

Universality and Sri Ramakrishna: An Historical and Philosophical Reappraisal*

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I

Universality, catholicity, syncretism and religious tolerance are values or strategies that have been consistently associated with the Bengali mystic, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836-86).¹ In his own lifetime, this was iconographically celebrated through the painting commissioned by one of his lay devotees, Suresh Mitra, that depicts the saint from Dakshineswar depicting to the Brahmo leader Keshab Chandra Sen, how all religious paths ultimately led to God.² Ironically enough, the substance of such claims was somewhat overshadowed by the debate that arose not long after about whether or not, such pronouncements had been earlier made by Keshab himself.³ Whereas such debates, at one level, are no doubt rhetorical, their very origin and subsequent development also points to the very fragility of certain truth-claims. This, in turn, opens up the possibility that terms such as 'universality' or 'tolerance' might have been quite differently understood by various religious communities, not excepting those theologically as close as Hindus and Brahmos in late nineteenth century Bengal.

A suggestion to this effect in fact appeared as early as 1887 in the orthodox Bengali journal, *Vedavyas*.⁴ Though its purpose here was really polemical, the essay did nonetheless make a valid distinction between the universality of Keshab, built around a syncretic fusion of select religious symbols, ideas or practices taken from several traditions and that of Ramakrishna, which in its respect for traditional boundaries, appeared to do just the opposite.⁵

This line of argument, however, has considerably weakened since. Especially after Vivekananda's historic trips to the west, the

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'universality' of Ramakrishna has increasingly been projected as a spirit that homogenises (many quite mistakenly use the term 'harmonises'), rather than one that allowed the pluralist juxtaposition of multiple religious choices. Not surprisingly, this coincides with a growing tendency to read Vedantic non-dualism, also deemed to be strongly universalist in character, as the predominant philosophical mood in Sri Ramakrishna. Some years back, Walter G. Neevel Jr. wrote an excellent historiographical essay that amply demonstrates how biographer after biographer (but typically the monastic disciples of Ramakrishna such as the Swamis Saradananda or Abhedananda) tried to drown the polyvocality of the saint's teachings under the monistic voice of 'Vedanta'.⁶ In this paper however, I only address the problem of how terms such as 'universality' or 'tolerance' might have been understood or used by Ramakrishna himself. In so doing, I hope I shall be able to demonstrate that these were used in a specific, idiosyncratic way. Following this, I shall also try to reiterate the older argument that syncretism or a synthetic fusion is perhaps the farthest from what he actually attempted.

II

The rich and varied influences that came upon his religious life and his consistent tendency to borrow key religious ideas or practices across traditions does make Ramakrishna something of an eclectic. One cannot, however, overlook the fact that this eclecticism could be quite arbitrary in its choices. Contrary to most hagiographic claims,⁷ Ramakrishna neither underwent training in all major religious traditions (not to speak of the lesser known ones) nor did he accept any tradition that he experimented with in its entirety. His choices, I dare say, reveal no particular pattern. In some cases, he tended to lean more on the metaphysical content than on the ritual; in others, he seems to convey the idea that ritual conformity could get to the heart of a religious tradition far better than mere philosophical speculation. There are instances when he upholds the idea of a synthesis (*samanvaya*) even when he rarely attempted this himself.⁸ He does not display a cohesive structure of thought and perhaps what he really desired to establish is a homology of (theistic) faiths in which a commonly pursued aim was able to accommodate a wide variety of methods.

This, he attempted to perform not through any institutionalized

public deliberations as one finds in the successive Parliaments of Religions after 1893, but through purely personal and practical experiences. This is consistent with two important features of his religious thought; one, regarding the individual as the sole operational unit of all religious experimentation and the other, privileging practical experiences in religious life over mere learning.

Two related points may be made here. Although he may have unwillingly contributed to this, Ramakrishna's personal interest was not in the *comparative* study of religions as was popular in both India and the West during his time. For him, religions were comparable, if at all, in their common objective of God-realization. This often led Ramakrishna to suggest an otherwise unlikely parallelism between metaphysical constructs coming from diverse traditions or sub-traditions.⁹ But there is a further reason why a comparative analysis of world-religions would have been something of an anathema for him. In Ramakrishna's view, men manifested differences without also being the ultimate cause of these differences. This followed from his belief that human agency or authorship was, in every instance, overridden by that of God.¹⁰ Not even a stray leaf moved without the will of God, maintained Ramakrishna.¹¹ By implication therefore, the various religious paths were also the creation of God Himself; they were an integral part of the complex, inscrutable Divine play on earth.¹² In explaining the pluralist world therefore, Ramakrishna actually used two subtly different parables. The first was that of several men each of whom claimed to have seen a chameleon of different colours, when in reality, there was but one chameleon which kept changing its colours.¹³ The moral of this story is clear—it reminded men of their epistemological uncertainties and warned them to be less dogmatic with their truth-claims. But Ramakrishna also used alongside, the parable of the all-knowing mother who varied her dishes in keeping with the particular requirements of each of her children.¹⁴ In this view, evidently, God (mother) became the moral Governor of the universe, regulating the continually unfolding *karmic* history of our lives.¹⁵

It is important to remember then that Ramakrishna was ultimately more interested in the objectives of religious life than its substance. In a sense, this also explains his tolerance or catholicity. It is precisely here that his life and work are also most misread. For Ramakrishna himself, the pluralism of the phenomenal world could collapse into the unitive experience of Reality only at some mystical state of integration.¹⁶ Perhaps more deliberately than otherwise,

the neo-Hindu discourse since his time turned this around and somewhat tendentiously suggested that such a radical experience could be replicated in our everyday social lives.

III

Even a superficial reading of the existing literature on Ramakrishna will reveal four broad assumptions that have been made in respect of his religious teachings:

a. that his religious experiments stretching over a period of roughly eleven years (1855-66) not only encountered all religious traditions but also reveal a comparable degree of intense experience

b. that no matter which tradition he experimented with, he arrived at identical conclusions

c. that for this reason, his experiments with different religious ideas/practices was never a source of inner tension or inconsistency and

d. that the universality and religious tolerance shown by Ramakrishna reflected the older, accommodative spirit of 'Hinduism' and yet carried an unique resonance for his times.¹⁷

Allowing for hagiographic excesses, these claims do not appear to be entirely baseless. Ramakrishna strongly derided sectarian attitudes as he found them both in upper-class religious life and the quotidian.¹⁸ This itself proceeded from his belief that no single religion could claim theological Truths exclusively for itself. There is in fact a curious resonance of Rammohun in the argument that all religions/religious scriptures carried elements of falsehood.¹⁹ Although he did not strictly follow this himself, Ramakrishna nonetheless consistently warned his followers against speaking ill of anybody, even the humblest of creatures.²⁰ Again, while barely concealing his revulsion for certain forms of worship, he did also concede that in their own ways, these too were manifestations of God's will on earth.²¹ It might be useful to note though that barring few exceptions, Ramakrishna's dissatisfaction with or disavowal of certain religious communities practically centred on their social or ritual practices, not the purely theological. We shall return to this point later.

It is only too obvious that Ramakrishna's *sadhana* did not traverse all paths and for his educated, upper-class biographers who insisted that it did, the ones practically eliminated, were apparently not worthy of serious consideration. Within Indian religions alone,

Buddhism, Jainism and (only to an extent) Sikhism are important exceptions. It could of course be argued that his familiarity with diverse religious traditions must have been practically conditioned by the availability of religious teachers or experts at hand. Other than what he might have learnt in his childhood days at Kamarpukur, Ramakrishna's major encounter with holy men occurred during his days at Dakshineswar. The area on which the temple-complex had been built also happened to fall on an annual Hindu pilgrim-route to Puri and Gangasagar²² and the Panchavati gardens, a part of the same complex, was a favourite camping-ground for pilgrims and holy men in transit. It is quite unlikely however, that any Buddhists or Jains frequented this route in any good number. With the views of Nanakpanthi sadhus that occasionally did, Ramakrishna was somewhat familiar.

That apart, there could be the further argument that the affirmation of the underlying unity of all religions as upheld by Ramakrishna was not necessarily contingent on his having exhausted all possible religious paths. I have, below, tried to argue that in his religious *sadhana* Ramakrishna proceeded with certain *a priori* assumptions, the most important of which was that notwithstanding its palpable difference in methods, all religious paths ultimately met in God. If therefore Ramakrishna did proceed with such a postulate, the actual number of paths that he experimented with could be quite immaterial. On the other hand, an overriding unity of conclusions often glosses over important nuances of perception. Hence, what one needs to seriously examine here is not so much his exclusions *per se* as how these came to be legitimated either by Ramakrishna himself or in later hagiographic writings. Ramakrishna once made an interesting remark about the Buddha, the substance of which is that rather than be an theist, the Buddha could not simply translate the beatitude of God-realization in human language.²³ Apparently, such views have a connection with the commonplace Hindu-Brahminical theory about the ineffable nature of the Absolute. This may explain the argument later appearing in an apologist essay that Ramakrishna's experience of Buddhism had been preempted in his 'Vedantic' experiences.²⁴ Both Ramakrishna and his upper-class admirers also display a marked ambivalence towards the world of Tantra —acknowledging its unique world-view but also remaining shamefaced about certain esoteric aspects of Tantric *sadhana*. Official biographies of the saint have also tended to underplay his indebtedness to certain traditions within Indian

religions. Some of Ramakrishna's key theological ideas seem to have been endorsed in the company of Nanakpanthi sadhus²⁵ and yet, other than cite this as further example of his remarkable catholicity, standard biographical sources contribute very little towards understanding such associations.

Perhaps the most emphatic claim of Ramakrishna's having accepted religions in their entirety appears in the writings of the near-contemporary philosopher, Sir Brojendranath Seal. Speaking before the World Parliament of Religions convened by the Ramakrishna Order in Calcutta in 1936, Seal put down the distinctiveness of the saint to two unique sets of belief:

a. that the practice of each religion with its attendant rituals and disciplines gives its essence more really and vitally than its theological dogma and

b. that it was in syncretism and whole-hearted acceptance of religion not selective eclecticism, that its true worth could be realized²⁶

Prima facie, it could be quite unreasonable to drive a wedge between theological belief and ritual practices; more often than not, a set of rites or rituals represent the practical, psychological methods of realizing metaphysical truths. This is certainly true of Tantra. But the point here really is that in any case, we are not sure if Ramakrishna was always on the side of complete ritual conformity. Ironically, the most well-known example of his refusal to be drawn into the full gamut of ritual activity occurs in respect of Tantra itself. Jeffrey J. Kripal has very meticulously examined how his *bhadralok* followers tried to rationalise the important exceptions Ramakrishna made with respect to the Tantric *Panchamakara* ritual, refusing to either consume liquor or engage in ritual copulation.²⁷ Whatever be the reasons thereof, it does emerge here that ultimately, Tantric metaphysical speculation was more important to Ramakrishna. With rituals, as we know, he was selective; with characteristic Tantric idea much less so.

What is also often overlooked is that Ramakrishna's knowledge of some major religious traditions outside the Hindu-Brahminical viz. Islam or Christianity was actually too elementary or superficial to uphold any genuine claims to religious universality. Far too often his biographers have fallen back on the stock argument that the essence of all religious traditions came to him through mystic visions, far removed from the domain of textuality.²⁸ Mystical visions

however, can often be related to the particular cultural or social roots of the mystic himself. Some sources on Ramakrishna on the other hand, represent him as the modern embodiment of all the world's prophets and holy men.²⁹

In truth, Ramakrishna's knowledge of Islam or Christianity came about in specific ways and was circumscribed by the cultural and historical boundaries in which these were placed. Instruction in Islam, for example, came only through a local acquaintance, Govinda Ray, whose relatively unorthodox Sufi leanings, I imagine, made him a more acceptable religious teacher.³⁰ It is also quite obvious that this training in Islam was neither a search for its philosophical positions nor a strict conformity to what Seal called 'rituals and discipline'.³¹ While undergoing such training, we are informed, Ramakrishna scrupulously kept off the Kali-temple,³² a good example no doubt of the practical incompatibility of various religious beliefs or practices, but also tried to understand Islam by emulating, of all things, the Muslims' food-habits.³³ Here, evidently, Ramakrishna shared the commonplace Hindu cultural equation of food cooked in onion and garlic with the 'Muslim' identity. Ironically however, his food during these days was cooked in the 'Muslim' way but not by a Muslim.³⁴ According to one source, this was made possible through the rare ingenuity of Mathura Nath Biswas, Ramakrishna's greatest patron and temple-proprietor, who had a Brahmin cook masquerade as a *bawarchi*.³⁵ Incidentally, there is also the anecdote about Ramakrishna's determination to eat beef but later giving up the idea after strong dissuasion from Mathura Nath.³⁶

Of Islamic theology and even rites or rituals Ramakrishna knew very little or perhaps it is safer to say that neither he nor his biographers saw it fit to address the matter in a more serious way.³⁷ Not surprisingly, some of his visions regarding Islam appear quite inexplicable. There is, for instance, the vision of an iconic representation of the Islamic God merging into the Impersonal Absolute. This, as Kripal has rightly pointed out, would have been a blasphemy for a Muslim himself.³⁸ Interestingly enough, while Ramakrishna made little or no comment on Islamic theology, the rigorous structuring of the individual's religious life in Islam, his punctilious attention to daily prayer pleased him immensely.³⁹

Similar observations can also be made with regard to Christianity. His association with the Bible and Christian precepts appears to have come from one of his own benefactors, the philanthropist

Sambhu Mallik, who reportedly had 'some knowledge' of these.⁴⁰ Actually, the lack of a more meaningful discussion of Christian precepts is a trifle surprising considering that he often had Christian missionaries visiting him at Dakshineswar⁴¹ (contrasted to the singular absence of an Islamic counterpart) and that after 1882, he had in his own chronicler, Mahendranath Gupta (later made famous by his five-volume work *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*), a man who knew the Gospels quite thoroughly.⁴² Evidently, social constraints were at work even here. Ramakrishna once wanted to enter a Calcutta cathedral but ultimately refrained from this for fear of displeasing the Dakshineswar temple-authorities.⁴³ He had less problems however, entertaining Christian visitors, whether European or Indian.⁴⁴ This, no doubt, must have been facilitated by the fact that rather than historically or culturally contextualize Christ, Ramakrishna saw him as only a representation of the unending sequence of Hindu *avatars*.⁴⁵ In different quarters, one suspects, this may have also fed into the idea of a resurgent Hinduism humbling 'alien' pretensions.

The catholicity of Sri Ramakrishna did not also fully extend to the 'lower', quotidian forms of religious life in his own regional society. Actually, his attitude here is a mix of somewhat conflicting perceptions. On the one hand, there is the romantic attachment to the spontaneity and lyrical grace of 'popular' religious verse, perhaps even an acknowledgment of its social and ritual freedom. On the other hand, Ramakrishna strongly disapproved of the antinomian tendencies in rural religious cults, their 'gross violation' of social and ritual proprieties.⁴⁶ Once at a community-meal at Dakshineswar he refused to allow a Baul visitor to sit beside his gentlemen-devotees for fear that this would somehow mar the auspiciousness of the occasion.⁴⁷ To reiterate a point made above therefore, Ramakrishna would often accept radical religious principles but not their radical application to everyday social life. The good and the wicked, the pure and the impure, pleasant and the unpleasant, the attractive and the horrific, he did accept metaphysically as the manifestations of the same Reality.⁴⁸ The early Ramakrishna was indeed the God-maddened *sadhaka*, who could not distinguish the stench coming from the local burning-ghats from the aroma of appetizing food.⁴⁹ His practical advice to men of this world, however, was always to adhere to the path of 'purity'.⁵⁰ Obviously, the world was characterised not simply by plurality but by a differentiated order of things. Talk of social egalitarianism frankly irritated Ramakrishna.⁵¹ God

was, indeed, present in every being, he granted, but you did not, for that reason embrace the tiger! ⁵²

The universality of Ramakrishna then, was tempered by a transparently Brahminical social concern. This is not to take away from the latent flexibility or radicalism of his messages. At the same time, one must also recognize for what it is worth, the practical social and moral resonance of the same. In defending his catholicity, critics have often cited his well-known analogy of water which, even when called by different names, remained intrinsically the same.⁵³ But Ramakrishna also used a different analogy, again using the analogy of water but in this instance sharply differentiating its ritual value in keeping with its various uses. Thus, water that was used for washing was quite unfit for sacramental use.⁵⁴ Practically speaking, therefore, the universality of Ramakrishna had to be consistent with hierarchized, prescriptive boundaries of our social and spiritual lives.

IV

To a considerable extent, the idea of the underlying unity of religions that Ramakrishna strongly put forth grew out of the fact that he seldom subjected the idea to a deeper, analytical scrutiny. I am aware that in making this argument, I am deviating from a considerable amount of literature which sees Ramakrishna either as the very embodiment of Indian philosophical wisdom or else as the syncretic genius who reconciled traditionally contesting philosophical claims. In truth, notwithstanding its syncretist, accommodative tendencies, the Hindu-Brahminical world-view was quite sensitive to inner tensions within itself. Ramakrishna's Tantrik guru, the Bharavi Jogeswari warned him that pursuing Vedantic non-duality (under the Punjabi Naga *sanyasi* Tota Puri) was inconsistent with the theistic orientation of his Sakta-Tantrik worship.⁵⁵ Ramakrishna himself seems to be no less aware of the fact that various scriptural sources could be speaking in different voices even when indicating a (higher) resolution.⁵⁶

Apparently, the tendency to simultaneously situate Ramakrishna within a pre-existing, fairly continuous, tradition and also ascribe to him, certain unique qualities, originated in two somewhat different perceptions of his life and work. One of these, chronologically more recent, is clearly the creation of hagiography and its best representatives are Swamis Saradananda, Abhedananda and Nikhilananda.⁵⁷ The other trend, though also associated with

western-educated, upper-class admirers, was born of somewhat different intentions. In the latter, we may include some of Ramakrishna's contemporaries who were deeply influenced by the development of comparative studies in religion and philosophy and were mistakenly led to believe that his practical experimentation with various religious traditions epitomised this progressive intellectual trend. A case in point is that of Dr. Mahendra Lal Sarkar, a founding-father of the Indian Science Association and Homeopath physician attending on Ramakrishna during the latter's terminal illness in 1886.⁵⁸ Dr. Sarkar, together with the early Vivekananda, was one of the consistent critics of avatarhood-theories in respect of Ramakrishna and yet significantly, he saw in him an unique storehouse of godliness and spiritual wisdom such as civilisation had not seen in a long time.⁵⁹ In a sense however, Dr. Sarkar also shared the larger, *bhadralok* sense of wonder at an unlettered man slighting the virtuosity of the learned. The humbling of genteelity and modern scholarship is perhaps best recorded in Mahendranath Gupta's *Kathamrita* itself. On his first visit to Dakshineswar (22 February 1882), Gupta is stunned into silence by the revelation, quite tellingly made by an illiterate female attendant, Brinde, that the Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) had all wisdom literally on his lips.⁶⁰

This reflexiveness and self-ridicule however, has since been transformed into elaborate philosophical legitimation wherein the Calcutta *bhadralok*, rather than be shocked by their own ineffectualness are able to detect both divine will and historical logic in such occurrences. The philosophically most intricate and ambitious work in this regard is Satish Chandra Chatterji's *Classical Indian Philosophies. Their synthesis in the philosophy of Ramakrishna*. (Calcutta, 1963). Such projects notwithstanding, there is ample reason to believe that Ramakrishna's religious views were actually too ambivalent and loosely structured to fit a cohesive philosophical framework. On the contrary, it is this fluidity that may better explain Ramakrishna as such an attractive figure—a religious polyglot who, in the words of Dr. Mahendra Lal Sarkar meant 'all things to all men'.⁶¹

Ramakrishna, but perhaps more so his hagiographers, tried to relate his 'universalist' visions to his conscious effort to transcend mere scholasticism or immodest pedantry. In reality, the dissatisfaction with formal learning⁶² as a possible road to God-realization is not unique to Ramakrishna. This had been repeatedly voiced in medieval *bhakti* cults, practically in all regions of India but

even in the highly textualised tradition of Vedanta which saw this as essentially a means to higher, transgressive freedom.⁶³ Stretching this argument too far however, does lead to certain problems. While a highly routinized study of scripture could blind an individual to his highest purpose which was to come face to face with God,⁶⁴ doing away with this altogether could, on the other hand, produce extremely reductionist readings. Ramakrishna, to cite an apt example, maintained that the substance of the *Gita* could be redeemed simply through a near-anagrammatic inversion viz. 'Gita' becoming 'Tagi'.⁶⁵ Here, 'Tagi' (*Tyaga/Tyagi*) stood for world-renunciation. Now, the *Gita* is known to be a highly syncretic text with multiple layers of meanings. It is, in other words, too complex a text to be reduced to such unilateral categories. One has only to recall that Ramakrishna's own disciple, Vivekananda and other notable contemporaries like Tilak took an entirely different view of the work when they emphasized its this-worldliness and activism.⁶⁶

In this context, it is only pertinent to examine Ramakrishna's views regarding 'Vedanta' with which he is so persistently associated. Here, interestingly, one finds both essentialization and a random juxtaposition of ideas. In the *Kathamrita*, the discerning reader will discover not only a conflation of Sankara's *Mayavada* (also known as *Vivartavada*) with other non-dualist positions within Advaita Vedanta but also the tendency to treat the very term 'Vedanta' with *Mayavada* alone,⁶⁷ thus underscoring as it were, dualism and other positions within Vedanta critical of Sankara. The text never once mentions Madhva, Nimbarka or Vallabhacharya, outstanding Vedantic figures of all-India importance, all of whom differed in varying ways from the postulates of Sankara.

In fairness, one must grant that the practice of somehow privileging Sankara Vedanta over other Vedantic schools or for that matter, Vedanta itself within other Indian philosophical schools, did not originate with Ramakrishna and in any case, its far greater exponent in modern India was Vivekananda. Interestingly however, the latter's preoccupation with Sankara and his school, albeit with a more positive reading of both, also gave him greater philosophical consistency. Ramakrishna, by comparison, appears to borrow ideas or precepts from several Vedantic schools—a tendency clearly rooted in his attempt to wed personal devotion to philosophical monism. It is noticeable for instance, that notwithstanding his dissatisfaction with the abstract qualities of Advaita Vedanta,⁶⁸ Ramakrishna uses ideas that lie at the very heart of Sankarite epistemology. For both,

the *Brahman* (Absolute) was beyond both human language and the cognitive powers of the mind. Both employ the Upanishadic category of negation ('*neti-neti*') to denote the ineffable character of the highest Reality.⁶⁹ At the same time, Ramakrishna never once used the other well-known Upanishadic dictum of '*Tat Tvam Asi*', commonly used by non-dualists to indicate the ultimate inseparability of *Jiva* (individual soul) and *Brahman* (the Cosmic).⁷⁰ Quite paradoxically again, Ramakrishna treats the world both as unreal, more or less in the same way as did Sankara, and also palpably real—an idea that he borrowed from the more theistic schools of Vedanta, Saiva-Sakta metaphysics and Tantra.⁷¹ In the latter view, the world was deemed to be real on two counts. In the first place, as a projection of the Real, the world could not be unreal itself but more importantly, the reality of the world followed from the fact that it was filled with Divine presence. Ultimately therefore, *Jiva*, *Jagat* and *Brahman* together constituted a single order of Reality just as the fruit was but the organic compound of all its individual constituents: skin, seed, juice and pulp.⁷² It occurs to me however, that, strictly speaking, this is an unity perceived in metaphysical terms, not phenomenal. Notwithstanding his empirical-experiential view of the world, Ramakrishna also voiced the common, long-standing Brahminical quest for a liberation from earthly ties. For him, the realization of the highest Truth, it has to be further noted, was possible only at the level of the transcendental.⁷³ The world and its categories could not be transcended through the use of such categories themselves.⁷⁴ Divine Grace, maintained Ramakrishna, may produce exceptions in individual cases,⁷⁵ without effecting a major structural alteration of categories. While in this world, we were powerless, victims of our delusions and ignorance, we could overcome this only by derecognizing the world and the constraints it put on our spiritual lives. This, as one can see, pushed him back to the trans-social position of Sankara.

In his attempt to project him as a uniquely syncretic figure, Swami Saradananda in his *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lila Prosongo* argued that Ramakrishna preached the Vedantic ideas of Ramanuja and Madhva alongside those of Sankara.⁷⁶ That this philosophically quite untenable apparently escaped the Swami. In truth, there seems to be very little meeting-ground between the acute monism of Sankara and the dualism of Madhva for whom, *Brahman* and *Jagat* are ontologically ever distinct.⁷⁷ Perhaps, the *Lila Prosongo* would have been closer to the mark had it suggested instead that Sri Ramakrishna

borrowed ideas across Vedantic schools without being sensitive to the problems of their reconciliation. There has been a tendency, both in critical scholarship and hagiographic writings, to unduly give Ramakrishna's thoughts on Vedanta, a distinct philosophical identity. Scholars of philosophy like Satish Chandra Chatterji were obviously aware of the inner incompatibility of such random borrowing but chose the escapist route of phrasing an altogether novel term '*Samanvaya* (syncretist) Vedanta' to overcome this problem.⁷⁸ More recently, Walter G. Neevel Jr. identified him with *Shuddhadvaita* of Vallabhacarya⁷⁹ and no doubt, such conclusions have been influenced by Ramakrishna's penchant for grafting non-dualist metaphysics upon the dualist structure of *bhakti*. Such considerations however, might have also taken him closer to the *Vishishtadvaita* of Ramanuja, as indeed has been argued by Sumit Sarkar.⁸⁰ Apparently, within theistic Vedanta (more specifically, those that produced Vedantic readings of Vaishnav devotionalism), Ramakrishna used metaphors and concepts identified with Ramanuja more freely than those identified with Vallabha. In either case, however, it is important to explain how he might have gathered these ideas. It is somewhat odd that of the several Vedantic or Vaishnav figures personally known to Ramakrishna, none seem to belong to either of these two schools.⁸¹ Partly for this reason, one cannot be certain whether, as Sumit Sarkar has argued, Ramakrishna actually preferred the qualified non-dualism of *Vishishtadvaita* of Ramanuja to the *Dvaita* (dualism) of Gaudiya (Bengal) Vaishnavism,⁸² philosophically labelled as *Acintya bhedabheda*. I am quite intrigued by Sarkar's identifying the Bengal school with dualism, for this would be belied by the use of the term '*bhedabheda*' (unity-in-difference). In all probability, such readings emanate in our inability to adequately separate philosophical imperatives from the purely theological. In Indian traditions generally speaking, the latter has enjoyed relatively greater flexibility and maneuverable space. Historically, religious communities have often been defined or demarcated on the basis of deep-seated philosophical differences, particularly as they begin to acquire a trans-regional character. In order that it gain an all-India standing, later day leaders of Gaudiya Vaishnavism transformed the largely non-textual, highly emotive Krishna-*bhakti* of (1486-1533) into a highly abstract body of belief combining classical aesthetics and high philosophy. Significantly, it was the exegetical reading of Vaishnavism in the light of core Vedantic texts such as the *Brahma Sutra*, *Upanishads* or *Gita* that

ultimately admitted the Gaudiyas into one of the four established Vaishnav Sampradayas of all-India fame.⁸³ By the end of the 18th century or the early 19th, Chaitanya himself and the spontaneity of his *bhakti* were better known and celebrated in the numerous 'popular' cults that traversed the Bengal countryside.

It appears that Ramakrishna was never too far from the fundamental theological constructs of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, though here again, he may have been quite selective. His geographical and cultural contiguities with the heartland of Bengali Vaishnav culture does make this unlikely anyway. The *Kathamrita* reveals his use of typically Gaudiya constructs such as *raganuga* (deritualized) *bhakti*, of the power of *ahetuki* (unmotivated) self-surrender to God, his great respect for Goswamis (Gaudiya religious leaders, mostly Brahmin) and the interesting suggestion that Chaitanya's *bhakti* too had an inner core of mystic non-dualism.⁸⁴ Many of his *bhadralok* followers, it may be significant to point out, considered him to be a modern incarnation of Chaitanya.⁸⁵

From *Vishishtadvaita*, Ramakrishna borrowed the ideas of *Saranagati*, willing surrender to Divine Grace and the power of Grace itself without however accepting its theistic ideals—Vishnu and his consort, Sri.⁸⁶ His favourite deity within the Vaishnav pantheon itself was the pastoral Krishna of Vraj country, the favourite of the Gaudiya school and who in many ways, subverts the more ritually constructed deity, Vishnu. His recurring feminization—dressing and behaving like a female—is again closest to the erotic mysticism (*madhur-bhava*) of Bengali Vaishnavism.⁸⁷ Ramakrishna also seems to have differed from Ramanuja but more particularly the *Sri Sampradaya* that grew after him in a subtle way. The greater social heterogeneity of this *sampradaya* when compared to the other Vaishnav-Vedantic schools partly followed from its concept of *Ubhay Vedanta*, (twin *Vedas*) that recognized as authorities, both the Sanskrit Vedic lore and sacred Tamil verse that had been growing since the time of the Alavars.⁸⁸ Ramakrishna, by comparison, used scriptural sources and the non-scriptural in different ways. The latter usually comes at the end of his discourse, representing the high point of personal ecstasy and leading many a time to deep *samadhi* (mystic trance). Cryptic summaries from Brahminical textual sources on the other hand, constitute the backbone of his public discourse.

It is important not to oversee that within this structure of thought, there is very little place for dualism, especially as identified with Madhva. For Madhva, God was only the efficient cause (*nimitta*)

of this world as the goldsmith was of all gold ornaments and not also its material cause (*upadan*) as gold was to gold ornaments. This is perceptibly different from the position of Ramakrishna, which, as we have noted above, saw the world not merely as a projection of God but also as something filled with Divine presence. Dualism *per se* came lowest in Ramakrishna's soteriology for the important reason that this implied an independent status to the world, and greater power and potentiality to human acts—something which would have ill-fitted some of his other key theological ideas. The oddity here is that Ramakrishna also seems to consider the world as an abode of activity (*karmabhumi*) and maintained that it was in man's nature to be constantly engaged in activity.⁸⁹ A closer reading of his message will reveal however, that he used the term *karma* not in the sense of free activity but the inexorable working out of our *karmic* fate. Here his position is indeed very similar to advaitic thought of Sankara which believed that true liberation came only after a cessation of all mental activities and freedom from the chain of cause and effect that all earthly activity implied. Ramakrishna fairly ridiculed the idea of Free Will by calling it God's gift to man only so that he would realize his powerlessness and tangible limits to his will. Not surprisingly therefore, he also discouraged all efforts at philanthropy and social 'improvement'.⁹⁰ No such effort, he felt, could override the inevitable unfolding of divine designs.⁹¹

V

Claims of 'universality' or 'tolerance' in respect of Sri Ramakrishna have thus to be understood within a specific framework. The inner tensions or conflicts in his teachings follow from his partial familiarity with most religious traditions. In part, they also arise from the fact that he simultaneously employed two different modes or methods—the philosophical-discursive and the ecstatic-mystical. A purely philosophical position would have been beyond him and given his mental inclinations, of little interest anyway. On the other hand, Ramakrishna did not remain transfixed at the level of intensely personal mystic experiences but made a conscious effort to translate these into socially and theologically useful messages.⁹² Here, one can see his significant transformation from an idiosyncratic religious figure to the socially important Guru or spiritual counsellor. It is thus that he was also forced to fall back on a random borrowing of discursive thought, which however, at some point was bound to come

into conflict with the relatively greater consistency within philosophical schools.

His increasing association with the role of the Guru in respect of respectable, urbane, upper-class householders created constraints of a kind and may well explain the several dichotomies in his religious thought. Perhaps this can be illustrated by an example. Ramakrishna, as we know, consistently tempered philosophical non-dualism in the light of theistic *bhakti*. This, nonetheless, did not necessarily make him a *bhakta* in every respect. For quite uncharacteristically, Ramakrishna disallowed the transgressive qualities that *bhakti* had historically acquired over the past several centuries. We have noted above, his disenchantment with ritualized (*vaidhi*) *bhakti* and yet significantly, Ramakrishna felt that ritual transgression was permissible not to the *bhakta* but the *jnani* (he who pursued gnosis)⁹³ Here we may recall that in effect, Ramakrishna was essentially the Guru of ordinary householders who were obviously denied the trans-social freedom of the renunciate. Whereas Chaitanya used *bhakti* to create greater social and ritual space for the average man of the world, the *bhakti* of Ramakrishna, shorn as it was of any transgressive qualities, tended to reaffirm prescriptive social and ritual boundaries. This is nowhere as clear as in the latter's statement that while all may dutifully strive for God-realization, ultimately this could come only to some.⁹⁴ Ramakrishna did seriously attend to the spiritual needs of the *grihastha* (the domesticated) and did not unduly stress the importance of world-renunciation. By symbiotically relating non-radicalizing *bhakti* to the world of the domestic however, he also put his spiritual panacea under some stress.

The operative limits of Ramakrishna's catholicity, universalism or tolerance then are understandable in terms of his social antecedents. As with most Brahminical figures, Ramakrishna allowed greater flexibility to theological matters than the social. It is worth noting that while he strongly disapproved of the relatively free mixing of men and women in certain 'popular' cults like that of the Kartabhajas,⁹⁵ he seems to have tacitly accepted the strong faith in the instrumentality of the Guru, also associated with such cults.⁹⁶ Again, though generally respectful of upper-class religious communities, Ramakrishna was quite capable of an occasional uncharitable comment. Given his long and fruitful association with several leaders of the Brahmo Samaj, it is possible that Brahmo social and religious ideals may well have left their impact on Ramakrishna.⁹⁷ Ironically however, the saint himself seems to have held a rather

poor opinion about Brahmos.⁹⁸ Theosophy, he rather unkindly dismissed as mere miracle-work⁹⁹ perhaps leading to Vivekananda's stronger condemnation of the same. Of Dayanand Saraswati too, whom he personally met at Calcutta, he speaks in no endearing terms.¹⁰⁰ But above all, contrary to what official biographies have suggested, Ramakrishna perceived religious precepts or practices in a clearly hierarchicized framework and here, one has only to recall his likening certain esoteric practices to entering one's house through the latrine.¹⁰¹

Although the bulk of writings since his time would contest this, Ramakrishna's catholicity, in practical terms, did not offer a perfect freedom of choice. Rather than be a matter of personal faith or conviction, religious identities for him seem to be grounded in one's birth and cultural situation. Ramakrishna reacted sharply to the news of conversion (to Christianity) of both the Bengali poet Madhusudan Dutt and the female scholar and social crusader, Pandita Ramabai.¹⁰² It is only fair to say that operatively, Ramakrishna's interest in non-Brahminical traditions were only peripheral to the Brahminical. He was, furthermore, a mystical figure who sought the resolution of differentiation in a state of transcendence. It is therefore entirely possible that he *a priori* proceeded from a unitive postulate to its experiential ratification through plural experiments. In other words, the idea of the underlying unity of all religious faiths was a postulate that he claimed to have variously tested out rather than a conclusion that he arrived at only at the end of a long period of *sadhana*. From what Ramakrishna once told a devotee it would appear as though this was a method well-established in pre-existing tradition.¹⁰³ Its precise roots however, are something that only a deeper knowledge of Indian religious traditions can reveal.

Some of Ramakrishna's contemporaries or near-contemporaries were evidently quick to gauge the ideological possibilities of his message. The *swadeshi* figure, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, who incidentally, shifted his own interests from Catholicism to Vedanta, once argued that the uniqueness of Ramakrishna lay in his ability to remain rooted in his own tradition even while accommodating diverse influences.¹⁰⁴ I am convinced that Ramakrishna himself would have been incapable of the pronounced political tilt given to this message.¹⁰⁵ The inner ambiguities of his life and message however, lent themselves to such uses.¹⁰⁶

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Statements to this effect have been made since his time by his devotees as well as academic critics. My purpose here however, is not to fully controvert these claims but only subject them to more searching scrutiny. For purpose of reference alone, I have cited below some representative statements. Ramakrishna himself said, 'I have experimented with all possible paths. . . I also acknowledge the validity of each . . . it is therefore that people of different faiths come to me' Translated from 'M' (Mahendranath Gupta): *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (hereafter *K*) Kathamrita Bhawan. 17th ed. 6th reprint. Calcutta. 1961: Vol: 242. All translations from this text are mine unless otherwise stated. Mahendranath Gupta himself observed: 'People of all religious persuasions find peace of mind and happiness in his company. It is quite unlikely however, that one can fully comprehend his extraordinary spiritual state'. *K1*: 295. Sister Nivedita considered Ramakrishna to be the 'only truly universalist mind of his times'. See Sister Nivedita: 'Two saints of Kali' in the collection *Kali and Mother*. London. 1900; reproduced in *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*. Nivedita Birth Centenary edition. Vol. I. Calcutta. 1961: 489.
2. *K3*: 283.
3. For details of this controversy see G.C. Banerji: *Keshab Chandra and Ramakrishna*. Navabidhan Publication Committee. 2ed. Calcutta. 1942.
4. Bhudhar Chattopadhyay: 'Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa': *Vedavyas* 2/8 1294 B.S. (1887): 202. The writer incidentally was connected with the Calcutta based orthodox Hindu body, the Dharma Mandali. For details on this see my *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal c.1872-1905. Some Essays in Interpretation*. Delhi. 1993. Ch. 4.
5. *ibid.*
6. Walter G. Neevel Jr.: 'The transformation of Sri Ramakrishna' in Bardwell L. Smith (ed.) *Hinduism. New Essays in the History of Religion*. London. 1976: 53-97
7. Typical examples of these can be found in Swami Saradananda: *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprosongo* (hereafter *Lila*) 2 Vols. Calcutta. 1976; Ram Chandra Dutta: *Sri Ramakrishna Deber Jeebon Britanta*. Kankurgachi. 2ed. n.d.
8. Ramakrishna once pointed out to his devotees the syncretic nature of the quasi-Vedantic text *Adhyatma Ramayana* which, he claimed had reconciled *Jnan* and *bhakti* long before Keshab. *K4*: 355; *K2*:130.
9. See for example his equating the Vedic concept of 'Saptabhumi' with 'Shadchakra' of Yoga (*K5*: 76) or 'Bodhi' of the Buddhists with 'Brahmajnan' of Vedanta *K5* 172.
10. *K4*: 246; *K5*: 77
11. *K5*: 77
12. *K4*: 246
13. *K5*: 119
14. *SK2*: 159-60; *K1*: 26; *K3*: 126
15. 'God has already determined what is to befall each one of us in this world', maintained Ramakrishna. *K3*: 87
16. *K1*: 51; *K1*: 93
17. The near-contemporary sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar writes '....in the

- synthesis of the transcendental and the positive, he is but the chip of the old block, coming down from the Vedas and perhaps still older times'. Benoy Kumar Sarkar: 'The social philosophy of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda' in *The Calcutta Review*. Feb. 1936: 175. Compare this to the statement claiming that Ramakrishna was more universalistic than even Sankara. Swami Chidbhavananda: *Ramakrishna lives Vedanta*. Tirupparai tharai. 1962: 468
18. K2: 132; K4: 195; Swami Nityatmananda: *Sri Ma Darshan*. Sri Ma Trust. Chandigarh. Vol. 3. 3rd ed. Chandigarh. 1982: 149. There is also the more irrational claim that Ramakrishna fought sectarianism ever since his childhood. See *Memoirs of Ramakrishna*. Reprint of the American edition of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Translated and published for the Vedanta Society of New York by Swami Abhedananda.) 2 Indian ed. Ramakrishna Vedanta Math. Calcutta. 1957: 3.
 19. K5: 2, 22; K5 (Appendix):77
 20. K5:251
 21. K4: 195
 22. See *Life of Sri Ramakrishna. Compiled from various authentic sources* (hereafter *Life*) 10R. Calcutta. 1977: 35f
 23. K3: 365
 24. Swami Nirvedananda: 'Sri Ramakrishna and the spiritual Renaissance in India' in Haridas Bhattacharya: *The Cultural Heritage of India*. Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. Vol. 4. Calcutta. 1956: 674. Swami Saradananda too found no distinction between Buddhism and 'Vedic Jnan Marg'. *Lila*, I.1: 374.
 25. K4: 350; K4: 415
 26. Sir Brojendranath Seal: Presidential Address before the World Parliament of Religions. Reproduced in *The Religions of the World*. Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. Vol. 2. Calcutta. 1938; Ramchandra Dutta. *op. cit.*: 43.
 27. *Lila*, I.2: 204-6. The *Pnacamakara* ritual involving the ritual use of the five 'Ms', viz. *Matsya* (fish), *Madya* (liquor), *Mamsa* (flesh), *Mudra* (parched grain) and *Maithuna* copulation) is by general consensus the most radical and daunting of *sadhanas*. See Aghenanada Bharati: *The Tantric Tradition*. Delhi. 1976; Atal Behari Ghosh: 'The spirit and culture of the Tantras', Swami Pragyatmananda: 'Tantra as a way of realization'; P.C. Bagchi: Evolution of the Tantra' all in *The Cultural Heritage of India: op. cit.*
 28. For a typical example see Swami Ritjnanada: 'The Gospel of Ramakrishna and what it stands for' in Dharam Pal Gupta & D.K. Sengupta Eds. *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamarita Centenary Memorial*. Sri Ma Trust. Chandigarh. 1982: 78.
 29. This is suggested at one place by no less than Mahendranath Gupta himself, the famous author of the *Kathamrita*. See *Sri Ma Darshan. op.cit.*: Vol. 14. 2ed. 1985: 80.
 30. *Life*: 465-66; *Lila*: I.: 309. Ramakrishna apparently knew of the Sufi mystic poet Hafez and his poetry. K4: 173.
 31. Seal. *op.cit.*
 32. *Lila* I.1: 307-10.
 33. *ibid.*
 34. *ibid.* I.3: 309.

35. *Sri Ma Darshan. op. cit.*: Vol. 11. 2R. Chandigarh. 1984:30.
36. See Notes 32-34 above.
37. Ramachandra Dutta for example, uses the 'syncretist' argument to rather perverse effect when he writes: '...having practised Islamic *sadhana*, he (Ramakrishna) tried to integrate it with the Hindu traditions of *jnan* and *bhakti*'. Ramchandra Dutta. *op. cit.*: 43. Translation mine.
38. This is reported in K4:4; *Lila* I.1: 310; Jeffrey J. Kripal: *Kali's Child. The Mystical and the Erotic in the life and teachings of Ramakrishna*. University of Chicago. Chicago and London. 1995: 165.
39. K4: 279.
40. *Life*: 184.
41. See Note 44 below.
42. This is fairly evident in all the five volumes in the *Kathamrita*. For a typical example, see K4: 120 (Foot Note).
43. K1: 18.
44. These are the European Missionary Rev. Cook who met Ramakrishna in the company of Keshab sometime in 1881; Rev. Hastie who suggested to his student Narendranath (the future Vivekananda) that he call on the saint for a first-hand experience of a mystical state and the Quaker from north India, Prabhudayal Misra who met the saint in 1885. Interestingly, while at Dakshineswar quite tellingly revealed his '*gerua*' (the *sanyasi*'s ochre robe) that he wore underneath European garments. See K1: 23; K4: 401-2.
45. Ramakrishna cited the *Bhagavat Purana* before a Christian visitor to argue that Christ was but one of the numerous avatic manifestations indicated in the work. See the reminiscences of Sibnath Sastri included in Nanda Mookerjee (ed.), *Sri Ramakrishna in the eyes of Brahma and Christian admirers*. Calcutta. 1976:18.
46. K4: 117; K4: 211.
47. K2: 196.
48. K1: 60; K5: 7.
49. K2: 168-9.
50. K5: 86.
51. K3: 293.
52. K1: 31.
53. K2: 132-3.
54. K1: 32.
55. *Lila*. I.1: 322.
56. K2: 269; K2: 122.
57. Neevel. *op. cit.*
58. For Dr. Sarkar's interest in comparative studies see K4: 387-8.
59. *ibid.*
60. K1: 21.
61. K2: 296.
62. K1: 243.
63. Consider for example the following passage from the well known Vedantic text *Vivekachudamani* attributed to Sankara: 'The study of scripture is useless as the highest Truth is unknown and it is equally useless as the highest Truth has already been known.' *Vivekachudamani of Sankara*. Text with English

- translation, notes and index by Swami Madhavananda. Advaita Ashram. Calcutta. 14R. Verse 59.
64. K3: 80.
 65. K3: 200.
 66. This is endorsed by none other than Tilak himself who writes that like Vivekananda, he did not believe the *Gita* to preach renunciation. *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda. By His Eastern and Western Admirers.* Advaita Ashram. 2E. 1964.: 21. Significantly enough, Tilak's claims are contested by the editor of the *Reminiscences*. See Preface.
 67. 'I am not in the least unhappy', admits Ramakrishna, 'for not having studied the Vedanta. I know that in essence it treats the Brahman alone as Real and the World as false' K5: 191. This, of course, is gross essentialization. Many more nuances are possible within Vedanta. The only Vedantic philosopher other than Sankara whom Ramakrishna speaks of particularly is Ramanuja whose views he somewhat cryptically explained to Mahendranath Gupta and Vivekananda. See K4: 2; K1: 251.
 68. K4: 414.
 69. K1: 115; K2: 123.
 70. Notice on the other hand, his jestingly inverting the identical non-dualist dictum 'Soaham' (I am He) to 'Naham' (I am not He) K4: 103.
 71. For affinities with the Saivaganma school see Jaidev Singh: *Vedanta and Saivagama of Kashmir. A comparative study.* Calcutta. 1985: 21f.. Affinities with Tantra are evident in M.P. Pandit: *Light on the Tantras.* Madras. 1968: 54.
 72. Jaidev Singh: *op.cit.*; K1: 224, K4: 317; K1: 115.
 73. K4: 77; K1: 243. Perceptions of plurality are but a form of ignorance. K4: 303. Note also Ramakrishna's strong association of 'mukti' with *Jnan*. K4: 272.
 74. K1: 151.
 75. Ramakrishna believed that *karmic* cycles could be partly modified through Grace; K4: 373.
 76. *Lila*. II.2: 241. This is perceptively different from the remark made elsewhere in the *Lila* that dualism progressively ascended to non-dualism. *Lila*. I.I: 378; I.2: 103.
 77. Swami Hiranmayananda: 'Indian Theism' in *The Cultural Heritage of India. op. cit.*: Vol. 3. 538-9.
 78. Satish Chandra Chatterji: *Classical Indian Philosophies. Their Synthesis in the Philosophy of Ramakrishna.* University of Calcutta. 1963: 150-51.
 79. Neevel: *op. cit.*: 87.
 80. Sumit Sarkar: 'Kaliyuga, Chakri and *Bhakti*. Ramakrishna and his times' in Sumit Sarkar: *Writing Social History.* Delhi. 1997: 317.
 81. Of Vaishnav figures personally known to Ramakrishna, Bhagavan Das Babaji, Natabar Goswami and Nakur Vaishnav are obviously Gaudiya figures. Vaishnavacharan a Gaudiya who also had connections with the Kartabhajas. His guru, Jatadhari, is a Ramait figure.
 82. Sarkar: *op.cit.* 16-17.
 83. S.N. Dasgupta: *A History of Indian Philosophy.* Vol. 4. Cambridge. 1955: 438.
 84. Sarkar: *op.cit.*; K2: 247; K4: 173; K1: 134; K4: 431, 241-42; K2: 22-23.
 85. K4: 431, 305; Ram Chandra Dutta: *op.cit.*, 176.
 86. K1: 29.

87. K3: 262. The use of such constructs can be found in the 17th century Gaudiya Vaishnav classic *Chaitanya Charitamrita* by Krishnada Kaviraj.
88. Dewan Bahadur K. Rangachari: *The Sri Vaishnav Brahmins*. Bulletin of the Madras Govt. Museum. General Section. Vol. III. Part 2. Madras. 1931; P. Srinivasachari: 'The Vishishtadvaita of Ramanuja' in *The Cultural Heritage of India.*, Vol. 3: 300.
89. K1: 99; K5: 44, 7.
90. See for example, his advice to the philanthropist Sambhu Mallik and the Brahmo Keshab Chandra Sen (K1: 63-4), the Bengali public figure, Krishna Das Pal (K2: 196) and the novelist Bankim Chandra (K4: 71).
91. See Note 15 above
92. A very important idea in Ramakrishna echoing the advaitic idea of 'Jivanmukta' (liberated in life). Such ideas he also picked up from Nanakpanthi sadhus; see K4: 350. Ramakrishna also tried to legitimise his position here by citing the case of Sankara, who, he claimed, also did the same. K3: 12.
93. K2: 144, 168.
94. K3: 126; K1: 153.
95. K4: 211. K4: 117. Mahendranath Gupta testifies to Ramakrishna's segregation of male and female visitors to Dakshineswar. *Sri Ma Darshan. op.cit.*: Vol. 14: 226.
96. This is worth comparing to the sharp ridicule of Guruvad from Bankim Chandra in the presence of Ramakrishna. K5 (Appendix): 76.
97. Seal: *op. cit.*: 109.
98. There is, for instance, the rather unfair comment about the Brahmo Samaj being frequented only by the worldly minded K4: 297; Ramakrishna also thought that the Samaj would prove to be short-lived. K5: 151.
99. K5: 30.
100. Ramakrishna met Dayanand sometime during 1872-73. His memories of this famous scholar is confined to certain jocular remarks the latter made in respect of the Bengali language and polytheistic worship. K2: 101, 203.
101. K4: 195; K4 (Appendix): 42; K2: 181. Ramakrishna's comments here are not on Tantra *per se*, as alleged by Kripal but on the use of esoteric Tantric methods by some popular cults. Kripal: *op.cit.*: 314.
102. K4: 123, 203; *Memoirs of Ramakrishna. op. cit.*: 193.
103. His advice to the Brahmo admirer Mani Mallik was that this was a 'Truth' that had to practically tested out through as many alternatives as possible. K3: 40-1.
104. This appeared in the Bengali journal *Swaraj* of 10th Chaitra, 1317 B.S. (1911). Translated and reproduced in Brajendranath Bandopadhyay and Sajani Kanta Das (eds.): *Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa. Somosamayik Drishtite*. Calcutta. 1952: 123.
105. Here I am reminded of the comment that his wife, Sarada Devi once made the substance of which is that rather than attempt any synthesis of belief or practice, Ramakrishna was essentially an intensely religious man who simply reveled in the thought of God. *Sri Sri Mayer Kotla*. 2 Vols. Udbodhan. Vol. 2. Calcutta. 1958: 204.
106. Ramakrishna's own statement: 'Respect all faiths but set your heart on one' (K5: 123) is capable of being so interpreted.