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The Shape of Indian Christian Theology

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The Problem

What should be the 'shape' of Indian Christian theology? In the West the traditional shape is Trinitarian, and goes back to the Nicene and Apostles' creeds with their three clearly defined sections dealing with God the Father and Creator, with Christology and Soteriology, and with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, in which is usually included ecclesiology. This—with minor variations—has remained the usual pattern for writers who have sought to deal comprehensively with the whole spectrum of theology, as distinct from monographs on particular doctrines. It is a shape which can be seen in such diverse authors as Origen, Peter Lombard, Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, Brunner and even Tillich, as well as in the many official symbols of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, such as the confessions of Heidelberg and Westminster, or the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. It is seen in most of the popular manuals of theology used in Indian theological colleges and Bible schools today, for example Marcus Ward's *Outlines of Christian Doctrine* or T. C. Hammond's *In Understanding be Men*.

The Present Shape of Indian Christian Theology

Hitherto very few Indian theologians have attempted a comprehensive *Summa*, the nearest approach to completeness perhaps being Appasamy's *The Gospel and India's Cultural Heritage*. Various attempts have been made to extract a systematic *corpus* from the scattered writings of thinkers like Chenchiah, Chakkarai, etc., but the writers themselves have on the whole judged that a comprehensive approach is for the moment premature. Their view has been that the materials for an edifice of Indian Christian theology are gradually being assembled, as David prepared for the building of the Temple, but that the time for a systematising Solomon has not yet come, and so no distinct shape for the structure has begun to emerge. Different Indian Christian theologians have dealt with individual doctrines in distinctive and original ways: one could mention Goreh's treatment of the idea of eternal punishment; Brahmabandhab's exposition of the Trinity as *Saccidananda*; Chakkarai's writing on the incarnation as *avatara*; Chenchiah on the Holy Spirit, etc. But hitherto the idea of writing a comprehensive *summa* of systematic theology has seemed to be either premature (as Fr Johanns thought), or undesirable because un-Indian, as Chenchiah, that inveterate opponent of dogmatic theology, believed.

Some authors have indicated their awareness of the problem. It is seen, for example, in the titles which the late Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai

gave to his books, titles which show that the author was anxious to present Christian doctrine not merely in an Indian terminology (*nama*) but also in an Indian shape (*rupam*). He used the titles *Sri Khrista Gita*, *Daivi Vachanamrut* (recalling the work of Swami Narayana), *Khristopanishad*, *Premopanishad*, *Prema Tattvadarshana* and *Adhyatmadarshana*, and each of these titles indicates a desire to present Christian teaching in a *shape* which would appeal to Hindu readers. (Gandhiji's motive was perhaps not dissimilar when he gave an English title to the commentary on the *Gita* which he originally wrote in Gujarati; the Gujarati title was *Anasaktiyoga*, but this was translated into English as *The Gospel of Selfless Action*).

A similar concern can be seen in Raymond Panikkar's well known book *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. This is essentially a book on Christology; it takes the form, however, of a commentary on a verse of the *Brahmasutra*, one of the basic texts of Hinduism. What Panikkar is doing is to give a 'Christological *bhasya*' (commentary) on a fundamental Hindu text, showing that the text finds its deepest—its ultimate—meaning in Christ.

The Shape of Hindu Theology

Can we say that Hindu theology has any specific shape? We are not, of course, referring to the *sruti*, the basic, inspired Scriptures, but to the systematic exposition of the Scriptures; and for this reason a Christian exposition which takes the shape of *Gita* or *Upanishad* does not meet our requirements, for Hindu theology regards these as basic texts to be commented on rather than as themselves examples of systematic theology.

In modern days we have, of course, the great standard expositions of Hindu philosophy, like those of Dasgupta or Radhakrishnan. But the shape of these great works is western rather than Indian, and owes much to standard western histories of philosophy and histories of dogma, as well, perhaps, as to the great western works of systematic theology. They do not, therefore, provide a model for Indian Christian theology.

Where, in fact, does the Hindu theologian turn for the great, comprehensive expositions of his faith? The answer surely is that if he is an *advaitin* he will turn to the works of Sankara, and if he is a follower of the *bhakti marg*a he will look to Ramanuja, in much the same way as a Roman Catholic theologian will still tend to look to Aquinas.

Pressing our inquiry a stage farther we ask, what is the characteristic 'shape' of the theology of Sankara? The most comprehensive and basic of all his works is probably the *Vedantasutra Bhasya*, his great commentary on the *Brahmasutra*. And it is interesting to notice that the most famous of Ramanuja's works is his *Sri Bhasya*, a commentary on the same work. In fact one of the clearest and simplest ways of contrasting the teaching of these two great thinkers is—as Thibaut demonstrated in somewhat controversial vein in his twin commentaries in the Sacred Books of the East series (1904)—to compare their interpretation of identical passages of the *Brahmasutra*. In other words, the basic 'shape' of classical Hindu theology appears to be the *Bhasya*

or commentary on some particular portion of the *sruti*. And the book of scripture which appears to be most frequently used as the basis of a comprehensive theological commentary is the *Brahmasutra*, which is widely regarded as the most authoritative summary of the teaching of the Vedas and Upanishads. (A case could, no doubt, be made out for regarding the *Bhagavadgita* as the most fundamental Hindu scripture, but in fact so far as Sankara and Ramanuja are concerned the *Brahmasutra* appears to be the text which provides the basis for the most detailed and systematic statement.) Confirmation of the importance of the *Brahmasutra*—obscure as it is, and so condensed as to be virtually unintelligible without a commentary—is provided by the fact that several of the great modern Hindu writers, like Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan, have also used it as the basis for commentaries which express at length their own particular interpretation of the ‘Hindu view of life’. Raymond Panikkar’s ‘Christological *Bhasya*’ on the same text has indicated that he too regards this scripture as a fundamental one.

The most typical ‘shape’ of Hindu theology thus appears to be a *bhasya* on one of the fundamental scriptures. This leaves open the possibility of different ‘schools’ of theology, like those of Sankara and Ramanuja, since Hinduism as a whole has never sought to establish a universally-accepted orthodoxy like that fixed by the great Councils of the first five centuries of the Christian Church. The typical shape of Hindu theology is then the *bhasya* on a book of scripture—a *bhasya* which gives a comprehensive statement of a particular school of thought.

Christian Theology in the Shape of Bhasya

I believe that we are here provided with an important clue to an acceptable ‘shape’ for an Indian systematic theology. Systematic theology should, in the Indian cultural milieu, be presented as a *bhasya* on a fundamental scripture. The question then arises, ‘Which scripture?’ Panikkar has given us a fascinating Christological *bhasya* on part of the *Brahmasutra*, one of the basic scriptures of the Indian cultural background. Yet a Hindu scripture could never become the basis of a comprehensive Christian theological statement. What is needed—and surely it corresponds very closely to the Indian way of theological thinking—is a *bhasya* on a basic and comprehensive unit of the Christian *sruti*.

The next question is, ‘Which part of the Christian scriptures is to be chosen for such a *bhasya*?’ The tendency among Indian Christian theologians hitherto has been to turn to the Fourth Gospel, which was so beloved of Sundar Singh, and whose exposition forms the basis of much of Appasamy’s writing. But is a Gospel really suitable for this purpose? A comprehensive statement of the Christian faith requires a treatment of many themes which are not fully expounded in the Gospels—even the Fourth Gospel. Where in the New Testament do we find the fullest and most detailed theological statement of the Christian faith? Surely the answer is the epistle to the Romans (with Galatians perhaps as a ‘Dogmatics in Outline’). We come therefore to the rather startling conclusion that if we wish to have an Indian

systematic theology whose 'shape' is close to that of Hindu theology it should take the form of a *bhasya* on Romans. Like the *Brahmasutra* Romans is not without its obscurities and problems—'in which are some things hard to understand, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest . . . unto their own destruction'! (2 Peter 3:16).

Here we are reminded that a commentary on Romans has in fact already been one of the crucial and basic 'shapes' of reformed theology. The commentaries on Romans by both Luther and Calvin have been very influential in the development of classical Protestant theology, and it was the reading of Luther's Romans which brought about John Wesley's conversion. The publication of Barth's *Romans* in 1919 was the beginning of the theological revolution which was to lead to the most comprehensive statement of systematic theology of modern times, the *Church Dogmatics*. And, in fact, when we study Barth's *Romans* and compare its 'shape' with Sankara's *Vedantasutra Bhasya* or Ramanuja's *Sri Bhasya* we find not a few correspondences. For example:

- (i) The commentary is primarily theological rather than critical, grammatical or historical.
- (ii) The commentator or *bhasyakara* covers the whole of the scripture studied, but does not hesitate to write at much greater length on the passages which he considers to be of the greatest importance.
- (iii) The material is divided up into sections or topics (known as *adhikarana* in Shankara), and when added together these comprise a comprehensive treatment of the main theological themes.
- (iv) The commentator makes every endeavour to be true to the original meaning of the scripture, not twisting it into an alien pattern, as Sri Parananda did in his Vedantic commentaries on Matthew and John. At the same time, however, he seeks to be the vehicle or medium through whom the essential reality or truth of the scripture makes itself known in systematic form.
- (v) The commentator makes a point of refuting false teaching. In Sankara's *bhasya* this process takes the form of a dialogue, the *purvapaksa* putting up arguments which are refuted, the true principle or *siddhanta* being then established.
- (vi) The *bhasya* is a faithful presentation of the theological outlook of its author. Barth goes on to write the *Dogmatics*, and Sankara and Ramanuja write further works, yet the *bhasya* is the best place to start in order to gain a clear idea of their teaching.

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Indian theologians on the whole have not taken kindly to Barth. Appasamy, for example, feels that the Barthian impact interrupted the true course of Indian theology for a whole generation, from the time of Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*

(1938) right up to the early sixties, when the 'dialogue' work of Devanandan and others began to lead to a less negative attitude towards Hinduism. Many theologians, in both India and the West, came to feel that theology had taken a wrong turn when Barth's *Romans* suddenly put Rudolf Otto and Baron Von Hügel in the shade!

Yet now, at the very moment when in most places the reaction against Barth is in full swing, we seem to be drawn towards a rather surprising conclusion: the conclusion that of all post-reformation western theologians, the one who in his method and the 'shape' of his theology comes closest to the Hindu—or rather the Indian—ideal is none other than Karl Barth! It is a conclusion that would no doubt have surprised, but perhaps also delighted him.

The Christological Bhasya as the Shape of Theology

Let us now attempt to formulate our conclusions:

- (i) The next step in the evolution of an Indian systematic theology would appear to lie in the field of the *bhasya*—the theological exposition of a book of the Christian scriptures.
- (ii) Looking to the need for comprehensiveness and for a treatment of all the fundamental Christian beliefs, the most promising basis for such a *bhasya* would appear to be the epistle to the Romans. (There is no reason, however, why many other Biblical books should not be used in the same way, for example the Fourth Gospel or the epistle to the Hebrews.)
- (iii) Such a *bhasya* should aim at comprehensiveness, i.e., it should seek to cover all the main doctrines of the Christian faith. In doing this, however, it should not distort the shape of the *sruti*, but should be an honest, scholarly commentary. Because it is a *theological* commentary, however, it will naturally give scope for the commentator's own interpretation of the material. In this interpretation he will be guided by the witness of the *sruti* as a whole, and will also frequently refer to the work of other theologians, past and present, eastern and western.
- (iv) The 'order' of subjects or topics will not necessarily correspond to the Trinitarian order of the early creeds and later confessions, for the *sruti* itself will dictate the order. At this stage of our discussion we cannot lay down rules for the order of topics. They might simply follow the order of the argument of *Romans* (so Barth in his commentary). Or they might follow the order of subjects in Peter's sermons in *Acts* (so C. H. Dodd in *The Apostolic Preaching*). There is, however, much to be said for T. F. Torrance's view that true theology finds its own 'shape', as it approximates more and more closely to the truth as it is in Christ.
- (v) It is to be hoped that different theologians will eventually write their different *bhasyas*. We could, for example, have a *bhasya* reflecting the Christian *jnana marga* of Brahmandhab, another expounding the *bhakti marga* of Appasamy

or the way of Christian action (*karma marga*) of M. M. Thomas. Another could present the 'new creation' theology of Chenchiah, to say nothing of future theologians who might attempt to unite two or more of these 'strands' into something new. We are not at this stage seeking to establish a universally accepted creed or confession for the Indian Church; such uniformity in any case is an ideal which finds little response in India.

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It would seem that such a *bhasya* offers greater possibilities for the development of a genuine Indian theology than is to be found either in the piecemeal approach which has hitherto predominated, or in any effort to compose a comprehensive Indian *Summa* in the shape of western models like Aquinas, Calvin or Barth.

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The *bhasya* should establish the shape of systematic theology.
The *sruti* should establish the shape of the *bhasya*.

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