

A Short History of *God to Man and Man to God*

The following account is reproduced from the essay entitled “A History of the Discourses,” published in the revised sixth edition of Meher Baba’s Discourses (Myrtle Beach: Sheriar Foundation, 2007), vol. 4, pp. 3-80; this extract is taken from pp. 33-41, with the original footnotes eliminated.

The first complete reedit of the *Discourses* as a collection—and indeed, the most radical reworking of the original among all the principal editions until the present time—was accomplished by an early Western disciple named Charles Purdom. In her preface to the second edition of *God to Man and Man to God*, Margaret Craske, another early Western disciple, describes this distinguished British writer and scholar thus:

Charles Purdom was among the small group of close disciples (including this writer) that Meher Baba drew to him on his first visit to the West in 1931. He was an Englishman of wide interests: writer, editor and one of the early planners of the innovative Welwyn Garden City. In the early 1930s very little was known—even in intellectual circles—about Perfect Masters. Nevertheless, Purdom published articles in his newspaper, *The Everyman*, introducing this subject with special reference to Meher Baba, who at that time had not publically proclaimed his Avatarhood. In 1937, Purdom published *The Perfect Master*, the first book about Meher Baba and his work to appear in the West.

Schooled and acculturated in Britain during the final decades of its colonial era, Purdom, like many other Englishmen of his time, disliked sentimental effusion, and no doubt he found the prose expression in Baba’s original *Discourses* to be overly flowery and ornate. He preferred a more restrained, laconic style that eschewed superfluity: and there is no doubt that, writing in this idiom, he himself often achieved a powerful resonance. With such a background, and having already introduced Meher Baba in a significant way to the British reading public from the early 1930s, it would have been natural for Purdom to take interest in Baba’s *Discourses*, and at the same time, to feel that these essays would need to be significantly revamped in their prose style, and brought within the compass of a single volume, before they could be found acceptable by a Western reading public. He conveyed this request to Baba in 1948, and Baba, in turn, referred the question to Deshmukh. Initially Deshmukh was resistant; but after a few years he relented, and Purdom was allowed to proceed. The result was *God to Man and Man to God*, published in 1955 by Victor Gollancz, a distinguished publisher in London.

Purdom’s work clearly represents an edition of the *Discourses*, yet the original essays have been considerably transformed and shortened. The book title, according to Margaret Craske, was chosen by Baba himself. Most of the original article titles Purdom retained. The book includes sixty of the original sixty-nine essays of the five-volume set,

most of them essentially complete, though a few were significantly trimmed and reduced.³³ The primary thrust of Purdom's editing, however, lay in the arena of prose style; and here Purdom revised extensively, mostly in the interests of simplicity and economy of expression. In his introduction—which is itself a memorable and eloquent statement—Purdom characterizes his undertaking thus:

The discourses contained in this volume were not, usually, dictated word by word. Baba's method was to state a theme and to indicate a general outline, which was completed by an Indian disciple, though sometimes he would go over every word. The language and methods of illustrating what was said were for Indian hearers and readers; in preparing the discourses for western publication, they have not been re-written, but what seemed to be redundant words and phrases have been eliminated to reduce their length and to make them clear without, however, any other change.

In actual practice, Purdom's editing went beyond what this description would seem to suggest: from time to time he excised paragraphs or even extended passages, and other sections were greatly boiled down to a fraction of their original expanse. Occasionally he pared away certain significant details; for example, his rendering of the discourse on "Avatar" eliminates reference to the fifty-six God-realised souls on earth at all times. Nonetheless, Purdom did not "rewrite" in the sense that, while he trimmed and cut, he did not introduce new content or verbiage of his own. *God to Man and Man to God* does not attempt to "re-create" the *Discourses* in any way, and it should not be regarded as an interpretation or a "version." It is indeed what Purdom intended it to be—Meher Baba's *Discourses* somewhat pared down (sometimes in content) and expressed in a more economical prose style.

When *God to Man and Man to God* was published, Meher Baba's disciples and close devotees around the world seemed to be cognizant of Baba's practices in the dictation of messages, and none of the published responses express alarm at the fact that they had been significantly edited. In a letter published in the *Awakener Magazine* (a quarterly magazine) earlier that year, Mani S. Irani, Meher Baba's sister, referred to the matter thus.

Did I tell you that Charles Purdom has been working on the "*Discourses*," and the revised version will be published soon. There are those who believe that literally every word in the original *Discourses* is Baba's and are reluctant to accept any revised version; but actually, though Baba dictated for hours on the board, Professor Deshmukh embellished and worked up the points. Though Deshmukh has undoubtedly done brilliant work in many places, we feel there are many places where simplification of sentence structure or correction of grammar would enhance the beauty and simplicity which are the essence of Baba's teachings. Deshmukh preferred not to give his name at all (though he was urged by some of the *Mandali* to do so) as

he felt it was all done by Baba.

Now we find there are places in the original *Discourses* where Deshmukh obviously misinterpreted the point, with the result that there are several important errors. Attention was drawn to them by Baba-lovers in Andhra, who wrote to Eruch, asking confirmation on the points. . . .

Mani follows up this preface with a two-page summary of some of the “errors” in the five-volume edition of the *Discourses* as well as in Irene Conybeare’s recent book, *Civilisation or Chaos*. Plainly part of Mani’s purpose in commenting on Deshmukh’s contribution in the quoted passage above was to provide the wider family of Meher Baba’s devotees around the world—including many new followers—with a way of understanding why a reedit (such as Purdom’s) might be called for and how errors in the original text might have cropped up. As Meher Baba’s sister and one of his closest resident disciples, Mani would never have written and published such a letter without Baba’s direct oversight and approval.

The subject of the reediting of the original *Discourses* came in for discussion again in the next issue of the *Awakener Magazine*, this time in Filis Frederick’s review of *God to Man and Man to God*, newly published. The contrast between the original *Discourses* and Purdom’s reworking of them Filis characterized thus:

[Purdom’s] style of English is excellent —smooth-flowing, clear and to the point. The long-winded and inverted phraseology of the old edition is gone. However, I don’t doubt but that there will be, inevitably, partisans of the “old” discourses and of the “new.” I think this is as it should be—after all, this is a new Bible for mankind, destined for innumerable editions. To many, the literary form of the old *Discourses* was a very real stumbling-block to their appreciation. This new edition, a painstaking labor of love by Mr. Purdom, for which we all can be truly grateful, should remove this objection and win a wider readership in the West for these incomparable essays on the spiritual meaning of life.

Filis’s prediction that the different editions of the *Discourses* would each win their adherents proved to be true, and it remains true down to the present day. Yet while Purdom’s rendering certainly garnered its measure of acclaim, the later editions returned to the five-volume set as their base text, and subsequent editors were far more conservative in their treatment. Nonetheless, the fact that an edition as drastic as Purdom’s should, in its own time, have gained such ready acceptance among at least certain significant figures in the Baba world attests to a generally non-literalistic attitude that prevailed then among much of Meher Baba’s following where his published messages were concerned.

God to Man and Man to God appeared in the same year—1955—as *God Speaks*, Meher Baba’s supreme statement in the domain of metaphysics. Also in 1955, the five-volume set completed its final edition. The next few years witnessed the publication of

several of Meher Baba's other principal books —*Listen, Humanity* and *Life at its Best* in 1957, and *Beams from Meher Baba on the Spiritual Panorama* in 1958. And during this same stretch of years from the end of the New Life in 1952 through his final visit to the West in 1958, Meher Baba was issuing some of his most important short messages, such as “The Universal Prayer,” “Meher Baba’s Call,” “The Highest of the High,” “The Final Declaration,” and “The Universal Message.” This phase indeed represented the high water mark of this Avataric advent in terms of “literary” output.