

# The Incarnation and Hindu Thought

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THE idea of Incarnation is not unfamiliar to Hindu thought and yet the Hindu reactions to the Christian proclamation that God was incarnate in Jesus Christ have not been sympathetic. This article is an attempt on the one hand to clarify at least partially what the Christian means by his message that God was incarnate in Jesus Christ, and on the other hand to see how the Christian may meet some of the typical reactions of the Hindu to this message. In considering these Hindu reactions we might discover that theological tensions between Christians and Hindus are in some respects similar to the theological tensions among Christian people themselves in parts of the Western world.

At the basis of the claim, which the Christian Church makes in one form or another, that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate, is an assumption that has to do with a certain basic theological division between Christianity and Hinduism. Most of the major non-Christian religions of the East, barring Islam, have tended to encourage a measure of metaphysical agnosticism at some stage in their development. Confucius refused to say much about God because he felt that, knowing so little about life here, he was not entitled to say more about life hereafter. Buddha was struck by the problem of evil in life, and to him the solution to this problem which was so empirically real had to be sought within the empirical process of existence rather than with reference to a reality that transcended this process. At any rate, metaphysical speculation seemed futile to Buddha when evil was so much a part of the process of existence here and now. Some strands of Hindu thought (we say some strands, because Hinduism is not one religious or theological position but a complex of many), while passionately affirming the existence of a transcendent reality, nevertheless have denied any possibility of knowledge of this transcendent reality.<sup>1</sup> This denial of knowledge (and we are using the term "knowledge" to indicate what is meant by it in some contemporary Western terminology) is based on the conviction that human intellect by its very nature is incapable of grasping anything that does not resemble the empirically given. The solution proposed with regard to any contact with ultimate reality is not through knowledge. Our contact with ultimate reality is *to be it* in an act of mystic intuition and union. The solution is therefore to be found through rejection of knowledge where the seeker and the sought stand distinguished from each other, and through attainment of a mystic state of identity between the seeker and the sought.

1. In translating the thought of one culture into the language of another culture there is always the danger of some inaccuracy, but as long as distortion is avoided the risk must be run for the purposes of communication.

While there are thus specific differences in the respective positions of the three great Eastern religions with regard to knowledge of God, there is an element which seems to be common to all of them. This common element is the conviction that intellectual speculation about ultimate reality is of little help, if not futile, while of course we have or can have no knowledge of God through sense-perception. One of the Upanishads says this unambiguously:

There the eye goes not  
Speech goes not, nor the mind.  
We know not, we understand not  
How one would teach it.

Other, indeed, is it than the known,  
And moreover above the unknown,  
—Thus have we heard of the ancients  
Who to us have explained It.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly enough contemporary thinking in the West would agree with the distrust of speculative knowledge in general. Since the collapse of rationalism and idealism in the West there have been only two alternatives with regard to the question of sure knowledge, pragmatism and the scientific method. Pragmatism has had a wide influence, notably in America, but owing perhaps to the fact that it is inherently incapable of providing a long-term or stable vision of truth, and also because of the combined practical and "objective" certainty in knowledge provided by the scientific method, this latter alternative has replaced pragmatism. But the scientific method can deal only with the empirically verifiable, whatever the precise test of verifiability may be, and while many are prepared to admit that there may be a reality beyond the dimensions of that which is revealed by the scientific method, they would nevertheless insist that we can say very little about it; in fact that we can have no knowledge of it.

There is a further point at which the Hindu attitude of the type indicated earlier converges with the contemporary scientific attitude. The type of Hindu thought under consideration, while denying that we can have any knowledge of God, nevertheless recognizes that many people do claim to have a knowledge of God. Knowledge thus claimed, however, is treated as tantamount to something subjective and therefore necessarily relative.<sup>3</sup> But these features do not necessarily render such knowledge useless. It has a pragmatic use in that it can create relative values of individual and social worth. It would seem that some of those who swear by the scientific method, but are willing to admit that there may be a reality beyond the dimensions of that which is revealed by this method, come to a similar position to the Hindu.

2. Kena Upanishad: First Khanda, 3. Translated by R. E. Hume (London: Oxford University Press, 1921).

3. In this connection the doctrines of "Adhikari" and "Istadevata" are relevant, as is also the position of the Ramakrishna Mission that, while one may choose voluntarily either Jnana Marga or Karma Marga or Bhakti Marga, one should not criticize the ways not chosen.

Since we cannot verify or falsify anything said about this reality, all affirmations concerning it must be treated as matters of individual taste or preference. Nonetheless, even though they are relative and unverifiable, they may have some pragmatic use in creating values of individual and social worth.

It would seem that distrust of speculation concerning the nature of God is not alien to the spirit of the Bible. The Bible asks, "Canst thou by searching find out God?" Isaiah 40 seems to compare the results of speculation to unmitigated idolatry. But the point where the Bible differs from the attitude represented by the kind of Hinduism under consideration is its insistence that, because man cannot know God, it does not follow that man is thereby left helpless. The living God can himself take the initiative to make himself known to man. Hinduism, depending solely on the efforts of man and seeing the futility of man's effort to comprehend God within his intellect, solves the problem by resorting to faith in a mystic intuition of identity. In other words the biblical position and the Hindu position of the type we have been considering agree that we have no knowledge of God, but while the Bible affirms that man's dilemma is nevertheless solved in the gracious initiative that God takes to make himself known to man, Hinduism affirms that despite his dilemma man must persist till he transcends subjectivity and attains oneness with God.

The Christian position, grounded in the biblical witness, is that the Christian faith is rooted in revelation, in something "given." The doctrine of Incarnation has meaning therefore only when viewed in the light of the doctrine of revelation. The Incarnation belongs to the history of revelation; it is indeed the climax of the revelatory activity of God. This is the message of the younger churches as they confront other religions. The basic assumption behind the doctrine of Incarnation is both an acceptance and rejection of the Hindu religious epistemology. It is an acceptance of it to the extent that the Christian would agree with the Hindu that our thoughts are not God's thoughts nor our ways his ways, but it is a rejection in so far as he disagrees with the Hindu view that on this account man is left helpless until he makes the supreme sacrifice of eliminating his individual identity and existence in mystic union.

What distinguishes the Christian from the Hindu when both stand confronted by the same dilemma is also what distinguishes him from those in contemporary Western culture who, out of disillusionment on various grounds with the rationalistic-idealistic tradition, would confine all knowledge to that capable of empirical verification and treat all religious affirmations as matters of individual taste and preference. The Christian would agree in part at any rate with the empiricist's criticism of the rationalistic-idealistic tradition. The history of thought has shown that dependence on formal reason alone results in any number of systems of religious philosophy. These systems, often in conflict with one another, result from the use of differing logical criteria in the employment of formal reason in the search

after truth. The employment of differing logical criteria is possible when formal reason is used in search after truth, for what formal reason is in actuality dealing with in such a case is only its own constructions. Truths of formal reason therefore are not necessarily truths whose referent is that which is objectively true. The "god" who is the discovery of formal reason may be no more than a construct of thought and therefore an idol. The Christian differs from the empiricist, however, in affirming that, while it is true we have no knowledge of God, man is not on that account left helpless. God himself can take the initiative, and in the very denial of the knowledge of God man can be raised to a true apprehension of him. To be sure, the Christian is not arguing, but is rather affirming a faith in preference both to scepticism and to relativism.

The history of religions seems to show that if we affirm knowledge of God, we are unable to escape relativism. If we deny knowledge of God and yet affirm faith in him, the choice seems to be between faith in revelation and faith in mysticism. This is why some scientists whose very temper of mind should be against relativism, choose mysticism if they fail to take the Christian position. Even Ludwig Wittgenstein, the father of logical positivism, shows mystical tendencies in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

The biblical position asserts God's initiative in making his own self or nature known. Hence religion is objectively rooted and it can become a social possession. It is true there is a difference between the object of faith and religion. Even in the Christian religion there is always an empirical element and therefore it is subject to reconstruction as it is placed under the judgment of "the given"; but its essential roots are in this "given." In the case of Hinduism, on the other hand, since religion is always subjective, one should eventually transcend religion and attain to a state in which the seeker and the sought are united. Religion may be a way of life and therefore have a social reference, but subjectivity and relativity are always marks of it.

There are other types of Hinduism which would accept the Incarnation with certain conditions attached. What offends the Hindu generally is the Christian assertion that whatever we know of God is through the person and work of Jesus Christ and that therefore our redemption is somehow tied exclusively to Christ's continuing ministry. We will presently see how to interpret this claim. The Hindu lays down two alternative conditions for accepting the Incarnation. On the one hand, if the Incarnation is interpreted symbolically, he will find no offence in it. If the Incarnation is viewed as symbolizing the continual descent of God into human life, then the Christian doctrine of Incarnation thus conditioned is perfectly legitimate to the Hindu. Jesus Christ could be accepted even as unique in that the descent of God into human life is most concretely and uniquely illustrated in his life among all the religious leaders of the world. On the other hand, the general idea of Incarnation may be interpreted as proclaiming the essential oneness of

God and man in the latter's inmost spiritual depths. Such historic persons as Jesus Christ and Buddha and many others of a similar stature, who are referred to by their respective followers as "Incarnations of God," serve to illustrate this truth by the measure of freedom gained by them from material and earthly limitations and the recovery in a remarkable degree of the essential identity of God and man. To put the same point in a slightly different way, such characteristics demonstrate the degree to which these persons have gained union between the human soul and divine life, and point to the possibility of a similar achievement by all men. This second alternative is closely related to the mystical position I discussed earlier. These two positions have a remarkable resemblance to some which are taken by Christians themselves in the West; consequently, one does not know whether to treat the Hindu positions as Christian heresies or to treat similar positions in the Christian Church as instances of the Hinduisation of Christianity!

What can the Christian say to the Hindu in view of the several Hindu reactions to the Christian message concerning Jesus Christ? In the first place the Christian has to be sure of the ground on which he bases his proclamation that God was in Christ in the sense in which the doctrine of Incarnation asserts that presence. The ground is neither rational nor empirical proof. The Christian affirmation that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate is part of the fundamental affirmation that we have no knowledge of God except the knowledge which God himself gives us about his own self, or in other words that the Incarnation belongs to the history of the revelatory activity of God. Those of us who seek for rational or empirical proof for the divine nature of Jesus Christ will find the search vain. Rational proof pertains only to the correctness or incorrectness of certain formal statements which point to no existing state of affairs. Nor can one point to any accepted empirical evidence and say by virtue of it that this person called Jesus was also divine. The only evidence for Christological statements, whether of the order of high Christology or of the order of low Christology, is the witness and testimony of the early Church. You may try to prove that early Christians did not say that Jesus Christ was God Incarnate or that the overwhelming consensus of faith of these Christians was that Jesus Christ was God Incarnate. The choice of a high Christological statement or a low Christological statement on the basis of any other evidence except that of the consensus of witness on the part of the early Church is a false choice. Divinity of an intense kind or of a pale kind, divinity ontologically true or only symbolically conceived, is not capable of empirical validation—as good coffee can be, or weak coffee or symbolic coffee like Postum can be. The primary support of every Christological statement is the witness or testimony of the early Christians. Christology was the expression of the faith of early Christians. It was neither their science nor philosophy. All this is involved in the assertion that the Incarnation belongs

to the history of the revelatory activity of God. In the end the Christian can only witness to this revelation. By its very nature revelation excludes proof. The only authentication of revelation is self-authentication.

When we have said all this, however, it remains true that, practically speaking, the Christian cannot escape justifying his position theologically or even philosophically, especially when his position is questioned on these grounds. However clearly he sees the limitations of an apologetic, the Christian cannot refuse to meet honest doubt.

In the first place, as far as the younger churches are concerned, there is an area where the apologetic task and the practical task of witnessing almost merge. The Christian and the Hindu agree on the inadequacy of intellectual knowledge to inform us of religious reality. This is the point at which the conversation between the Christian and the Hindu should begin. It will involve an honest examination of the adequacy of their respective choices, namely, revelation on the one hand and mysticism on the other hand, to meet the fundamental aspirations of man. These aspirations pertain not only to our ultimate destiny but to life here and now, and life here and now is recognized both by the Hindu and Christian as at any rate partly determinative of ultimate destiny. Mysticism, however, tends to put a minimal value on the historical existence of man. Mysticism may not reject history altogether, but it finds no need for the redemption of history. Having acted in history, responsibly no doubt but with a detached spirit, man looks forward only to a respectable exit from historical existence. The Hindu's tendency to place a minimal value on history is the result of his interpretation of all privations in history as the privations essential to finitude. The mystical attitude inevitably leads to depreciation of finitude. The transcending of finitude and its limitations is redemption. The depreciation of finitude is the depreciation of one stage of life, that of historical existence, without explaining the why of this stage. On the other hand, the Christian doctrine of revelation and the consequent doctrine of the Incarnation show a more realistic attitude to history. The Christian does not depreciate finitude, since the Incarnation is the assurance that God has a supreme concern for the finite. The Christian does not depreciate history, for the Incarnation is the assurance that God values history. At the same time, the Incarnation is also a judgment, not indeed on finitude as such but upon the misuse of all the opportunities that man has even in his finite existence. The Incarnation as a judgment has a reference to history also, history as the collective story of mankind, but it is again not a judgment on history as part of the finite order but as something subjected to distortions by man's misuse of those opportunities which he has even in his finite existence. The Incarnation is thus an acceptance of finitude but a rejection of the wilful distortions to which it is subjected by man. It is an acceptance of finitude, because the Incarnation is the entry of the Infinite into the finite order; it is a rejection of its distortions, because the Cross stands central to the history of the Incarnation. The story of man is for the most part a story of sin and corrup-

tion. Human sin perpetually distorts history, but man and history can be redeemed and need to be redeemed. Man's life in the light of the Incarnation is viewed as a whole and not torn into two, one to be rejected and the other to be redeemed. The two dimensions of man's life, the historical and the supra-historical, are recognized as of equal value. Thus the Christian in his rejection of *something that arises* in the finite order has something in common with the Hindu, but unlike him he sees no necessary connection between evil and finitude itself. New impulses are now stirring India, along with other lands of Asia. The peoples of these lands used to look upon history with the eyes of spectators, but now, caught up in the tidal wave of recent historical events, they find they can no longer afford the luxury of their traditional attitude of detachment. The message of the Incarnation has a peculiar relevance to this contemporary situation, and if properly presented should have an appeal.

But Christian realism arising out of the Christian faith in the Incarnation cannot be presented merely on the thought level. It has to be lived out by the Christian. If such Christian realism is lived out, it should be a kind of authentication of the Christian claim, not in the sense of a proof or verification of it but in the sense of a witness to the power of the Incarnation.

The doctrine of Incarnation is the true basis of the Christian doctrine of vocation. The Incarnation is an event in history and a redemptive event. The Christian accepts history to act redemptively in it. To act redemptively is the Christian vocation and the Christian acts redemptively in every area of life. For example, the greatest reason for a Christian's participation in politics is the Incarnation. The redemptive vocation is not the vocation of the Christian individual alone but of the Christian community corporately. This needs a little elaboration. Man in his historical existence is a necessary participant in communal life. Any attempt on the part of an individual to withdraw himself completely from community is an unreal attempt. There are two urges native to human nature; one is for individuality and the other for community. Individuality in and by itself is nothing more than a principle of division. Man in addition to being an individual is a person, and as a person he has his roots partly in society. Influences coming from the home, school, church and other groups mould the personality of an individual, and to that extent his personality has deep social roots. If a society without real individuals is a mass, a herd, individuals apart from society are abstractions. This is the natural state of man. There are two potentially disastrous consequences of this natural state. On the one hand, the social roots of man may be severed through a culture that either encourages atomistic individualism or leads to a depersonalization of social relations, so that social relations no longer have the interpersonal dimension but are purely impersonal. In either case man suffers alienation from part of his own self—from that part of the self which lives by sharing in the life of the community—with a consequent sense of loneliness and anxiety. On the other hand, man's individuality may suffer a near elimination through the development of a mass

or totalitarian culture as an alternative to chaotic, atomistic individualism. In this case man is reduced from a person to a mere function in society. The recurring sickness of human society is due in a large measure to the failure of man to achieve a balance between the two urges innate in his nature, the urges for individuality and for community. The Church, when it is the Church, is truly a gift of God, in that the natural state of man is transmuted into a higher level in its fellowship. The Church is the community where the individual stands in a dual relationship, namely, to God and to his fellow men in this new community. His relationship to God is that which preserves the privacy and individuality of his self. An individual standing before God is truly himself and the unique object of God's love. His relationship to others in the Church's fellowship, a relationship ideally at any rate not based primarily on an identity of race, culture and social status but on the antecedent relationship to God himself, is that which creatively and redemptively preserves that part of the self which he shares with society. If, in the natural state of man's existence, atomistic individualism is pathological, its perpetuation in the Christian context makes it no less pathological. In such a case, Christianity, instead of becoming redemptive, itself becomes a pathological phenomenon. The biblical witness is that God created not only man but woman, intending thereby that man's life should be lived in the context of interpersonal relations. The biblical witness is that God called not only individuals, like Abraham and Moses, but also a nation, thereby indicating that God's purposes comprehend society as well as individuals. In other words, what we called the natural state of man is really a part of God's creation, but owing to man's sin it ends up in frightening distortions. This fallen natural state is to be redeemed and restored in a new society, the society of grace, the Church. Therefore it is permissible to say that there is no such a person as a solitary Christian. The Christian world is not an aggregate of individuals, but a world where through interpersonal relationships of a redemptive kind a community of new individuals is created. Christian redemption transcends atomistic individualism and mass society. The Church, then, is integral to the Christian's view of man's destiny, and the Christian redemptive vocation rooted in the Incarnation is both individual and corporate in character. It is only to the extent that the Church acts as a redeeming community that it lives by its vocation and witnesses to the fact and power of the Incarnation. In that sense, however—that is, in so far as the Church is the redeeming community—it can be called a continuation of the Incarnation. The redeeming mission of the Church is the sole means of authenticating for ourselves and for others the Incarnation and its power.

I said that the chief offence to the Hindu is the Christian assertion that whatever we know of God is known through the person and work of Jesus Christ, and that therefore our redemption is somehow tied exclusively to Christ's continuing ministry. If this claim is properly presented, however, it need not be an offence. The claim is not that God has not revealed himself

elsewhere and to other people, but that wherever he has revealed himself he has shown himself to be like Jesus Christ, so that Jesus Christ becomes the revealer of God wherever he is and a judgment on all idols put up by the human mind both within and outside the Church. There is thus both an uncompromising exclusivism and a broad universalism in the Christian claim. This broad universalism, however, is conditioned or limited by one thing. In the whole range of the history of man's religions, nowhere else outside the Christian tradition has a community which was either so large or so heterogeneous, racially and ethnically, built its life for so many centuries on the faith that in one person who really lived and moved among people at a particular time and in a particular place God really was incarnate. To be sure, one strand of Hinduism speaks of incarnation and believes that God entered history not once but many times. But apart from some reported incarnations of God in some non-human forms which can be dismissed without offending the Hindu as part of his religious mythology, the historicity of the human persons in whom God is said to have become incarnate is at best dubious. And so a modern Hindu scholar comments that the Hindu scriptures are not concerned with historical truth but with ideal truth, and that, when they report that God had entered history at some given time, they are not speaking of something that actually happened in the framework of space and time but of the eternal nature of God which makes him come into the human scene continually.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless it would seem to me that if we believe that the Christian claim is, not that God has not revealed himself elsewhere and to other people, but that, wherever he has revealed himself, he has shown himself to be like Christ, and that therefore he is still the revealer of God wherever he is and the judgment on all idols of the human mind both within and without the Church, then this viewpoint should give us the humility to search in other faiths and religious traditions for the movement of God's self-revelation. This does not mean and cannot mean that Christ is reduced to an idea. The *Christ-event* is the object of Christian faith and the means of men's redemption. Furthermore, to the Christian, redemption involves participation in the life of the *Christ-community*, the Church, and therefore he cannot be content merely to point to God's activity elsewhere as Christ himself reveals it. Rather, even as he rejoices in such activity of God, he can also point to the signs in other religions that authenticate his Christian claims. Furthermore, if we do this we will find much to learn and perhaps our own faith will become enriched. This possibility of enrichment will mean more to us in so far as we remember that there is a difference between revelation as an event and the religion that has developed around it. As I said earlier, even in the Christian religion there is an empirical element, arising out of racial experiences and human pride and sin. The Christian *religion* has its own idols, and if sometimes we cannot discover these idols ourselves, because we are so enamoured of them, perhaps if we are humble enough the

4. Prof. D. S. Sarma in his *Primer of Hinduism* (London: Macmillan, 1929).

Christ who is acting elsewhere and whom we can sometimes recognize as we stand even momentarily aside from our idols, may help us to see our own idolatry.

To repeat and to conclude, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that, to the Christian, revelation is primarily an act or an event and never an idea. Specifically, it is in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that the Christian sees God's decisive revelatory activity. But if the Christian Faith affirms that God is the God of all people and of all history, it would seem to follow that man cannot limit God's activity to any particular stream in history. Nonetheless, to be able to recognize God's activity at all, one has to cleave uncompromisingly to the Christ-event, for this revelation alone enables one to see the movement of God wherever it may be. In one sense, then, it is only the Christian with the eyes of his faith who can see such divine activity. Consequently, the Christian is still under the obligation to bring people to direct confrontation with Christ and to reconciliation to God in him.