

'Jesus Christ—The Life of the World' A Hindu Response

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I

In this note, I propose to discuss how, as a Hindu, I react to the Christian confession—"Jesus Christ—the life of the world." Such a reaction has its roots in the Hindu understanding of life and world, and as such, this note will also briefly touch upon these issues.

It should be mentioned at the outset that the views expressed here are essentially *personal*. It is indeed difficult to encompass in a brief note all the views that may be held by Hindus about the significance or purpose of life and the status of the world. Unlike Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Hinduism is not a book religion in the strict sense of the term, and, consequently, its outlines are somewhat amorphous. While its principal tenets are supposed to be based on the Vedas, many of its religious beliefs and practices can be traced to the Samhitās, Purāṇas and Tantras; and at times, such sources seem to differ from each other. Consequently, the views or attitudes that enjoy a common acceptance will be emphasized.

II

For the Hindus, a living creature is a composite entity—an amalgam of matter and soul (*cijjaḍagranthi*). The body, sense-organs and the vital airs (*prāṇavāyu*) are material. Consciousness is due to soul (*jiva*). The material component is produced and destroyed, but the soul is eternal—it is not created, nor can it be destroyed.¹ The soul is embodied due to its past deeds, that is deeds performed in a previous birth. The body to be inhabited by it is also determined by its past deeds.² This doctrine of *Karma* and rebirth implies that the embodiment of the soul does not have any beginning in time.

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¹ Bhagavadgītā 2. 18-24.

² Chāndogya Upaniṣad 5.10.7.

The experiences of a living creature may be pleasant or unpleasant to it. It is attached to the objects of pleasure, and tries to attain them. On the other hand, it tries to avoid objects that lead to unpleasantness. Actions due to attachment (*rāga*) and aversion (*dveṣa*) produce what is known as *Adṛṣṭa*. Such actions may be virtuous (*puṇya*) or vicious (*pāpa*). Virtuous actions lead to pleasure here or hereafter (may be in heaven or in a subsequent birth). Similarly, vicious actions lead to suffering here or hereafter (may be in hell or in a subsequent birth). [It should be noted that the soul is embodied even when it is in heaven or hell. In a disembodied state, the soul can experience neither pleasure nor pain.³] Once the due enjoyment of *puṇya* or *pāpa* is over, the soul returns to another mundane existence.⁴

So long as the soul remains in this process, it is said to be in bondage (*bandha*, *saṃsāra*). This goes on until the soul, tired of this cycle of rebirth, aspires for emancipation (*mokṣa*), and gains it through spiritual discipline and self-knowledge. [According to some sects, such aspiration for emancipation or its attainment is not possible without the grace (*krpā*) of God.] Attachment and aversion are due to ignorance (*ājñāna*, *mithyāiñāna*), and such ignorance can be removed when the soul realizes its own nature, and comprehends its distinction from things like body, sense-organ and so on. With the attainment of self-knowledge, ignorance is destroyed, and consequently, attachment and aversion cease to exist. As a result, there is no fresh accumulation of *Adṛṣṭa*. The body with all its functions continues to exist so long as the results of some past deeds remain to be enjoyed, but the emancipated soul does not feel any attachment towards it, just as a snake does not care about the slough that it has left behind.⁵ When there is no further *Adṛṣṭa* to be enjoyed, the body ceases to exist, and the emancipated soul becomes disembodied for ever. In this way alone can one transcend death, and attain immortality. [Some sects would put emphasis on the realization of God rather than on realization of the self.⁶]

³ Chāndogya Upaniṣad 8.12.1.

⁴ Chāndogya Upaniṣad 8.1.6.

⁵ Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.7.

⁶ Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 3.8, 6. 15.

Self-realization (or realization of God, for that matter) can be achieved only through an arduous process—it may even extend over a number of rebirths. A strong desire for emancipation (*mumukṣutva*) and the advice of a competent spiritual guide are essential prerequisites.⁷ One must also be pure at heart, and for this, a pure life, as prescribed in the scriptures, has to be led. Performance of religious rites is also essential. [Some sects would, however, put more emphasis on devotion (*bhakti*) and surrender to God (*śaraṇāgati, prapatti*).]

III

Adṛṣṭa, which controls our life in this world and hereafter, is not, however, an autonomous principle. Being inert (*jaḍa*), it is not an intelligent principle, and as such, it cannot act on its own. It functions under the guidance and superintendence of God, who is omniscient, omnipotent and impartial. God, while creating the world anew at the end of each *Kalpa*, takes into account the cumulative *Adṛṣṭa* of all the souls that may still be in bondage, so that there may be objects in the world that can produce pleasure and sufferings that are due to the souls. The world that we inhabit is not the first (and need not be the last) of its kind. The periodic dissolution (*Khaṇḍa-pralaya*) and creation of the world provides some rest to the souls in bondage. The worlds created in successive *Kalpas* do not differ in any significant way.⁸ In each *Kalpa* a few souls attain emancipation, but others are still in bondage, and hence the necessity of creating another world.

The souls in bondage are not automata, and they are, at least to some extent, free to choose their course of action. It may so happen that the majority of them can adopt the path of vice, and those who prefer the path of virtue may be subject to severe oppression and torture, leading to a total disruption of social and moral order. At such moments, the Incarnation (*Avatāra*) of God becomes necessary.⁹ Once the supremacy of justice over injustice is established, the task of the Incarnation is over.

⁷ Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 1.2.12.

⁸ Rg-Veda Samhitā 10.190.3, Bhagavadgītā 9.5-8.

⁹ Bhagavadgītā 4.7-8.

IV

Against this sketchy background of the Hindu belief about life and world, let us try to understand the Christian confession, "Jesus Christ—the life of the world." So far as I can understand, the Christian faith simply has no room for doctrines like transmigration of soul or emancipation. The life that one leads on earth no doubt stands in need of redemption, but it is not redemption from ignorance or mortality—it is a redemption from sin and guilt, and such a redemption is possible through the grace of God. This doctrine can be understood when one considers the Christian doctrines of creation and resurrection. As Whale puts it, "In the beginning, God created; in the end he will sum up all things, in heaven and on earth, in Christ."¹⁰ The last two words in this quotation may help us in understanding in what sense Jesus Christ is considered by Christians as the life of the world. To quote Whale again,

The life we live is life on earth, historically conditioned. Its tensions and troubles belong to the mystery of sin in which all earthly existence is involved. Escape out of it we cannot. But freedom within it and sufficient light upon it we may have, in Christ, through faith. In him existence becomes life.¹¹

That God is gracious is supposed to be proved by the fact that He is in Christ, in whose person man and God could meet, who died on the cross for the atonement of human sin, whose resurrection shows that death is not the last word of human existence, and through whom salvation can be attained. Since the possibility of rebirth is ruled out, the path of Christ becomes the sole path of salvation [whence the dictum *salus extra ecclesia non est*].

V

It should by now be clear that the Hindu and Christian views about life, world and the role of God diverge on some vital points. The Christian concept of Jesus Christ as the redeemer of mankind fits perfectly with the Christian doctrines of creation, human history and Divine Judgement, but to accommodate such a doctrine in the

¹⁰ J.S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine*, London: Collins (Fontana), 1958, p. 132.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 132.

framework of Hindu thought is well-nigh impossible. As we have seen, for the Hindus, the judgement of God is discontinuous—it does not wait for any length of time, and the outcome of the judgement is not linked up with following a path shown by a saviour, who is supposed to be the son of God. Thus the belief in Christ as the life of the world is not logically entailed by the central beliefs that constitute Hinduism.

Nevertheless, due to a long exposure to Christian preaching and literary or cultural sources, Hindus have formed their own opinion about Jesus Christ, and while they may not look upon Christ as the sole saviour of mankind, they may very well regard Him as a model of human action towards a betterment of life on this earth. While Christ preached the doctrine of love, charity and service towards fellow-beings, He also raised His voice against oppression, hypocrisy and dry ritualism prevalent in the society in which He was born.

The miracles performed by Him may show that he was Divine—but he did not perform them for the sake of impressing anybody or of winning followers. Through all these miracles He was alleviating the suffering of some fellow-being or other. To me at least, this shows His mercy and compassion rather than His glory. How else should we explain His refusal to perform the miracles suggested by Satan? The way He embraced death on the cross after enduring a series of mockeries and humiliations goes a long way to show that love and compassion for fellow-beings bends before nothing on earth—even death is defeated before such an inspired person.

It is, therefore, not surprising that a large number of reformers in the Hindu tradition were deeply influenced by Christian ideals (for example Swami Vivekananda was influenced to a great extent by *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis). Moreover, Hinduism has nothing to lose if it looks upon Christ as the prophet of an alternative path towards God. One can only recall here the following prayer in *Atharva-Veda*:

May the Earth that bears people speaking varied language,
With various religious rites according to the places of abode,
Enrich me with wealth in a thousand streams
Like a milch-cow that never fails.¹²

¹² Atharva-Veda Samhitā 12.1.45. Also, see Bhagavadgītā 4.11.