

## THE CONCEPT OF SALVATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RELIGIONS OF INDIAN ORIGIN

*E.J. Sharpe*

Near the end of Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, we read:

The limit of human powerfulness, . . . and the commencement of the divine, together constitute the goal which has been sought and found in the religion of all time:— *salvation*. It may be the enhancing of life, improvement, beautifying, widening, deepening; but by “salvation” there may also be meant completely new life, a devaluation of all that has preceded, a new creation of the life that has been received “from elsewhere”. But in any case, religion is always directed towards salvation, never towards life itself as it is given; and in this respect all religion, with no exception, is the religion of deliverance. (681f.)

The implications of a statement of this order are, I think, clear: that provided we are prepared to accept a sufficiently wide definition of the all-too-common term “salvation”, there is no religious tradition which cannot be called a religion of salvation. Man is constantly, it seems, seeking to relate himself to the power or powers which he believes to control his individual and collective destiny in such a way as to achieve deliverance — or salvation — from limitations, frustrations, evils and unrealities. Where the traditions differ is not in daring to suggest that deliverance may be found, but in their identification of “the enemy” from which deliverance is sought. The enemy may be, as Professor Brandon used to suggest, the Time-process itself; or it may be some manifestation on or inhabitant of that process — the changing world, the spirits that exercise malevolent control over some corner of the world; or again the enemy may in some way be the enemy within, rather than the enemy without. All religions, though, seem to agree that man's situation in the world is not what it ought to be, and that between the ideal and the actual, as far as man is concerned, there is a gulf fixed. He attempts to bridge the gulf, to attain whatever ideal he has learned to envisage: and the way across the bridge is the way of salvation:

Frae Whinny Moor when thoo art passed  
Ivvery neet an' all,

Ti t'Brig o'Dread thoo cums at last  
 An' Christ tak up thy saul.  
 If ivver thoo gav o' thy siller an' gowd,  
 Ivvery neet an' all,  
 On t'Brig o'Dread thoo'll find footho'd,  
 An' Christ tak up thy saul.  
 Bud if siller an' gowd thoo niver gav neean,  
 Ivvery neet an' all,  
 Thoo'll doon, doon tum'le towards Hell fleeames,  
 An' Christ tak up thy saul.

*(Cleveland Lyke Wake Dirge)*

Perhaps though, we may leave the unfortunate soul poised on the Bridge of Dread for a moment, as it tries to recollect past generousities, and recollect a few collective ungenerosities of the comparative study of religion.

I suppose that we would all agree that the title of this paper — the concept of salvation — makes tolerable sense. After all, as students of religion we have spent very many years in the company of “concepts” of one kind or another, not to mention the “doctrines”, “ideas” and “-isms” that every scholar in our field acquires as his or her birthright. But from time to time the dangerous thought strikes me that our understanding of religion is, shall we say, complicated by the very terminology which ought to render it transparent. In this present case, the danger attending salvation as a “concept” is the danger of assuming that there is a standard compartment, labelled “salvation” or still worse “salvation-religion”, into which some phenomena may be inserted, but only if they themselves are the right size and shape. A very proper concentration on our own Christian pattern of salvation, with its incorporation of the believer by baptism into the mystical body of Christ, once led to the frantic attempt on the part of the so-called “history of religion school” to find corresponding phenomena in other religions of the Mediterranean area. The attempt was, as we all know, not an unsuccessful one. But the unfortunate corollary was that you can only speak of religions of salvation where you have a saviour-god, preferably of the dying and rising variety, with whom the believer may be ritually identified in some way or other. A further implication was that “salvation” can be spoken of only against the background of some such pattern, and that soteriology as a concept has reference only to the post-mortem existence.

I trust that this particular misapprehension has been for the most part abandoned by now; but the larger implications of the suitability of the terminology we use to describe religious traditions other than our

own is not a matter which I am able to discuss further in this context. However, the point toward which I am moving is that if we regard salvation in this light, and in this light only, we are liable to find ourselves, willy-nilly, making many a living religious tradition fit the Procrustean bed of our accepted terminology; and that the Eastern religious traditions are apt to suffer more than most from this treatment. There are no Mediterranean-style dying and rising gods in the East; nor is there anything which corresponds very closely to sacramental incorporation into the body of a deity who guides the soul through the labyrinths of the underworld. But there is most certainly a practical dualism of the ideal and the actual, good and evil in the absolute sense; and there are a host of recognized means for bridging the gap between the two.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasized, however, that in the study of those traditions which sprang out of Indian soil, presuppositions are everything. If, as I have suggested, the main problem in the study of salvation is to identify the enemy from which deliverance is sought, that identification is made on totally other grounds in the East than in the West. It follows that although the Christian and the Hindu or Buddhist might perhaps find *some* common ground in the answers they would give to the question "What must I *do* to be saved?", there would be very little common ground on the matter of what it is *from which* man must be saved. Generations of Christian missionaries in India have, I fear, found this out to their cost — or failed to find it out, to their even greater cost.

India's fundamental presupposition is that of metempsychosis — rebirth in an infinite series, *samsāra*, the "sorrowful, weary wheel" of existence. Where this notion arose we have not the slightest idea. It is not present, other than possibly in germ, in the earliest literary sources of Indian tradition, the hymns of the *Rgveda*. These in fact represent life as to be lived on earth once, and once only; after which comes, for the fortunate ones, life with the gods in their celestial paradise, and for the rest, a shadowy underworld not unlike Sheol.

You may recall that we left a trembling soul attempting to cross a Bridge of Dread some time ago; this source comes as a matter of fact from North Yorkshire, but the Vedic Indian would not have found anything strange in it. It is authentic Indo-European material, with parallels across the whole continent of Europe and Western Asia. It assumes that once life has been lived, the next step is for the soul to go on a journey — a long and perilous journey as a rule — in search of blessedness. On the way, various obstacles have to be met and overcome, of which the Bridge of Dread is one of the best known. But once crossed, stability has been achieved in some form of paradisa-

existence with the gods, with Primal Man (Yama in the Indian tradition) and with the blessed ancestors.

It is not a long step from this kind of idea to the "classical" concept of salvation as it is found in the Mediterranean world. The topographies of the underworld, the secret knowledge, the passwords and the powerful guardians that we know so well from, for instance, the Orphic or Eleusinian mysteries have all developed in this very soil. And even in India, ideas like these die hard, even after three thousand or so years. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, the presuppositions of which are on the whole quite different from these, still contains echoes of an Indo-European past. Take, for instance, the passage in which the prince Arjuna is telling his charioteer Kṛṣṇa what he thinks will happen if he engages in war against members of his own family: the eternal laws that rule the family will simply collapse. And he goes on:

Yes, caste-confusion leads to hell —  
 The hell prepared for those who wreck  
 The family and for the family so wrecked.  
 So too their ancestors fall down to hell,  
 Cheated of their offerings of food and drink. (I.42)

The idea of ancestors toppling out of heaven because they have not been given their proper sacrifices is an intriguing one; but more seriously, it is one which does not fit in very well with the idea of perpetual rebirth. The official explanation of this, incidentally, is that "heaven" and "hell" are intermediate rewards and punishments which intervene between births higher or lower on the scale of merit — clearly an attempt to provide justification for a dominant ritual practice, even though no longer metaphysically defensible.

The gradual process by which the Indo-European idea of life as something to be enjoyed, followed (given the right conditions) by an even more enjoyable afterlife, came to be replaced by the idea of life as a weary wheel of existence, to be escaped from if at all possible, is one that we do not understand at all fully. Since the unexpected discovery in the 1920's of the Indus Culture, the tendency has been to suppose that the notion of transmigration came from roughly that direction, that it went underground for a few centuries, but that it finally emerged into the full light of day in the speculations of the *Upaniṣads* and the later schools. This may or may not be the case: and the problem is far too complex for me to discuss in this context. All that we can say with some degree of certainty is that one set of ideas more or less linear in character gave place to another set, determinedly cyclical in character, and that the concept of salvation has ever since been determined by this latter set.

In the Hindu traditions there are two words which we are accustomed to translate as "salvation", *mokṣa* and *mukti*. They both denote the same thing, the idea of being set free, or liberated, from rebirth. "Release" is a very fair equivalent in English. It is a commonplace of comparative religion that there are three major paths to release in the Hindu traditions; *karma mārga*, the way of works, which denotes basically the acquisition of merit and the gradual ascent of the ladder of rebirth, regarding final release as a fairly distant goal; *jñāna mārga*, the way of knowledge, which insists that release is to be obtained only by achieving a blinding intuitive insight concerning one's own identity with the Self of the universe; the *bhakti mārga*, the way of devotion, in which one throws oneself entirely on the mercy and grace of a personal deity, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, or whoever.

Now I think that we can leave the first of these out of the reckoning. It is, after all, only a way which leads in the general direction of salvation. The second and third are of more importance. But rather than analyse each in detail (which I fear would be very tedious), I want to suggest that there is a further presupposition which needs to be taken into account at this point, but which is very often overlooked.

All the Indian traditions agree, as I have said, that *mokṣa* in the sense of release from rebirth, is something which it is good to strive for. The enemy is the world, and everything that has to do with it — everything, in short, that is mediated to man through his senses. The world of the senses is impermanent, bound up in suffering, and in the last resort unreal. But how can one possibly arrive at such a conclusion, and how can one possibly know whether or not one has been released from it?

I am growing more and more convinced that the answer to both of these questions has to do, not in the first instance with a metaphysical analysis of the world, but with a highly distinctive type of religious experience, upon which a metaphysical edifice was subsequently erected.

There is evidence that from a very early stage indeed, India knew of techniques by which individuals might achieve a state of trance, or ecstasy, leading in some cases to catalepsy. Such techniques are, of course, by no means confined to India: shamanistic practices the world over suggest that particular means of softening the hard outlines of time and space have been remarkably common. One of the roles of music and dance was to encourage ecstatic states. The repetition of rhythmical movements (of which the sexual connotations are often explicit), of short phrases of music or song, of drum-beats and the like, has always been known to tend in this direction. The use of drugs (using that word in the sense of anything which has the effect of blurring the senses) has always been far more widespread in the religious context than we have

been willing to admit. The greatest gods were often the greatest users of intoxicants: witness Indra in India and Thor in Scandinavia. The mysterious drink called *soma* in India and *haoma* in Iran can be paralleled in various ways throughout the ancient — and not-so-ancient — world. Of it we know that it helped to ensure the immortality, that is, the freedom from time and space, of the gods — and helped the worshipper to feel, however temporarily, that he was one of the immortals.

In short, there seems, in Indian tradition, to be a continuous tradition, going all the way back to Vedic times (and if the evidence of the proto-Siva seal is to be trusted, to the Indus Culture) of the use of physical and mental techniques for the achievement of a super-normal state of ecstasy. But what are the implications?

First, I think, that it came to be an accepted notion that the bounds of time and space were capable of being transcended for longer or shorter periods of time, and that in such a state, the individual believed himself to be temporarily identified with an unchanging dimension of reality. Secondly, that since in such a state the individual's senses were undeniably not functioning, it follows that "reality" is not something which the senses as such are capable of mediating. Reality can only be equated with the unchanging dimension *beyond* the scope of the senses; a dimension which is found in deity as Brahman, and in man as Ātman. Now if one superimposes this kind of view on the belief in transmigration and rebirth, it will follow that rebirth, since it ensures the perpetuation of the world of the senses, is part of unreality, and that once reality is achieved, rebirth and everything connected with it recedes into comparative unimportance. The possessor of this experience has achieved a state in which the senses, and all the impressions they normally convey, have been simply left behind; he has achieved a state of timelessness, in which there is no change and hence no suffering.

From the unreal lead me to the real!

From darkness lead me to the light!

From death lead me to immortality! (Brh.Up. 1.3.28)

The various Indian traditions have spun intricate webs of theory and speculation around this experience, in their attempt to analyse and account for the conditions of man and the universe which help to bring it about. But concerning the experience itself (the commonest word for which is *samādhi*; other terms, like the celebrated *nirvāṇa*, reflect rather the metaphysical implications of the experience rather than the experience itself) there is virtual unanimity. It is the final stage on more

than one ladder of experience, for instance the eightfold path of Buddhism and the path of Yogic discipline. It is ineffable, incapable of being spoken of in ordinary conceptual terms, it is a state in which the senses are transcended, and a state in which rebirth may be brought to an end and *nirvāṇa* attained. As such it is not precisely a commonplace experience: nor is it intended to be. The path is long and difficult, perhaps involving the soul in repeated incarnations, during which merit is gradually accumulated, until such time as a concentrated and total effort may be made to leap out of the world into eternity, out of death into immortality, out of time into timelessness.

Nothing is more characteristic of this scheme of salvation than the fact that the concept of deity is not strictly necessary to it. One may in other words achieve the immediate experience of timelessness and trance without recourse to a saviour-god — although clearly, if one begins with the belief that the timeless regions are inhabited by powerful spirits, there is no reason why they should not be called upon for their help across the frontier. But certain of the Hindu traditions, notably Sāṃkhya, and to some extent also classical Yoga, are non-theistic; and so too is Theravāda Buddhism. In these cases it is quite possible, and in no way uncomplimentary, to speak of auto-salvation, since the conditions on which release is to be achieved rest entirely in the individual concerned, in his self-discipline, his asceticism, his control over the senses. But even in the Indian tradition, the greater part of mankind has always remained obstinately theistic, and has looked to the powerful gods, not only for assistance in the everyday concerns of life (the lowest level of salvation), but for guidance across the ultimate frontier.

Yoga, for instance, suggests that God, Īśvara, may be an appropriate object on which to fix one's attention in the quest for self-control — a circumstance which has led many commentators, wrongly in my opinion, to dismiss Īśvara as an artificial *ad hoc* deity, invented for this particular purpose and for no other. It is more appropriate, I think, to consider the example of the *bhakti* (devotional) schools which on any reckoning are the most influential Hindu groups. Typically they centre their worship on one or other manifestation of the supreme deity — for instance, on Rāma or Kṛṣṇa as incarnations of Viṣṇu (who is in his turn a manifestation of Brahman, the Supreme). They may concentrate on Śiva, or again on one of the consorts of the great gods, Durgā or Kālī — types of the great mother-goddess. But in no case do they lose sight of the experiential goal of *samādhi*: the worshipper of any of these deities may lose himself or herself in an ecstasy or trance entirely comparable to the final state of the Yogin, and thus achieve salvation on precisely the same terms, even though apparently by different means.

Problems arise, then, largely out of the vast variety of conflicting interpretations which may be placed on the ecstatic experience, and the no less vast variety of implications and applications which may be drawn out of it. This is, I suppose, only to be expected. So, too, is the degree to which adherents of these various interpretations have conflicted with one another — and this despite the impression which modern Hindu apologists love to give, of their religion as transcendently tolerant. Let me give an example.

In the celebrated eleventh book of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, prince Arjuna is granted a vision of the cosmic Kṛṣṇa, in which Kṛṣṇa is revealed to him as nothing less than the Time-process, as containing within himself all things, all men, all gods. But it is impressed on the reader that this vision was granted to Arjuna entirely outside his normal waking state, by the granting to him of a “celestial eye”, and as the result of his devotion (*bhakti*) to God incarnate. In a hymn of praise Arjuna says — or rather sings:

Full just it is that in praise of Thee  
The world should find its pleasure and its joy,  
That monsters by terror tamed should scatter in all directions,  
And that all who've won perfection should do Thee homage.

(11.36)

All hail to Thee when I stand before Thee,  
All hail when I stand behind Thee,  
All hail to Thee wherever I may be,  
All hail to Thee, Thou All!

How infinite Thy strength, how limitless Thy prowess!

All dost Thou bring to consummation, hence art Thou All. (40)

But Arjuna is unable to bear the vision. He calls upon Kṛṣṇa to resume his normal (four-armed) form. Kṛṣṇa does so, but first informs Arjuna that:

Not by the Vedas, not by sacrifice,  
Not by much study or the giving of alms,  
Not by rituals or grim ascetic practice,  
Can I be seen in such a form in the world of men:  
To thee alone have I revealed it. (48)

This is certainly meant as a deliberate statement of the inadequacy of the hitherto accepted ways of salvation, and their replacement by the way of *bhakti*, in which God himself grants to man the saving experience, supplemented by the saving vision of the true nature of deity. Nevertheless the *Gītā* is sufficiently eclectic to find place for a positive evaluation of other means of salvation, and on the whole this

eclecticism has persisted throughout Indian religious history. The goal may be a remote one in the normal course of events; but by throwing oneself wholly on the mercy of God, one may hope to achieve more than just a half-step up the ladder of spiritual evolution.

What *bhakti* salvation actually means in practice may be seen very well indeed by referring to the life of, for instance, Ramakrishna, the nineteenth-century Bengali saint to whom so many Hindus look up as a shining example of *bhakti*. In him we see total devotion to the Supreme, conceived of particularly as the goddess Kālī, but also capable of being conceptualised as Muhammad and Jesus. But the proof of his sainthood is to be seen, as far as the Hindu is concerned, not in his talk — however gracious, pithy or shocking (it could be all three) — but in the ease with which he was able to slip out of time and into *samādhi*. Almost anything, it seemed, could serve as a “trigger”; all he needed was the slightest reminder of the eternal dimension, and he would be literally lost to the world, for hours on end. And when overtaken by cancer, he slipped for the last time into *mahāsamādhi*, just as the Buddha before him had slipped into *Nirvāṇa*. Standing on the threshold of the eternal, he could cross the border temporarily, more or less at will. He was a *jīvanmukta*, “released in the midst of life”. For such a one, though, Hindu and Buddhist alike would claim that there is no more rebirth. The senses, ignorance, desire, rebirth — all have been overcome so thoroughly that they have no further hold upon the soul, the *ātman*, the *puruṣa*, or whatever else it may be called by the Hindu, or upon man’s constantly changing makeup, as the Buddhist would say. In either case, salvation is a victory, over transience and change, a liberation into a larger dimension which by its very nature must forever remain indescribable, other than in negatives.

Now rather than penetrate further into the analytical hinterland of this doctrine, I should like to add a few comments strictly from the Christian point of view.

The Christian mission in India has always conceived its real purpose as being the proclamation of a message of salvation from the guilt and power of sin, and the incorporation of the believer into the community of the redeemed, the body of Christ, the Church (and here I deliberately use traditional phraseology). Throughout its recent history, it has passed through a number of well-defined phases of encounter with Indian traditional thought. At first there was the phase characterized from the Protestant side by the text “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” and from the Catholic side by the doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* — which really amounted to the same thing in the long run. The phase of Liberal Protestantism, with its characteristic emphasis on “Christ the

fulfilment of Hinduism" (or Buddhism, or whatever) had no real equivalent in Catholic missions, nor did the refurbished evangelicalism of the neo-Orthodox. But together the missions and the Indian church have slipped into the age of dialogue, with everyone seeking to come to terms in a new way with the reality of the Indian cultural heritage.

To deal even superficially with these developments would of course require a further paper, and I do not propose even to try; but it may be worth inquiring in all brevity into the impression which the Christian patterns of soteriology, bearing in mind what we have said, make upon the Indian mind. I am afraid that the short answer must be that they make very little impression, at least upon the mind schooled in the traditional forms of worship, devotion and thought. One need only look at the criticisms of a Radhakrishnan to realise how infinitesimal this impact has been, even on a man who was educated almost entirely in Christian institutions, and spent long years in the West. In this light, one cannot altogether avoid thinking that a great deal of Christian energy has been devoted, in India at least, to the task of providing answers to questions which the Hindu has never asked, and the solution to problems which he does not feel, while his real questions — concerning the transitoriness and unreality of existence, and the means of escape from the fetters of the material world — have for the most part remained unanswered, other than perhaps by a few Christian contemplatives.

I do not wish on any account to make this into the occasion for a wholesale condemnation of Christian thinking in India. But I think that it needs to be recognized that only when the Hindu mind has, as it were, been thrown off balance by the initial impact of the Christian message is there any real possibility of its responding in any positive sense to the Christian message as we understand it, and would wish it to be understood, i.e. as a message of salvation in an eschatological dimension. It is still frequently imagined (and some of the utterances of Vatican II seem to support this view) that the Indian traditions are a seeking after salvation, but not a finding, and that the finding can only be found in Christ. We may say this, if we will, but there is absolutely no way in which we could, or should, say this kind of thing to a Hindu. It would be tantamount to saying that a myriad of years spent in the search for Captain Kidd's treasure ought to have been spent looking for the source of the Amazon, and that the treasure-hunter really has been wasting his time.

The goals of salvation, Christian and Hindu, really are different, though they approach at least within hailing distance of each other in some types of mystical experience (a subject which I cannot go further into here). And if this rather superficial examination of some of the

conditions attending the Eastern quest for salvation has served any purpose at all, perhaps it may have served to show that the paths of inter-religious dialogue are liable to prove thornier than some of the optimists suppose. When presuppositions differ radically, one fears that apparent agreement may be superficial, while the real causes of discord remain utterly untouched. There are other points of difference, of course, but the same judgment must apply: that warm-hearted comprehensiveness, whoever may hold it, will not serve to span a gulf wider than many of us imagine.

University of Sydney