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MYSTERY, MYTH, HISTORY: THE DIMENSIONS OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF AVATARA

Spirituality may be understood as man's 'adjustment' with the ultimate Mystery, the goal of man's existence. It is the existence before God, the human spirit being grasped, sustained and transformed by the Supreme Spirit; it is man's search for communion with God, an anticipation of the human salvation awaited in the age to come. The constant theme of spirituality is man's being with God or God's being with man.

The mystery of God's being with man finds its expression in the history of religions in various ways, the 'Avatara' stories popular especially in the Bhakti tradition of Hinduism being just one of them. What we try in the following lines is to have a look at how the myths regarding the mystery of God's being with man point to its possible realization in history, which is indispensable as constitutive of human existence.

Mystery as a Boundary-Concept

An adequate conceptualization of Mystery is impossible; it signifies what is beyond all conceptualities. It is a boundary-concept (*Grenzbegriff*).[1] From the human point of view it is the sum total of human transcendence and the corresponding 'whither' (*Woraufhin*)[2] of this transcendence, which by and large are evident to us but at the same time hidden from us, which is awe inspiring and distant while being at the same time within us and fascinating. It is in this sense that we are using the term Mystery here, and not just in its meaning in common parlance as the hidden, secret and obscure religious doctrine.

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1. K. Rahner, "Über den Begriff des Geheimnisses in der katholischen Theologie", in: *Schriften zur Theologie IV* (Einsiedeln: 1964), pp. 51–99.

2. Cf. M. Vekathanam, *Christology in the Indian Anthropological Context: An Evaluative Encounter with K Rahner and W. Pannenberg* (Peter Lang: Frankfurt, New York, 1986), pp. 404–412.

Mystery, myth and history are terms which are interrelated. The mystery of man can be understood and interpreted mythically, metaphysically or historically as far as his ultimate destiny is concerned. Myth and history are so intimately involved in shaping man's experience of the Mystery, that it is difficult to say where myth ends and history begins. This is especially true in the Indian mode of thinking: the mysteries are clothed in primitive myths, the myths are interpreted metaphysically, and hardly a line is drawn between what is mythical and what is historical. Myths in fact point to the limitations of history in conceptualizing and presenting the Mystery.

The Mythical Dimension in Faith

In showing the difference between Christianity and Hinduism many an author affirm emphatically that Hinduism is mythological while Christianity is historical.[3] The development of form criticism and historical method in biblical exegesis has made such a blunt assertion absurd. Besides, even the Hindu mythologies point to the historical milieu which has deeply influenced the formation of the convictions expressed therein. The reality of this historical influence is, of course, one thing and how that historical aspect is understood and interpreted is another thing.[4] Even the expressed Indian or better said Vedantic disregard of historicity and what is historical[5] cannot make a discussion on the relevance of history, even in the Vedantic context, meaningless. On the other hand, as S.J. Samartha observes in his "The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ", historicity is not something very special for which the Christians are to be necessarily congratulated.[6]

The bold application of the method of historical criticism in today's Christian theology has brought to light the difference between what is mythical and historical in the understanding of the Sacred Scriptures and especially of the New Testament. 'The quest for the historical Jesus,' to use an expression of Albert Schweitzer,[7] or the discussion

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3. J.N. Farquhar, *Permanent Lessons of the Gita*, 1912. p. 31, Cf. also: E.J. Sharpe, *Not to Destroy but to Fulfil*, 1965, p. 200., E.G. Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation* (London; 1970), p. 236.

4. M. Vekathanam, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 161–195.

5. Cf. *Ibid.* Part I, Ch. II, C.

6. S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Madras: 1974), p. 154.

7. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 1910.

of 'the problem of the historical Jesus', as E.Käsemann would mean,[8] has also occasioned theologians to try to liberate theology from the shifting sands of historicity. This reaction of the western theologians can be compared to the historical distrust of the Vedantic pundits.

Myth and History

Myths have certainly their importance in shaping the spirituality and conveying the religious vision of people because of the essentially anthropological character of mythology. But myths will have to be evaluated and interpreted in the context of man's historical experiences apart from which myths fall into the category of mere fancies. The task of the historico-critical method in the study of religious scriptures is precisely to discover the historical foundations which shed new light upon the mythical expressions. The search for the historical is therefore no threat for the religious and theological elements of the Sacred Scriptures. It is a genuine help for their better understanding, appreciation and practical application. It does not mean, however, that what is true has to be historical. Mystery is expressed in mythical categories as well as through historical realities. Myths are the human concretizations of the Mystery as R.Bultmann observes:

> Myths are expressions for the insight that man is not himself the master of this world and his life, that the world in which he lives is full of mysteries and secrets and that the human life itself contains many paradoxes. The mythology is an expression for a particular understanding of the human existence. It believes that the world and the life have their foundation and limitations in a power that is outside the field of our calculation and control. One could say that the myths render an immanent and this–worldly objectivity to the transcendental truth. The myth concretizes the other side in terms of this side.[9]

The task of separating the Mystery from its mythical expressions is not an easy one. For example, the stories of Avatars in the Indian mythology are the concretizations of man's desire to see God in a human, visible and tangible form, i.e. in the midst of human history, as a

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8. E. Käsemann, *Das Problem des historischen Jesus*, 1954.

9. Personal translation from: R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christus und die Mythologie – Das Neue Testament im Licht der Bibelkritik* (Gütersloh: 1980), p. 17.

'key' to history, which indeed is a mystery. This history, according to the Christian faith, is not a mystery of meaningless repetitions in the bleak eternity of Samsara, as the Hindu vision might hold, but it has a meaning in so far as it is raised to God's salvific plan in the person of Jesus Christ. In a land like India where the religious vision is abundant in myths, what is most required is a historical sense. What is here meant is not a narrow historicism, which again is a myth because it reduces and limits the incomprehensible into the confines of the idol called history.

The Divine in the Midst of Men: Idols

The archeological excavations in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, the Indus Valley cities inhabited by the sophisticated pre-vedic Indian agriculturalists, point to the fact that there spirituality consisted also of worshipping gods represented in material symbols.[10] Though the Vedic gods are largely personifications of the powers of Nature, the Vedic religion cannot be explained as nature-worship; natural phenomena were transposed to a mythical plane. In the late Rigvedic period the gods began to be represented anthropomorphically in the form of idols.[11] In the Agamic period the deity venerated was represented by some visible emblem, a tool like a sword or a club, a tree, a stone, a picture or a statue which after being consecrated by a priest was looked upon as a visible presence of the personal God.[12]

The presence of the Divine in the midst of men, the irruption of the Divine into the profane, is what is emphasized by idol worship. The Divine and the profane are the two aspects of the same reality; the two fields are not entirely separated or even superimposed on each other, but rather identical. The Divine cannot, however, be adequately comprehended or circumscribed by the spatio-temporal.[13] The Hindu has a deep sense of the Divine or Sacred which is diffused throughout nature penetrating every thing and every person. The Divinity can be focalized in a particular person or object through a process of ritual or mental purification,

10. A. Cotterell, *A Dictionary of World Mythology*, London 1979, pp. 55, 56. Cf. also: P. Fallon, "Image Worship." in R. De Smet/ J. Neuner (Ed.), *Religious Hinduism* (Allahabad: 1968), p. 172.

11. J.N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, Oxford 1915, p. 303.

12. J.B. Chethimattam, *Consciousness and Reality: An Indian Approach to Metaphysics* (Bangalore: 1967), p. 22. Cf. also: J.N. Farquhar, *Op. Cit.*, p. 305. and P. Fallon, *Art. Cit.* p. 172.

13. J.B. Chethimattam, *Loc. Cit.*

making manifest *(avirbhuta)* what was latent *(avyakta)*.[14]   But even when
the diety is conceived in an anthropomorphic manner, it is generally
supposed to be pure spirit.   The relation between the deity and the idol is
extrinsic; matter cannot be 'transubstantiated' into the deity.[15]   In a
consecrated idol there is only a special presence *(visesadhisthana)* of God
who is immanent in all beings *(sarvadhisthana)*.[16]   After the consecration
the divinity is supposed to assume the idol as his body which results in
his real presence *(sannidhya)* and self-manifestation *(avirbhava)*. The
assuming of the idol form is considered a great condescension on the part
of God.[17]

It is evident that idolatry ministers to some of the most powerful and
most valuable of man's religious instincts.   That is the reason why it has
played such a great part in the religious history of human race.   Even
great nations like Babylon, Greece and Rome that rose to great power and
influence in the ancient world bowed down to idols.   It is no wonder
that the Indians are no exception to this general phase in the development
of religions.[18]   The making of images is a response to the eager human
desire to know God's nature and character.   The idols meet this need.
God comes down from the sphere of thought and imagination to the level
where he can be touched and seen, concretely adored and prayed to; man
sees how the revered Being is like; man can gaze on his great features,
read his character and carry away a picture of the Divine in his heart.[19]
It is a sign of man's effort to reach beyond and above the sense-reality.
The consciousness of the sacredness of things and persons may represent
an admirable search and yearning after God, even if, due to human
weakness, this movement towards God becomes vitiated by idolatry.[20]

The Descend of God: Avatara

The best Indian exposition of man's attempt to reach the Supreme
Personal God is generally considered to be the Bhagavadgita.[21]   The

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14. A. Huart, "Pilgrimages and Holy Men," in R. De Smet/ J. Neuner, *Op. Cit,* p. 149.
15. P. Fallon, *Art. Cit.* p. 175.
16. *Ibid.,* p. 178.
17. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Vedanta According to Sankara and Ramanuja* (London: 1923),
     p. 256.
18. Idem, *The Hindu View of Life* (London: 1980 (1927)), pp. 24-25.
19. J.N. Farquhar, *Op. Cit.,* p. 340.
20. P. Fallon, *Art. Cit.,* p. 179.
21. Cf. J.N. Benerje, *Puranic and Tantric Religion,* (Calcutta 1966), p. 31., J. Gonda,

teaching of the bodily dwelling of the Divinity among men is one of the most important contributions of Bhagavadgita.[22] S.N. Dasgupta observes that Gita is probably the earliest work available to us in which the doctrine of 'incarnation' is found.[23] It cannot, however, be denied that in the Upanishads there are hints of man's prayer to the Divinity to appear in his kindly form *(tanu)* ;[24] that might have paved the way for the 'incarnational' doctrine of the Bhagavadgita.[25] In the course of the centuries the doctrine acquired many modifications under the title of 'Avatara.'

Differing Positions in Hinduism

In Sankara's non-dualistic spirituality there is theoretically no room for *avatara*, and this concept is considered 'an unnecessary complication it not a betrayal of the non-dualism of the Upanishads.'[26] Non-dualistic Vedanta discourages myths and crude legendary symbols. In the place of a transcendent personal God it proposes a universal Mind, with which the human mind is one. But because of the prestige and popularity of Gita, Sankara himself could not but write a commentary on it. He elaborated vastly what could support his non-dualism and greately watered down the reality of *avatar* to the level of an illusion. Commenting on Gita 4, 6–9 he writes that God appears to be born; real from the empirical point of view, but it is only an illusion from the absolute point of view.[27]

The Avatara doctrine demands a positively theistic spirituality. Vedantic philosophers like the qualified non-dualist Ramanuja have been more faithful to the message of the Gita. This great leader of Vaishnava spirituality writes:

Visnuism and Saivism – A Comparison, London 1970, pp. 22–24., E.J. Rapson (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of India,* Vols. 6 (1922–Repr. 1957–1964), Vol. I, p. 273.

22. D. Acharuparampil, "The 'Guru' in Hindu Tradition," in *Ephemerides Carmeliticae,* Teresianum: Rome, XXXI (1980), I, p. 13., M. Dhavamony, *Classical Hinduism* (Documenta Missionalia 15), Rome 1982, p. 61.

23. S.N. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy,* 5 Vols. Cambridge (Repr. 1955), Vol. 2, p. 525. This view of Dasgupta is shared by E.G. Parrinder, *The Significance of Bhagavad-Gita for Christian Theology* (London: 1968), p. 13.

24. *Svet. Up.* 3.12 ff. Such hints are present also in *Kath. Up.* and *Mand.* Up. Cf. also: *Bhagavadgita* 13.13.

25. G. Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation,* p. 18.

26. *Ibid.,* p. 48.

27. *Ibid.,* p. 61. Cf. also: A.M. Sastri, *The Bhagavadgita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya* (5th Ed. 1961), p. 121.

God . . . though He exceeds the capacity of all minds, neverthe-
less, by reason of His infinite compassion, love and liberality,
assumed various forms without giving up His Divinity, and
repeatedly manifested Himself . . . He descended in this manner
not only to relieve the burden of this world, but also to become
accessible to men, made like unto us. Thus He reveals Himself
to the eyes of all whether high or low.[28]

Ramanuja justifies the Bhagavata devotees of Vishnu in their spiritua-
lity and teaching that the Highest Brahman becomes manifest in *avatars*.[29]
The human eyes could see Him and He delights the world by His looks
and language, overflowing with the nectar of friendship and love.[30] The
Lord assumes a real body which is no illusion; 'Maya' according to him is
not illusion, but the creative power of God. This assuming of the body by
God is not by the compulsion of Karma as in the case of ordinary mortals,
but only due to the free will and compassion of the Lord towards His
beloved. By *avatara* the Lord does not lose anything of His essential
eternal nature.[31]

The Indifference to Historicity

The avatara – stories, however, can hardly claim any substantial his-
torical backing. Unhistoricity, according to the Vedantins, is the sign of
the perfection of a religion because it 'is not affected by the historicity of
any particular man,'[32] which could be shaken and shattered. What is im-
portant is the universal principle that lies behind particular historical mani-
festations. As far as even Jesus Christ is concerned, Vedantins like
S. Radhakrishnan maintain that 'Christ' is not a datum of history but a
judgement, an after-thought of the timeless spiritual fact represented by
Jesus. It may be correct to note that in the Vedantic position a very
strong indifference or even a certain avertion and fear towards the fact of
history can be detected.

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28. Ramanuja: *Gita–Bhasya*, I. Cf. M. Vekathanam, *Op. Cit*. p. 148.

29. G. Thibaut (Tr.), *The Vedanta Sutra with the Commentary by Ramanuja* (1904),
    2. 2. 42.

30. A. Govindacharya (Tr.), *Sri Bhagavadgita with Sri Ramanujacharya's Visishtad-
    vaita Commentary* (1898. See Intr).

31. M. Dhavamony, "Hindu Incarnations," in *Studia Missionalia* 21 (1972), pp. 156ff.

32. Cf. M. Vekathanam, *Op. Cit.*, Ch. IV. for details.

The Historical Dimension of Mystery

In modern India history is receiving a steadily increasing importance.[33] The Vedantic axiom that the eternal truths are more important than the transient facts of history is understood today in a new light under the influence of the fast developing natural sciences and the international communication system that have made the world so small, that a particular 'fact of history' in one place shows inevitable repurcussions to a considerable extent in the rest of the world. Historical facts are therefore no monads independent of each other, but each fact is in one or another way involved in the making of other facts which all together are progressing towards a dynamic future.

History could be described as the progressive revelation of the Mystery and in this sense we could speak of an historical dimension of the Mystery. This historical dimension of the Mystery, as far as the Christian world-vision is concerned, takes its concrete form in Jesus of Nazareth. If Christian spirituality is a matter of authentic Christ-Experience, then the Christ-event should be understood and interpreted as the historical unfolding of the Mystery. Christ's relevance for any people depends on the possible relevance he can have on their history. The mystery of Jesus Christ could be meaningfully presented in the context of the Indian spirituality only when He is shown as a part and parcel of the integral historical development of India down through the centuries and how He could render the future of India more meaningful.

Search in History

Writers like N. Goreh, R.C. Zaehner and V. Chakkarai have considered the Indian *avatara* stories as dreams of the mystery of God's being with man, as 'praeparatio evangelica' for the preaching of the mystery of God's incarnation in the midst of history.[34] If the myths of Avatars are dreams, it is the responsibility of man, as K. Rahner observes, to search in human history for the one in whom this dream is realized or become concretely tangible beyond all merely abstract possibilities.[35] This search should be

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33. S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, p. 156. Cf. also: *The Hindu View of History* (Bangalore; 1959).

34. Cf. M. Vekathanam, *Op. Cit.*, Ch. V.

35. K. Rahner, "Was heibt heute an Jesus Christus glauben?," in *Schriften zur Theologie*, Band XIII, Einsiedeln (1978), pp. 175-176.

done beyond all boundaries of particular religions. Christian spirituality should in this case pay sufficient attention to the general history of religions, especially to the doctrine of incarnation in other religions in all its parallels and contrasts. The history religions, according to K. Rahner, is an unconscious seeking for the Word of God who was to come in human flesh. Our knowledge of the historic incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth gives a really illuminating interpretation of the history of religions. That would show the 'seeking' of man as it is in the depth of his concrete nature. It shows man as a being 'who in the course of history looks out for the presence of God Himself.'[36] This suggestion of Rahner has special relevance in the context of the Indian Avatara myths.

The Claims of Jesus of Nazareth

Man has a right, and above all a duty, to look out in history for a concrete encounter with the decisive self-manifestation of the Mystery in history inspite of the theoretical possibility that this manifestation has not yet been given. This implies an encounter with the claims of various personalities in human history to verify whether these claims are founded or substantiated. We cannot say 'a priori' that Jesus of Nazareth is the historical incarnation of the Word of God, God's being with men, that is sought after in *avatara* mythologies. A verification of Jesus' claims is possible only from historical experience. Jesus of Nazareth, as the one who has raised absolute claims regarding his person and function[37] deserves to be taken earnestly in his claims at least for the sake of identification and verification.[38] It is not difficult, so opines K. Rahner, to find the one whom we are seeking in Jesus of Nazareth as the final and unsurpassable realization and culmination of humanity's encounter with God. Rahner finds no other person in human history other than Jesus of Nazareth, who has made such substantiated claims legitimating us to commit ourselves fully to him in absolute and unreserved trust. The absolute bringer of salvation after whom man seeks in his transcendence manifested to some extent in mythologies is historically verified in Jesus of Nazareth.[39]

36. Idem, "Current Problems in Christology," in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. I (1961), p. 189.

37. Cf. for details: M. Vekathanam, *Op. Cit.*, Ch. VIII.

38. K. Rahner, "Probleme der Christologie von heute," in *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. I, Einsiedeln (1958), p. 191.

39. Idem, *Ich glaube an Jesus Christus* (Theologische Meditationen 21), Hrg. H. Küng, Einsiedeln (1968), pp. 33-34.

It, however, does not mean that faith in Christ is the result of one's search in history for the realization of the Avatara dreams. The search in fact is very often a subsequent reflection on the concrete faith received from one's own historical experience.[40] The insight into the transcendental possibility that is expressed through the Avatara myths can be gained only in the reflection of the experienced Christ-fact.[41]

The Fulfilment in Christ

At the beginning of this century J.N. Farquhar made an attempt to present Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the Hindu aspirations: "... in Him is focussed every ray of light that shines in Hinduism. He is the crown of the faith of India."[42] Acharya R.C. Das also subscribes to this line of thought:

> He (Jesus Christ) is the Maitreyi of Buddhism, the concrete realization of its Dharma. He is the full historical manifestation of the Rita (moral order and cosmic law) of the Vedas, the perfect Incarnation satisfying the fundamental longing of the Vaishnava Hindu as expressed in the *Gita* (IV:7-8). He is the true Kalki of popular Hinduism satisfying the demands for final justice, and the true Hari who takes away the sin and sorrow of the world. He is the Sadguru of the ignorant and sinful, the Jivanmukta of popular idealiam, the Perfect man of the Unitarian and the Brahmo, the Purushottama of the Gita, the Purusha or Prajapati of the Rigveda.[43]

Even Indian thinkers like K.C. Sen who do not accept the Christian claim of Jesus' oneness with God, consider him to be the fulfilment of the spiritual aspirations of man's desire for communion with God: ''He (Jesus Christ) comes to fulfil and perfect that religion of communion for which India has been panting as the hart panteth after the water-brook... For Christ is a true Yogi, and he will surely help us to realize

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40. Idem, ''Jesus Christ,'' in *Sacramentum Mundi* (Eng.), III, p. 204.

41. Idem, *Grundkurs des Glaubens-Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg im. Br., 1976), pp. 203, 205, 227, 288.

42. J. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, p. 458. Cfr. for also: M. Vekathanam, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 278-302.

43. R. C. Das, *Convictions of an Indian Disciple* (Bangalore: 1966), p. 9.

our national ideal of a Yogi."[44]   P.C. Mozoomdar similarly observes that 'so far as God's nature and relation could be shown within the limits of the finite humanity, at a distant age and in imperfect human society, Christ showed it ... From the mystic depths of Father's eternal reason, the Son sprang into personality as a fitting consummation here on earth of created things in the fullness of time becoming flesh. . . the divine humanity of Christ only crowns (the) marvellous structure of man.'[45]

The religious myths of Hinduism, especially the stories connected with the *avatara*, point to the deep desire of man to have a God, a personal God among men and this desire, according to P. Johanns, finds its fulfilment in Christ: "The Indian heart is after Christ. India wants a human God either in Brahman or in Krishna ... We have to offer them something : the realization of their own ideal . . ."[46]   Similarly, Sadhu Sundar Singh maintains that 'Christianity is the fulfilment of Hinduism. Hinduism has been digging channels. Christ is the water to flow through these channels.'[47]   Paul Sudhakar however, prefers to call Christ 'the Answer' to the question called 'Hinduism' : "Hinduism is a hunger, and Christ comes to satisfy it. So I emphasize Christ 'the Answer' rather than Christ 'the fulfilment.' God puts the hunger and provides the food for the hunger in Christ."[48]

In his work *Jesus the Avatar*, V. Chakkarai maintains that the Hindu Sastras and Darsanas formed the precondition for the true Avatar, Jesus Christ.[49] The divine Avatars formed in India the background for the preaching of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Christ is the fulfilment for the quest we find in the Bhagavadgita for a God in human form. It is quite reasonable to think that 'the need of man is for a central figure, a universal model, one who includes in himself all (the) various embodiments of God's manifestation. The need of man is for an

44. K.C. Sen, *Keshub Chunder Sen's Lectures in India* (Collection) 2 Vols. (London: 1901), 1904; Vol I. pp. 388–389.

45. P.C. Mozoomdar, *The Spirit of God* (Boston: 1894), pp. 246–249.

46. P. Johanns, "To Christ through the Vedanta," in *Light of the East*, VIII (June 1930), 9, p. 6.

47. B.H. Streeter and A.J. Appasamy, *The Sadhu* (1921), p. 232.

48. Paul Sudhakar: quoted from Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: 1969), p. 217.

49. V. Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar* (Madras: 1929), p. 2.

incarnation in whom all other incarnations will be completed. Such
an incarnation was Christ.'[50]   J. Neuner also speaks of the dream-
character of the *avatar* myths which find their realization in Jesus
Christ:

> Just as in the natural life of the human soul a desired object is
> perceived as real through dreams, the spiritual destiny helps to
> create a myth in which man's hope takes visible shape.   Dreams
> are not history, and yet they have a real bearing on the psycholo-
> gical reality of man.   In the same way the *(avatar)* myths,
> insubstantial though they are in historical sense, reflect a real
> human inclination towards Christ.   Thus we find in the myths
> motives that are similar to that of Christianity.   They speak of the
> miraculous coming, of the unfolding of limitless power, of the
> bliss of love in the Kingdom of God made manifest.   But all these
> analogies only help to set off the fundamental difference: Christ
> is history, the Avatars are myths.[51]

Like dreams, so opines Neuner, the myths are so blurred and confused;
they tend to aberrations.   "Yet the myths spun around the incarnate God
testify mankind's eternal longing for Christ, and particularly where the
joyful tidings of His actual arrival have not been heard."[52]   The *avatar*
myths are not 'truths of a tangible kind, but they bear the truth of
prophecy,'[53] because they are 'the profoundest expression of man's desire
and destiny to meet God not only in his transcendence but also in the
closeness of human contacts.'[54]

The Historical Anchorage for Spirituality

The insistence on the historical aspect of Jesus Christ does not mean
that 'mere historicity is a matter of final significance.'[55]   No spirituality can
be built on the bare fact of Jesus Christ.   It must also be shown how His

50. P.C. Mozoomdar, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 239ff. Cf. also: *The Oriental Christ* (Boston:
     1883), pp. 40–46.

51. J. Neuner, "Avatara Doctrine and the Christ-Mysterium," in *Man and Religion*
     (1965), p. 32

52. *Ibid*.

53. *Ibid*.

54. Quoted from Samuel Rayan; "Interpreting Christ to India: The Contribution of Roman
     Catholic Seminaries," in *Indian Journal of Theology* 23 (1974), p. 224.

55. S.J. Samartha, *The Unbound Christ*, p. 157.

history has a decisive and transcendental significance in terms of finality and fundamental harmony, for the whole of human history. In fact, Christ comes down to us in centuries through a medium that is experiential and therefore subjective. Although the Mystery is not a matter of mere subjectivity, it has an important subjective dimension. The personal and subjective confrontation of the fact of Christ on the part of the immediate disciples of Christ and the communication of their Christ-experience have a normative value for man today, because they have a certain power, intensity and originality based on the objective Christ-event. So subjectivity cannot be regarded as a distortion of the Mystery, but as an attempt to penetrate that aspect of the Mystery that manifests itself in subjective forms.[56] In the Indian mystic and experiential tradition, both the historical and experiential aspects of the Christ-event are to be stressed without losing sight of their historical dimensions. Without holding fast to the historical anchorage of Christ as S.J. Samartha observes, the mystical experience of Christ, is 'likely to be a leaky boat without moorings in the swirling waters of Indian philosophy and religions.'[57]

Conclusion

There are Indian theologians who think that the application of the term 'Avatara' for the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is not advisable even with reservations, because 'Avatara' has a load of unacceptable elements which cannot be simply removed by a mere Christian interpretation. The theologians who prefer to follow the Bhakti tradition of Hinduism are favourably disposed to consider Christ as an Avatar; but those who find Sankara's type of *advaita* better suited for the Christian purpose would hesitate to call Christ an *avatar*. It cannot, however, be ignored that the word *avatar* has been used for generations of Indian Christians in reference to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, which is the manifestation of the mystery of God's being with man, the sum and substance of spirituality. Therefore, any serious attempt on the part of Christians at systematizing their spirituality in the Indian spiritual context has to pay sufficient attention to the mythical and the historical dimensions in the expression of the Mystery.

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56. *Ibid.* p. 161. Cf. also: James Robinson and John B. Cobb (eds.), *The Later Heidegger and Theology* (New York: 1961), p. 151 (Ch. 4: "Theology as Ontology and History").

57. S.J. Samartha, *Op. Cit.*, p. 162.