

The Gospel in the Advaitic Culture of India : The Case of Neo-Vedantic Christologies

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Advaita Vedānta is a religious experience which has taken birth in the soil of our motherland. One important feature of this culmination of Vedic thought (Vedānta) is that it cannot be tied down to the narrow boundaries of any one particular religion. Advaita Vedānta stands for unity and universality in the midst of diversities.¹ As a result it can very well function as a symbol of Indian composite culture. Advaita has "an enduring influence on the cultural life of India enabling people to hold together diversities in languages, races, ethnic groups, religions, and more recently different political ideologies as well."² It was its cultural unity based on religion that held India together historically as one. The survival of the political unity of India is based on its cultural unity within which there persists a 'core' of religion to which the sense of Advaita or 'not-twoism' makes an enduring contribution.³ Advaita represents a grand vision of unity that encompasses nature, humanity and God.⁴ Sociological and social anthropological studies have shown that in Indian religious tradition the sacred is not external to the secular ; it is the inherent potency of the secular. There is a secular-sacred continuum. There is a continuum between the gods and the humans, a continuum of *advaita*, and this is to be found even among the primitive substratum of Indian population.⁵ So the point is, such a unitive vision of Advaita is very relevant for an Indian understanding of the gospel manifested in Jesus.⁶

A glorious fact of the renascent history of India is that the Gospel is not external to the Indian cultural heritage which has its deep roots in religion, but rather very much internal to it. The Gospel emerges naturally and spontaneously from within the integrally related religio-cultural heritage of India, an important expression of which is Advaitic experience. The Neo-Vedantic interpretations of the Gospel manifested in Jesus bear witness to this truth and we undertake a brief study of these in this paper.

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It will do a lot of good to Christians in India as well as outside India, if they are willing to listen carefully to these Neo-Vedantic Christologies and with humility learn lessons from them. We Christians have done a lot of talking in the past and in our pride have attempted to give a lot of lessons to people of other living faiths. Now it is our turn to listen to and learn lessons from others.

The Neo-Vedantins whom we study starting from Swami Vivekananda are mostly distinguished members of the Ramakrishna Mission Order; but they also include a philosopher of the stature of S. Radhakrishnan. The central focus of their endeavour was to reinterpret Advaita Vedānta and bring out its contemporary universal relevance. But in doing so all of them found the person and message of Jesus to be naturally and spontaneously relevant to the Indian context, provided exclusive dogmatic interpretations as provided by the Christian Church, are avoided. We are studying the Vedantins' own interpretations of Jesus; how they could see Jesus from within the framework of Advaita Vedānta. These interpretations are from within their own heart of hearts. They are not Christian superimpositions and that is their significance. These interpretations are the outcome of the last hundred years of Neo-Vedantic history of India. No one can change this history or ignore it, but only learn lessons from it for the further dynamic growth and progress of Indian religio-cultural thought, an integral part of which is Indian Christian thought.

1. Swami Vivekananda :

In Swami Vivekananda's view, there is very little difference between the pure religion of Christ and that of the Vedānta. Jesus was an Advaitin because to the masses who could not conceive of anything higher than a personal God, he said, 'Pray to your Father in heaven'; to others, who could grasp a higher idea, he said, 'I am the vine, ye are the branches', but to his disciples to whom he revealed himself more fully, he proclaimed the highest truth, 'I and my Father are one'.⁷ We have to realise the kingdom of God which is within us, i.e. we have to realise our spiritual nature that we are immortal spirit, we have to attain perfection through renunciation.

Krishna, Buddha, Jesus and Ramkrishna are just few among the many incarnations. Among the incarnated personalities like Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Jesus, Mohammad, Luther, Ramkrishna, some are called Gods and some prophets. The difference between man and Christ is a difference in

manifestation; but as Absolute Being there is no difference between the two. When intelligence is perfect, we get the Incarnation—the Christ. Jesus was a man who has felt and realised God intensely. Still the Christs are Teachers of teachers; they can transform us into saints. But mere worship of Buddha or Christ will not save a person; God alone can give us freedom. Jesus and others like him are free spirits and hence they took human form, not by the compulsion of their past actions, but just to do good to humankind.⁸

A Christian should retain the essentials of Christianity which according to Vivekananda, are the teachings of Lord Jesus as exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount.⁹ Christ shows us the way to become perfect; he shows us our true nature which is divine.¹⁰ Christianity considered human person as a sinner, a worm and that is why it could not understand the message of potential divinity implied in his saying, 'I and my father are one'. Human sacrifice was a Jewish idea and to fit the gentle and loving Jesus into Jewish beliefs, the idea of human sacrifice in the form of atonement or as a human scapegoat, by Christianity, was really unfortunate. The problem with Christianity is its idea that religion consists in doctrines. It has the peculiar doctrine that the whole world was born because Adam ate the apple and now there is no way of escape other than belief in Jesus Christ that he died to save us. For the Christians the problem is how to escape the wrath of the terrible God.¹¹ Like the Indians they are unable to see that religion means realization which involves the regaining of the lost selfhood. The West has distorted the religion of renunciation and realisation of Jesus into a 'shop-keeping religion' of luxury and intolerant superstitious doctrines.

2. Swami Abhedananda:

Swami Abhedananda rejects the traditional Christian understanding of sin and salvation as dogmatic, unsatisfactory, illogical and contradictory. Christians mean by salvation redemption from sin through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, the Son of God. But Jesus, the Christ did not teach the idea of vicarious atonement; what he taught was 'the kingdom of Heaven is within you'; 'I and my Father are one'.¹² Our true nature is Spirit and sin is nothing but selfishness or ego-sense caused by the ignorance of this true nature. The appearance of the Ātman as the limited ego is fall. Through Satan, the Ignorance, the Eve or *Buddhi* or understanding is overcome and that is the spiritual meaning of fall according to Vedānta. And the fallen ego will

recover its absolute state through the help of the Ātman which is described as Christ. The true saviour of the apparent ego is the Ātman and the way of salvation is the knowledge of Ātman.¹³

Jesus, Krishna, Buddha etc. become saviours of the world in the sense they communicate to the unawakened souls this message of salvation. Among these great ones, though Moses, Confucius and Mohammed are called prophets of the Lord, Zoroaster and Lao-Tze are regarded as the messengers of God, and Krishna, Buddha, Christ and Ramakrishna are classed with the saviours of the world, each of these has fulfilled his divine mission by setting an example, by showing the path to perfection.¹⁴

Jesus shows us the way to the realization of our oneness with the Heavenly Father as expressed by his famous saying, 'I and my father are one'. Christhood is the supreme state of God consciousness where all duality vanishes. Each soul is a latent Christ.¹⁵ Jesus gives new life to old truths. The religion of Christ was taught before him by Buddha and Krishna in India. The 'word' and the 'Cross' were originally two great sacred symbols of the ancient Aryans as *Vāk* and *Swastika* respectively and they were later taken up by the followers of Christ. Moreover, the earliest record of the sacrifice of the first born is found in the Rig Veda. But we should not absolutise these symbols into dogmas and thereby convert Jesus' pure religion of heart into Churchianity.¹⁶

3. S. Radhakrishnan :

According to Radhakrishnan, anyone who approaches the New Testament will find that the emphasis of it is on other-worldliness, but the character of renunciation which is basic to Christian faith has been distorted by the West. The contemplative spiritual religion of Jesus has been changed now into a dogmatic secular one, a system of belief and ceremony, which fails to change human lives.¹⁷ The spirit of intolerance is found very much in Christianity because unfortunately, it inherited the Semitic creed of the 'jealous God' in the view of Christ as 'the only begotten son of God'. The Jewish emphasis on the historical and the Christian doctrine of incarnation are difficult to reconcile with the absolute and non-historical character of Godhead. If Christianity confounds eternal truth with temporal facts, metaphysics with history it will never understand the meaning of Jesus.¹⁸

Radhakrishnan believed that Indian religions have to help Christian faith to revive its own mystic tradition. Jesus himself and Christian thought have gradually absorbed much insights from mystery religions, Greek metaphysics and mysticism of the East.

In Essenes and the Book of Enoch, we can trace Buddhist and Upaniṣadic influences and they in turn influenced Jesus.¹⁹

The insights which Jesus expresses through his historical life are expressions of a timeless spiritual fact of mystic human perfection.²⁰ The abandonment of the ego and the soul's arisal to a sense of its universality is the meaning of the cross. Cross shows how love is rooted in self-sacrifice.²¹ Resurrection is the passage from the death of self-absorption to the life of unselfish love, the transition from the darkness of selfish individualism to the light of universal spirit.²² The resources of God which were available to Jesus are open to all and if we struggle as he did, we will develop the God in us. The central lesson of the life of Jesus to the Hindu is the undermining of the false antithesis between human person and God. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are not so much historical events which occurred once upon a time as universal processes of spiritual life, which are being continually accomplished in the souls of humans.²³

4. Swami Akhilananda :

Swami Akhilananda explains Jesus, the Christ, as an incarnation of God²⁴ who came to demonstrate how humans can become God-conscious. A Hindu believes that God incarnates Himself at different times to fulfil a particular mission and to re-establish the spirit of religion, whenever religion declines and irreligion prevails. Jesus, the Christ came to re-establish the spirit of religion in the Jews and other people of the Roman empire. An incarnation shows us that the background of the world is divine, as the eternal subject of experience is also divine. In other words, the subject and object of experience are basically one. They also demonstrate how to live on the basis of this knowledge. They are rulers of *māyā* (*māyādhīsa*) while we are the slaves of *māyā* (*māyādhīna*). The Hindu will agree with orthodox Christians as opposed to 'liberalism' in regarding Christ as unique in comparison with ordinary humans. There is an important difference even between saints and incarnations. Whereas saints are at first bound souls who later became illumined, the incarnations are the veritable embodiment of divine light and power from the very beginning of their lives. The divine incarnations are embodiments of patience and forgiveness, love and sympathy. Moreover they being the manifestations of God have the power of grace, have the power of dispensing all limitations and weaknesses of a person and giving direct illumination to a saint as well as a sinner.

Jesus was an Oriental who emphasized the supreme goal of

life as the attainment of the kingdom of Heaven which is same as realization of God.²⁵ He shows us the way to perfection which is same as the realization of the kingdom of God which is within us. As an incarnation of God, Jesus was a *yogi* of the highest type, one who was thoroughly established in *yoga* union with God. A *yogi* is one who can declare 'I am the self' or 'I am Brahman', just as Jesus says 'I and my Father are one'. Jesus practiced all the *yogas*, namely *karma*, *bhakti*, *rāja* and *jñāna*. He emphasized the spiritual transformation of the individual as is exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount.

Cross is the expression of spiritual power or soul force through which alone we can conquer evil. Cross teaches us that through aggression we cannot conquer evil. Cross symbolizes the conquest of the lower passions as well.²⁶ Resurrection signifies changeless immortal life; It is the realization of the abiding presence of God in us attainable by all, through the crucifixion of the empirical selves.²⁷

5. Swami Prabhavananda :

From the Experience of oneness with the Ultimate which Vedānta teaches, Swami Prabhavananda approaches the teachings of Christ as given in the sermon on the Mount.²⁸ Jesus teaches us to be reborn in spirit or be perfect through the purification of the heart. Christ's statement, 'behold the kingdom of God is within you' refers to the divinity within human person. Jesus taught all the *yogas*, giving special emphasis to *bhakti yoga*.

Jesus is one of the *avatars*.²⁹ To the Hindus the Word is incarnated in all beings. But the Word is made flesh in an Avatar, in a special sense, the avatar being the descent of God; they being born without *karmas* and above *māyā*. Whereas, ordinary person ascends towards God. It is not exclusive claims which make one an *avatar*, but it is the unique power to transmit spirituality and transform human lives by touch, look or wish, and the revelation of their divinity in transfiguration that expose one as an *avatar*. An *avatar* does not originate the truth of God but only unfolds it.

6. Swami Ranganathananda :

According to Swami Ranganathananda, India's approach to religion is spiritually-oriented and not dogma-oriented and this is also the approach of Jesus Christ to religion. Jesus struck a new note when he proclaimed that the kingdom of God is within

us and that we can realize it or have spiritual realization or perfection here and now. He taught purity of heart as the condition for spiritual realization. His message of inward realization was a departure from the tribal faith Judaism and it sounds strangely Vedāntic in significance. The emphasis of Jesus was on *sāadhanā* the practice of religion through renunciation, with a view of attaining realization.³⁰

Unfortunately, the universal message of Jesus which comprises the ideas of the indwelling divinity, of divine grace, universal ethics and spiritual realization was distorted by the Christian Church through fettering it in cast-iron dogmas of innate vileness of human nature, 'the scape-goat' and 'the atonement', physical resurrection and the second advent, earthly kingdom and the imminence of the Day of judgement which are purely tribal in their scope.³¹ The lost universality of the message of Jesus can be regained now under the guidance of the philosophy of Vedānta. Ranganathananda also extols Jesus as one of the divine incarnations whose power is beyond the reach even of saints.³²

7. Swami Satprakashananda :

Swami Satprakashananda believes that Christianity in both its early phase and later developments was directly influenced by Hindu religious ideas, as well as indirectly by Buddhism.³³ The Swami can identify the Hindu ideas of reincarnation and law of *karma* in the New Testament. The ethical precepts of Jesus like 'love your enemies', and renunciation are taught by Upaniṣads and Buddha. The ideas of grace of God, devotion to God and 'purity of heart' are emphasized by Jesus Christ and Hinduism. 'The kingdom of God is within you' means the self of human person is ever united with the Supreme Self; God always shines as our Inmost self. The consciousness of the Spiritual Self attained through purification of the mind is what baptism really is.

Hinduism and Christianity both believe that it is from the Word or *Vāk* that everything in universe including Divine Incarnation has arisen. According to the Swami, Jesus is one of the many incarnations³⁴ and it is unimportant whether a spiritual teacher is considered a prophet, a messenger, or worshipped as the Incarnation of God; if one faithfully follows the teachings of any of the spiritual leaders of the world he/she will certainly be saved. The two Incarnations Jesus Christ and Sri Ramkrishna had constant vision of God and through *samādhi* they realized the identity and unity of the individual self with the Supreme Self.

Through his crucifixion,³⁵ Jesus Christ teaches us to overcome

the body-idea by the spiritual conquest of the flesh, to overcome the lower self by the higher spiritual Self. He also demonstrates the very perfection of the teaching of non-resistance of evil in his crucifixion. Through resurrection³⁶ Jesus Christ affirms that human person is really Spirit ; death can take life out of the body, but it cannot after the spiritual self of a person. Resurrection is the resurrection of the subtle body made of subtle elements.

8. Bhawani Sankar Chowdhury :

According to Bhawani Sankar Chowdhury, Jesus had been teaching Vedānta i.e., the realization of human divinity.³⁷ The philosophy of Christ can be identified in the words, 'I and my Father are one', 'I in my Father, Father in me', 'You in me', 'the kingdom of God is within you' and in the words declaring himself as the son of God and inviting others to be sons of God too. The message of Jesus is : 'I and my Father are one ; you too, can be one with me and my Father- *So (h) ham, tattvamasi, sarvam idam brahmaiva* - I am He ; thou are that, all these are Brahman only'.

Jesus' death on the cross can be understood as an expiatory sacrifice not for the sins of the whole humanity, but for the sins of those people whom he cured of their diseases or in his lifetime converted to righteousness.³⁸ Eternal life is living in the spirit and that is what resurrection means.³⁹ The body dies but the spirit lives on. All must imitate Christ, go Christ's way and return to unity with God Himself. That is the significance of Resurrection. Unfortunately, today in spirit the Christians are more Jewish than Jesuit ; instead of the gospel of the kingdom of God they preach the Christhood of Jesus.⁴⁰

Conclusion :

All the Neo-Vedantins whom we studied above are of the opinion that Jesus had a non-dual relation with God the Father and he is inspiring all the humans also to have the same relation with God through the renunciation of the lower self. Jesus shows as the way to become perfect, he shows us our true nature which is divine ; he brings us to realization which involves the regaining of the lost selfhood. The central lesson of the life of Jesus to an Indian is the undermining of the false antithesis between human person and God. The abandonment of the ego and the soul's arisal to a sense of its universality is the meaning of the cross. Resurrection is the passage from the death of self-absorption to

the life of unselfish love, the transition from the darkness of selfish individualism to the light of universal spirit.

Jesus is one of the *avatars* or the descents of God, born without *karmas* and above *māyā*. An *avatar* has the unique power to transmit spirituality, transform human lives by touch, look or wish, and reveal divinity through transfiguration. Jesus was a *yogi* of the highest type who practiced all the yogas, namely *karma*, *bhakti*, *rāja* and *jñāna*.

Today, the lost universal message of Jesus can be regained with the help of Advaita Vedānta; the Christian dogmatic assertions like the atonement theory and the innate vileness of human nature no more need distort the meaning of the gospel.

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