

# The Indian Journal of Theology

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# Blasphemy

E. SAMBAYYA

As a religious term blasphemy means speech injurious to God and derogatory to His divine majesty. To blaspheme is to come short of the faith and reverence due to God by intentional and contemptuous speech. Though the term is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is doubtful whether it has the same force in Hinduism. From the Christian point of view, the *Vedanta* ideal of identity between the Absolute and the individual self is open to the charge of blasphemy. The enthusiastic language of some of the *Vedantists* like *Vivekananda* exposes the *Vedanta* ideal to such criticism. But it should be borne in mind that the *Vedantists* are not primarily thinking of ethical completeness but of an identity in Being, above the ethical level. Nevertheless, the identity conception for which the *Vedanta* is so famous is peculiarly disastrous to the claim of ethics in human life. Some of the frivolous episodes of the *Puranas* and the *Epics* expose popular Hinduism to the charge of blasphemy. But there are exceptions. In the *Gita*, *Arjuna* says to *Krishna*, 'If in my mirth I showed no reverence to thee while playing or resting, while sitting or eating, while alone, O eternal Lord, or in the presence of others, I implore thee who art infinite to pardon me.' (XI: 42.) Another instance is provided by the story of *Prahlada* whose father was slain for his blasphemous deeds and utterances against God. It is generally true that in the comprehensive system of Hinduism the sin of blasphemy is noticed wherever the personality and the majesty of the deity are stressed.

In Islam blasphemy occurs in connection with the doctrine of the unity of God (*Tauhid*). The excessive influence of this doctrine is such that the offence of associating a partner with God is considered an unpardonable sin (*Shirk*). 'Verily God will not forgive the union of other gods with Himself. But other than this will He forgive to whom He pleaseth. And he who uniteth gods with God hath devised great wickedness.' (Sura 4:51.) Thus the Trinitarian conception of God is blasphemous to Islam because Allah is He who has no partner (*la sharik*), and cannot share His glory with another. The blasphemy (*Shirk*) against God is defined to be of four kinds: viz. (1) that of ascribing knowledge to others than God (*Shirk'ul ilm*), i.e., to ascribe power to soothsayers; (2) that of ascribing powers to others than God (*Shirk'ul tasrrif*), i.e. to suppose that God so esteems the rank of any one as to pardon his sin on account of it; (3) that of offering worship to created things (*Shirk'ul ibadat*), i.e. prostration before any created being with the idea of worshipping it or 'associating in worship'; (4) that of performance of ceremonies which imply reliance on others than God (*Shirk'ul adat*), i.e. to swear by the name of the Prophet, of *Ali*, of the

the reality and sufficiency of the atoning act upon which it rests, it must be intransigent; on every other matter it can afford to be, and rejoice to be, infinitely forbearing. But its forbearing will not be of the kind which easily lets every man go his own way because in a world of illusion clear-cut distinctions are folly. It will be earnest in wrestling for the truth. But yet the unity does not depend upon intellectual unanimity. It is the relationship of mutual love and responsibility which is created by the recognition of a common obligation to infinite love.

It is of the very essence of such a relationship that it must issue in a visible community. Love is nothing if it does not issue in words and deeds by which the lover binds the beloved to himself. Love is infinitely more than tolerance. Tolerance requires no visible community to express it, but love does. The deeper and stronger the love, the more binding will be the mutual obligations to which it will lead. Therefore, it belongs to the very essence of the atonement wrought by Christ, that it leads to the creation of a visible community binding men together in all nations and all generations.

4. How, then, are we to understand the bond which binds together churches in the World Council which are deeply divided from one another on matters of truth? As in the case of the Hindu conception of religious unity, so here we must go to the starting point and understand the whole from there. The starting point is the faith that, in the once-and-for-all events which we confess in the Creed, the clue to all existence has been given.

In Jesus Christ, God the Holy One has died for sinners. The holiness is wholly his; the sin is mine. Even my understanding of what he has done is clouded by my sin. My formulation of what he has done and my obedience to him have no finality. It is only in him and his finished work that there is finality. When, therefore, I meet another body of Christians which acknowledges the lordship of Christ and the finality and sufficiency of what he has done, but differs from me in its interpretation of the saving events and of the life which flows from them, I am placed in an existential relation with its members which I cannot deny, even though I may find myself in acute disagreement with them about its nature and implications. All who have shared in the life of the ecumenical movement will recognize the situation which I am trying to describe. As one talks and prays with the fellow-Christian of another confession, one is driven to recognize that here is the same acknowledgment of an infinite obligation to the One Redeemer. The common acknowledgment of this infinite obligation makes it impossible for the one to disown the other. The same Holy Spirit by whose working in the heart I am driven to acknowledge Christ's sole lordship drives me to acknowledge also his presence in the other's confession. The bond that unites us is not a mere feeling, not a mere agreement in thought, not a merely natural sympathy, it is an actual knitting-together of two persons, which can be described either by saying that the Holy Spirit unites us or by saying that the death of Christ for us both places us in a relation to each other wherein we can but acknowledge each other as brothers. Within this acknowledgment there is room for the possibility of wide difference of belief. Just because the very basis of our relationship is the fact of the all-sufficient death of the Holy One for sinners, our recognition of one another is compatible with the recognition that each of us may, in his formulation of the nature of Christ's work, be led far

astray by sinful blindness. We must claim absoluteness and finality for Christ and his finished work; but that very claim forbids us to claim absoluteness and finality for our understanding of it. The resulting relationship between us is characterized, therefore, by a complete intransigence in regard to the central ground of our faith, along with a willingness to recognize and learn from one another in the realms where we differ. For this mutual recognition the word 'toleration' is not appropriate, because the relationship is much more than tolerance. 'Tolerance' suggests leaving one another alone, and this is precisely what Christians cannot do. If contradictions of belief and practice are not allowed to destroy fellowship, it is because they are recognized as the results of that sin and its resultant blindness from which Christ has redeemed us. Therefore, the relationship of mutual responsibility into which Christ puts us by his atoning work lays upon us the obligation to wrestle with these differences in frankness and humility, until they yield deeper insight into God's nature and will.

Everything depends upon the starting point. For the Christian, it is the person and work of Christ as the clue to all reality. About that the Christian has to be as intransigent as the Hindu is about his. The characteristic fruit of the Hindu starting point is toleration, in the form of which I have tried to speak earlier. The characteristic fruit of the Christian starting point is the creation of a new relationship, a relationship of binding mutual responsibility between persons. Within that relationship a right understanding of the starting point issues in an attitude which can hold profound differences of belief and practice within a tension of love. But it is a tension. It is not static but dynamic, full of movement and of conflicting force. The resolution of the tension comes as and when difference leads to penitent acknowledgment of our sinful blindness, and from that to a fresh apprehension of the divine will and nature revealed in Christ. Above all, the Christian starting point requires and creates a visible community. Binding mutual responsibility can be expressed only in a visible community. So, from the beginning, the gospel has the church at its heart, and so also the ecumenical movement cannot remain a mere movement, but must necessarily give birth to something like the World Council. The unity which Christ creates must, of its own nature, take to itself some such visible and tangible embodiment.

To the question What is the proper form of that embodiment? I shall return in a moment. But first the line of argument must be pursued in another direction. I have asserted that the starting point of the whole Christian understanding of the world is the series of historic events centering in the death of Jesus Christ under Pontius Pilate, interpreted as the all-sufficient atonement between God and man and between man and his neighbour. This event, so understood, places those who understand it in a relation with one another which can be expressed only in the form of a visible community. The church is organic to the gospel. But, in saying this, we have only said the first half of what has to be said. The atoning work of Christ places me in a new existential relationship not only with my fellow-believer but also with every human being, whether he is a believer or not; for that atoning act is directed to the whole human race, and not to anything less. Christ died for all men. Speaking of his own death, he is reported to have said: 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto myself.' No limit can be drawn

to the potential reconciling power of his sacrifice, short of the limits of humanity itself. Those who have been, by the power of the Holy Spirit, brought within the circle of that reconciling power and reborn into the new system of relationships which it creates are by that very fact committed to participation in that reconciling ministry. They are bound to go out to all men with the words that the apostles used to the Corinthians: 'We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ, as though God were entreating by us, we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God.' In other words, by their membership in the church they are committed to a mission to the world. They cannot abandon the latter without forfeiting the former.

## The Christian Dilemma

It is precisely here that the Christian, looking at the world today, is liable to find himself in a dilemma. If he goes out into the non-Christian world to prosecute vigorously the Christian mission, he must appear in many places to be the agent not of unity but of separatism. That is especially true in India today. The evangelistic missionary is looked upon as, at best, an anachronism left over from the age of colonialism and, at worst, a positive menace to national unity and progress. That attitude is, of course, far from universal among non-Christians, but it is dominant. In the face of it the missionary is assailed by three temptations: the first is to bury himself in the affairs of the Church and to evade real meeting with the non-Christian culture. The second is to engage in a flurry of welfare activities of the kind most likely to be popular at the moment with the powers that be. The third is to align himself with the most sympathetic leaders of the other religions in a profession of loyalty to 'Truth', the implication being that 'Truth' is something which transcends and includes both his message and theirs. Examples of all three are to be found in India today. The first, which is perhaps the most popular, requires no comment. It is a simple evasion of the church's fundamental task. The second may earn quick popularity, but it is mocking men with false hopes. It is only by deliberately blinding ourselves that we can persuade ourselves to believe that the world will be saved by the universal dissemination of the economic and cultural achievements of Europe and America. The third is a frank abandonment of the central message of Christianity, which is the offer of reconciliation with God and men through the death of Christ. It is not possible to undertake such an abandonment in the face of the non-Christian world and at the same time to retain any living reality of faith within Christendom. This is no longer a remote issue. The world is now a neighbourhood, and the implications of the missionary character of Christianity are forced right upon our attention, whether we like it or not. If Christianity is true, then it is the centre—not merely in theory but in a concrete visible community—for the reconciliation of mankind. If it is not that centre, then it is untrue in its central affirmations and ought to be abandoned.

It ought by now to be clear to all that the ecumenical movement can have no enduring substance if it is not missionary through and through. The claim to transcend religious differences must, as has been said already, rest upon some claim of truth, unless it be a merely cynical indifference to truth or a merely loveless indifference to the eternal

destiny of our fellow-men. The Hindu claim rests upon a definite conception of religious truth which we have examined. The ecumenical movement within Christendom rests upon something different, upon the once-and-for-all atonement wrought by Jesus Christ. But that very fact involves it in a mission to the world. If, in seeking to be faithful to him who said, 'I will draw all men unto myself,' we appear to others to be separatists and sectarians, we can comfort ourselves by the reflection that every claim to draw men together must rest upon some truth, must derive from some centre, and that whatever the truth be, and whatever the centre, it must be one liable to human criticism and opposition. There is no standpoint available to man which is not some particular standpoint, and every claim to reconcile men must share the precariousness which arises from that fact.

### The Scandal of Disunity

But we must immediately add a second reflection which is a source not of comfort but of deep shame. And this brings us back to the question which we were discussing a moment ago. The Christian claim that Christ is the centre round which all mankind must be made one has to encounter much more than the necessary amount of resistance in the minds of good men just because that claim is so flagrantly contradicted by the disunity of Christendom itself. The real scandal of this situation is only fully manifest when the church is in a missionary situation in the face of a dominant non-Christian religion. The claim of a small minority, in the midst of a vast and ancient religious civilization, to have the ultimate secret of man's reconciliation would in any circumstances be likely to arouse disbelief. But when that small minority is itself divided into a multitude of yet smaller sects, the claim becomes not merely incredible but laughable. It is not possible for the same group of men in one context—when facing the non-Christian world—to assert that the death of Christ is the one sufficient event by which all men may be made one family under God, and, at the same time, in another context—when dealing with one another—to assert that the event is not sufficient to enable those who believe in it to live as one family. The disunity of the church is a public denial of the sufficiency of the atonement. It is quite unthinkable that the church should be able effectively to preach that atonement and to become, in fact, the nucleus of the reconciled humanity, while that denial stands. So long as it stands, the world will see in the church not the one place where all men may at last come home, but a series of separatist bodies, each marked by a whole series of cultural peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of belief and practice. Even those who love the church best would surely stand appalled before the thought that the whole human race should find its unity in any of the sects as we now know them. Yet it is not possible to proclaim Christ as the centre for the world's reconciliation quite apart from the demonstration of that reconciliation as an experienced fact.

Thus the question of the visible embodiment of the unity of mankind in Christ becomes one of pressing urgency. If the heart of the Christian message is the good news of atonement for the human race wrought out in the death of Christ and issuing in a newly created community of reconciled men and women, and if the preaching of the gospel to the whole world is inseparable from the existence of that community, then

the question 'What is the proper form of this new community?' is plainly central to our whole task. I have repeatedly stressed the fact that it is a visible community, an actual human fellowship offering to all men the centre for a reconciled humanity. But where on earth today can we find that fellowship? The Roman Catholic Church is confident that the answer is to be found without remainder in its own communion. The Orthodox Churches make a similar claim, though in a less exclusive form. The ecumenical movement is the recognition of Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant Churches that an answer must be given. If the world is to be made one in Christ, the world must be able to see the nucleus of that unity embodied in some sort of visible community. There is no more urgent task than to seek to meet that need. But we have to face the fact that there is no general agreement among Christians even as to the direction in which we ought to go in order to do so.

### The Embodiment of Unity in Christ

On that issue the World Council of Churches is (necessarily) officially neutral. It is itself a form of Christian unity and one of the dangers of the present situation is that the very success and value of the Council's work should lead to an obscuring of the other elements which are necessary to a full embodiment of unity in Christ. Nevertheless, there is to be found within the council itself a very wide range of views on the proper form of the Church's visible unity. The Orthodox Churches believe that they themselves contain the fulness of the Church's being; maintained in unbroken continuity from apostolic time and that it is only by reconciliation with them that other Christian bodies can participate completely in the fulness of Churchliness. The Anglican Churches have generally made it clear that they regard as essential to the Church's being the acceptance of the historic episcopate and that the proper form of the Church's unity would be a federation of regional churches, all episcopally ordered and having complete fellowship with one another on that basis. Among others there is wide diversity; some regard doctrinal agreement as the one essential and do not see any need for a uniform ministry; some look for the linking-together of existing denominations in a federal union, each retaining its own separate existence and traditions, but all being regarded as parts of one Church and therefore enjoying complete intercommunion; some again—though probably the majority of these are outside the membership of the World Council—see no need for any all-embracing organization and would be content to have the maximum liberty for every group of Christians to organize itself as and how it wishes, without reference to others, but with the hope that all would be willing to treat one another with brotherly charity and respect.

It is not my business here to comment in any detail upon this babel of opinion. I shall make only a few general comments on the issues which are involved.

1. The question of visible organization cannot be evaded and is, in fact, central to our present task. The very essence of the Christian claim to be the way to unity for mankind is that it springs from an atonement wrought out in history and issues in an actual community. Therefore the question 'What is the proper form of that community?' cannot be evaded.

2. Those who fear and resist the formation of vast organizational structures deserve to be heard with respect. There is at least a very good case to be made out for the view that large-scale centralized organization is harmful to the development of man's personality and incompatible with the nature of the atonement wrought in Christ.

3. It is not possible to believe that any of the existing ecclesiastical structures, or even all of them together in one organization, could provide the home for the whole human race. The proper nature of the Church is that it should be simply the new man, humanity re-created in the last Adam, Jesus Christ. It should be the place wherein mankind would see its own true image, its own self according to the original divine intention. One of the effects of division is that the divided parts have been led to emphasize and develop those elements of belief and practice which distinguish them from one another; the result is a series of societies, each marked by some peculiarity of tradition, and that very peculiarity makes it impossible that it should be the home for all mankind. It is possible to hope and pray that all mankind should be made one in Christ; it is not, I think, possible for the most devout Christian to pray that the whole of mankind should become Baptist, Presbyterian, Anglican, or Methodist. These separated bodies which we have come to call (in defiance of the usage of the New Testament) 'Churches' have necessarily developed a kind of life, a kind of structure, a kind of organization, which makes it impossible to believe that any one of them or all of them tied together in a superorganization of the same kind could ever be the home for all mankind.

4. Nevertheless, these broken fragments, distorted by their divisions, are yet, in fact, the place where the atonement in Christ is being continuously and ever afresh made available for the life of mankind. They have at the heart of their being the one secret of healing for the world. What is required of them is a return in fellowship to that source, to the place where self-sufficient humanity is brought to death and rebirth, to the place where forgiveness and reconciliation are alone to be had. Their coming together must necessarily be a kind of corporate dying, in order to live anew in Christ. It is impossible to say in advance exactly what that dying will involve. What is certain is that while the separated churches cling to their own individuality and seek to evade that dying, they cannot be reborn into the one fellowship which mankind will recognize as the nucleus of its remaking into one.

5. If we ask What is to be the character of the fellowship which issues from such a dying and rebirth; what—in other words—is the proper form of the Church's unity? I believe that at least these things can be said in answer: first, that it must be such that all who are in Christ in any place are, in that place, visibly one fellowship. Second, that it must be such that each local community is so ordered and so related to the whole that its fellowship with all Christ's people everywhere, and with those who have gone before and will come after, is made clear. That will mean at least this: a ministry universally recognized and visibly linked with the ministry of the Church through the centuries. But within these wide limits there are vast areas where we must simply say that we have yet to learn what is required of a fellowship which is truly to embody Christ's atonement in and for the world. What degree of uniformity in belief and practice is necessary in order to safeguard the fundamental truth upon which the very exist-



tence of the fellowship depends? What are the nature and method of organization proper to such a fellowship? How are authority and freedom to be related within it? What is the nature of the discipline which it must exercise in order to safeguard its true character as a fellowship founded upon Christ's atoning work for sinners? On each of these matters a vast amount might be said. It is quite certain that the Church has repeatedly demanded more uniformity than was necessary for the safeguarding of its essential nature, and has thereby obscured its essential nature; quite certain that it has often adopted methods of organization and kinds of authority which were not proper to it, and thereby obscured the gospel; quite certain that it has often abandoned the task of discipline or exercised it in a way that destroyed instead of creating. Our experience in South India has been that it was only the fact of union which compelled us to recognize and face these questions. It was when we were brought into one fellowship with others of widely differing traditions and when we were led to abandon our own separate existence as churches and throw ourselves together into a common life that we were compelled to listen to one another's criticisms, to face these questions, and to go back together to the centre of our faith in order to seek for the answers.

6. This leads me to my final comment. All our thinking and acting has to be controlled by our starting point, which is the atonement wrought by Christ for men. That atonement is the clue to unity for mankind, because it is the place at which men's sins are forgiven and they are enabled to forgive one another. It is the only place at which the fundamental problem of humanity is dealt with. It is only at that point that the churches can be made one. The essential nature of the unity which the Church can offer to mankind is the unity that issues from mutual forgiveness in the presence of the Crucified. The Church can offer that unity to mankind only when it is the substance of its own life. And it can be the substance of its own life only when its members are daily and weekly rediscovering for themselves that experience of mutual forgiveness. In a divided Church that does not happen. The fundamental problems of human community are evaded when men are offered a variety of churches from which they can take their choice. In that situation men are not compelled to face the issue of mutual forgiveness. They can simply avoid one another, and the churches become a series of clubs for the like-minded. When, on the other hand, the churches begin to tackle the issue of unity at the local level, then they are brought back to the starting point, to the Cross; for it is only there that sinful men and women can find the secret of community—there, where sin is forgiven. The search for unity drives us back to the Cross, which is the place alone where unity can be born.

But from that place we are bound to go out also beyond the bounds of Christendom to proclaim to the whole world that this is the place where it may be made one. Unity and mission, mission and unity, these must ever be the two foci of the ecumenical movement. The unity which the ecumenical movement seeks, transcending the differences between Christian denominations, is not—as some perhaps have thought it was—the first step toward a unity that would ultimately transcend all religious differences in some larger truth still to be discovered. The situation is precisely the opposite. The unity which the ecumenical movement acknowledges is a unity created by Christ in his atoning

death, and that finished work of his means unity not only for the churches but for the world in him. The same impulse that drives us to dig below our differences to find one another as forgiven sinners in the face of our crucified and ascended Lord drives us also to the ends of the earth to proclaim to all men that he alone is the secret of their unity. And the great task before the ecumenical movement is just this: to help to make that claim credible to the world by the demonstration of a Christian fellowship which the world could recognize as the nucleus of its own re-creation into one; it is, in fact, to be the instrument in the hands of Christ for the fulfilment of his own prayer that his people may be one, that the world may know.

The unity of mankind is no longer the dream of a few philosophers; it is the clamant necessity of today. But it will not be achieved by any amalgam of religions. It will not be set forward by any device which pretends to bypass the fundamental differences between the religions of mankind. There is no way of evading the necessity to take a stand. The greatest task before the Church today is simply to take her stand humbly but decisively upon the accomplished work of Christ upon the Cross and to go forth into all the world with the proclamation that here, and here alone, at the place where all men are made nothing, is the place where all men may be made one.

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The Word of God as authority *to* the Church; the Holy Spirit working through brotherly love as authority *in* the Church—are not these the two foci of authority to be found in the New Testament ecclesia?

T. O. WEDEL

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So long as nearly half mankind thinks that life is a thing to be escaped from, and nearly the other half thinks it a thing to be enjoyed and exploited, and a minority of us Christians think it a thing to be redeemed, there can be no lasting peace.

J. MACKENZIE

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In Primitive Christianity ethics without theology is absolutely inconceivable. All 'Ought' rests here upon an 'Is'. The imperative is firmly anchored in the indicative. We are holy; this means that we should sanctify ourselves. We have received the Spirit; this means that we should 'walk in the Spirit'. In Christ we already have redemption from the power of sin; this means that now as never before we must battle against sin . . . . We are dealing with the working out of . . . 'the tension between already fulfilled and not yet fulfilled.'

O. CULLMANN