monadic units but related to each other and hence affected by those which are discovered later in an essential manner.

Most of the major religions have, however reluctantly, come to accept the theses of essential incompleteness with respect to all non-religious forms of knowledge. They have, however, stuck fast to the claim of completeness with respect to truths which they have claimed to be revealed in their scriptures. But they have not seen that the dichotomy between the secular and the sacred realms of truth and the acceptance of essential incompleteness with respect to the former and its denial in the case of the latter itself leads to a denial of completeness for the latter if any relation between the two realms is accepted in any form whatsoever. And once the completeness claim is given up, the situation with regard to finality-claims in the field of truths pertaining to the realm of religion is no different from that which obtains in other realms.

The giving up of the claims of finality and completeness in the realm of religious truth may lead not only to a greater tolerance between different religions and the process of learning from the insights and achievements of one another, but also open new vistas for the religious seeking of man and give it an added zest and spirit of adventure which it undoubtedly had in the formative periods when the so-called great religions came into being. It will also infuse that eternity-in-time which all human seeking displays in its historical dimension and thus release it from its fixed moorings in the past and set it afloat once again to seek and explore the inexhaustible possibilities of the spirit in a gaze turned towards the future.

God, as we said earlier, is a necessary correlate of human self-consciousness and as this consciousness itself has both a temporal and an atemporal dimension, the same is true of God also. The awareness of God in its limitless possibilities is to become aware

God and the Human Consciousness

of the possibilities of one's own self in each of those dimensions also. The spiritual seeking of man will remain central as it emanates from the very structure of his self-consciousness. To ignore it would only be to deny oneself, to limit one's vision to a narrow range of one's possibilities and in the deepest sense, to be alienated from oneself, for God is the name we give to that which is most real and of utmost worth in all that *is*, whether in that which I apprehend as outside myself or in me.

Daya Krishna
(*University of Rajasthan, Jaipur*)