

RAMAKRISHNA
AND
THE VITALITY
OF
HINDUISM

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(1969)

Funk & Wagnalls New York

the temple welcomed them all with the same satisfaction which was all the keener because his greatest delight was in religious exchanges. Mathur was generous in his provision of food and clothing for the arriving pilgrims. Ramakrishna, though he knew nothing of books, possessed an amazing philosophical background that he had gained through his communication with ascetics and scholars.

It was his custom to say that, when the flowers open, the bees come of themselves to draw off the juice from which they make their honey. Now souls were flocking to Dakshineswar to assuage their hunger for God. He who yearned toward God had become a Master. Gauri, the great theologian who had been one of the first to announce that Sri Ramakrishna was indeed a Divine Incarnation, visited the priest of Kali in 1870 and, having received his benediction, renounced the world.

Narayan Shastri, another great *pandit*, who had studied the six *darśanas* of Hinduism, acknowledged that the adorer of the Divine Mother had gained in the ideal life what he himself had been able to learn only by reading the Holy Books. He too begged Ramakrishna to give him initiation. Soon Ramakrishna was surrounded by a circle of the "devout." They came from everywhere, and they were to continue doing so until his death.

After he had achieved *nirvikalpa-samadhi*, the young priest understood that the gods of the various religions were merely aspects of the Absolute, and that the Ultimate Reality could not be expressed in any human



language. He felt that every religion led its believer to the same goal, *God*. Hence he grew impatient to try the paths of the other religions, having learned all the ways of his own.

One day he met a Muslim, Govinda Rai, and observed his devotion to his prayers. Ramakrishna saw that this man was truly illumined by the presence of God, that he too had found God. He asked the Muslim to grant him initiation. Thereupon he lived this new religious experience as he had the capacity to live each of them in all its fullness. For some time he continually repeated the name of Allah, he dressed as a Muslim, and he practiced the spiritual disciplines of Islam. He forgot the Hindu gods and goddesses, even Kali, and no longer visited their temples. After three days, a radiant countenance, that of Muhammad, appeared to him in a vision. Thus he came to know the Prophet of the Muslims. Then he entered into communion with *Brahman*. The powerful river of Islam had carried him back to the shoreless ocean of the Absolute. He had gone from the personal to the impersonal God. It was at the end of 1866 that this experience took place.

Eight years later, in November, 1874, Sri Ramakrishna heard the Bible being read in a garden at Dakshineswar and was seized with the desire to know Christianity. At once he dedicated himself to the task with zeal. Fascinated by the personality, the life, and the teaching of Jesus, he was sitting one day in the



drawing room of Jadu Mallick at Dakshineswar when his eyes focused on a painting of the Holy Virgin with the Infant Jesus. He was filled with a Divine Emotion. The faces that he was contemplating came to life, and the rays of light that emanated from them entered into his soul. This vision far exceeded his Muslim vision. (It was his first encounter with Jesus, who in his view became an incarnation of Love.) The vision was indeed so potent that, carried away, he cried out: "O Mother, what are you doing with me?" Shattering every barrier of belief or religion, he was lifted into a new state of ecstasy. Christ possessed his soul. For several days he could not enter the temple of Kali. On the fourth day, when he was walking in the Panchavati, he saw approaching him a man with beautiful eyes and a light skin, utterly serene. When they were face to face, a voice spoke in the depths of Ramakrishna's being: "Contemplate Christ, who shed his heart's blood for the redemption of the world and who suffered an ocean of anguish for the love of man. It is he, the Master, who is in eternal union with God. It is Jesus, Love incarnate." And *The Gospel of M.* (page 34) continues: "The son of Man kissed the Son of the Divine Mother and was dissolved in Him."

The priest of Dakshineswar had "realized" his identity with Christ as, in turn, he had identified himself with Kali, Rama, Hanuman, Radha, Krishna, *Brahman*, and Muhammad. Ramakrishna entered into *samadhi* and into communion with *Brahman* with at-



tributes. He discovered that Christianity too was a road that led to the Awareness of God. Until the end of his life he believed that Christ was a Divine Incarnation, but not the only one. Buddha, Krishna, and Saitanya were among the others.

Having accepted the divinity of Buddha, he strove to find the likenesses between his teachings and those of the *Upanishads*. Without requesting formal initiation into religions other than his own, he profoundly lived their ideals. His vast love of God erased all religious barriers. Then he was to utter those famous words inscribed in *The Gospel of M.* (pages 35 and 135):

I have practiced all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the various sects of Hinduism. . . . And I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are turned, along different roads. . . . You have to pass along these various roads in the practice of each religion once. Everywhere I see men who dispute in the name of religion: Hindus, Muslims, Brahmos, Vaishnavites, etc. But they do not stop to think that he who is called Krishna is also called Siva, and that he is also called Primal Force or Jesus or Allah! exactly like the single Rama and his thousand names. It is a pool entered by many *ghats* (stairs). From one, the Hindus draw the water in cruses and call it *jal*; from another, the Muslims draw the water in leather bottles and call it *pani*; from a third, the Christians draw it and call it *water*.* Can we imagine that this fluid is not *jal*

* In English in the original.—Translator



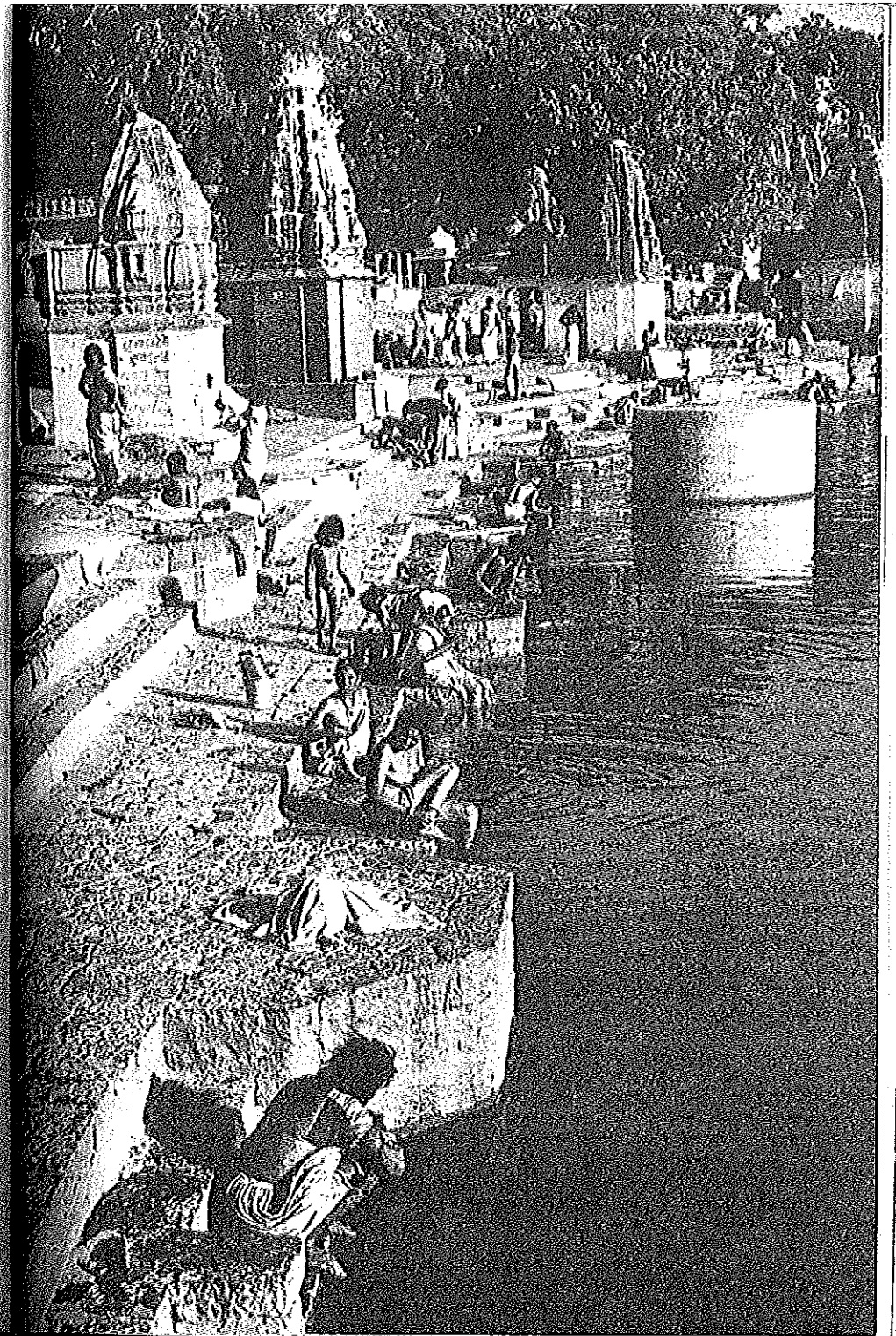
but *pani* or *water*? How absurd! The substance is one under different names, and each man is looking for the same substance; only the climate, the temperament, and the name create difficulties . . .

He did not believe that any one religion could hold the whole truth to the exclusion of the others. Now the Christian, like the Jew or the Muslim, recognizes no other revelation than his own. The problem of religious unity lies in these basic, irreducible oppositions. But can there not be mutual respect? According to Ramakrishna, every metaphysical concept calls for a form in which to express itself, but it is impossible to believe that only one such form exists. This is equally true for the spiritual content, universal in nature, of religion, which, even though it be presented in different terms and under a multitude of aspects, nevertheless remains identical with itself. Religions are special expressions, limitations of the Transcendental Truth, he said, which overflow or shatter their frames—or else abandon them for new structures when the old ones begin to stifle them.

He believed in the existence of God, a unique and supreme principle of every faith, and that religions are roads that take the believer to Him. It was his custom, using a colloquial imagery, to say:

God is on the roof. It is a matter of climbing up to Him.
Some use a ladder, others a rope, or a stone stairway, or a

“A pool has many *ghats* . . .” (Upjañ)



bamboo pole; still others make their way up in their own fashion. What is essential is to reach the roof. It makes little difference whether you have chosen this method or that. What you must not do is to try several at the same time; try them in succession. When you have found God, you are on the roof . . . and then you recognize that one can take different roads in order to arrive there. In no event should you believe that the other roads do not lead to God. They are other paths toward the same roof. Let each man follow his own path. He who genuinely and ardently searches for God, peace be upon him. Surely he will find Him. You may say as often as you like that there are many errors and superstitions in some other religion; I will reply: "Let us assume this to be so. Every religion includes errors. Every man thinks that his watch tells the correct time. It is sufficient to be ardent in one's love of God. It is enough to love Him and to feel oneself drawn to Him. Do you not know that God is our inner guide?" (*The Gospel of M.*, page 112.)

Depressed by his protracted austerities, Ramakrishna was eager to breathe the pure air of his native place. He went to Kamarpukur in 1867. There he was reunited with his young wife, Sarada Devi, who was now fourteen and whose spiritual growth amazed him and enabled him to make her his pupil when she requested it. Her heart swelling with gratitude, the new pupil called her joy "indescribable."



Charity

But Sarada's *guru* could not stay long in Kamarpukur. At the beginning of 1868 he had to accompany Mathur Babu on several pilgrimages that Mathur had to make. The group of some 125 pilgrims went first to Benares, the holy city, that "compressed mass of spirituality," and then to the junction of the Ganges and the Jumna; shortly afterward the pilgrims visited Vrindaban. At Vaidyanath in Behar, when Ramakrishna saw how miserable the people were, emaciated, looking like so many skeletons in their abject poverty, Swami Nikhilananda tells us (*The Gospel of M.*, page 35), he asked his rich protector to succor these unfortunates and give them clothing. Mathur replied that his entire fortune would not be enough to ease such terrible hardship. The priest of Kali announced that he wanted to share the lot of these poor people and that he would stay among them. Mathur bowed to Ramakrishna's invincible will and agreed to make great sacrifices in order to improve the living conditions of these wretched people.

Later Ramakrishna accompanied Mathur on a visit to the latter's estates. Together they saw how poor the harvest had been, and again the problems were the same for those who could not pay their rent. Here again the priest of Kali prevailed on Mathur Babu to give help and to offer a gift to all these sufferers by

