

A Vedantin's View Of Christian Concepts¹

A Dialog between Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Professor Helmut Girndt²

Introduction

During February of 1997 Dr. Helmut Girndt, Professor of Philosophy at Gerhardt Mercator University, Duisburg, Germany, visited Rishikesh, India where he took part in a dialog with Swami Dayananda Saraswati, a traditional teacher of Vedanta. Vedanta is an ancient method of unfolding the nature of the Self, and is found in the final portion of the Vedas, the Hindu books of knowledge. The focus of the dialog centered on what are the main Christian beliefs and how they can be interpreted in a Vedantic way.

Professor Helmut Girndt had met Swami Dayananda the previous October when Swamiji first visited Germany. At that time Swamiji had given talks in a few cities and towns in Germany and Helmut had the opportunity to travel with him along with some of Swamiji's students. Helmut had a keen interest in finding areas in Christian theology and Western philosophic thought that could be interpreted from a Vedantic perspective, but he had not formally studied Vedanta. Swamiji was in the middle of teaching a three-year Vedanta course in India and suggested to Helmut that he could attend a month long segment of the course that would be held in Rishikesh on the banks of the River Ganges.

It was mid February of 1997 when Helmut arrived at the Swami Dayananda ashram in Rishikesh. Since the Vedanta course was in full swing, Swamiji engaged in a dialog with Helmut outside of formal class hours during "satsangs." Satsangs are informal gatherings where spiritual topics are discussed.

While Helmut is not a theologian, he culturally identifies with Christianity and is an admirer of Christian forms of worship, particularly of Catholicism. As a professor of Western philosophy he understands the basic dilemmas or paradoxes of human life and the ways that various Western philosophers have tried to come to terms with them.

In these discussions, Helmut is exploring whether Vedanta has succeeded in resolving the basic questions that Western philosophers have been grappling with for millennia and whether Christian theosophical forms and myths lend themselves to developing a teaching tradition that unfolds the nature of the Self.

To that end Helmut tries to present what he understands to be the various interpretations of some of the key points in Christianity even though he does not profess to be a theologian.

These lively sessions resembled the type of dialog present in the Upanisads (Vedanta books) where often one of the participants offered the opposing view to that of the "Vedantin." This opponent was a sort of sparing partner and in the course of the dialog the subject matter of Vedanta became clear.

¹ Published in the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam 13th Anniversary Souvenir, 1999

² Edited excerpt from the book *A Vedantin's View of Christian Concepts*, edited by Lasa Donnerberg.

Following are transcriptions of the satsangs, which took place over the course of several days. Through this dialog the ageless Vedanta wielded by Swami Dayananda is working in its traditional way as a means to know the Self. Here the opposing views are not those of the Buddhists, the Sankhyas, the Vaisesikas or the Naiyayikas of Shankara's time, but of the Christians and their Greek predecessors. Although these sessions took place on the banks of the sacred Ganga as they often did in ancient times, the confusions that are addressed apply to our global society of today.

Lasa Donnerberg, Editor

Swamiji: Let us begin with St. John's concept, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What does a Catholic say about this sentence? What would be the meaning?

Helmut: It has to do with God and *logos*. *Logos* means the structure of the universe, the order. And the order of the universe is with God. It is manifested in the creation and is always co-residing in this God. Everything came out of this order. Later on the Christians identified Jesus with the order and as such he is named Christ. He is Christ as this order. The Christ refers to this order that was never created but was always with God. And the creation comes and goes.

Swamiji: What is creation then?

Helmut: Creation is the manifestation of the universe according to this eternal order.

Swamiji: That's acceptable. That's not the Catholic view.

Helmut: Most people don't know the meaning of the term *logos* and the difference between "Christ" and Jesus.

Swamiji: How do they look at God?

Helmut: It all depends on the level of theology one is talking on. You can look upon God as an ancient man among the clouds, which is a very popular view. But actually, God is beyond time, beyond space. He is eternal and He is self-sufficient, absolutely complete in Himself.

Swamiji: Then what about time and space? How do they relate?

Helmut: The popular view is that the world came in the big bang. The best view that I know is that God creates time in such a way that each creation is a new one, because from the present you cannot go to the future. So, each time the creation is new. It's a continued creation. Otherwise, you get the strange idea that in time and space suddenly the world began. And this is nonsense. So if God is the creator of the universe, He's also the creator of time. And consequently, He's beyond time.

Swamiji: Then let us say God is a being. We have to accept God as a being. Is that being bound by time? Referring to "being" generally one thinks of time.

Helmut: It's supposed to be beyond time because it's the creator of time.

Swamiji: Then what is the relationship between the created time and the creator?

Helmut: The relationship cannot be conceived of rationally. You can only infer. Since there is time and time is contingent, [the creator] creates it along with different places, and this is God. That's the only way to refer to God. Deductively, you cannot go.

Swamiji: What I want to say is, if God is timeless and then God created time, then there is a distance between time and the timeless; there is a difference between the time-bound and the timeless. Time as such doesn't exist. It has to include other things. Let us say we have the time-bound world and the timeless God. Between the timeless God and the time-bound world, what is the connection? The timeless God created the time-bound world.

Helmut: This can only be understood in terms of the constant creation, the continuous creation.

Swamiji: Even if it is a continuous creation, at this moment there is a *jagat* (world). And this world, according to Christian theology, is a reality. This reality has come from the reality of God, and therefore, God, the timeless reality, created this time-bound reality. This is a very crucial topic. The timeless being created the time-bound world. Now this time-bound creation must have a certain relationship with its creator. I would ask, is it separate from that creator?

Helmut: There are two views. On the one hand, from the point of view of the creation, the creation is separate from God because the creation is not God. But from the other side, since God is all-comprehensive, the world is not outside of Him.

Swamiji: If God is all-comprehensive, all-inclusive, all-pervasive, then the creation is not separate from God.

Helmut: That's true from an absolute point of view; God is in everything and everywhere. Whereas, from a human point of view, God is something beyond. So it depends on which perspective you take.

Swamiji: That means we're not accepting the world as a reality.

Helmut: In the absolute sense of reality, we cannot.

Swamiji: The Catholic religion will not accept that. There must be a certain clarity in all this. If that is so, the problem of sin, the problem of condemnation, the problem of separation between God and the individual, all become an entirely different type of problem.

Helmut: But here they have a distinct interesting teaching: the order originally is not separate from God. It is in total consonance with God's intention and will. But part of the creation is man, and man is created free. Since he's free, he can choose whether to stay within the pre-given order, or to follow his own will and not God's command, and in this way he brings confusion into the God-created order. This is a key for understanding Christianity. If there were no free act according to which mankind separated itself from God, then there would be no need for the veneration of God and the salvation of man. The freewill of man makes the difference. And there's a strange teaching that due to this free act, all mankind is affected.

Swamiji: The reality of this is: God is all-including, but the world is not. If this all-including God includes all of the world (the world means me, let me say), and I am not all-including, that means I'm an individual. His body, we can say, includes my body, whereas, I am someone who is limited and who has freewill. I am given a free will by God who is the creator. I'm given a one-time chance also. That's another thing. Therefore, I'm an individual, and I'm always going to be

an individual. Thus, I have to follow His special message given to me after millions of years through a given person in history, a little less than 2000 years ago. So, God sends a message.

Helmut: But before that He did so with Moses. Moses got the message and Jesus later on followed by giving a renewed message.

Swamiji: That means God also edited His message. God originally gave some message through Moses, and then felt that perhaps a little addition was necessary. Before Moses, also, there were other people.

Helmut: Yes.

Swamiji: Anyway, this is a belief system. Now in this belief system they say that if I follow certain commandments etc., then I will go to heaven. I'll have some beatitude. I'll be in love with God or whatever, and in that love I will discover some beatitude. This is the salvation. And to follow this person you have to undergo baptism. The baptism is necessary because there is original sin. That original sin has to go, for which I have to undergo baptism. Then, when I die, I should be buried properly, and then I have to wait.

Helmut: There are different interpretations. One says you have to wait. Another says you go to heaven or hell right away. And another says man is totally dead and then totally resurrected. There is no soul that somehow waits. It is a totally new spirit. There are different interpretations and they are pretty vague. The main point in the whole discussion has to be that man is capable of separating himself from God by his own freewill, while God always includes him.

Swamiji: But you see, if this separation is real, non-separation is impossible.

Helmut: Man relates to God through a certain attitude. And this attitude is one of either accepting God's love and commandments or rejecting them. If he rejects them, and then changes his mind, then by God's grace he can be saved. His own goodwill is not enough. The incarnation of God was needed for helping man because he was in such a mess. Being in such confusion, he couldn't find [his way] out anymore; so he needed God's grace through Jesus, His helping hand, to get out of it. And if he changes his mind then enters into a union with God, still he will never be identical with God.

Swamiji: This is where the problem is. This is what we call *dvaita*. This is a duality. We need to examine this dual concept properly—whether duality is possible, whether there is a real separation, whether there is a necessity for intervention, and then, what kind of intervention is required, if at all there is an intervention. What I'm thinking of is this. In this particular presentation, if you are in love with God and you follow the commandments of God and follow the do's and avoid the don'ts, (and of course you have to do the baptism too, and have the blessing of the Holy Ghost) then you have some kind of a beatitude later. The individual has to be given salvation because he is a condemned person.

Now, there is only one thing that I'm going to say here. Suppose I am confused, man is confused, then, we need a resolution of this confusion. The human intellect is incapable of resolving the confusion because it is the intellect that has the confusion. The intellect is born of confusion, also. There is an ego which is born of confusion and that confused ego has an intellect. That intellect is not going to resolve this original confusion.

Helmut: Yes. Which is based on the original sin; that means on an act of will.

Swamiji: Yes. That original sin is a problem. I'm going to give an interpretation of original sin, and I'm going to look at it entirely differently. Now, suppose I say that all that I require is the resolution of the confusion. That's all I require. The assumption that God is different from everything and everything is God, I feel reveals a certain truth. And that truth I will look at in only one way, and I don't see any other way of looking at it. If there is any other way, I can prove that it is wrong.

If one includes everything and everything is not that one, that means we are talking about a cause-effect relationship. A cause-effect relationship like we have in this table. This table is wood, nothing but wood. The whole thing is wood. But wood is not table. Wood is not table, because when I think of wood, in my understanding of wood, there is no tableness. This is exactly the situation when one includes the other, and the other does not include the one. This table, therefore, is non-separate from the wood, even though the wood transcends the table. My understanding of wood transcends the table, meaning it doesn't include the table, but definitely, the table is going to include wood, in the sense that the table is wood.

As long as the table doesn't have a human mind, it won't have a problem. But suppose the table has a human mind. It will say, "I'm a small table. I'm a mortal table. I'm different from everything else. I'm not a chair." It can have all the problems of a human mind. Then this table is told that it committed original sin. What is the sin? For me the original sin is only this conclusion, "I'm a table."

Helmut: No. The original sin is: let's assume you are the creator and the table is your creation . . .

Swamiji: That is a problem. Then that means an entirely different thing. That's why in the beginning of this discussion I wanted to establish the relationship between the creator and the creation. [If the creator created the creation as I create a table], that means the creator is entirely different from the creation. And that means there's a problem. There exactly is the confusion, and that confusion is that God created out of nothing.

Helmut: Yes.

Swamiji: *Logos* and all that we discussed exists only with reference to His knowledge. There is no material involved, and that is the problem. That is a real problem. In that case, I am entirely different from God. The conclusion is that out of nothing God created the world.

Helmut: Yes.

Swamiji: Then the world is a creation, not a manifestation of God. I would like to find out what is the word for "nothing" in Hebrew or Latin. What is that word?

Helmut: There is one word that means chaos in the Old Testament, which says God as a spirit was hovering over the chaos, the ocean in the dark and in fog, which is somehow a symbol for the chaos; you cannot make out anything. God's spirit is hovering above the waters, above the chaos. And the chaos is compared with something that you cannot define. It is something out of which the creation comes. In the Jewish writings, the Old Testament, God is hovering over the chaos, that which has no form. As such it is nothing because it has no form yet. And God creates out of this chaos everything. That is one version.

Swamiji: Whatever term is there, I feel that it is not understood. But I want to interpret it in a Vedantic way, to give it some meaning; otherwise it doesn't make sense. Out of nothing He created is what they present.

Helmut: Yes.

Swamiji: Creation out of nothing, one cannot assimilate. Whatever you present should be possible for me to assimilate. When we're talking of a cause, we should talk about it all the way. We can't just consider it half way. When you think of *logos*, (logos meaning knowledge, order or whatever) the *logos* is with the maker; so, God is the maker. Then you need a material.

Helmut: It was the ancient Greek way of thinking that God was like a pot maker who created something.

Swamiji: That "out of nothing" I feel is equivalent to "*mĒyĒ*." Because *mĒyĒ* is nothing, really. *MĒyĒ* is nothing, conceptually speaking, in that it is nothing independent of the reality. Now here, *mĒyĒ* is what we say *is* when we look at this table. It is *mĒyĒ* because it is useful, empirical. You can't dismiss the table as unreal. Nor can you take it as real because the weight of this table is the weight of wood. And when I touch this table, I touch wood. I thought I touched the table, but I touched wood. Then—and this is another very astounding truth—I cannot think of a table without thinking of wood or some other substance. It's amazing. How it doesn't strike people, I don't know. You see, I cannot even think of a table without thinking of something else. I can imagine a lot of things, but I can't even imagine . . .

Helmut: Isn't it possible just to think about the form?

Swamiji: You can't think of a form without thinking of a substance.

Helmut: Of which the form will be informed.

Swamiji: Because unless there's a substance, you can't think of a form. And therefore, the form is of the substance.

Helmut: What about mathematical relations?

Swamiji: Still, it is the same.

Helmut: It's a form?

Swamiji: It's a form. Mathematically suppose, you think of a circle. That's a form. And then you're thinking of space.

Helmut: Right. But not of matter.

Swamiji: Matter is another *mithyĒ* (apparent reality). Even mathematical equations cannot be conceived without numbers, or numbers themselves without values, without thought, without consciousness.

Helmut: Yes.

Swamiji: So without thinking of space, you can't think of a circle, or a square. Therefore, we're always thinking of one thing or another. And if that is understood very clearly, then what we have is only a form, as you said, which depends entirely upon something else. And that means the form has a reality that we call *mĒyĒ*, or *mithyĒ* (apparent). And this goes all the way [through creation]. Therefore, we can say that God did not go outside Himself in creating this world.

Helmut: Yes.

Swamiji: That would be proper. And therefore, let us say, out of nothing *else*, instead of out of nothing, He created.

Helmut: Yes.

Swamiji: Then the whole vision of reality is different. That will open up the gates. We will look into that.