

strolling and debating the question dearest to them: which path truly leads to union with Brahma (God)? Each claims emancipatory exclusivity to his respective path, citing scriptural justification and the weight of the tradition in support. Stuck with antinomies, they finally place the issue before the Buddha: which is the best way to union with God?

Śākyamuni, of course, discerns the tilt toward a “salt solution” in the question, an invitation for empty talk. He has a distaste for the metaphysical discourse basically for two reasons: it is a cover for the fear of facing human finitude (*āvaraṇa*), and it displaces the fear in abstractions, in questions about an eternal being from which the world originates and to which it returns (*vikṣepa*). Fearful consciousness needs false comfort. It believes that Brahman or God was there in the beginning of the world, it still is there, and returning to it is the essence of salvation. Because the question of origins is symptomatic of an existential malady, Śākyamuni raises a series of counter-questions to clear the malady. His intention is two-fold: first, to help Vāsetṭha and Bhāradvāja face the reasons why they have come to formulate the question; and secondly to bring them back to the middle of the world, to muster courage to face human existence and find meaning in the concrete particular. Is there any evidence that a single one of the Brahmins, learned in Vedas and Upaniṣads, has seen God face to face? Have any of their ancestors, going back to seven generations, seen God face to face? Have any of the *rishis*, the composers of the secret mantra called AUM seen God face-to-face? Angīrasa? Bhṛgu? Vāmadeva? Vasiṣṭha?¹⁷ Seeing face to face presupposes being face to face, a concrete person facing an entity or person that is just as concrete by virtue of bearing a name.

Śākyamuni’s counter-questions are not innocent. They incarnate a radical shift in the method and theme of thought, a new thinking and a new vision of the world. They make a shift from the metaphysical to the existential. Given to “salt solutions”, the Upaniṣads exile existence from essence. Brahman (God) is a being in-itself, autonomous and independent of everything else. It needs no other, and union with it too means seeing or hearing no other. Brahman, in Śākyamuni’s view, is a phantom, and union with it just as much a phantom. Śākyamuni exiles essence from existence, eternity from time. Existence is interdependent difference, a radical relationality governed by the law of cause and effect. An entity is concrete because some other entities precede it causally, and because it is a causal antecedent of entities subsequent to it. An entity exists concretely because, and only because, it is both cause and effect simultaneously. To exist means to function causally — it means to change, to come to be and then cease to be. That which does not change does not exist. That which is uncaused or causes nothing is fictional; so is an uncaused entity, the first cause, that is believed to cause everything. If God creates the world without being a creature of something else, then it can not exist. God is an abstract phantom.

Śākyamuni's point is clear. It is the logic of interdependent difference that accounts for concrete existence. And concrete existence alone can be thought and spoken about. If Brahman (God) is omnipresent, if it is everything everywhere, then it is not a particular entity; there is nothing that it is not, and therefore nothing that can count against it (*pratiyogī*). A concrete entity, say, a cow, is so by virtue of being similar to entities that bear the name "cow," and because it is dissimilar to all the entities bearing different names, say, "horse." That which admits of no difference, internal or external, is not different from nothing. Because it is not a concrete existence itself, it cannot be the argument for the existence of things from which it could be shown to be different. God is naught, null and void.

The argument that God is wholly other to everything in the world is fundamentally flawed. God does not answer the description of difference in Śākyamuni's view. "God" is not a demonstrative symbol, it does not signify an entity encountered as *this* in sense-experience (*idantā*). Nor is the word a proper name signifying embodied selfhood like "John" and "Joe" (*nāma kalpanā*). Nor again is the word a descriptive symbol of class properties, like "cowness", "goodness", "humanness" (*jāti kalpanā*). "God" is an empty name, a deceptive signifier, a word without actual reference. But it is in this empty signifier that the monotheistic imagination has hit its own limits. In its own efforts to flee the real world, the imagination uses "God" to name an entity so different from everything in the world that none more different than it can ever be conceived. Such is the abstracting power of the ontological argument, the greatest escape from existential finitude, the real world. God is perfect by default, only because of his difference from anything known or lived. The truth is that God does not answer the description of difference. "God" is the name of a non-idea, a naught that cannot create, cannot love, and cannot redeem. The nought is so perfect conceptually, and so alien to the human order of the world, that it cannot recognize a cry in the face of old age and death. "God" does not name a being that can be met or seen face to face, nor a concrete presence to which one can say "Thou art God." Absolute otherness means lack of actual conversation. God, and for that reason Atman or Brahman, does not have a human face, man does have a God-like face; and the two would not be able to recognize each other even if they ever could meet. Not having a face himself, God cannot confront a human being with a face and say "Thou art man." The problem with Vāsetṭha and Bhāradvāja, and Rosenzweig, is that they believe in a God who is eternal, who is not born and thus does not grow old and die. This God can have no empathy with tragic existence, especially old age and death. An abstract phantom, it cannot cry, it cannot scratch, and cannot rise and talk about the lived world. Bhāradvāja and Vāsetṭha place salvation in union with a God that has not seen a real man, and whom no man has met face to face, person to person, proper name to proper name. Monism, including monotheism, is an historical obsession with a phantom. Fearful of human existence, it

returns to a non-idea and calls it Brahman or God. Śākyamuni illustrates it all with a sadness. "Just as a file of men go on, clinging to each other, and the first one sees nothing, the middle one sees nothing, and the last one sees nothing, so it is with the talk of these Brahmins learned in the Three Vedas: the first one sees nothing, the middle one sees nothing, the last one sees nothing. The talk of these Brahmins learned in the Three Vedas turns out to be laughable, mere words, empty and vain."¹⁸

Two questions are in order here. Why name a being that is not there to be named in the first place? And why do philosophers, the supposed agents of rational discourse, chase phantoms? Śākyamuni's answer is simple: desire (*vāsanā*). Desire differentiates itself into a subject that says "I" and an object about which one can say "mine." Names, naming and being named — they all are conceived in a desire that incarnates itself in the duality of self and body, I and other. Conceived in desire, the self is chronically erotic (*kāma mūlam*). It seeks the other not to affirm the otherness of the other; it seeks the other as an attributive sign, something about which it can say "mine" on the way to objectifying its own identity (*aham mama'iti*). So erotic — and thus possessive — is the I in its desire for the other that it even names objects that are not there to be named. The self finds comfort in false consciousness, in altering imagination into perception, wishes into reality. It finds truth in a category mistake, turning the world into an epistemic field where "I perceive X" is actually a cover for "I wish X". Epistemology is covert egology. Whatever the self encounters in seeing, hearing, touching, etc., is ordered by its desire for identity. Its sense organs are not passive, inactively receiving data from the outside. Goaded by desire for identity, sense organs actively look for objects, seeing them even when they are not there to be seen, hearing voices coming from nowhere in particular. Epistemology is conceived in an egological cave. Perception is covert imagination, and the claim "I know this" is actually the tool through which the self certifies itself as "I am this."¹⁹ Saying "I" is the reason why there is the good old world.

The greatest incarnation of such self-deception, this ordering of wishes into reality, is the belief in Brahman (God). Śākyamuni illustrates it with characteristic simplicity. Suppose, he says to Vāsetṭha and Bhāradvāja, there is a man who believes he is in love with the most beautiful woman in the land (*janapada kalyāṇī*). When asked whether he knows her name or caste, the complexion of her body, whether she is tall, short or of medium height, slim or heavy, or whether she lives in the city, the suburbs or a remote village — to all these the man says "no." The man loves the other, the woman so perfect and different, that he does not even know her name or place of dwelling. The man is an embodied self, and the reason why he loves the woman is real. But the other, the object of his love, is so transcendent and perfect, so different from everything he knows, that she cannot be known or met face to face. She can only be worshipped precisely because she is a phantom, an imagined entity.²⁰

So geometrically correct is the human imagination. So also is the case with man's love for God, the wholly other. No individual, nor any of his ancestors seven generations back, has seen God face to face, person to person. Yet, he espouses love for God in the name of his tradition, his believed identity. The truth is that the otherness of God is none other than what the I has imagined it to be. The ego's love of itself is so chronic — and so persistent — that it can love the Other, no matter how holy, only as its own alterego (*ātmīyākāra*). Hence the idea of "my God", "our God", "my Atman". The I even sublimates its finitude into the idea of a soul which is believed to be in union with God from eternity to eternity! This deception is at the heart of spiritual discourse, including theological discourse.

Śākyamuni had no faith in the spiritual discourse of the Upaniṣads. He even exited the city of Kapilvastu, his birth place, to discover the meaning of human finitude on human terms. In search of the meaning of being in the world, he walked through the world. Under the bodhi tree he inaugurated the discourse of dependent origination, the concrete and the particular. He also discovered the erotic roots of the metaphysical imagination, establishing the causal relation between the self-loving I and the other it claims to love. He has arrived in Manasāketa village with a mission: how to convince the self-centering ego that the God (Brahman) it talks about is none other than the self that does the talking.²¹ Śākyamuni has no desire to quarrel or disrupt the spiritual discourse; he only wants the self to face itself in the mirror.

Just whose face does the I encounter, its own or God's? The irony is that metaphysicians and theologians do not thematize the self-projecting activities of the I; they do not face themselves. Instead they seek shelter in the transcendent, thus doing more of the same that the I does. They sublimate eros into logos, fantasy into a conceptual ordering of the world, thus constructing an abstract highway to the transcendent chambers where God is believed to dwell and from where he commands man's prayer and love.²² Śākyamuni likens the metaphysician and theologian to an engineer who is out to build stairs to a palace without knowing where the palace is, what it looks like, or in which direction its gates open. The metaphysical, theological construction of the world is downright nonsense; it also is escapist. For it finds solace in false consciousness, in mistaking imagination for valid perception, eros for logos, the wish that "X be" with the claim that "X is" is true. Desire edits itself into the language of truth claims.²³

Śākyamuni urges Bhāradvāja and Vāseṭṭha to please not misunderstand him. He is only against the claim that "God" names a transcendent, omnipotent being who is unlike everything else, and commands man's prayer and love by virtue of his absolute otherness. His critique of the metaphysical-theological God is on ethical and existential grounds, in defense of a human order of the world. Man must face *saṃsāra*, the finitude entailed in old age and death, on his own terms. Love and redemption have little to do with the doctrine of

creation, with the belief that God created the world and that on Him we must call in times of distress. If in need of crossing a river, such as Achiravaté, one needs to build a raft or a boat. Being human means doing things human, enlightened existence means action. There is no point in doing *zazen* in the soundproof chambers of *nirvāṇa*, or in offering prayers to a God who is just as silent in his transcendence, or yet again in sublimating problematic existence in a mystical union, with Brahman. These are all varieties of self-deception, ways of solving problems by denying them away. They all smell of a "salt solution." Man cannot afford to sit mystically on this side of Achiravaté and deny the other side in a non-dualistic trope, or call out prayerfully and say, "Come here, other bank, come here."²⁴ Glued to his metaphysical otherness, God would not come to the world, no matter how much human beings pray or address him by however many names. After all, why should man offer prayers to a God who is omnipotent and perfect and yet has created a world where evil reigns and good human beings suffer, where people are dehumanized in a society of formalized purity, and where man is born to face humiliation in old age and death? How can God have the courage to face man? And why should man be face to face with a God who has already lost his moral face? It makes sense if man, in loneliness and death, calls on God for help. But it makes no sense for God to create human beings so they are forced to look for his help. That is like saying human beings must fall sick because there are hospitals to help, and not that there should be hospitals because human beings are sick and need help.

The monotheistic imagination is ethically flawed. It first posits a system of salvation from which it then derives sin and suffering. It cannot explain human imperfection on human terms. It must transcendentalize. The world that the imagination constructs may be theologically correct, but morally empty. It cannot muster courage to turn the terror and tragedy of finitude into a moral fear of human existence. It flees instead into a holy vacuum, landing into a moral void signified by the word "God." The monotheistic imagination excels in the discourse of power, not compassion and love for the frailty of human existence. It centers the world in a God who says to man, do as I say and never ask whether I myself practice what I say. God is so perfect that he need not practice, or obey, the moral law which he himself has authored. Not only is the idea of God morally empty, it also is logically flawed. If God obeys the law, he is imperfect like human beings; if he does not, he is beyond good and evil. There is a chronic alienation of saying and doing in God, his perfection so complete that it excludes the possibility of interdependent existence. Śākyamuni believed that moral authority is an achievement, not an a priori idea. It results from the reciprocity of saying and doing, action and speech (*yathāvādī tathākārī*). If moral hypocrisy is the price of saying "I" before God, then Śākyamuni will have none of it, neither the I nor God. Both smell of false selfhood. Śākyamuni feared that the alienation of speech and

action in God would filter into religious life. Prayer becomes ritualized, words replace action, and hypocrisy becomes institutionalized into the hierarchical society and priestly life. This is precisely what Śākyamuni has in mind when he says, "Well, now, Vāseṭṭha, those Brahmins persistently neglect what a Brahmin should do, and persistently do what a Brahmin should not do."²⁵

The key word is "persistently". It suggests a way of life. The Brahmins have elevated the alienation of speech and action to a sacred institution, to the scriptural justification of why the elite should recite mantra and not share their power with the ordinary folks. Mantra and mysticism are ideological gates. And the Brahmins use the gates to spiritualize salvation in a mystical union with God, but they do this to sanctify their material and political privilege. They ask others to practice self-denial and sense-control, while they themselves are driven to a life of greed, ill-will, and jealousy, to egocentric appropriation of pleasurable form, sound, and smell (*rūpa rāgotpanna*). Enclosed in sensuous slavery, to the pleasures of the body, the *Brahmins* have no interest in exiting the gate to a life of material and moral freedom for all. They cannot make an exit from the *samsāric* cave. They cannot bear the truth that "God" names an ethical idea, evoking an exit from Kapilvastu, the city of bondage, to a human order of the world beyond the gate, (*niḥsaraṇam*).²⁶ That is the world of moral embodiment (*śīlakāya*), of concrete personhood devoted to compassion, friendship and self-sacrifice. "God" names not a metaphysical dream, but *śīla*, the pursuit of moral existence and social dignity in the world. Like the sound of a drum, the word echoes the mutuality of each person with all others, and of all with each. Hearing the name "God" means being on a *mārga*, on the way to moral mutuality.

Then with his heart filled with compassion, ... with sympathetic joy, with equanimity, he dwells suffusing one quarter, the second, the third, the fourth. Thus he dwells suffusing the whole world, upwards, downwards, across everywhere, always with a heart filled with equanimity, abundant, unbounded, without hate or ill-will.²⁷

There is no point in dreaming with eyes closed or open, or in gazing at a transcendent God in prayerful piety. The point is to turn the world into an ethical neighborhood, to love and be with others. That is the essence of redemption. That alone is the meaning of "union with God".²⁸

IV

I am a creature of history and am in no position to divinize. Nevertheless I cannot resist the temptation of wondering a couple of what ifs. What if Rosenzweig met Śākyamuni face to face in Manasāketa? I tend to think that he would have loved Śākyamuni's deconstruction of "union with God", happy

to discern the echoes of his belief that the mystics claim of the non-othemess with God is actually a vault in which the privileged elite have sanctified their differences from the ordinary folks. And what if Śākyamuni had read *The Star*, especially the last chapter called "Gate"? I tend to think that Śākyamuni would have been shaken, not only by its moving prose, but even more so by its depth of faith and hope. "Gate" is a signpost differentiating the border of slavery and freedom. It also marks the difference between a God that is mummified in metaphysical silence and a God who cares. I tend to think that Śākyamuni would have walked out of the gate to a life on the road to freedom. He would have done so while recalling with relief his own exit through the gate of Kapilavastu, the city of his birth.

Once out of the gate, well on the way, Rosenzweig and Śākyamuni would have put two questions to each other. What unlocked the gates? And what lies ahead? Rosenzweig's answer is clear: God, in his love and mercy, unlocked the gate. What lies ahead is God himself who can be glimpsed, but whom no human being can see fully and live. Human beings cannot be God; they can only follow the signs of his presence. God leads the way to a life beyond in the middle of life, obligating human beings to live in pursuit of justice, mercy and love with prayer. What lies ahead is the way itself, which means walking humbly with God towards the endless perfectibility of human existence without ever reaching perfection. Perfection for man means death. Śākyamuni would have said that God indeed unlocked the gate, that God is the argument against loneliness of old age, death and social indignity. But "God" names moral humanity itself, the community in search of freedom from the slavery that possessive ego entails. Rosenzweig would have reiterated that moral humanity is an endowed entity, one that God uses as a medium to illustrate his liberative project. Śākyamuni would have said that liberation, be it social or existential, is not a gift but an achievement. Moral humility is indigenous to human existence, and it uses itself as the medium to materialise the liberative project. It is this collective will of moral humanity, embodied in Moses that unlocked the gate.

Śākyamuni would have concurred with Rosenzweig on the second question. What lies ahead is the *mārga*, the massive expanse of the way itself. The *mārga* obligates human beings never to return to slavery inside the gate, despite the temptations, and to keep walking on the way of compassion and friendliness with equanimity. What lies ahead is *saṃsāric* facticity, the commitment towards a better human order, to a life beyond in the middle of life. The facticity entails endless perfectibility that inevitably lands in imperfection. Being on the way means knowledge of where to be and the concomitant anguish of not being able to be there. It is not for nothing that Śākyamuni affirmed *mārga*, the way, as the last of the four noble truths. There is *mārga* and more *mārga*, and still more of the same. That alone is the destiny of the middle way, the predicament of having to keep walking towards a shifting

horizon. Conceived in the rejection of faith in the absolute beginning and end of the world, moral humanity can have no other destiny. *Nirvāṇa* does mean perfection, but *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are two different things. *Nirvāṇa* means whatever happens to a morally striving *arahant* after death. Such is the anguish of dying in pursuit of perfection in life. Rosenzweig would have nodded at Śākyamuni with sympathy and understanding. They would have smiled at each other in enlightened difference, happy to discover the way that leads towards life beyond in the middle of life as the theme of actual conversation. Addressing each other as a 'Thou', they both would have looked at the shifting horizons in awe and optimism, knowing that to keep walking together is the way of being in the middle of the world.

- ¹ See William C. Allen's Ph.D. dissertation on Kumarila and Vasubandhu, Temple University, August 1996.
- ² *The Star of Redemption*, trans. and ed. by William W. Hallo (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), N.N. Glatzer's Forward to *The Star*, pp. xvi-xvii.
- ³ *The Star*, pp. 35-36, parentheses added.
- ⁴ *The Star*, p. 58.
- ⁵ *The Star*, p. 36.
- ⁶ *The Star*, p. 40.
- ⁷ *The Star*, p. 35.
- ⁸ *The Star*, p. 37.
- ⁹ *The Star*, pp. 59-60.
- ¹⁰ *The Star*, p. 37.
- ¹¹ *The Star*, pp. 37-38.
- ¹² "What is absolutely effective is not enlightenment, but love. Love cannot be other than effective", *The Star*, pp. 368-269.
- ¹³ *The Star*, p. 39.
- ¹⁴ *The Star*, p. 60.
- ¹⁵ Bibhuti S. Yadav, "Vallabha's Positive Response to Buddhism", *Journal of Dharma*, April-June 1994, pp. 113-137; Vallabha, *Tattvarthadipa Nibandha*, Vol. I (Varanasi: Bhartiya Vidya Prakashana, 1971); Julius Lipner, *The Face of Truth*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986).
- ¹⁶ *Dīgha Nikāya* (hence onward as DN) Eng. trans. by Maurice Walsh (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995).
- ¹⁷ DN, p. 188.
- ¹⁸ DN, p. 189.
- ¹⁹ Bibhuti S. Yadav, "Methodic Deconstruction", in S. Biderman and Ben-Ami Scharfstein (eds) *Interpretation in Religion*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992) pp. 129-166.
- ²⁰ DN, p. 190.

- 21 DN, p. 190.
- 22 For technical discourse on God in Sanskrit thought, see works of Udāyana, Udyotkara, Jayanta, Gangesha (Hinduism); and Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, Ratnakīrti (Buddhism). Also John Vattanky, *Gangesa's Philosophy of God* (Madras: Adyar Library, 1984) pp. 3-150; George Chemparthy, *An Indian Rational Theology* (Vienna, 1972) pp. 77-157.
- 23 DN, p. 190.
- 24 DN, p. 190.
- 25 DN, pp. 190-191.
- 26 DN, p. 191.
- 27 DN, p. 194.
- 28 DN, p. 194.