

STATEMENT OF THE INDIAN THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
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**BRAHMABANDHAB UPADHYAY: A “HINDU-CATHOLIC”
HIS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THEOLOGIZING IN INDIA TODAY**

We, the members of the Indian Theological Association (ITA), at its 30th Annual Meeting at Vidyadeep, CRI's Brothers Institute, Bangalore, April 21-25, 2007, reflected on the contribution that Brahmabandhab Upadhyay made to India's freedom struggle, and to understanding and practising religious faith. A hundred years after his death, we have the chance of honouring this great son of India and learn from the method that he employed to be truly Indian and no less Christian.

Introduction

1. Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (Bhavani Charan Bannerjee) is an Indian who has done his country and the faith that he professed, proud. During the 46 years of his life Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) sought the truth relentlessly, engaged in the freedom struggle against foreign domination and lived out Christian discipleship in spite of difficult odds. Equipped with a sharp and probing intellect, he followed truth on a journey that led him to be baptized a Catholic, to appreciate his Hindu upbringing that had made him proficient in Vedanta, to participate in a struggle for freedom that took him to prison and to his death and, finally, to arrive at a fulfillment that is the legacy he leaves to all of us Indians.

2. Upadhyay was a child of the Bengal-based nationalism of the 19th century and was passionately committed to ending foreign domination. In pursuit of this objective he wrote articles in Bengali in *Sandhya* (1904-1907) and in English in *Sophia* (1894-1900) against British colonialism and European cultural hegemony, and he was arrested on charges of sedition. Already in 1891 he had become a Catholic and applied himself to employing the Upanishadic Vedanta to express Catholic dogma and belief in a new idiom. This effort was the fruit of an interior conversion allied to the need to

offer a sound theistic worldview to all Indians. He edited *Sophia* (1894-1900), an English journal, and in it he wrote theological articles that broke new ground for an indigenous Christian theology. He professed himself a Hindu-Catholic and justified this appellation by explicating his Hindu identity as *samaj dharma* and his foundational Catholicism as *sadhana dharma*. He founded a Christian ashram in Jabalpur. The existing ecclesiastical authorities did not take kindly to his interpretation and forbade Catholics to read *Sophia*.

3. Upadhyay pioneered many movements in different fields. In religion, and after his conversion, he sought to study the Christian tradition since he believed that it alone was supernatural in its origin and offered comprehensive salvation to humankind. Yet, as a Hindu who had a phenomenal insight into the intricacies of Vedanta, he used Vedantic categories to reinterpret the dogmatic and doctrinal content of Catholicism with a creditable degree of success. While believing totally in Jesus Christ who brought all persons salvation, he was able to separate him from the vehicle that brought him to India: the Christianity that was, de facto, practised and propagated by the West. He dreamt of an India in which Indian Christians would draw from the well-springs of Vedanta and live a life of creative harmony with all others. In this he was a forerunner of the inculturation and dialogue that Vatican II affirmed in its relevant documents.

4. He was a freedom fighter. Along with like-minded individuals who were committed to the freedom struggle, he denounced the continued foreign presence in India and gave himself to the cause of freedom tirelessly. At the same time, his way of life committed him to Christian discipleship that motivated him to tend the plague-stricken in Karachi and to travel the expanses of India to proclaim his faith to Brahmins in South India. In addition, he also journeyed to England and, after interacting with Anglican divines, returned to India but kept up corresponding with Church leaders in

his efforts to continue his quest for an indigenous Christianity that was orthodox and yet constituted a simple way of life.

5. One need not endorse all that Upadhyay said and did. However, he was willing to acknowledge ecclesiastical authorities in his efforts towards an indigenous Christianity. But he would not sacrifice his intellectual honesty at the altar of ecclesiastical intransigence. His new-found categories to express Christian faith may need modification and greater nuancing but the Church of his times was ill equipped to understand his contextualized approaches to the faith. One may also find his understanding of caste quite naïve and ask if Upadhyay saw the contradiction in affirming the wholesomeness of caste distinction without being appalled at its hideous discrimination. But one must desist from examining Upadhyay from standpoints of today since he was formed in and belonged to another age. Facing many odds, he showed how a loyal Indian could be an authentic follower of Jesus and committed to the cause of emancipation for all Indians; he journeyed on the path of truth even to the door of death. As a theologian, he offers a paradigm for new theological methods and he symbolizes the Christian commitment that is faithful to God while serving others in the Indian context.

PART I

Upadhyay and Indian Nationalism

6. The conception of India as a 'nation' began to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century. Prior to that period the notion of India as a unified political entity was almost absent; what was present was ethnic and regional identities in India. In a way the Bengal renaissance had set the tone for the emerging nationalist consciousness. The introduction of print technology, newspapers, journals, as well as the liberal values such as political self-determination and freedom did play a part in the spread of the nationalist consciousness. If the second-half of the nineteenth century saw British colonial power at its height, it was also a

period, which saw India's transition into modernity in political and economic terms. It is during this period which saw the emergence of the ideology of nationalism which eventually led to the formation of India as a nation. Transition from region-based identity to the imagined pan-India identity marks the creation of national space in the nationalist thought.

7. Three significant challenges contributed to the sudden spurt of national consciousness following a deep soul searching that had been forced upon the Hindu intelligentsia in search of their identity. The first was the denigration of Indian culture in general, even ethics and moral values by the colonial administration. The second was an ill informed assault on Indian religions especially on Hindu gods and goddesses, rituals and other expressions. The third was the perceived threat from Christian evangelicals in their efforts at proselytization. Nationalists like Tilak and Aurobindo began to respond by reasserting religious symbols and values as inseparably linked with authentic national consciousness.

8. It is in this atmosphere of emerging nationalist consciousness that Brahmabandab Upadhyay grew up. At a deeper level we can detect a unifying thread in Upadhyay's thought and writing; and that thread is precisely the nationalist sentiment which had occupied his mind from his younger days. Bengali intellectuals like Upadhyay played a significant role in the articulation of identity formation as well as the production of meaning in the emergent national space. It was through the complex interpretation of India's past and present that the notion of a distinct national space began to crystallize in the nationalist discourse. However, for many Bengali nationalists at the end of nineteenth century 'nation' was an ambiguous concept. Often 'nation' in the nationalist discursive practices coincided both with Bengal and with the territorial boundaries of British India.

9. As far the nationalist thought of Upadhyay is concerned, we can see two distinct stages: pre-*Swadeshi* period and *Swadeshi* period. In the pre-*Swadeshi* stage Upadhyay is a moderate nationalist; often he is even positive about the British presence in India. Yet Upadhyay

is also critical of certain aspects of British colonialism during this stage. Prior to 1905 Upadhyay's nationalist thinking is rooted entirely within the framework of constitutional means. The turning point in Upadhyay's active political intervention was the Bengal partition in 1905. His nationalism turned more and more towards radicalism even to the extent of advocating violence against the British. As a radical nationalist, Brahmabandhab began to spell out in *Sandhya* the need for complete independence for India.

10. One of the important features of the emergent nationalism had been the focus on the cultural/spiritual domain. Indian nationalist movement was generally marked, even in their early stages, by an upsurge of cultural activity or cultural *renaissance*. Many Indian nationalists like Upadhyay and Balagangadhara Tilak sought to keep away colonial modernity and its influence from this cultural/spiritual space. Nationalists like Upadhyay had incorporated into Indian nationalist ideology, either directly or indirectly, the Orientalist interpretations of India and its cultural past. Such interpretations had depended heavily on the Indian classical textual traditions to the exclusion of other traditions. Further, North Indian nationalists had utilized the theory of the superiority of the Aryan race in their interpretation of Indian cultural past. We need to recognize the fact that the Orientalist interpretations of Indian past and the nationalist uncritical appropriations of it entail a certain degree of distortion. It negates not only the composite nature of Indian cultural ethos but also the ethnic plurality.

11. Upadhyay, along with other nationalists like Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore played an important role in forging a sense of collective cultural identity and in formulating the notion of nationhood. The colonial discourse had legitimized their continued existence through the claim that India was not a nation. Against this colonial claim, the anti-colonial nationalism felt impelled to forge a national identity. In the process of confronting British colonialism Indian nationalists like Upadhyay felt the need to create a national

identity through the mediation of complex mechanisms. Out of several competing claims of what constituted such national identity, a common Hindu heritage, based on the classical Hindu ethos was projected as the core structure of the emerging nationhood. Upadhyay's nationalism was a response to a situation in which the 'loss of self' loomed large on the political and cultural horizons. His nationalism was conditioned by what he perceived as the urgent need to consolidate those aspects of culture and identity which were on the verge of disintegration. He wanted to evoke in the people theistic belief in order to create national consciousness.

12. Upadhyay incorporated his intense nationalist sentiments into his engagement with Catholicism. He was deeply concerned about the stagnant state of the Catholic Church. He wanted Christians to take an active part in the social and political process of the country. By his life and writings Upadhyay sought to demonstrate that being a Christian and a patriot are in no way contradictory. Though he became part of the Bengali radical nationalism, this in no way diminished his contributions towards India's freedom struggle.

13. As a Hindu Upadhyay wanted to be loyal to the ideals of his country. His patriotism took on a spiritual dimension. He felt called to work to free Hindu culture from the pitfalls of atheism, polytheism and pantheism threatening it from without and from within. If India had to recover its spiritual greatness it had to remain a witness of God in a world where religious values were threatened by an incipient secularism. But this ideal did not make him forget his commitment to the freedom of his beloved country. He fought for it with his pen relentlessly, and even died for it, for his imprisonment and his death were consequences of his courageous protest against the control of the country by the foreigners. Today we surely can celebrate and remember his strong commitment to the country. His contribution to the freedom struggle has not been sufficiently acknowledged. With many friends and colleagues of other religious persuasions he tried to

keep before the public the awareness of the need to achieve political freedom.

PART II

Brahmabandhab the *Hindu-Catholic*

14. Upadhyay was a lover of India throughout his life. In his mid-twenties he gradually discovered another love that would fuse with and transform his love for India and that remained with him till his final prayer on the death bed, 'Thakur,. Thakur!' This was his invocation of Jesus Christ whom he had come to love so ardently and serve so passionately. Nothing makes sense in the life of the adult Upadhyay if we do not understand his love for Jesus Christ. Till the end of his life he never gave up his faith in Christ the Lord in spite of the opposition from the institutional Church.

15. He had of course heard about the person of Jesus from the missionaries who did not hesitate to announce their message in the streets of Calcutta and through the pamphlets that flooded the bazaars. He seems to have been indifferent to their voice, for they spoke in a strange language. He was not even ready to follow the example of his uncle, the Rev. Kali Charan Banerji, a pastor of the Anglican Church, an authentic and humble man, greatly involved in the freedom struggle and much loved by Mahatma Gandhi. But when Keshab Chandra Sen, his spiritual mentor, spoke of Christ as "God's chosen human ideal" and the "Son of God" (in a sense which Upadhyay would later correct), Upadhyaya became interested and listened. A careful reading of an apologetic work, *Catholic Belief*, by Faa de Bruno, and much reflection and prayer convinced him. Once the decision was taken, nothing would stop him. He had to follow Jesus and for his sake 'leave father and mother.' In 1891 he renounced his job in the Union Academy of Hyderabad, Sind, and announced his decision to seek baptism. There was consternation in the family and in the circle of friends and admirers. He would live by his work or by alms if need be, but he would be a follower of Jesus Christ. He talked about him with

love, he spoke about him with friends, he convinced a good number of them to follow him in the discipleship of the Lord. In 1901, he would publish an article, "Christ's Claim to Attention," which deserves attention even after more than a century (*Writings I*, 191).

16. Yet his decision did not diminish his love for his country and people. He refused to become a member of a westernized Church, though he had an outgoing character always in need of a community. Eventually he sought and obtained admission into the Catholic Church which he considered as universal, not bound to any nation or culture. In 1894 he was convinced that "if India had to be converted it must be by the Catholic Church, the handmaid of Almighty God" (*Writings II*, 176). Towards the end of his life, in 1904, he wrote to Khemchand: "Rest assured that for me it is impossible to go against the Holy Church. Never, for a moment, since my baptism have I been even tempted (I am not boasting) to doubt the divine authority of the Pope of Rome over my faith and morals. Moreover, I have never failed to submit to lawful ecclesiastical authorities." (*Writings II*, 545)

17. Soon after his conversion he changed his name and renounced the prefix "Vandya-ji" (meaning 'to be revered', the original form of his family name Banerji) because he said, "I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Man of Sorrows, the *Despised Man*" (*Writings II*, 449 stress his). Shortly after this he took to a sannyasa form of life and confirmed his earlier decision to remain celibate for life. He would devote himself exclusively to the work of God. All his life he would live in dire financial straits, and would suffer from cold and hunger. He had often to appeal to his friends for financial assistance. (*Writings II* 538-540 with footnote 213).

18. He remained in the Church but ill at ease. For he presented himself as a strange kind of Christian: he was a *Hindu-Catholic*, Hindu by birth and culture, Catholic by faith and rebirth. Hinduism was his family inheritance. Christianity was a free grace of God given to him, without any merit of his own. He tried to explain his faith, using categories from the current Christian theology; his

Hinduness was God's gift through nature, his Christianness God's gift by a special and unmerited grace.

19. Using Indian terminology he distinguished between *samaj dharma* and *sadhana dharma*. Samaj dharma was the order of society, the cultural world he had inherited. As a member of his samaj he would remain faithful to the norms of his caste, which was Brahmin. His fare and dress did not change. But Hinduism allows its votaries the inner freedom to choose any authentic path to spiritual progress and even the choice of one's own *ista devata*. He claimed this right from his samaj: he had chosen Jesus Christ as the incarnate form of the Divine that he would worship and proclaim. Nothing could deflect him from this. He wanted to purify the religious discrimination of the country. In 1898 he wrote strong words about this:

Human reason must begin with the infinite and end with the infinite. A young one of a whale must gambol in the ocean, though young. It will fail for breath in a tank. Two brothers, however unequal their intellectual attainments may be, possess the equal privilege of honouring their father as father. It will be a shame, an ignominy, to ask the less educated son to honour a servant as his father. The son who is intelligent and educated may know more of the riches and glories of his father, but he stands on the same platform with his less advanced brother so far as the entire "acknowledgement" of fatherhood is concerned. Likewise, *all men, high or low, educated or uneducated, should worship none else but God as God.... Brahmins and Chandals, philosophers and peasants, should join hand in hand and heart with heart to worship in spirit and truth the timeless infinite spirit.* (*Writings I*, 286, italics added).

21. Besides this purification, Upadhyay wanted to awaken the Hindu masses of the country to the need of raising a religious symbol which would be theistic and at the same time inspiring for the work of national liberation. He found it in the figure of the Lord Krishna, the beloved avatar of the country. Addressing the Hindu constituency he presented Krishna as a national symbol, though earlier he had criticised the cult of Krishna.

22. Today theologians and many believers are struggling with the question of multiple belonging to religious communities. There are many practical issues involved, e.g., in families professing different religious faiths. How can they worship together as family? How will they use the various symbols of the Divine deriving from different religious traditions? India may offer good examples in this area.

23. The *samaj dharma / sadhana dharma* distinction may not be adequate in the present understanding of the faith. The Christian *sadhana* of discipleship to Jesus involves a communitarian dimension which one would need to distinguish in some form from the Hindu Samaj. We know however that this distinction has helped the formation of new communities like the *Isu-panthis* and the *Krist-bhaktas* in parts of North India. The integration of such new communities into the total brotherhood/sisterhood of the disciples of Jesus is not without its own problems, although one must be open to the Spirit that leads the Church into new paths. Perhaps we must think of various forms of discipleship of Jesus.

24. The natural / supernatural categories in theology are not satisfactory, for the supernatural call to share in the Divine Life reaches all people, often through their own religions. Upadhyay offers us a personal example of an effort to remain loyal to his two traditions. How to articulate this question in the modern world remains a challenge for theologians today.

PART III

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay the Theologian

25. Upadhyaya was proud of being *born* in a land of rich spiritual heritage, and was also grateful to be *reborn* as a disciple of Christ. His theological concern was to integrate the spiritual intuition of the rishis with the mystical insights of Christian faith: to harmonise Vedanta with the Christ-experience. Updhyaya's restatement of Christianity in terms of Hinduism marks a significant departure from the traditional approaches of Christianity towards Hinduism.

Christian missionaries in general had a negative view of Hindu sages, scriptures and symbols. In contrast to such a negative approach Upadhyaya sought to forge a positive relationship between Hinduism and Christianity. As a person involved in the national awakening his concern was to bring Christians to the mainstream of nationalist movements.

26. Upadhyay had an early initiation to the spiritual riches of India, to both the bhakti traditions of Bengal Vaishnavism and the jnana pursuits of the Vedantic sages. He grew up in a milieu of ardent quest for the spiritual resources of Indian heritage that would unite and mobilise the people in their struggle for freedom. In the early 1890s he studied carefully the Vedanta of Sankara (as given in the Orientalist translation of Thibaut) and the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (as presented in the Stornyhurst Series). He found that Vedanta was "misunderstood by the Europeans; even Max Müller and M. Thibaut have failed to grasp its central meaning." (*Writings*, I, 228) His concern was then to give an authentic interpretation of Vedanta and present it as a rational base to grasp the revelatory experience of Christ. "Vedanta rightly interpreted and brought into line with modern thought will make the natural truths of Theism and the supernatural dogmas of Christianity more explicit and consonant with reason than was done by the scholastic philosophy." (*Writings*, I, 228)

27. As a theologian therefore Upadhyay had a twofold concern: the first, by upholding belief in the One supreme God and in line with the reformers of Hinduism to *rid Hinduism* of forms of idolatry, superstitions, enslaving rituals and jati-based discriminations (*Writings*, I, 34); and the second, by insisting on the underlying dynamic unity of reality to *liberate Christianity* from its tendency to stagnation in concepts as well as resistance to promote evolution in theological pursuits. (*Writings*, I.35, 229)

28. The entire theological methodology of Upadhyay seems to be based on a threefold distinction: between the natural and the

supernatural, between the pursuit of reason and the gift of revelation, and between culture and faith. Of these polarities he consistently puts Hinduism in the first category and Christian faith in the second. (Writings I.16). Between them he does not find a separation or conflict, but immense scope of harmony. In as much as affirming the supernatural is not the denial of the natural, and the gift of revelation is not the negation of reason but its fulfilment, Christian faith has to be seen as the fulfilment of the noble strivings of the human soul, as beautifully articulated in the Vedantic search of the sages.

29. What is the golden string that binds Christian faith with Vedanta that is seen in the depths of mystical experience? Upadhyay finds it in the experience of the dynamic unity of reality. In the hymn *Vande Saccidanandam* and in his reflections on the Trinity he dwells on the inner-divine oneness that is alive through relationship. In the designation of Christ as *nara-hari* and in his Christological writings he emphasises the unity between the human and the Divine in the reality of Christ. The Holy Spirit recreates everything to enable its participation in the unity of divine life. And the Church is the symbol of the unity of humanity. However in the western theology, which Upadhyay deplors, the analytical mind takes the upper hand and dissects faith into manifold categories and definitions which block the way to deep mystical experience.

30. It is here that Upadhyay discovers the epochal need for the West to open its gates to the East. "Concerning the ground of a particular thing, it is the Hindu's distinctiveness to enter into the core of that thing. Its mark is the one-centredness or interiority...This one-centred vision, having gradually blossomed, received its culmination in the pure advaitic teaching of Vedanta." (*Bangadarsan*, 1901) Understood in the light of Vedantic experience, faith in Christ would lead to a mystical perception at the *paramarthika* level that we are in the Divine, the Divine in us, we are one with / in the Divine. "The end of the human being is to be

perfect, like God, according to the measure of one's own being, to feed upon the same divine substance of Truth, Goodness and Beauty that God himself feeds upon, to be everlastingly happy as God is happy, in fact, to live *the very life of God.*" (Writings, I.9 emphasis added). The natural quest of the human is elevated and fulfilled in the supernatural gift of grace, given in Christ.

31. Jesus is the incarnation of the divine Cit, Logos, Sophia (Writings, I.126) "Man is destined to become perfect like God by union with Him who is *real* God and *real* Man, fully realised God-in-Man" (Writings, I.18)

32. For Upadhyay this mystical experience is an incentive to affirm the world at the *vyavaharika* level. He does not admit a monistic interpretation of Vedanta nor does he accept a world-denying spirituality. On the contrary he holds on to a Vedantic affirmation of "the contingent existence of finite beings" (Writings, I. 230) . Hence he advocates a spirituality of involvement in the struggles of the people and of commitment to the welfare of all beings. His ascetic life style, his care for the plague stricken people, his participation in the freedom-movements, his critique of the oppressive systems of the British were all consequences of his Vedantic theology. He was a prophet well ahead of his times.

33. With our contemporary theological sensitivity we are reluctant to make a clear distinction between the natural and the supernatural. If God is ONE, humanity is one family, and human history is in one spiritual evolution. Then the presence of the divine Spirit is to be perceived as at work everywhere and in every human heart. Divine grace transforms all human pursuits into the new creation. It is within this global process that we look at religions and cultures today. The Christ event gives us Christians the light to perceive the Divine, while other symbols enlighten the minds of others. Hence is the need for great respect in inter-religious encounters and inter-cultural solidarity.

34. In his fascination for the heritage of Vedanta, Upadhyay seems to have overlooked several other spiritual streams which nourished India's composite culture over the centuries, like the Buddhist tradition, the medieval Bhakti movements and the social protest movements. The identification of Indian heritage with *Hindu* heritage falls short of the multi-religious and pluri-cultural fabric of the sub-continent. Following the speculative lines of Thomism and Vedanta, Upadhyay adopted more of an 'essentialist methodology' that does not effectively address the concrete 'existential or contextual' questions people face in their life.

35. However Upadhyay has a clear message for the development of Indian Christian theologies. (i) Theological reflection, he would insist with the sages of India, must have its well-springs in mystical experience. Mental constructs without authentic inner experience would be mere word-game. (ii) Faith in Christ is not to be identified with the traditional Graeco-scholastic paradigms. The Indian experience, past and present, complex and paradoxical, does offer a rich substance for articulating Christic experience in cultural forms resonating deeply with our soil and psyche. (iii) "The way you live, so you think!" - Upadhyay would warn today's theologians. "Being a disciple of Jesus the despised man" Upadhyay lived a life of simplicity and radical insertion into the struggles of the people and the nation. Hence the fearless stance that he took in theology, with all the struggles and sufferings that it involved.

Conclusion

36. Brahmabandhab Upadhyay was a convert with no longstanding family background of Christian upbringing. He was a layman with no formal theological training. Still he is perhaps the first native Indian Catholic theologian who systematically reflected on the foundational elements of Christian faith. He was a forerunner of Indian Christian Theology. The pioneering attempt he made to develop an Indian Christology is an inspiration for us Indian theologians to share the liberative story of Jesus in ways that are

appealing to our people with diverse religio-cultural background. The creative way in which he engaged in dialogue with Hinduism invites us to explore new ways of theological discourse with the religions alive in India. The courageous manner in which he committed himself to the freedom and welfare of his country and his fellow citizens motivates us to get involved in the life and destiny of the people, especially of the poor and the marginalised. His readiness to take risks in developing indigenous forms of Christian life and thought is a constant reminder not to give up when confronted with opposition from within or outside the Church.

37. We, the Indian theologians, are grateful to God for the gift of Barahmabandhab Upadhyay to our country, and to the Church. As we remember him with esteem and love in this year of the centenary of his final departure, we pay homage to the memory of this great son of the country and fellow believer in the Catholic communion. Today as we witness exclusivist claims and counterclaims regarding identities. Upadhyay's experimentation is an invitation to build *bridges* between cultures and traditions.

38. We know that the circumstances in which he lived and struggled are not the same as those shaping today's context in which we live and search. The Independence of India, which he dreamt of, has become a *reality*, and the Second Vatican Council has opened the doors of the Church to other cultures and religions. Globalisation makes the entire world a *global village* and secular ideologies raise new challenges that theology should address. In this new context Brahmabandhab Upadhyay inspires us to listen anew to *what the Spirit is telling the Church* and nation, and to deeper Christian commitment in civil society with our fellow citizens for the integral wellbeing of the people of this great nation.