

Ramakrishna: A Model Of Historical Renewal Through Incarnational Consciousness And Role Playing

Hal French

University Of South Carolina

Introduction

How does a tradition such as Hinduism renew itself in the face of frontal challenges by a Westernizing presence? Nineteenth Century India was replete with all the formidable elements that the British Raj presented—challenges to national, cultural and spiritual identities of the people of India. Were the traditions of Hinduism now to be regarded as outmoded, incapable of meeting the needs of modern India? This paper will explore how the personal model of one man was profoundly influential in renewing the vitality of Hinduism for many, with particular reference to his contacts with the Brahmo Samaj. Ramakrishna (1836-1886) seemed, by his incarnational consciousness and role-playing activity, to revivify the life force of the deities. Yet, as has been noted, "If one takes into consideration Ramakrishna's life only up to 1875 or so, when He first came into contact with modern Bengal, it is difficult to place him in any particular age: he seems so immune from any contemporary influences."¹

At that time, his *sadhana* complete, it seems particularly auspicious that his meeting with Keshub Chander Sen should have occurred, for by that relationship the circle of his influence began to expand. Still, one gains the strong impression that this was not his conscious intent. If he stands, to 21st century observers, as having crystallized in his life the verities of protean Hinduism in the 19th century, he did not seem to do so strategically. He followed his own spiritual inclinations without design, apparently quite without ambition to establish institutional patterns and directives. His influence on his peers, then, seems simply a validation of "better mousetrap" theory. Or as Saradananda quoted Ramakrishna, "When the rose is fully bloomed, the bees come of themselves."² He was 'discovered' by a few cosmopolitan leaders such as Keshab, householder and monastic disciples began to gather, and the word began to be broadcast in Calcutta environs concerning the winsome little man at the Kali Temple in Dakshineswar.

¹ Diwakar, R.R. 1964, p. 63.

² Prabuddhaprana, 2002, p. 337

Keshab is cited by one source in these words: "Of those devotees belonging to the outer circle, Keshab was perhaps the foremost to grasp the inner import of the Master's teachings."³ Ramakrishna was seen by the Brahmos as the universal guru. "All the *avatars* played in his body."⁴ In one speech, Keshab stated, "If you want to comprehend what Reality is, go to Dakshineswar."⁵

Yet when we consider Ramakrishna's illiteracy and village origins, it rather stretches credulity to trace the widening waters of his influence. Small splashes in the Ganges which flowed by the ghats of his temple might have been anticipated; the larger ranges of his influence could scarcely have been imagined. This paper attempts to assess the dynamics of his appeal, which provided a new measure of confidence in the varied well-springs of Hindu spirituality. An analysis of these dynamics, as per the title, will follow the telling of the story.

The Style And Stages Of Ramakrishna's Sadhana—His Role Playing Activity

The dominant character of Ramakrishna's spiritual style was clearly *bhakti*. But the varied *ishtas* and gurus which guided his expressions mark him as unusually catholic in his devotion. Dakshineswar's temple complex, with the central shrine to Kali, augmented with others to Radha/Krishna and Shiva, seemed to encourage his exploration of alternative paths within Hinduism, in fidelity to his childhood fascination with dramatic role-playing of the myths and legends of his people. He was much in demand as a boy for his artistic re-enactment of these scenes, as an organizer of a small group of boys, in his native village. The incorporation of a childish penchant into a mature religious vocation is unusual; the extent to which role-playing, specifically, was used in his spiritual quest by Ramakrishna would seem unique.

An alarming intensity of desire for the saving vision of the Mother Goddess surfaced little more than a year after his coming to the Dakshineswar Temple. We can speculate that this may have been partly triggered by the death of his older brother, Ramkumar, who he had assisted at the temple, for he initially had little affection for the whole complex. Built by the wealthy *Shudra* woman, Rani Rasmani, the taboos for the *Brahmin* boy were gradually overcome, perhaps in part by his affection for his less class-conscious older brother. When he was asked to

³ Sen, 1998, p. 344

⁴ Sen, 1998, 346.

⁵ Sen, 346.

succeed him as officiant at the primary shrine to Kali he was almost immediately plunged into an agony of longing for a saving vision of the goddess beyond her image. He had not seemed to have been so distraught in connection with his brief service at the Radha/Krishna temple, but the goddess seemed somehow to compel his fully authentic worship, beyond the formal initiation. He became so immersed in his personal services to the image of Kali that he was incapacitated for the conventional conduct of worship. Complaints were voiced, but the Rani, upon witnessing his devotional ardor, felt that the purpose for which the temple had been built was already being realized. Still, the vision did not come until, in the darkest of dark nights at its absence, Ramakrishna was at the point of impaling himself on a ceremonial sword in the temple. This moment of extremis seemed to force the issue, and the transforming vision came. Bliss flooded over him, and from that point the emotional tone of his life, where it ranged beyond that of most men, was one of elation rather than despair.⁶

In the first stages of his *sadhana* Ramakrishna, with an internalized image of the Mother, was his own guru. His formal initiation to qualify him to conduct Kali's worship had not been accompanied by instruction. For years he guided his own spiritual growth, but with such unconcern for his surroundings and mundane matters that those close to him feared for his psychic health. Although Bengal affords abundant precedent for devotional ardor approximating madness, his family was not thereby reassured, and in obedience to his mother's wishes he went home for over a year. Again, obediently, he agreed to marry, and in general, in his mother's eyes, became more stabilized. By his own apparently psychic selection, he had directed his family to the home in a neighboring village where his bride would be found, and following the marriage or betrothal, she remained with her family till the age of eighteen.

Returning to Dakshineswar, he continued in his devotional fidelity to Kali until, after four years, a noted Tantric practitioner, the Bhairavi Brahmani, appeared on the scene. She led him for three years through the sixty-four disciplines of the Tantric path, regarding him at an early meeting as a powerfully spiritual person, and an incarnation of Chaitanya. He stated that it did not take him more than three days to succeed in any of the disciplines, by the Mother's grace, and that he had not needed the physical accompaniment of a woman in these practices. Indebted

⁶ Saradananda, 1964, pp. 140, 141. Ramakrishna doubtless had this in mind when he observed later, "One must force one's demands on God. One should be able to say, 'O God wilt thou not reveal Thyself to me? I will cut my throat with a knife.' This is the *lambas* of *bhakli*." While he could accept this quality in himself and legitimize it for others, he relegated it to the lowest stage of *bhakli*, the *lambasic*. Quotation from Gupta, 1964, p. 119.

as he was to the Tantric path, he later opposed the view that yoga and *bhoga* (discipline and enjoyment) could exist in the same person, and felt that the *vamamarg* or left hand path of Tantra had dangers so great as to make it unadvisable for most persons to follow. He had gone through certain of the practices which were sexual in nature, symbolically, but his ecumenism with regard to Tantra was qualified by his feeling that the symbol might lead to the overt experience, which would in turn not be transcended by many.⁷ Nevertheless, the *panchavati* (five trees) sacred to Tantric practice, was an important part of Ramakrishna's pilgrimage in the Dakshineswar complex, which had been built, auspiciously, on a former cremation ground.⁸

Jatadhari, an itinerant devotee of Ramachandra, then came to Dakshineswar and initiated Ramakrishna, perhaps at the urging of the Brahmani, into Vaishnava *sadhana*. This was most natural to him, since his family had worshipped the childhood form of Rama, and after his guru in this path departed, he continued for some time in childlike adoration of an image of the boy Rama, which he carried about with him. He also adopted another Vaishnava pattern, the *madhura bhava* or sweet mode, worshipping Krishna as Radha. Once more his genius in merging into the adopted role was intense. He assumed the dress and manner of life of a woman for several months, both to relate to the beloved, Krishna, and also, by his own account, to overcome the idea of sexual difference.

But while the Brahmani may have encouraged his assumption of the Vaishnavite path, she definitely discouraged his experience of Advaita worship, which seems to have been rather rare in Bengal at this time. Mother Kali, however, gave her sanction as the prior and still preeminent internalized guru. In this case the teacher was Tota Puri, "the naked one", who guided him for a year. It was perhaps Tota Puri who, at the close of his initiation, gave the name, Ramakrishna, and perhaps also the title, Paramhansa (supreme swan), although this is by no means certain. Or perhaps the name Ramakrishna was self-conveyed. His incarnational

⁷ I have not been persuaded by the arguments of scholars such as Jeffrey Kripal, 1995, and others that the Tantric element, overtly, or in homoerotic tendencies generally, pervaded the whole of Ramakrishna's *sadhana*, or of those such as David Gordon White, 2003, who see little if any spiritual dimension in Tantric practice. Kripal does, however, conclude that "this greatest of the Tantric mystics, with all his visions and ecstatic states, nevertheless remained quite unaware of the latent or "hidden" themes that structured much of his own experience." (and which could, presumably, be uncovered through psychoanalytic perspective) Kripal, 1995 p. 327.

⁸ In the temple of the Ramakrishna Mission, Mumbai, which is also built on a former cremation ground, these words are written, "In the heart of a cremation ground, we have planted the *panchavati*. Under its shade, we shall unite the world's hundred *core*."

consciousness, at any rate, is manifest in his statement, repeated many times, "One who was Rama and Krishna is now Ramakrishna."⁹

It was difficult for Ramakrishna to pass into *samadhi* through his realization of Brahman beyond name and form, so intense was the reality of Kali ' s image and that of the other deities which had so flooded his soul. But his insistent guru led him to a prolonged state of *samadhi* which astonished even Tota Puri. It took a sharp rock embedded in Ramakrishna's forehead as an object of concentration to banish Kali's image, but that having been achieved (with the sanction from the Mother in advance, it must be remembered), the immersion was intense. Ramakrishna became convinced through this experience that all the *sadhanas* took the aspirant toward the non-dual plane, which in turn produced in his mind a still wider catholicity. He soon desired to know something of spirituality beyond his native Hindu tradition, and was initiated into the practice of Islam by Govinda Ray, attaining *samadhi* with Islamic visions after three days of seeking to divest his mind of anything Hindu. Still later, after having a fellow Hindu read the Bible to him for a certain period, he also reported a vision of Jesus.

His mother was with him in Dakshineswar for the last twelve years of her life, from 1865. And when he returned for a time to his village he again saw his wife, now fourteen, and spent some time in teaching and educating her, again against the counsel of the Brahmani, who felt that he should have no contact with his wife, Sarada Devi. Sarada Devi came to Dakshineswar four years later and lived with Ramakrishna for over a year, sharing his vision of what their relationship should be. Neither, during this time, experienced desire; instead, as the final stage of his *sadhana*, called the *shodasi*, Ramakrishna learned to worship the divine through the body of a woman, whom he continually sought to think of as Mother, or natural mother.

All of this may sound sober and strategic in purpose, but let me emphasize that Ramakrishna's role-playing was enacted, in each stage, with a total lack of self-consciousness or concern with what those observing his behavior might think. Those who deeply understood could experience the mythic scenes which he recalled with an element of *lila*, or play. The drama into which he drew them was indeed a play, for still young children. Amazingly, Ramakrishna himself could, in high, festive hilarity, be mimicked by his disciples. Project further into the story: six months after his death the death of their Master, when the *gurubhais* gathered one evening in what was anything but mournful remembrance.

⁹Saradananda, pp. 169,881,890,891.

Narendra now began to joke like a child. He was imitating Sri Ramakrishna. He put a sweet tooth into his mouth and stood still, as if in *samadhi*. His eyes remained unwinking. A devotee stepped forward and pretended to hold him up by the hand lest he should drop to the ground. Narendra closed his eyes. A few minutes later, with his sweetmeat still in his mouth, he opened his eyes and drawled out, "I-am-all-right." All laughed loudly.

Refreshments were now given to everyone. M. looked on at all this wonderful mart of happiness. The devotees shouted joyfully, "Jai Gurumaharaj",¹⁰ The role playing was contagious, and often playful.

The Widening Waters Of His Influence

The varied stages of his *sadhana* occupied twelve years, and it was shortly after their conclusion, his mature identity seeming to have crystallized, that he began to come to the attention of representatives of educated Bengal. Keshab, the primary vehicle of that acquaintance, describes their first meeting: "We met a sincere Hindu devotee and were charmed by the depth, penetration and simplicity of his spirit. The never-ceasing metaphors and analogies in which he indulged were as apt as beautiful."¹¹

The richness of the relationship which ensued between Ramakrishna and Keshab is unfortunately marred somewhat by the partisan claims of the followers of each, which have persisted, as to who influenced whom. This tendency was already noticed in a Vaishnava journal in 1893, which cites a mutual irradiation.

Keshub Chander Sen used to tell his friends that he was gradually making him (Ramakrishna) a convert to Brahmoism; Ramakrishna, on the other hand, told us that he was gradually bringing Keshub Chandra back to Hinduism! ...As a matter of fact, both were right and they influenced one another. It was Ram Krishna, who with his powerful mind, succeeded in convincing Keshub Chandra that there was much in Hinduism that was not to be found in other religions. And it was Keshub Chandra who taught Ramakrishna to take every good thing of every religion. At first, Ramakrishna was

¹⁰ Gupta, 1964, p. 975.

¹¹ Diwakar, 1964, p. 252

a pious Hindu devotee; under Keshub's teaching, he became a cosmopolitan in view.¹²

It may be objected that Ramakrishna's experiments with Islam and Christianity antedate his relationship with Keshab, as they appear to have done. Both men had a disposition to inquire beyond the limits of their own tradition. Their inquiry certainly led them to a different manner of appropriation of the truths resident in other faiths, however. Ramakrishna's was almost exclusively mystical, based on his intuition of the nature of Islam and Christianity with very limited personal interaction with their representatives, their institutions, their literature. This is in no way to question the depth of the experience, for the observer must have regard for three factors in this experience. First, his intentionality, to test the merits of each path (as well as those of his Hindu *sadhana*) by his own encounter with them. Second, by the intensity of his immersion in them, as has been noted, through his role-playing activity, screening out previous encounters, meaningful and those had been. And then third, his interpretation, that each path, again by his own penetration of it, could lead to God-realization. However one may assess the authenticity of these experiences, those things are clear. But Keshab's travels to the West, his education, use of English, wide relationships with Christian leaders and close working ties with Unitarians, make eminently credible that Keshab could have contributed larger measures of the ecumenical implications of Ramakrishna's experience. In the same manner, it would seem beyond refutation that Keshab's own devotional nature began to blossom, and with more characteristically Hindu expression, in particular toward the Mother, from his association with Ramakrishna.

An early vehicle by which Keshab shared Ramakrishna with his fellow Bengalis was in the publication of a ten page booklet of Ramakrishna's sayings, entitled, in Bengali, *Paramahanser Ukti*. Among numerous references to his friend in the *New Dispensation* journal of Keshab's branch of the Brahma Samaj, one says, "Paramahansa is serving as a marvelous connecting link between the Hindu and the New Dispensation Brahmos. Representatives of both are seen blended together in common meetings."¹³ Perhaps both were able to discern in Ramakrishna, in a very deep sense, the Mother lode of Bengali religion.

¹² Basu and Ghosh, 1969, p. 298.

¹³ Diwakar, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

The reader may imagine Brahmo gatherings as somewhat sober and restrained in tone, as might accompany a more philosophical and rational approach to the one God. But they do not appear to have been so, and aided and abetted by the presence of Ramakrishna, the impression may be seen as far wide of the mark. One such service during Kali Puja in 1884 is recorded:

Presently Trailokya (a Brahmo) began to sing to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals. Sri Ramakrishna danced, intoxicated with divine love. Many times he went into *samadhi*. He stood still, his eyes fixed, his face beaming, with one hand on the shoulder of a beloved disciple. Coming down a little from the state of ecstasy, he danced again like a mad elephant. Regaining consciousness of the outer world, he improvised lines to the music:

O Mother, dance about Thy devotees!
 Dance Thyself and make them dance as well.
 O Mother, dance in the lotus of my heart;
 Dance, O Thou the ever-blessed Brahman!
 Dance in all Thy world bewitching beauty!

An indescribable scene. The exquisite and celestial dance of a child completely filled with ecstatic love of God and identified heart and soul with the Divine Mother! The Brahmo devotees danced around the Master again and again, attracted like iron to a magnet. In ecstatic voices they chanted the name of of Brahman. Again, they chanted the name of the Divine Mother. Many of them went like children, crying, "Mother, Mother!"¹⁴

The renewal for the Brahmos of their appreciation of Hindu *bhakti* motifs is patent. In his abandon of joy Ramakrishna could both stimulate others to share in his mood as he also entered deeply into theirs. Once, riding in a carriage with two disciples in Calcutta, he came across a noisy group of drunkards, reeling down the street. Rather than expressing prophetic disapproval, he entered into their inebriated mood himself, his own familiar mood of divine intoxication, and swayed from the carriage, muttering indistinctly till one of his disciples feared for his safety.

How The Movement Reflects Ramakrishna's Catholicity

His *bhakti* temperament would seem to allow for a wide range of identification with more conventional celebrative scenes. This quality has been preserved, balancing the strong social service motifs developed by Vivekananda. One Western scholar, however, writing on the personal and social factors in the growth of the Ramakrishna Movement, makes the assertion,

"The Movement is a permanent, professionally administered network of agencies, with scarcely any traces of the charismatic leadership that brought it into being.¹⁵ I would strongly dispute this, for to visit or to live in even briefly at one of the centers in India or the West (as I revisited, those in Hollywood and Santa Barbara just two years ago) makes one very conscious of the importance given to the contemplative life, and to devotional acts associated with what Christopher Isherwood called the cult of Ramakrishna. Much of the popular appeal of the Movement certainly must be credited to these practices. Visiting the Movement's central shrine at Belur many years ago during Kumari Puja, I witnessed perhaps in excess of 10,000 persons coming and leaving the temple precincts.¹⁶ On a much smaller but still significant scale, morning and evening hours for ritual and meditation gather lay persons to mingle with monks in each location in India and the West.

Certain monks, following Vivekananda, may be generally less disposed to ceremonials, but the Movement is concerned to retain the Master's acceptance of diversity. Further incidents from his contacts with the Brahmos serve to illustrate this. One of their number once asked him, "Sir, is it good to worship God with form, and images of the Deity made of clay?" Ramakrishna replied, "You do not accept God with form. That is alright. The image is not meant for you. For you it is good to deepen your feeling toward your own Ideal. From the worshippers of the Personal God you should learn this yearning—for instance, Sri Krishna's attraction for Radha. You should learn from the worshippers of the Personal God their love for the Chosen Ideal. When the believers in the Personal God worship the images of Kali and Durga, with what feeling they love the Deity! You should accept that feeling. You don't have to accept the image."¹⁷ From such observations he could reflect, "In the serenade we have here, one flutist plays a single note right along, while another plays various melodies. The Brahmos play one note, as it were; they

¹⁴ Gupta, 1964, p. 598

¹⁵ Schneiderman, 1969, pp. 60-71

¹⁶ The Kumari Puja, taking place during the Durga Puja holidays, singles out for veneration a young girl who has been selected by certain auspicious signs. Ramakrishna relates, from his own experience, a similar moment, and other related ones. "I worshipped the 'Beautiful' in a girl fourteen years old. I saw that she was the personification of the Divine Mother. At the end of the worship I bowed before her and offered a rupee at her feet. One day I witnessed a Ramlila performance. I saw the performers to be the actual Sita, Ram, and Hanuman. Then I worshipped the actors and actresses who played those parts. ...One day I saw a woman in blue standing near the *bakul* tree. She was a prostitute. But she instantly kindled in me the vision of Sita." (Gupta, 1964, pp. 168, 169) The capacity to see the Divine in other performers in life's drama was the reverse side of his own role-playing. At this time he was immersed in worshipping the Divine Mother as her handmaid.

hold to the formless aspect of God. But the Hindus bring out the different melodies; that is to say they enjoy God in His various aspects."¹⁸ There is precedent for this breadth of acceptance. Kabir is quoted as having said that the formless God was his father, while the God with form was his mother. God, in this understanding, assumes the very form the devotee wishes to see.¹⁹

This tolerance of differences was communicated with a quality of warmth and humor. Not all could follow the strenuous demands which Ramakrishna placed on himself, and he was generally quite non-prescriptive in supplying regimens for others. Thus another Brahmo, hesitant concerning Ramakrishna's counsel on renunciation, by which he meant chiefly the overcoming of desire and greed (for which he commonly used the symbols 'woman' and 'gold'), asked, "Sir, can't we realize God without complete renunciation?" And Ramakrishna, with a laugh, responded:

"Of course you can! Why should you renounce everything? You are alright as you are, following the middle path—like molasses partly solid and partly liquid. Do you know the game of *nax*? (a card game, similar to blackjack) Having scored the maximum number of points, I am out of the game. I can't enjoy it. But you are very clever. Some of you have scored ten points, some six, and some five. You have scored just the right number; so you are not out of the game like me. The game can go on. Why that's fine! (all laugh)

I tell you the truth: there is nothing wrong with your being in the world. But you must direct your mind toward God; otherwise you will not succeed. Do your duty with one hand and with the other hold on to God. After the duty is over you will be able to hold on to God with both hands."²⁰

Patient with personal shortcomings, Ramakrishna could be somewhat more aggressive concerning too much attention to social action. This, we may presume, was not the issue of weakness of the flesh, but wrong understanding of the essentials of religion. Further, he may have felt that its orientation was not really the *karma yogic* path sanctioned by the Indian tradition, but based on excessive emulation of European religious models in their midst. Still,

¹⁷ Gupta, 1964, p. 151.

¹⁸ Gupta, 1964, p. 123

¹⁹ Sen, 1998, p. 571.

²⁰ Gupta, 1964, p. 67

insofar as it could with integrity be regarded as *karma yoga*, he did not judge it to be the best path for the Kali Yuga in which we live. The chief difficulty is that many pursuing this path might be deluded in thinking that they were serving others while actually seeking to establish a name and fame for themselves. He drew the caricature of those who would come to the Kalighat Temple in Calcutta and spend their whole time giving alms outside, never finding time to see the image of the Mother within. God or Self realization was the goal of all the paths for Ramakrishna, and the *karma yogi* might be tempted to psychological inflation in imagining that he could really do anything for another by his good works. He once warned a group of Brahmos against rushing in to effect revolutionary change, "As coconut and palm leaves grow up, the branches drop off by themselves. Caste conventions drop off like that. But don't tear them off as these fools do."²¹

He was more restrained and even pastoral in his counsel to a giant of social concern such as Pandit Vidyasagar, however. He observed, "The activities that you are engaged in are good. It is very good if you can perform them in a selfless spirit, renouncing egotism, giving up the idea that you are the doer. Through such action one develops love and devotion to God, and ultimately realizes Him. The more that you come to love God, the less you will be inclined to perform action."²² Progress could be made through the active path, but with spiritual growth, reliance on that path would normatively decrease, in Ramakrishna's thought.

Other Bengalis, however, were Westernized beyond Keshab and Vidyasagar to the point of secularity, and were often captivated academically by European rationalism. For them, Ramakrishna must have seemed a retrogressive throwback little calculated to be responsive to the current needs of Bengal. One such person, initially, was Naren (Vivekananda) himself, and some of his fellow students retained that assessment long after Naren himself had chosen to become a monastic follower of Ramakrishna. In retrospect from some years distance, one of them records his feelings at the time.

"I watched with intense interest the transformation that went on under my eyes. The attitude of a young rampant Vedantist-cum-Hegelian-cum-revolutionary like myself towards the cult of religious ecstasy and Kali worship may be easily imagined; and the spectacle of a born iconoclast like Vivekananda, a creative and

²¹ Gupta, 1964, p. 1023.

²² Gupta, 1964, p. 35.

dominating intelligence, a tamer of souls, himself caught up in the meshes of what appeared to me an uncouth, supernatural mysticism, was a riddle which my philosophy of the pure reason could scarcely read at the time."²³

There were those, then, beyond the circle of his influence. And his disciples viewed men such as Keshab as too Westernized to be able fully to appreciate his deepest insights. Among the disciples, also, those who were monastics felt that they had received, after the householders would leave on a given day, the core of his life giving message. Premananda, thirty years after the death of Ramakrishna, told an inquirer that the reason his stories of Ramakrishna were, by their testimony, more inspiring than those in M' *Gospel* was that they contained the esoteric essence of the teaching, communicated behind locked doors to the monastics alone.²⁴

Ramakrishna's Incarnational Consciousness

Yet M's recordings may seem to us anything but sterile, and the *Gospel* may be probed for the assessment of Ramakrishna by householders such as M and others, as well as the disciples. The incarnational consciousness surfaced for M from the beginning, as he reports from their first meeting in February of 1882. "It was as if he (Ramakrishna) were standing where all the holy places met and as if Sukadeva himself were speaking the word of God, or as if Sri Chaitanya were singing the name and glories of the Lord in Puri."²⁵ On his third visit a few days or weeks following, Ramakrishna specifically addressed him as they walked together, "Let me ask you something, "What do you think of me?" M remained silent. Again Sri Ramakrishna asked, "What do you think of me? How many *annas* of knowledge have I?" M replied, "I don't understand what you mean by *annas*. But of this I am sure: I have never before seen such knowledge, ecstatic love, faith in God, renunciation, and catholicity anywhere." The Master laughed.²⁶

The reader may ask whether Ramakrishna identified with a particular deity more than others. From his name, of course, the association with Rama and Krishna is evident. But a

²³ Nirvedananda, 1956, p. 693.

²⁴ Omkareswarananda, 1962, p. 62.

²⁵ Gupta, 1964, p. 1. Carl Olson discusses this same geographical comparison, in terms of the concept of *tirthas*, or places of pilgrimage. "As a *tirtha*, Ramakrishna formed a link between the mundane world and the transcendent much like the incarnation who combined the divine and the human in one nature." Olson, 1990, p. 98. See Eck, 1981, pp. 323-344, for a further discussion of the significance of *tirthas*.

conversation that Sara Bull records between Sister Nivedita and Vivekananda indicates a still more pervasive identity with the Divine Mother, when Nivedita asked him to clarify what the incarnation meant. Vivekananda replied, "Well, you see, there was a feminine something somewhere, that wanted to manifest, but in some ways it was desirable to manifest as a man, and that something became Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and that is why he always spoke of himself as "My Divine Mother."²⁷ We may discern, also, from M's title, as well as from a number of recorded incidents that he was given to drawing parallels from the life of Jesus to clarify for himself his understanding of Ramakrishna. One is particularly impressive. It took place in 1885, a little over a year before Ramakrishna's death. M was relating incidents from the life of Jesus, particularly the one when Jesus had been a guest in the home of Mary and Martha.

Master: "Well, after seeing all this, what do you feel?"

M: "I feel that Christ, Chaitanyadeva and yourself – all three are one and the same. It is the same person that has become all these three."

Master: "Yes! Yes! One! One! It is indeed one. Don't you see that it is He alone who dwells here in this way?" As he said this, Ramakrishna pointed with his finger to his own body.

M: "You explained clearly, the other day, how God incarnates Himself on earth."

Master: "Tell me what I said."

M: "You told us to imagine a field extending to the horizon and beyond. It extends without any obstruction; but we cannot see it on account of a wall in front of us. In that wall there is a round hole. Through that hole we see a part of that infinite field."

Master: "Tell me what that hole is."

M: "You are that hole. Through you can be seen everything – that Infinite Meadow without any end."

Sri Ramakrishna was very much pleased. Patting M's back he said, "I see you have understood that. That's fine."²⁸

²⁶ Gupta, 1964, p. 17.

²⁷ Prabuddhaphrana, 2002, p. 30 I. ²⁸ Gupta, 1964, pp. 809,810.

²⁸ Gupta, 1964, pp. 809, 810

While a case for his unequivocal self-consciousness as an incarnation might be made from such a statement as this, other incidents do not reflect that this was, uniformly, a dogmatic conviction with him. His terminal illness, throat cancer, raised questions for some of his followers. Should an incarnation be impotent to effect his own healing? Ramakrishna himself seemed to ponder over his power at this point and the religious issue of his use of such power as he might possess. Girish, a famous Bengali actor, came to Ramakrishna late one evening in a somewhat inebriated mood. But this seemed only to intensify his emotional concern for his master's health, and he began to implore Ramakrishna to heal himself. Finally Ramakrishna partly relented, saying, "Alright, I shall be cured if it is the will of God." But this did not satisfy . Girish responded, "You are trying to fool me. All depends on your will." Ramakrishna said, "Shame! Never say that again. I look upon myself as a devotee of Krishna, not Krishna himself. You may think as you like. You may look on your guru as God. Nevertheless it is wrong to talk as you are talking."

Girish did not let the matter drop, but continued, finally asking the other devotees, "Does any of you understand why he is here? It is for the liberation of men. Their suffering has moved him to assume a human body.²⁹ Another devotee, a few days later, interpreted Ramakrishna's suffering in what appears still closer to a Christian theological understanding. He addressed Ramakrishna, saying, "Sir, your illness is for the sake of others. You take upon yourself the sins of those who come to you. You fall ill because you accept their sins."³⁰

The above instances make clear that disciples and devotees cast the meaning of Ramakrishna into incarnational language. But a word should here be added to clarify the particular character of the incarnational consciousness which we discern in Ramakrishna. First, it was highly subjective. A quality in himself or in another might surface which, to his extremely god-suggestible mind, would powerfully recall qualities of the divine or features of one of the

²⁹Gupta, 1964, p. 827.

³⁰ Gupta, 1964, p. 832. A similar interpretation is recorded elsewhere. "While he was at Shyampukur , Ramakrishna had a vision in which he saw his subtle body emerge from the gross physical body while he was walking about the room. He observed that the back of the subtle body was covered with sores, especially where the trunk joined the throat. He wondered why this was so. The Divine Mother explained to him that many people who had committed evil deeds had touched him and thus become pure. Their bad karma had been transformed to him and had produced the sores on his body. Ramakrishna did not seem at all disturbed by this discovery. Indeed, he said repeatedly that he was ready to be reborn many thousands of times more, if his incarnations could be of service to others." Christopher Isherwood, 1964), p. 291.

classic incarnations. He did not expect that others might discern these same qualities which he felt the gods revealed to him. Second, this luminous capacity to reflect the divine might well be transitory. It might reside with some permanence, as in his own self-consciousness, but it might surface for a moment, with the subsequent life-style of the one who had conveyed it being unaltered, because he might be wholly unaware that he had been such a vehicle to another. And third, given the obvious provisional and subjective character of such consciousness, it follows that it was not dogmatically insisted upon. The god-man polarity which the West historically assumes was never so sharply drawn in the Indian tradition. One who seemed to reflect the divine was not, thus, so unique; it was expected that various incarnations would emerge. The Ramakrishna Movement, thus, does not make belief in the founder as an incarnation an article of faith, even for its monastic members. Most, obviously, do so regard him. But freedom for alternative interpretations was allowed from the beginning.

The Tradition Renewed Through Ramakrishna

All of this attention to the person of Ramakrishna, however, had the effect of revitalizing for his hearers the God language and mythic scenes of Hinduism, but also giving, at least to some, the feeling that they were in the presence of a savior being out of their own tradition as real as that of the Christians. This was a powerful resource for spiritual awakening, first in Bengal, then throughout India and beyond, as I have elsewhere explored, following the initiatives of Vivekananda and other disciples and friends of Ramakrishna.³¹ Yet the awakening was not confined to Hinduism, seemingly by Ramakrishna's own intention. As he is cast in a sometimes Islamic or Christian mode, he also validated their paths to God-realization. In this he can be viewed as a reconciler, above and beyond all of the traditions, yet without compromising his root stock in Hinduism. Some might have responded, "If an unlettered village Hindu can attain these heights, what spiritual food sustained him? Who needs to feel any measure of shame for the faith which nurtured him? We may be grateful for some of the social initiatives which Christians have shown in our midst, but have they met such a one as Ramakrishna?" His example furnished Hindus with powerful ties to their origins. As Carl Olson notes, "A feature of Ramakrishna's nature that made him appear strange to others was his visions, an inward sign of his holiness. Not a psychotic fantasy, his visions had a cultural meaning because they were expressed in an

³¹ French, 1974, *passim*.

accepted religious idiom and common cultural symbols."³² India recognized him as one of her truest children.

Elizabeth Harding cites Joseph Campbell, in noting how Europeans failed to provide an alternative spiritual source for the people of India. "But in Dakshineswar, only a few miles outside the Victorian metropolis of Calcutta, practicing his *sadhana*, not according to enlightened, modern methods, but after the most ancient. ..traditions of timeless India, Sri Ramakrishna cut the hinges of the heavens and released the fountains of divine bliss."³³ Again, from Sen, "The main purpose of the Master's incarnation was to propagate a unique type of religion appropriate to the present age. ...He went through the rituals of all types of meditation and spiritual practices, thereby demonstrating that religion can neither be confined within one particular community nor to a single place."³⁴ We are the grateful inheritors of the legacy of Ramakrishna.

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³² Olson, 1990, p. 119

³³ Harding, 1998, p. 271

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