The terse words of Meister Eckhart: "Art is religion, religion art, not related, but the same", are applicable not only to Medieval Europe but to nearly all Indian periods before the 19th century. Even though there is not, strictly speaking, that Western dichotomy of religious belief and worldly practice in the art of India, dividing it neatly into religious and secular, virtually all Indian art is easily and accurately described as religious. When Shankracharya said that even a misshapen image of a God was to be preferred to an image of man, however charming, he was formulating a dictum that was followed consistently ever many centuries in many periods. Art became in India, in the words of Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy, "essentially the proof of a religious inspiration, the outward sign of inward and spiritual grace,...." Art and religion became often names for one and the same experience.

For this and other reasons, the subject matter of Indian art assumes great importance, because for the artist and the viewer, the śilpa and the rasika alike, it was a part of his belief. The artist was not really always creating aesthetic surfaces while painting; he was creating,

in his own manner, a magic world in which his faith was reflected as in a mirror.

Because of these basic assumptions about the intimate connection between art and religion, an attempt has been made over the last fifty years to understand the paintings of India that Ananda Coomaraswamy first designated as "Rajput", in terms of religion and the cultural ethos of the period in which they arose. When he produced his classic work on Rajput painting, Dr. Coomaraswamy formulated statements which have been quoted tirelessly over and over again because their validity is taken for granted. The marvellous intuition and the sensitivity which that great scholar commanded gave to almost everything that he said an air of sanctity. The views he expressed have therefore held strangely firm ground over the years. Much work on Pahari painting, has been done since Dr. Coomaraswamy first brought them to the notice of an admiring world, and more views have been given in the context of the present study. These views are important especially where they concern the connection between Rajput painting and religion, more particularly between Pahari paintings and Vaishnavism.

When Dr. Coomaraswamy said that "Rajput Painting is the counterpart of the vernacular literature of Hinduism", he was emphasising at once two aspects of this

1. Coomaraswamy, Rajput Painting, I, I.
art; its illustrative character and its contents. He saw that the "essential inspiration of Rajput art, the law of its being", was "rather religious than moral" and went on to say that it was "constantly preoccupied with one sentiment of Bhakti, passionate devotion to a God in the person of his Avatar, Sri Krishna..."

He saw in India, in fact, the signs of a Hindu Renaissance in the medieval period which became reflected in, and was fed by, a variety of factors. An essential element in the situation, according to him, was the development of the two great phases of popular Vaishnavism, "the cult of Rama, and the cult of Gopala Krishna". He said that the development of these cults was contemporaneous with that of the vernaculars; that "the literature of these cults has remained until recently the dominant factor in the development of the languages and the essential themes of their poetry." And then Dr. Coomaraswamy went on to make his famous statement which became a beginning point for many scholars; "The central inspiration of Rajput painting is ... Vaishnava".

2. Ibid., I, 27.
3. Ibid., I, 2.
4. Ibid., I, 2. Also, "It (Rajput Art) is largely inspired by the impassioned Vaishnava poetry which it so often illustrates". Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon, 90.
Repeatedly after this Dr. Coomaraswamy spoke of Rajput art as being synonymous with Vaishnava art, and even though he did not equate Rajput art with sectarian expression and specifically said that in Rajput paintings Shaiva and Shakta themes were also treated, he instinctively thought of Rajput art as Vaishnava in theme and inspiration. This can be seen clearly in the beautiful passages in which he contrasts Rajput with Mughal paintings seeing them as the two opposite ends of a pole.

Other scholars who have given thought to the problem have arrived at nearly similar conclusions about the connection between Rajput art, specially Pahari painting and Vaishnavism. O.C. Gangoly saw in Rajput painting "pictorial commentaries on the Bhagavata and the Puranas representing the plastic parallel to Prakrit literature". The synchronisation between the rise of popular Vaishnavism, vernacular poetry, musical modes and much miniature paintings had generally been interpreted as signs of a cultural renaissance, but J.C. French discovered a very direct connection between the Vaishnava faith and art in the sixteenth century Bengal. According to him it was the Vaishnava revival "which thawed the ancient Hindu art, frozen by the winter of the Mahomedan invasion, and caused it to blossom like the flowers of spring."

1. O.C. Gangoly, Masterpieces of Rajput Painting, 2-3.
2. J.C. French, Himalayan Art, 103-104.
This artistic "outburst" as a result stemming from a renewed religious activity was firmly believed in by Mr. French because he said about Pahari painting—and this is of more intimate concern to the present study—that "it was as much the arrival of this enthusiastic religious force (Vaishnavism) as the decline of the Moghul empire and acquisition of the Moghul technique in line and drawing, which produced the beautiful Kangra Valley School."

Even when casually seen, Pahari paintings strike one as concerned predominantly with the Vaishnava themes, and it is this, among other reasons, which has led the foremost scholars of Pahari painting to comment on the recurrence and the frequency of Vaishnava, especially Krishna-Radha, themes in this art. The "outburst of painting" in 17th century Rajasthan in "a new style transcending in its rhythmical assurance and glowing ardour all previous achievements" in Rajasthan of the 17th century, W.G. Archer ascribed to the worship of Krishna. At the same time he saw "the most exalted expressions of the (Krishna) theme" as coming from Kangra.

1. French, Himalayan Art, 103-104.


3. Archer, Himalayan Art, 93. "It was here that Krishna, the cowherd lover, was most fully celebrated. Pictures were produced in large numbers and the Kangra style with its delicate refinement exactly mirrored the enraptured poetry of the cult."
Dr. Archer has described with persuasive charm and much erudition the passionate, intense feeling in the legends and the loves of Krishna from which resulted "the Indian equivalent of pictures by El Greco, Grünewald and Altdorfer - paintings in which the artist's own emotions were the direct occasion of a new manner."

"The central inspiration of Basohli painting, like other Rajput painting", wrote Dr. M.S. Randhawa, "is Vaishnavism", for according to him the "devotional poetry of the saints and the mystics of the 16th century found visual expression in paintings of the 17th and 18th century" from Basohli. He saw the 17th century in the Western Himalayas as a period of Vaishnava revivalism and for him the explanation of the greatness of Basohli art lies in the fact that "all great art is inspired by religion".

Mr. Karl Khandalavala speaks also of the Vaishnava literary and religious renaissance affecting all classes of society, even the illiterate folk who were moved by the cult of Krishna. As a result, according to him, "soon there arose a demand at the courts of Rajput Princes both in Rajasthan and in the Hill states not only to have

portraits and miniatures but also to have the great masterpieces of Vaishnava literature and the epics illustrated. Mr. Khandalavala sees the rulers of the Pahari States taking endless delight in the Krishna legend, and the artists following them closely in this. "The intense hold which the Krishna legend has on the masses to this day is in no small measure due to the fact that it creates for them two different worlds, one a solace and a refuge from the drab reality of the other". Even out of Vaishnava themes Mr. Khandalavala considers the Krishna legends in the Bhagavata Purana as playing the most vital role in the renaissance of Indian poetry and painting from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth.

And, in this manner, Pahari painting has come more or less to be identified with Vaishnava themes. Its rise is linked with the arrival of popular Vaishnavism in the hills and it is seen more or less as a sudden outburst following upon a literary and religious renaissance that centred around the cult of Krishna. One is not surprised therefore when one comes upon an emphatic and unqualified


2. Khandalavala, 304.
statement like: "Rajput art is Krishna-Lila; it is Kabir, Mira Bai and Vidyapati in line and colour".

All this leads one at once into many questions that need be asked before one can either support or deny these suggestions. It becomes necessary not only to inquire into the nature of the paintings but also into the nature of religion in the hills which the various theories would have us believe was not only predominantly Vaishnava at the point of time at which Pahari painting began but remained so in the three centuries during which Pahari painting flourished, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth. This inquiry has to be precise because of the formulation that the faith was shared not only by the patron and the people, but also, in particular by the artist, for he must have been directly involved in the whole creative effort which went into the making of Pahari painting.

The questions that one has to ask in this connection therefore are many. One has to enquire, for example, into the matter of the approximate date at which Vaishnavism came into the hills. But before this can be done, it becomes important to try and ascertain the nature of religion which obtained in the hills before the arrival of Vaishnavism. It is equally important to know more and in depth, about the agency through which Vaishnavism travelled and arrived in the hills. Questions arise also about the

gains made by Vaishnavism and the manner in which these
gains were made. It is almost certain that a religion which
came from the plains could not have made easy progress,
and one has therefore to try and discern for oneself, the
processes and the strains through which Vaishnavism went
before it could find a firm footing. There are of course
other questions which do not relate only to the history of
the religion in the hills; questions like the time-gap
between the arrival of Vaishnavism in the hills and the
beginnings of Pahari painting. But this will naturally
lead one to enquire into the date at which Pahari paintings
may be said to have first appeared.

There is also the matter of feeling in these
paintings and that of understanding on the part both of
the patron and the artist of the situations encountered in
these pictures. A great deal has been said about the
philosophical content of Vaishnava belief, and of the
allegorical meaning of the loves of Radha and Krishna. But
the need is to determine how much of the mysticism and the
spiritual content of the legends meant to the minds
concerned.

In any case it is necessary to try and see whether
the feeling that the artist is able to evoke in this
section of his work also belongs to his other work - and
there is a whole body of work which is non-Vaishnava-like
that which treats of Shiva or Shakta themes or even
scenes of ordinary, everyday occurrence. This, because even
a casual look at some of these pictures will assure one
that these are not without feeling nor are they lacking
in that strength of emotion, that power or tension of
which great art is born. A point that is to be determined
therefore is whether the inspiration which is said to
have arrived in the hills with Vaishnavism was simply
restricted to pictures of Vaishnava themes or was it
something that permeated the whole being of the artist
at this particular point of time? It is to some of
these questions - and it is not necessary that all of
these can easily be answered - that the enquiry in the
following pages is addressed.