THE ROLE OF THE WIND-GOD VĀYU IN HINDU MYTHOLOGY AS ANALOGOUS TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

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I

The purpose of this paper is to indicate an analogue to the Holy Spirit in Hinduism and to examine the extent in which the analogy can be sustained.

To a student of Hinduism the analogue to the Holy Spirit which readily suggests itself is Vāyu in Hindu mythology — both in its Vedic and classical versions. For Vāyu is the wind-god and in ‘Hebrew and Syriac the word Rūah means equally wind, breath or spirit’.1

II

The role of Vāyu in Vedic mythology may first be examined. But before such an exercise can be carried out the attitude towards the gods in the RgVeda may be identified. It is best described as heno-theistic rather than either monotheistic or polytheistic.2 Despite the presence of henotheism the one god to whom the largest number of the hymns of the RgVeda are devoted — about one-fourth, is Indra,3 the god of both valour and thunder and rain.4 Indeed Indra is ‘often referred to as Eka Deva “one god”’.5 Thus if Indra is not the sole God in the RgVeda, he is surely the central god therein.

Interestingly enough, as in the case of the Holy Spirit in relation to God, Vāyu is spoken of in close association with Indra, being ‘celebrated alone in one whole hymn besides parts of others, and in about a dozen others conjointly with Indra . . . the two deities being often invoked as Indravāyū’.6 Moreover, according to A. A. Macdonell, ‘this couple is regarded as so closely connected by the ancient native interpreters, that either of them might represent the deities of the atmospheric region in the Vedic triad (Nir. 87,5)’.7 The Vedic triad, however, is nothing like the Holy Trinity. The

3. R. C. Majumdar, ed., The Vedic Age (Bombay 1965), p.373
6. A. A. Macdonell, The Vedic Mythology (Varanasi 1971), p.82. It should be noted that Vāyu is distinguished from the god Vāta here which represents the wind in its more concrete element.
7. Ibid., p.82.
RgVeda, like the New Testament, has a three-decker view of the universe. In the New Testament the three levels are hell, earth, and heaven. In the RgVeda they are earth, atmosphere, and sky. This is the Vedic triad. The various gods are classified regionally and Indra and Vāyu belong to the same region, the atmosphere. ‘Vāyu’s car, in which Indra is his companion, has a golden seat and touches the sky’.

Thus in Vedic mythology the idea of the Holy Spirit may be seen as present in a germinal form in the RgVeda in the concept of Vāyu and its relation to Indra but that is about as far as one can go.

III

A closer parallel is achieved in classical Hindu mythology as utilized by the Hindu thinker Madhva (1199-1278 A.D.) between Vāyu and the Holy Spirit. In fact this parallelism is not typical of Hindu mythology or theology but is so typical of Madhva’s theology and mythology that in the opinion of many scholars it could well be a case of Christian influence on Madhva.

The following points deserve consideration in this context:

1. Madhva’s system is monotheistic. The supreme god is Viṣṇu. He has two sons, Brahmā and Vāyu. Here is a parallel to the Trinity, in which Vāyu is not only a son of Viṣṇu or God, salvation can be obtained only through Vāyu. From a Christian point of view it parallels in part the idea of salvation through Jesus alone and in part the idea of there being no salvation outside the Church which represents the activity of Holy Spirit.

2. Vāyu, the wind-god, plays a key role in the various incarnations of Viṣṇu somewhat comparable to the role of the Holy Spirit in the incarnation of Jesus. In the incarnation as Rāma, the wind-god appears as Hanumān and in the incarnation as Kṛṣṇa, as Bhīma, who replaces Arjuna in Madhva’s version of the Mahābhārata epic as Kṛṣṇa’s chief colleague.

3. Madhva himself is an incarnation of Vāyu according to the hagiographies of his philosophical school of Dvaita Vedānta or dualistic Vedānta. One can hear echoes of the adoptionist view in relation to Jesus here.

4. The sect founded by Madhva is known as Brahmasampradāya

8. R. C. Majumdar, ed., op.cit., p.366
9. A. A. Macdonell, op.cit., p.82.
12. Ibid., p.232.
13. Ibid., p.233.
'because it is said to have been first communicated by Viṣṇu to Brahmā(n), who spread it through the world with the help of his brother Vāyu'. An obvious parallel here is the association of the missionary activity of the early Church with the activity of the Holy Spirit.

(5) Hinduism in general is not regarded as proselytizing but Madhva was quite a missionary and the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement has its Indian roots in a movement which 'is an offshoot of Mādhvism'. Of all the Hindu movements the Hare Kṛṣṇas have been accused of being blatantly missionary. While they do not attribute this to the activity of Vāyu, Madhva, to whose movement they are related, did.

(6) Those who reject Vāyu are doomed to eternal damnation in Madhva's system. Both of these points, namely, (1) eternal damnation and (2) rejection of Vāyu are sentiments which rarely find an echo elsewhere in Hindu thought. But both find a symmetrical comparison in Christianity as those who reject the Church which represents the activity of the Holy Spirit are doomed, as all sins can be forgiven, except those against the Holy Spirit (Luke 12:10; Matthew 12:31-32).

(7) Madhva's hagiographies speak of the spirit of Viṣṇu coming upon a Brāhmaṇa and making him a messenger to proclaim the good news when Madhva appears on earth. This is reminiscent of the role of the Holy Spirit at the baptism (rather than the nativity) of Jesus (John 1:24-34).

(8) No case of glossolalia is recorded in relation to Madhva but it is claimed that he 'could speak the language of the mlechchhas (foreigners)'. This is reminiscent of the episode in the Acts where the apostles began to speak in foreign languages. It must be added, though, that no miraculous element is associated with this in the case of Madhva. It could, however, perhaps be connected with one of the functions of the Holy Spirit — that of elucidation and propagation of the doctrine.

IV

The foregoing discussion then yields the following conclusions:

(1) The Holy Spirit, as wind-god, does play a role in Hindu mythology. (2) The standard way in which this role is acted out is on the model of companionship of distinct beings — of Vāyu with Indra, Hanumān with Rāma etc. This differs from the Christian concept which involves a greater indwelling of the Holy Spirit with Jesus (Romans 8:1-11), (3) In the theology of Madhva, however, Vāyu plays a soteriological role analogous to the

Christian case. (4) Vāyu rarely forms part of a trinity; more typically it is part of a unity: Vāyu and Indra, Hanumān and Rāma; Bhīma and Kṛṣṇa. (5) The need for anything analogous to a doctrine of the Trinity 'of three persons but one in substance' is not felt within Hinduism in the context of relationship of Vāyu to other 'divinities'.