CHAPTER VI

COMPARISON BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN CONCEPTION OF GOD AS THE DIVINE PERSON

In the previous chapters I have considered the conceptions of God that we come across in the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Purāṇas and in the different schools of Indian philosophy. Let me now make a comparison between these conceptions and the conceptions of God that have been developed in western philosophy and theology.

According to absolute idealism, the Absolute is no person. A person is a self-conscious, self-distinguishing being ever conscious of his own identity. But the self-consciousness is possible only on the basis of the distinction or opposition between self and not-self, between 'I' and 'not-I'. The self must be confronted with and limited by a not-self which contrast alone can make the self a self-conscious being, i.e., a person. The Highest Principle, the Supreme Being is ex hypothesi unlimited and infinite. There is nothing outside it, in contradistinction
from which it can realise its personality. To ascribe personality to God, who is admittedly the highest, would be in effect to set a limit to His nature and thereby make Him limited and finite. Personality, in short, can belong only to a finite being and never to the Highest. Infinity and personality are incompatible.

According to Bosanquet, the Absolute is an individual or the individual in the strict sense, but no person. Personality, he says, is a legal or social category. A person is so only in relation to others. Hence we cannot extend the term 'personality' to any individual who is above or below social life. The Absolute is the only reality. Hence we cannot posit anything beyond it with which it can be related. As Bosanquet puts it, "individuality, the principle of reality ...... takes us on beyond personality in the strict sense, beyond the consciousness of self which is mediated by an opposing not-self ......". The Absolute being self-determined and all-inclusive cannot be regarded as personal. On this point Bosanquet completely agrees with Bradley.

Bradley, the great absolutist thinker, emphatically asserts that the supreme Principle or the ultimate Reality can never be personal. "For me", he says, "a person is finite or meaningless". We must remember in this connection that Bradley does not deny personality to God - to the

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1 The Principle of Individuality and Value, p. 270.
What he denies is that a personal God, which the God of Religion undoubtedly is, can never be the ultimate truth about the universe. He thus draws a distinction between the God of Religion and the Absolute of Philosophy.

A personal God "has no meaning outside religious consciousness", which involves the practical relation between the worshipper and the worshipped. But the Absolute, the Highest Principle, cannot be personal, for in the end the Absolute is related to nothing so that there cannot be a practical relation between it and the finite will. As he puts it, "when you begin to worship the Absolute or the Universe and mankind it the object of religion, you in that moment have transformed it. It has become something forthwith which is less than the Universe". Therefore, the personal God, the God of Religion is "a finite factor in the whole".

This does not mean, Bradley points out, that the idea of God's personality is not relatively true. He continues that personality of God may indeed be satisfying to the demands of religion. It may be indispensable for practical purposes; but theoretically it is most indefensible. It cannot satisfy the demands of Logic. God is not God till He is all in all and a God who is all in all is not the God of Religion.

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1 Essays on Truth and Reality, Oxford University Press, P. 428
There is agreement between Sankara and Bradley regarding the position that the ultimate reality is beyond personality and that a personal God though not the ultimate reality is required for religion. Bosanquet, however, emphasises the personality as a social category. But the Absolute does not live in any society and is not related to any social beings. Therefore, the category 'personality' does not apply to it. Sankara of course does not say that personality has social association about it. But he does say that personality involves difference between one individual and another and that there is no difference in the Absolute. As it is pure identity, it, according to Sankara, transcends personality.

In spite of the subtlety of Bradley's arguments, it is impossible for either philosophy or religion to rest satisfied with the unstable position he has arrived at. There surely cannot be contradiction between the higher religion and the higher philosophy. Our religious and intellectual needs must ultimately find their satisfaction in the same source. Religion can never be content with worshipping a Supreme Being who is discovered not to be supreme at all, but to be an appearance of a greater Being. Religion would be satisfied with nothing else than a Being who is admittedly the highest — who is both practically and intellectually satisfying. It demands that God, the object of our worship, must be nothing less than the supreme Reality, the Absolute and further that this Absolute must be personal.
Against the contention of the Absolutists, Lotze attempts to show that not only is personality not incompatible with God's infinity but that God alone can be called a person in the truest sense, that complete personality can exist in God alone.

The gist of Lotze's arguments, no less convincing than that of Bradley's may be stated as follows:

It is not a fact that the ego requires a non-ego to become conscious of itself, that because ego and non-ego are correlative terms of a relation it does not follow that they are constituted by the relation or that each of them was not whatever it is, even before it entered into the relation of contrast.

Further, what is the content of the non-ego itself? It is not any extra-mental physical reality - rather the non-ego for us is constituted by the sensations and ideas which constitute our mental life, our experience, and the ego or the self knows itself as the unitary subject in opposition to states that are its own. Extending the same analogy to God we may say that He does not require any world external to His which possesses an equal reality with Him. God realises His personality in and through the inner world of His ideas.

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1 Philosophy of Religion, pp. 58-72.
It may be urged that the ideas in the finite spirits are aroused by an external world; but how are they aroused in the divine mind? Such a question does not arise at all, says Lotze, for God, who is the infinite spirit and to whom no limitation appertains, and no such stimulus from a reality external to Him. He is eternal and everything is present to Him from all eternity. Further, as finite spirits, we are tied down to a particular point in space and through our experience in time, we can be conscious only of the present and of that portion of the past that is reproduced in memory. But God who is omnipotent has the whole universe presented before His mind in an "Eternal Now". So God alone can be a person in the truest sense, or to put it in another way, complete personality can exist only in God, while in finite beings there exists only a faint copy thereof. Lotze truly says, "God is an Infinite Personality, and we are pale copies thereof".

Though there is no exact similarity between Lotze's view of God as the divine Person and those of the Indian theists, yet we can say that Lotze agrees with the latter in so far as the conception of divine personality is concerned. All theists eastern and western emphasise the fact that the personality of God involves difference at least between Him and the finite spirits. But the relation between the divine Person and the finite selves is differently conceived. Lotze, for example, says that difference is of course needed for the personality of God but that it is provided by the multiplicity of ideas within God's consciousness. Rāmānuja, on the other hand, draws upon the category 'whole and part' (āṁśa-āṁśi). Madhva, again, posits God chiefly as the creator and ordainer of the universe including finite beings.
Let us now consider the views of the pluralistic theists with regard to the question of the personality of God. In opposition to philosophical theism, the pluralistic idealism puts forward the theory of a finite God and distinguishes Him from the Absolute. Pluralists who are also personalists maintain that personality which is the highest concept of religion is, after all, a limiting concept involving social relationship and therefore falls short of the Absolute. This view is maintained in general by pluralists like Ward, Rashdall, Howison, Balfour, Schiller and others, though they differ among themselves in minute details. Pluralism which began as a reaction against Absolutism, suffered a division within its camp and in the hands of some of its exponents it inclined towards atheism and humanism, while in some others it got the recognition of a new religious philosophy.

According to McTaggart, the celebrated commentator of Hegel, the Absolute is unity of persons but is not itself a person. He turned Hegel's monistic Absolute into a society of selves, but did not feel the need of God as the basis of such unity or society. The unity was regarded as that of common fellowship such as a college affords to students within it. Just as the college includes persons though not itself a person, so the Absolute is necessarily self-differentiated in persons and is spiritual though not personal. Each person within the unity excludes everything else yet as conscious includes what it excludes. The Absolute, however, excludes nothing; hence it has not the characteristic, e.g., the consciousness of the non-ego which is external to all personality and therefore, it is not personal. McTaggart, however, simply assumes the fact
of unity as a matter of inexplicable necessity and tends to move towards atheism. But the unity is not really inexplicable, rather its explanation lies in the idea of God which McTaggart resolutely avoids.

According to Ward, Howison, Rashdall, on the other hand, God is the basis of the unity. God who is the central monad in the society of uncreated and eternal monads (persons) as their common ideal, draws them towards the divine goal and makes them cooperate as free members of his eternal republic. God is no doubt a member in the series, but the central member 'primum inter pares' and who are guided by the vision of the City of God. He draws them on towards the final issue (cf. Leibniz's monad of all monads and Aristotle's unmoved mover). Ward even goes further and regards God as creative, as the creator or creators and not simply the impersonal principle of synthesis among the uncreated spirits. But in spite of these minor differences they all agree in affirming that God, the central person is not the Absolute, for such a God would be, therefore, no God at all. Absolute is not God alone but God and the world or God and the spirits.

Both Rashdall and Howison advocate the separation between the God of Religion and the Absolute of Philosophy. But while Rashdall's view appears to be more pronounced in this respect, in so far as he makes God finite having all the limitations of personality, Howison appears to be rather hesitant, for according to his own showing, if God is the supreme prime and eternal ideal of all spirits, if He is the final cause of all evolution it is very difficult to distinguish Him from the Absolute.
Schiller and Balfour, however, in their humanistic obsession to personality go to the length of discarding the conception of the Absolute altogether. Schiller's pluralistic universe, consisting of self-existent, itself created God, egoses and matter, leaves no room for an absolute, all-complete infinite being. God is God only as person, as striving like other egoses amongst the resisting force to rend it into a perfect system—the only difference being that God is the foremost among egoses as possessing greater wisdom, power and insight. As Schiller puts it: "By becoming finite God becomes once more a real principle in the understanding of the world, a real motive in the conduct of life, a real factor in the existence of things, a factor nonetheless real for being unseen and inferred."

Balfour, according to whom, theism and absolutism, are diametrically opposed, thinks that the idea of God as absolute is detrimental to religious aspiration. Religion demands a personal being who enters into fellowship with other beings in love and will. It does not matter if such a being is limited by the will of his worshipper and is finite, because He is the highest of all finite selves. It is better to finitize God than to depersonalize Him. As Balfour puts it: "When I speak of God, I mean something other than an ideality wherein all differences vanish or a unity which includes but does not transcend the differences which it somehow holds in solution. I mean a God whom man can love, a God to whom man can pray, who takes sides, who has purposes and preferences, whose attitudes, however, conceived, leave unimpaired the possibility of a personal relation between Himself and those whom He has created."

1 Philosophy of Doubt.
William James also, on pragmatic grounds, gives us a radical pluralism according to which the Absolute which abolishes all distinctions, is, for all practical purposes, an 'absolute blank'. He avoids the 'black universe' of the monists and finds himself in a 'moralistic and epic kind of universe', the hallmark of which is progressed through effort. Hence the God that is acceptable on pragmatic grounds is one that makes possible the moral struggle of the individual, who shares with him in his struggle, triumphs in his success and sympathises in his failures, even though He may fail to ensure the final triumph. Thus James comes to rest in a finite God who abounds in good will though hopelessly destitute of power and in an unfinished world. James gives the Absolute only the benefit of doubt. If there is an Absolute in addition that is just "the wider cosmic whole of which our God is but the most ideal portion."¹

The pluralistic theism of the West represents a new philosophical-religious movement which is scarcely paralleled by any Indian School of Thought. The view of the pragmatists about God is rather peculiar because, according to them, God is a person and is at the same time finite ever striving to perfect himself along with other finite beings, though he is the greatest of all beings. Indian theism in general, however, does not entertain such an absurd view of God, for a finite God, however powerful he may be, cannot be, according to Indian theists, the object of devotion and worship.

¹ A Pluralistic Universe, p. 125.