

A HINDU ENCOUNTERS CHRIST

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Introduction to Christ

It is well known that the life and teaching of Christ have exerted an enormous influence on Hindus in India. In fact, if the divine Word/Logos has been in communication with the human race from the beginning, we should expect that when people are presented with this Word become man, they would spontaneously “recognise” him and acknowledge in him the response to their deepest desires, their “seeking expectation”.¹ This a priori postulate is confirmed a posteriori by the positive response which non-Christians have given and continue to give to the person and teaching of Christ. Among these we must count Mangesh Padgaonkar, a well-known Marathi writer, born in 1929. He is a poet and essayist, with about forty publications to his credit. Besides receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1980, he has been given several literary awards in Maharashtra. He has recently published his own Marathi translation of the four Gospels, prefaced with his insightful reflections (in Marathi) on each of the Gospels: *Bible: Navā Karār* (“Bible: the New Testament”), Mauz Prakashan, Mumbai, 2008. The Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke stirred his poetic talent to translate them into attractive verse form. His reflections on Matthew’s Gospel cover more space than those on the other three Gospels combined; no reason is adduced for this. An introduction traces the origins of Bible

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¹K. Rahner, “Christ in the non-Christian Religions,” in *God’s Word among Men*, G. Gispert-Sauch, ed., Delhi: Vidyajyoti, 95-104

translations into the vernaculars. His interest in the Bible began as a student in the English medium Wilson School, run by the Church of North India in Mumbai. Here there were regular, rather boring, classes on the New Testament. It was only in his final year in school that he came into possession of an English translation of the New Testament. He found the cadences of that translation so much like those of Tagore's English version of his *Gītānjali* that it caught his fancy as a budding poet. Here lay the origins of his desire to make a Marathi translation of his own.

2. Method of Proceeding

In order to understand Padgaonkar's interpretation of the Gospels, it is important to take cognizance of his methodological considerations. The desire to awaken reflection on Jesus' personality has inspired him to offer the present volume. Religion, he notes, is not meant to divide people into diverse organizations, but to keep alive in them the quest for God and self-realisation. Sectarian walls tend to rise around any great spiritual leader. Padgaonkar feels that one should be able to read any religious or spiritual book with a free mind, unbound by traditional considerations. This methodology has revealed to him the revolutionary personality of Jesus. He does not approach Jesus as an 'avatar', but as a '*Mahātmā*'. The closest Padgaonkar comes to acknowledging Jesus as more than a Mahātmā is his comment on the Prologue of praise of the creative Word, with which John begins his Gospel. Between the Word and God there is distinction (*dvaita*: the Word was with God) and oneness (*advaita*: the Word was God). But he does not develop this line of thought further. Jesus' faith (*shraddhā*) in God was so unbounded, that between him and God no duality (*dvaita*) remained. He lived in God and God in him. He may be termed a "*shraddhā-yogi*" (p. 14, 247). This faith finally led him to the cross.

This approach must be borne in mind when assessing his interpretation of the Gospels. It makes him quite at home, for example, with a Midrashic interpretation of the infancy narrative of Matthew, involving dreams, a star in the East, angels (Mt 2). He resolves problems of interpretation in favour of the basic traits of Jesus' personality, as outlined below (section 3). He has not consulted any Biblical commentary in elucidating the Gospels. He therefore finds it difficult to explain certain passages. Thus he finds the master unjust for paying the same wages to all the workers, including those hired at the eleventh hour (Mt 20:1-16). He is quite free in rejecting any statements of the Evangelists or words attributed to Jesus, which he feels do not conform to the basic traits of his personality, as it

emerges from the Gospels. So he has no difficulty stating that "Matthew's Jesus does not look like the real Jesus" (p. 22). The praise of the Law, placed on the lips of Jesus in Mt 5:17-19, must be attributed to Matthew and not to Jesus. For Jesus was not an expounder of the Law; in fact he rejected the law of avenging "an eye for an eye" (Mt 5:38). If he were an expounder of the Law, he would not have been crucified. Jesus knew that the priestly class had laid down rules and regulations (*karma-kānda*) in the name of the Scriptures, in order to preserve their domination over people. He would disregard these when required, e.g. washing before eating. The following response of Jesus to the urgings of his brethren must be attributed to John and not to Jesus: "Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival ..." (Jn 7:8). It does not correspond to the character of Jesus, who would not lie. Then again, it is difficult to see how Jesus would say, "I am not asking on behalf of the world ..." (Jn 17:9); John here makes him appear like the leader of a sect. But he is a Mahātmā who cares for humanity. He would surely have prayed that all humans be happy and well. Padgaonkar is probably not off the mark when he observes that Judas was a complicated character. He was sensitive enough to repent. So was it only money he sought, or did he have some other motive?

What Then is It in the Life and Teaching of Jesus Which Attracts Padgaonkar?

3. Life and Teaching of Jesus

The wise men from the East refer to Jesus as "king of the Jews" because he was born among the Jews. Rather, he was "king of the wise" in virtue of his possession of wisdom. But King Herod is thrown into turmoil. Those who are attached to worldly glory and power always fear losing it. Matthew wishes to suggest that here the power of arms comes face to face with the power of the spirit which appears inconsequential.

3.1. Inner Transformation: Even if people were cured by Jesus, he wanted them to dwell on his teaching more than on their cures. The food of Jesus' flesh and blood is only his teaching (Jn 6:25 ff). "Fishers of men" (Mt 4:19) must not be understood as increasing the numbers of an organisation, but as bringing about a complete change in the person (*parivartan*), creating a new person dominated by the values of faith and love. Jesus gave humankind a new philosophy of revolution: not of weapons, but of values, so that the greatest would become the least and the servant of all. Unlike the Synoptics, John does not describe many miracles, because Jesus knew that people get

obsessed with these to the neglect of his teaching; miracles are an easy way to gain devotees. True, Jesus taught people to struggle against sin. But more than that, he sowed the love of God in the human heart. For the turning from sin begins with the love of God (p. 10). That is indeed a very perceptive comment by the author.

3.2. Sacrifice, Detachment and Service: Self-surrender (*ātmasamarpan*) was the very breath of Jesus' spiritual way. He considered his success to consist in self-sacrificial suffering on the cross. This is reflected in the Sermon on the Mount, where he declares that persecution awaits those who follow his teaching. So he could not have spoken about looking forward to receiving a reward of a hundred fold (Mk 10:30): it does not square with his teaching on self-sacrifice and persecution. Jesus gave his disciples power to heal and to cast out demons (Lk 9:1-2). This was not only in order that people might listen to their message of the Kingdom of God, but to inculcate that true spirituality gives, does not take from people. Jesus' answer to Satan's temptation to turn stones into bread (Mt 4:4) is expressive of the fact that he is merely a vehicle of God's power, which must be used only to help others. Such selflessness/humility (*nirahamkār*) is a mark of spiritual power. He does not want to flaunt his power: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test," because his only power is his faith in God. Satan is aware that people generally bend helplessly before any opportunity to advance themselves. Hence the third temptation. But Jesus' answer is aggressive, befitting a warrior: "Away with you, Satan!" He will not seek the way of cheap or easy popularity, but of love, kindness, non-violence. Herein lies the core of spirituality, and it is not weakness.

If Jesus often tells people not to publicize his miracles (Lk 8:56), this is because he is '*nirahamkār*'. He does not want people to get fixated on his miracles. How many religious leaders are like that? God must be worshipped in service; service and spirituality are here joined. This service must be rendered with detachment (Lk 9:3), because possessiveness is connected with pride (*ahamkār*) and insecurity and gives birth to violence. In forgiving his enemies and surrendering to God, Jesus asks nothing for himself. Thus the one word *service* epitomises his whole life.

Popularity with the crowds has intoxicated many a holy man. But Jesus was too detached and rooted in God for that to happen to him. He steered clear of power games. He knew that the crowds which followed him would not remain in the time of trial. To the one who would follow him, Jesus says he has nowhere to lay his head (Lk 9:58); not many would be ready for this. He knew the connection

between his work and his death. So Jesus would have to be a lonely figure, with the refrain sounding in his ears, "*Eklā chalo re*" (you must walk alone). Indeed he was alone in his Passion: "A successful leader has a crowd following him, a Mahātmā stands alone" (p. 165). How are Mahātmās treated in life? They are spat upon and denied by their followers. Dearest to the heart of Jesus was the example of the little child (Mt 19:14). It shows the greatness of his spiritual experience and is not easy to grasp. Grown-ups chase after power, wealth, pleasure, which are at the root of violence. However, the "Kingdom of heaven" is the state of the child, free from that craving (*trishnā*) which gives rise to violence. In that sense the Kingdom is within you. Padgaonkar makes much of freedom from greed or avarice. Greed is in fact numbered among the worst vices in Hindu, Buddhist and Christian traditions (Lk 12:15; Mk 7:22; Rm 1:29; Eph 5:3; Col 3:5; 2 Pt 2:14).

3.3. Love and Mercy (*karunā*): The way of Jesus was one of love, mercy and faith in God. Hence he could not have used hell-fire to frighten people into following the right way (Mt 13:42); it must be attributed to Matthew's too human way of thinking. Jesus' self-sacrifice was not motivated by fear. Also, the cursing of the fig tree (Mt 21:19) does not jell with Jesus' mercy. It must be attributed to Matthew's desire to boost the image of Jesus as a powerful person. Again, would Jesus, whose kindness was boundless, have considered non-Jews dogs, as in the encounter with the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:26)? God cannot be the shepherd of only Israel's lost sheep. The mercy in the heart of Jesus emerges from the image of the shepherd and the commission to Peter, "Feed my sheep" (Jn 21:17), which means 'give spiritual guidance to my disciples'. Jesus is concerned for the sheep after his death; his role as 'Good Shepherd' was anticipated by the shepherds already at his birth.

The non-violence of Jesus was a spiritual power bringing about a total change in the person, creating a new person. Death comes to the body, not to this 'soul-power' (*ātmashakti*). It was a revolutionary outlook and soul-power which aimed at creating a new world (p 13). His non-violence was that of the brave, not that of a weak or fearful lamb before the tiger.

3.4. The Humaneness of Jesus: He integrated sublime idealism with human feeling. He was not a man with a one-track mind; so he was able to see beyond the beaten track and defend the selfless sacrifice of the woman who anointed him with very costly ointment (Mt 26:6 ff). One truly lives when one gives one's life for one's ideals (Mt 8:35); yet Jesus is human enough to think of feeding the people, though he did not care for himself (Mk 8:3). Likewise, after raising Jairus' daughter,

he “told them to give her something to eat” (Mk 5:43). This humaneness was the backbone of his spirituality. One cannot express the philosophy of humaneness in simpler and fewer words than the command of love (Mk 12:31).

Jesus’ shrewd observation of Nature and of human nature is seen in his parables. The human side of Jesus is also seen in his plea in the Garden of Gethsemane to be spared the chalice. If we had not met this side of Jesus, we would have *bowed* reverentially before this Mahātmā, but we would not be able to *love* him. He does face the temptation to save his life, when he realises that his enemies will kill him. This creates an upheaval in his mind. How else to explain that after having once told his disciples not to carry purse, bag, etc. (Lk 9:3), he now tells them to carry all (Lk 22:35-38)?

3.5. A Spirituality of Daily Life: We must find God among people, not in the desert. Jesus used simple language and joined spirituality with the daily life of people. In the ‘Our Father’ Jesus combines high spirituality with daily life concerns of people. For Jesus sacrifice, such as Martha shows in service (Lk 10:38-42), is true *bhakti*. Hence the words addressed to Martha must be considered to be the words of Luke, not of Jesus. Jesus would have said something like, “Martha, I am close to you in your sacrifice as I am to Mary.”

Jesus’ faith in God was not a mere private devotion, but was exercised in the midst of society in order to bring about therein total change/conversion (*parivartan*). His was not a spirituality of fleeing the world, but of social commitment (p. 14-16). To root this faith in the midst of the society of his time posed a challenge to the religious and political establishments. When he said that he had come to bring a sword and to set close relatives against each other (Mt 10:34-36), he meant that he had come to challenge the status quo. He also announces the result of this struggle: “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” There is rebellion in the thought of Jesus and his spirituality is marked by social revolution. Yet, looking at his humaneness, his pity in the face of human suffering, one might wonder what sort of rebellion that is? Well, it did appear rebellion to the Pharisees, because it went against the current religious Law (*dharma-shāstra*) and tradition. This may be illustrated by the incidents of plucking grain on the Sabbath and healing a man with a withered hand on that day (Mt 12:1-14). However he did not break the Law for the sake of breaking the Law. His rebellion did not proceed from any social theory, but was born out of his mercy and love for humanity. Jesus’ revolutionary outlook lay in this, that he made the centre of his service ordinary people who

were despised by the established powers. A total conversion was to be brought about in them. Their heart had grown dull and they had become hard of hearing (Mt 13:15), due to the burden they carried along the rut of ancient traditions.

3.6. *The Miracles:* The idea of miracles in the Gospels, as signs of the kingdom of God, is unique.² It is therefore no wonder that Padgaonkar fails to understand their import. He feels that Mark has ascribed miracles to Jesus in order to enhance his image. After all, “without *chamatkār* (miracles) there is no *namaskār*” (p. 105). This is what people want. Still, Mark has not failed to bring out the revolutionary character and teaching of Jesus. Jesus’ desire to bring about a total spiritual change bears no connection with his miracles. Matthew too has recounted miracles in order to capture the minds of the ordinary faithful. How then are we to explain the cures which people claimed? The explanation can be sought in the fact that some people were coincidentally cured in the course of nature; the cure of others may have been psycho-somatic, in as much as they were expecting a cure. The miracles are an external draw to get them to accept his difficult teaching. Padgaonkar is puzzled that Jesus did not work many miracles in his hometown “because of their unbelief” (Mt 13:58). It implies that he worked miracles only where people had faith: but do such require miracles?

3.7. *The Resurrection of Jesus:* Padgaonkar is aware that all the Gospels record the resurrection of Jesus. This resurrection is to be understood metaphorically. His body is not important; his philosophy and message is. This remains and provides guidance to humankind as the centuries roll on. So the resurrection really means the spread of his teaching.

4. The Hindu Reception of Jesus

Hindus do not seem to have shown as much interest in the founders of other religions as they have shown in Christ. Padgaonkar’s reflections on the life and teaching of Jesus are of a piece with a long tradition of Hindu reception of Jesus. This reception has been on their own terms, ranging from admiration for Christ, to commitment to Christ in various forms. We have no control over this and have to accept people as they are, showing “respect for their tempo and pace ... for their conscience and convictions ...”³ Here in India we are sufficiently familiar with various Hindu responses to Jesus.⁴ Already

²L. Monden, *Signs and Wonders*, New York: Desclee Co., 1966.

³Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 79.

⁴H. Staffner, *The Significance of Jesus Christ in Asia*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1985.

in 1820 Ram Mohan Roy published his booklet, *The Precepts of Jesus, Guide to Human Peace and Happiness*. As in other parts of India, so in Maharashtra too one may trace a similar tradition. In this connection we may mention two illustrious figures. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) found great inspiration in Jesus for his campaign against caste discrimination. As a result, he was denounced as a tool of missionaries, though he never became a Christian. Another influential person, closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi in the freedom movement, was Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982). He asserted: "We accept Christ and his message, and are eager to live up to that. We take him as one of our family."⁵ Examples like this illustrate the statement of Vatican II: "The gospel has truly been a leaven of liberty and progress in human history, even in its temporal sphere, and always proves itself a leaven of brotherhood, of unity, and of peace."⁶

Padgaonkar may be numbered among those who admire Jesus and find inspiration in his life and teaching. That has motivated him to expend so much labour on the present work. His response to the Gospel narratives reflects the common Hindu position of discounting the miracles and resurrection of Jesus, while retaining his moral teaching. What particularly draws him is Jesus' 'spirituality of daily life,' leading to social change, motivated by unbounded love and mercy and sustained by extraordinary detachment and sacrifice. He often uses the word *krānti* (revolution) in connection with the thought and actions of Jesus. No doubt he finds here something which complements his own Hindu tradition.

4.1. *Jesus the New Man*

The foregoing reflections need to be placed in the larger context of the significance of the person and ministry of Jesus. As remarked at the beginning of this article, it is to be expected that the Logos incarnate would respond to the deepest desires of humans. So Vatican II states: "By manifesting Christ, the Church reveals to people the real truth about their condition and their total vocation. For Christ is the source and model of that renewed humanity ..."⁷ The theme is taken up by Pope John Paul II in his inaugural encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*: "Christ the new Adam, the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, *fully reveals man to himself* and brings to light his most high calling."⁸ Hence by revealing Christ to the world, the

⁵V. Bhave, *Christ the Love Incarnate*, Varanasi: Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1964, 17.

⁶*Ad Gentes*, no. 8.

⁷*Ad Gentes*, no. 8.

⁸*Redemptor Hominis*, no. 8.

Church “helps each person to find himself in Christ.”⁹ For this reason, “missionary activity is closely bound up with human nature itself and its aspirations.”¹⁰ It is therefore very much part of missionary activity to “love Jesus and to make him loved,” an ideal to which Thérèse of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church, dedicated her life, to become “Patroness of the Missions.”¹¹ This leads us to the question of what was the primary intention of Jesus’ ministry and where does the Church fit into the scheme of things?

4.2. A Renewed Humanity:

When Jesus came proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God (Mk 1:14-15), he did not intend to start a new religion. What he intended was “a kingdom of truth and life ... of holiness and grace ... of justice, love and peace.”¹² It was to be a radically new orientation of human life and society, in which the brokenness of humans is redeemed in communion and solidarity, in the consciousness of God’s love for all. It was incidentally, in carrying out this mission, that he revealed the Trinitarian nature of God, which would be defined in Nicaea in 325 AD. He also gathered a group of ‘apostles’ from among his disciples, who were to continue his mission. We might say that he intended a renewed Judaism. But when he met with only opposition from the religious establishment, he instituted a “new covenant in my blood” which would fulfil the prophecy of Jeremiah (31:33) for a covenant of profound interiority: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” And this “whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Gal 5:14).

In taking all these steps, Jesus in fact *laid the foundation for the emergence of a new religion*. If we understand religion as comprising belief, cult and law, then Jesus had already established these: in the Trinitarian faith, the new covenant and the “new commandment” (Jn 13:34). What preserved these founding acts of Jesus from dissolving with his death, was his *resurrection*. This set the Father’s seal on his life and ministry. It revived the faith of his disciples and fired them with astounding enthusiasm. Thus belief in the resurrection necessarily came to be added to the disciples’ faith. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2.42). Henceforth, it was through

⁹*Redemptor Hominis*, no. 11.

¹⁰*Ad Gentes*, no. 8.

¹¹G. Roberge, *A Little Way to God*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1984, 29, 149.

¹²Preface of Mass for Christ the King.

Jesus, with him and in him that they would offer all glory and honour to the Father. We have here already the nucleus of a new religion, which would perpetuate the apostolic function. So Christianity does indeed exist as a legitimate religion, but with a whole lot of accretions which are by no means of the same importance and which need to be evaluated according to the "hierarchy of truths."¹³

The disciples were very conscious of the new way of living and acting which Jesus taught. It was characterised by love and care, so that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). The address of "brother" occurs about 28 times in Acts. In fact the mode of life of the Christians was so characteristic that the community was called simply "the Way" (*mārga*): Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22. In the course of history this *mārga* has accumulated many additions, so as to acquire an ambiguous image. So it is that, especially in India, multitudes of Hindus are drawn to Christ in various degrees but, for diverse historical, cultural and sociological reasons, prefer to remain aloof from the religion which grew out of the teaching and actions of Jesus himself. This observation is made by Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*.¹⁴

5. Conclusion

The Church is meant to continue the mission and ministry of Jesus, as sign and instrument of the Kingdom of God preached by him: the Church is not its own proper end. So we must count not members of the Church, but disciples of Jesus.¹⁵ Nor must we lose sight of the fact that Jesus primarily taught a *way of life*, as in the Sermon on the Mount illustrated by his own life. It is this way that all humans are encouraged to follow. Although baptism was certainly included within the scope of St Paul's missionary activity (Acts 16:15, 33; 19:5), he stated his priority quite clearly in one of the earliest writings of the New Testament: "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor 1:17). It is in this sense that we should understand the single imperative in Mt 28:19-20: "Make disciples!"¹⁶

These perspectives are as necessary for the Church as they are for its missionary activity in India.

¹³ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 11.

¹⁴ No. 35, 47.

¹⁵ J. Saldanha, "Unbaptised disciples of Christ ?", in *Mission Today: Themes & Issues*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 97-108.

¹⁶ G. Soares-Prabhu, "Following Jesus in Mission," in J. Kavunkal, ed., *Bible and Mission in India Today*, Bombay: St. Paul's, 1993, 64-92.