PREFACE

Despite its long presence in India, Christianity does not seem to have impinged on Hinduism to any remarkable degree till the gradual establishment of European political control over much of the world and more specifically till after the establishment of British Raj in India.

This historical development created a novel situation for both Hinduism and Christianity. For Hinduism it implied a new dispensation which, despite its Christian irritant, offered a more secular, scientific and liberal environment than Hinduism had experienced for centuries. For Christianity it implied a natural if uneasy alliance with European political domination. The combined effect of this historical situation was that, simultaneously and paradoxically, while on the one hand it enabled Christianity, as the religion of the dominant minority, to challenge Hinduism; on the other it enabled Hinduism to face that challenge with equal vigour. There were times when the encounter took on confrontational overtones. It may not be unjust to assume that when Swami Vivekananda spoke of nations being driven to despair by “persecutions with the sword or with the pen” he had the Christian polemical pen in mind which William Ward wielded to the effect that all Hindu men were immoral and women unchaste and which was threatening to prove mightier than the proverbial sword in the Hindu imagination. The gracious acknowledgement of the unacknowledged Christ of Hinduism was to come later. The Hindu response, at the gutter level, was to use verbal inversion like a rapier thrust and reduce the Christian “God” to a “dog”. The Hindu acknowledgement of the ameliorative example of Christianity in purging itself of its toxic elements was yet to come. But despite such occasionally jarring notes the interface between the two traditions—never totally acrimonious if never fully harmonious—continued to be challenging in the best sense of the term, for both the traditions, in due course, felt challenged by it. As mentioned earlier, the fact is not without a touch of irony that the very set of circumstances which provoked the challenge stimulated the response; the very forces which brought Christianity to India imparted new vigour to Hinduism. It was as if the same providence had dispensed the sword as well as the shield. At the risk of sounding phantasmagorical one might say that the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity over the past two centuries has been like a battle out of the Purāṇas in which, with each clash, each contestant derived a fresh access of strength from the rival!

This book is an attempt to offer a perspective of the encounter from the
Hindu side, from an analytical rather than a combative stance. It seeks to achieve this purpose by portraying the responses to Christianity as formulated by the chief spokesmen of Hinduism during the modern period. Much is known of the Christian view of Hinduism during the period under review; not as much is known, or at least in as clear and consolidated a manner, about the Hindu view of Christianity during this period. If this book serves to balance the scales of scholarship in this regard it will have served its purpose.

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