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Hindu Interpretation of Christ from Vivekananda to Radhakrishnan

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The purpose of this paper is not to furnish an exhaustive survey of Hindu interpretations of Christ, but to view the highlights, particularly the interpretations of some leading and responsible Hindu figures whose views influence strong movements¹ in the ongoing Hindu renaissance. These may be indicated as follows:

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|----------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| I. Swami Vivekananda | } | ... The Ramakrishna Mission |
| II. Swami Akhilananda | | |
| III. Mahatma Gandhi | | ... The Sarvodaya Movement |
| IV. Bhai Manilal C. Parekh | } | ... New Hindu Secularism |
| V. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan | | |

I

Recent research has shown that Swami Vivekananda was much more indebted to the Brahmo Samaj for his religious awakening than is commonly realized. It is from this contact that his warm appreciation of Christ is to be traced. It is significant that Swami Vivekananda inaugurated the Ramakrishna Mission, after his master's death, on Christmas Eve.

But we touch the heart of Vivekananda's interpretation of Christ when we note three things. *First*, his approach to Christ was not that of a seeker but that of one who found satisfaction in philosophical-mystical Hinduism. *Second*, he is influenced by a certain historical scepticism, due apparently to being influenced by the Christ-myth speculation of the late nineteenth century. *Third*, he viewed everything at all times from the angle

¹ In the period before us, there are two other outstanding names: Dr. Bhagavan Das of the Banaras Hindu University, and Shri Aurobindo of the Pondicherry Ashram. Neither of these gave much sustained attention to the Christ theme. Shri Aurobindo's 'integralism' is of growing East-West significance.

of *Advaita Vedanta*. 'It is', he said, 'the Vedanta, and Vedanta alone, that can become the universal religion of man . . . no other is fitted for that role'.² He felt that 'Christianity with all its boasted civilization is but a collection of little bits of Indian thought. Ours is the religion of which Buddhism, with all its greatness, is a rebel child, and of which Christianity is a very patchy imitation'.³

In Vivekananda's treatment of Christ there is an unresolved problem. There is a vein of historical scepticism. He admires Christ greatly. But how can one consistently admire a person whose historicity is open to question? Except Hinduism, he says, 'All the other religions have been built around the life of what they think is an historical man, and what they think is the strength of the religion is really the weakness, for disprove the historicity of the man and the whole fabric tumbles to the ground . . . The glory of Krishna is not that he was Krishna but that he was the great teacher of Vedanta . . . Thus our allegiance is to principles always, and not to the person.'⁴ With reference to Christianity he said, 'If there is one blow dealt to the historicity of that life (Christ's), as has been the case in modern times . . . if that rock of historicity, as they pretend to call it, is shaken and shattered, the whole building tumbles down, broken absolutely, never to regain its lost status.'⁵ Thus, springing as it does from such a sceptical attitude, one can attach nothing more than rhetorical significance to Vivekananda's statement, 'Truth came to Jesus of Nazareth and we must all obey him.'⁶

We do not in Vivekananda find a systematic discussion of the outline of the life of Christ. He rejected outright Nicholas Notovitch's speculation that Christ had been tutored by Brahmin priests in the temple of Jagannath in Puri (Orissa).⁷ But regarding the central fact of the passion of Christ, the Crucifixion, Vivekananda said, 'Christ was God incarnate; they could not kill him. That which was crucified was only a semblance, a mirage.'⁸ According to Vivekananda, Christ was a *Bhakta* and essentially a *Sanyasin*. Vivekananda believed that Christ believed in reincarnation.⁹ The Johannine claims for Christ's divinity (in an exclusive and final revelation) do not present any problems at all to Vivekananda. For, 'Christ', he says, 'preached dualism to the masses

² Vivekananda, *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*, p. 90.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91. We cannot go here into the question of the historicity of Christ. The Christ-myth theory has several times been refuted, and notably by H. G. Wood, *Did Christ Really Live?* (S.C.M. 1938). For satisfying critical reconstruction of the life of Christ see the two outstanding lives by Vincent Taylor and Ethelbert Stauffer.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 182, 3.

⁸ Gambhirananda, *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission*, p. 39.

⁹ Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, vol. I, p. 319.

and non-dualism to His disciples.'¹⁰ It is entirely in the light of such a reductionist orientation that Vivekananda's interpretation of Christ must be understood. Hence the Ramakrishna Mission finds no difficulty at all in quoting liberally the great *Mahavakyas* of the Gospels such as 'I and my Father are one', or the sayings of Jesus concerning his authority in *Thus Spake the Christ* (which reached the 30,000th printed copy in Vivekananda's birth centenary year, 1963). There, Vivekananda is quoted as saying:

So we find Jesus of Nazareth, in the first place, the true son of the Orient . . . He was a soul! Nothing but a soul, just working in a body for the good of humanity ; and that was all his relation to the body. He was a disembodied, unfettered, unbound spirit . . . In him is embodied all that is best and greatest in His own race and He Himself is the impetus for the future, not only to his own, but also to the unnumbered other races of the world. If I, as an Oriental, am to worship Jesus of Nazareth, there is only one way left to me, that is to worship Him as God and nothing else.¹¹

It is clear from these that for Vivekananda the Atonement is no problem, for (according to him) Christ really did not suffer. If Vivekananda calls him God, it is on the Advaita understanding that God (*Ishvara*) is a lower and not the absolute spiritual reality. Indeed, Vivekananda's interpretation of the doctrine of *maya* follows an extreme line which few Advaita apologists would be prepared to accept today. For him it is nothing more and nothing less than cosmic illusionism. Hence the docetic overtones to his handling of the body, person and significance of Jesus.

The real difficulty for Advaitins (and Vedantins) in accepting the finality of the self-revelation of the Supreme Spirit in Christ Jesus is that they eschew ultimate metaphysical personalism. With this follows an ambivalence in regard to creation and a suspicion of the significance of time. Without a change of metaphysical premise, it will be impossible for Advaitins to see the absolute significance of Christ.

II

The Ramakrishna Mission, when it established a firmer footing in the Western hemisphere, required a fuller adumbration of the Hindu interpretation of Christ. A book supplying this was furnished by a leading Swami of the Mission two years after India achieved political independence. The book is published by no less a concern than the Philosophical Library, New York.

¹⁰ Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, Vol. II, pp. 142-3, 351 ; Vol. IV, p. 144.

¹¹ Swami Suddhasatwananda (Ed.), *Thus Spake the Christ*, quoting Vivekananda, pp. xvi-xvii (from his *Complete Works*, Vol. IV, p. 143).

Swami Akhilananda's *Hindu View of Christ* (pp. 291), owing to its insidious challenge to Christian orthodoxy, deserves to be much better known than it is. Here we find the attempt to work out in a more orderly way, in a strictly Vedanta setting, the numerous scattered suggestions of Swami Vivekananda. This volume contains an 'Introduction' by Walter G. Muelder, Dean of the School of Theology, Boston University. Dean Muelder misleads the public into thinking that Swami Akhilananda succeeds in 'giving the Christian equivalent of Hindu thought and the Hindu equivalents of synoptic and Johannine teachings'.¹² Muelder declares that the Swami is not baffled by the Christian thought of conversion because Jesus' word to Nicodemus, 'You must be born anew' is fully acceptable. The author comes to terms not only with Christian teaching but with Christ himself.¹³ This is a dangerously misleading statement, as the Swami's book does nothing of the kind; rather he strongly attacks the evangelical emphasis on conversion experience.¹⁴ In fact, one of the things that is striking about Akhilananda's bibliography (pp. 285-287) is that it is heavily weighted with literature of the quest for the Jesus of history of the Liberal period.¹⁵ The post-liberal, conservative critical reconstruction has not been reckoned with. Moreover, the bibliography is weighted with books interested in the psychology of Jesus and questions of general 'religious consciousness'. A notably striking feature of the work through 10 chapters is frequent quotations from the writings of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Swami Brahmananda. So much so that one wonders whether it was his intention, in giving the 'Hindu' view of Christ, to infuse a conscious Vedanta apologetic.

Akhilananda regards Christ as an Incarnation. He says Incarnations have the following characteristics:

- (1) They have a purpose, goal and method of life.¹⁶
- (2) They come to fulfil the crying need of the age.¹⁷
- (3) Incarnations are at peace with themselves.¹⁸
- (4) 'However, the Hindus believe that there have been numerous incarnations (Avataras) in the history of the world, of whom Jesus was one, while the Christians take Jesus to be the only one. There

¹² Swami Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ* (Phil. Lib. N.Y., 1949), p. 6.

¹³ Walter E. Muelder, *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 256-257.

¹⁵ That there has been a conservative scholarly reconstruction by such unimpeachable N.T. scholars as C. H. Dodd, Vincent Taylor, T. W. Manson, O. Cullmann, E. Stauffer, F. F. Bruce, etc., would be unknown from the bibliography.

¹⁶ Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, p. 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

- we have a basic resemblance and the basic difference between Hinduism and Christianity.¹⁹
- (5) An Incarnation 'is always aware of his divine nature ; consequently, he is not bound by any limitation whatsoever'.²⁰
 - (6) The human and divine are wonderfully blended in Incarnations.²¹
 - (7) 'Incarnations have no longing for or consciousness of permanent multiplicity'.²²
 - (8) Incarnations are eternally free to transform individuals and start new civilizations.²³
 - (9) They live lives of intense God-consciousness.²⁴
 - (10) They unflinchingly practise what they preach.²⁵
 - (11) They come not to destroy but fulfil, and to establish Dharma.²⁶ (Reference to Mt. 5:17 and Gita 4:8).
 - (12) 'When they depart from the world, they feel no pain or agony because they are leaving it ; there is no feeling of separation'.²⁷
 - (13) An Incarnation is a *Trilokanga*, i.e. knows the past, present and future.²⁸
 - (14) Incarnations love their disciples and followers.²⁹
 - (15) This is the distinctive mark which separates incarnations from all others.³⁰

Swami Akhilananda is somewhat above Vivekananda's scepticism regarding the historicity of Jesus. He summarily rejects the views of critics who discount the Fourth Gospel. But he interprets all the 'I am' sayings in the non-dual sense suggested by Vivekananda. (That is, he will not take seriously the emphasis on the historical of *Jesus*, which presupposed an unabrogated and unabrogatable metaphysical divine-human polarity). Hence, Akhilananda will have nothing to do with critics who question vindications of Jesus' sanity in the psychiatric study of Jesus.

In a whole chapter (2), Akhilananda stresses that Jesus was an oriental. In another chapter (3), he stresses that Jesus was a Yogi: He was a *Bhakti, Karma, Raja* and *Jnana Yogi*. 'Where did Jesus learn Yoga? It is not inconceivable that he learned the technique of the *Yogas* in the Near East where he lived. We are told that the followers of Buddha had their monasteries and

¹⁹ Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, p. 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

centres all over the Near East at the time Jesus was born.³¹ This statement is a symbolic disclosure of the entire absence in this book of knowledge of the Hebraic-Jewish background of the Gospels. The author elaborates on the mystique of Jesus (ch. 4). Two chapters, (5) and (6), are given to a diffuse account of the ethical teaching of Christ, wherein Christians are reproved for not taking Jesus' teaching literally, and for their failings of militarism and imperialism. Here the book reflects very much the (Indian) nationalistic temper of the 1920s and 1930s.

No discussion of Christ is ever complete without an account of Jesus and his cross. Swami Akhilananda's seventh chapter, on 'Christ and the Cross', turns out to be a plea for pacifism, as Jesus was a *satyagrahi*. For the author, the cross is of significance as a moral *example for conquest of self, egoistic and egotistic passions*. Concerning circumstantial, legal and theological questions—Why was Jesus convicted? Was he a messianic pretender? What is the significance of such a claim? What is the import of the pre-Passion sayings of Christ? How did he interpret his impending death? Why is the greater portion of the Gospels taken up with the passion story? Why is the rest of the New Testament preoccupied with interpreting one event above all in the life of one person, namely the death of Christ?—for all such questions there is not a word of exposition or answer.

Closely linked with the need for an account of the cross is the need for a discussion of the resurrection. 'The poor, childish people', says Swami Akhilananda, 'needed signs, and Jesus gave them John's preaching of repentance and His own resurrection'.³² His eighth chapter, 'Spirit of Easter', turns out to be an exhortation to what is usually called sanctification. 'Another fact we learn from Easter is that a man can overcome and defy death. How can we do that when we know that some time or other this cruel death will come to us? 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?' Death can be defied only when we have that realization of the abiding presence of God in us.'³³ 'This', he says, 'is not a question of the acceptance of facts, but is a question of constant grappling with our craving'.³⁴ It is the spirit of Easter without the Easter fact.

III

Mahatma Gandhi's interpretation of Christ is of significance because of the paradoxical effect or consequences of his reverence for Christ.

As the Mahatma was not a mystico-philosophical monastic, his interpretation of the Christ theme did not have the explicit (though it did have an implicit) philosophic derivation so clearly

³¹ Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, p. 96.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

evident among the major exponents of the Ramakrishna Mission. Therefore, whenever Gandhi touched upon the Christ theme, it had a ring of authenticity. Indeed, he carried the name of Jesus to the obscurest corners of India more than anyone before him. But the Christ he admired was not the New Testament Christ or the Christ of the major Christian orthodox interpretation.

It is impossible to measure (quantitatively) the Christian influence on the Mahatma. On the basis of his own testimony, we know that his religious awakening was due chiefly to his student-day contacts in England. At least two of his biographers³⁵ are impressed by the volume of such influence. Dr. E. Stanley Jones has given a fairly convincing study of the extent to which the Mahatma's practice and teaching outgrew the classical Hindu faith which he professed.

Gandhi was a life-long student of the New Testament. He said that he read it daily along with the Gita. But we have no evidence that he studied it systematically. We may at best say that he had unorganized acquaintance with it. From time to time numerous booklets by Mahatma Gandhi have appeared on such topics as religion, scriptures, Christianity and Jesus. These are topical arrangements of the things he said or wrote at sundry times. The most convenient of such arrangements is No. 6 of the 'Pocket Gandhi Series', *The Message of Jesus Christ*.³⁶ Its editor, A. T. Hingorani, observes, 'The rich and radiant personality of Jesus cast a fascinating spell over him'.³⁷

Yet—due incipiently to Hindu interpretations of the indifference of the universe of spirit to nature, time and history—the Mahatma could say with ease: 'I may say that I have never been interested in a historical Jesus. I should not care if it was proved by someone that the man called Jesus never lived, and that which was narrated in the Gospels was a figment of the writer's imagination. For, the *Sermon on the Mount* would still be true for me.'³⁸

Gandhiji was very fond of giving religious and moral exhortation by deed and word. However, he was equally insistent that Christians should practise but never preach. 'All I want them to do', he said, 'is to live Christian lives, not to annotate them'.³⁹ In his oft-quoted analogy, they should emit fragrance as the rose which never speaks about itself. But to the question 'Did not Jesus Himself teach and preach?' he answered, 'We are on dangerous ground here. You ask me to give my interpretation of the life of Christ. Well, I may say that I do not accept everything in the Gospels as historical truth . . . I draw a great

³⁵ Vincent Shean, *Lead Kindly Light*. E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*. An interpretation (Reprinted, cheap Indian edition, Lucknow Pub. House, this year).

³⁶ M. K. Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

distinction between the *Sermon on the Mount* and the *letters of Paul*. They are a graft on Christ's teaching, his own gloss apart from Christ's own experience.'⁴⁰ But confronted with the *prima facie* Johannine evidence, Gandhi's answer was, 'The fundamental verses of St. John require to be re-read and re-interpreted'.⁴¹ Pointing to his breast he would firmly insist 'I exercised my judgement about every Scripture, including the Gita'.⁴² A moment earlier, speaking of different scriptures he said, 'I don't approach them with a critical mind'.⁴³ For him, in fact, the Gita was 'the key to the Scripture of the world'.⁴⁴

The Mahatma seems to have been influenced by the Islamic objection to Christ's unique divine Sonship. 'Thus', he said, 'to believe that Jesus is the only begotten son of God is to me against reason, for God can't marry and beget children. The word 'Son' there can only be used in a figurative sense. In that sense, every one who stands in the position of Jesus is a begotten son of God'.⁴⁵ On another occasion he said, 'I have often made it clear that I regard Jesus as a great teacher of humanity, but I do not regard him as the only begotten son of God'.⁴⁶ The most he could say, therefore, was 'I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born. His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept'.⁴⁷ So 'I can pay equal honour to Jesus, Mohammed, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, and others that may be named'.⁴⁸

In making this assessment, Gandhiji depends a good deal on 'feeling'.

'For many, many years I have regarded Jesus of Nazareth as one among the mighty teachers that the world has had . . . I claim humility for this expression for the simple reason that this is exactly what I feel. Of course, Christians claim a higher place for Jesus of Nazareth than as a non-Christian and as a Hindu I have been able to feel. I purposely use the word "feel" instead of "give", because I consider that neither I, nor anybody else, can possibly arrogate to himself the claim of giving place to a great man. The great teachers of mankind have had the places not given to them, but the place has belonged to them as a matter of right, as a matter of service they have rendered; but it is given to the lowest

⁴⁰ M. K. Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), p. 55, the classic refutation of this is Machen's *The Origin of Paul's Religion*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

and humblest among us to feel certain things about certain people'.⁴⁹

The one clue which might have enabled Gandhi to escape the subjectivism of mere feeling, and the implied judgement in relativistic terms, would have been what Richard Niebuhr has called 'historical reason'. But this he could not believe. He could not believe that God could be great enough to speak decisively in and through history. This was partly because of a certain pan-cosmic-pantheistic cum theistic ambivalence in his experience, interpretation and conception of God and His transcendence. 'I do not regard God as a person', he said, 'Truth for me is God, and God's law and God are not different things or facts'.⁵⁰ Replying to a question concerning redemption he said, 'That lands me into the region of interpretation. Whilst I must not enter it, I may suggest that God did not bear the cross only 1,900 years ago, but he bears it today, and he dies and is resurrected from day to day. It would be poor comfort to the world if it had to depend upon a historical God who died 2,000 years ago. Do not then preach the God of history, but show him as He lives today through you'.⁵¹ Gandhiji appears not to have grappled with the New Testament resurrection passages as history. The nearest he apparently came to it appears in a hint at the 'swoon' theory. 'Jesus died on the Cross because he was limited by the flesh . . . As for Jesus raising the dead to life, well, I doubt if the man he raised were really dead. I raised a relative's child from supposed death to life, but that was because the child was not dead and, but for my presence there, she might have been cremated'.⁵²

IV

With Bhai Manilal Parekh's *A Hindu Portrait of Jesus Christ*, which was published in Rajkot in 1953,⁵³ we have what is probably the fullest and most systematic Hindu attempt to deal with Jesus' life and meaning.

From the point of view of Hindu expository study this book is an important one and deserves to be far better known than it is. In its constant endeavour to bring out comparative religious overtones, this work is not easily paralleled. It cannot, however, be said that all this comparison can be sustained by closer study.

The author seems to be familiar with the procedures of source analysis. He is highly sceptical of the historical value of the Fourth Gospel. His portrait of Jesus is largely drawn from

⁴⁹ M. K. Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), pp. 41-42.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-39.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵³ M. C. Parekh, *A Hindu's Portrait of Jesus Christ* (Harmony Home, Rajkot, 1953), pp. 594. Rs.10.

the Synoptic Gospels, following the Markan chronology of events. The work on the whole is sympathetic—with an occasional criticism of Jesus and several jabs at ecclesiastical failures. Though one may not agree with Parekh's contextual re-location of the materials in the Gospels, one is nevertheless bound to admit that he has put much study into the production of his portrait—and this in spite of his own modest disclaimer (p. 7). This work may not match the high standards of some other contemporary professional New Testament scholarship, but Parekh's work should make multitudes of educated Christians very humble indeed, that a Hindu brother should have laboured so immensely in constructing a portrait of Christ from a Hindu point of view. Considering the scrappy way in which even intellectual Hindus have handled the Gospels, this book does much to restore the outstanding neglect on this score. But a truly scholarly survey of the research for the 'Jesus of History' cannot sustain the author's claim: 'It is very significant that the discovery of the true Jesus as distinguished from that of the Western Churches and missions is largely due to the Hindu mind . . . This work has borne such fruit that the entire Hindu public has come to understand and love Jesus almost as much, if not more than Christendom'.⁵⁴

However, evidence can be furnished concerning the rather loose way in which Parekh weaves his discussion of some of the salient points of the portrait of Jesus. For purpose of illustrating this remark we shall mention only Parekh's handling of the Virgin Birth of Christ. He says, 'The Hindus have treated it as a pious myth'.⁵⁵ Yet for him such an event is not impossible,⁵⁶ for all things are possible to God. But even if true, it may not be necessary to salvation.⁵⁷ Parekh takes into account Greek virgin birth myths, the prophecy of Isaiah and the doctrine of original sin.⁵⁸ But unlike some Hindus (viz. Dr. Radhakrishnan's Spalding Lectures) Parekh suspends completely any suggestion of Hindu influence in the infancy narratives.⁵⁹

For the teaching and example of Jesus the author has nothing but the highest praise. In this regard his appreciation of Christ stands in contrast to those ethical evaluations of Jesus offered from a full Vedanta standpoint. The Vedantin Akhilananda and the near theist Mahatma Gandhi were able to say that Christ was greater than many, but has equals among the greatest; they circumspectly avoided asserting his superlative moral excellence.

⁵⁴ M. C. Parekh, *A Hindu's Portrait of Jesus Christ* (Harmony Home, Rajkot, 1953), pp. 331-332.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138. A critical examination of supposed Gentile influence on the Virgin Birth Narrative will show that this explanation will not do. For fuller discussion see J. Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*; Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*; V. Taylor, *The Virgin Birth*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

It is here that Parekh's evaluation exceeds what appears to be a normal Hindu evaluation. 'No other prophet or teacher,' he says, 'has turned so instinctively to the poor and the despised, the outcaste and the sinner, as he, and this constitutes the uniqueness of his life and work'.⁶⁰ He goes so far as to say that Buddhist *maitri* (compassion) cannot be compared to Christian love (*agape*), 'Here Jesus goes certainly beyond both Mahavira and Buddha, who are the only two among the great teachers of the world with whom he can be compared'.⁶¹ The author misses the Messianic (Christological) significance of the parables of Jesus. However, he feels that 'Saturated as the Hindu mind is with religious thought and feeling through all ages, it has created few parables which can be placed at the side of those of Jesus. Hardly a couple of Hindu parables have become universal'.⁶²

The author has no doubt that Jesus worked miracles.⁶³ But he denies Jesus' raising of Lazarus, as it is mentioned only in the Fourth Gospel.⁶⁴ Most Hindu accounts of Jesus' life silently bypass the question, or insinuate the non-factuality of the resurrection narratives. Parekh's handling of these (ch. 23), though reverent, makes the weakest chapter of the book. According to him the body of Jesus was not raised.⁶⁵ 'It remained where it was.' The Resurrection was only an 'appearance' like that of Swami Narayana.⁶⁶ Parekh is able to bypass the empty tomb problem and the historicity of Christ's resurrection because of his inadequate appreciation of New Testament assumptions about time. 'They', he says of the Gospel writers and St. Paul, 'lived on a plane of life where chronology and time were of no account'.⁶⁷

Regarding the death of Christ, Parekh observes, 'There is no doubt, however, that we are here face to face with the greatest tragedy enacted on the earth'.⁶⁸ He has much to say of the apparent ominous defeat of Jesus, the obscure carpenter of Nazareth, in tiny Galilee of insignificant Palestine; this is in contrast to the glorious victory of his ninefold influence on the history of the world and human betterment.⁶⁹ Therefore, 'All this and much more can be cited as witness to the glory that surrounds the figure and spirit of Jesus today. We may contrast it with the shame and the agony of his crucifixion, and ask ourselves again whether we do not see here the greatest miracle performed by God Himself on our Globe'.⁷⁰

⁶⁰ M. C. Parekh, *A Hindu's Portrait of Jesus Christ* (Harmony Home, Rajkot, 1953), p. 263.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 386.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 344; pp. 338-368, Chap. 16.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 580.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 586; pp. 579-580.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 572.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 572-575.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 575.

But why was Jesus crucified? Parekh is quite emphatic that 'this is a tragedy which has no parallel in history, though elements thereof are found in small or big measure in every human life. Lives of Prophets, Saints and Martyrs furnish us with something of a parallel to this though of a slender kind'.⁷¹ Parekh will have none of the glib comparisons of the death of Socrates, Hussein, or any one else to the death of Christ. He has much convincing argument against such comparisons.⁷² Indeed, 'The death of Jesus has the proportion of a world tragedy, and it has proved itself in the course of time to be the greatest moral and spiritual dynamic of history'.⁷³

Parekh accepts the appellation of 'Messiah' as applied to Jesus, and knows well the Jewish significance of the Messianic titles such as 'Son of Man' and 'Son of David'.⁷⁴ He knows also that it was Jesus who fused the concept of the Messiah as *Regus Victor* with suffering. But not having linked this with the expiatory ordeals of the Suffering Servant and the Son of God, Parekh has not grasped the exegetical and the existential significance of Jesus' claim to divinity and saviourship. Consequently the Lucan 'Father' passages (which find enlargement in St. John's Gospel) are misinterpreted as *attained samadhi* and Parekh explains 'it is a genuine saying and is one of the greatest ever uttered by man'.⁷⁵ The author, therefore, misses the Christological significance of the Lord's Supper.⁷⁶ The author almost, but never quite, links the *avatara* theory with Christ. That is, he resists the very first of Hindu theological temptations concerning Christ! It would appear that for Parekh, Jesus is more than an *Avatara* but a bit less than God.⁷⁷ For Parekh is aware (ch. 18) that the Caesarea Philippi self-disclosure is the climax of self-disclosure of Christ to the inner circle of disciples. It was particularly in this context that Christ said that He must suffer. But without a shred of argument Parekh dismisses the three predictions of the resurrection, linked with the prediction of the passion.

But why did Jesus suffer? To this the author has no clear negative or positive answer. He was indeed condemned for his Messianic claim. For according to the earliest 'source' of the trial, Mark 14:55-65, He was condemned as the 'Son' of God ('the Blessed'). The author's crucial chapter (19) on 'The Way of the Cross' is the mistiest chapter in an otherwise well thought out study of the life of Jesus. Here Parekh remained quite puzzled by 'covenant' and 'remission' of sins.

⁷¹ M. C. Parekh, *A Hindu's Portrait of Jesus Christ* (Harmony Home, Rajkot, 1953), p. 568.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 541, 560-561; 568-569; 570-573.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 541. This is more than Akhilananda, Gandhi, or Radha-krishnan will admit in print.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 418-420.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 373-376.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 525-532, especially pp. 529 ff.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 464.

So far as I know, this is the nearest that devout, thoughtful and considerate Hindus have come to the central fact in the life of Jesus. Whether Hindu thought will attain to the level of such a study or even exceed it, only the future can tell. Parekh recognizes one thing which most Hindus are unaware of: 'His (Christ's) life was considered far more important than his teaching and in this lay the origin of the Gospels.'⁷⁸ Why this should be so, on Parekh's handling of the passion, can never be explained. What is needed here is attention to Jesus' interpretation of his own passion.

V

The cultural, religious and theological significance and importance of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan's reinterpretation of Hinduism and interpretations of Jesus is not yet sufficiently grasped. Even during his tenure as the Vice-President of the Republic of India, a volume on comparative religion by no less a person than the professor of Comparative Religions in the University of Cambridge, could regard Radhakrishnan's apologetic and interpretative efforts as 'pathetic'! What is estimated as 'pathetic' is not his reconstructive synthesis as such, but rather its presumed cultural impact. Probably never before in the history of the world has an outright, life-long religious scholar preached so to the world of nations. As long as India preserves the democratic (rather than an anti-religious totalitarian) way, Radhakrishnan's influence is bound to increase. What is his interpretation of Christ?

Radhakrishnan's interpretation is conditioned by the inclusive character of Vedantic exclusivism. It has been conditioned also by a massive national reaction against the West (by which it has also been informed). It has been conditioned by thirteen years of study in Christian missionary schools and colleges. In the formative period of his career as a researcher, his interpretation has been conditioned by the theologically liberal reductionist interpretation of Christ. Whether consciously or unconsciously we cannot say, but he appears to be conditioned by Vivekananda's method of accounting for Jesus. Radhakrishnan has, on the whole, an attitude of respect for Christ. In 1924 he said, 'In our loyalty and devotion to Christ we may say that the revelation of God in Jesus is a perfect and complete one and His personality is unapproached in all history'.⁷⁹ But this, as we shall presently see, is interpreted in a peculiar *Advaita Vedanta* context.

Radhakrishnan has no trace of scepticism regarding the historicity of Jesus. But in a long chapter in his Spalding

⁷⁸ M. C. Parekh, *A Hindu's Portrait of Jesus Christ* (Harmony Home, Rajkot, 1953), p. 118.

⁷⁹ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Heart of Hindustan: 1931*, p. 96; 1950, p. 85.

lectures⁸⁰ he more than intimates Buddhist influence on the Gospel narrative, and even, perhaps, on the teaching of Jesus. He raises no question concerning the historicity of the miracles of Jesus. But we have no evidence that he comes face to face with the problem posed by the resurrection narratives. He once alluded to the Resurrection as a symbol of power.⁸¹

Regarding the question of Jesus' claim to divinity and saviourship, Radhakrishnan appears to fuse number of questions which, for analysis, require to be kept distinct. There is (1) the *prima facie* evidence of the *Textus Receptus*. (2) Given the *prima facie* evidence, what is its meaning? (3) Given an adequate grasp of the meaning of the text, did the Jesus of history make any such claim? (4) If so, what did He really mean (if different from 2)? (5) Did the disciples impute a (different) meaning to Him? Radhakrishnan bypasses (1), (2) and (3). He fuses (4) and (5) with emphasis on the latter. Two quotations will make the point clear. The meaning, according to Radhakrishnan, is not that God revealed by descent, but that man attained by ascent: 'Jesus is the example of a man who has become God, and who can say where his manhood ends and divinity begins. Man and God are akin "That art Thou". *Tat Tvam Asi*.'⁸²

Dr. Radhakrishnan thought that St. Paul intensified Christian intolerance by heightening the divinity of Jesus. The effect of the great credal councils has been similar, he feels. This, then, is an example of euhemerism. But there is little point in Radhakrishnan blaming St. Paul and the councils if it is the disciples of Jesus who 'euhemerized' him. And this is what Radhakrishnan claims. After quoting the great eschatological passage, Mat. 25:31-46, he says (on the same page)⁸³ that Christ was exalted to the level of Judge, Saviour and Logos only 'when the followers of Jesus raised Jesus to the rank of God, (and) the three aspects of *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Siva*, infinitude, grace and sovereignty, wisdom, love and power, were attributed to him'.⁸⁴ The positions (4) and (5) cannot be held at the same time, i.e. that made claims for Himself of the sort Vedantins believe, and that the followers exalted him. Needless to say, the significance of Jesus' Messianic claim in the light of its Jewish background and its eschatological impact is completely bypassed in Radhakrishnan's tangential contacts with the Christological problem in the Gospels and in the New Testament witness in general. The problem posed by the person and claims of the Jesus of history

⁸⁰ S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religious and Western Thought*, Ch. V. The question of Buddhist influence is not to be judged by the fact that Buddha lived before, but by the canonical history of the two sets of scriptures. Such scholars as Rhys Davids and Max Muller strongly disagreed on this matter.

⁸¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion in a Changing World*, p. 65.

⁸² S. Radhakrishnan, *The Heart of Hindustan*, p. 93.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

is nowhere systematically treated by Radhakrishnan. But he alludes to it again in his commentary on the *Bhagavadgita*—where his treatment reveals no development at all since 1924.

His attitude to Christ reveals an uncertainty of mind. At that time Jesus was for him 'unapproached'⁸⁵ (that was at the age of 36). However (at the age of 59) in his Kamala Lectures⁸⁶ before Indian University audiences in Calcutta and Banaras we find that he not only extracts certain 'difficulties' from the Gospels, but gives to their presentation an apparently bitter twist:

In violent language Jesus denounced the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. He drove the money changers from the temple with a whip . . . This conduct, which is not quite consistent with Jesus' loving and tender disposition, and is inconceivable in the case of a Buddha or a Gandhi, is used to justify violence. The militarist emphasizes the side of Jesus who insisted that salvation was of the Jews and vehemently denounced the Pharisees, even though he was their guest, as vipers, hypocrites, grafters and liars! . . . He was fierce toward evil and stern to unrepentant sinners.⁸⁷

This passage cannot be matched by even the most stringent of rationalists, like Voltaire, Paine, Bradlaugh or Ingersoll! Dr. Radhakrishnan's general reverence for Jesus is not above occasional sarcasm. Speaking of the tolerance of his ancestral faith he turns aside to refer to Christianity: 'The very gods are married . . . When the Hindu descends from the adoration of the absolute and takes to the worship of a personal God, his God has always a consort. He does not worship a bachelor or a virgin.'⁸⁸ But in a course of lectures⁸⁹ given in the West at McGill University in Canada, he speaks of Christ in near Pauline terms as the first fruits of the kingdom of the Spirit and the 'Second Adam'.

Considering the width of his mental horizon and the charm with which he writes; considering too Dr. Radhakrishnan's oratorical eloquence and great gifts as a thinker, one cannot but feel that the question of the cause and meaning of Jesus' passion ought to have been the object of a more serious and sustained study. Such a volume of scientific study has been put into the ancient Gospel text that a man of such immense culture as Radhakrishnan would be but doing justice to himself if he heeded

⁸⁵ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Heart of Hindustan*, p. 96.

⁸⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion and Society* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1956, Ind. Ed.).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208. The problems raised by Radhakrishnan have often been answered. Cf. H. Rashdall, *Conscience and Christ*, Chs. 4, 6; C. Ullmann, *The Sinlessness of Jesus*; L. Weatherhead, *When the Lamp Flickers*.

⁸⁸ S. Radhakrishnan, *East and West in Religion*, p. 84.

⁸⁹ S. Radhakrishnan, *East and West: Some Reflections*.

his own words concerning the Scriptures: 'That the water of a spring is purer at its source is certainly true of the religion of Christianity.'⁹⁰ Scattered in his many works we find in Radhakrishnan a mention of Jesus' sympathy and compassion for the fallen and destitute. He gives no evidence at all of Jesus' influence on the course of human events. Nor is there a sustained reference to the cross and passion of Jesus. The cross represents the immortal pleading of the love of Jesus and (for the Christian) the offer of salvation. Can the silence here of a great scholar-statesman be taken as the final view of the cross which speaks to suffering humanity? Perhaps this is the natural outcome of judging a historical fact by a philosophical frame—rather than constructing a framework through serious attention to a fact or a set of events known as the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. Another Asian scholar, a Chinese classicist who faced the same problem for years on end, said that around the cross our philosophies and theologies are like ten-cent frames adorning an aesthetic masterpiece by a great artist. Without such a frame, concluded Lin Yutang,⁹¹ in the perspective of his cross, Jesus and his grace is the majesty of light.

⁹⁰ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Heart of Hindustan*, p. 87.

⁹¹ Lin Yutang, *From Paganism to Christianity*.