

Johannine Ontotheology and Vedanta

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July 3, 2017

In the King James version (KJV) of the Bible the apostle John writes:

John 1.1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

Commentary: The meaning appears to be that the Word and God are different, yet identical also. Ordinary understanding doesn't like contradictions so it tries to ignore the contradiction and simply accept the sameness of Word and God without the difference. However, that is not what John is saying here. He distinguishes the Word from God by stating the Word first, and then using the preposition "with" to connect the Word with God. Finally John then identifies the Word with God. What John is actually saying therefore is that Word and God are different and identical at the same time - a contradiction!

Western philosophy since Aristotle avoids contradiction like the plague. But this identity-in-difference is a very important concept in Vedantic philosophy called *bedha-abadha* in Sanskrit. So it is not to be swept under the rug without taking it seriously. It forms the basis of a very important conception of the Absolute Reality of Chaitanya Vaisnavism and other similar vaisnava traditions, and even in the Roman Catholic tradition it is the basis of what is known as the Holy Trinity - the Oneness and Difference of God in His three distinct individualities/Persons.

'In the beginning' means that we must not identify the Word with Jesus Christ right away, as many do. Actually the identity of the Word with Christ will come in John 1.14, so we don't want to skip over the significance that the other verses play in arriving at that identity. So sticking to John 1.1 we can recognize that the Word [in the original Greek it is Logos and that is translated as Word in the KJV] is related to thought or thinking. Words are used to express or utter [meaning outer or objectify] thoughts [which are internal or subjective]. So we can interpret John 1.1. as saying the thoughts of God are with God, certainly, and they are also God, because a person is only what his/her thoughts make them. Thinking reflected upon itself is what is meant by "I." Descartes; first indubitability was "I think, thus I am." He identifies thinking with his being as an ego or I. At the same time thinking and being an "I" are different - we naturally distinguish the two. We naturally presume that "I" am the agent who produces thinking. In the case of John 1.1 the Word [thinking] is conjoined with the Supreme "I" or God. Thus God expresses His thinking as the Word, which makes the Word the offspring or Son of God. So the idea of the Son as produced from God the original "I" is contained in John 1,1.

However, there is a subtle nuance here which is not normally recognized by theologians or philosophers. Since John 1.1 states that the Word was there first in the beginning, how then can the Son be before the Father God? Again we have to carefully examine the relation between thought and the "I" or ego. Without thinking there would be no ego.

The ego is not independent of thinking. Descartes recognized this as well, thus he puts thinking first, and then the "I" is concluded. Of course, it is not that they are separable. Given thinking the "I" is implied already since thinking when reflected upon itself is what is meant by "I." Aristotle called this thinking reflection upon itself *noesis noesios noesis*, or thought thinking thought, thought thinking itself, which he identifies as *theos*, God.

In summary what John 1.1 tells us is that God reveals His mind as the Word, or the revealed Word of God which is what the scriptures mean. Revelation of the Mind of God also comes in the form of the incarnation of the Son or Jesus Christ who speaks the same revelation of God's mind among the people of the world. Thus John describes in John 1.14 *And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth*. In this verse the third Person of the Trinity is expressed as that which "dwelt among us" referring to the [Holy] Spirit of the community of believers.

In between verses 1.1 and 1.14 John refers to two other principles: Life and Light. Both are explained as being in God and originating from Him. Light refers to reason or the rational world, and life to the senses or sensuous world. It is a peculiar fact that many people, including those in this forum, do not realize that the senses represent a form of consciousness - sensuous consciousness. Certainly the senses are an important form of consciousness by which the life of an organism interacts with its environment. However, the senses are not sufficient by themselves to interpret the environment they connect with. For this they require the mind [understanding] which some modern scientists believe is the brain. Other scientists understand the brain is superseded by a more subtle mind [intelligent understanding] beyond the unintelligent materials and processes of the brain.

In fourteen lines John has thus explained the original Aristotelian absolute as the thinking thought of *Theos* (God), the expression or Word of the Mind of God, and how that can become known to Man through the Light of Reason, and the Life or consciousness of the Word as taught by the incarnation [in flesh] of His Word, begotten as His Son from God's own Mind.

In fact, this sounds very much like the Puranic description in which Brahma, creates of the universe from the sound vibration originated from Maha Vishnu, and begets his progeny from his own mind.

What is important to understand from all this is that God or Ultimate Reality is not merely consciousness, and importantly is not unknowable. The abstract monist interpretations of Reality either coming from the scientists who are completely uneducated about consciousness and other spiritual truths or those who are novices in spiritual knowledge and bring only abstract notions to bear on such truths, both fail to understand that Brahman is not beyond Man's ability to know anything about it. Among the novice class they do not even understand the very first principle of Vedanta which states *athatho brahma jijnasa* - that one must inquire about knowledge of Brahman. The whole of *Vedanta-sutra* or *Brahma-sutra* is based on such reasoning. The *Bhagavad-gita* is the expression [*gita* means song] of such knowledge, and so are

the *Upanisads* [which means to sit and learn at the feet of the teachers]. The neophytes select certain verses from the scriptures that verify their own narrow presuppositions and ignore the majority of references to those statements that contradict such biased views.

We can add one further note to this message concerning the very important principle of identity-in-difference. When we see so many differing opinions presented in this forum, each one different from the others, we may think there is nothing we can identify as the same in all of them. That would be a mistake if we consider the logic: if all x are different from one another (D), then all x are D, or x(D), i.e. all x are the same in their independence and freedom. Here we have an example of identity in difference.

The universe is a single entity that combines diversity into a unity. So too is the body of an organism an identity of itself as a single organism with all its diverse members. A whole is a unity in difference of its parts. So this principle of contradiction of one and many, identity and difference, already has innumerable instances. It should not be so strange to us as it might at first seem.