SRUTI AND PHILOSOPHY

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I

It is sometimes said that the teachings of those Upaniṣads usually accepted as canonical shows development from a lower to a higher level of understanding, and that this development, which is said to be historical as well as doctrinal, is indicated by a movement within these scriptures from a less abstract to a more abstract mode of expression — from what is sometimes called a less philosophical to a more philosophical way of speaking. A typical example of this claim is found in a work by Bharatan Kumarappa: and in order to show how little reason there is to have faith in at least the major form-critical methods used by people who make these claims 1), as well as to throw some light upon the function of certain Upaniṣadic symbols used to refer to Brahman, I want to look at the suggestions of Sri Kumarappa. In doing so, I intend to argue,

(i) that the historical development he speaks of cannot in fact be illustrated from the Upaniṣads, which, if anything, seem to suggest a quite contrary development;

(ii) that the assumption of doctrinal development is based on two more basic assumptions which, once more, seem contrary to fact;

(iii) that, if the Upaniṣads are sruti, a development through history from a less to a more adequate understanding of the doctrines these scriptures seek to teach is anyway impossible.

II

In his work, The Hindu Conception of the Deity 2), Sri Kumarappa claims to trace the pUpaniṣadic doctrine of Brahman from (i) its sup-

1) I am speaking here not only of claims made about Hindu Scriptures but of any scriptures whatever. And though I will in this article be speaking primarily of one group of Hindu scriptures—namely, the Upaniṣads—I believe that most of my arguments apply, mutatis mutandis, to other scriptures as well, Hindu or otherwise.

2) B. Kumarappa: The Hindu Conception of the Deity; London (Luzac), 1934.
posed beginnings in the cosmogonic myth found in Brhadāranyaka 1:4:1-5, to (ii) the referring use of words like ‘water’, ‘food’ and ‘breath’ (prāṇa), which normally are used to indicate natural phenomena, and then beyond to (iii) a still higher level, namely, the “level of abstract thought” 3), in which ‘space’ (ākāśa) is used as a symbol for Brahman.

In affirming this first supposed transition (from cosmogonic myth to the use of nature symbols), Sri Kumarappa begins with the claim that the Brhadranyaka myth, which likely supplies us with the earliest symbols for Brahman found in the Upaniṣads, is no better than a “crude anthropomorphism” 4). From thence, he continues, “we rise to a distinctively higher level of philosophical thought” 4) when we progress “to explanations in terms of natural phenomena” 4) — viz., “explanations” in terms of ‘water’, ‘food’ and ‘prāṇa’. These explanations, he says, arose “precisely because these are absolutely essential to human life”. 4) Now clearly, certain assumptions are at work here, most glaringly that the Upaniṣadic rśis were attempting to present some kind of “philosophical thought”. That this is a false way to approach these (or any) scriptures will, I trust, be clear from examination of the more basic assumption underlying this approach — namely, the Western myth of ‘progress’. By this I mean, the Western assumption that all movement forward in time amounts to advancement, coupled perhaps with, or even implied by, the Christian notion of ‘progressive revelation’.

It may be true, and shortly I will argue that in a way it is true, that “Whether the ultimately real is conceived of as Water, Food, or Breath, it is precisely because these are absolutely essential to human life”. 5) But to view the relation between the creation myth and the use of nature symbols in referring to Brahman, as an historical movement from a “crude anthropomorphism” to a “higher level of philosophical thought” can be shown to be a viewpoint that has no grounds, both because there is no good reason to assume that the creation myth is in any sense “crude”, or that the use of nature symbols represents a higher level of understanding. And even if there were good reasons, this would not of itself be sufficient to establish the supposed historical

3) B. Kumarappa; op cit; p. 6.
4) B. Kumarappa; op cit; p. 3.
5) B. Kumarappa; op cit; p. 5.