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An Indian Jesus From Advaita Vedānta

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The first section of this paper indicates our theological method which gives importance to a hermeneutical context in terms of Pluralistic Inclusivism for the relational convergence of religions. The second section is on the person of Jesus. The person of Jesus is interpreted as the extrinsic denominator, name and form, effect, reflection and delimitation of Brahman. The third and final section expounds the function of Jesus so as to reveal the all-pervasive, illuminative and unifying power of the Brahman-Ātman as Witness and Self of all, as well as to proclaim the eternally present human liberation.

1. Our Aim and Method

Our aim is to arrive at an answer to the question Who is Jesus?'. In the past twenty centuries numerous attempts have been made by people in every generation to answer this question. From the Indian side, the striving for indigenous Christologies was great in the last and present centuries; India has tried to understand Jesus from various different perspectives, the Christological formulations which have used the Advaita Vedanta 'strand' being one important type. We, in this paper are limiting ourselves to Sankara's Advaita Ved anta, that again to the concept of Jīva-Brahman relation in Sankara's Advaita Vedanta, from within which understanding of Jesus or Jesuology is to be constructed. We selected Sankara's Advaita Vedanta because of the conviction that it directly or indirectly represents the culmination of God's self-disclosure to Indians and hence an ongoing effort for the development of Christian theology in India should be made on the basis of Śankara's Advaita Vedānta. We focus on

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the Jīva-Brahman relation in Sankara's Advaita Vedānta as it provides the best framework in the construction of an understanding of Jesus.

Our method is to give complete authority to the authentic writings of Śankara in order to explain 'who Jesus is'. We do not reinterpret Śankara's thought to explain Jesus. Nor do we reject any of Śankara's insights while understanding the person and work of Jesus. We receive totally all the insights of the Jiva-Brahman relation arrived at through the analysis of the authentic writings of Śankara and we use them fully in framing a model to understand Jesus. This is because our endeavour is the outcome of a double experience - experience being understood as the realization by the total being of the experiencer - namely Jesus-experience and Advaita Vedantic experience. In our view both these experiences are equally authentic, true and ultimate and hence we ventured to expound the former using the framework of the latter.

The following are the reasons for us to adopt such an approach: (a) Jesus is of the whole humanity and hence it is the whole humanity of all ages together who have to experience and express him. (b) Jesulogy or understanding Jesus is a continuous integrated process involving human persons and God simultaneously. Human person and God are not two separate realities. Every act, every experience, every existence is the act, experience and existence of God human. Reality is God-human. Theology is neither the once-for-all given unchanging dogma nor entirely a human construction. Revelation of God in Jesus and the human understanding of it are not two separate processes but rather one continuous integrated process. Reality is non-dual. (c) Knowledge of anything is an immediate existential knowledge formulated in the very knowing-process. In our knowing-process there exists nothing externally ready-made that can be adapted indigenised, incultured or contextualised.2 Our hermeneutical context decides the content of our knowledge.3 Epistemology of Advaita Vedanta enlightens us that in the supreme sense, there is no gap between the knower, the knowledge and the object known. In reality there is no gap between us, Jesulogy and Jesus. These three points make us aware of the truth

that world religions have a continuous authority in understanding Jesus, in formulating Jesulogies. And hence. (d) the basic question in the formulation of an Indian Christian theology is not 'what can we suitably adapt from Sankara's Advaita Vedanta so that our already formulated Christian theology will not be harmed?' but rather, 'when an Advaitin experiences Jesus how should he/she view both the already formulated Christian theology and Advaita Vedanta so that they may together be a basis for an Indian understanding of Jesus for him/her?' (e) The question 'why an Indian Christian theology' should be answered as 'to contribute to the very formulation of the human expression of the Revelation of God in Jesus': until India's contribution is received. Christology has not become Christology fully, 'Revealed Truth' has not become 'The Revealed Truth' in its possible expressive fulness. (f) Indian Christian Theological development may have to be in terms of the approach of Pluralistic Inclusivism in theology of religions. Pluralistic Inclusivism4 inspires each religious faith to be pluralistically inclusive, i.e. on the one hand each living faith is to become truly pluralistic by other faiths contributing to its conceptual content and, on the other, Inclusivism is to transform its meaning to witness the fulfilment of the theological and spiritual contents of one's own faiths in and through the contributions of other living faiths. Christians for example, can receive Advaitic insights and thus make Christology pluralistic. Also Sankara's Advaita can fulfil traditional Christology and the meaning of Inclusivism can get transformed. Pluralistic Inclusivism thus provides authentic dialogical theologies for the relational convergence of religions.⁵ Our attempt to develop a Jesulogy from the thought of Sankara's Advaita Vedanta in this paper is a practical demonstration of this fact.

Thus what we have struggled for is not to put in the language of Advaita Vedānta the already formulated human expression of the Revelation of God in Jesus but rather to formulate a fuller expression of that very Revelation with the help of Sankara's Advaita Vedānta so that humanity may be able to receive 'the Revealed Truth' in its possible expressive fulness as well as the Advaitin who is experiencing Jesus may attain

a viable theological category to express himself/herself the mystery that confronts him/her. We have to arrive at a correct understanding of the Jīva-Brahman relation as revealed from the authentic writings of Śankara, namely his bhāsya on Brahma Sūtra (B.S.B), bhāsyas on nine upanisads, Brhadāranyaka (Br.U.B), Chāndogya (C.U.B.), Taittiriya (Ta.U.B), Aitareya (Ai.U.B), Mundaka (Mu.U.B), Prasna (Pr.U.B.), Katha (Ka.U.B.), Kena (Ke.U.B) and Īśa (Is.U.B.), bhāsya on Bhagavad Gītā (B.G.B) and the independent treatise Upadesa-sāhasri (U.S.). Then, we have to use this understanding in expounding who Jesus is. The important features of our Jesulogy can be divided broadly as those related to the person of Jesus and those related to the function of Jesus, though in reality, there is no dichotomy between the person and function in him.

2. The important features of our Jesulogy related to the person of Jesus

Regarding the person of Jesus, the specific features of our Jesulogy emerge in the context of our presentation of him as the human representative, as the representative Jīva.

a) The constitution of the person of Jesus

The constitution of the person of Jesus, the human representative is the same as that of a human person. The Lord ($\overline{Isvarah}$) created ($samup\bar{a}d\bar{a}ya$) the human form ($purus\bar{a}k\bar{a}ram$) of Jesus from the five elements ($pamcabh\bar{u}tebhyah$) namely, space (kham), air ($v\bar{a}yuh$), fire (jyotih), water ($\bar{a}pah$) and earth ($prthiv\bar{i}$). The manifestation of names and forms are effected after the triplication (trivrtkaranah) or quintuplication ($pamc\bar{i}karanah$) of each element and this was true in the formation of the person of Jesus as well. And in this process the distinctiveness and preponderance (vaisesyata) of one or other elements are maintained which again was true in the formation of the person of Jesus. Thus the human form of Jesus is the result of a distinctive combination of the five elements.

In the human person of Jesus all the five elements namely space, air, fire, water and earth pessess respectively the qualities of sound, touch, colour, taste and smell together with all the qualities that belong to the predecessors of each (sahdasparśa rūparasagamdhottarottaragunāni pūrvapūrvagunasahitat)9. The senses of Jesus have for their objects things of their own kind (sajativarthamindriyam)10. The five senseobjects (buddhi bhedah) are sound, touch, colour, taste and smell and there are five sense-organs (buddhindriyani) of Jesus namely ear, skin, eye, tongue and nose for their perception. 11 The five activities are to speak, hold, walk, excrete and enjoy (vacanāda naviharanotsargānamdāh) and for these are the five motor-organs (karmendriyāni) of Jesus, located in the mouth, hands, feet, anus and the sex organ.12 The mind (manah) of Jesus characterised by volition, deliberation and doubt (samkalpavikalpasamśayalaksanam) controls his five sense-organs and five motor organs by residing inside them.¹³ These five sense-organs, five motor-organs and the mind together are called the eleven pranas of Jesus.14 But the foremost (śresthah) or chief (mukhyah) Prāna or vital force of Jesus through which the nourishment of his body and organs (sarīrendriyapustim) is accomplished is different from these eleven. 15 The intellect (buddhih) of Jesus which is also called heart (hrdayah)16 represents the faculty of determination (adhyavasāyah), and its function as internal organ (amtahkaranam) is to discriminate between right and wrong and thus attain the human goal.¹⁷

The Jīvātman of Jesus is the reflection of the Supreme Self in his body, senses, vital force, mind, intellect, and ego. ¹⁸ The intellect of Jesus which is not conscious by itself, being transparent (svacchatvāt) and next to the Self (ānamtaryāt) easily becomes (bhavati) the reflection (praticchāyā) of the light of Consciousness of the Self (atmacaitanyajyotih). ¹⁹ Next comes the mind (manah) of Jesus which catches the effulgence of the Consciousness (caitanyāvabhāsatā) through his intellect (buddhisamparkāt), then the organs (imdriyāh) of Jesus, through contact with his mind (manahsamyogāt) and lastly the body (śrīram) of Jesus through his organs (imdriyasamparkāt)²⁰. The five sheaths (pamcakosāh) of the human person

Jesus are physical, vital, mental, intelligent and blissful and the Self is implanted (mayah) in each of them as well as innermost to all of them.²¹

b) The person of Jesus interpreted as the extrinsic denominator (upādhi) of Brahman

During his life with us in this world, Jesus' intellect, mind, senses and body functioned as extrinsic denominators (upādhih) to the Inner Self. The own form, in the supreme sense, of the embodied being Jesus is the Supreme Lord Himself/Herself (parameśvarameva hi sarīrasya pāramārthi kam svarūpam); his embodiedness being a creation of extrinsic denominators (upādhikrtam tu sārīratvam) as per the texts like 'that thou art' (C.U.6.8.7), 'there is no other witness but this (Br.U.3.8.11).22 Jesus is neither unreal as a dream nor absolutely real (atvamtikam satvam) but the extrinsic denominator (upādhih) of Brahman, who is within the scope of relativity (vyavahārāpannam).23 The extrinsic denominator does not point to or explain itself, but always points to and explains that of which it is the extrinsic denominator; Jesus does not point to or explain himself but his person always points to and explains the Supreme Self of whom he is an extrinsic denominator. When one really understands the Reality as 'this is what is really and absolutely Real' (paramārthatah satyamiti) then he renounces all that is unreal in the shape of Jesus which is the product of mere words (anrtam vikārajatam vācārambhanam hitvā) and comes to realise that, Being who pervades (avastham satah) over the whole of Jesus alone is Real (satyam).24

There are Upanishad texts which show the difference (bhedah) between Jesus, the representative Jīva and Brahman (Jīvaprājñayoh) (Mu.U.3.1.8; 3.2.8; Br.U.3.7.15 etc.) and there are others which show non-difference (abhedah) between them (C.U.6.8-16; Br.U.1.4.10; 3.4.10; 3.7.3-22, etc.).²⁵ If that is so, the relation between Jesus and Brahman has to be understood in the following way alone: As light, space, the sun etc., appear to be diversified in relation to the activity taking place in such extrinsic denominators as a finger, a pail, water etc., and yet

they do not give up their natural unity (svābhāvikīmavišesāt-matām) so also the difference in the Self as Jesus is a creation of the extrinsic denominators (upādhinimitta evāyamātma-bhedah), in His/Her own essence the Self is one Self alone (svatastvaikātmyameva)²⁶. The interpretation that should be accepted by all those who follow the Upanisads is that the difference between Jesus the individual self and the Supreme Self (vijnānatmaparamātmano bhedah) is a creation of the extrinsic denominators like body etc., constitution by name and form which are conjured up by ignorance (avidyāpratyu-pasthāpitanāmarūparacita dehādyupādhinimittah). The difference is not from the supreme standpoint (na pāramārthika). This view is supported by such texts as C.U.6.2.1.; 7.25.3.; Mu.U.2.2.11; Br.U.2.4.6; 3.7.23; 3.8; B.G. 7.9; 13.2, 27; Br.U.1.4.10; 4.4.18; 4.4.25, etc.).²⁷

c) The Person of Jesus as the reflection (ābhāsa) and the delimitation (ghatākāsa) of Brahman

Brahman as related to the names and forms of the bodies which are its extrinsic denominators, are the Jīvas and it is this Jīva-Brahman relation that is explained by Sankara through the comparison pot-space (ghatākāsah) and Cosmic Space (mahākāśah), and the reflections (ābhāsah) of sun or moon or human person. The delimitation (paricchidyamanah) of the Supreme Self (para evātmā) by the extrinsic denominators of body, senses, mind, intellect etc., (dehemdriyamanobudayupādhibhih) is spoken of by the ignorant as Jesus, the embodied Self (sarīrah) and the case is similar to the appearance (avabhāsate) of space (nabhah) undivided though it is (aparicchinnamapi) as if divided (paricchinnavat) owing to such extrinsic denominators as a pot, a jar etc. (ghatakarakādyupadhivasat)28. We are able to speak about the difference as well as non-difference (bhedābhedau) between Brahman and Jesus, the representative of Jīvas simultaneously without contradiction on the basis of the analogy of cosmic space and pot-space. Until we receive instruction about the unity of the Self (atmaikatva) we can speak about the distinction between the Supreme Self and Jesus using the analogy of cosmic space and pot-space.29 But

just as the space within pots etc., when perceived as free from the limitations of the pots etc., are but the cosmic space; similarly Jesus is not logically different from the Supreme Self.³⁰ No change occurs in Brahman due to Its being the Cause of the creation including Jesus. The Creator Himself/Herself without undergoing any change (avikrtasya), has become the experiencer in Jesus, only difference which occurs is that relating to the extrinsic denominator just as space becomes divided owing to the presence of conditioning factors like pot etc.³¹

Jesus, the human representative is a reflection (abhasah) of the Supreme Self like the semblance of the sun in water (ialasūryakādivat). 32 Jesus as reflection of the Supreme Self conforms to the characteristics (dharmanuvayi) of the extrinsic denominators of Jesus, but according to the supreme sense the Self does not have these characteristics.33 There does not occur any change (parinamah) in the Self due to Jesus' reflection.34 The Self is merely the witness of all the modes of the intellect (sarvabauddhapratyayasāksitayā) of Jesus. 35 And Jesus being the reflection of the Self has reality only as the Self. Jesus the human representative is possessed of an existence due to that of the changeless Self (sannati hyesa kūtasthenātmanā tathā) though reflection as such has no being (vastutva)³⁶. As reflection is neither the property of the object nor of the reflection medium, something new has taken birth in Jesus; Jesus is the outcome of something entirely new effected through the ongoing interaction between Brahman and the world.37

d) The person of Jesus as the name and form (nāmarūpa) of Brahman

The multiplication effected in Brahman's becoming Jesus does not refer to becoming something extraneous to Its own essence (na hi arthāntaravisayam) as one does by begetting a son. 38 Jesus is only the manifestation of name and form that are latest in Self (ātmasthānabhivyakta) into all the states by retaining their own nature as the Self (atmasvarūpāparityāgenaiva) and remaining indistinguishable from Brahman in

time and space (brahmanā apravibhaktadeśakāle).³⁹ The symbol 'Son' cannot express the depth of the relation between Jesus and Brahman; name and form (namarupa) would be a better symbol; and India suggests this through Śankara's Advaita Vedānta.

Jesus, the representative name and form pre-existed in Brahman as unmanifested name and form $(avy\bar{a}krtan\bar{a}mar\bar{u}-pah)$; as the potential seed $(b\bar{i}ja\hat{s}aktih)^{40}$. Being the representative of the whole humanity, Jesus is the representative name, form and action of the whole humanity. He symbolises sound in general $(\hat{s}abdas\bar{a}m\bar{a}nyam)$, form in general $(r\bar{u}pas\bar{a}m\bar{a}nyam)$ and action in general $(kriy\bar{a}s\bar{a}m\bar{a}nyam)^{41}$. Jesus is common to all names, forms and actions which are his own particular forms $(\bar{a}tmavi\hat{s}esaih)$. It is in and through the manifestation of the body and organs of Jesus, the name and form of Brahman, that the Self's form without extrinsic denominators $(\bar{a}tmano\ nirup\bar{a}dhimkam\ r\bar{u}pam)$ which is Pure Consciousness $(praj\bar{n}\bar{a}naghan\bar{a}khyam)$ could be known $(pratikhy\bar{a}yeta)$.

The unmanifested name and form (avyākrtanāmarūpah) can become the reality-providing factors (upadanabhute sambhavatah) of Jesus and it is in this sense that the Omniscient Being (sansarvajñah) who is entirely different from name and form (namarūpavilaksanam) is said to create (nirmimite). Jesus by virtue of His/Her oneness with the name and form which are the reality-providing factors that are identical with Himself/Herself (ātmabhūtanāmarūpopādāna $bh\bar{u}tah)^{43}$. The existence (astitvam) of Jesus does not contradict the non-duality of the Self. When Jesus, the representative name and form is tested from the vision of highest meaning (paramarthadrstya) as to whether he is different from the Supreme Self or not in substance (tatvat), he ceases to be separate in substance (vastvamtare tatvato na stah), like the foam of water, or like the modifications of clay, such as a jar (salilaphenaghatādivikāravadeva)44.

(e) The person of Jesus expounded as the effect (karya) of Brahman

In our Jesulogy, we have further expounded that if Brahman

is the Cause, Jesus is the effect. Jesus, the effect existed in Brahman, the internal reality-providing (upādhānakāranam) as well as efficient cause (nimittakāranam) even before he took birth in this world. The special potency for Jesus, the representative of all Jīvas must be the very essence of Brahman, the Cause, and Jesus the effect must be related to the very core of that potency (karanasyatmabhuta śaktih śakteścātmabhūtam kārvam)45. Self is the efficient Cause of Jesus because there is no other ruling principle (adhistatr) and the Self is the internal reality-providing Cause because there is no other substance from which (yatah) Jesus could originate.46 Despite the non-otherness (ananyatva) between Brahman and Jesus, Brahman, the Cause, as Cause is ontologically superior and anterior to Jesus the effect as effect. Jesus is non-other than Brahman as his internal realityproviding cause, whereas Jesus is not non other than Brahman as his efficient cause (nimittakāranāvyatirekastu kāryasya nāsti)47. The relation between Jesus, the human representative and Brahman is tadatmya relation, i.e. non-reciprocal relation: Jesus the name and form in all his states has his Self in Brahman alone (brahmanaivātmavatī), but Brahman does not have Jesus as Its Self (na brahma tadatmakam)48. Jesus, the effect is non-existent in isolation from (vyatirekenābhāvah) the Supreme Brahman (param brahma), the Cause. The entire body of effects including Jesus has no existence apart from Brahman (brahmavyatirekena kāryajātasyābhāvah)49.

Moreover, the person of Jesus proclaims the gospel that all have their root in Being (sanmūlāh). Brahman as Cause is the root of Jesus the effect. It is the Supreme Brahman which is the support (dhrtih), respository (āyatanam) and impounder (one who holds in position) (vidhārayita) of Jesus the representative of the whole universe. Again Brahman is the controller (adhyaksah) and director (prerayita) of Jesus who represents all the effects. Due to its independence (svātamtryāt) Brahman cannot be impelled by any desire. Its desire for the creation of Jesus the representative of all is essentially Reality-Knowledge and pure in virtue of it being its own Self; Brahman's volitions regarding Jesus are not other than Its own Self. But Jesus, the human representative,

bereft of lordship as he is, has no power of creatorship (na vyākaranasāmarthyamasti) and even in the case of those things, with regard to which he has any power (sāmarthyam), it is only under the Supreme Lord's dispensation (parame-svārayattameva) that he has this.⁵⁷ The Lord is all-pervasive whereas Jesus exists only in the body which is the seat for his experience (bhogādhistāna)⁵⁸. It is through the Supreme Lord's grace alone (anugrahahetukenaiva) that Jesus becomes the sign of liberation which results from knowledge (vijñānena moksasiddhirbhavitumarhati)⁵⁹. But this does not mean that the importance of human freedom and the value of human efforts are not given emphasis with regard to Jesus. The Lord is the ordainer of results (Īśavarameva phalahetum) as per the human effort (karmānurupam) of Jesus.⁶⁰

(f) Jesus and the other humans: The significance of the person of Jesus lies in his denial of any significance for himself through complete self-sacrifice

Our interpretation of the person of Jesus as the extrinsic denominator (upādhi), name and form (nāmarūpa), and effect (kārya) of Brahman affirms the relation of total dependence on the part of Jesus with regard to Brahman. It is this total dependence on the part of Jesus upon Brahman that is expressed in the self-sacrifice of Jesus. The relevance of Jesus lies in his not claiming any significance for himself; in his total sacrifice of himself for others and it is this fact which we have tried to bring out by presenting Jesus as the human representative, as the representative Jīva.

As representative Jīva, Jesus has no separate reality for himself; his reality lies in sacrificing himself and finding his reality in Brahman. Jesus in particular form is unreal (akāravisesatoanrtam); he is real only in his own form which is the form of being (svatah sanmātrarūpataya satyam). Jesus is real in so far as he is of the nature of Being (sadātmanā satyatvābhyupagamāt). Also all empirical dealings (sarvavyavahārānām) of Jesus are real in so far as they are of the nature of Being. Jesus is only the manifestation of name and form that are latent in Self (ātmasthānabhivyakta) into

all the states by retaining their own nature as the Self (atmasvarūpāparityāgenaiva) and remaining indistinguishable from Brahman in time and space (brahmanā apravibhakta deśakale). The life of Jesus is the affirmation that all names and forms are modifications and are real by the Self who is Being and unreal by themselves (sarvam ca nāmarūpani sadatmanaiva satya vikarajatam svatasvanrtameva).62 If we understand the organs (imdrivani) of us or our representative Jesus or the objects of the world (imdrivavisayāni) as the Supreme Lord that is mava and we are under avidva.63 The person of Jesus proclaims that if we identify any aspect of his person as Brahman, we are in ignorance; but if we identify in every aspect of his person Brahman and Brahman alone, we have come to the experience who he truly is. Jesus in his person always affirmed the reality of Brahman and helps us to do the same. But the Christian Church in its history has reversed this very often to affirm the reality of Jesus in the person of God and thus totally misinterpreted the meaning of Jesus. If that is so, it is India, through Sankara's Advaita Vedanta who corrects the misinterpretation of the meaning of Jesus caused by the Christian Church through providing the ideological basis for the self-sacrifice of Jesus and thus explaining his meaning for us: It is Being Himself/Herself who is perceived in a form other than His/Her own, namely Jesus, and hence we should not make any assumption of anything other than Being at any time or place (kadacitkkacidapi). For those who know the real character of the rope and clay, the name and idea of serpent and jar cease and in the same manner for those who know the real character of Being (tadvatsadvivekadarsinām), the name and idea of Jesus cease.64 We have to sacrifice ourselves as Jesus did to discover our reality as Being.

(To be continued)

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- 48. Ta.U.B., 2.6.1; B.S.B., 2.1.18; B.S.B., 2.2.38; B.S.B., 2.1.9; B.S.B., 2.1.14.
- 49. B.S.B., 2.1.14.
- C.U.B., 6.8.4, 7; Ka.U.B., 2.3. Introduction; Ka.U.B., 2.3.1; Ka.U.B., 2.3.12.
- 51. B.S.B., 1.3.11.
- 52. B.S.B., 1.3.1.
- 53. B.S.B., 3.2.32; B.S.B., 10.3.1; B.S.B., 1.3.16.
- 54. C.U.B., 5.1.15; B.S.B., 1.4.15.
- 55. Mu.U.B., 3.1.1.
- 56. Ta.U.B., 2.6.1.
- 57. B.S.B., 2.4.20.
- 58. B.S.B., 1.2.3.
- 59. B.S.B., 2.3.41.
- 60. B.S.B., 2.3.42; B.S.B., 3.2.38, 39, 41.
- 61. C.U.B., 7.17.1.
- 62. C.U.B., 6.3.2; Ta.U.B., 2.6.1.
- 63. Br.U.B., 2.5.19; B.G.B., 18.50; B.S.B., 1.4.3.
- 64. C.U.B., 6.2.2, 3.