



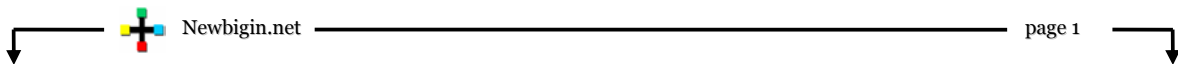
Christian Vendanta: Review of “A Vision to Pursue”, by Keith Ward

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When the Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford tells us that he can no longer hold the faith which he formerly held in the Incarnation, this is an event of public interest. In a closely argued and persuasive book Professor Keith Ward (*A Vision to Pursue*. SCM Press 1991, £9.95) sets out his reasons. If Jesus was God, he must have been omniscient and his teachings inerrant. But they were not. He taught the imminent end of the world, and it has not happened. ‘The whole Christian Gospel is founded on a mistake’ (p. 18). In fact we know almost nothing of the real Jesus. What we have is evidence of the spiritual experience of some of his followers arising from their encounter with him. The Gospel narratives are ‘historical retrojections of present spiritual relationships to God’ (p. 112). This is not a matter for surprise since ‘all past history is in principle irrecoverable’ (p. 32). What we have in the Gospels is not historical fact as the basis for religious belief, but present religious experience rendered as narrative. The function of narrative is that it expresses and evokes religious feeling. Thus the stories told about Jesus and the stories told about Krishna and the cowgirls are both to be valued as expressing and evoking a feeling of God’s love. The question ‘Did it really happen?’ is of no importance (pp. 4-5). We can never know ‘what really happened’ and the obsession of the Enlightenment with this question has to be set aside.

Religion is not about objectively ascertainable facts but about inward spiritual experience. The world religions are not monolithic blocks but developing traditions of spiritual experience. They have wide areas of mutual overlap and their internal disagreements are often sharper than their inter-religious ones. Christianity is no exception. Jesus was a man exceptionally but not uniquely sensitive to the Supreme. But this does not mean that Ward opts for a pluralism of the style of Hick, in which all religions are equally valid ways of salvation. Religion can be good or bad, and there are good and bad elements in all religions. We must choose the best from every religion. Ward therefore proposes a model of ‘convergent pluralism’. The religious traditions must and will grow together.

If it is asked ‘What are the criteria for such convergence?’ the answer is that there are ‘values’ which are absolute and autonomous (i.e. not dependent on ‘any religious or factual

beliefs about the world' (p. 187). These values are: happiness, rationality, wisdom, knowledge, freedom and justice (p.185 ff.). This is not an arbitrary list; these and no others are the absolute values. They constitute 'absolute criterion for discrimination in religion' (p. 187). The goal towards which all religions must look is the 'realization' of these values (p. 191). Contemporary evolutionary thinking encourages hope for this. All religions must be 'internalized' and 'universalized' (p. 160). But all must also 'pass through the fires of the Enlightenment' as Christianity has had to do (p. 200). The ultimate goal is a 'Christian Vedanta' bringing together the Semitic concept of a personal purposeful God, and the Indian concept of the Inclusive Self (atma-brahma).

I spoke of this as a 'persuasive' book. In the days when I used to spend evenings studying the Upanishads with the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission in Kancheepuram I remember saying to their leader that if it were not for the fact of Jesus I would become a Vedantin, since it is the most complete intellectual system ever conceived. It leaves no loose ends. His good-humoured response was that, if I wanted to tie my eternal salvation to a set of disputable historical events, I must be mad. But that is the whole point. Is true human fulfilment to be found by 'internalizing' all religion, withdrawing it from contact with a world of happenings? In a long and subtle argument Ward seeks to show that there is no essential difference between saying 'On Calvary God suffered for my sake' and saying 'God sympathizes with all human suffering'. I fear the argument does not stand up. And, on the other hand, if it is really true that 'the Son of God loved me and gave himself up for me' (Gal 2:20) then that stupendous fact has to be the starting point for my understanding of the world.

Everything depends on the starting point. Ward's starting point is a set of metaphysical beliefs about 'The Supreme' and about 'values'. If these are accepted then of course it is absurd to claim that Jesus was God in human form. One can have fun elaborating the absurdities, as Ward does in his argument with Brian Hebblethwaite. On the other hand, one can take the Gospel narrative as starting point – not as a set of 'infallible' propositions which I must accept whether or not I understand them, but as the light that constantly illuminates the path I have to find as I make my way through life, and challenges the smallness of my understanding with new perspectives. Ward repeatedly attacks fundamentalist claims for indubitable certainty concerning the biblical testimony, and of course his attack is effective. But he shares the Enlightenment belief that there is indubitable certainty available to us; he has no doubts about the metaphysical categories which he uses.

But, against both Ward and the fundamentalists whom he attacks, we have to affirm that all human knowledge is a venture of faith in which we can be mistaken. All our knowing is shaped by our culture. We are seekers, but do not have to be without clues. We all have to begin by taking certain things for granted, and Ward, in spite of his brilliant description of the wasteland into which the Enlightenment has led us (p. 201), still takes it for granted that it is the

'fires of the Enlightenment' which must determine what in religion can endure and what is dross. His basic assumptions are those of the Enlightenment, and his 'values' are absolute, not tentative or provisional. With these assumptions it is of course impossible to treat the Gospel narratives as true; Ward's reconstruction of what 'must have happened' is speculation required by the initial dogma, and has no independent claim to truth.

Ward is of course right in saying that Christianity is a changing and developing movement, and that religions are not marked off from each other by sharp edges. But an entity can be as well identified by its centre as by its edges. Christianity is identified by the place it gives to Jesus and this is an adequate account of its distinctiveness in all its variety. But for Ward the word 'Jesus' does not stand for an objective reality. We have only early Christian religious experience. Ward even suggests that we might be on surer ground if a camera crew had followed

Jesus through his ministry (p41) and there are other examples of a very odd sense of 'objectivity', as though we had some kind of access to reality which by-passed human judgement. His extreme scepticism about the Gospel narratives is surely an example of the kind of positivism which he so brilliantly demolishes in his chapter on science - the view that scientists are not in touch with reality because they have only sense-data and instrument readings.

I have to ask: What is the ontological status of Ward's 'values'? In what sense are they real? They have yet to be 'realized' in some distant future. They are not dependent on any beliefs about the world, but nevertheless there is value 'inherent in the world process itself' (p146). The 'anthropic principle' regarded by some (by no means all) cosmologists as suggesting purpose in the cosmos is invoked at this point, but to speak of 'purpose' unless there is a personal being whose purpose it is, must be as absurd as the 19th century idea of the cosmos as a machine designed by nobody for no purpose. Yet, in typically Vedantin fashion, any references to God as personal are under the heavy shadow of an impersonal 'Supreme'. One is not encountered by a living God who has a name and a character .

I have also to ask for the grounds for Ward's optimism that the religions will converge towards the realization of value. Since the past is as unknowable as the future, there can be no grounds for believing in progress. It is hard to see that there is any basis for Ward's optimism except the general ideology of evolution. If we are thinking in cosmological terms, the time-arrow points the other way, towards total entropy. And even if one accepts Ward's optimistic scenario, the Omega point at which the religions converge in the full realization of value is something in which I will have no place. It is a vision of progress for the human race, but not for the individual soul. Here is where the eschatological teaching of the New Testament is so important. Jesus' predictions of an imminent end to the present age provide Ward with his main reason for rejecting belief in the incarnation. But he ignores entirely the many other words of Jesus concerning the need for long patience, and his saying that even the Son does not know the time of the end. If one takes Jesus' eschatological teaching as a whole, it is clear that it offers a vision of the future which transcends the dichotomy between hope for the individual soul and hope for the world, a vision which inspires both alertness and patience. But Ward's prior views of what incarnation must mean preclude him from understanding that the incarnate Son could say that he did not know. Much of Ward's polemic is directed against religious claims to infallibility, and some of it is justified. But Ward claims the same kind of infallibility for his position. The values are absolute and no rational human being can contradict them. This may be so, but a rational person could also enquire about the absence of love from among the values. This is not accidental. The only point at which interpersonal relations enter into the catalogue of values is filled by the word 'justice' .But this vital concept is not identical with love although it is a necessary manifestation of love. But for Ward interpersonal relations have no central place. The ultimate realities are abstract nouns. We are not encountered by other people or by events in the real world. A nice illustration is provided when Ward argues that 'a God of universal love must act to redeem (people) whether they have heard of Jesus or not' (p93). Thus redemption is detached from any events of history. One could equally argue that a God of love should feed the hungry whether anyone gives them bread or not.

For the Vedantin the absolute claims which Christians make for Jesus are offensive. But the Christian who enters into deep converse with Vedantins soon learns that the claims of the Vedanta are equally absolute. Jesus can never be more than one illustration of a truth which is known only in inward experience. Two absolutes meet. But how can it be otherwise? We are human beings, not God. Both Christian fundamentalists and Vedantins have seemed to claim a kind of infallible certainty which surely belongs only to God. We are all under obligation, as part of our calling as human beings, to seek the truth and to bear witness to the truth as we understand it. We have to begin somewhere. We have to start with assumptions, and normally start with the common assumptions of our society as Ward does. The Gospel is news of events which provide another starting point. Christian discipleship is an exploration - spiritual, intellectual, practical - of the real world from this starting point. The 'certainty' of a Christian is not (or ought not to be)

a claim to possess full and unrevisable truth. It is a personal trust in one who has proved trustworthy. The Vedantin bases his confidence on inward experience which is not regarded as dependent on historical happenings. Within the Vedanta Christ can only be one among many. 'Christian' may be adjectival; the substantive reality is not changed. From the point of view of the Vedanta reality is one coherent whole. It has a rationality which leaves nothing unexplained. But it, no less than Christianity, rests on a faith commitment. Other commitments have their own inherent rationality. When Christians claim a sort of infallibility that absolves the believer from the venture of faith, they expose themselves to the kind of logic that Ward deploys. Christianity does not make the kind of claim that Ward makes for a belief that no rational person can contradict. To affirm the Gospel as public truth does not (or should not) mean claiming control over the public square. It does mean coming into the public square to bear witness to what God has done as the starting point for all human fulfilment, knowing perfectly well that this witness can be and will be contradicted. After all, that is what Jesus told us to expect.

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