

THE CONCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY AND THE EAST WEST SYNTHESIS IN S. RADHAKRISHNAN: AN EXPLORATION

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Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was a renowned academician, intellectual figure who was achieved a reputation not only in India but also around the globe. He defines philosophy as a "logical enquiry into the nature of reality." "If we widely explain his conception of philosophy it should include a systematic study of almost every aspect of life in the Universe. For him, the Absolute or the Ultimate reality should be such that everything could be resolved in it but it will not be resolved into anything else. He advocated an idealistic kind of philosophy i.e., also can be known as Monistic Idealism. He synthesises Advaita Vedânta and the Philosophy of Absolute Idealism. He was well-versed as the great bridge builder between the east and the west. In describing the relationship between philosophy and religion he suggests that we should make religion philosophical as far as possible rather than to make philosophy, religious. The present paper proposes to explain the nature of philosophy which was propounded by S. Radhakrishnan; secondly, examine the relationship between philosophy and religion; thirdly, what is his opinion about the Spirit following him; fourthly, what is he said about religious experience and intuitive apprehension and lastly, how was he known as a bridge builder between the east and the west.

Key Words: Monistic Idealism, Spirit, religious experience, intuitive apprehension, bridge builder.

Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) was an influential philosopher, academician, statesman, and a renowned Indian thinker in the academic circle of the 20th century. His basic philosophical credo is that he acknowledges the monistic kind of reality. He emphasises the monistic character of *Advaita Vedânta*, and combines it with the important aspect of *Absolute Idealism*. Like in *Vedânta*, he too maintains that the reality is one, and like in *Absolute Idealism*, he regards that everything is a necessary aspect of the one. So, his philosophy could be broadly described as a philosophy of Monistic Idealism.² As he conceived reality as one, it is called 'monistic', and his philosophy is metaphysical. Therefore, it is called an 'idealistic kind of philosophy'. He has faith in that the reality is mental or spiritual and there is a spiritual ideal towards which the entire world-process is progressing. According to him, an idealist can also be called a 'teleologist' because he believes in the ultimate meaning and purpose of the universe. The ultimate nature of the universe is generally regarded to be spiritual, and individuals are expected to reawaken the spiritual sense in their lives to ensure that their lives should not become chaotic, full of anguish, and influenced by evil.

From time to time philosophy should make itself adaptable to the recent challenges of modern scientific and rationalistic approaches and re-evaluate its

tasks and methods according to the demands of the time. Radhakrishnan himself writes,

“It is the task of Philosophy not merely to reflect the spirit of the age in which we live, But also to lead it forward. Its function is creative, to state the values, to set the goals, to point the direction and to lead to new paths. It must inspire us with the faith to sustain the new world, to produce men who subordinate national, racial and religious divisions to the idea of humanity. Philosophy is nothing, if not universal in its scope and spirit”.³

Philosophy, as per the philosopher, should be made more universal and ready to adopt the beliefs of the people belonging to different caste, creed and the nations, that can bring a better unity, understanding and oneness of the spirit.

Philosophy is always associated and linked with religion from ancient times. There was no conflict between religion and philosophy from Indian perspective. However, as per the Western standpoint, Christian theology and philosophy combined in the medieval period in the preachings of, for example, like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. At the beginning of the modern period – through the thoughts of Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon – Philosophy became independent from the general Christian religion.

Radhakrishnan was familiar with this welcome separation. He maintained that though the common aim of searching the ultimate reality brings philosophy and religion closer to each other, their method for achieving their goals are usually different. The achievement of truth is the end or the ambition of philosophy, and the liberation of the soul is the ultimate goal of religion. The questions which are raised for ultimate reality can be answered by logical method in philosophy while in case of religion it is answered through its beliefs (faith) based on the authority of scripture. Radhakrishnan observes the harmony between philosophy and religion in spite of their distinct characters. Reality, according to him, “reveals itself in two different forms to the mystic and to the thinker and ultimately the two should harmonise with each other. Unity and harmony ought to make the relation of true religion to genuine reason.”⁴

For Radhakrishnan, there is no conflict between true philosophy and true religion as like there is no contradiction between faith and reason. He said, “Philosophy itself, will be religious and Religion in its deepest aspects will be philosophical.”⁵

According to him, Religion can be true only when it is Philosophical. He asserts that individuals should make religion philosophical as far as possible, instead of attempting to make philosophy religious. Radhakrishnan defended this by saying, “My endeavour has been to expound a philosophy not to state a dogmatic theology, a philosophy which offers an interpretation of the Universe, which is at once rational and spiritual, which depends on logical reflection and not on acts of faith.”⁶ He attempted to convince the West that Indian Philosophy is Philosophy rather than theology or religion. He wrote *Indian Philosophy* that have two volumes which represent different schools and systems of Indian thought and religion, and this was called “Indian Philosophy” even in the Western sense of the term.

The ultimate Reality that is the central or the core concept of Philosophy as well as Religion. But, what is the real nature of the so called *Ultimate Reality* as described by S. Radhakrishnan? The *Ultimate Reality* is such that anything can be resolved in it, however it cannot be resolved into anything. This is the essence of idealism. Spirit is the central concept of Hegelian idealism. While describing the spirit, Hegel said that Spirit is alone Reality. He maintains that it is the inner being of the world, that which essentially is and *is per se* it assumes objective, determinate form and enters into relations with itself – it is externality (otherness) and exists for itself, yet in this determination and in its otherness it is still one with itself-it is self-contained and self-complete, in itself and for itself at once. Its substance is spiritual.⁷ *Advaita Vedānta* seems to have inspired Hegel through its maintenance that Brahman is the ultimate reality.

Deeply studied in both *Vedānta* and Hegel, Radhakrishnan referred to ‘Brahman’ and ‘Absolute’ as being essentially one. In his opinion, “The same Absolute reveals itself in all these but differently in each. The ultimate reality sleeps in the stone, breaths in the plants, feels in the animals, and awakens to self-consciousness in man.”⁸ He apprehends Absolute as “pure consciousness and pure freedom and infinite possibility.”⁹ The first two characters were more or less same as the *Vedantic* manner and the third character has been explained from Hegelian perspective of Absolute Idealism. Here he synthesises the eastern concept of Brahman and western concept of Spirit or Absolute. There is no internal differentiation (the *svagata-bheda*) in Absolute or Brahman which is free, infinite, complete-in-itself, changeless, spiritual, self-dependent, eternal, the whole of perfection. However, through our limited scope of language we cannot fully describe the very nature of Absolute or the Brahman.

According to Radhakrishnan, “The spirit is the Absolute. It has many possibilities present to it. The one actual manifestation of it is the world. Other aspects of the absolute are God and souls.”¹⁰The Divine spirit is being manifested differently in the Absolute, God, World and Self. Radhakrishnan describes the spirit as one which is felt everywhere, but cannot be seen anywhere. One which can be known but cannot be explained. It is not body, mind or will but it sustains all of them.¹¹The Spirit as the Ultimate Reality helps as the inherent cause for the evolution of the world process. This is the process of evolution from the material world to the spiritual world.

Reality has been defined by Radhakrishnan as ‘a logical enquiry into the nature of Reality’. By the logical process to search for the Reality is the ultimate goal and from the primitive age the philosophers and the saints of religions have concerned to attain the knowledge of the spirit or the Ultimate Reality or God. Some of the people thinks that it is impossible to obtain the knowledge of the Absolute Reality through our limited human mind in the phenomenal world. However, some others believe that as because the knowledge of Reality or God is an impossibility, so God himself reveals to mankind through the prophets to convey the message to the people. This knowledge can be called the Revelation of God.

There are some of the people who believe that knowledge of God can be felt within ourselves through an experience. However, this experience can be achieved by the method of purification of mind, body and soul. After achieving this experience, the lives of the men will completely be changed. The mystics, saints and sages are the men of the experiences. They will be *Upanisadic*sages, the saints of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism etc. are some of the examples.

There are some sources through which people can attain the knowledge of Reality. From ancient times to modern period, from the Eastern to the Western saints and sages, prophets and philosophers belonging to every period of time. Some of the main sources of the knowledge of Reality are:

(1) Scripture, *srūti* or revelation or word of God – Radhakrishnan rejected the authority of the scripture. He said, “The old days when the scriptures were accepted on trust that God was their author are no more. There is a new approach today. We do not accept scriptural documents apart from other books, unquestionable in their accuracy and advice. The view that they are inherent word

of God, does not carry conviction.”¹² The scriptures can be considered as the eternal records of the experiences of the seers. In this respect, Radhakrishnan departs himself from the traditional acceptability of the scripture.

(2) Reasoning-inferential or mediative knowledge – Radhakrishnan was not fully ascertained the demonstrability of the existence of Brahman or God through the various logical proofs. These are all approximations because the rational arguments only prove the validity of those who have direct experience of the Divine.

(3) Religious or Spiritual experience – According to Radhakrishnan, this is the all comprehensive source to know the Reality. This is the immediate knowledge. Man has the ability and power to stand out of his existence and acquire the knowledge of the truth. Through the immediate or direct experience man can obtain the knowledge of the Reality and this is the Religious or Spiritual experience. It is an apprehension of the real tied with enjoyment. It is an inner satisfaction. According to Radhakrishnan, Religious Experience is as old as our smiling and weeping, loving and forgiving, the sense of God is induced within us in several ways, through communion with nature, through worship of goodness even through natural events like sunset and death.

The metaphysical discussion of Radhakrishnan demands a faith in his epistemological standpoint. According to him, the human mind possesses three kinds of knowledge. They are: (1) Sensory or Perceptual Knowledge, (2) Intellectual Cognition and (3) Intuitive Apprehension. The Eastern philosophy has given priority to intuition and the Western philosophical thought revolve around the intellectual cognition. Radhakrishnan also has given priority to intuition than the intellectual knowledge.

Now, we can elaborate these concepts one by one. We know the sensible qualities of a particular object through sense-experience. It is somehow or other similar with sense-perceiving as described in psychology. Sense-experience gather impressions from the physical objects and it provides materials for every kind of study and thought. The knowledge that is received from sense-experience is not infallible, it sometimes deceives us. The two sense-apprehension of a same object are not totally alike. So, according to Radhakrishnan, although sense-experience is useful in our practical life or day-to-day experience but it is not sufficient for acquiring the knowledge of reality.

The second one is intellectual cognition which is constructed through the process of analysis and synthesis. The senses collect the data from the outer world and it is through the intellect analysed and synthesised. This knowledge is indirect as well as symbolic because it is depended on the senses and it receives only signs or symbols. It relates different entities with each other, so it is related with relation. As because Reality is one, so it cannot give the knowledge of the Reality. Like Sense-experience, this is also useful in our practical life. Radhakrishnan thinks that this intellectual cognition is limited in itself and also defective, so it is not able to comprehend the reality properly. However, he holds that intellect is not totally opposing to intuition, because intuition requires intellect for the expression, elaboration and justification of its results.

The third one is intuitive Apprehension. Radhakrishnan develops the third sources of knowledge because it is the intuitive apprehension which is only capable of giving the knowledge of Reality. It is the direct realisation of object. There is no space of signs or symbols. There is no duality between the knower and the known in case of intuitive apprehension. It is in a sense of knowing by becoming. For example, to know the emotion of love properly, one has to become a lover. In intuitive apprehension, Radhakrishnan defines that here we become one with the truth or the object of knowledge. It is the source of infallible knowledge because it is direct and immediate and it introduces the knowledge of the whole, so it can be considered as primary source of knowledge. This is self-evident.

The knowledge of the self is also can be known through intuitive apprehension. This is the self-knowledge, *anubhava* or integral experience is the highest kind of knowledge, according to Radhakrishnan. He had identified some synonymous concepts in his writings such as – insight, vision of truth, intuitive insight, enlightenment, perfect knowledge, integral experience or spiritual or religious experience. Radhakrishnan approved that through intuitive apprehension we can reach to the Ultimate Reality, we are to be one with the Absolute or in other words we are knowing by becoming. There is no duality or differentiation between I and *thou*(the Ultimate Reality).

He was also known as the bridge-builder between the east and the west. He has constructed a comprehensive philosophy of the best elements chosen from the Indian and the Western systems of thought. He was familiar with the eastern and western culture because he was born in Hindu family and completed his education in missionaries Schools and Colleges.

Radhakrishnan describes his philosophy as well as religion in his own pattern of thinking. He synthesises the western humanism and the eastern spirituality, the western concept of God or Absolute with the Indian *Upanisadic* concept of Brahman and he established his philosophy of Monistic Idealism.

Describing the nature of philosophy, Radhakrishnan opts for:

“A philosophy which will combine the best of European humanism and Asiatic Religion, a philosophy more profound and more living than either, endowed with greater spiritual and ethical force which will conquer the hearts of men.”¹³

The world is culturally divided into two opposites – the East and the West. The East is known as orient and the West is known as occident, and the two parts of the world are separate, distant, unbridgeable. The West is characterised as modern, objective, rational, individualistic, realistic, logical, dynamic (activism) etc. On the other pole, the East is ancient, subjective, intuitive, idealistic, mystical, passive etc. The relationship between the east and the west are incompatible with each other. Many of the writers and thinkers tried reconcile or synthesise the West to the East. Albert Schweitzer, for example, wanted to contrast the East and the West as life-negating and life-affirming, and he Westernised the East as a solution of former’s life-denying character. Rabindranath Tagore was advocated the building of one world for the East and the West. The Eastern mysticism is to be reconciled with Western rationalism or the social service of West can be combined with the Eastern spiritual love. He wanted to establish humanity and universal brotherhood and spread it to every corner of the world.

The life, thought and also the philosophy of Radhakrishnan clearly indicates the meeting of the East and West and enriches the experiences of the man of the 20th century. His art of synthesising sometime contrasted with the renowned philosopher Kant, who has reconciled the rationalism with empiricism. Sometime with Hegel’s dialectic method of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis as a technique. Radhakrishnan’s philosophy is a comprehensive one because it combines the eastern and western philosophy and also transcends them and constructed a World Philosophy. In his opinion, “Even as our political problem is to bring East and West together in a common brotherhood which transcends racial differences, so in the World of Philosophy we have to bring about a cross fertilization of ideas.”¹⁴ In this regard, D.M. Dutta says that Radhakrishnan has opted for constructive synthesis, the idealistic point of view. Emphasising the basic unity between the

idealistic traditions of India and the West, he has conceived a reconciliation between the two.¹⁵ As per the philosopher's belief, the basic differences between the East and the West which are due to nationalities, races, languages and historical circumstances, are restricting to develop the true human community of one World. To achieve the ideal goal, however it will take time but we have to strive to realise such unity or the goal because it brings change and progress in mankind. In this regard Radhakrishnan said, "If we are to find a solution for the differences which divide races and nations today, it must be through the recognition of the essential oneness of the Modern World, spirituality and socially, economically and philosophically."¹⁶

As we have already known that Indian Philosophy is the assimilation of Philosophy and Religion, theory and practice. For attaining the ultimate goal each and every Indian philosophical system combine itself with religious aspects follows the applied methods suggested by it. However, in Western Philosophy, Religion is separated from Philosophy. Belonging to Indian traditional background Radhakrishnan assimilated true religion with true philosophy and recognized that there is no conflict between faith and reason. Among the various theories Radhakrishnan attracted with Absolute Idealism that is also known as Monistic Idealism and this is the true Philosophy according to him. For him, in modern age philosophy should be dynamic, creative, practical and universal in scope. The modern men are facing different problems not merely the spiritual or philosophical but also economic, social, political problems are there. He wanted to perceive philosophy as synthetic that can be accepted by different cultures, different community and also different countries. So, it will construct a spirit of oneness among us. We have found in his Philosophy the spiritualism as well as idealism, realism, rationalism, monism and above all the humanism which makes his Philosophy flavoured with reformative as well as innovative in nature.

According to the above discussion, we can conclude that Radhakrishnan can be considered a World Philosopher. However, there are so many opinions about that is Radhakrishnan an original thinker or not. In this regard, H.N. Singh said that the originality of Radhakrishnan was denied by his countrymen because he has reinterpreted the ancient ideas in the modern perspective. Singh identified that if the Western Philosopher Kant and Hegel were famous for their ideas and doctrines and considered to be as an original thinker, although their doctrines are based on Platonic Idealism. However, the Westerners have given the honour of original thinker to Kant and Hegel. From the same ground, Radhakrishnan also to

be considered as an original thinker for an innovative ideas and thinking sharing with us.

Sankara's *Advaita Vedânta* and Radhakrishnan's Philosophy are not same or identical; rather, they are independent from each other. Though their concepts derived from the *Upanisads*, their interpretations are not similar. Sankara was inspired by Indian tradition for constructing his Philosophy, whereas Radhakrishnan was influenced by Indian as well as Western tradition and Philosophy. These aspects make their ideas and thoughts separate from one another. In a nutshell, Radhakrishnan has constructed a Philosophy that gives the perfect inner satisfaction and realises the feeling of oneness to everything that leads us to the perfection, or the ultimate goal – termed *Sarvamuktibya* Radhakrishnan himself.

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