

VEDÂNTA PHILOSOPHY

LECTURE BY

SWÂMI ABHEDÂNANDA

ON

WHO IS THE SAVIOUR OF SOULS?

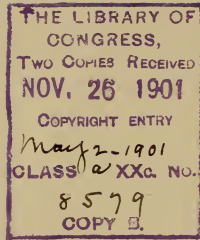
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“Even shouldst thou be the most sinful of all sinful (men), thou shalt by the raft of knowledge of thy Atman or Self cross over the whole ocean of sin.”—*Bhagavad Gītā*, ch. IV., 36.

WHO IS THE SAVIOUR OF SOULS?

WHO is the saviour of souls? is a question of momentous importance in all the great religions of the world. Since the first dawning in human minds of the nature of the soul, this question has been asked and discussed by prophets and priests, kings and beggars, as well as by the inspired revealers of the sacred Scriptures. Various attempts have been made since the beginning of the religious history of the world to arrive at the right solution of this great problem. It is a question so deep in its nature that many advanced thinkers, philosophers and metaphysicians of all ages and climes have confessed their failure to arrive at any satisfactory solution. They have tried, but the conclusions they have reached have not been universally acceptable; indeed, as this is a problem to be solved by each individual soul, it is highly improbable that any particular solution can give satisfaction to all classes of minds. The question resolves itself into three divisions, each of equal importance: First. Who can really be called a saviour? Second. From what, and

in what way, is a soul to be saved? Third. What is the true nature of the soul? These three points must be understood very clearly before we are able to discuss the main question at issue; that is, Who is the saviour of souls?

Three great spiritual leaders of the world are worshipped to-day as the Saviours of mankind by the peoples of different countries. One was of Semitic origin, and the other two appeared amongst the ancient Aryans who inhabited India. The one is known as Jesus the Christ; the other two are Buddha and Krishna. Each of these Saviours is recognized by his followers as the Incarnation of God on earth. The followers of these Saviours worship their masters as God Himself. The general belief in India is that, like Jesus the Christ, Buddha and Krishna also possessed the divine powers of atoning for sins and of leading suffering humanity through different paths to the abode of eternal happiness and everlasting life.

As the followers of Jesus the Christ hope to be saved from sin and eternal suffering through their sin-atoning Master, so the followers of Buddha and Krishna expect to reach the highest ideal of life, the ultimate goal of religion, through the paths laid down by *their* divine Masters. Although each one of these is worshipped as the Saviour of the world, still the idea of salvation, the true meaning of the word salvation, and the methods of attaining to it are understood differently by the followers of each of these three great Incarnations. We all know that the Christians mean by salvation, redemption from sin, escape from eternal

punishment and the attainment of everlasting felicity in heaven through faith in Jesus the Christ who died for sinners.

According to the majority of Christian sects, each individual soul is born sinful, inheriting sin as his birthright. They accept the account of creation as given in Genesis and believe in the temptation and fall of man through the influence of Satan, the creator of evil. When the first man was created, he was made perfect and sinless after the image of the Creator; and then the evil spirit appeared on the scene and sowed the seed of evil in the fertile soil of Adam's soul. As that positive seed of evil grew into a tree and bore fruit, Adam's sin, the disobedience to the command of God, brought about his fall, punishment, suffering and death. The tree of evil did not die with the death of the first man, but it continued to grow larger and larger with innumerable branches until the whole world was covered with its shadow, sorrow, disease and death. The results of Adam's sin or disobedience to God's command have been reaped by his descendants from generation to generation for nearly six thousand years. At last, when the whole world was groaning under the burden of sin and suffering, the compassion of the Father in heaven was aroused and He showed how much he loved mankind. It is said God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son to save the souls of men. If that love had been shown a little earlier, how many thousands of souls might have been saved from sin and its consequent suffering! The ways of the merciful Father are mys-

terious and beyond human comprehension. Jesus the Christ came and sacrificed himself, taking upon his shoulders the burden of the sins of all humanity. His blood washed away all the sins of the world; and since then the world has become free from sin, suffering and death for those who accept this sacrifice and redemption. Of course these results are not to be enjoyed by unbelievers or heretics, but only by those who believe in Jesus the Christ as the Saviour of the world. Most Christians assert and believe that although Jesus the Christ died for all humanity, only those who come to him shall receive redemption from sin and go to heaven to enjoy celestial felicity. Those who, either through ignorance or perversity, fail to come under his banner, shall suffer for eternity. This is the explanation and solution of the great problem of the salvation of souls as understood and preached by the theologians and priests of Christendom and as popularly accepted.

The whole idea of Christ's being the Saviour of the world and of individual souls is most intimately connected with the theory that each individual soul is born in sin and is destined to suffer. Being born sinful, it has no power to save itself from the inevitable results of sin, which was committed, not by itself, but by the first man; consequently it needs the help of the innocent, holy Son of God, who came down from heaven to rescue sinful souls by taking upon himself the burden of their guilt and suffering its results in his own person. It is often said that before one accepts Jesus the Christ as the Saviour of souls he must believe that

he was born in sin; that the very nature of his soul is sinful; that he cannot redeem himself; that he has no power to obtain salvation save through external help, and he must have absolute faith in the theory of vicarious atonement: through that faith alone he will go to heaven and be free from all sin and suffering. No one is allowed to ask any question regarding any of these points; he must accept the doctrine or suffer the consequences. There is no other alternative.

This solution may bring comfort to many souls; it may solve some problems of life and be entirely satisfactory to those who can accept it. We do not wish to disturb the well-settled opinions and beliefs of those who are content with this explanation and who are not ready to ask questions or seek farther. But there are many others who do not wish to accept anything upon hearsay or because it is written in some book: who do not care to believe anything on external authority. Such minds have found this solution unsatisfactory, illogical and contradictory. Some of the best thinkers and philosophers of the world, as well as the advocates of modern science, have asked again and again "If God is infinite and all-pervading, where is there room for Satan?" "Who created Satan? Why did not God prevent the first man Adam from being tempted by that evil spirit? Why did He not protect him? Why should He punish an innocent man instead of the doer of evil?" How unkind and unjust must he be who punishes his own son for the faults of others! All these questions and many others have arisen again and again in the minds of thinking

people, driving them to discouragement and unbelief. To them we say: Friends, you need not despair; there is great hope for you; there is another solution of the problem which may appeal to your reason and bring comfort to your souls. That solution, standing on the rock of reason, science and philosophy, answers all questions and doubts, and may clear away all your difficulties.

First of all, let us examine carefully the origin of the idea of vicarious atonement. In ancient times, when primitive men were divided into classes, communities and tribes, each tribe had a tribal god; they believed that they could hold communion with these supernatural beings through prophets, priests, witches, or through oracles or inspirations. These tribal gods were numerous, as you will find, among the ancient Semitic tribes. The members of those communities believed that their tribal god was their ruler, protector, guide and friend; whenever the god was angry or displeased, then evil overtook them; whenever any misfortune happened or any disease fell upon them, they thought that it was the result of their god's wrath, and they tried to appease him by going to the priests or to some necromantic diviners, or to certain prophets, and then performing such acts as these sages directed. The priests usually told them to offer the most useful and valuable things to their gods. In this way gradually grew up the idea of offering sacrifices and prayers to their god, and thus bringing him to their side and appeasing his wrath. The main object, however, was to get rid of the miseries and sufferings of

life. Sometimes they offered things which could not be easily obtained; sometimes they sacrificed animals which were of great use to them; some tribes reached the climax by offering up human beings.

It was the custom amongst the ancient Jews to sacrifice human bodies before the altar of Jahveh. Nothing was of more value than a child; therefore the first-born child or animal or fruit of trees belonged to Jahveh and they gave it to him. Before offering these sacrifices the priests transferred the sins to the innocent animals, and when these animals were killed they had the belief that the blood of these innocent creatures would purify the souls of sinners and wash away the sins committed by the members of those communities. They used to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificed on the heads of the sinners, believing that they were thus made free from all sins. This custom still prevails in some parts of the world. There are tribes in India who sprinkle blood of sacrificed animals in the same way as we read in the Old Testament. This custom gradually developed into the idea of vicarious atonement; the blood of the innocent is the purifier of souls and the redeemer of the wicked.

In the whole world the Christian nations alone have kept up this theory of vicarious atonement. The Zoroastrians, Jews and Mahammedans no longer accept it. They try to be free from sins by following the commands of their God, obeying the Scriptures and living a righteous life.

As long as we believe in the special creation of man at some particular time by some extra-cosmic being,

in his temptation and fall, in the transmission and inheritance of sin as that of some positive thing like wealth or property; so long we are bound to believe that the individual soul is born in sin, that it has no power to save itself from punishment, that it needs help from outside; so long we are forced to accept the idea of vicarious atonement. Modern science has shown that this world was not created at any special time. The doctrine of evolution has thrown that theory into the background; so we are not obliged to accept the account as given in Genesis. Modern geology has proved that man appeared as early as the tertiary period, more than 10,000 years ago; therefore we need not concern ourselves about the temptation and fall of man, perhaps 4,000 years later. Satan is already entombed in the grave of the nineteenth century, so we need not talk about the inheritance of sin. First of all, we are not bound to inherit the sins of our parents; consequently nothing can force us to accept the theory of vicarious atonement. Let us throw aside all the dogmas and superstitious beliefs with which we have burdened our minds from childhood; let us forget for a moment that we are born in sin and that our nature is sinful. All such ideas do not bring any good to humanity; they make us more sinful; they keep us on the plane of sin and wickedness, because the power of thought is tremendous. "What thou thinkest, thou shalt become," is the saying of all sages. If we constantly think of ourselves as sinful, as born in wickedness, and to be punished eternally, then by the power of thought we make ourselves sinful. There is no hope

for us to be better until we forget these things. If I constantly think I am wicked, I keep myself on that plane. If I constantly think I am weak and diseased I bring disease on myself. Fixed thoughts and ideas which predominate in our minds, mould our inner nature and force us to act in accordance with those thoughts. The Christian Scientists and mental healers have found this to be true. They knew what an enormous power faith has. If I believe myself to be a sinner, "born in sin and shapen in iniquity", that belief intensifies all the evil propensities in my nature and makes it almost impossible for me to attempt their conquest. I know many people who have been brought up in institutions where it is taught that every individual soul is born in sin. The idea of a born sinner has become so strong in their minds that they can hardly imagine it possible for a soul to do good deeds without being helped by Jesus the Christ. They are frightened when they hear for the first time that God dwells within them. They cannot believe it; they will say: "How is it possible for God to dwell in the body of a sinner like me?" This is the effect of the training they get from their childhood; this degeneration of the human mind is the result of such training; it prevents the realization of truth; it keeps them back from the path which leads to perfection.

The fact is that we have not inherited the sins of our parents. Why should we inherit sin of another? Who can force us to inherit sins? Who compels us to inherit sin from father or grandfather? Did our parents create our souls? Have we sprung into existence

out of nothing? Did we come into existence from a state in which we did not have our individuality? Is this my first and last birth? No, it cannot be. Who can answer such questions? That we have inherited sins from our fathers may delude the ignorant minds of children; but no right-thinking persons can accept it as true. The truth is that our present lives are the results of our past lives. We are not the victims of the sins of our forefathers. We possess individuality quite distinct from them. We existed as souls before our bodies were born, and shall exist after the death of our bodies. Jesus the Christ said: "Before Abraham I was;" so it is with each individual soul. Each soul existed before Abraham was born, nay, before creation itself, and has been manifesting its powers from the beginningless past. Our present existence is a connecting link in the chain of our various manifestations. We are living in delusion, committing mistakes and reaping the results of those mistakes, and thinking that we are born sinners and are to be punished forever.

One point we should remember: that as long as we think we are born sinners we are not approaching the true nature of our souls. If the innate nature of our souls be sinful, who can save us? It is impossible for anyone to change the innate nature of anything without destroying the thing itself. The innate nature of fire is heat; did you ever see fire exist without heat? Can fire exist, being separate from its innate nature? It is impossible. If the innate nature of the soul be sinful, then it can never exist as sinless. There is no

power in the universe which can change the innate sinful nature of the soul without destroying the soul itself. Consequently salvation of a sinful soul will be identical with the destruction or annihilation of it. Therefore such statements as that we are born in sin, that the innate nature of our souls is sinful, are absurd, illogical and misleading. On the contrary, if we accept God as the Infinite Spirit, we cannot deny that He dwells everywhere. If that be the case, then God dwells within us, in every individual soul; who can prevent it? If you do not believe that, you do not believe that God is Infinite Spirit. If we once admit that Spirit is pure, sinless and divine, we are forced to the conclusion that the Spirit which dwells in us is sinless and divine. Infinite is always one. It cannot be many. How can the true nature or the Spirit in man, which is a part of the universal Spirit, be sinful, when God, the Infinite Spirit, cannot be corrupted by sin? How can the Spirit which dwells in the soul of each individual be called sinful? What right have you to teach your child that it is born a sinner; that it has inherited sin as its birthright? You have no right whatever. On the other hand, teach your children that they are pure souls, that the Divine Spirit dwells in each one of them, that God is within them. If your children imbibe such ideas from their childhood they will be more spiritual when they grow older; they will not have to unlearn anything. We all know how difficult it is to unlearn things which we have learned in our childhood. How many grown-up people ever succeed in unlearning the ideas with

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which their tender minds were inoculated in childhood?

Teach your children such ideas as "The kingdom of Heaven is within you"; "I and my Father are one." That will be of great help to them. Do not accept the interpretations which you get from priests or books. First of all, learn the true meaning yourself and then explain it to them. If you do not understand the true spirit of Christ's sayings, wait for the explanation, and search within. The true meaning will come to you. That explanation will be true which is not bound by the limitations of the manners, customs, prejudices or particular beliefs of a particular race. The standard of truth is always universal. That explanation will be the true one which is not limited by books or dogmas, but which will harmonize with the truths discovered by all religions.

Jesus the Christ did not teach the idea of vicarious atonement; none of the great spiritual teachers of the world taught the dogma that we are born in sin and are going to eternal perdition. In India we do not find such teachings; from ancient times these ideas were never accepted by the thinkers, sages and philosophers. The most ancient scriptures of the Hindus are the Vedas; they do not teach it. On the contrary, the Hindu philosophers unanimously declare that each individual soul is immortal, pure and cannot be stained by sin. Ancient seers of Truth in India realized the unity and infinity of the Supreme Spirit, and the divine and sinless nature of the soul of man. They never preached the idea that the soul was created by some

being at a certain time; they never taught it to their children. If we read the Upanishads, there we find Vedic sages, after realizing the divine nature of the soul, declaring before the world: "Oh, ye children of immortal bliss, listen to me: I have discovered the truth; I have found the path. Know ye your true Self; that knowledge will light you across the ocean of death and sin." "Children of immortal bliss"; how full of sweetness, what a life-giving and heart-consoling expression!

One of the results of such teaching is that the Hindu mind cannot imagine why an individual soul should be thought to be born in sin. A Hindu mother never teaches her children such ideas. There was a Hindu queen who used to teach her children "*Tat twam asi.*" That thou art. That is, thou art the Eternal Spirit, the Infinite Spirit, the All-knowing Spirit, the Spirit that is free from sins and sufferings, which cannot be stained by sin. When she put her babe into its cradle she used to sing: "That thou art." "Thou art the Divine Spirit." As the child grew older it asked its mother the meaning of what it heard, and the mother said: "Go and find out the meaning." That impression created in the mind of that child was so strong that he afterwards became one of the great sages of India. If Christian mothers would teach their children in the same way, instead of telling them that they are born sinners and going to be punished, what a great blessing would it be to the children and to society. The number of sinners would decrease among the Christian nations.

There is no such thing as absolute sin; nor is it possible for one to inherit it like a piece of property. Sin is nothing but selfishness. Its cause is the ignorance of our true nature; as long as we do not know our real nature we remain selfish. If all individuals are born sinful, then why is it that sinful parents produce virtuous children? There are to be found many instances of this.

Here a question may arise: "If our true nature is divine, why are we not conscious of it? Why do we not know that the spirit which is dwelling within us is divine?" Because of our imperfect understanding, which does not allow us at present to see things as they are. We mistake the body for the soul and soul for body, matter for spirit and spirit for matter; we identify the changes of the body with the nature of the soul. We give all the attributes of the body to the soul; and if the body is diseased we think we are diseased and suffering. This understanding, being subject to evolution, gradually manifests in a better way and ceases to make mistakes as we rise higher in the scale of evolution. Mind and intellect are the medium through which the perfect and Divine Spirit within us is expressing its powers. The Atman or the Divine Spirit may be compared to the self-luminous sun and the medium of mind to space. When the mental space is covered with the thick and heavy clouds of ignorance, the light of the self-luminous Sun of the Atman or the Divine Spirit is invisible to the eye of the understanding. As the most powerful rays of the sun seem to us to be powerless and dull on a rainy

day, so the most powerful rays of the divine light of the self-effulgent Atman do not shine on the understanding when the heavy clouds of ignorance overhang the intellect. When ignorance covers the light of the spirit the understanding makes many mistakes. Just as in the partial darkness of twilight our eyesight is often deluded and we mistake a rock or a tree-trunk for a robber and are frightened, so in the darkness of ignorance our understanding mistakes the body for the soul, matter for spirit and *vice versa*. Then we suffer and cry for help. Through such mistakes we falsely identify ourselves with the limited medium of mind, intellect, senses and body, and attribute their qualities to our true nature. Then the Self-consciousness of the Atman or Divine Spirit in us becomes confused with those limitations. The result of this mixture is what we call ego and egoism or selfishness, or, in other words, the idea of "I and mine," "I am this or that," "I am born," "I am diseased," and so forth. The changes of the body, and the senses and modifications of mind are identified with our true nature, the Atman or Spirit. The appearance of this Atman or Divine Spirit as the limited ego is sometimes described as the fall of the divine spirit within the limitations of phenomenal existence. This appearance of the Absolute as relative individual ego through the power of ignorance is described in the Old Testament, in a crude mythological way, as the fall of Adam, the personified pure and perfect image of God. Ignorance is Satan. Through the influence of the magic power of ignorance or *Avidyâ*, or nescience, as it is called in Ve-

danta, the Eve or *Buddhi* or understanding is overcome. Then Adam, or Divine nature, or Atman, through the association of *Buddhi*, or imperfect understanding, falls from Paradise, i. e., appears as individual ego, losing for the time being the consciousness of the Absolute and becoming selfish and miserable. This, according to the teachings of Vedanta, is the spiritual meaning of the fall of man. The fallen ego will recover its absolute state through the help of the Atman which is described as Christ. This is the whole secret of true Christianity. The ego is the apparent, or selfish man. Buddha called this Atman, Truth, and the apparent man, soul. Who can save the apparent man except the Real man, or Atman, or Truth? There is no other Saviour of the Soul from this attachment to body and senses, from the bondages of ignorance and their results; and the way of salvation is the knowledge of Atman, with the consequent surrender of the limited ego. If the Soul, realizing its Divine nature, tells any unawakened soul: "Thou art spirit; thy true nature is divine"; then that true soul acts as the greatest friend and he is called the saviour of the unawakened soul. As the Incarnations of God, like Krishna, Buddha, Christ and others declared this truth to the world through their divine personality and power, they are called the greatest friends of mankind, the Saviours of the world. Still we must not forget through the zeal of our loyalty to and reverence for those great souls, that they merely point out the right paths to God-consciousness and that the true Saviour of the apparent ego is the Atman. Even the

great souls like Jesus the Christ could not bring into the right path—to God-consciousness—those who were not ready for such teaching. Think of what a small number of disciples Jesus left after so much sacrifice! What does it show? It shows that only those who feel the need of spiritual help can follow the example and teachings of the great soul, whether it be Christ or Buddha or Krishna or any other. They alone can attain to salvation or God-consciousness who are striving for salvation. No one can save you if you are not ready to be saved. When the individual soul dwelling in the darkness of ignorance, after committing many mistakes and reaping their results, after gathering experience in different planes of life, catches a glimmer of the light of Truth and struggles towards it; then, and then only, the divine light which is shining within is discovered; and Satan or Ignorance is conquered. Therefore Christ said: "Seek and ye shall find"; "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Buddha said: "The truth is noble and sweet; the truth can deliver you from evil. There is no Saviour in the world except the Truth. Have confidence in Truth, although you may not be able to comprehend it, although you may suppose its sweetness to be bitter, although you may shrink from it at first. Trust in the Truth." Where is that Truth to be found? Not in temples, not in churches, or mosques, not in books or creeds or sayings of this or that prophet, but in the depth of your own hearts. Search within. It is the Atman, the Self, the Soul of our souls. There-

fore Vedanta says: "One should save himself by his own Self or Atman; never should one let himself sink in the ocean of birth and death. For Atman or Divine Self is the greatest friend and Saviour of the Soul."

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