

# David, Shankara, Hōnen

FRITHJOF SCHUON

DAVID, SHANKARACHARYA AND HŌNEN are spiritual personalities who are in many respects quite different, but who have in common the fact that they each represent an altogether fundamental mode of spirituality, and that they do so in a perfect, unsurpassable and incisive manner.

David is the great personification of prayer; of discourse addressed, from the depths of the heart, to the Divine Person. He thus incarnates all the genius of Israel, all the great Semitic message, which is that of faith; hence all the mystery of man standing before his God, and having nothing to offer but his soul; but offering it entirely, without reticence or reservation. *De profundis clamavi ad Te Domine*; the creature who stands thus before his Creator knows what it is to be a human being, and what it is to live here below. David represents the man of virtue contending with the powers of evil, yet invincible because he is a man of God.

It is thus that David, in his Psalms, spreads out before us all the treasures of the dialogue between the creature and the Creator. Everything is manifested therein: distress, trust, resignation, certitude, gratitude; and all is combined and becomes a song of glory to the Sovereign Good. It is easy to understand why Jesus is "son of David"; and why—by way of consequence—Mary could be called "daughter" of the Prophet-King,<sup>1</sup> independently of the fact that she is his descendant according to the flesh.

To be a Prophet is to open a way; David through his Psalms opened the way of prayer, even though he was not, to be sure, the first to know how to pray. Metaphysically speaking, he manifested in concrete and

---

<sup>1</sup> As is attested by the *Magnificat*, which is altogether in the line of the Psalms.

human mode—not in abstract and doctrinal mode—the reciprocity between *Māyā* and *Ātmā*; he incarnated so to speak—and this was the purpose of his coming—all the varied and paradoxical play between contingency and the Absolute, and in this respect he even opened indirectly a way towards gnosis. But he always remains man and, consequently, does not seek to draw away from the human point of view, as is especially attested by Psalm 139: “O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off . . .” And later: “For there is not a word in my tongue, but lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it.”

Independently of the fact that the Psalms, being inspired by the Divine Spirit, must contain implicitly all wisdom,<sup>2</sup> these Texts are not lacking in passages capable of directly vehicling esoteric meanings. It is thus that the first of the Psalms speaks of him whose “delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.” The law of the Lord is, on the one hand Revelation, and on the other, the Will of God; as for meditation, it signifies a contemplation and not a cry of the soul. Moreover, this meditative contemplation comprises two modes or two degrees: the “day” and the “night”; the first concerning the literal and immediate truth, and the second, esoteric truth. “The Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish,” for only on the side of the Immutable is there stability, peace and life. And the fourth Psalm speaks to us thus: “But know that the Lord hath set apart him that is godly for himself: the Lord will hear when I call unto him.” This invocation, in fact, is the very essence of the soul of the righteous, at whatever level we envisage the prayer of the heart.

\* \*

Aside from the esoteric allusions necessarily contained in the Psalms, it could also be said, from another point of view, that it is Solomon who represents esoterism most directly; thus David and

---

<sup>2</sup> We do not, however, believe that one can draw “any meaning from any word,” for hermeneutics has its laws as does every science; but it is a fact that these rules have often been lost sight of.

Solomon appear as two inseparable poles, or as the two sides of one and the same Revelation.

David is the builder of Jerusalem; he represents, for Israel, the passage from nomadism to sedentarism. As for Solomon, he is the builder of the Temple; from David comes the body, from Solomon the heart.<sup>3</sup> Solomon also had sanctuaries built for foreign divinities; through this universalism, he entered into conflict, not with the formless Truth, but with the Sinaitic, Mosaic, Israelite form of this Truth. Moreover, we may consider the three Books of Solomon to be a spiritual mountain, the Song of Songs being—in the opinion even of the Kabbalists—the summit or the heart; or the wine, in the initiatory sense of the word.

As regards the problem of doctrinal formulation, one should not lose sight of the fact that for the Semites, prior to their contacts with the Greeks, metaphysics pertained in large measure to the inexpressible; now, not to know how to express something—not to know that one can express it or possibly not to wish to express it—is in no wise not to conceive it. And all the more so is this the case in a perspective of transcendence where the accent is on the fear of God, whence the prohibition of pronouncing the supreme Name; whence too the reticence to articulate the divine mysteries.

\* \*

In Shri Shankaracharya, the distinction between *Ātmā* and *Māyā* does not appear as a mystery which is brought out “in the final analysis”; it is expressed from the outset without a veil, which is to say that it constitutes the message itself. As for the veil, which is exoterism, or legalism, Shankara abandons it to others.

Like the inspired Kings of the Biblical world, Shankara is a Prophet, but not the Founder of a religion; his message presupposed a preexisting framework. This is not to say that his message is merely partial; if it can have this appearance in relation to the Hindu system viewed in its totality, it is because, geometrically speaking, it is like the point which does not encompass the periphery; but it cannot be said that this is because something is lacking in the point, which is perfect and can suffice unto itself. Moreover, Providence foresaw for Shankara a

---

<sup>3</sup> David, however, chose Mount Zion—as a kind of replacement for Mount Sinai—as the seat of the Ark of the Covenant; Solomon placed it in the Holy-of-Holies.

quasi-exoteric complement, namely Ramanuja, the great spokesman of Vaishnavite monotheism: the convinced adversary of the Shankarite and Shaivite metatheism, yet tolerated by the Shankarite school as an elementary stage. Even within *Advaita-Vedānta*, the necessity for worship is taken into account: the disciples of Shankara do not deprive themselves of adoring and invoking divinities, for they know that they are human beings and that it is proper to put everything in its place. One cannot transcend *Māyā* without the grace of a divinity which is included within *Māyā* who is *Ātmā* of course, but within *Māyā*, as we ourselves are. The contact between man and God presupposes a common ground.

One could speak of the "Shankarite miracle," for this intellectual phenomenon is almost unique in its character at once direct, rigorous, explicit and complete; just as the Semites, through their Prophets, have brought the world the great message of Faith, so the Aryans, through Shankara—and in a certain manner also through the Greeks—have brought it the great message of Intellection. This is not to say, obviously, that Shankara was the first in India to speak of this mystery, for one finds it formulated first in the Upanishads, and later by the great commentator Badarayana; but Shankara offers a particularly precise and complete crystallization of it, unique in its perfection and fecundity.

The entire message of the Upanishads, of the *Brahma-Sūtras* of Badarayana, and finally of Shankara, may be condensed into the following words: "*Brahma* alone is real; the world is illusion, *Māyā*; the soul is not other than *Brahma*."

\* \*

Some scholars have quite improperly concluded that the Shankarite advaitism—"non-dualism"—stems in the final analysis from Nagarjuna, hence from mahayanic Buddhism which Shankara condemns implacably; the reason for this false assimilation is that there is a certain parallelism between advaitism and the Nagarjunan perspective in the sense that both represent a metatheistic immanentism; but the starting points are totally different. No doubt, the Buddhist *Nirvāṇa* is nothing other than the Self, *Ātmā*; but whereas for the Hindus the starting point is that reflection of the Self which is the "I," for the Buddhists on the contrary the starting point is entirely negative and moreover purely empirical: it is the *Samsāra* as the world of suffering, and this

world is merely a "void," *shūnya*, which it is not worth the trouble to try to explain. The Buddhists deny the concrete existence of the soul and consequently also that of the Self—they conceive in negative mode that which the Hindus conceive in positive mode—and the Hindus, for their part reject no less categorically this negativism of the Buddhists, which appears to them like the negation of the Real itself.

Here one may nonetheless wonder—and we cannot avoid this doctrinally important parenthetical insertion—why a mind like Shankara indulged in casting invective even on the very person of the Buddha; now it is excluded that a Shankara could have "indulged" himself; in fact, he exercised in this case a function which we will term a "self-defensive symbolist interpretation"; we meet with such examples in the sacred Scriptures themselves. Shankara's mission was not only to formulate the *Advaita-Vedānta*, but also to protect the vital milieu of this doctrine against the Buddhist invasion; but he could not have the mission of explaining the intrinsic validity of Buddhism, which did not concern the Hindu world. If Shankara's mission had been to explain traditional universality and thereby the validity of all the forms of revelation and spirituality, it could then be said that he erred in judging Buddhism and the Buddha Shakyamuni; but, again, Shankara's mission was altogether intrinsic—not extrinsic as the study of the diverse traditional forms would have been—consequently he could overlook, and wanted to overlook, the possible value of foreign traditions; he did not practice the "science of religions" (*Religionswissenschaft*).

On the plane of metaphysics as such—and it is this which alone counts in the final analysis—Shankara was one of the most eminent authorities who has ever lived; his scope was of a "prophetic" order, as we have said, which means that he was as infallible as the Upanishads. The doctrinal and institutional work of Shankara marked the inauguration of a millennium of intellectual and spiritual flowering;<sup>4</sup> to say Hindu wisdom, is to say Shankara.

\* \*

Like Shankara, Hōnen Shōnin was not the founder of the perspective that he personified, but he was its most explicit and incisive representative, and this is precisely what allows us to say that he was

---

<sup>4</sup> For he did not limit himself to writing treatises, he also founded spiritual centers whose influence was immense and which still exist in our time.

the personification of his message. Doubtless—from the point of view of “avataric” phenomenology—he is not situated at the same level as David and Solomon, or as Shankara; the Buddhist equivalent of these rather would be Nagarjuna, the great spokesman of original *Mahāyāna*. But Nagarjuna—while he eminently represented the invocatory branch of *Mahāyāna* and is considered to be the first patriarch of this school<sup>5</sup>—was hardly explicit concerning the perspective here in question; thus it became necessary later on to expound in detail this particular doctrine, and this was done by the other patriarchs of the so-called “devotional” Buddhism, Hōnen being the seventh and last of them; his predecessors—after the Indian Vasubandhu—were Chinese, followed by one Japanese.<sup>6</sup>

If David incarnates the meeting with God and Prayer, and Shankara metaphysical Truth, Intellection and Meditation, Hōnen for his part will be like the incarnation of Faith and Invocation; his perspective and his method coincide, as regards the essential, with the way of the “Russian Pilgrim” and the Hindu *japa-yoga*, as well as with the *prapatti*—saving trust—of the Vaishnavites. This is to say that it is the way of easiness, of Grace; the word “easiness” is not to be taken here in a pejorative sense, it rather means that the technique of this way is easy. Grace is conditionally acquired; but concrete perseverance is difficult *de facto*, for in the final analysis, it demands all that we are; man cannot bear the “divine climate” for long, except on condition of gently dying to the world and to himself. In fact, no way, if it is really spiritual, could be “easy” in the vulgar sense of the word.

\* \*

The fundamental idea of the way of *Amitābha* (*Amida* in Japanese) coincides in substance with this saying of Christ: “With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27). This is the Buddhist perspective of the “power of the other” (*tariki*, in Japanese), not of “self-power” (*jiriki*); it means that man adopts an attitude of faith “which moves mountains,” combined with a divine and sacramental support which, for its part, is what in

<sup>5</sup> Founded on the worship of *Amitābha* Buddha, the great manifestation of saving Mercy.

<sup>6</sup> Namely, Tan-luan, Tao-ch’o, Shan-tao and Genshin. Eminent Japanese precursors who are not counted as Patriarchs were Kūya and Ryōnin.

reality brings about salvation; there is something analogous in the case of Christian communion, which in fact communicates an incommensurable grace without man having any part in it, except as regards receptivity, which clearly has its requirements.

But the sharp alternative between a "way of merit" and a "way of grace"—for that is what the distinction between the principles *jiriki* and *tariki* means in Japanese Buddhism—this alternative is, we think, more theoretical than practical; in concrete reality, there is rather an equilibrium between the two procedures, so that the distinction evokes the Far Eastern symbol of the *Yin-Yang*, composed, as is known, by a white half containing a black dot, and a black half containing a white dot, this being the very image of harmonious complementarity.<sup>7</sup> Shinran, the disciple of Hōnen, wished to place the accent on the "power of the other," which from a certain mystical point of view is defensible, on condition of not reproaching Hōnen for stopping half-way and of having mistakenly maintained an element of "self-power"; for, as initiative and activity are natural to man, we do not see what advantage there would be in depriving him of them. Faith, it seems to us, is much more easy to realize if one allows man the joy of collaborating with it; in our personal activity there is in fact a criterion of concrete reality and a guarantee of efficacy, whereas faith alone—as a condition of salvation—has no support which is ours and which we could control. Hōnen knew as well as Shinran that the cause of salvation is not in our work but in the grace of Amida; but we must in fact open ourselves in some fashion to this grace, otherwise it would suffice to exist in order to be saved.

The great Semitic message, as we have said in speaking of David, is that of faith; now the fact that devotional Buddhism is founded upon saving faith could cause one to think that in both cases it is a question of the same attitude and the same mystery, and consequently that the two traditional positions coincide. Now, aside from the fact that the element of faith exists necessarily in every religion, there is here this distinction to be made: the Semitic or Abrahamic faith is the fervent acceptance of the omnipotent Invisible and consequently submission to

---

<sup>7</sup> For example, man bears in his soul a feminine element, and woman, a masculine element, and it is necessarily thus, not only because every person has two parents, but also because each sex belongs to one and the same human species.

## SCHUON

Its Law; whereas the Amidist faith is trust in the saving Will of a particular Buddha, a trust linked to a particular and well-defined practice: namely the invocation *Namomitābhaya Buddhaya:* or *Namu Amida Butsu*.<sup>8</sup>

\* \*

Way of altogether human Prayer; way of metaphysical Discernment; way of saving Trust: The three ways can be combined because man has many chords in his soul, or in other words, because human subjectivity comprises different sectors. It is true that Prayer and Trust pertain to the same sector; but such is not the case with metaphysical Discernment, whose subject is not the sensible soul, but pure intelligence; which—far from creating an antagonism—permits the simultaneity of parallel approaches. The proof of this is the altogether lyrical piety of a Shankara, his hymns and invocations to the feminine as well as masculine aspects of the transcendent and immanent Divinity: to the Self who a priori is infinitely “other,” but who in reality is infinitely “ourselves.”

---

<sup>8</sup> “Salutation to the Buddha *Amitabha*.” The second of the two formulas cited is the Japanese adaptation of the Sanskrit formula.