SYMBOLISM IN THE VEDAS AND ITS CONCEPTUALISATION

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Indian tradition, not surprisingly, claims supramundane origin for its holy scriptures, the Vedas. This view has been duly noted by Western scholars, but it has never been given serious consideration. In fact, it has been tacitly dismissed by them and the Vedas have been interpreted mostly from a positivistic standpoint and characterized as a primitive or archaic stage in the development of Indian religious thought. Recent advances in the discipline known as History of Religions (sometimes also called "religious science", in German Religionswissenschaft) make such an approach obsolete. Dismissing or ignoring a claim within a religious tradition, like the one made for the Vedas, reveals an implicit conviction of the superiority of the position adopted by the interpreter. Surely, it must be a part of the task of scholarship to interpret, within its conceptual framework, even such a claim in a meaningful way.

In India this claim is of course made in the usual religious way: the Vedas are believed to be the product of direct divine revelation. And on the surface it appears, as L. Renou argued 1), that this revelation has been very much revered but seldom really followed either in spirit or in letter. But if we realise the complexity of the Vedic message delivered simultaneously on several levels — addressing ordinary people, educated classes like priests and aristocrats and also a spiritually minded minority — through the medium of the language of symbols and myths, our attitude to and understanding of the Vedas will change substantially and we shall see the question of the origin of the Vedas and their destiny in India in a different light from Renou and other scholars.

1) L. Renou, The Destiny of the Vedas in India, Delhi 1965.
The crucial point to bear in mind when interpreting the Vedas is the necessity of deciphering the meaning of the symbols and myths which they use, in other words of translating them into the language of our age. And this amounts to what can be called their conceptualisation. The next important point is the need to apply the hitherto neglected or overlooked hermeneutical principle of several levels of interpretation of the Vedas and to deal with them in an appropriate way. This means that whenever a comprehensive treatment of the Vedas is attempted, all levels of interpretation which can be detected have to be taken into account and used distinctly, and when a particular aspect of the Vedic message is dealt with, one has to decide which level of interpretation one is concerned with. It is, at the same time, essential to avoid confusing different levels of interpretation 2).

The aim of this paper is to concentrate on the higher level of interpretation, which can be called spiritual, and to demonstrate with a few selected examples the fact that the Vedic mind reached the highest peak of spiritual achievement, which may have been approximated or reached anew in subsequent epochs of the development of Indian religions, but has hardly been surpassed.

First of all the claim that the Vedas are a divine revelation has to be interpreted on more than one level. On the current religious level it is just a matter of faith, but on the spiritual level of interpretation it represents what the mystics and Yogis describe as personal vision or direct experience of the transcendent. The frase “divine revelation” (śruti) is thus a symbolical expression for what in plain conceptual language would be called direct perception of the transcendent 3). If this is so, the Indian tradition has never really digressed from the Vedas, but kept renewing or kept trying to renew the vision of their ṛṣis through the spiritual endeavours of its religious leaders, Yogis and mystics, and kept expressing their experiences in ever new idioms,

2) The idea of different levels of interpretation of the Vedic texts is old, having been hinted at already by Yāska (Nirukta 7, 1-2), but it has been generally neglected. In modern times it was used by Dayananda. I have referred to it in my paper on “Problems of Interpretation of Indian Religions” and it has been used by F. R. Allehin in his paper “Gāyatrī Mantra and the Beginnings of Indian Theology” both presented during the Cambridge Symposium on Indian Religions (20-23 March 1975) and both still awaiting publication.

3) This is often expressed in the hymns by the word dhiṭi, vision. Cf. J. Gonda, *The Vision of the Vedic Poets*, The Hague 1963.