

VEDĀNTA PHILOSOPHY

LECTURE BY

✓
SWĀMI ABHEDĀNANDA

ON

The Word and the Cross in Ancient India

DELIVERED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE VEDĀNTA SOCIETY,
AT TUXEDO HALL, NEW YORK, SUNDAY,
MARCH 4TH, 1900.

Published by the VEDĀNTA SOCIETY

NEW YORK

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"The Word was Brahman" (or The Absolute.)—*Bri. Upanishad.*

"He who exists by Himself let first stream forth the Word, the Eternal, without beginning or end, the Divine Word which we read in the Veda, whence proceeded the evolution of the world."—*Mahābhārata.*

THE WORD AND THE CROSS IN ANCIENT INDIA.

Since the beginning of the Christian era the followers of Christ have popularised the two great sacred symbols of the ancient Aryans—the Word or the Son of God, and the Cross. Although these two symbols were unknown amongst the Semitic races, especially the ancient Hebrews, yet they were known to the pre-Christian Greek philosophers as well as to the Aryan philosophers and thinkers who lived in ancient India.

The conception that the Word was the only begotten Son of the Father, the first-born, or the Son of God, was rooted deep in the abstruse philosophical speculations of the Aryan minds who tried to bridge over the gulf that exists between the visible and the invisible, between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between the individual soul of man and God the Creator of all. The Aryan seekers after the ultimate cause of the universe and the true relation of soul to God advanced many theories to explain the apparent separation between the Creator and the created, between God and the soul of man; and made various attempts

to discover the means by which the two can be brought together in closer union and by which the soul of man will return to its Creator.

In ancient Judaism, however, the conception of Jehovah was so objective, so far from the universe, so majestic and so high that the idea of union between the individual soul and Jehovah or even its approach to His throne was considered to be blasphemous, and insulting to Jehovah the Supreme Deity. The result of this conception was that the idea of the sonship of man, or of the Word, never took any hold upon the ancient Semitic minds. The superficial readers of the Old Testament may find some vague expressions of the idea of sonship of man in such passages as: "Ye are the children of the Lord your God"—Deut. xiv. 1; or in the passage where Moses says: "Of the Rock that begat thee thou art unmindful and hast forgotten God that formed thee"—Deut. xxxii. 18; or when he asks: "Is not he thy father that hath bought thee? Hath he not made thee and established thee?"—Deut. xxxii. 6. In whatever manner the Christian theologians might interpret such passages they never meant the same idea of the fatherhood of God, or the sonship of man, or of the Word or of the Christ which pervades the Fourth Gospel. Moses meant nothing more than the fatherly goodness of the Creator. Through the paternal goodness of Elohim Yahveh, Abraham became the friend of God. A similar meaning lies behind the passage where Adam is described, once only in the New Testament, as the Son of God.

The deep philosophical meaning which is connected with the first verse of the Fourth Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God," was never expressed before by any of the writers either of the New or of the Old Testaments. Some of the Christian theologians have tried to trace the origin of the meaning of the Divine Word as given in the Fourth Gospel to certain expressions of some Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament. For instance, they refer to the passage, "By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth"—Psalm xxxiii. 6. Some again refer to another passage: "He sent his word and healed them"—Psalm cvii. 20. In these and similar other passages "word" does not stand for any other meaning than simple commandment, as we find in the verse: "He sendeth forth his commandment upon earth; his word runneth very swiftly"—Psalm cxlvii. 15. Thus we can understand that in the Jewish Scriptures there is no historical antecedent of the idea of the Divine Word as the Son of God which is described by the writer of the Fourth Gospel in the first verse of the first chapter.

The Oriental scholars are unanimous in their opinion that the writer of the Fourth Gospel was a follower of Philo, the reformed Jewish philosopher, who was a contemporary of Jesus and who lived in Alexandria from 20 B.C. to 60 A.D., but never heard of Jesus. The writings of Philo Judeas abound in passages which show that he was a student of Greek

philosophy and that he adopted the Greek conception of the Word, or the only begotten Son of God, as explained by the Stoic philosophers of the pre-Christian era. It was through Philo that the Greek conception of the Divine Word was introduced amongst the thoughtful class of the Jews then living in Alexandria, and was afterwards identified with Jesus the Christ by the writer of the Fourth Gospel, and was later accepted by Christians generally. Alexandria was in those days the principal centre of education and culture, where Jewish, Greek, Hindu, and Buddhist philosophers met and interchanged thoughts and religious ideas. The Greek philosophers called the Divine Word *Logos*. *Logos* is a Greek word which meant at first simply word, not as a mere sound, but as thought embodied in sound. The theory of the *Logos* first originated with Heraclitus, one of the earliest Greek philosophers who lived about 460 B.C. Although he believed that fire was the primitive element of the phenomenal universe, still he postulated some power, force, or law which controlled the material element fire. He called that power *Logos*, that is, reason or order. Though the theory of the *Logos*,—that reason, or order, was the primal cause of the Cosmos, originated in Greece with Heraclitus, yet it did not develop in meaning until the time of the Stoics. The Stoic philosophers believed that *Logos*, or Supreme Reason, or God, pervaded all matter. It was not only the Creator of all things but controller and ruler also. The Stoic philosophers held that the *Logos* was universal and eternal and that the human soul possessed

a portion of the universal Logos and therefore man had a share of intelligence and reason. They believed that word, or speech, was the manifestation of Reason, or thought, which would remain as non-existent for us, without the power of speech. This Logos became the medium through which the transcendent Cause of the universe was related to the phenomenal world. It was like the bridge between God and the world. Philo's mind, which was seeking some explanation for the relation between Jehovah and the world, adopted the Stoic explanation and the theory of the Logos.

In Philo's hands the theory of the Logos gradually developed in its meaning. By Logos he wished to express not merely word, but the thought, or idea of which word or speech is but the manifestation. As the audible or perceptible sound of a word is the expression of an imperceptible thought or idea, so the visible universe is the expression of the ideal universe, or the universe in a thought form existing in the Divine mind. This ideal creation, or concept of the universe, or type of the universe in the Divine mind was the Logos, and it was called by Philo the only begotten Son, or unique Son. Philo always used the only begotten Son in its philosophical sense, that is, as the Thought of God, made visible in the world either by creation or projection, but there is nothing in his writings to show that he ever personified the Logos. These terms, more or less poetical with Philo, became afterwards most technical when the Logos was identified with Christ by the writer of the Fourth

Gospel. The author of this gospel did not identify the Logos with Jesus of Nazareth, who was son of Mary, but with Christ the incarnation of the ideal man, the perfect type of man which existed in the Divine mind from the beginning. As the Logos was the only begotten son of God according to Philo, who never heard of Jesus the Christ, so it was with his disciples. The author of the Fourth Gospel, believing in Jesus as the perfect type of man, gave him all the predicates of the Logos and described him as the Son of God.

Some scholars are of opinion that this meaning which was given to the Logos or word by Philo and the Neo Platonists of later date was the result of the influence of the Hindu philosophers who lived in Alexandria and Greece about the time of Alexander the Great, 333 B.C. This has been supported by the writings of Eusebius, who quotes a work on Platonic philosophy by Aristocles, who states therein on the authority of Aristoxenes, a pupil of Aristotle, that an Indian philosopher came to Athens and had a discussion with Socrates. When Socrates told him that his philosophy consisted in inquiries about the life of man, the Indian philosopher is said to have smiled, and to have replied that no one could understand things human who did not understand things divine.*

In the most ancient writings of the Hindus, the Vedas, we find the idea of Logos most clearly expressed. There are many Sanskrit words used in the Vedas which signify that Divinity is the Lord of

* See Max Müller's "Theosophy or Psychological Religion," pp. 83-84.

Speech, or word, the Lord of thought and reason, or Logos. For instance, *Brihaspati* is a Sanskrit compound word which we read often in the Vedas. *Brihas* comes from the Sanskrit root verb *Brih* or *Barh*, meaning to break forth or drive forth; from the same root Latin *Verbum* and English *Word* can be derived; and *Pati* means lord or father. Therefore *Brihaspati* means the Lord or Father of word. A synonym of *Brihaspati* is the Sanskrit *Vâchaspati*—*Vâchas* or *Vâk* (the same as *Vox*) means word. So *Vâchaspati* also means the Lord or Father of word, or speech. In *Brihadâraṇyaka Upanishad* we read *Vâk vai Brahma*, "The word was Brahman," or the Absolute." Again, it is stated that "That, of which these things are born, by which when born they live, and into which they return and enter after death, or dissolution, is Brahman." "He with his mind united himself with his word." * "In the beginning, Divine *Vâk*, or Word eternal, without beginning or end, consisting of wisdom, was uttered by the Self-existent One from which all activities proceeded." "In the beginning the Lord of the universe shaped from the words the names and forms of all beings, and the procedure of all activities." † In one of the ancient writings of the Hindus we read: "I know that great Self-effulgent Being who thought all forms and made their names." ‡ "He desired let a second body be born of me and embraced word with his mind." § "All

* *Brihadâraṇyaka Upanishad*.

† *Smṛiti*.

‡ *Taittiriya Âraṇyaka* III., 12, 17.

§ *Brihadâraṇyaka Upanishad* I., 1, 24.

things that can be thought of had beginning in word, or the eternal concept in the Divine mind." Again, in the Mahâbhârata we read: "He who exists by himself let first stream forth the Word, the eternal without beginning or end, the Divine Word which we read in the Veda, whence proceeded the evolution of the world." The Hindus believe that the phenomena of the world exist because they are in the Veda. The word *Veda* does not stand for any book or writing but for Logos, or Sophia, or Wisdom, and comprehends all named concepts necessary for the creation of all created things. In the Veda it is said: "When the Lord projected the concept of the earth from His Divine mind, the earth was formed," etc. By Word the Vedic sages did not mean mere sound, but thought or concept in the Divine mind; therefore, the Divine mind was the Father, and Word or concept or ideal type was the Son, like the Greek Logos, as explained by Philo.


The later Hindu philosophers took up this idea, discussed it, and wrote volumes after volumes on the Logos theory. Whenever any man or woman reached perfection and manifested divinity, he or she was worshipped as the incarnation of the Word, the first-born, or the manifestation of the ideal man or woman as existing in the Divine mind. Krisna, Siva, Râma, Buddha, and others are worshipped in India as the ideal types of men, or incarnations of the Word.

As the doctrine of the Logos, the very life-blood of Christianity was purely of Aryan origin, most probably of Hindu origin, so the symbol of the Cross,

which is the corner-stone of the structure of Christianity, originated not amongst the Hebrews but amongst the Aryans.

Well has it been said by St. Augustine: "What is now called the Christian religion has existed among the ancients and was not absent from the beginning of the human race until Christ came in the flesh, from which time the true religion, which existed already, began to be called 'Christian.'" Whatever importance the followers of Christ may attach to the worship of the Cross by connecting it with the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, it existed as a religious symbol for centuries before the birth of Christ, and was largely used as a sacred symbol by the Egyptians, Persians, Hindus, Buddhists, Tibetans, Chinese, and other ancient nations of almost all parts of the world. The Cross is the oldest religious symbol that has ever been invented by human mind. Traces of the worship of the Cross as a religious symbol can be found amongst the most ancient pre-historic aboriginal tribes of the old and new worlds.

The ancient Egyptians used the Tau Cross, which is like the English letter T. In the Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Cross has been interpreted variously; for instance, a Cross with four equal arms has been assumed to have meant four elements. When the form of the Cross was composed of two or four sceptres with a circle at the point of interception it is said to indicate "divine potentiality." It stood sometimes for "protective power," sometimes "for life to come," etc. Some of the Egyptian deities, as *Ra*, *Ammon-Ra*,

and *Ammon* had the sacred "Tau Cross" in their hands. The Cross was used by the Egyptians in tattooing the body, in the paintings on the walls and tombs at Thebes. A long Cross surmounting a heart, meaning good or goodness, was fixed upon the fronts of houses in Thebes and Memphis, intimating "This is the abode of the good." The Egyptian symbols of five planets had a Cross connected with each. The natives of Abyssinia used to observe certain religious rites by plunging a Cross in the river Gitche. In ancient India the Cross was used as a sign of prosperity, good luck, longevity and happiness, a protector from evil, and was used largely in connection with religious rites and ceremonies. The most ancient form of Cross which has been used in India from prehistoric times is called *Swastika*. It is like a Greek Cross, but its arms are bent at right angles. It literally means in Sanskrit *Su*, well, and *Asti*, being, that is, well being, welfare. Originally the form of *Swastika* was two lines crossing each other, but afterwards it was shaped like . The word *Swastika* had been in existence in the Sanskrit language long before Buddha was born. In the Rig Veda we read, "*Swasti mé Indra*," "Do thou, O Indra, grant me welfare." *Swastika* Cross appears in the hands of Visnu, the Preserver of the world, and represents the world-sustaining power which Visnu possesses. It was found in the foot-prints of Buddha in Buddhistic temples. In the Buddhistic inscriptions and coins, the *Swastika* or Cross very often occurs. In the Râmâyana we read, "Bharata selects a ship marked with the sign of the

Cross or Swastika." The Buddhistic Stupas (tombs) were built in the form of a Swastika or Cross. When a woman covers her breast with crossed arms it is called Swastika posture, that is, the sign of good luck, prosperity and protection. It is supposed that a woman with Swastika posture is free from all dangers. When a person sits cross-legged, it is called Swastika posture, which is the best of all the sitting postures. In ancient times houses were built in the form of a Swastika Cross.

When the Cross became the religious symbol of the Buddhists, wherever Buddhism went the symbol of the Cross travelled with it. In Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Burma, Ceylon, Java, and in other places the Cross as a religious symbol was introduced from India. In China, Japan, and in other countries the statues of Buddha were usually marked with a Swastika or Cross. In Tibet the Cross is to be found as the royal emblem of the Bonpa deities. The Lâmas, or Buddhist priests, carry a Cross and use it at the time of benediction.

Sir Stamford Raffles, after living in Java for twenty years, writes: "Java received her civilization and art directly from India. Out of the six steps of the most ancient prehistoric temples in Java, three are in the form of a Cross."

In the most ancient paintings of the Hindus, Krisna has a Cross in his hand. Yama, the ruler of the departed ones, is painted as holding a Cross in one hand. Some of the Christian missionaries say that the Cross was introduced into India by the early

Christians who visited the country. Such statements are not correct. Among the most interesting ancient relics that have been recently excavated in the forests of Central India which were never visited by any Christian missionary, two rude stone Crosses have been discovered. The archeologists think that those Crosses must have existed in good shape at least three thousand years before the advent of Jesus the Christ. Moreover, the ancient rock-cut cave of Elepanta is nearly in the form of a Greek Cross; its dimensions being longitudinally 130 feet and transversely 123 feet, and height is about 17 feet. In this cave, which was cut before the Buddhistic period, there is a figure of Hindu Trinity holding a huge Cross in one hand. Tavernier, who visited Benares in the end of the seventeenth century, seeing the temple of Visnu, said that the body of this edifice was built in the form of an immense Cross. This temple was destroyed by Aurungzebe, the Mogul emperor, who built a huge mosque in its place.

The Cross is to be found in almost all the ancient temples of India. Amongst the Jains, the Swastika or Cross is the oldest religious symbol. In the Sanskrit grammar of Panini, written at least 400 B.C., Swastika or Cross is described as one of the ancient signs for marking cattle, and even to-day cattle and sheep are marked with a Cross by the illiterate classes of India. Swastika is mentioned in the Atharva Veda. Even to-day the Hindus paint a Swastika or Cross on the walls of the room which the newly married couple enter immediately after the wedding.

The "Y"-shaped Cross is drawn on the foreheads of the Vaisnavas, the dualistic worshippers of Vis nu. The Cross was used in the Hindu coins of prehistoric period. It was also used as decoration on walls, furniture, earthenware, rugs, and on garments worn by the priests and priestesses.

This Swastika or peculiar form of the Cross is the oldest of all forms of this symbol that are found in the West. It originated in prehistoric times amongst the Aryans who inhabited India, and from there it travelled all over the world. The same sign was found in hundreds of places on the Christians' tombs in the Catacombs at Rome.

There was a time when a great discussion arose amongst the early Christians as to the selection of the Cross which should be representative, and history tells us that the Swastika was one of those which were suggested. It is for this reason we find it on the tombs in the Catacombs at Rome. The latest use of Swastika mentioned in the literature on this subject is in the Archiepiscopal chair in the cathedral at Milan.

Prehistoric archeologists maintain that the Swastika or Cross travelled into Western countries from the East during the Bronze age. They claim that long before the tin mines of Spain, Britain or Germany were discovered, bronze came to Europe from the East—Burma, Siam, and other places where copper and tin were first made into bronze. When bronze was introduced into Western Asia, Egypt, and Europe, the sign of the Cross was also introduced in those countries, as the most ancient relic is found on

bronze. Professor Wilson, in his celebrated essay on Swastika, which was read before the Smithsonian Institute, not only supports this theory of migration of the symbol of Cross from the East to the West, but believes that it migrated from Asia to America. Regarding the same symbol which has been discovered in North and South America, Professor Wilson says: "Adopting the theory of migration of the Swastika, we may therefore conclude that if the Swastika came from India or Eastern Asia (to America) it came earlier than the sixth century B.C."

Thus we can understand how the Word, or the Son of God, was known in ancient India and that the Cross was the most ancient religious symbol of the Hindus. Not only this, but the earliest record of the sacrifice of a divine man in space is to be found in the Rig Veda described in mythological language. John P. Lundy, in his "Monumental Christianity," says: "At any rate, the religion of India had its mythical crucified victim long anterior to Christianity. . . . I am disposed to believe this to be the victim described in the Vedas themselves. We read in the Rig Veda: 'The first-born being, before the beginning of the material phenomena, became a victim of sacrifice. The Devas, gods, and angels who came later took the first-born being for the animal of sacrifice, fastened him to a sacrificial post, sanctified him, and afterwards sacrificed him, stretching his limbs in the eternal space. From that sacrifice arose all that exists on earth and in the heavens.' " Here you will notice the metaphor that the first-born being was the

only begotten son of God, the absolute Being; that he was fastened to a post and was sacrificed by the Devas for the good of the universe. The students of the Vedic literature are well aware of the fact that the most ancient sacrificial post was in the form of a Cross. On such a post the first-born was fastened, like an animal of sacrifice.

John P. Lundy quotes from Colebrooke in his "Monumental Christianity": "When that ancient sacrifice was completed, sages and men and our progenitors were by him formed. Viewing with an observant mind this oblation, which primeval Devas offered, I venerate." Mr. Lundy says: "This looks like the lamb slain from the foundation of the world and whom all the angels of God worship."

Thus the vital points of Christianity, in whatever manner they might have been explained by priests and theologians, were of Aryan origin. Whenever we worship the Cross, or the Son of God, we unconsciously worship the Aryan symbols of prehistoric times. Whenever we think of the sacrifice of Calvary, we unknowingly think of the mythological sacrifice of the first-born being which is described in the Vedas.

Although these and other similar religious symbols have certain value in helping human minds in the path of spiritual progress as objects of concentration and meditation, still they are of slight consequence if those abstract truths, for which all religious symbols stand, are forgotten or are not properly understood. Many symbols are used in India, each of which represents an abstract truth which ordinary minds cannot easily

grasp. They are used largely by the dualistic and qualified non-dualistic worshippers of God. Most of them, however, like the orthodox Christians, do not understand the true meanings of the mythological symbols of the Word, Cross, etc., and are the easy victims of superstition and errors.

The object of Vedanta philosophy is to free human minds from ignorance, superstition, prejudice, and errors, as well as to lead them to the realization of those abstract truths which give foundation to the names and forms of all symbols. Therefore Vedanta insists that salvation cannot be obtained by the mere worship of the Cross, or the Son of God, or the Word in flesh and blood, and maintains that it can only be reached by going beyond all symbols, by realizing the sonship of the soul and its oneness with the Universal Spirit.

Vedanta declares that each individual soul is in reality the Word, the Christ or Son of God, which dwells eternally in the bosom of the Father,—nay, which is one with Him; that there is no gulf between the Father and His children, and that the realization of this Supreme Unity depends upon the sacrifice of the lower self upon the Cross made by the traversing of the Divine will by the human will. Such a sacrifice obliterates the Cross and leaves only the Word, which is the Father, the Absolute Brahman.

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