CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

From the point of view of philosophy of religion both absolutism and pluralism appear to be equally unsatisfactory views of life and experience. Absolutism rightly asserts that the character of the universe is a significant whole but emphasizing the whole, it comes upon an empty form of unity in which all differences and values are lost and ultimately obliterated. Absolutism is right in its assertion that the true meaning and central function of the individual are to be found in the universe in which the individual attains fulness and abundance of life. But it commits a great blunder when it takes up an altogether negative attitude towards individuality by denouncing its uniqueness and value. Pluralism, again, is right in its assertion that individuality is not a negligible feature of the world but is of unique value and meaning. But it runs to the opposite extreme when in safeguarding freedom and uniqueness of the individual, it almost neglects the very basis on which such freedom and individuality ultimately rest. Absolutism in the interest of the one leaves out of account the legitimate claims of the many, while pluralism in its insistence on the many denounces the one for all. What satisfies both rational thought and religious aspiration is the idea of reality that does not abolish all distinctions but maintains them while
transcending their nature as such. This is what true religion has ever
emphasized in its conception of divine transcendence and what true philo-
sophy has always endorsed in its assertion of a spiritual reality of the
nature of unity-in-difference. And it is no wonder that in modern times
we find in Sri Ramakrishna's experience and teaching a reconciliation of
the personal God and the impersonal Absolute. This is a solution of the
problem of divine personality which is more satisfying and convincing than
any views considered so far.

According to Sri Ramakrishna God is formless and has forms too.
He is also that which transcends both form and the formless. He alone knows
what all He is. Fire itself has no definite shape, but as glowing embers
it assumes different forms. Thus the formless fire is seen endowed with form.
Similarly, the formless God sometimes invests Himself with definite forms. God with form and God without form are not, therefore, two different beings.
He who is with form is also without form.

Sri Ramakrishna illustrates this truth by many examples.
"When a bell is rung the repeated ding-dongs may be distinguished one from
the other as if each has a form, but when we stop ringing, the indistinguishable
sound which is audible for a while and gradually dies away appears formless.
Like the sounds of the bell God is both with form and without form." 

2 Thus spoke Sri Ramakrishna, compiled by Swami Suddhasattvananda, p.7.
3 Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras.
Again, Sri Ramkrishna’s parable of the chameleon is important on this point. Two persons were hotly disputing as to the colour of a chameleon. One said, ‘The chameleon on that palm tree is of a beautiful red colour’. The other, contradicting him said, ‘you are mistaken, the chameleon is not red, but blue’. Not being able to settle the matter by arguments, both went to the person who always lived under that tree and had watched the chameleon in all its phases of colour. One of them said, ‘Sir, is not the chameleon on that tree of a red colour?’ The person replied ‘Yes, sir’. The other disputant said, ‘what do you say? How is it? It is not red, it is blue’. That person again humbly replied, ‘Yes, sir’. The person knew that the chameleon is an animal that constantly changes its colour, thus it was that he said ‘Yes’ to both of these conflicting statements. God likewise has many forms. The devotee who has seen God in one aspect only, knows Him in that aspect alone. But he who has seen Him in manifold aspects is alone in a position to say, ‘All these forms are of one God and God is multiform’. He is formless and with form, and many are His forms which no one knows.1

On another occasion Sri Ramkrishna illustrates the same truth with the help of the parable about the form of an elephant. Four blind were disputing among themselves, elephant. One touched the leg of the elephant, and said, ‘The elephant is like a pillar’. The second touched the trunk, and said, ‘The elephant is like a thick stick or club’. The third touched the belly, and said, ‘The elephant is like a winnowing basket’. Thus they began to dispute amongst themselves as to the figure of the elephant. A passer-by

1 Sayings of Sri Ramkrishna, Compiled by Swami Abhedananda, Ramkrishna Vedanta Math, Calcutta, 1946, p. 41.
seeing them thus quarrelling said, 'what is it that you are disputing about?' They told him everything, and asked him to arbitrate. The man said, 'None of you has seen the elephant'. The elephant is not like a pillar, its legs are like pillars. It is not like a water-vessel, its belly is like a water-vessel. It is not like a winnowing basket, its ears are like winnowing baskets. It is not like a thick stick or club, but its proboscis is like that. The elephant is the combination of all these. In the same manner those who have experienced some different forms of the Deity quarrel among themselves.¹

According to Sri Ramkrishna, different forms of God are not contradictory to one another. "As the same sugar is made into various figures of birds and beasts, so one God is worshipped in various climes and ages under various names and forms".² As with one gold various ornaments are made, having different forms and names, so one God is worshipped in different countries and ages, and has different forms and names".³ Again:

"In a potter’s shop there are vessels of different shapes and forms — pots, jars, dishes, plates, etc. — but all are made of one clay. So God is one, but is worshipped in different ages and under different names and aspects".⁴ Again, as the same fish is dressed into soup, curry or cutlet and each has his own choice dish of it, so the Lord of the universe, though one manifests Himself differently according to the different likings of His worshippers and each one of these has his own view of God which he values most. To some He is a kind master or a loving father, a sweet smiling mother or a devoted friend, and others a faithful husband or dutiful and obliging son.⁵

¹ F. Max Muller, Ramkrishna: His Life and Sayings, p. 100.
⁵ Sayings of Sri Ramkrishna, Compiled by Swami Abhadananda, p. 43.
Unless one sees God one is not able to realise all this. For the sake of those that love the Lord He manifests Himself in various ways and in various forms. To take a parable of a dyer from Sri Ramkrishna: A dyer had his own way of dying cloths. He would ask the customer, "In what colour does thou want thy cloths to be dyed?" If he said 'red', the dyer dipped the cloth into his tub and brought it out saying, 'Here is thy cloth dyed red.' Another wanted his cloth dyed yellow. The dyer dipped it in the same tub and when he brought it up it was dyed yellow. In the same way, when some other colour was wanted — blue or orange or violet or green — the same tub was used with like result. A customer who was watching all this came up to the dyer and said, 'My friend, I am not fond of any colour. I desire to consult thy taste and should like to have my cloth dyed just as thou pleasest. I want the colour in which thou has dyed thyself'. The same is the case with God, the Divine Dyer. The Lord manifests Himself, as with form or without form just according to the need of the devotee. Manifested vision is relatively true, that is, true in relation to different men placed in different conditions and environments. The Divine Dyer alone knows in what colour He has dyed Himself. He is not bound by any limitation as to forms of manifestation or the negation thereof.¹

Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly tells us that the finite being cannot exhaust the Divine in any spiritual experience. An ant went to a sugar hill. It ate one grain and was satisfied. It took another grain in its mouth and went home. As it went it thought that next time it would take the whole hill.

¹ Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Published by Ramakrishna Math, Madras.
Men, who are but insignificant creatures, think like this. However, great a man may be, he can never know God. ¹

As in a theatre one man assumes successively various marks, so in the world, Sri Ramkrishna says, God assumes various forms. Why can we not then see the Divine Mother? Sri Ramkrishna tells us that the Divine Mother is like a high-born lady transacting all her business from behind the screen, seeing all but seen by none. Her devout sons see her, by going near her behind the screen of maya. ¹ Here too Sri Ramkrishna illustrates this truth with the help of a nice analogy. The Policeman, he says, can see with his lantern (bull’s eye) every one on whom he throws its rays of light, but no one can see him so long as he does not turn the light on himself. So does God see every one; but no one can see Himself until He reveals Himself unto one through His mercy.²

Sri Ramkrishna does not draw any distinction between Brahman and the Divine Mother. He acknowledges that Brahman and Sakti are one and the same Being. He sums up this truth in the following words: "When I think of the Supreme Being as inactive, neither creating, nor preserving, nor destroying, I call Him Brahman or Purusha, the impersonal God. When I think of Him as active, creating, preserving, destroying I call Him Shakti or Maya or Prakriti, the personal God. But the distinction between them does not mean a difference. The personal and the impersonal are the same Being, in the same way as milk and its whiteness, or the diamond and its lustre, or

¹ Teaching of Sri Ramkrishna, Ramkrishna Math, Madras.
² Ibid.
the serpent and its undulations. It is impossible to conceive of the one without the other. The Divine Mother and Brahman are one."

We may compare this text with another, less known but still more striking, showing the identity between the Personal and the impersonal aspects of the Supreme reality: "Kali is none other than He whom you call Brahman. Kali is Primitive Energy (Shakti). When it is inactive we call it Brahman (literally we call That ....). But when it has the function of creating, preserving or destroying, we call that Shakti or Kali. He whom you call Brahman, She whom I call Kali, are no more different from each other than fire and its action of burning. If you think of the one, you automatically think of the other. To accept Kali is to accept Brahman. To accept Brahman is to accept Kali. Brahman and His power are identical. That is what I call Shakti or Kali".

Again in another context Sri Ramakrishna brings out the same truth with the help of an example from empirical life. In a famous conversation with Keshab Chandra Sen he observes as follows: "A tank has several ghats. In one of these the Hindus take water and call it Jal; in another the Mohammedans drink water, and they call it Fānī; while a third is used by English men who call the same thing water. All three are the same, the difference being only in name. Some call Him "Allah, some God and others designate Him as Brahman, Kali, Rama, Hari, Jesus or Durga".

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1 Roman Roll and, Life of Ramakrishna p. 68-69.
2 Ibid, p. 69. Conversations of Ramakrishna with Naren (Vivekananda) and Mahendranath Gupta ("M") on the philosophies of Saṅgāra and Ramanuja published in the Vedanta Kesari, Nov., 1916.
3 Life of Sri Ramakrishna Published by Swami Gambhirananda p. 420; also Max Muller, Ramakrishna - His Life and Sayings, p. 98.
Sri Ramakrishna makes a distinction between the nitya and lila aspects of the Divine, although he admits the truth of both. Brahman in its essential nature (svarūpa) or immutable being (nityarūpa) is indeterminate and impersonal, while in its sportive or creative activity (līlārūpa) it is personal God. We cannot think of the one apart from the other, i.e. of līlā apart from nitya, and of nitya apart from līlā. As he puts it: "It is through the ‘Līlā’, that you must feel your way up to the ‘Nitya’. It is again from the ‘Nitya’ that you must feel your way back to the ‘Līlā’ — no longer unreal, but manifestations of ‘Nitya’ in the sense-plane. So long as you are a person your ‘Absolute’ must imply a ‘Relative’, your ‘Nitya’ must imply a ‘Līlā’, your ‘Substance’ must imply ‘qualities’, your ‘Impersonal’ must imply ‘personal Being’, and your ‘One’ must imply ‘many’.”

So long as you are in the plane of relativity, Sri Ramakrishna continues, "You must admit both personal God and the universe. The original milk, as it were, is the Brahman realised in samādhi, the ‘Butter-milk’ the universe made up of twenty four tattvas or categories."

Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly points out that there is no contradiction between the Brahman of the jñānīn and the Love of the bhakta: "Suppose there is an infinite expanse of water—water alone, water beneath, water in all directions. At certain times of the year, the water freezes with cold and again when the days are warm, it thaws and becomes water. Brahman..."
Those parts which are frozen into ice are the spiritual Personal Forms of the Deity. The cold is the bhakti of the devotee, his love, his devotion, his self-surrender. The heat again is jnana vichara leading up to nirvikalpa samadhi, the total effacement of the self which says 'I' 'I'. To a bhakta the Lord manifests Himself in various forms. To one who reaches the height of Brahmajnana in Samadhi He is the nirguna Brahman once more, Formless, Nirvikara, Unconditioned. Herein is the reconciliation between jnana and bhakti.\(^1\)

The Jnana-yogi longs to realise Brahman — God the Impersonal, the Absolute and the Unconditioned. But such a soul, Sri Ramakrishna says, "would do better ... to love, pray and surrender himself entirely to God." The Lord loves His devotees and will vouchsafe to him even Brahma-jnana if the devotee hungers and thirsts after it. Thus the jnana-yogi will attain Jnana as well as Bhakti. It will be given to him to realise Brahman. He will also realise the Personal God of the Bhakta. The Bhakta, on the other hand, will generally be content to see and realise the personal God, the Suguna Brahman of the Upaniṣads; yet the Lord makes him the heir of His infinite glories, grants to him Bhakti as well as Jnana, and gives to him the realisation of God Personal as well as of God impersonal.\(^2\)

Sri Ramakrishna warns the Advaitin against deifying the worship of the personal God. He taught: "So long as there is 'I' in me, so long as there is before me the Personal God, revealing Himself through

\(^1\) Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Translated into English by Swami Nikhilananda.
\(^2\) Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings, Published by the Advaita Ashram, Mayavati Almora (Himalayas), 1920, Pt. II, p.42.
various forms of glory, or as jiva and jagat. Even those that have realised
the Absolute in samādhi come down to the lower plane of sense-consciousness,
and have just sufficient ego ( aham ) left to hold communion with the
Personal God. Is it not difficult to raise the voice incessantly to ni,
the highest note of the gamut? Hence, says the knowing one, is the
necessity of a Personal God.1

The Advaitins, therefore, must not say that his position
is the only correct, rational and tenable one and those that believe in a
personal God are wrong. The personal manifestations of God are by no means
less real than the impersonal and uniffertentiated. To quote Sri Ramakrishna
again: "To think of Him as formless is quite right. But take care that thou
do ost not run away with the idea that that view alone is true and all else is false.
Meditating upon Him as a being with forms is equally right. But thou must
hold on to thy particular view until thou realizest, seest God; and then
everything shall be clear".2

Brahman, the Absolute and Unconditioned is realised in samādhi
alone; and then there is all silence; all such talks as delusion or non-
delusion, knowledge or ignorance are hushed. There remains then only Being,
and nothing else. Once a salt doll went to fathom the sea! It would report
about its depth. But that was hopeless. As soon as it touched the water, it
dissolved.3 And who was there to report? This is Brahma-jñāna. To him

1 Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Translated into English by Swami Mkhilananda.
2 & Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Ramakrishna Math, Madras,
3 Ibid.
alone who comes down from samādhi to the plane of sense-consciousness a thin ago — like a line — a length without breadth — just sufficient individuality to retain only the spiritual vision (Divya caksu). This enables him to see Jīva and Jagat as well as himself, as the One, manifesting Himself in these different forms. This vision of Glory comes to Vijnānī who has realised the Nirākāra Nirguna Brahman in Nirvikalpa samādhi and also the Sākāra Saguna Brahman in Savikalpa samādhi. Thus the state of vijnānī is superior to that of Jñānī, the known of the Undifferentiated and Unconditioned.

From what has been said above it is clear that according to Sri Ramakrishna, the impersonal Absolute and the personal God are one and the same. A belief in the one necessarily implies a belief in the other. We know from the study of the life of Sri Ramakrishna that the Divine Mother asked him not to be lost in the featureless Absolute but to remain in bhāvamukha, on the threshold of relative consciousness, border line between the Absolute and the Relative. He was to keep himself at the sixth centre (sat cakra) of Tantra, from which he could see not only the glory of the seventh, but also the divine manifestations of the Kundalinī in the lower centres. He gently oscillated back and forth across the divine line. Ecstatic devotion to the Divine Mother, the personal Deity alternated with serene absorption in the ocean of absolute Unity. He thus bridged the gulf between the personal and the impersonal, the immanent and transcendent aspects of the reality. His own spiritual experience enlightened even his

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1 Sri Ramakrishna by Swami Nikhilananda, p. 49.
The great Advaite Guru Totapuri, who had realized the impersonal Absolute, but had no experience of the personal God and the relation between Him and the impersonal Absolute. This is indeed a unique spiritual experience in the recorded spiritual history of the world. "The experiences here, to use Sri Ramakrishna's own expression, "go beyond the Veda and Vedanta."

1 Swami Ghanananda, Sri Ramakrishna: His Unique Message, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 1946, p. 223.