

**The
CHARM AND POWER
of
THE UPANISADS**

Swami Ranganathananda

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Swami Vivekananda has said: 'Let the lion of Vedanta roar, the foxes (of fear and hatred) will fly to their holes.' It is that lion-roar that we get in the Upaniṣads. These Upaniṣads whisper great truths like *Tat tvam asi* (That thou art) etc. in our ears so that the whole of life becomes a gradual unfoldment of the infinite possibilities hidden in every one of us.

The Charm and Power of the Upaniṣads, a special lecture delivered by Swami Ranganathanandaji, Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission, was first published by the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, in 1966. It was long out of print. At our request, the present authorities of the Institute have accorded permission to us to bring out this second edition, for which our grateful thanks are due to them.

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THE CHARM AND POWER OF THE UPANIṢADS

THE MESSAGE OF THE UPANIṢADS is a study, verse by verse, of three of the principal Upaniṣads, namely, *Īśā*, *Kena*, and *Kaṭha*. The first contains eighteen, the second thirty-five, and the third one, hundred and nineteen verses. Though constituting a small portion of the total Upaniṣadic literature, they yet contain a lucid exposition of all the essential ideas of this immortal literature.

Scholars are divided as to the date of the composition of the Upaniṣads. Many of them are agreed, however, that most of the principal Upaniṣads belong to the period prior to the advent of Buddha in the seventh century before Christ. There are over two hundred Upaniṣads, many of them sectarian in character and palpably post-Buddhistic and even post-Śaṅkara.

The Principal Upaniṣads

The principal Upaniṣads are accepted to be those which Śaṅkarācārya (AD 788-820) chose to comment upon; they are ten in number and enumerated in the Indian tradition as follows: *Īśā*, *Kena*, *Kaṭha*, *Praśna*, *Muṇḍaka*, *Māṇḍūkya*, *Taittirīya*, *Aitareya*, *Chāndogya*, and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*.

According to some scholars, Śaṅkara also commented on an eleventh Upaniṣad, the *Śvetāśvatara*. In his commentary on the

Brahma-Sūtra, he refers to four more, namely, *Kauṣītaki*, *Jābāla*, *Mahānarāyaṇa*, and *Paīṅgala*.

The *Īśā Upaniṣad* embodies in its very opening verse the central theme of all the Upaniṣads, namely, the spiritual unity and solidarity of all existence.

The *Kena* illumines the nature of knowledge by pointing out the eternal knower behind all acts of knowing, and purifies man's concept of ultimate reality of all touch of finitude and relativity by revealing its character as the eternal Self of man and the Self of the universe.

The *Kaṭha* holds a special fascination for all students of the Upaniṣads for its happy blend of charming poetry, deep mysticism, and profound philosophy; it contains a more unified exposition of Vedānta than any other single Upaniṣad; its charm is heightened by the two characters of its dialogue, namely, old Yama, the teacher, and young Naciketā, the student.

The *Praśna*, as its name implies, is an Upaniṣad of questions; each of its six chapters comprises a question asked by each of a group of six inquiring students on various aspects of Vedānta, and the answers given by their teacher, the sage Pippalāda.

The *Muṇḍaka*, after classifying all knowledge into *parā*, higher, and *aparā*, lower, and describing all science, art, literature, politics, and economics—in fact, all positive knowledge, the knowledge of the changeful many—as *aparā*, and boldly including even the holy Vedas and all sacred books in this category, proclaims that one knowledge as *parā*, 'by which the imperishable changeless reality of the One behind the many is realized'. And the Upaniṣad sings in ecstasy the glorious vision of the One in the many.

In the brief compass of its twelve verses of condensed thought, the *Māṇḍūkya* surveys the whole of experience through a study of the three states of waking, dream, and dreamless sleep, and reveals the Atman, the true Self of man, the *Turiya* or the Fourth, as it puts it, as pure consciousness, eternal and non-dual. It proclaims in its second verse the infinite dimension of man in a pregnant utterance—one of the four *mahāvākyas* or the 'great utterances' of the Upaniṣads: *ayam ātmā brahma*—'This Atman (Self of man) is Brahman.'

The *Taittirīya*, after majestically proclaiming that 'the knower of Brahman attains the Supreme': *Brahmavidāpnoti param*, describes the five *kośas* or sheaths that enclose and hide Brahman, and demonstrates the technique of piercing these sheaths of relativity and finitude with a view to reaching the infinite and the eternal at the core of experience. It also provides a scientific definition of Brahman as 'that from which all these beings are born, by which, after being born, they live, and into which they merge when they cease to be.'

The *Aitareya* establishes the spiritual character of the Absolute through a discussion of the nature of the Self of man, and proclaims this truth in another of the four *mahāvākyas* (V. 3): *Prajñānam brahma*: 'Brahman is pure Consciousness.'

The *Chāndogya* introduces us to charming truth-seekers like Satyakāma, Śvetaketu, and Nārada, and outstanding spiritual teachers like Āruṇi, Sanatkumāra, and Prajāpati. Through several illuminating teacher-student dialogues, the Upaniṣad helps us to discriminate the reality of being from the appearance of becoming. In a brief utterance of deep spiritual and philosophical import, treated as another of the four *mahāvākyas*, it sings in refrain the divinity of man: *tat tvam asi*—'That thou art.' It prescribes a knowledge of this innate divinity of man as the one remedy for the deeper ills of life: *tarati śokam ātmavit*—'The knower of the Atman crosses all sorrow.' In its profoundly human episode of the discipleship of Indra under Prajāpati, it instructs us in the true nature and technique of man's spiritual quest and the blessings that flow from spirituality. It is an impressive account of man's spiritual education, his growth from worldliness to spirituality. It points out the limitations of materialism as a philosophy of life and the evils that flow from it.

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, the longest of the Upaniṣads, is, as its name implies, a big (*brhat*) forest (*araṇya*) of philosophical thought and spiritual inspiration. Four outstanding personalities illumine its pages—two men and two women—Janaka, the philosopher-king, Yājñavalkya, the philosopher-sage, Maitreyī, the deeply spiritual wife of Yājñavalkya, and Gārgī, the *vācaknavī*, the 'gifted woman speaker and philosopher' who is foremost among the

questioners of Yājñavalkya in philosophical debate. The Upaniṣad majestically expounds, through its fascinating dialogues conducted by these outstanding and other lesser personalities, the central theme of all the Upaniṣads, namely, the divinity of man and the spiritual solidarity of the whole universe in Brahman. It contains another of the four *mahāvākyas* (I.4.10), namely, *aham brahmāsmi*—‘I am Brahman’, besides the *ayam ātmā brahma* of the *Māṇḍūkya* already referred to. It dares to characterize Brahman as ‘the fearless’, and presents its realization by man as the attainment, *here and now*, of the state of absolute fearlessness and fullness of delight.

From Obscurity to Prominence

IT GOES TO THE ETERNAL CREDIT OF ŚĀṆKARA that, through his masterly commentaries on the principal Upaniṣads, he brought out of obscurity this immortal literature, as also the great *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and made them accessible and intelligible to a wider audience; and that audience has been steadily widening ever since, aided by the contributions of subsequent commentators, thinkers, and sages, until, in the present age, thanks to the techniques of modern western civilization, the whole world has become its actual or potential audience. Apart from the great western orientalists, whose translations and expositions brought this and other books of the Indian tradition to the attention of scholars in East and West, it was from Swami Vivekananda, the most authentic voice of Vedānta in the modern age, that vast masses of men and women in both the hemispheres became drawn to the spiritual charm and rational strength of this literature and to a recognition of its relevance to man in the modern age. In his lecture on ‘Vedānta and Its Application to Indian Life’, the Swami says (*Complete Works*, Vol. III, Eighth Edition, pp. 237-38):

‘Strength, strength is what the Upaniṣads speak to me from every page. This is the one great thing to remember, it has been the one great lesson I have been taught in my life. Strength, it says, strength, O man, be not weak. Are there no human weaknesses? — says man. There are, say the Upaniṣads, but will more weakness heal them, would you try to wash dirt with dirt? Will sin cure sin,

weakness cure weakness.... Ay, it is the only literature in the world where you find the word *abhih*, 'fearless', used again and again; in no other scripture in the world is this adjective applied either to God or to man.... And the Upaniṣads are the great mine of strength. Therein lies strength enough to invigorate the whole world. The whole world can be vivified, made strong, energized through them. They will call with trumpet voice upon the weak, the miserable, and the down-trodden of all races, all creeds, all sects, to stand on their feet and be free. Freedom—physical freedom, mental freedom, and spiritual freedom—are the watchwords of the Upaniṣads.'

Śaṅkara's commentaries on these Upaniṣads, especially on those of their passages pregnant with philosophical and spiritual import, are masterpieces of philosophical discussion illumined by deep spiritual insights. His masterly handling of the Sanskrit language in these commentaries gives us a prose which is marked by brevity and vigour, simplicity and poetic charm.

What the Upaniṣads Contain

IN THE UPANIṢADS, WE GET AN intelligible body of verified and verifiable spiritual insights mixed with a mass of myths and legends and cosmological speculations relating to the nature and origin of the universe. While the former has universal validity, and has a claim on human intelligence in all ages, the latter forswears all such claim. All positivistic knowledge contained in any literature, including religious literature, is limited and conditioned by the level of contemporary scientific knowledge. Modification, and even scrapping, of much of this knowledge due to subsequent advances has affected the truth-validity of much of man's literary heritage, including his religious and philosophical ones.

The spiritual insights of the Upaniṣads, however, are an exception to the tyranny of time. Subsequent scientific advances have not only not affected their truth-value but have, on the contrary, only helped to reveal the rational basis of their insights and enhance their spiritual appeal. This is no wonder, because these insights are the products of an equally scientific investigation into a different field of experience, namely, the world of man's inner life.

Satyasya Satyam

BY SHEER SPECULATION ON THE MEANING of the facts of the external world, the Vedic thinkers had earlier arrived at a unitary conception of the universe, at a materialistic monism, through their concepts of *avyakta*, indeterminate nature, or *prāṇa*, cosmic energy. But the culminating point of their discoveries was the spiritual unification of all experience in the Atman or Brahman: *Brahmaivedaṁ viśvamidaṁ variṣṭham*—‘All this manifested universe is verily Brahman the Supreme’ (*Muṇḍaka*, II. 2. 12); *idaṁ sarvaṁ yadayaṁ ātmā*—‘All this (manifested universe) is this Atman’ (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, II. 4. 6); and *tat etat brahma apūrvam anaparam anantaram abāhyam, ayam ātmā brahma sarvānubhūḥ*—‘This Brahman is without a prior or a posterior, without interior or exterior; this Atman is Brahman, the experiencer of everything’ (*ibid.* II. 5. 19).

If everything is the Atman or Brahman, the universe of name and form cannot be an illusion. The Upaniṣads consider it as *māyā*; but this does not mean illusion. *Māyā* is a mere statement of fact, what we are and what we see around us. It refers to the inner contradiction involved in our experience of the world and in our knowledge of it. These contradictions will remain, say the Upaniṣads, so long as we remain at the sensate level, so long as we fail to take into account the Atman, the Self behind the not-Self, the One behind the many. Yet, all our experiences and knowledge in the sphere of *māyā* are experiences and knowledge of the Atman, coming through the sense-organs. Hence they are not illusory, but true. Man travels, says Swami Vivekananda, not from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from truth that is lower to truth that is higher. Hence the Upaniṣads describe the world of the not-Self as ‘truth’ and the Self or Atman as ‘Truth of truth’. This is conveyed in a significant passage of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (II. 1. 20):

Tasyopaniṣat satyasya satyamiti; prāṇā vai satyam; teṣāṁ eṣa satyam—‘Its (Atman’s) intimate name is “the Truth of truth”; the cosmic energy (*prāṇa*) is verily, truth; and This (the Atman) is the Truth of that.’

Elucidating this Vedantic idea, Swami Vivekananda says (*Complete Works*, Vol. V, Seventh Edition, p. 272):

'There is really no difference between matter, mind, and Spirit. They are only different phases of experiencing the One. This very world is seen by the five senses as matter, by the very wicked as hell, by the good as heaven, and by the perfect as God.'

Inquiry into the 'Within' of Nature

POINTING OUT THE REASON FOR this change in the field of search from the external to the internal, which occurred in ancient India, and its significance for human thought, Swami Vivekananda says (*ibid.* Vol. III, Eighth Edition, pp. 330-31):

'Just as the Greek mind, or the modern European mind, wants to find the solution of life and of all the sacred problems of being by searching into the external world, so also did our forefathers; and just as the Europeans failed, they failed also. But the western people never made a move more, they remained there; they failed in the search for the solution of the great problems of life and death in the external world, and there they remained stranded. Our forefathers also found it impossible, but were bolder in declaring the utter helplessness of the senses to find the solution. Nowhere else was the answer better put than in the Upaniṣads: *yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha*—"From whence words, unable to reach, come back reflected, together with the mind" (*Taittiriya*, II. 4); *na tatra cakṣurgacchati na vāggacchati*—"There the eye cannot go, nor can speech reach" (*Kena*, I. 3). There are various sentences which declare the utter helplessness of the senses, but they did not stop there; they fell back upon the internal nature of man, they went to get the answer from their own soul, they became introspective, they gave up external nature as failure, as nothing could be done there, as no hope, no answer, could be found; they discovered that dull, dead matter would not give them truth, and they fell back upon the shining soul of man, and there the answer was found.'

Posing the question how the West, which has undoubtedly been in the forefront of advance in several fields of knowledge from the time of the Greeks, could lag behind India in this field of inquiry these thousands of years, Professor Max Müller answers (*Three Lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy*, London, 1894, p. 7):

'But if it seems strange to you that the old Indian philosophers should have known more about the soul than Greek or medieval or modern philosophers, let us remember that however much the telescopes for observing the stars of heaven have been improved, the observatories of the soul have remained much the same.'

Science and Religion

ALL SCIENCE IS THE SEARCH FOR UNITY. Vedanta discovered this unity in the Atman; it followed its own method relevant to this field of inquiry. But it illustrated its conclusions with whatever positive knowledge was available at the time. In recent centuries this knowledge has been advanced radically and vastly by modern science, the impact of which on Vedanta, however, has been most wholesome. In fact, Vedanta hopes for and welcomes further radical advances in modern science by which its own spiritual vision of the One in the many may be corroborated by positive scientific knowledge, so that the spirituality of science and the spirituality of religion may flow as a united stream to fertilize all aspects of human life. Referring to this fact and hope in his 'Paper on Hinduism' read at the Chicago Parliament of Religions on 19 September 1893, Swami Vivekananda says (*Complete Works*, Vol. I, Fleventh Edition, p. 15):

'All science is bound to come to this conclusion in the long run. Manifestation, and not creation, is the word of science today, and the Hindu is only glad that what he has been cherishing in his bosom for ages is going to be taught in more forcible language and with further light from the latest conclusions of science.'

Vedanta is thus both religion and philosophy. As religion, it discovers the truths of the inner world, and fosters the same discovery by others; and as philosophy, it synthesizes this science of the inner world with the other sciences of the outer world, to present a unified vision of total reality, and to impart to human life and character depth of faith and vision along with breadth of outlook and sympathy.

Religion, according to Vedanta, is super-sensual knowledge; it is not supernatural, but only super-sensual. Vedanta does not

speak of any supernatural revelation. What lies within the sphere of the senses is not the concern of religion; nor has it the competence for it, says Vedānta, for that is the field of the positive sciences, the verdict of which will always hold in this field in preference to the verdict of religion. 'Not even by a hundred statements of the Śruti (body of super-sensual knowledge, or scripture), can fire become cold', says Śaṅkara, because it goes against what has been ascertained by sense experience and positive knowledge. On the other hand, the positive sciences have no authority in the super-sensual field of experience. They overreach themselves when they pronounce judgements on subjects like soul and God; they may, and often are, competent to provide hints and suggestions; but the inquiry itself is the concern of another science. The science of religion. Clarifying the position of these two types of sciences, Swami Vivekananda says (*Complete Works*, Vol. VI, Sixth Edition, p. 81):

'Religion deals with the truths of the metaphysical world just as chemistry and the other natural sciences deal with the truth of the physical world. The book one must read to learn chemistry is the book of (external) nature. The book from which to learn religion is your own mind and heart, the sage is often ignorant of physical science because he reads the wrong book—the book within; and the scientist is too often ignorant of religion, because he, too, reads the wrong book—the book without.'

Śruti versus Smṛti

THE UPANIṢADS ARE AN IMPRESSIVE record of this 'reading of the book within'. The scriptures of every religion are such records. But all of them, except the Upaniṣads, contain also a good bit of extraneous matter, not only myths and legends and cosmological theories, which the Upaniṣads also contain, but also a large number of rules and regulations, with their do's and don'ts, to guide the individual and collective conduct and behaviour of their respective followers. The significance of these latter being merely local and temporary, they are not capable of universal application and are not relevant for all time; the fundamental message of all religions, however, derive from their central core of essential

spiritual truths which are universal and for all time. *The Upaniṣads are the only sacred books which addressed themselves exclusively to the discovery of these essential spiritual truths and to leading man, irrespective of creed and race, to their realization in his own life.* Indian tradition refers to the Upaniṣads, therefore, as Śruti, as contrasted with another class of religious literature known as Smṛti, including the *Dharma Śāstra*, to which it wisely left the work of forging social rules and regulations in the past, as it would leave it to the political constitutions and social consciences today. To the category of the Smṛti also belong the sacred books of all the *historical* religions, which derive their origin and authority from a personal founder. Thus, among India's sacred books, the *Gītā*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyana*, and all the *Purāṇas* are classed as Smṛtis, besides *Manu-smṛti*, *Yājñavalkya-smṛti*, and similar other books of Hindu law. Excepting the Upaniṣads, all other scriptures of religions, in India and outside, contain a mixture of Śruti and Smṛti contents in varying proportions. That is why the Upaniṣads are treated as *the one Śruti par excellence*.

The Sanātana Dharma: Its Uniqueness

THIS EXPLAINS THE VERY HIGH authority and prestige of the Śruti in the Indian tradition; it derives from the verified and verifiable character of its truths and their universality. Accordingly, the Smṛti is always subordinate to the Śruti in spiritual matters. Smṛtis come and go; they change age after age; but the Śruti, according to the penetrating analysis of Śaṅkara (commentary on the *Brahma-Sūtra*, I. 1. 2), contains *vastutantrajñāna*, 'knowledge of reality as it is', whereas Smṛti contains *puruṣa-tantrajñāna*, 'knowledge depending on the person', which 'can be modified or altered by human effort': *kartum akartum anyathākartum śakyate*. A Smṛti that sustained society in one age may choke it in another age. As socio-economic conditions change, laws and regulations need to be recast and reinterpreted. Otherwise, they result in strangling the social organism. If the bark that protects the tree fails to grow and expand along with the growth of the tree, it will choke the tree; and if it is a living tree, it will shed that bark and grow a new living bark for itself. Regarding

all Smṛtis in general, Ramakrishna's pithy utterance correctly conveys the Indian idea: 'Mughal coins have no *currency* under the (East India) Company's rule.'

Much of the irrelevance of the world's religious traditions today proceeds from their inability to separate the Śruti, or the essential, from the Smṛti, or the obsolete, contents, the *eternal* spiritual *truths* from the *historical* socio-political *dogmas*, in these traditions, and their unwillingness to throw overboard the latter which have ceased to have any *currency* value in the changed conditions, and their incapacity to forge new Smṛtis in response to the new demands. Referring to this, the mathematician-philosopher, A. N. Whitehead, says (*Science in the Modern World*, p. 234):

'Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development.'

Historian Arnold Toynbee also stresses this point in his book, *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (pp. 262-64):

'Thus, in our society in our time, the task of winnowing the chaff away from the grain in mankind's religious heritage is being forced upon us by a conjunction of social and spiritual circumstances....

'In the life of all higher religions, the task of winnowing is a perennial one because their historic harvest is not pure grain. In the heritage of each of the higher religions, we are aware of the presence of two kinds of ingredients. There are essential counsels and truths, and there are non-essential practices and propositions.

'The essential counsels and truths are valid at all times and places, as far as we can see through the dark glass of mankind's experience up to date....

'But at the same time these same higher religions are historical institutions; and they have been making a transit through space-time in which, at every point-moment in their trajectory, they have been encountering the local and temporary circumstances of human life....

'These accidental accretions are the price that the permanently and universally valid essence of a higher religion has to pay for com-

municating its message to the members of a particular society in a particular stage of this society's history.'

The philosophy and religion that India developed out of the Śruti bears, therefore, a significant title, namely, *sanātana dharma*, 'Eternal Religion'. It derives its authority from its truth-character and not from any person, be he saint or even an incarnation; and the truth-character of a teaching demands that it be verifiable by all, irrespective of dogma, creed, and race, and at all times. It has, however, a high place for saints and incarnations as exemplars and teachers of the eternal truths of religion, and for the promulgators of social laws and regulations, be they holy or gifted individuals, as in the past, or institutions like the national legislatures or international organizations, as in the present.

Throwing light on this unique characteristic of the *sanātana dharma* as derived from the Upaniṣads, Swami Vivekananda says in his lecture on 'The Sages of India' (*Complete Works*, Vol. III, pp. 248-51):

'Two ideals of truth are in our scriptures; the one is what we call the eternal, and the other is not so authoritative, yet binding under particular circumstances, times, and places. The eternal relations between souls and God are embodied in what we call the Śrutis, the Vedas. The next set of truths is what we call the Smṛtis, as embodied in the words of Manu, Yājñavalkya, and other writers, and also in the Purāṇas, down to the Tantras....

'Another peculiarity is that these Śrutis have many sages as the recorders of the truths in them, mostly men, even some women. Very little is known of their personalities, the dates of their birth, and so forth, but their best thoughts, their best discoveries, I should say, are preserved there, embodied in the sacred literature of our country, the Vedas. In the Smṛtis, on the other hand, personalities are more in evidence. Startling, gigantic, impressive, world-moving persons stand before us, as it were, for the first time, sometimes of more magnitude even than their teachings.

'This is a peculiarity which we have to understand—that our religion preaches an Impersonal-Personal God. It preaches any amount of impersonal laws plus any amount of personality; but the very fountain-head of our religion is in the Śrutis, the Vedas, which are perfectly impersonal; the persons all come in the Smṛtis and

Purāṇas—the great *avātaras*, incarnations of God, prophets, and so forth. And this ought also to be observed that except our religion, every other religion in the world depends upon the life or lives of some personal founder or founders. Christianity is built upon the life of Jesus Christ, Mohammedanism upon Mohammed, Buddhism upon Buddha, Jainism upon the *Jinas*, and so on. It naturally follows that there must be in all these religions a good deal of fight about what they call the *historical* evidences of these great personalities. If at any time the historical evidences about the existence of these personages in ancient times become weak, the whole building of the religion tumbles down and is broken to pieces. We escaped this fate, because our religion is not based on persons but principles. That you obey your religion is not because it came through authority of a sage, no, not even of an incarnation. Kṛṣṇa is not the authority of the Vedas, but the Vedas are the authority of Kṛṣṇa himself. His glory is that he is the greatest preacher of the Vedas that ever existed. So with the other incarnations; so with all our sages.'

By Śruti is generally meant the Vedas; specifically, it means the Upaniṣads, they being the Vedānta, the *anta*, literally the end or concluding portion, but in a deeper sense, the very *gist* or *essence*, of the Vedas. The Vedas or Śrutis expound *sanātana dharma*, which means eternal religion. Indian spiritual tradition holds the Vedas as *anādi*, beginningless. Clarifying this idea in his address at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago, Swami Vivekananda says (*ibid.* Vol. I, pp. 6-7):

'It may sound ludicrous to this audience how a book can be without beginning or end. But by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times. Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery, and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so is it with the laws that govern the spiritual world. The moral, ethical, and spiritual relations between soul and soul, and between individual spirits and the father of all spirits, were there before their discovery, and would remain even if we forgot them.

'The discoverers of these laws are called *ṛṣis* (sages), and we honour them as perfected beings. I am glad to tell this audience that some of the very greatest of them were women.'

Meaning of the Term Upaniṣad

THAT THIS IS THE TRADITIONAL view is evident from what Śaṅkara says on the etymology of the term 'upaniṣad'. The term means knowledge received by the student 'sitting close to' the teacher. Explaining the derivation of the term in the introduction to his commentary on the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, Śaṅkara says:

Kena punararthayogena upaniṣacchabdena vidyā ucyate, ityucyate. Ye mumukṣavo drṣṭānuśravikaviśayavitrṣṇāḥ santaḥ upaniṣacchabdavācyaṁ vakṣyamāṇalakṣaṇāṁ vidyām upasadya, upagamya, tanniṣṭhatayā niścayena śīlayanti, teṣāṁ avidyādeḥ saṁsārabhijasya viśaraṇāt, himsanāt, vināśanāt ityanena arthyogena vidyā upaniṣad-ityucyate—

'By what etymological process does the term "upaniṣad" denote knowledge? This is now explained. Those who seek liberation, being endowed with the spirit of dispassion towards all sense objects, seen or heard of, and *approaching* this knowledge indicated by the term "upaniṣad" presently to be explained, devote themselves to it with one-pointed determination—of such people, this knowledge *removes, shatters, or destroys* the *avidyā* (ignorance or spiritual blindness), which is the seed of all relative existence or worldliness. By these etymological connexions, "upaniṣad" is said to mean knowledge.'

And anticipating a possible objection, Śaṅkara continues:

Nanu ca upaniṣacchabdena adhyetāro granthamapi abhilapanti, upaniṣadam adhīmahe, upaniṣadam adhyāpayāma iti ca. Naiṣa doṣaḥ; avidyādisaṁsārahetuviśaraṇādeḥ sadidhātvarthasya granthamātre asambhavāt, vidyāyām ca sambhavāt, granthasyāpi tādarthiyena tacchabdatvopapatteḥ, āyurvai gṛham ityādivat. Tasmāt vidyāyām mukhyayā vṛttyā upaniṣacchabdo vartate, granthe tu bhaktyā iti—

It may be urged that students use the term "upaniṣad" even to denote a book, as when they say "We shall study the Upaniṣad", "We shall teach the Upaniṣad". This is no fault; since the destruction etc. of the seed of worldliness, which is the meaning

of the root *sad* (in *upa-ni-sad*), cannot be had from a mere book, but can be had from knowledge, even the book may also be denoted by that term, because it serves the same purpose (indirectly), as when we say that "clarified butter is verily life". Therefore, the term "*upaniṣad*" primarily refers to knowledge, and only secondarily to a book.'

Education involving the student 'sitting close to' the teacher means the most intimate student-teacher communion. The higher the knowledge sought, greater is this communion and greater the silence accompanying the knowledge-communication. These values reach their maximum when the knowledge that is sought and imparted is of the highest kind, namely, *ātmajñāna* or *brahmajñāna*, knowledge of the Atman or Brahman, which, as Śaṅkara points out in his commentary on the *Brahma-Sūtra* (I. 1. 2): *anubhavāvasānatvāt bhūtavastuviṣayatvāt ca brahmajñānasya*— 'finds its consummation in *experience* (or realization), since the knowledge of Brahman relates to a reality which is already existing.'

Truth versus Opinion

ONE OF THE FASCINATING FEATURES of the Upaniṣads is love of truth and its fearless quest. Referring to this, Robert Ernest Hume says in his book *The Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads* (p. 30, footnote):

'The earnestness of the search for truth is one of the delightful and commendable features of the Upaniṣads.'

In them we are always in the company of earnest students and teachers who discuss the central problems of all philosophy and religion with a sincerity and thoroughness, objectivity and detachment, rare in the history of philosophic thought. The Upaniṣads discovered very early in history what Thomas Huxley refers to as the difference between opinion and truth, between 'I believe such and such' and 'I believe such and such *to be true*'. Says Huxley (quoted by J. Arthur Thomson in his *Introduction to Science*, p. 22):

'The longer I live, the more obvious it is to me that the most sacred act of a man's life is to say and feel, "I believe such and such to be true." All the greatest rewards and all the heaviest penalties of existence cling about that act.'

A belief is true if it has stood, and can always stand, the test of experience, and not because it has been said by a man or written in a book. The essential Vedantic truths belong to this category; they possess universal validity as they are verifiable by all men. This is forcefully brought out by Śaṅkara in a remarkable passage of his commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* dealing with the validity of scriptural statements (I. 4. 7):

Na vākyaśya vastvanvākhyānam kṛiānvākhyānam vā prāmāṇyāprāmāṇyakāraṇam, kiṁ tarhi? Niścitaḥ phalavat vijñānotpādakatvam. Tat yatra asti, tat pramāṇam vākyaṁ; yatra nāsti, tat apramāṇam—

'The test of the validity of a sentence is not that it just states something about a thing or about an act. What (is it) then? (It is) its capacity to generate certain and fruitful knowledge. A sentence that has this is valid; while one that lacks it is invalid.'

Such truths are far different from the private beliefs of an individual or a group, a sect or a church, held with all emotional intensity and projected for other people's acceptance with equal fervour. Such beliefs cannot claim 'the greatest reward' because they have not paid 'the heaviest penalty' involved in being subjected to the rigorous scrutiny of reason and being thrown open to universal verification. Referring to this unique characteristic of Vedānta, Romain Rolland says (*The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*, Third Impression, 1947, p. 196):

'The true Vedantic spirit does not start out with a system of preconceived ideas. It possesses absolute liberty and unrivalled courage among religions with regard to the facts to be observed and the diverse hypotheses it has laid down for their co-ordination. Never having been hampered by a priestly order, each man has been entirely free to search wherever he pleased for the spiritual explanation of the spectacle of the universe.'

The Mental Climate of the Upaniṣads

I HAVE REFERRED BEFORE TO THE FEARLESS quest of truth characteristic of these Upaniṣads. Any reader of this literature cannot also escape being struck by the rational bent and speculative daring of these sages of ancient India.

The spirit of inquiry which possessed them led them to question experience, to question the environing world; it also led them to fearlessly question their gods and the tenets of their traditional faiths. In this latter field, they showed their uniqueness in contrast to the other gifted people of the ancient world, namely, the Greeks, who did not experience the same urge to subject their religions to that rational investigation which they so diligently and passionately applied to social and political phenomena, and in which their contributions were to become unique and lasting. The Upaniṣadic, and earlier, even the Vedic, sages did not also fear to doubt when rational, certain knowledge was difficult to come by. They illustrate the truth of the creative role of scepticism; in the pursuit of truth, such scepticism is but the prelude to traditional faith.

When they sought for the truth of the external universe, they found it baffling; inquiry only deepened the mystery. The *Nāsadīya-sūkta* of the *Ṛg-Veda* records the impact of this mystery on the ancient Indian mind in language at once fascinating and provoking. That mind discovered early, as modern thinkers are slowly discovering today, that the mystery of the external world will only deepen and not diminish, in spite of advancing knowledge, if the mystery of the inner world of man is not tackled. For a complete philosophy of reality, there is need to have data from both the fields of experience, the outer and the inner.

Modern science has become aware of the influence of the datum of the observer on the knowledge of the observed data. If the self as knower is inextricably involved in the knowledge of the not-self, of the known, an inquiry into the nature of the self and the nature of knowledge becomes not only a valid but also an indispensable and integral part of the scientific investigation into the nature of reality. As remarked by Sir Arthur Eddington (*Philosophy of Physical Science*, p. 5):

'We have discovered that it is actually an aid in the search for knowledge to understand the nature of the knowledge which we seek.'

The Upaniṣads, therefore, were far in advance of human thought when they decided to dedicate themselves to the tackling of the inner world. *By their emphasis on inner penetration, by their whole-hearted advocacy of what the Greeks centuries later promulgated in the dictum 'Man, know thyself', but at which they themselves stopped half-way, the Upaniṣads not only gave a permanent orientation to Indian culture and thought, but also blazed a trail for all subsequent philosophy in East and West.*

The Upaniṣads do not disclose any details as to the personal histories of their thinkers; but they provide us with a glimpse of the working of their minds; we can study in this literature the graceful conflict of thought with thought, the emergence of newer and newer thought more satisfactory to reason and more in accord with experience at deeper levels, and the rejection of the less adequate ones without a tear. Hypotheses are advanced and rejected on the touchstone of experience and reason, and not at the dictate of a creed. Thus thought forges ahead to unravel the mystery of man and the universe in which he finds himself; and we can watch this developmental movement of thought and, if we are sensitive enough, also experience, in the words of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (III. 2. 8.), this onward march of being carried along in its current to the one ocean of truth and beauty and delight, and realize our oneness with the One behind the many:

*Yathā nadyaḥ syandamānā samudre
astam gacchanti nāmarūpe vihāya;
Tathā vidvān nāmarūpāt vimuktaḥ
parātparam puruṣamupaiti divyam—*

'Just as rivers, as they flow, merge in the ocean giving up their (separate) names and forms, so the knowing one, freed from (separateness arising from) name and form, attains the luminous supreme Self, which is beyond (even) the (other) supreme (namely, nature in its undifferentiated state).'

The Upaniṣads reveal an age characterized by a remarkable ferment, intellectual and spiritual. It is one of those rare ages in human history which have registered distinct breakthroughs in man's quest for truth and meaning and which have held far-reaching consequences for all subsequent ages. The mental climate of the Upaniṣads is saturated with a passion for truth and a similar passion for human happiness and welfare. Their thinkers were 'undisturbed by the thought of there being a public to please or critics to appease', as Max Müller puts it (*Three Lectures on Vedanta Philosophy*, p. 39). They considered no sacrifice too heavy in their quest for truth, including not only earthly pleasures and heavenly delights, but also what is most difficult to achieve and what every truth-seeker is called upon to achieve, namely, the sacrificing of pet opinions and pleasing prejudices. Referring to this characteristic of the Upaniṣads in his book *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*, Max Müller says (p. 182):

'It is surely astounding that such a system as the Vedanta should have been slowly elaborated by the indefatigable and intrepid thinkers of India thousands of years ago, a system that even now makes us feel giddy, as in mounting the last steps of the swaying spire of a Gothic cathedral. None of our philosophers, not excepting Heraclitus, Plato, Kant, or Hegel, has ventured to erect such a spire, never frightened by storms or lightnings. Stone follows on stone after regular succession after once the first step has been made, after once it has been clearly seen that in the beginning there can have been but one, as there will be but one in the end, whether we call it Atman or Brahman.'

An impressive procession of students and teachers, earnest and sincere; a moving record of their animated discussions and graceful thought conflicts here in small groups and there in large assemblies; a flight of thought now and then into sublime heights of experience recorded in songs of freedom and delight, graceful and direct; an effective use of beautiful metaphors and telling imageries serving as feathers to its arrows of thought in flight; a singular absence of an atmosphere of coercion, open or veiled, secular or sacred, inhibiting the free pursuit of truth or its communication; the constant summons to man to verify for

himself the truths placed before him for his acceptance; and the treatment of man as man and not as cut up into creeds, races, and sex—these and other varied features invest the Upaniṣads with the enduring greatness and strength of a perennial philosophy and the beauty and charm of an immortal literature.

Unlike philosophies elsewhere and other systems here, Vedānta is a living philosophy; and from the time it was first expounded in that dim antiquity down to our own times, it has been the spiritual inspiration behind the vast and varied Indian cultural experiment.

The Upaniṣads and Indian Culture

WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING THE UPANIṢADS, it is impossible to get an insight into Indian history and culture. Every subsequent development of philosophy and religion in India has drawn heavily on the Upaniṣads. The path of *bhakti* or devotion to a personal God, the path of *karma* or detached action, and the synthesis of all spiritual paths in a comprehensive spirituality, expounded by the *Gītā*, are all derived from the Upaniṣads. The *Gītā* is described as *brahmavidyāntargata yogaśāstra*—‘the science (and technique) of *yoga* derived from the science of Brahman’. Emphasizing this pervasive influence of the Upaniṣads on Indian religions, Swami Vivekananda says (*Complete Works*, Vol. III, pp. 230-31):

‘In the Upaniṣads, also, we find all the subsequent development of Indian religious thought. Sometimes it has been urged without any grounds whatsoever that there is no ideal of *bhakti* in the Upaniṣads. Those that have been students of the Upaniṣads know that that is not true. There is enough of *bhakti* in every Upaniṣad, if you will only seek for it; but many of these ideas which are found so fully developed in later times in the Purāṇas and other Smṛtis are only in the germ in the Upaniṣads. The sketch, the skeleton, was there, as it were. It was filled in in some of the Purāṇas. But there is not one full-grown Indian ideal that cannot be traced back to the same source—the Upaniṣads.’

In the words of Bloomfield (*The Religion of the Veda*, p. 51):

‘There is no important form of Hindu thought, heterodox Buddhism included, which is not rooted in the Upaniṣads.’

Every creative period in India’s long history has behind it the impact of this Vedantic inspiration in a concentrated measure. The drying up of this fount of inspiration, similarly, has always seen the setting in of the low tide of her culture and life. The ages of the *Gītā*, Buddha, and Śaṅkara in the past, and of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda in the present, are such landmarks in India’s ancient and modern history. It is the energy of this strengthening and purifying philosophy of Vedanta, coupled with the energy of modern science and technology, that Swami Vivekananda has released for recreating India in the modern age. That Vedantic energy could not be confined to India only, but has flowed out first to the West, and later to the East as well, to recreate the life of modern man.

The Upaniṣads are thus the perennial spring of strength and creativity. This creativity and strength derive from their vision of man as the Atman, the eternal, infinite dimension of the human personality. Their theme is freedom of the human spirit and their message is fearlessness and love and service. They summon men and women everywhere to this mighty adventure of freedom and fearlessness, love and service, and to the realization, by each man or women, of his or her essential spiritual nature, and the transcendence of the limitations of finitude. They explain every great movement—social, political, or religious—nay, the phenomena of life itself, as an expression of the urge to freedom inherent in every organism—the struggle of the Infinite caught up in a cell or in a body, in a social scheme or a political system, in a religious dogma or a philosophical creed, in a texture of relations or the network of relativity itself. Hence their constant summons to man is to wake up and march on: ‘Arise! Awake! and stop not till the goal is reached!’ as conveyed by Swami Vivekananda, adapting the powerful words of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*: *Uttiṣṭhata jāgrata prāpya varān nibodhata*.

To the Upaniṣads India owes almost all the brighter sides of her life and culture. To them she owes her impressive record of active toleration within her borders and the uniformly peaceful

and benevolent nature of her foreign relations in the field of religion. To them she owes the singular absence of aggressive political and military policies and programmes on her part towards other nations during her millennia of history. To them she owes the periodical renewal of her national springs of life when they seem all but choked and about to dry up. To them also she owes the absence of the heavy hand of an all-powerful church and the tentacles of an inescapable dogma on the national life and mind, allowing for the emergence and unhampered functioning, in succeeding periods, of free, creative, and universal spirits who came to purify and reactivate the dormant spirit of the people, who were received by the Indian people and given divine honours, unlike the hostility and persecution with which spiritual innovators were, and still are, receive in all Semitic religions in the absence of the blessing of the impersonal background which the Upaniṣads had provided for the Indian religions, and whose procession down the ages is an impressive feature of India's long history.

And today she is on the threshold of another such creative era of history in the wake of an unprecedented new manifestation of the Vedantic spirit and energy in Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

Sri Ramakrishna, of whom Rabindranath Tagore, in a tribute paid during Sri Ramakrishna Birth Centenary in 1937, sang in his charming Bengali:

*Bahu sādaker bahu sādhanār dhārā
dhāyne tomār milita hoyeche tārā,
Tomār jīvane asīmer līlāpathe
nūtan tīrtha rūp nilo e jagate,
Deśvideśer praṇām ānila ṭāni,
sethāi amār praṇati dilām āni—*

'The diverse sources of spiritual seeking of millions of spiritual seekers—they have all mingled in your meditation.

The limitless expanse of your blessed life has assumed the form of a new *tīrtha*, place of pilgrimage, in this world.

Which *draws* the salutations (of seekers) from India and abroad,
 To which I add my own salutation';
 of whom Kazi Nazrul Islam, Bengal's revolutionary Muslim poet, sang:

*Mandire masjidē gīrjāy
 pūjile brahme sama śraddhāy;
 Tava nām-mākhā prem-niketane
 bhariyāche tāi trisaṁsār—*

'Thou didst worship God with equal fervour in temple, mosque, and church; for which reason the whole world is filled with the reservoir of Love that Thou art';
 and Swami Vivekananda, about whom Rabindranath Tagore said (*Prabāsi*, Vol. 28, p. 286):

Ādhunik kāle bhāratavarṣe Vivekānanda i ekṭi mahat vāṇi pracār karechilen, seṭi kono ācāra-gata nai. Tini deśer sakalke deke bolechilen, tomāder sakaleri madhye brahmer śakti; daridrer madhye devatā tomāder sevā cān. Ei kathāti yuvakder cittake samagrabhāve jagiyeche. Tāi ei vāṇīr phal deśer sevāi āj vicitrabhāve vicitratyāge phaleche. Tār vāṇī mānuṣke jakhani sammān diyeche, takhani śakti diyeche—

'In recent times in India, it was Vivekananda alone who preached a great message which is not tied to any do's and don'ts. Addressing one and all in the nation, he said: In every one of you there is the power of Brahman (God); the God in the poor desires you to serve (Him). This message has roused the heart of the youths in a pervasive way. That is why this message has borne fruit in the service of the nation in diverse ways and in diverse forms of renunciation. His message had, at one and the same time, imparted dignity and respect to man along with energy and power';

and of whom Kazi Nazrul Islam sang:

*Nava bhārate ānile tumi nava ved,
 Mūche dile jāti-dharmer bhed;
 Jīve īśvare abhed ātmā jānāile uccāri—*

'You brought to New India a new Veda, and washed away her stain of separateness of religions and castes by proclaiming from the house-tops the inherent divinity of man.'

Romain Rolland calls Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda *Pater Seraphicus* and Jove the Thunderer, whose beneficent impact is already being felt by the spiritual seekers of all religions.

The Upaniṣads and Western Christianity

CHRISTIANITY IN THE WEST IS ALREADY experiencing, under the impact of the modern challenge, an unprecedented ferment and questioning, resulting in a sincere quest, on the part of the various Christian denominations, for the universal spiritual content of the Christian religion underlying its denominational specialities and exaggerations, and forging thereby an ecumenical Christian unity. The success of this noble quest will entirely depend on increasing emphasis on the Śruti aspects of Christianity and the soft-pedalling of its Smṛti elements. And this is what is being done by the denominations concerned, and with very hopeful results. It is difficult to isolate, from among the complex factors, the Vedantic contribution to this healthy development. If its content derives from the inescapable world conditions created by modern science and technology, its stimulus and direction can largely be traced to the silent but powerful influences proceeding from the spread of Vedantic ideas in the West in the wake of the tumultuous ovation that greeted Swami Vivekananda when he addressed the historic Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Said he in that memorable address (*Complete Works*, Vol. I, p. 18):

'To the Hindu, then the whole world of religions is only a travelling, a coming up, of different men and women, through various conditions and circumstances, to the same goal. Every religion is only evolving a God out of the material man, and the same God is the inspirer of all of them. Why, then are there so many contradictions? They are only apparent, says the Hindu. The contradictions come from the same truth adapting itself to the varying circumstances of different natures.'

'It is the same light coming through glasses of different colours. And these little variations are necessary for purposes of adaptation. But in the heart of everything the same truth reigns. The Lord has declared to the Hindu in his incarnation as Kṛṣṇa: "I am in every religion as the thread through a string of pearls. Wherever thou seest extraordinary holiness and extraordinary power raising and purifying humanity, know thou that I am there."'

No clearer and more authentic pronouncement on the nature and scope of the spiritual core of religions, on their Śruti aspects, has ever been uttered. And giving us an insight into the shape of things to come, he said later in that address (*ibid.*, p. 19):

'...If there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Kṛṣṇa and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brāhminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for, every human being, from the lowest grovelling savage not far removed from the brute, to the highest man towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity, making society stand in awe of him and doubt his human nature. It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be centred in aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature.'

And addressing the final session of the Parliament, he uttered these prophetic words in conclusion (*ibid.*, p. 20):

'If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possession of any church in the world, and every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: "Help and not Fight", "Assimilation and not Destruction", "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension".'

'His words are great music,' remarks Romain Rolland about Vivekananda's utterances (*The Life of Vivekananda*, p. 162). Vivekananda set to music the tune that was haunting the ears of millions in the modern world, the tune of human unity and equality, tolerance and love, the tune of the divine in the heart of man.

The Life of Swami Vivekananda by his Eastern and Western Disciples quotes the following contribution from Mrs. Ella Wheeler Wilcox, one of the foremost poetesses and writers of America, to the *New York American* of 26 May 1907, giving her impressions of Swami Vivekananda; though a bit long, it bears reproduction in this context, as it provides a glimpse of the impact of the message of Vedanta on thinking people in the West (Vol. II, Seventh Edition, pp. 10-11):

'Twelve years ago I chanced one evening to hear that a certain teacher of philosophy from India, a man named Vivekananda, was to lecture a block from my home in New York.

'We went out of curiosity (the Man whose name I bear and I), and before we had been ten minutes in the audience, we felt ourselves lifted up into an atmosphere so rarefied, so vital, so wonderful, that we sat spell-bound and almost breathless, to the end of the lecture.

'When it was over we went out with new courage, new hope, new strength, new faith, to meet life's daily vicissitudes. "This is the Philosophy, this is the idea of God, the religion, which I have been seeking," said the Man. And for months afterwards he went with me to hear Swami Vivekananda explain the old religion and to gather from his wonderful mind jewels of truth and thoughts of helpfulness and strength. It was that terrible winter of financial disasters, when banks failed and stocks went down like broken balloons and businessmen walked through the dark valleys of despair and the whole world seemed topsy-turvy—just such an era as we are again approaching. Sometimes after sleepless nights of worry and anxiety, the Man would go with me to hear the Swami lecture, and then he would come out into the winter gloom and walk down the street smiling and say: "It is all right. There is nothing to worry over." And I would go back to my own duties and pleasures with the same uplifted sense of soul and enlarged vision.

'When any philosophy, any religion, can do this for human beings in this age of stress and strain, and when, added to that, it

intensifies their faith in God and increases their sympathies for their kind and gives them a confident joy in the thought of other lives to come, it is a good and great religion....

'We need to learn the greatness of the philosophy of India. We need to enlarge our narrow creeds with the wisdom religious. But we want to imbue them with our own modern spirit of progress, and to apply them practically, lovingly, and patiently to human needs. Vivekananda came to us with a message.... "I do not come to convert you to a new belief," he said. "I want you to keep your own belief; I want to make the Methodist a better Methodist; the Presbyterian a better Presbyterian; the Unitarian a better Unitarian. I want to teach you to live the truth, to reveal the light within your own soul." He gave the message that strengthened the man of business, that caused the frivolous society woman to pause and think; that gave the artist new aspirations; that imbued the wife and mother, the husband and father, with a larger and holier comprehension of duty.'

The contemporary approach of Christianity to inter-denominational unity reveals itself to be a Vedantic approach not traceable to Christianity's own two-thousand year history. Accordingly, this approach is destined to find its consummation not only in inter-Christian unity, but in Christian-non-Christian unity as well. *It will be a great event in human history when the spiritual energies of the world's religions, so long working in isolation or at cross purposes, become entirely positive and co-operative, and function as an integrated spiritual grid to redeem man from the depth of worldliness and restore him to his true spiritual dimension.* This is the true line of human evolutionary advance; and its nursery and stimulus are to be sought in the spiritual core of the world's religions.

Upaniṣads and Indian Christianity

CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA IS PRACTICALLY COEVAL with Christian history itself. Indian Christian tradition traces the origin of the Christians of Kerala, the south-west state of India, to a visit of St. Thomas, a direct disciple of Jesus Christ, in the first century of the Christian era. From then to this day, Christianity in India, as also Judaism, which also reached Kerala about the same time,

followed by Zoroastrianism, which reached western India eight centuries later, have been protected, cherished, and nourished by the *mother-heart* of Hinduism under the inspiration of the spiritual vision of the Vedantic sages.

Western Christian penetration, both in its Catholic and Protestant forms, began from the sixteenth century under the most un-Christian auspices of western imperialism and colonialism. After four centuries of co-existence of a dogmatic and intolerant Christianity with an all-inclusive and tolerant Hinduism, during which a silent give-and-take process was going on all the time, Indian Christianity has succeeded in finding its own soul and has begun to assert its *Indian* character. A glorious future for Indian Christianity is assured thereby, not only as a national, but also as an international, spiritual force.

Christianity in India today is experiencing a thought-ferment from the impact of Vedanta, whose scientific terminology in the field of religion is steadily invading its exposition and presentation in sermons and books. This is resulting in a steady release of Indian Christianity from its rigid Smṛti elements—the dogmatic and creedal limitations which had kept it ever in conflict with its sister religions and among its own denominations—and its steady conversion into a wholly positive spiritual force proceeding from its Śruti nucleus, keen to respond to the positive spiritual forces of her sister faiths with a view to meeting the spiritual challenges of the industrial age into which modern India is deliberately plunging at a fast pace. As early as 1913, the Christian journal, *Indian Interpreter*, published a significantly titled article 'Christian Vedantism' by R. Gordon Milburn, in which the writer highlights the need for Christianity to open itself to the influences of Vedanta (quoted by S. Radhakrishnan in his *The Principal Upaniṣads*, p. 19, 'Introduction', footnote):

'Christianity in India needs the Vedanta. We missionaries have not realized this with half the clearness that we should. We cannot move freely and joyfully in our own religion, because we have not sufficient terms and modes of expression wherewith to express the more immanent aspects of Christianity. A very useful step would be the recognition of certain books or passages in the literature of

Vedanta as constituting what might be called an Ethnic Old Testament. The permission of ecclesiastical authorities could then be asked for reading passages found in such a canon of Ethnic Old Testament at divine service along with passages from the New Testament as alternatives to the Old Testament lessons.'

In the 'Introduction' to his book, *Christianity as Bhakti Mārga*, published as early as 1926 by The Christian Literature Society for India, as the first book of its 'Indian Studies Series', the author, A. J. Appasamy, M.A. (Harvard), D. Phil. (Oxon), an eminent Indian Christian, writes:

'In attempting to understand how Christianity is likely to relate itself in the coming years to Indian thought and become a living force in the country, I am inclined to think that it will lay much emphasis on mystic experience.'

Emphasizing that this mystic orientation of Indian Christianity will be of the *bhakti* type, the author says further on:

'When we speak of interpreting Christianity in its relation to the spirit of India's religious genius, we have to remember that India's religious genius has expressed itself in systems of philosophy, religious practices, and sacred books often most diverse. The immediate task which lies before Indian Christians anxious to make clear to themselves and to others the relation between the real spirit of Christianity and the real spirit of India's religious life is that of choice. We have to decide what particular form of religious life in India is best suited for this purpose. As there are many types of religious thought in India, an inevitable consequence of the attempts of Christian thinkers to adjust the expression of their religious experience to the terms and ideas familiar to India would be the development of many types of Indian Christianity.'

The Upaniṣads and Indian Islam

THE INFLUENCE OF THE UPANIṢADS on Indian Islam has not been very profound in the past. Even though Sufism, the mystical offshoot of Islam, owes much to the Upaniṣads, Islam as a whole, which has been generally hostile to its own offshoot as to all non-Islamic faiths, has remained largely unaffected.

Prophet Mohammed was a deep lover of God and man. And he has breathed this double love into the *Koran*. Below are given a few verses taken from the English translation of the *Koran* by Al-Haj Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar.

The following three verses singing the glory of God can be found repeated in any number of verses in the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. The opening verses of the *Koran* possess rare spiritual majesty and beauty:

(We commence) with the name of God,
The most Merciful (to begin with),
The most Merciful (to the end).

All praise belongs to God,
Lord of all the worlds,
The most Merciful (to begin with),
The most Merciful (to the end).

Master of the day of Judgement.
Thee alone do we serve,
And Thee alone do we ask for help.
Guide us on the right path,
The path of those upon whom be Thy blessings,
Not of those upon whom be (Thy) wrath,
Nor of those who are lost.

In verse 255 of Chapter 2, we read about the power and glory of God:

God!
There is no deity but He,
The Ever-living,
The All-sustaining:
Slumber overtakes Him not,
Nor sleep.
To him belongs
What is in the heavens,

And what is in the earth.
Who is there to second anyone before Him
Except with His authority?
He knows what is in front of them,
And what is behind them;
And they encompass nothing of His knowledge
Except what He pleases;
And his power extends over the heavens and the earth;
And the guardianship of these tires Him not,
And He is
The Uppermost,
The Highest.

Verse 25 of Chapter 3 sings the majesty of God:

Say, 'O God! Master of the kingdom,
Thou givest the kingdom to whom Thou pleasest,
And Thou snatchest the kingdom from whom Thou pleasest;
And Thou exaltest whom Thou pleasest,
And Thou abasest whom thou pleasest;
In thy hand is all good:
Thou art capable of doing all 'Thou pleasest'.

The *Koran* contains specific mention that salvation is not the monopoly of the Muslims. Verse 62 of chapter 2 says:

As to those who believe (in the *Koran*),
And the Jews,
And the Christians,
And the Sabians—
Whoever believes in God
And the future day
And does good,
For such, then, there is a reward with their Lord,
And there shall be no fear on them,
Nor shall they grieve.

The *Koran* insists that the only condition to be fulfilled to obtain divine mercy is good life and good deeds and not subscription to a creed (*ibid.*, 2, 177):

There is no virtue in your turning your faces
Towards the East or the West,
But virtuous is he who believes in God,
And (in) the future day,
And (in) the messenger-spirits,
And the Book,
And the Prophets;
And he who gives his wealth, in spite of his love for it,
To the near of kin,
And the orphans,
And the needy,
And the wayfarer,
And the beggars,
And in ransoming the slaves;
And who keeps up the prayer,
And pays the stated alms;
And those who fulfil their covenants when they covenant;
And the persevering ones
In hardship,
And injury,
And in time of war;
These are the truthful,
And these! They are the reverent.

The prophet had set a high example of tolerance and respect in his dealings with non-Muslims. Verse 256 of Chapter 2 of the *Koran* upholds religious toleration and fellowship:

Let there be no compulsion in religion,
The right path has surely been made distinct from the wrong,
Then whoever disbelieves in the transgressor,
And believes in God,
He has, then, got hold of the firm handle.

No breaking therefore:
And God is Hearing, Knowing.

Verse 135 of Chapter 4 (also verse 8 of Chapter 5) emphasizes justice and equity in inter-personal relations:

O ye who believe!
Be maintainers of justice,
Witnesses for the sake of God,
And though it be against yourselves,
Or your parents,
And your relations.
Whether a person be rich or poor,
Then God is nearer to them (than you),
Therefore follow not (your) low desires,
Lest you do not do justice.
And if you distort (the evidence),
Or keep away,
Then, surely, God knows well what you do.

These and other verses of the *Koran* proclaim truths which are eternal and universal; they constitute, in the language of Indian spiritual tradition, the Śruti content of Islam. This is Islam as a path to God. There is also another aspect of Islam as a way of life in society. This constitutes the large Smṛti content in the *Koran*, the group of ideas and values which the prophet gave to his people to weld them into an Arab nation. This is of limited application, as it constitutes its personal laws and social rules and regulations—all those elements that form the socio-political content of a religion. No scripture can legislate on these for all time and for all peoples. *The laws that were beneficial to the Arabs of the seventh century AD may not be beneficial to the Indians or Indonesians, Europeans or Americans, and strangely enough, even to the Arabs themselves of the twentieth century.* Progressive Arab states today are wisely modifying them in response to the demands of the modern age.

But the *spiritual* message of the *Koran*, its teaching which shows man a path to spiritual realization, is eternal and universal.

In periods of dynamic social changes, every religion needs to be subjected to a reinterpretation process, 'a winnowing process', in the words of Toynbee referred to earlier, with emphasis on its spirit and a soft-peddalling of its letter, a greater stress on the *eternal* and less on the *historical*, so that it may emerge reconstructed to meet the challenge of the new age; for 'the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life', as the New Testament puts it. If this is not done, the religion concerned becomes a procrustean bed, twisting the personalities of its followers.

The Sufi movement in Islam, arising from the contact of Islam with Christian mysticism and pre-Islamic Iranian spiritual traditions, sought to emphasize its Śruti content, its *non-historical* elements, its *eternal spiritual* core; here Islam as a path to spiritual realization shines most. It found a welcome soil first in Mesopotamia and Iran, then in India, where it became powerfully influenced by Vedānta. But everywhere it had to face fierce opposition and persecution from orthodox Islam, which was centred in a rigid allegiance to its Smṛti contents, including its parochial socio-political ideology and programmes, initiated more often by ambitious rulers and ruthless military adventurers. Socio-political ideologies uninspired by high moral and spiritual values tend to nourish the lower self of man from which proceed selfishness and intolerance, violence and war. The first object of every religion is to check and discipline this lower self of man. But instead of that, instead of religion elevating the socio-political ideology to its own level, it is itself brought down to the level of the other, and functions as its handmaid. This phenomenon afflicted Islam from too close an association with *real-politiks*, as it also afflicted Christianity after Constantine. The saints of Islam—the lovers of God and man—became muted and the voice of Islam was sounded by ignorant zealots, and by war-minded conquerors, un-Islamic and worldly to the core, in search of loot and power and pleasure, who used and *abused* the name of Islam to cover their own worldly propensities.

Indian contact with Islam was through Muslim Arab merchants and missionaries during the first four centuries after the birth of Islam. This phase represented the normal form of

inter-religious and international contact resulting in mutual benefit from a peaceful give-and-take process. It was also the period when Islam reached the height of its power and glory, with the Arab national mind keen for the acquisition of, and warmly hospitable to, new ideas, and taking freely from Greco-Roman, Iranian, and Indian cultures.

But from early thirteenth century, all this changed. Dissensions and corruption set in in the wake of imperial power and luxury, which overwhelmed the simple desert Arab; and the Mongol invasions in the middle of that century finally destroyed the hegemony of Arab Islam. Islamic learning and culture suffered a terrible eclipse, which was to continue for centuries together. The conquerors, and other central Asian groups in their wake, adopted Islam or, rather, *adapted* Islam to their own low cultural standards and purposes. When reason and love of truth were dethroned, the 'letter of the law' triumphed, and reactionary orthodoxy entered into unholy alliance with military adventures, blessing their violent deeds and converting them into a succession of holy wars and jihads with the seal of religious approval.

This was the second phase of Islamic contact experienced by India from about the twelfth century onwards, when India and its religions were systematically battered in the name of that religion which had, during the preceding centuries, nourished a culture and a political state which had freely learnt from Indian knowledge and wisdom and had been the torch-bearer of science and humanism. *The history of India and the character of Indian Islam and Hindu society would have been different if Islam had come to India in this second phase as in that first phase, as a friend and in peace.* This is one of the crucial might-have-beens of the human history. It would then have contributed its equalitarian social gospel to the purification of the caste-ridden social edifice of Hinduism. Hinduism would have gladly learnt these lessons from it, while imparting its own Vedantic outlook and tolerance to the sister faith. But the fact that Islam in its most effective forms came to India through ignorant zealots and militant conquerors, through what Nietzsche terms 'violence of deed and demeanour', made Islam an eyesore to the Hindu mind. *It is one of those sad chapters*

in inter-cultural contacts which yielded bitter fruits, but which, in a different form, would have been fruitful of great results for the religion and culture of mankind.

This second phase, therefore, has written a sad chapter in the history of India, whose far-reaching evil effects constitute the most serious challenge to Indian wisdom today. And India is facing this stupendous task with the strength and dynamism, far-sight and foresight of her Upaniṣadic heritage.

All the lofty ideas of love of God and man, justice and equity in human relations, equality between man and man, and toleration and respect for other faiths—in short, all the Śruti aspects of Islam, which are the nurseries of the progressive trends of a religion, became submerged in successive waves of bigotry and intolerance. Hindus and their saints were not the only victims of this reactionary Islam; Muslims themselves, including some of Islam's lovable saints, holding progressive spiritual views or upholding rational socio-political ideas and programmes, became subjected to persecution, torture, and death. And yet, much give and take and cross-fertilization of the two cultures did take place; and mystics and saints did not fail to arise from time to time during this period, as witnesses to the eternal and universal values embedded in the Islamic religion, thus demonstrating the vitality of its Śruti aspect. The period also saw the occasional appearance of a king or an emperor, with forward-looking state policies, such as the early Mughals and Sher Shah. Such saints and rulers have always responded to the spiritual beauty and depth of Indian wisdom as expressed in Vedānta.

Hindu tolerance continued in the midst of Muslim intolerance because that tolerance was the product of a spiritual vision and philosophical conviction bequeathed by the Upaniṣads, which had become an inseparable part of the Indian outlook and the way of life. There is a uniqueness about Indian toleration in that it has always been the product of religious faith, unlike the toleration developed by the modern West resulting from its waning of faith in religion. Explaining this Indian approach, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan says (*Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, p. 317):

'Toleration is the homage which the finite mind pays to the inexhaustibility of the Infinite.'

Muslim chroniclers themselves have noted this strange phenomenon of Hindu tolerance in the midst of Muslim intolerance. Dr. Radhakrishnan quotes (*ibid.*, p. 312) the following passages from Murray's *Discoveries and Travels in Asia* (Vol. II, p. 20) in which the author gives the remarks of a Muslim ambassador from Persia to the court of the Hindu ruler of Calicut in Kerala:

'The people (of Calicut) are infidels; consequently I (Abdul Razak Berni, Ambassador from the court of Persia about the middle of the fifteenth century) consider myself in an enemy's country, as the Mohammadans consider everyone who has not received the *Koran*. Yet I admit that I meet with perfect toleration, and even favour; we have two mosques and are allowed to pray in public.'

Even the bigoted chronicler of Aurangzeb's reign, Khafi Khan, felt compelled to give high tributes to Shivaji, the Hindu ruler of the South, who cherished Hindus and Muslims alike and cared for their holy places with equal solicitude, even while resisting tooth and nail the policy of systematic oppression of the Hindus zealously practised by the Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb. The same cultured attitude and policy were adopted by Guru Gobind Singh in the Punjab during his relentless struggle against the intolerance and oppression of this emperor who saw at his death in 1707 the dismemberment of the mighty Moghul empire due to his own follies. Says historian S. N. Sen in his *Military System of the Marathas* (p. 18):

'In India religious intolerance has been very rare and Shivaji's conception of a Hindu empire was in no way identified with religious persecution. He enlisted in his army seven hundred (Muslim) Pathan deserters from Bijapur, at least three of his naval commanders were Muslims by faith, and he venerated the Muhammadan saint, Sheikh Muhammad as he venerated the Hindu saints Tukaram and Ramdas. He granted *inām* lands for "the illumination of, and food offerings to, the shrines of Muhammadan saints, and Muslim mosques were maintained by state allowance". Only once in his eventful career did he fail to respect the asylum given by a

Muhammadan saint to some fugitives, but he never failed to show due respect to the holy scriptures of the Muslims. And Khafi Khan, who delights in showering the most opprobrious epithets...on him, is yet constrained to admit that "he made it a rule that whenever his followers went plundering, they should do no harm to the mosques, the Book of God, or the women of anyone. Whenever a copy of the sacred *Koran* came into his hands, he treated it with respect, and gave it to some of his Mussalman followers. When the women of any Hindu or Muhammadan were taken prisoners by his men, and they had no friend to protect them, he watched over them until their relations came with a suitable ransom to buy their liberty." (Elliot and Dawson, *History of India*, Vol. II, pp. 254, 256, 262, and 269).'

Islamic intolerance, as we have seen, is not the fruit of Islam as such, but of its fundamentalist interpretation, of its mixing up of religion with parochial and exclusive tribalism and political nationalism. Islam, as history shows, has also exhibited, in its progressive variety, the finest tolerance in the lives of several of its saints and laymen, kings and states. In the context of the modern world, the mind and face of that fundamentalist Islam wear the look of a long-vanished age. But there is also the mind and face of this progressive Islam which is today struggling to work out a new Islamic *yugadharma*, the *dharma* for this *yuga* or age, as Indian thought puts it. This latter Islam has already begun to move the minds and hearts of millions in several Arab states. The conflict between the two types of Islam shows itself essentially as a conflict between reactionary and progressive forces, between rigid backward-looking and resilient forward-looking ideologies, the former viewing Islam as a *finished* and final *Smṛti*, exclusive and intolerant of all other *Smṛtis*, and the latter viewing it in the light of its *Śruti* elements and the scientific and humanistic thought of the modern age, and striving to forge a new Islamic *Smṛti* in tune with what is eternal in Islam and with the spirit of modern enlightenment.

Modern Indian Islam, except in small groups here and there, has so far escaped this conflict in any serious form due, among other things, to the encouragement and support given by the foreign British government, in the interest of its own self-perpetuation, to all reactionary forces in Indian Islam, and

to the frenzied upheaval which preceded and led to the partition of India in 1947; these abnormal circumstances helped to nourish and sustain the ideology of that backward-looking Islam. But the conflict between the progressive and the reactionary is bound to invade Indian Islam also as it has invaded Arab Islam. Due to the exigencies of its birth, Pakistan Islam may experience it somewhat later. *Earlier or later, no religion or society today, be it Muslim, Christian, or Hindu, can escape the inquisitive, and often irreverent, questioning and peering by increasing sections of its intelligent youths, both girls and boys, educated and nurtured in modern thought.* The searchlight of critical thought will soon be systematically directed by thoughtful Indian Muslims on their religious traditions with a view to finding out what is essential, and separating what is obsolete, in them, as it was directed earlier by free-minded Christians on Christianity and free-minded Hindus on Hinduism.

When this becomes a barrage, either of two things may result: the onset of a reforming zeal which, for want of insight into, and faith in, the higher spiritual dimensions of religion, will begin to secularise Islam by reforming its obsolete elements, and end in reforming away Islam itself, and converting it into a mere social reform programme, into a mere worldly ideology, as has happened in the case of protestant Christianity; or else, the setting in of a process of creative adjustment in which the eternal and universal spiritual message of Islam will be increasingly liberated, the forces of which tending to align with the kindred forces of her sister faiths with a view to providing the *bread* of religion to the spiritually hungry modern Muslim youth who refuses to be fed on the *stones* of exclusive and outworn dogmas and creeds.

This search for the essential and casting away of the non-essential is a hoary tradition in Islamic spirituality. Dr. Bhagawan Das refers (*Essential Unity of All Religions*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Edition, 1960, p. 100) to the verse in the famous *Masnavi*, which is accepted in the Muslim world generally as next only to the *Koran* in holiness, in which the author, Maulana Jalal-Ud-din Rumi

describes in beautiful Persian the purpose of his work as precisely this:

*Man Ze Qurān maghz rā bardāṣtam,
Ustukhān peṣe sagān andakhtam—*

'The marrow from the *Koran* have I drawn,
And the dry bones unto the dogs have cast.'

When this is done with regard to the *Koran* today, the scope of the Smṛti aspect of Islam, such as personal laws and social rules relating to marriage, inheritance, etc., will be subjected to rational scrutiny and become wisely relegated to the care of political constitutions and parliamentary social legislations and to the enlightened social consciences of the respective nations, on the one hand, and of the various legislative organs of the international community, on the other.

The two courses above enumerated mean either the *secularization* of religion or the *spiritualization* of the secular life of man; the latter will meet the contemporary demand for the toning up of the secular life of man in terms of the essential core of spiritual truths imbedded in religion.

Whatever may be the future course of Islam in other countries with respect to these two alternatives, the course of Indian Islam will be determined not only by the spiritual forces arising from within itself, but also by its environing forces, the forces proceeding from the total Indian social situation, conditioned, among other things, by the hoary Indian culture with a spiritual base and a spiritual direction. And these forces, so far as religion is concerned, are the forces arising from the strengthening, purifying, and unifying philosophy and vision of the Upaniṣads. Many scholars and thinkers of Islam and Hinduism, past and present, have expressed the conviction that the spiritual core of Islam is perfectly in tune with this philosophy and vision, and that some of the practical achievements of Islam, such as social equality, are more so than similar achievements of Hinduism itself. The closer alignment now of these two kindred spiritual forces will help not only in the

evolution of a progressive modern Indian national society, free, equalitarian, and spiritually oriented, but will also result in the evolution of a distinctively Indian Islam stamped with the Indian spiritual genius, and in the development of Islamic democracy into human democracy.

The revivalist movements in Indian Islam have so far been *politically* inspired and motivated, backward-looking, and productive of bitter fruits. They have done everything to suppress the redeeming forces of the spirituality of Islam and its close kinship with Hindu and Christian spirituality. But Indian Islam cannot long escape the modern impact; it is bound, before long, to pass through a process of inner ferment and questioning under the stimulus of expanding modern education and the nourishment provided by the free atmosphere of Indian democracy. *These two circumstances offer the supreme opportunity to every Indian religion to bring the highest and best out of itself.* When Indian Islam begins to avail of this opportunity, it will capture a forward-looking mood and temper and that dynamic capacity for assimilation of new ideas which it manifested in the Middle East in the heyday of its glory under the Caliphate. This is bound to bring the higher mind of Islam under the spell of Vedanta, and of its dynamic modern expression in Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, as it fell under the spell of classical Greek thought and higher Persian thought in that earlier period. It will then experience a pervasive revival and reconstruction of a truly *spiritual* character in tune with the enlightenment and progressive spirit and demands of the modern age. It can be predicted that such a reconstruction of Indian Islam will see the appearance of new commentaries and other types of studies on the *Koran* in the light of the Upaniṣads. Vivekananda believed that the modern renaissance in India will result in a happy synthesis of the spiritual streams of Vedanta and Islam, a consummation which was fervently wished for, and achieved in a small way, by the saints and laymen of both the religions even during the unpropitious times of the Middle Ages. This is the glorious future before Indian Islam today.

The Upaniṣads and Indian Secularism

THE CROSS AND THE CRESCENT have always been at loggerheads with each other all over the world. This is in for a profound change in the Indian context today. When Indian Christianity and Indian Islam will achieve their spiritual self-discovery, they will issue forth as distinct national and international spiritual force, in harmony with each other and with the other world religions. To India herself, this will be the consummation of that process which Vivekananda refers to as 'the union of her scattered spiritual forces'. The Indian Constitution and the Indian state are passionately wedded to the ideal of freedom—freedom of thought and conscience and freedom to profess and practise the faith of one's choice, *and even freedom to live without a faith*. And freedom is the one condition of growth, says Swami Vivekananda. In the passionate words which he uttered in the course of his lectures on 'Practical Vedanta' delivered in London in 1896 (*Complete Works*, Vol. II, p. 336):

'We should, therefore, follow reason and also sympathize with those who do not come to any sort of belief, following reason. For it is better that mankind should become atheist by following reason than blindly believe...on the authority of anybody. What we want is progress, development, realization. No theories ever made men higher. No amount of books can help us to become purer. The only power is in realization and that lies in ourselves and comes from thinking. Let men think. A clod of earth never thinks; but it remains only a lump of earth. The glory of man is that he is a thinking being. It is the nature of man to think and therein he differs from animals. I believe in reason and follow reason having seen enough of the evils of authority, for I was born in a country where they have gone to the extreme of authority.'

The freedoms granted and guaranteed by the Indian state are meant to ensure the all-round growth of the Indian people through stimulation of their thinking and initiative. They seek to convert India into a vast laboratory of human development for a seventh of the human race, in a *milieu* of freedom and equality and the sacredness of the human personality.

This is the meaning of India declaring herself a secular state. The vast majority of those who met in the Constituent Assembly in Delhi and voted the Indian constitution in 1949 were religious and not irreligious. And yet, they adopted the principles and policies of a secular constitution for their deeply religious country. We should not fail to note the significance of this. In the words of Dr. Radhakrishnan (*Recovery of Faith*, p. 202):

‘Though faith in the Supreme is the basic principle of the Indian tradition, the Indian state will not identify itself with or be controlled by any particular religion.... This view of religious impartiality, of comprehension and forbearance, has a prophetic role to play within the national and the international life. The religious impartiality of the Indian state is not to be confused with secularism or atheism. Secularism as here defined is in accordance with the ancient religious tradition of India. It tries to build up a fellowship of believers, not by subordinating individual qualities to the group mind but by bringing them into harmony with each other. This dynamic fellowship is based on the principle of diversity in unity which alone has the quality of creativeness.’

A secular state so conceived, one that is not wedded either to religious indifference or anti-religious atheism, but impartially promotes all religions, believing in the spiritual dimension of the human personality over and above his sensate nature, is a unique phenomenon ‘with a prophetic role to play,’ as remarked by Dr. Radhakrishnan. It is more appropriately termed the Vedantic state, for the inspiration behind it is the tolerant all-embracing Upaniṣadic tradition. No such secular state has existed in history, ancient or modern, either in the East or in the West, including India. In Indian history, we come across great states dedicated, no doubt, to toleration and inter-religious fellowship, but also committed to one particular faith. In western history, on the other hand, we come across states which hold the scales even between its diverse faiths, itself uninterested in all of them, except politically. This is specially true of the Roman Empire, the various cults and religions of which, in the cynical remark of Gibbon, ‘were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosophers as equally false, and by the magistrates as equally

useful'. The United States of America comes closest to the Indian conception, where the separation of church and state co-exists with a general commitment to God and religion. But the American political philosophy does not claim any insight into, and is unconcerned with, the faith of the individual as such, but is concerned only with its social expression in his or her conduct and behaviour. *It is the presence of this insight and its integration with man's external life that makes Vedanta a complete philosophy which has the courage and capacity to see life steadily and see it as a whole.*

The New Testament dictum, 'Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's,' is only a working principle at its best. It leaves man as a denizen of two unreconciled worlds, either of which may encroach, or be encroached by, the other, to the detriment of human progress and well-being. Both have happened in history. Whatever be the justification for this dualism of God and Caesar in the past, it is utterly irrelevant in the modern age with its unprecedented enlightenment and progress, when no aspect of human experience is left out of the scrutiny of reason, and when there is a growing international integration of the human communities. The philosophy of 'Caesar and his dues' and the philosophy of 'God and His dues' need to be comprehended in an integral philosophy of total experience, in a unifying vision of man and nature. We need a philosophy which bridges the gulf between action and contemplation, work and worship, the secular and the sacred. This is Vedanta, which Swami Vivekananda preached in East and West alike at the end of the nineteenth century. Highlighting its unifying vision, Sister Nivedita (Miss Margaret Noble) writes ('Introduction: Our Master and His Message', *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. I, p. xv):

'The many and the One are the same Reality, perceived by the mind at different times and in different attitudes.

'It is this which adds its crowning significance to our Master's life, for here he becomes the meeting-point, not only of East and West, but also of past and future. If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of crea-

tion, which are paths of realization. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.

'This is the realization which makes Vivekananda the great preacher of *karma* (detached action), not as divorced from, but as expressing *jñāna* (Self-knowledge) and *bhakti* (love of God). To him, the workshop, the study, the farmyard, and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple. To him, there is no difference between service of man and worship of God, between manliness and faith, between true righteousness and spirituality.'

The search for such a philosophy will become insistent day by day; and it will draw all thinking people, be they Hindus, Christians, or Muslims, or others, within India or abroad, into the orbit of Indian thought and to the charms of the philosophy and spirituality of its undying source, the Upaniṣads.

The Upaniṣads and the Ideological Struggle

THE MODERN WORLD IS IN THE GRIP of various ideologies, of which the most effective ones are those which are most narrow and exclusive. Up to the modern period, religion, especially those of the Semitic family—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, were the nurseries of these exclusive and narrow ideologies. But in the modern period as religions are wisely shedding this vice of narrowness and exclusiveness, it has moved over to the socio-political fields. The eclipse of liberal ideologies in these fields is one of the more glaring features of the twentieth century. Calm and clear reason has all but disappeared from vast segments of man's socio-political ideologies; they seem to be under the grip of the blind attachments, fears, and hatreds of his collective unconscious. It is a heartening sign of the second half of this century that man's collective reason, organized in international groups and associations, is waging a slow but successful struggle to tame the blind forces of his collective unreason in these fields. Setbacks there may be; but nothing can thwart permanently the onward march of this struggle; for it is the manifestation of the

time spirit. Behind it is the dynamic energy of that scientific reason and enlightenment of the modern age whose impact is already evident in the field of religion, for which it provided the *milieu* and the stimulus to struggle to liberate itself from the blind forces of man's collective unreason, and make it function in the light of reason.

Scientific deliberations are generally conducted in a calm atmosphere, and differences of opinion are tolerated. This was absent in the field of religion due to the very initial divorce of reason from religion. This is changing fast. Encounters between religions are increasingly taking place today in an atmosphere of decreasing emotional temperatures. This dawn of sanity in inter-religious relationships is a priceless gift of reason as expressed in Vedanta and modern thought. It is reasonable to expect that this light of reason will eventually succeed in conquering unreason, and in introducing sanity, in the socio-political fields as well. It may take longer, as these fields are the arenas of man's search for power and pleasure, largely at the dictates of the blind forces at his lower sensate nature. When reason succeeds in establishing a measure of sanity in this field, democracy, which upholds human dignity and equality and which has been under constant threat from these underground forces of human nature, will become firmly established as the best political and social value and technique. The struggle for sanity will continue till the position with respect to ideologies will become reversed, so that, unlike now, the most effective ones will be those which are most broad and inclusive.

But this needs the ministrations not only of scientific reason, but also of Vedantic reason; for the latter alone has the capacity to purify the emotional springs of man's energies, centred in his worldly and religious aspirations, of all their narrowness and exclusiveness, *retaining intact, at the same time, their intensity and dynamism*. This our scientific reason is unable to do by itself; when it eliminates narrowness, it tends to destroy also the energy of the emotions in the process.

Hence the contribution of the Upaniṣads in bringing about this great consummation is going to be vital and pervasive. Ideals

and ideologies are vital to human life and achievement; they give direction to powerful human emotions. Without their help, man becomes flabby and ineffective, and often blunders all along. If a man with an ideal commits a thousand mistakes, says Vivekananda, a man without an ideal commits fifty thousand. Hence the dictum of Vivekananda: Let sects multiply; but sectarianism must go. Narrowly conceived ideals have done as much harm as good in religion and politics. Intensity was obtained at the cost of extensity; extensity, on the other hand, has always resulted in a reduction of intensity. The current flows fast in a narrow stream. When the river broadens, the current loses in intensity.

This has been the dual choice before man with respect to ideologies. The modern age is in search of ideologies which yield the fruit of maximum character. This signifies, according to Vedanta, the simultaneous presence of intensity and extensity. *Vivekananda presented Vedanta as a fearless philosophy of life which helps man to frame ideologies for himself combining 'the intensity of the fanatic with the extensity of the materialist'*. It derives its intensity from its inward spiritual penetration and its extensity from its outward human concern, in both of which it upholds reason as the guide. Such an ideology gives, in the words of Vivekananda, a character 'deep as the ocean and broad as the skies'. Vedanta considers this as the true line of human evolutionary advance. And it has given to the modern age the example of such a character in Sri Ramakrishna, who was not only the very personification of the intensity of religion, but also encompassed, in his infinite sympathy, atheists and agnostics along with believers belonging to the world's diverse and often mutually hostile religions.

The Upaniṣads and Modern Crisis

THE MODERN WORLD IS EXPERIENCING a far-reaching re-assessment in all aspects of human life and thought. Initiated and sustained by the positive sciences and modern technology, this process began as an intellectual movement but soon developed into a dynamic socio-political force. In its methods and results, it was as much a destructive force as a constructive one. It lifted

man from many fears and uncertainties of his primitive past and landed him in new and more gnawing fears and uncertainties. It destroyed many a fable and myth and superstition imbedded in his past traditions, and challenged, and continues to challenge, the credentials of every one of his beliefs and practices in the moral, religious, socio-economic, and other fields of his life.

These are solid gains; but they are not enough; they have 'lengthened the ropes' without, however, 'strengthening the stakes' as the Bible puts it. The tree of life has branched wide without correspondingly rooting deep. In the modern achievement, the sciences of nature have far outstripped the sciences of man, leaving man puny and unstable, with his centre of gravity always outside of himself. Moral and spiritual values emerge only from the sciences of man. Referring to this imbalance, *the bitter fruits of which are found in the shallowness and sterility of much of modern intellectualism and in the widespread cynicism among the intellectuals*, Bertrand Russell says (*The Scientific Outlook*, pp. 278-79):

'Man has been disciplined hitherto by his subjection to nature. Having emancipated himself from this subjection, he is showing something of the defects of slave-turned-master. A new moral outlook is called for in which submission to the powers of nature is replaced by respect for what is best in man. It is where this respect is lacking that scientific technique is dangerous. So long as it is present, science, having delivered man from bondage to nature, can proceed to deliver him from bondage to the slavish part of himself.'

This 'respect for what is best in man', and the science which will 'proceed to deliver man from bondage to the slavish part of himself', is what the Upaniṣads developed ages ago in India in her *adhyātmavidyā*, in her science of the inner world of man, in her 'science of human possibilities', in the words of Julian Huxley. *The intellect on which the light of the Atman shines is far different from the intellect which is in thrall to the sense-organs*. These two groups of sciences—the sciences of outer nature and the sciences of inner nature—need to pool their resources together to advance man on the evolutionary path of total fulfilment. 'Take religion away from human society and what remains is a forest of brutes',

says Swami Vivekananda. Echoing this conviction in the concluding portion of his *Autobiography*, astro-physicist R. A. Millikan says:

'It seems to me that the two great pillars upon which all human well-being and human progress rest are, first, the spirit of religion, and, second, the spirit of science—or knowledge. Neither can attain its largest effectiveness without support from the other. To promote the latter, we have universities and research institutions. But the supreme opportunity for everyone with no exception lies in the first.'

Without the spiritual nourishment coming from religion, the phenomenal progress of the modern age has become wobbly in its movement and blind in its course.

Lead Kindly Light

THE 'WHEEL OF MODERN PROGRESS' revolves faster and faster decade after decade, and man everywhere is feeling dazed and unable to find his bearings. He finds himself deep in a situation where his past is unrecoverable, his present uncertain, and his future an interrogation. Is this the twilight of a day of hope and cheer ahead, or of a night holding gloom and sorrow in store? Never in human history has man experienced so much darkness within him in the midst of all-round enlightenment outside of him, so much inner poverty in the context of measureless enrichment without, and so much loneliness in the midst of an environing crowd. The modern crisis is thus essentially a spiritual crisis, and modern man is seeking for light to lead him out of the encircling gloom. His heart today is crying for truth, for light, and for life. *All these facts indicate that the whole of the modern world is in the throes of a silent spiritual revolution.* The sentiments of the ancient Vedic prayer are echoed in the silent murmurings, deep searchings, and unspoken prayers of the heart of modern man (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, I. 3. 28):

*Asato mā sadgamaya;
Tamaso mā jyotirgamaya;
Mrtyor mā amṛtaṁ gamaya—*

'From the unreal lead me to the Real;
From darkness lead me to Light;
From death lead me to Immortality.'

To convert this twilight into a twilight of dawn and of a brighter day is the challenge facing human knowledge and human wisdom today. Great thinkers of the past and present have held fast to the conviction that the eternal soul of India has preserved, through the ups and downs of her long history, a perennial message of hope and cheer to all humanity.

In the preface to his book, *The World as Will and Idea* (Vol. I, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1957, pp. XII-XIII), Schopenhauer, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, has referred to the impact which the Vedānta will in due course have on the West. After stating that the West's acquaintance with the Vedas,

'the access to which, opened to us through the Upaniṣads, is in my eyes the greatest advantage which this still young century enjoys over previous ones',

he predicted:

'I believe that the influence of the Sanskrit literature will penetrate not less deeply than did the revival of Greek literature in the fifteenth century.'

Concluding his treatment of India in *Our Oriental Heritage* (written in 1935), the first volume of his series on *The Story of Civilization*, the American philosopher and historian, Will Durant, says (p. 633):

'One cannot conclude the history of India as one can conclude the history of Egypt, or Babylonia, or Assyria; for that history is still being made, that civilization is still creating....

'It is true that even across the Himalayan barrier India has sent to us such questionable gifts as grammar and logic, philosophy, and fables, hypnotism and chess, and above all, our numerals and our decimal system. But these are not the essence of her spirit; they are trifles compared to what we may learn from her in the future. As

invention, industry, and trade bind the continents together, or as they fling us into conflict with Asia, we shall study its civilizations more closely, and shall absorb, even in enmity, some of its ways and thoughts. Perhaps, in return for conquest, arrogance, and spoliation, India will teach us the tolerance and gentleness of the mature mind, the quiet content of the unacquisitive soul, the calm of the understanding spirit, and a unifying, pacifying love for all living things.'

Swami Vivekananda considered this to be India's distinctive contribution to the sum total of human progress. In a letter written from America in 1894, the Swami says (*Complete Works*, Vol. V, p. 43):

'The whole world requires Light. It is expectant! India alone has that Light, not in magic, mummeries, and charlatanism, but in the teaching of the glories of the spirit of real religion—of the highest spiritual truth. That is why the

Lord has preserved the race through all its vicissitudes unto the present day. Now the time has come.'

This conviction of Vivekananda and other thinkers derives its guarantee from the Upaniṣads and the living spiritual tradition, intellectually strong, scientific, and therefore universal, flowing from them and getting periodically enriched by spiritual giants like Buddha and Śaṅkara, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. The following pages of *The Message of the Upaniṣads* will, I hope, enable the reader to test for himself or herself the strength and relevance of this conviction and its guarantee.

[The above exposition of the *Charm and Power of the Upaniṣads* by the author is a prelude to his volume, *Message of the Upaniṣads*, published by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, in which the author has expounded the *Īśā*, *Kena*, and *Kaṭha Upaniṣads*.]



If I were to look over the whole world to find out the country most richly endowed with all the wealth, power, and beauty that nature can bestow—in some parts a very paradise on earth—I should point to India. If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant—I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature we, here in Europe, we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw the corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human, a life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life—again I should point to India.

— F. Max Muller, in
India: What Can It Teach Us?