

ON THE EXACT MEANING OF THE WORD HINDU

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EVERYTHING that has been said up to now might serve as a general introduction to the study of all Oriental doctrines; what follows will relate more closely to the Hindu doctrines in particular, adapted as they are to modes of thought which, while retaining those characteristics common to Eastern thought as a whole, also exhibit certain distinctive features of their own, with corresponding differences in the forms of expression. These differences arise even when strict identity exists with other traditions as regards the basis of the doctrine, which in fact must always remain the same when it is a question of pure metaphysics, for reasons we have already explained. At this point in our treatise it is important, before passing on to anything else, to indicate the exact meaning of the word "Hindu," for the more or less haphazard manner in which it has been used has given rise to frequent misunderstandings in the West.

In order to define clearly what is Hindu and what is not Hindu, we cannot avoid recalling briefly certain points which we have touched on already. In the first place, this word cannot denote a race, since it is applied without distinction to persons belonging to various races; still less can it denote a nationality, since nothing of the kind exists in the East. India considered as a whole is more comparable to the whole continent of Europe than to any single European state, not only because of its size or the numerical strength of its population, but also because of the variety of ethnical types to be found there; from the north to the south of India the differences are at least as great in this respect as from one extremity of Europe to another. Moreover, no governmental or administrative bond exists between the various regions, other than that recently established in an entirely artificial way by the Europeans. This administrative unity, it is true, had already been achieved before them by the Mughal emperors, and perhaps even before that by others, but it never had a more than transitory existence in relation to the permanence of Hindu civilization, and it is noteworthy that it was nearly always the result of a foreign domination, or in any case the work of non-Hindu influences; furthermore it never went so far as completely to suppress the autonomy of the separate states, the intention being rather to include them in a federal organization. On the other hand, there exists nothing in India comparable to the kind of unity which is achieved elsewhere by the recognition of a common religious authority, which may either be represented by a single individual, as in Catholicism, or by a plurality of distinct functions, as in Islam. Though the Hindu tradition in no wise partakes of a religious character, there is yet no reason why it should not possess a more or less analogous organization, but such

is not actually the case despite the gratuitous assumptions which certain people make in this respect, because they are unable to understand how unity can be effectively achieved simply by the inherent power of the traditional doctrine itself. That is certainly very different from anything obtaining in the West, but nevertheless it is a fact: Hindu unity, as we have already emphasized, is a unity of a traditional order purely and exclusively and has no need to depend upon any more or less exterior form of organization, or upon the support of any authority other than that of the doctrine itself.

From these facts the following conclusions may be drawn Hindus are those who adhere to the Hindu tradition, on the understanding that they are duly qualified to do so really effectively, and not simply in an exterior and illusory way; non-Hindus, on the contrary, are those who, for any reason whatsoever, do not participate in the tradition in question. This is, for example, the case of the Jains and the Buddhists; it is also, in more modern times, the case of the Sikhs, who moreover were, subject to Moslem influences, the mark of which is clearly to be seen in their particular doctrine. Such is the true distinction, and there can be no other, although it is admittedly a rather difficult one for Western people to grasp, accustomed as they are to judging by quite different standards, which are entirely absent here. Under these circumstances it is absurd to speak, for example, of "Hindu Buddhism," as has actually been known to occur; if one wishes to refer to Buddhism as it formerly existed in India, the only appropriate expression is "Indian Buddhism," just as one speaks of "Indian Moslems," that is to say the Moslems of India, who are in no sense Hindus. The true gravity of an error of the kind indicated above, and the reason why we look upon it as something more than a mere fault of detail, lies in the fact that it implies a profound misunderstanding of the essential nature of Hindu civilization; but the remarkable thing is not that such ignorance should be widespread in the West, but that it should even have been known to occur among professional orientalist.

Certain evidences that we have already mentioned go to show that the tradition in question was brought to the country now known as India, at a comparatively remote date which it would be very difficult to determine exactly, by men who came from the North; nevertheless it has never been proved that these men, who must have settled successively in various regions, ever formed what could properly be called a people, in the beginning at least, or that they belonged originally to a single race. At all events, the Hindu tradition, or at least the tradition now bearing this name—since it may at that time have had a different name or even have had no name at all—when it became established in India, was adopted sooner or later by the majority of the descendants of the indigenous populations; the latter, the Dravidians for example, consequently became Hindus as it were by adoption, but once they had been admitted into the unity of the traditional civilization, they were just as genuinely Hindus as those who had always been so, even though some traces of their origin may still have persisted in the form of particular modes of thought and action, always provided that these were compatible with the spirit of the tradition.

Prior to its establishment in India, this particular tradition belonged to a civilization which we do not intend to call Aryan, having already explained why this word is devoid of meaning, but

for which, in the absence of a better term, the name Indo-Iranian may be accepted, not because the place of development of the tradition is any more likely to have been in Iran than in India, but simply to indicate that it subsequently gave birth to two civilizations, distinct and even opposed in certain respects, namely the Hindu and the Persian civilizations. At some period or other therefore, a rupture must have occurred not unlike that brought about by Buddhism at a later date, and the separated branch, constituting a deviation from the primordial tradition, then became what is known as "Iranism," eventually destined to form the basis of the Persian tradition, known also as Mazdeism. We have already drawn attention to the tendency, often met with in the East, for such doctrines as were at first opposed to the regular tradition to become established in their turn as independent traditions; and there is no doubt that this happened in the case under consideration long before the tradition was codified in the Avesta under the name of Zarathustra or "Zoroaster," which moreover should not be taken for the name of a man but rather as denoting a collectivity, as is often the way in such cases the examples of Fo-hi in China, Vyāsa in India and Thoth or Hermes in Egypt show this very clearly. On the other hand a very distinct mark of the deviation has survived in the Persian language itself, where certain words have taken on an exactly contrary meaning to the one they bore originally and which is the meaning they still preserve in Sanskrit; the word deva is the best known example, but it would be possible to cite others (such as the name Indra) which cannot be due to pure accident. The dualistic character usually attributed to the Persian tradition, if it were a fact, would also be a manifest proof of an alteration in the doctrine, though it must be stated that this character appears to have become attached to it only as the result of a false or incomplete interpretation; another more serious proof consists in the presence of certain sentimental elements, but there is no need to insist upon this point here.

Starting from the moment when the separation of which we have just been speaking occurred, the regular tradition may properly be called Hindu, wherever the region may have lain in which it was first established and whether or not this name was actually given to it at that time. The use of this name, however, should on no account give rise to the idea that the tradition had undergone some profound and essential change; any modifications that may from time to time have taken place are attributable merely to a natural and normal development of the primordial tradition. This leads us to point out another error committed by orientalists, who, understanding nothing of the essential immutability of the doctrine, have imagined the existence, subsequent to the Indo-Iranian period, of three successive and supposedly distinct doctrines, to which they give the names of Vedism, Brāhmanism and Hinduism respectively. If this classification were only intended to refer to three periods in the history of Hindu civilization, it would no doubt be admissible, notwithstanding the fact that the names are very inappropriate and that it is extremely difficult to fix the limits of these periods and to relate them chronologically. Even if it were only intended to state that the traditional doctrine, while always remaining fundamentally the same, received successively several more or less different forms of expression in order to adapt itself to the particular mental and social conditions of such and such a period, this again, with similar

reservations, would be admissible. But this is not the sole contention of the orientalists: in using a plurality of denominations, they expressly assume a series of deviations or alterations, which are not only incompatible with traditional regularity, but have never existed save in their own imaginations.

In reality, the entire Hindu tradition is founded upon the Veda; it always was so and has never ceased to be so; it might therefore quite legitimately be called Vedism, and the name Brahmanism also would be equally applicable to it at all periods. The name actually preferred is really a matter of little importance, provided one clearly understands that, under one or several names, it is always the same thing that is being referred to; and this can only be the development of the doctrine contained in principle in the Veda, a word which literally means traditional knowledge without further qualification. There is therefore no such thing as Hinduism in the sense of a deviation from traditional thought, since that which is correctly and purely Hindu is just that which, by definition, admits of no such deviation; and if, notwithstanding, certain more or less grave irregularities have sometimes occurred, the power of the tradition has always kept them within certain limits, or else has rejected them entirely from the unity of Hindu civilization, and in any case has prevented them from acquiring any real authority; but to be properly understood, this calls for further explanation.

(यह लेख रेने गुएनॉन की पुस्तक "Perpetuity of the Veda" से लिया गया है।)