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## THE DIFFERENT FACES OF CHRIST IN ASIA

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### Abstract

All those Christians who live in the vast continent Asia, having an existential experience of the different cultures, sharing the world-view of the people, encountering everyday people of different religious traditions and listening to the cries of people who struggle to lead a life worthy of human beings raise the question about the meaning of Jesus Christ in the lives of the people of Asia. How does Jesus appear to the people of Asia? He has different faces in Asia. His face among the Chinese and other East Asian cultures is different from that of the Indian Subcontinent. Jesus is seen as the liberator of the oppressed Minjung people of Korea, the Dalits in India and other poor and oppressed people of Philippines and other countries as well as the liberator of Asian women. Since Jesus is identified with every humanizing culture of the Asian people and their struggle for full humanity they would find his face that is liberating, reassuring and meaningful to them in their own cultures and in their struggles, sometimes hidden, sometimes revealed but always challenging and liberating.

**Keywords:** Asian Christology, Confucianism, Incarnation, Indian Christology, Jesus of Nazareth, Matteo Ricci, Minjung, Yin and Yang

In the multiverse of Asia Jesus have many faces. Each culture or nation of Asia develops its own Christology. Though Jesus Christ is one, Asian Christologies are many. The Church articulated “who Jesus Christ is” in dialogue with Judaism and the Greco-Roman

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world. Such a finished Christology with its ready-made Christ image did not make much impact on the peoples of Asia for the last twenty centuries because Asian people have different cultures and world-views that cannot understand the 'language' of Christian proclamation. Moreover, the religions of Asia claim to have their own mediators and saviours who seemed to have shown them the ways of salvation. They might find 'Christ an exotic figure more or less appealing, or a suspicious construct associated with the conquering and invading foreigners.'<sup>1</sup>

### 1. "What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth"

Does Jesus Christ offer anything new to the poor of Asia, which the religions of Asia cannot give? Is he just another apocalyptic visionary or a true prophetic missionary? How does Jesus Christ, as the self-emptying of God, respond to the situation of suffering in the Asian context whatever be the cause of suffering? Is Jesus Christ just another God competing with a myriad of gods and goddesses of the Asian continent for supremacy? Is he not the God of the colonizers? Can Jesus address the quest for ultimate liberation and the questions of poverty? "Is he an oriental pantocrator? A western divine prophet? The private God of the Christians? The Universal Saviour? A Man for others?"<sup>2</sup> The mystery of Christ cannot be limited to any titles or any particular function of Christ. However, the figure of Christ that is encountered, lived and interpreted in any cultural, religious, social, political and economic context makes him the liberative force against all types of alienation.

The fundamental Christian kerygma is that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour. But the question is how to proclaim this kerygma meaningfully in the Asian context. Jesus in Asia has many faces. His presence is 'known' or 'unknown' in the religious traditions of Asia as well as among the poor as the liberator of the poor and the oppressed in their socio-economic, political situation of dehumanization and marginalization.

A variety of the Asian faces of Jesus emerged from the struggle of the Christian believers in articulating their faith-experience in dialogue with the religious and cultural traditions of Asia in order to proclaim him in a meaningful way to their listeners. They were convinced of the fact that Jesus Christ would not make much impact on the lives of the people of Asia and his Good News of liberation

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<sup>1</sup>R. Panikkar, "A Christophany for our Times," The Thirty-fifth Annual Robert Cardinal Bellarmine Lecture, *Theology Digest* 39,1 (1992) 4.

<sup>2</sup>Panikkar, "A Christophany for our Times," 4.

and wholeness would be lost on them if they are presented with the traditional image of Jesus Christ articulated in another culture and historical context which has very little in common with the Asian context. Moreover, the experience of colonialism had blurred their vision of Christ as some of them identified Jesus Christ with the God of the colonizers. In spite of such negative responses to Jesus he had such a powerful impact on some educated people of other religions in Asia that they interpreted Jesus Christ and his message using the categories and images drawn from their religious, cultural and philosophical traditions.

## **2. Chinese and the Other East Asian Faces of Christ**

In describing the various faces of Jesus in Asia we can begin with the various Christologies that have emerged in the Chinese context. Not only because of the vastness of the country of China with a population of more than 1.2 billion people but also because the earliest attempts at interpreting Jesus Christ in Asia began in China. Before the arrival of Jesuits in 1582 C.E. the East Syrian missionaries (the Nestorian missionary movement) had reached China already in 635 C.E. and the Franciscan John of Montecorvino in 1294 C.E. Their proclamation of Christ was to some extent successful as they could establish Christian communities in China. But both the East Syrian church and the Roman Catholicism in China disappeared with the founding of Ming dynasty in 1368 C.E. which systematically 'purified' the Chinese culture by removing all foreign elements. Two centuries later the Jesuits had to begin again trying to interpret Christ in a way meaningful to the Chinese people.

### **2.1. Jesus, the Bodhisattva**

In dialogue with Buddhism, the Nestorian missionary Alopen, one of the first missionaries to arrive in 635 interpreted the soteriological function of Jesus Christ in terms of the self-less service of the Bodhisattvas to humanity. Bodhisattva is a person who has reached the stage of attaining Nirvana but postpones it in order to serve human beings. Alopen made use of the story of *Avalokitesvara*, a male Bodhisattva who puts on a female form to serve the people, to explain the life and mission of Jesus. The Chinese called *Avalokitesvara* in his female form *Guan Yin*, the goddess of mercy. Alopen explained that God becoming human in Jesus Christ in order to save humans was similar to the self-sacrificing action of Bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara*. Four Christian treatises in Chinese titled *Jesus-Messiah Sutra* and other three grouped together as *Discourses on*

*Monotheism* are attributed to Alopen.<sup>3</sup> Jesus is the Bodhisattva, par excellence. In Sri Lanka similar Christologies are emerging today in dialogue with Buddhism.

## 2.2. Jesus, the Greatest Teacher

In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit companions found it extremely difficult to communicate traditional understanding of the Person and mission of Jesus to the Chinese people because their world-view was totally influenced by Confucianism for more than two millennia. Christ's Incarnation, death and resurrection would not make any sense in this worldview. The idea of crucifixion was abhorrent to any follower of Confucianism. At first, for pedagogical reasons Ricci and companions did not introduce the passion and death of Jesus. They tried to present Jesus as the Greatest teacher in the tradition of Confucius.

In his attempt to prepare the mind of the people to understand the mystery of Christ, Ricci interpreted the Confucian understanding of the Supreme "Lord of Heaven" from a Christian perspective and introduced Jesus without mentioning his passion and death. In his book, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu shiyi)* Ricci explained that the Lord of Heaven acted with great compassion and descended into this world to save it and experienced everything. In the second year after Emperor Ai of the Han dynasty adopted the title Youan-shou, on the third day following winter solstice, the Lord of Heaven selected a virgin to be His mother and became incarnate and was born. "His name was Jesus, the meaning of which is 'one who saves the world.' He established his teachings and taught for thirty-three years in the West. He then reascended into Heaven. These were the concrete actions of the Lord of Heaven" (*Tianzhu shiyi*, para. 580).<sup>4</sup>

In his *Introduction to the Incarnation of the Lord of Heaven*,<sup>5</sup> the first Chinese text completely devoted to Christology,<sup>6</sup> Guilio Aleni explained the meaning of incarnation and its relation to the passion,

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<sup>3</sup>S.B. Bevans and R.P. Shroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Queson City & Bangalore: 2005, 105.

<sup>4</sup>Jonathan Tan Yun-ka, "Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Sage: Towards a Confucian Christology," in *Asian Faces of Christ*, ed., Vimal Tirimanna, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2005, 84. For a critical translation see, Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (Tien-chu Shih-i)*, tr. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, ed., Edward J. Malatesta, St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985.

<sup>5</sup>*Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV)*, Borgia Cinese 324 (5) b.

<sup>6</sup>Aristotle Dy, "Towards a Chinese Christology: Inculturation and Christology in the Chinese Context," *Landas* 15, 2 (2001) 56.

death and resurrection of Jesus. It was impossible for the Chinese to understand why God had to suffer. But Aleni tried to make them understand the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death in terms of the voluntary self-offering of Cheng Tang, the first emperor of Shang dynasty who allowed himself to be sacrificed to propitiate the Lord of Heaven in order to save his people from famine. For Aleni, the emperor Cheng Tang pre-figured Jesus Christ, the greatest Teacher who offered himself to the Lord of Heaven to save human beings. However, Aleni's explanation about the incarnation, passion and death of Jesus as the son of the Lord of Heaven remained unconvincing for the Chinese people because the Lord of Heaven could never become human, live or die in human history. It was possible for them to accept Jesus as a great Teacher like Confucius.

### 2.3. Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Sage

In the Confucian world of East Asia, namely, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan and Vietnam, according to Jonathan Tan Yun-ka, a Christology that presents Jesus as the ideal Sage, crucified and risen, is meaningful.<sup>7</sup> Different from the Western-Greek approach in seeking Truth, the Sinic-Confucian approach is seeking the Way. In this context a 'Confucian Christology' is relevant as it attempts to discover the "Way" (*dao*) of Jesus, the Sage or (*sheng*). The sage, according to Confucius, is "an example both of *something*, as an embodiment of the Way of Heaven, and an example to *someone*, as a model for emulation."<sup>8</sup> The sage is the fullness of human perfection. The six attributes of a sage according to Mencius are true, good, beautiful, holy, great and divine.<sup>9</sup> All the attributes of a perfect Sage are found in Jesus in their fullness. However, Jesus is more than a perfect Sage. Jonathan Tan Yun-ka affirms that the death and resurrection of Jesus the Sage makes him unique. According to him, the peoples of East Asia would answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" in the following or similar words:

You are the sage, the son of the Lord of Heaven who embodies perfect humanity and divinity, discerning and proclaiming to us the nearness of the Way of the Lord of Heaven, showing us by your life, suffering and death on the cross what this Way of the Lord of Heaven

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<sup>7</sup>Tan Yun-ka, "Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Sage," 49-87.

<sup>8</sup>R.L. Taylor, "The Sage as Saint: A Study in Religious Categories," in *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism*, Albany, NY, 1990, 41, cited by Tan Yun-ka, "Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Sage," 73.

<sup>9</sup>M. Fang, "Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Sage: Towards a Confucian Christology," (Response), in *Asian Faces of Christ*, ed., Vimal Tirimanna Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2005, 108.

entails, and inviting us to imitate you and your preferential option for the poor and the marginalized by joining you in embracing and walking along this Way from its beginning to the end.<sup>10</sup>

#### 2.4. Jesus, The Yin and Yang

In the context of Taoism which has a tremendous influence on the life and culture of the people of the East Asian countries Jung Young Lee, a Korean theologian interprets the person and message of Jesus using the symbolism of *yin* and *yang*. Originally, *yin* symbolized shadow and *yang* brightness. Eventually *yin* came to mean female, receptive, passive, cold, etc., and *yang*, male, creative, active, warm, etc. In the final analysis everything that exists can be understood as an interplay between *yin* and *yang*. Underlying epistemological principle behind the symbolism is the principle of identity or non-contradiction. Therefore, the emphasis is on *both/and* category of thinking which characterizes Eastern thinking and not on *either/or* which characterizes the Western thinking. According to Lee,

Jesus as the Christ, as both God and man, cannot really be understood in terms either/or. How can man also be God? In the West we have to speak in terms of paradox or mystery in order to justify the reality of Christ. However, in *yin-yang* terms, he can be thought of as both God and man at the same time. In him God is not separated from man nor man from God. They are in complimentary relationship. He is God because of man: he is man because of God.<sup>11</sup>

For Lee all theological issues like incarnation, death and resurrection, creation and redemption, sin and salvation, being and becoming, etc. can be better understood and explained through the symbolism of *yin and yang*.

### 3. Jesus of the Indian Sub-continent

Though Jesus Christ was known in the south-west of India from the first century onwards, he did not have much impact on the subcontinent in the following centuries. It was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century due to the missionary movement of Francis Xavier, the inculturation attempts of Robert De Nobili and the other Jesuits in the Mogul Court of Akbar, Jesus Christ and his teachings came to be known to a wider section of the Indian society. During the Hindu Renaissance of the

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<sup>10</sup>Tan Yun-ka, "Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Sage," 87.

<sup>11</sup>J.Y. Lee, "The Yin-Yang Way of Thinking: A Possible Method for Ecumenical Theology," in *Mission Trends No. 3*, G.H Anderson and T.F. Stransky, ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976, 37. See Anton Wessels, *Images of Jesus: How Jesus is Perceived and Portrayed in Non-European Cultures*, tr., J. Vriend, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990, 156-157.

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jesus and his teachings were taken seriously by some Hindu reformers for the transformation of the Indian society.

### 3.1. Jesus, the Guru

The father of Hindu Reformation, Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), found in the moral teachings of Jesus the powerful message to liberate Hinduism from its superstitions, polytheism and certain dehumanising practices. According to him the moral teaching of Christ is indeed the way to freedom and happiness.<sup>12</sup> In a letter he wrote to his friend in 1815 he says, "The consequence of my long and uninterrupted search into religious truth has been that I found the doctrine of Christ more conducive to inculcate moral principles and better adapted to the use of rational beings than any other that has come to my knowledge."<sup>13</sup> Roy's recognition and application of the moral teachings of Christ for the reformation of the Hindu Society influenced the view of other Hindu reformers about Jesus and his message.

### 3.2. Jesus, the Satyagrahi

For Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), the social and political reformer of Modern Indian society, Jesus Christ is the ideal Satyagrahi or one who clings to Truth. He says, "Jesus Christ is regarded as Prince of those who practice non-violence. I maintain that non-violence in this case must be understood as satyagraha, satyagraha and nothing else."<sup>14</sup> Gandhi never hesitated to acknowledge the influence of the person of Jesus and of the Sermon on the Mount on him. In his book *The Message of Christ*, Gandhi writes, "The gentle figure of Christ, so patient, so kind, so loving, so full of forgiveness that he taught his followers not to retaliate when abused or struck but to turn the other cheek – it was a beautiful example, I thought, of the perfect man."<sup>15</sup> Gandhi recognised Jesus as perfect man with a divine dimension. He affirms the influence of Jesus on all human beings.

### 3.3. Jesus, the Perfect Yogi

Those Hindus who follow the Advaitic or non-dualistic tradition of Hinduism consider Jesus a perfect Yogi or an ideal ascetic. In the advaitic tradition, the self-realisation of a person consists in the

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<sup>12</sup>Ram Mohun Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness*, Calcutta, 1820.

<sup>13</sup>Hans Staffner, *The Significance of Jesus Christ in Asia*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1985, 6.

<sup>14</sup>Staffner, *The Significance of Jesus Christ in Asia*, 25.

<sup>15</sup>M.K. Gandhi, *The Message of Christ*, Bombay, 1963, 3.

ultimate realisation of his/her identity with the Absolute. For Advaitins or so called Neo-Vedantins like Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan, Jesus is the perfect Yogi who attained the fullness of self-realisation. Jesus realised the ideal of Hindu view of life, namely, the experience, "I am That" (*aham brahmaasmi*), or the realisation of identity between the individual and the Absolute. They often quote the Johanine statement of Jesus, "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30) as the articulation of the non-dualistic experience of Jesus. Jesus realised this truth about himself progressively. Everyone has the potentiality to become like Christ or to realise the divinity within through self-denial. Vivekananda says, "Christ was a Sannyasin, and his religion is essentially fit for Sannyasins only. His teaching may be summed up as: 'Give up'"<sup>16</sup> Further he says, "I pity the Christian who does not reverence the Hindu Christ. I pity the Hindu who does not see the beauty in Jesus Christ's character."<sup>17</sup>

### 3.4. Jesus, the Divine Humanity

Among the Hindu views on Christ one that comes much closer to the Christian faith-affirmation about Jesus Christ is the view of Keshab Chunder Sen (1838-1884). Though he never became a baptized member of any Christian Church, his views on Jesus Christ influenced many Hindus as well as the Indian Christian thinkers.

Sen believed that the correct presentation of Christ to India was his life-mission for the regeneration of India. For Sen the Indian myths of evolutionary incarnations are the portrayal of a process of the evolution in perfection. He says: "Indian Avatarism is indeed a crude representation of the ascending scale of Divine Creation."<sup>18</sup> Long before Teilhard de Chardin articulated his views on the relationship of Christ to evolution, Sen affirmed that Christ is the apex of organic evolution. In Christ the evolution has reached its maximum perfection and so Sen calls this perfection in Christ 'Divine Humanity.'<sup>19</sup> Sen prefers the term God-in-man to explain incarnation to God-became-man. Yet he would insist that it was Logos, the pre-existent that expresses itself in full humanity in Jesus. Further he affirmed that in Jesus Christ, the ultimate term of evolution, the Logos is offered to all. "The problem of creation," according to him,

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<sup>16</sup>*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 6, Calcutta, 1966-71, 109.

<sup>17</sup>Daniel E. Bassuk cites Vivekananda to show his critique of both Christian and Hindu attitude to Christ. Daniel E. Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity: The Myth of the God-man*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1987, 180.

<sup>18</sup>K.C. Sen, *Keshub Chunder Sens's Lectures in India, Vol. II*, London: Cassell & Co., 1904, 14.

<sup>19</sup>Sen, *Keshub Chunder Sens's Lectures in India, Vol. II*, 13.



“was not how to produce one Christ but how to make every man Christ.”<sup>20</sup>

Sen had no hesitation to confess Christ as the Divine Son of the Father, the Second Person of the Trinity which he called *Saccidananda* (*Sat*=Truth, *Cit*=Intelligence, *Ananda*=Bliss). At the same time he affirmed that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and was an Asiatic ascetic or Yogi with full of Hindu devotion, communion and self-surrender. Sen was certain that the Hindus would recognize him as their brother and friend, Lord and Master and not as a doctrine.

### 3.5. Jesus, the Unique Incarnation

In the progressive development of the Hindu views on Christ, Pratap Chander Mozoomdar (1840-1950) comes still closer to the Christian confession of faith in Jesus Christ than Sen. In his writing, *The Oriental Christ*, he tried to show the soteriological value of Christ being both Son of God and Son of Man. According to him, Jesus Christ is unique incarnation because he completes all other partial and limited incarnations. Other incarnations

...are partial, local, imperfect, bounded by time, nationality and circumstance. Socrates is for the Greeks, Moses for the Hebrews, Confucius for the Chinese, Krishna for the Hindus, and Mohammed for the Musalmans... The need of a man is for a central figure, a universal model, one who includes in himself all these various embodiments of God's self-manifestation. The need of man is for an incarnation in whom all other incarnations will be completed. Such an incarnation was Christ.<sup>21</sup>

According to Mozoomdar, Jesus Christ was present in all that was great and good in humanity and he perfectly embodies the true and universal relation between God and man.

### 3.6. Jesus Christ, the Cit or Consciousness

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) was the Indian Christian to make a serious attempt at interpreting Jesus Christ using Indian categories and thought patterns. He says: “The Hindu mind is extremely subtle and penetrative, but is opposed to the Greco-Scholastic method of thinking.” For Upadhyaya the philosophy of non-dualism (*Advaita*) of Sankara is better suited to explain the Christian doctrines. “We must fall back on the vedantic method of formulating Catholic religion to our countrymen. In fact, the Vedanta must be made to do the same service to the Catholic faith in India as

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<sup>20</sup>Sen, *Keshub Chunder Sens's Lectures in India*, Vol. II, 15.

<sup>21</sup>P.C. Mozoomdar, *The Spirit of God*, Boston: Geo. H. Elias, 1894, 239f., cited in M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ o the Indian Renaissance*, London: SCM, 1969, 89.

was done by Greek philosophy in Europe.”<sup>22</sup> Upadhyaya made use of the vedantic understanding of the attributeless Absolute or *Nirguna Brahman* who is also described in the Vedanta as *Saccidananda* (*Sat* = Being, *Cit* = Consciousness, *Ananda* = Bliss) to explain the inner Trinitarian relationship of communion. The communion ‘within’ the Trinity can be explained when *Cit* (Consciousness) is understood as the self-knowledge of God, which is ‘eternally generated’ because God (*Sat*) is eternally in his self-cognition and so eternally proceeds Bliss (*Ananda*) from this colloquy of *Sat* and *Cit*. Jesus Christ is God’s own Known Self, or God’s own Self begotten in Thought or the ‘Acknowledging Self-Image.’ Thus he is the *Cit* or Logos of the Father. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the *Cit* or Consciousness of God. In a Christological hymn he wrote in Sanskrit, the *Hymn of Incarnation*,<sup>23</sup> Upadhyaya presents Jesus Christ as ‘transcendent Image of *Brahman* and *Nara-Hari*’ (God-Man).

### 3.7. Jesus, the Avatara or Incarnation

A prominent Indian Christian theologian A.J. Appasamy considers that the ‘qualified non-dualism’ of Ramanuja is better suited to the Christian interpretation of Christ in India.<sup>24</sup> According to the philosophy of Ramanuja, God is a personal and loving being and the doctrine of *Avatara* holds that the supreme personal God Vishnu ‘descends’ in an embodied form from time to time for the sake of liberating the world. The term *avatara* means to appear, to become embodied to incarnate or etymologically it means to cross over, to come down or descend. The number of *avataras* vary but the standard number of *avataras* of Vishnu is ten and the prominent ones are Rama and Krishna. Other Protestant theologians, like, V. Chakkarai and P. Chenchiah hold the view that the doctrine of *Avatara* can be correctly interpreted to explain the Christian mystery of incarnation. The Catholic theologians are of different opinions with regard to the use of the term *avatara* to mean incarnation as understood in Christian theology. However, in most of the regional languages of India the Christian theological and devotional literature use this term for the incarnation of the Word. Jesus is the once and for all *avatara* of God different from all other *avataras* who descend from time to time not only to remove wickedness from the world but also the wicked.

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<sup>22</sup>B. Animananda, *The Blade: Life and Work of Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya*, Calcutta: Roy & Sons, 1946, 68.

<sup>23</sup>R. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2004, 77.

<sup>24</sup>A.J. Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga – A Study in the Johannine Doctrine of Love*, London: SPCK, 1927, 20-21; *The Theology of Hindu Bhakti*, Bangalore: United Theological College, 1970, 44ff.

### 3.8. Jesus, the Symbol of Cosmotheandric Christ

One of the greatest contributions of Raimon Panikkar (1918-2010) to the humanity is his insight into the Mystery of Christ, which is at the same time an insight into the mystery of humans and their world. According to Panikkar, Christ is to be seen not only in the limited Abrahamistic or Semitic tradition but also in the cosmic tradition of mankind and in all authentic religious traditions. The whole Christ is historical and trans-historical, pre-existent, historically existed at a particular place, time and culture. He is the living one who can be encountered in the sacraments, in all human beings and especially in the deprived and the depraved. He is the most perfect expression of the complete harmony between everything that is Divine, Human and Cosmic or the Cosmotheandric reality. But this insight of Panikkar should not be construed as his attempt to separate Jesus of Nazareth from Christhood as some of his critics accuse him of separating the two. But the Christ of Panikkar's Christology is not an a-personal principle. "The Christ that sits at the right hand of the Father is the first-born of the universe, born of Mary; he is the Bread as well as the hungry, naked or imprisoned."<sup>25</sup> This Christ is the second Person of the Trinity, the pre-existent Christ who reveals himself in Jesus of Nazareth.

### 4. Jesus, the Liberator of the Oppressed

Some of the Asian liberation theologians like Sebastian Kappen (India), Choan Seng Song (Taiwan), Aloysius Pieris (Sri Lanka), George Soares Prabhu (India), Samuel Rayan (India) and others affirm that the liberative thrust of the Christian message must challenge the existing socio-economic and socio-cultural and religious systems which have the preferential option for the rich and the powerful and oppress the poor. Kim Chi Ha, the Korean Christian writer, portrays in his play *The Gold-Crowned Jesus* the struggle of the real Jesus to reveal that he is in the midst of the suffering of the poor. A leper looks at the cement statue of Jesus with a gold-crown and asks him penetrating questions about the situation of pain and misery, which destroys millions of humans especially in Asia.<sup>26</sup> C.S. Song says: "The real Jesus and the people in suffering... Jesus cannot be Jesus apart from such people. Jesus is not real unless he is with them in their daily struggle."<sup>27</sup> Only the real Jesus of the poor can identify himself with the suffering humanity of Asia in their struggles

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<sup>25</sup>Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga*, 27-28.

<sup>26</sup>Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga*, 121-122.

<sup>27</sup>C.S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, 11.

and tragic experience of failures at the face of repressive social, political and economic systems and powers. So the suffering people reveal the real Jesus and Jesus the human can reveal the fullness of God as compassionate (suffering with) love as he did when he lived among the poor and the outcasts his time in Palestine.

In the Philippines where Christianity became the majority religion, there are a variety of images of Jesus beginning from the pious images like Santo Nino to the very challenging 'theology of struggle' which presents Jesus as the liberator of the poor who struggle daily to live a life worthy of their vocation as human beings. Various titles of Jesus like *Datung Maraya* which in Visaya means 'the one who gives prosperity' or *Ngir Omekuul* meaning anchor or harbour in Palau or *Abay* which in Cebuan means travelling companion reveal the closeness and solidarity of Jesus with those who struggle for a better human life. In the island of Mindanao Jesus is *Manluluwas-Kauban*, "he who cares, who gives aid to the hungry, who travels with his people, who protects the persecuted, who pardons sinners, in a word, the liberator."<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.1. Jesus, the Dalit

The Dalits of the Indian subcontinent are the victims of centuries-old religious, cultural, social and economic discrimination. Religion condemned them to be untouchables because they were born as outcastes in a social system that is legitimized by the sacred Hindu religious texts. "In a society in which purity-pollution becomes central principle of social organization, a religiosity centred on sacredness is an effort to exclude the 'impure,' it serves as an ideological device for the subordination of the subalterns like the Dalits."<sup>29</sup> The Indian Constitution has abolished the untouchability but the Dalits continue to suffer discrimination in all aspects of their life. In the context of their struggle to unfold themselves as humans the Dalits encounter Jesus as the one who suffers with them and struggles with them and empowers them to attain the fullness of life. According to A. Maria Arul Raja,<sup>30</sup> "... Dalits do not discover the meaning of Jesus as mere substance or being but primarily as the co-sufferer leading them to the new heights of realizing the human-divine continuum. This realization enables Dalits to get awakened to transform their suffering as a historical opportunity in a creative

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<sup>28</sup>Jesus Christ, *the Word of the Father, the Saviour of the World*, Mumbai, 1997, 49.

<sup>29</sup>Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2005, 155.

<sup>30</sup>A. Maria Arul Raja, "Witnessing to Christ in the Dalit Context," *Jeevadhara* 35, 207 (2005) 219.

manner in their journey towards integral emancipation." Jesus, the Dalit, challenges the systems of discrimination and dehumanization and suffers the consequence of standing for creating a new humanity where all humans are equal brothers and sisters; his prophetic message transforms both the victims and the victimizers.

#### 4.2. Jesus, the *Minjung*

The oppressed people or the *Minjung*, of Korea recognize their powerlessness before the oppressors yet have the will to recover their dignity as humans. The power of the powerless like the paradox of the cross is well expressed in the concept of *minjung* which connotes also liberation and salvation. No wonder then, the oppressed people or the *Minjung* found Jesus Christ, Lord and God who can identify with them and yet can liberate them. According to Korean theologian Byung Mu Ahn<sup>31</sup> Jesus identifies with the *Minjung* and he is God's solidarity with the suffering people. Jesus is, indeed, the *Minjung*.

According to David Kwang-sun Suh, Jesus might have been a great *mudang* who performed miracles, cured the sick and cast out evil spirits. Jesus might have been the greatest counsellor *mudang* for the poor and the deprived. But in the shamanistic mind-set, the idea of Jesus as the son of God is beyond comprehension."<sup>32</sup> Jesus, the *mudang* can take away the *han* or that feeling of pain, frustration, resentment, indignation and at the same time submission and resignation and give new life and dignity to the *Minjung*. In the paradox of the power of powerlessness Jesus the liberator continues to have tremendous influence on the *Minjung* of Korea for the transformation of their lives.

#### 4.3. Jesus of Asian Women

Going beyond the traditional images of Jesus some Asian women have discovered new images of Jesus emerging from their own cultural contexts. "They have expressed Jesus' presence in their culture, in traditional religions, and in secular political movements. They dare to use political-religious symbols of their movements to describe the meaning of Jesus for them. Their Christological images emerge from their struggle for full humanity. Some of these images represent Jesus as liberator and political martyr, while others show him as a mother, a woman, a shaman."<sup>33</sup> What is the most striking

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<sup>31</sup>Byung Mu Ahn, "Jesus and People (Minjung)," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed., R.S. Sugirtharajah, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

<sup>32</sup>D. Kwang-sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, Hong Kong SAR, 2002, 114.

<sup>33</sup>Shalini Mulackal, "Feminist Christology in Asia," *Theology Digest* 48, 2 (2001) 109.

aspect of the Christology of Asian women is that the various images discovered by the Asian women appeal to all the oppressed women of Asia belonging to various cultures and religions and empower them to struggle for a fuller human life and their right to be equal partners in building a new society of God's dream and where all are sisters and brothers.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus Christ can be recognized and proclaimed as the mediator and the unifier of all authentic religious traditions by his hidden presence in them and through the work of his Spirit in them. The revelation of the kenotic Christ without his historical incarnation can be manipulated by vested interests to support any systems of oppression and injustice whether religious, cultural, social, economic or political. The challenging *newness* of the revelation in Jesus Christ is that God seeks the integral liberation of human being not from beyond the cosmic and historical context but from the centre of the cosmos and from the heart of human history. God suffers when humans suffer because in his radical kenosis he shares everything that humans live and breath except the alienation humans choose for themselves. This is the *paradox* of Divine Revelation in Christ that Paul speaks about in I Corinthians 1:23, 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.' Asia can only respond to a God who reveals himself from within its own contexts. Therefore, there will be many different faces of Jesus in Asia.