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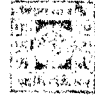
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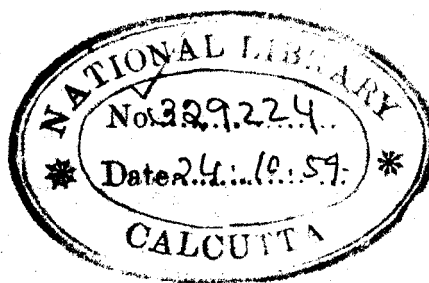
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TAGORE
AND THE PROBLEM OF GOD





A CLOSE study of Tagore's philosophical writings brings out a distinct world-view or *weltanschauung* which is of immense interest in the background of our present-day controversies in the realm of fundamental thought. The doctrine of the transcendence of God, that which equates God to the philosophical Absolute, the Thing-in-itself, bereft of all becoming and multiplicity, is now given up as a lost case. For even if this abstract Absolute exists out of all connections with this concrete world of change and multiplicity and beyond our rational knowledge, it is something useless for us ; it can neither give us courage and faith in our life's struggle nor inspire us to better the state of things in which we find ourselves. If the Absolute reality is a pure being or consciousness, supremely indifferent to this world of good and bad, truth and untruth and beauty and ugliness, then the socio-ethical consequences of this metaphysics follow immediately. It is irresponsible living ; any way of life would be regarded as good enough, everything being the content of a dream ; the only good then would be to realize that it is so and thus to break the dream. Detachment and cynicism are the natural outcome of such a philosophy which, therefore, is held at considerable discount in our present age of humanism and enhanced social consciousness in general. But this latter attitude in its extreme and philosophically articulated form is also fraught with difficulties. Let us examine them.

Existentialism of the neo-scholastic brand, such as its original author, Kierkegaard, offered us, holds individual life or existence realized through suffering and joy, freedom and the agony that it implies — for to feel the burden of responsibility and to take decision is agonising — as fundamental and final. Now this attitude satisfies our resentment against the Hegelian essentialism which presents the individual existence

as a part of a Whole and, so, explained away, and its evil and suffering justified, neatly in terms of the Whole, the Absolute Idea, which realizes itself in and through the parts. After the two world-wars and all that it involves it is futile to tell us that the Absolute Idea, that is also perfection, is being realized through a historical process, that we are approximating the Ideal, and that what appears to be but contingent and temporal is but necessary and eternal inasmuch as it is implied in the rational Whole. We cannot now talk lightly of the individual sufferings and ignominies as necessary parts in an universal drama that is informed by the spirit of Beauty, Truth and Goodness. That would be severely callous on our part. The individual self has come to be regarded as of fundamental worth and his right as inviolable. The contingent and the temporal, existence as it is felt in life while facing our freedom, taking some decision and generally suffering from a sense of responsibility and uncertainty that freedom involves, is held as prior to essence or thought that conceives all this concrete being as a part of an ideal whole, which becomes for it more real and important. Existentialism is a coming back to the naked intuition of reality as it is actually faced by us in our everyday life and particularly in our moments of intense uncertainty and agony, when our existence and free-will themselves are unbearable.

Now this neo-scholastic version of existentialism or new humanism would be unrelentingly morbid had it not believed in some Being that is necessary and eternal over and above this contingent existence. But this belief is mere faith or credulity for the existentialists, nothing but an 'existential leap', that is a complete paradox, can explain our possible escape from our finite existence to the infinite Being or God.

One alternative to this irrationality is simple acceptance of the contingency of our life and world without hope and aspiration

for anything permanent beyond it. This resignation to contingency and finitude as taught by the secular existentialists like Sartre and by some positivists like Russell is as unredeemingly depressing as it is ruthlessly rational, but it offends our inherent religious consciousness which is as important in our nature as rationality, if not more. This religious consciousness is not irrational but is supra-rational which teaches reason to see its limits and informs it from within when the latter is not too arrogant to listen to it. And this tells us of our dependence on some higher power that is the ground of the world of things and spirits and that guides us through our destiny. Religious consciousness when undisturbed by any philosophical doctrine or dogma ensures us a God that is our Father in the sense that we have individuality and freedom given to us by Him and also his kind hand to guide us, his presence about us to encourage and cheer us. Our individuality and freedom appear not as something to be dreaded but inescapable as Sartre would have us believe but as a fine gift to be enjoyed and yet to be surpassed and transfigured by our realizing in and through them the infinite purpose and joy of God. The religious faith of Kierkegaard offends reason for there is no bridge between his individual existence and universal essence, but the religious faith just described, which is universally residing in the heart of man, compliments reason which feels itself incomplete and helpless without a superior light.

This religious faith may be called panentheism to distinguish it from other kinds of theism. It is not pantheism which identifies God with the world and so dismisses His transcendence over the latter, His creatorship and lordship, and thus takes from us our urge for self-transcendence, for enlarging our present selves through love and worship, service and sacrifice. Pantheism no doubt inspires us with awe and self-surrender but it makes automats of us led by some universal cosmic necessity. Panentheism

is not deism either which ensures our individual freedom and worth at the cost of making Him too remote from us. Deism conceives God to have created the world of forces and spirits and to be sitting apart ever since absorbed in Himself. This view of the matter too, is full of difficulties. For what did God do before he created the world is a question as disturbing in its implications as that of creation of spirits. If the world is temporal, how can it be created in time? What can that time mean when the world was not created? Then, the spirits are not material objects to be thought of as created, my spirit appears not to be created, it is not a product but an eternal partaker of the divine spirit. So deism too does not seem to be a satisfactory theological position.

Panentheism is monotheism though not monistic absolutism of an extreme or abstract form. It holds God to be an infinite Person, a spirit who is in and above the world of things and spirits. Again, it is to be distinguished from personalism which holds God to be a personal God, but a finite one who struggles and progresses even like us to realize its fullest possibilities. Though this view of God makes him nearer us, to be easily understood and loved, yet it does not satisfy either reason or a religious consciousness. The former wants God to be the ultimate ground of everything and a finite spirit cannot serve as this ground which must comprehend and explain the finitude and striving of the personal God himself. The latter, religious consciousness, too must have an infinite and eternally perfect God who must be the source and ideal limit of all that is finite and imperfect in the world.

Now it is interesting to see how Tagore reaches panentheism, which is the most satisfactory theological position so far, guided by his own religious consciousness, quietly but nimbly passing through the maze of religious thought with its multiplicity of alternative paths, branching off every few steps the treader

takes, to puzzle him. Tagore by-passed all the blind or narrow lanes led by a fine intuition, as it were, and not by any preconception or dogma, nor by laborious philosophical thinking. The Upanishads he read and the Hindu religion he belonged to contain all varieties of religious doctrines, being the repository of the accumulated experience of a very ancient and widespread people in their adventure in search of the ultimate reality. One can read the Upanishads and be a Hindu yet believing in any of the doctrines mentioned here. Of course Tagore was helped in his way to the most comprehensive of the doctrines by the teachings of the Brahmo-Samaj which he received early from his saintly father, but the religion that he came to rest in in his mature age was of his own discovery. It has all the elements of all that is true in the various religious ideals of the world but it is not exactly any one of these. We have called it panentheism for the sake of convenience of reference — yet, as may somewhat be evident from what follows here, it is a richer and more delicately fashioned system than the conventional panentheism. It is the work of a highly sensitive yet profoundly thoughtful poet whose soul goes out to comprehend the mystery of life and this world in its totality.

Tagore rejects abstract absolutism in a manner fraught with philosophical interest. He accepts the bare Absolute, the infinite and the timeless, as a logical antecedent of its concrete manifestations that are finite and temporal but not as a reality itself which must include human interests, his thoughts and emotions. Thus the real is the supreme Person or God of our religious consciousness, who is infinite in his essence but finite in his manifestations.¹ He is called the Infinite Person, but we should note that as Person he is finite, creating and moving in time, suffering and striving by our side, giving us

¹ *The Religion of Man* (1931), p. 118

courage and hope and inspiring our love and worship. In his original self, as Himself, God is infinite. "Limitation of the unlimited is personality."² This limited and logically posterior product of the Absolute is held to be more real than its abstract condition, or the appearance to human personality as a whole, his interests and emotions has more reality than to his sheer reasoning.³ Since art expresses what appeals to the human personality it expresses reality more than science or rational philosophy. "Abstract truths may belong to science and metaphysics, but the world of reality belongs to Art."⁴ This view that what is logically prior is not more but less real than the product, such as beauty and other values, for which reality strives and which completes reality, has been also championed in the West by many thinkers.⁵

The abstract absolute is only a moment in the concrete absolute which is ultimate reality. Reality is infinite-finite, infinite in essence but finite in appearance, this appearance being a mark of its reality and not of unreality. Tagore quotes Upanishad to support this faith in the unity of the infinite and finite in reality. It is said in Isopanishad that mere knowledge of the finite is as dangerous as that of the infinite, one should combine the two.⁶ But how should we understand this combination of apparently opposite characters, the finite and the infinite the temporal and the timeless? Tagore gives the analogy of art-experience. "The infinite and the finite are one as song and singing are one. The singing is incomplete ; by a continual process of death it gives up the song which is complete. The

² *The Religion of the Artist*, p. 37. Essay in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* by Radhakrishnan and Muirhead (2nd Vol.).

³ *Personality* (1923), p. 52

⁴ *The Religion of the Artist*, p. 37

⁵ See e. g. Prof. S. S. Laurie's *Synthetica* ; also A. S. Pringle-Pattison's *The Idea of God* (1920), pp. 122-30

⁶ *Isopanishad*, verses 12-13. *Personality* p. 26-27

absolute infinite is like a music which is devoid of all definite tunes and therefore meaningless.”⁷ Again, he says that the perfect unifying idea of a poem that animates its words and sentences and makes it a thing of beauty and joy is timeless infinity that lives in union with the finite and the temporal that is the poem. “The progress of our soul is like a perfect poem. It has an infinite idea which once realized makes all movements full of meaning and joy.”⁸

Thus the timeless infinite is not one object among many to be possessed as we do objects of our desire, it is realization of the inner unity in the diversity of its manifestations. In other words, it is the “that” of everything which can never be exhausted by the “whats” which qualify and determine it. The ultimate subject of every judgement like “That is red”, “That is round” etc., is reality itself which is the subject of all the predicates that seek to determine it but can never complete their task. Reality is thus the infinite indeterminate ground and unity of all the finite determinations of it. But this unifying ground is not to be abstracted from the determinations. So that reality is unity-in-diversity, infinite-finite. The two moments in reality have equal importance. The Absolute is the concrete manifested absolute. The Absolute as the bare “that”, the indeterminate ground, is a moment in the Real and may be intuited through *prajna* or *bodhi* (while its concrete manifestations are known through *vijnana* or *buddhi*) but it is only a moment in Reality which is incomplete without its other moment, the “whats.” Thus the real absolute is a concrete one.

Now reality being infinite-finite, it may best be regarded as a Supreme Person or self-consciousness, for, matter cannot have a moment in it of infinite and it cannot have self-movement, creativity and purposiveness evident in the world. So that pantheism

⁷ *Personality*, p. 57

⁸ *Sadbana*, 1919, p. 157

is impossible, the infinity of unmanifested potentiality being transcendent over its manifestations. "The world as an art is the play of the Supreme Person revelling in image-making."⁹ But personalism also, such as the personalists like Schiller, Rashdall, Balfour and others offer us, is not tenable. For a person, suffering and striving even like us in time and space, is a finite being who cannot be said to be the ground of this world and to be omnipotent and omniscient which are the attributes of God that religious consciousness unmistakably reveals. God as a big person cannot satisfy our religious consciousness. He must be an Infinite or Absolute Person. In our own personality we find inexhaustible reserves. We have a finite aspect as well as an infinite one. The former leads us to possess worldly things and to distinguish ourselves from others, but the latter urges us to rise above all possessions and difference, to enlarge ourselves continually and realize the higher Self in us that seems to embrace the whole of creation in love and harmony.¹⁰ Thus the Supreme Person can well be conceived after the image of our own person. If it is objected that it is anthropomorphic projection, the answer would be that we cannot escape it and everything else would be meaningless to us. Then this person, the individual 'I' with its infinite passion and pain, is self-hood as well as self-transcendence or universalism, has to be explained. And nothing can explain it but the conception of reality as a Supreme Person, both the creator-sustainer and the ideal end of the individual self. This individual self is not material to be thought of as a finite-creature with well-defined limits. It appears to be, and really is, like an eternal spirit having no beginning and end in time and ever enlarging itself to appropriate its limitless being through knowledge, activity, love and self-sacrifice. So that

⁹ *The Religion of the Artist*, p. 37

¹⁰ *Sadhana*, p. 63

deism that separates the individual self from God is untenable. "The consciousness of the infinity in us proves itself by our joy in giving ourselves in abundance."¹¹ "Life is perpetual creation ; it has its truth when it outgrows itself in the infinite."¹² Deism separates man from God in order to ensure his freedom. But this separation from God is an error, for even in our selfish acquisitive moments we are aware of the objects acquired as not wholly satisfactory, we rise above them and pass on to others. Nothing ultimately satisfies us and we have to recognize that it is really the infinite that we seek. But the infinite cannot be sought and possessed like worldly objects. It has to be realized as the unity of perfection, the informing spirit of all things. This realization requires us not to covet worldly objects but to rise above them through renouncing them.¹² Thus the individual self is well aware of the infinite Self in him from which his separation is not fundamental. "The meaning of our self is not to be found in its separateness from God and others but in a ceaseless realization of *yoga*, of union."¹³ The freedom that the deist ensures by separating God from man may be better understood in terms of God as residing in man. For God's bestowing freedom on man who is really separated from Him is less comprehensible than God separating us and giving us freedom out of love just for the sake of uniting us again in love. Love requires separation as well as union.¹⁴ The aspect of separation is only an appearance while that of union is the truth of the matter. "Separatedness is the finitude where it (the Self) finds its barriers to come back again and again to its infinite source. Our self has ceaselessly to cast off its age, repeatedly shed its

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 65

¹² *Ibid*, p. 151

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 79

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 79

limits in oblivion and death, in order to realize its immortal youth.”¹⁵ This philosophy of divine love and play (*lila*) explains how our individual self can realize the universal Self or Person whereas this self-transcendence is offered to us as a complete paradox by Kierkegaard and his school of existentialists. Tagore accepts with them the reality of the individual self, the sanctity of the human personality. But he believes that this individuality can be transfigured or transformed by a living sense of unity with the universal spirit, the Supreme Person. Our individuality is valuable because it is not universal, for only through it can we realize the universal, which realization would be meaningless if we were lying within the breast of the universal, unconscious of our individual distinction. “The universal is ever seeking its consummation in the unique.”¹⁶ Thus our individuality has its own relative reality, it is the “other” of the universal self that is posited in order that this play of love between the two may go on. Of course, this otherness of the individual self is not as real as its identity with the universal self. It is an illusion in a sense yet as an illusion it is true and not a sheer naught.¹⁷ The Platonic philosophy with its bifurcation of being from becoming, the universal from the particular, is less real than logical, and under its spell Christian thought separated God, whom it identified with Being, from the human self and the world that are Becoming. So that for the scholastics, Christ, who is absolutely to be regarded by them as God-man necessary for the salvation of humanity, becomes a paradox to be accepted by sheer faith. “This idea of absolute transcendence (of God or Being over man and world) is certainly not that which Christ preached, nor perhaps the idea of the Christian mystics, but it seems to be the idea

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 87

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 70

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 155

that has become popular in the Christian West.”¹⁸ This separation between God and his manifestation is worked by pure logic that must hold being to have nothing in common with becoming. But reality is not logical, at least logic cannot prove that it is so. There is the eternal play of love in the relation between this being and becoming and this mystery is the ground of all truth and beauty that sustain the endless march of creation. God is also man. Tagore believes in God-man (Nara-narayana) as do the medieval saints and some cults, e. g. the *Bauls* of Bengal.¹⁹ St Anselm also writes, “The God-man, who is necessary for the salvation of man, cannot be made by the conversion of the one unto the other, or by the co-mixture of both into a third, defacing both...it is needful that the same person shall be perfect God and perfect man.”²⁰

Thus we see that while Tagore gives full value to our individuality, he does neither make it ultimate nor the passage to the universal something dark to human conceiving, to be accepted by blind faith. By a kind of transcendental psychology of love he has approached this fundamental problem of philosophy and religion and has offered us a solution that may be satisfying to the largest section of humanity having different cultures and traditions. For it is a solution that appeals to the deepest experience of man, having sprung from the profound intuition of a poet-saint whose background of learning, thought and culture was as wide and penetrating as his poetic imagination which dissolves knowledge and experience to transform them into new wholes of truth. The dualism between God, the universal spirit, and the individual self, a trouble to Platonic and Scholastic tradition and a sore in the modern existential philosophy, one that has torn present-day thought between

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 154

¹⁹ *Religion of Man*, pp. 112-15

²⁰ *Cur Deus Homo*, II, VII

rational pessimism (of Russel and Sartre) and irrational optimism (of Kierkegaard) can be dissolved if we listen to Tagore's all-reconciling voice, at once deep and sweet. "Where can I meet thee unless in this my home made thine? Where can I join thee unless this my work transformed into thy work? If I leave my home I shall not reach thy home; if I cease my work I can never join thee in thy work. For thou dwellest in me and I in thee. Thou without me or I without thee are nothing."²¹

This experience of God as a transfiguration, and not a transportation from the finite and the temporal to the infinite and the eternal, from becoming to being, is what the Jews originally believed in till the reception of Platonism which changed everything.²² And this is also what, in spite of the Platonic-Greek influence on Christianity, most of the Christian mystics have affirmed. This is not surprising. For the intellect that depersonalizes God into absolute being and then finds it impossible to span the gulf between God and man is a poor instrument of knowledge to yield us the ultimate reality which is the ground of the intellect and the empirical world where intellect rules. This ground is revealed to our intuition, which is religious, moral and aesthetic, as God, Goodness and Beauty respectively. The latter are the triple aspects of reality or truth.

²¹ *Sadhana*, pp. 163-69

²² The original meaning of the Hebrew text "Ehyeh asher ehyeh" (*Exodus* iii, 14) was "I am always with you and you need not conjure me up or cast magic spell." But the Platonic-Greek rendering of the text was "I am Being" and this led to the interpretation of God as absolutely transcendent over becoming. See Peter Munz: "Sum Qui Sum", *Hibbert' Journal*, Jan., 1952.