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# Interpreting Christ to India: The Contribution of Roman Catholic Seminaries

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With a view to writing this paper, every Roman Catholic institution in India where some theology is taught was contacted. Most of them replied regretting the fact that they had no contribution to make to our survey or study. One said that to Adivasi students, Hindu religious traditions, ideas and concepts were as strange as western religious traditions and concepts, and this was one of the reasons why not much was being done there to Indianize christology. Another promised to send an article or two written in the context of dialogue with Islam, and that would be worthwhile since the Indian dimension of theology seemed for most people exclusively restricted to Hinduism. But these articles never arrived. Two others observed that there was no possibility for an Indian christology or theology to evolve unless first we begin to live the Gospel faith right here in India, for theology should arise from a life-situation. We are thus left with very limited material: the main sources are the notes on Christology (1971) and an article in *Das Konzil von Chalkedon*, Vol. III (1954; =KC III), entitled 'Das Christus-Mysterium und die indische Lehre von den Avatāras', (The Mystery of Christ and the Indian Teaching on Avatāras), both by Joseph Neuner of the Pontifical Athanaeum, Poona. There are also the christology notes of James Dupuis of Vidya Jyoti, Delhi, which, at the point that interests us, come very close to Neuner's. Finally there is an article by the writer of this paper, with the title 'An Indian Christology: A Discussion of Method', published in *Jeevadhāra* (May-June 1971).

## PROMISE AND FULFILMENT

Neuner presents Christ as the fulfilment in history of man's longings for, and dreams of, a divine saviour sojourning in our midst on earth. All men are called to salvation in Christ, and that from the beginning of human history. The promise of grace and of a Saviour implied in this call has ever accompanied man on all his ways. The destiny thus inscribed into man's being can emerge to the psychological level and find expression in myths. As in our day to day life desires seek realization in dreams, so in the religious sphere man's orientation to Christ, in its striving for realization, projects myths. In the myth man's hope takes on form and face. Such in particular is the Avatara tradition in India. Though not history, myths mirror the historical reality of our Christward destiny. That is why in their basic motive

they resemble Christianity so closely. The Avatara traditions speak of God's miraculous coming, the unfolding of his power and the joy of love in his reign. In spite of all their limitations, myths of divine comings remain mankind's permanent witness to Jesus Christ. Myths of peoples are like children's happy Christmas dreams: they are not yet true, but neither are they simply false; they have the truth of promise. Hence their only meaningful explanation is Christ Jesus in his historical reality. Christ is thus presented to Hindu India as the fulfilment of its religious dreams expressed in its myths of divine comings and born of its call to salvation in Christ. The Hindu tradition of Avatara should be acknowledged as 'the profoundest expression of man's desire and destiny to meet God not only in his transcendence but in the closeness of human contacts'. (Notes p. 190; KC III, pp. 822-824).

We have here an approach to our problem, full of significance and promise. It is modelled on God's method in biblical history. In the bible, Christ is not introduced all on a sudden without warning and expectation, as a wholly strange reality violently breaking into the religious world of man and imposing himself extrinsically. He rather comes into a hall made ready for him and awaiting his arrival, In India as in Israel he comes as an answer to the cry of the human heart and as fulfilment of God's promise of which the cry itself was born. In examining and discussing this presentation we should perhaps ask ourselves if there is in Hinduism no more than the dream and the myth looking forward to Christ, if Christ himself is not present as grace, as promise, as the source of the religious experience which finds partial expression in the sacred books and religious traditions, especially those dealing with Avatara, and as the content of this experience and the object of a loving devotion which has been something historically real.

### PARALLELS AND CONTRASTS

As already mentioned, the Avatara doctrine bears certain resemblances to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Neuner's treatment of these similarities clearly implies that they, taken together, could constitute a place of sympathetic encounter between the two faiths, and show a way of interpreting Christ to India. The parallels are as follows. (i) As in the Incarnation, so also in the Avatara the freedom and initiative of God in regard to his entrance into the world is expressly maintained. God comes, not compelled by nature, or constrained by *karma*, or carried by the run of the *yugas*, but of his own free will, mastering nature which is his own, with full knowledge and awareness and a clear purpose. The miraculous at his entrance, like virginal conception, emphasizes the fact of God's freedom from nature's laws and the chain of creaturely causality. No virgin birth is narrated of Krishna as it is of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas and of Jesus; but the spiritual character of Krishna's birth is stressed. Before he is in his mother's womb he is present in his parents' spirit. (ii) In both traditions the absolute transcendence of God even in his earthly sojourn is safeguarded. God remains God and is not mixed

up with nature, world or *prakṛti*. (iii) There is a twofold purpose both for the Incarnation and the Avatara, namely, God's self-revelation and, through it, man's salvation. The Beyond is made manifest in the Avataras, and knowledge and possession of the Beyond makes for *Mokṣa*. Saving knowledge is facilitated by the re-establishment of *Dharma* on earth and the protection of the good, which are the joint purpose of Krishna's comings. These similarities point to possible approaches which could be utilized in interpreting Christ to devotees of Avataras.

But if there are similarities between these two religious traditions, there exist also differences and contrasts. In interpreting Christ to India, it will be of vital importance to take these into account. The differences which Neuner notes are: (i) that Krishna is God and not Son of God as Jesus is, and therefore there is no question of sonship either for the Avatara or for those who receive him; (ii) that the Avatara is a manifestation of the Absolute and not a communication of the Trinitarian Mystery to man; (iii) that Krishna's coming is a presence rather than the fulfilment of the prophetic call and history of a people; (iv) that by his advent the world-process is not radically changed and history is not definitively oriented towards a transcendent destiny, while this is what Christ has done; (v) that in the absence of such a decisive intervention on God's part, he has to come into the world over and over again, *yuge yuge*, unlike his once-for-all action in Christ for the redemption of the world; (vi) that the Avataras save men out of the world and not the world itself, there being no redemption for *prakṛti* and no resurrection for the body; (vii) that the Avatara himself is not truly human and there is no real becoming-man since God in coming into the world has nothing to do with *prakṛti*, his humanity being a doctist appearance and illusion and play-acting, *līla*; (viii) and that therefore there is in India no God who takes on himself our *karma*, who shares in the human situation of kenosis, who labours, suffers and dies.

Surely the warning Neuner gives should be taken seriously. All the same I have the feeling that a different understanding of several items on this list is possible. A deeper plumbing may well prove that the Hindu experience of a Saviour-God in our midst lies much closer to the Christian experience than this list suggests. If for instance the once-for-all of God's action in Christ is understood not in isolation but in relation to (a) the presence of Christ's saving grace in human hearts and societies from the beginning of history, (b) to the progressive character of Old Testament revelation made through God's repeated interventions, (c) to Christ's present ongoing activity in the church and the world through his Spirit, and (d) to the salvific meaning of his second coming, then perhaps new light may fall on the Hindu conception of God's repeated Avataras, especially since not all idea of uniqueness is absent in their tradition, the *Kurukṣetra* revelation situation, for example, being once and for all. We should also clarify the real content of the statement that not only men but the 'world' has been radically changed and saved by and in Christ.

When we are distressed by the Hindu position that *prakṛti* is not saved but left behind, we should also remember that for Ramanuja the world is and will one day fully become the body of God, and that at the resurrection men and women do not marry. Or again is there doctism when Krishna's humanity is given as much reality as is given to other men and the world at large? We cannot go here into a thorough discussion of these matters. Suffice it to note that if the method of comparison and contrast (the validity of which in the sphere of living and lived religions is highly debatable) is followed, the nature of the material requires that one whole be compared with another, and not fragments of one with fragments of another. Note also that in interpreting Christ to India our leading interest cannot centre on objective religion with its ideas and formulations but on men's experience of God and the kind of life this experience shapes.

### THE IMAGE OF THE FATHER

There is another and very significant manner in which Neuner moves towards an Indian interpretation of Christ. This is seen in his discussion of image-worship in India. In the context of his treatise he is seeking an understanding of the cult of images in the light of the Incarnation. He says that the cult of images is 'wonderfully fulfilled in Christ in whom we are allowed to see and touch God himself, and to make his visible presence the centre of the cult'. If so, image cult may be an excellent medium in which to present the Lord to our land.

Men do not usually give religious worship to things; they do to the image what they wish to do to the person who is represented. 'In the image God is worshipped; through it man enters into contact with him; with it the whole drama of the divine life is enacted'. 'Divine life is timeless; in the image it becomes present and effective for the worshipper'. A thirteenth century Tamil text by Pillai Lokacarya is quoted, expressive of the mystery of God's hiddenness in the image, and reminiscent of Christmas hymns. 'God when present in an inanimate idol becomes in all respects subject to his devotee. Though omniscient he seems without knowledge; though alive and conscious he appears inanimate; though independent he seems entirely to depend upon others; omnipotent he seems powerless; though perfect he seems to be needy . . . He is the Lord but hides his lordship; the invisible makes himself the object of the senses; the inapprehensible brings himself within our easy reach; he makes himself present and near in holy places, in shrines and temples, in our towns and villages and in our very homes and in the person of his saintly men'. The last part of this quotation shows an ascent from things and places to the person of holy men. To those who think along these lines and come thus far, one should be able to suggest a further step and say that finally God makes himself present and near in One who is the saintliest of men because he is also identical with God's Eternal Born Personal Image. In him, then, 'the instinct of idolatry found in all religions' will be healed and fulfilled. (Notes pp. 192-194).

Healing is needed, for there is danger in image-making. To quote Neuner: 'God is incomprehensible and must be found and adored as he is, not as man would have him. In every image man tries to express his own idea of God, and to get hold of God and his power . . . Thus image worship in concrete means man taking God's own place, making himself the centre and aim of his worship; not man serves God, but God is taken into man's service' (Notes p. 196). This judgement is severe. The fact is that Neuner's own principle of man's dreams of God's descent, born of man's Christward orientation, as well as available texts and facts, including those cited earlier by Neuner himself, would warrant the position that in the image men were not, as a rule, seeking to express their own idea of God, but the idea of God that shaped within them from God's own call and touch and word and self-communication in nature, in prayer, in mystical experience, in conscience, in the basic structure and orientation of their own hearts. In Christ, God at last fulfils and perfects this divinely initiated longing of man to see and hear and touch God. Man responds by allowing himself to be taken hold of by the Divine, and by expressing the experience in his limited way in images of stone or wood or word. Neuner actually agrees with this when he proceeds to point out that, in spite of aberrations, image worship 'often reveals the sincere desire to love and serve God', and expresses a greater closeness to God than an idealistic philosophy. Neuner quotes P. Charles and M. Eliade: 'The idol worshipper, despised by philosophic schools as a publican, is perhaps less distant from the kingdom of God than Plato'. 'Far from thinking of pagan religious ways (fetishes, idols, and such) as false and degenerate stages in the religious feeling of mankind fallen in sin, one may see them as desperate attempts to prefigure the mystery of the Incarnation. The whole religious life of mankind—expressed in the dialectics of hierophanies—would from this standpoint, be simply a waiting for Christ'. Thus Neuner's discussion of image worship opens up a well-laid and direct way of presenting Christ to India's masses: as the final and perfect living Image of God fashioned by God himself, so that in this saintly Image we may see and touch and worship Him, and all other images may find meaning, unity and redemption.

## I AM THE WAY

A third approach indicated in Neuner's writings is to seek to present Christ as the *Marga*, the Way. Hindus generally point to three inter-related ways as means of salvation: *karma*, *jñāna* and *bhakti*. To our purpose his treatment of *karma marga* is particularly helpful (notes pp. 318-324). The Gita sees that *Karma* or work, comprising all human activity, lands us in a dilemma. On the one hand, work is necessary (*a*) for the continuation of the world-process in cosmos and in history, and (*b*) for the fulfilment of one's personal and caste duty in obedience to the laws and requirements of one's nature. But on the other hand all work binds man to *Māyā* and immerses him deeper into *Samsāra*, thus pushing back farther and farther his prospects of *Mokṣa*. The solution of the dilemma lies in

*Niṣkāmakarma*, action with detachment. For it is not work as such that binds, for God himself works and remains pure and free. What binds is desire, gratification of senses, selfishness. Therefore work must be done with renunciation of all self-interest, of all hungry grabbing for fruit. Such work wears out *karma* and leads to *Mokṣa*.

This doctrine is used by Neuner to present Christ's redemptive work as well as the programme of Christian living. Christ as man works with other men for the sake of the world and of mankind, thus sharing in God's work of creation and obeying God's will, who gave Eden and the Earth into man's hands as gift and as task. The work of other men is vitiated by sin or self-centredness and self-assertion against God; it is not obedience, it cannot liberate them, it binds. But as Christ has no sin, and is not self-centred but centred wholly on God and other men, he lives and works seeking nothing for himself, as one wholly given for others, in obedience to God and in service to mankind. The fruit of his work is not in his or in any human hands. He worked with the awareness that he would be rejected and killed, and that his life would be, humanly speaking, a failure. He left everything to God and entrusted himself to the Father's keeping, without seeking to defend or preserve himself. Therefore his life and work have become the pattern of all human existence.

We could go a step further and say something which Neuner's presentation surely implies. Christ's total renunciation is more than a pattern for our work. His *Niṣkāmakarma*, now charged with liberating power, has become for us the enabling Source and enabling Way of our own liberating surrender into God's hands. God not only demands action with detachment from us; he not only points to his own example; but he inserts this new style of work with its inner otherwardness and freedom into the current of our history, into the flesh of our humanity and into our hands for our taking. Jesus in his renunciation, in the *Niṣkāmakarma* perfected on the cross, is the *Karma-marga* for India and the world.

In discussing the *Mokṣa-mārga* called *Jñāna*, Neuner makes two observations very helpful for our theme. (i) Jesus is not only the teacher who gives a doctrine, but he is revelation, is God's self communication and an integral part of the knowledge of God. (ii) 'In Christ, God has really become *Mārga*—the Way by which we enter to God, not by an access from outside, but by seeing and touching God in his actual presence in the world' (Notes pp. 327-329). Christ is then both *Jñāna* and *Jñāna-mārga*. This is an attempt to present him in terms of India's classical,—and in some quarters, privileged—*muktisādhana*. *Jñāna* is not something merely rational or intellectual. It is an inner vision involving and fulfilling the whole man, and amounting to an identity with the Absolute. Knowing the Absolute means experiencing it, realizing it, sharing in its immortality. In *jñāna* empirical differences are transcended and all attachments dissolved. It is not a fruit of human endeavour, yet human effort is needed to remove whatever stands in the way of the ultimate knowledge of the *Atman*. In the Christian view too, knowledge of God

is not mere intellectual activity but a personal contact and inner sharing. It is an end in itself, a participation in the clarity of God's life, and is obviously his gift. It is already present in Christian life as faith, which too therefore is a gift and has Christ and God for object.

Neuner does not go much farther; but taking the hints he gives we could develop and utilize three points for an Indian interpretation and presentation of Christ. (i) The first is Jesus' own faith-experience of and faith-commitment to God, as well as his participation in the clarity of God's life through the clarity of his own sinless, selfless living. Here as man Jesus would be with us in the pilgrimage of our faith and redeem the totality of our *jnāna*, just as he participated in and redeemed our *karma*. (ii) The second point would be the final and complete experience and knowledge of God which came with his resurrection,—a knowledge of total union and personal identity with the Absolute—representing the union and clarity to which man is destined. (iii) The third point is the availability to us of this unique experience of Jesus for our sharing and appropriating progressively in faith active through love. Jesus would thus become for us both *jnāna mārga* and *jnāna*, as well as the source of the possibility and strength to follow the way that he is. In Jesus *jnāna* does not remain merely a cherished distant goal, but a goal which mankind has already reached in its Leader, which we too already touch and possess in the measure in which we are in solidarity with him in faith.

To sum up, Neuner is seen to develop a threefold approach to interpreting Christ to India. He utilizes the Avatāra doctrine, the phenomenon of image worship and the teaching about the Mārgas or the ways of salvation. He contemplates Jesus as entering the religious life and history of India as God's concrete historical answer to the people's age-long and grace-born longing for a God living with them on this earth as the object of their devotion and the protector of eternal Dharma. He presents Jesus also as the perfect Image of God, for whose coming India's ancient and elaborate image-worship has prepared the people, and in whom that worship reaches its ultimate meaning and fulfilment. Finally Neuner would interpret Christ as the Way which all the ways of India's spiritual journeys have been seeking and foreshadowing, in which all these ways reach home and come to a meaningful end, and which gathers up and takes to God all the spiritual strivings of this land along the triple road of *karma*, *jnāna* and *bhakti*.

My own article in *Jeevadhara* is only a partial discussion of the method of an Indian Christology, or of the way of presenting and interpreting Christ to our country today. Only a brief summary of the main ideas of this article will be given here. (i) The first methodological observation is that the India to which we want to interpret Christ cannot be the India of the past, of the Rishis and the Upaniṣads, but the India of today, of the factories, five year plans and atomic reactors, the India which finds itself today in a ferment of change under the impact of forces like western technology, revolutionary Marxism, the Christian message, political independence and the new sense of dignity and hope that is sweeping through the masses.



The past needs to be taken into account only in the measure in which it is present, is alive now, and affects and qualifies life today. (ii) A second remark is that the approach and method has to be existential, responding to actual, live situations. Given the cultural, religious and psychological mosaic that is India, and given the fact of rapid change, we should not hasten to finalize a full and firm Christology or interpretation of Christ for universal distribution and consumption. Each of us should rather learn to hold himself at the disposal of the Spirit, in a situation of tension and dialogue, seeking always to understand, to re-interpret, and reword the Christ-reality as called for by concrete experiences and encounters. Thus an Indian Christology will always be a process, and interpreting Christ to India will be a common task shared by, say, the Hindu, the Christian and the Christ. Before this position, of course, our usual forms and programmes of formation, intellectual and spiritual, stand challenged. One aspect of the challenge is the need of an authentic Christian existence fully integrated in the Indian situation, cultural as well as religious. An Indian Christology will result when such an existence will become progressively self-aware and begin to spell out its own mystery which is Christ. And the uniqueness of Christ can be revealed and brought home only in and through the arresting uniqueness of our own life and love, as individuals and as community. We are here far from an abstract Christology; 'we are within a dialectic in which we ourselves are interior to an evolving Christology'.

With these two remarks the article proceeds to scan the face of modern India to discover its Christological lineaments, and some eight points are made. (i) In India the dread of *samsāra* and the longing to escape from it is lessening, while concern for India and its growth is on the increase. Will it not be in terms of the new national hope and yearning that the Saviour will be best understood and that the land will open up to him who came to feed and to heal and to liberate? (ii) Old Testament theology grew out of an experience of political liberation and land-gift. And Christology was born of an experience of salvation. Modern India's experience of salvation consists in her achievements and hopes in the political and socio-economic spheres, in her independence and rising standard of life secured through toil and struggle. Such attainments have meaning beyond the temporal, both according to the Bible and Indian religious tradition. Hence a theology of national freedom and earthly well-being as well as of the promised land and New Testament miracles may well constitute an essential ingredient of an Indian Christology. (iii) Our youth are in a dilemma. They dread being uprooted from their ancient spiritual heritage; but they find this heritage does not foster, even hinders, the building of a new India which youth have at heart. The solution lies in a vision of life and reality in which time and eternity are duly integrated, in a world-view the heart of which is a full historical Incarnation blossoming into the Resurrection. (iv) Within the modern movements of freedom, development, liberation and technological progress there lies an affirmation of the human and the earthly. This experience links up directly with God's affirmation of man and his world in Jesus Christ. 'On different levels,

but in a true sense, Christ and the world illumine and explain each other: they belong together'. (v) India is rediscovering the ancient insight of Hinduism that it is by losing one's self that one comes to one's true Self; that only work can produce new values, only service can bring relief to the masses, only through the death of much that is old can the new India come to birth. 'A theology of the Suffering Servant and of his redemptive cross is thus being shaped in India's experience of toil which uplifts and builds.' (iv) The new experience of mass movements, organized effort and community action, the search for national integration, the nation's international connections, etc., are awakening a new sense of community within the nation and within traditional religions. Here is a fresh opening for the ingrafting of a theology of corporate personality which is an essential dimension of Christology. (vii) Implied in the community awareness is a sense of service and of responsibility for the social situation. This spiritual growth is the soil in which to plant the self-revelation and self-gift of a God who comes to serve and share our common lot in order finally to heal us and lift us up. (viii) The genius of India seeks the Universal Spirit not so much in nature and external events as in the world of the mind. An Indian Christology will therefore centre on the Lord who is spirit, the Risen Lord, on the indwelling Christ, the *Antaryamin*, and on the Christ whose body we are. It will lead us to discover and experience Christ as the true and ultimate Self of our self.

This last point brings up the question of history. The historical particularity of Jesus has been a difficulty in the way of accepting him as the Universal Spirit and the Saviour of all. We may note two things in this connection: (i) There is in India today a new appreciation of history as some recent publications show, arising out of our international involvement, the experience of world consequences of particular facts like the splitting of the atom or a decision of Hitler. But already in the Gita, Kuruksetra is conceived as a particular historical situation in which Krishna is involved, and yet both have consequences reaching far into space and time. (ii) On the other hand we should also recognize that there is a history of the Spirit, that the Risen Jesus belongs to this history and that religion has much more to do with this than with the 'hard facts' which are the modern historian's anxious concern. (iii) Emphasis on the historical should be made meaningful by showing in relief the significance of Jesus for society and social change. Otherwise situating Jesus in history becomes unimportant, and history fails to enter truly into the heart of religion.