

CULTIVATING CRITICAL RESPECT FOR ALL RELIGIONS AND SCRIPTURES

Ignatius Jesudasan[♦]

1. Introduction

It is a commonplace of contemporary thought that all religious thinking including our own is influenced by historical, social and cultural contexts, and so the era of exclusive claims is now passed and a new acceptance and cordiality between religions has dawned. That this new age of sweetness and light is itself conditioned by historical and social contexts is less impressed on our awareness. Yet we all know that the post-modern thinking of recent decades has had a marked emphasis on the relativity of all thinking and that this line of reflection has been seductive in academic circles, on and off, from the time of Plato's Protagoras. And no philosophical position has been more tolerant and accepting of every position than relativism. I do not know whether any Indian Catholic theologian today is explicitly relativist;¹ he wouldn't have much of a future after Benedict's stern warnings. But this is an inescapable problem for us Indians who'd like to have cordial relations with the proponents of the numerous religions around us, and whom we often recognize as being better individuals than ourselves and from whose religions we realize that we can learn. So we are not tempted to claim, as some fundamentalists do, that all that the Bible or the Pope or the Church says is literally true and that all or almost all of what other religions state is false. Nor are we inclined to accept, as some Vedantins seem to, that all religions can be said to be equally true. And it appears pretty vacuous to declare that all religions are partly true and partly false and so we are all in the same boat. Some studies have tended to focus on the experience behind the different

[♦]**Dr. Ignatius Jesudasan** is a professor at Arulkadal, Jesuit regional theologate in Chennai. He also serves as the librarian of the Institute. His publications include, *Roots of Religious Violence: A Critique of Ethnic Metaphors* (2007), *Genesis Myth of Manifold Meanings* (2008), *Through the Prism: Literary-Critical Scripture-Reading* (2008), *A Rumour of Biblical Angels* (2008), *Cult and Spirituality* (2008), and *Gospels of Deconstructed Adamic Myth* (2009).

¹I remember Fr. D. S. Amalopavadoss a couple of decades ago embracing the Protagorean slogan, 'Man is the measure of all things' in one of his talks as exemplifying the principle governing Indian theology of that period.

religious formulations and to present this experience as being identical or at least similar. I believe this approach to be not just fuzzy but mistaken. Much of Wittgenstein's work has shown how one's theoretical formulations deeply influence one's experience.² His follower, Rush Rhees asks, 'Can we experience romantic love without the language of romantic love?'³ We can certainly experience the love of domestic life or the love of sensuality, but the experience of romantic love needs a tradition of romantic poetry, song and novels.

So how should we go about investigating the religious plurality of our place and time? The question that I propose to address in this paper is: If one is a Catholic believer what would be a rational position to take towards the other religions around us? I take for granted that the practical attitude between the adherents of different religions should be one of courtesy and respect, and this is what we almost always get at the academic level even in seriously controversial exchanges. Only those who seek to make political capital out of these differences spew animosity at each other. The question at the head of this paragraph raises the further question: what beliefs do the other religions share with Catholic Christianity? What is the common ground between us? The answer would obviously be different for each of the non-Christian religions. So our investigation needs an examination of each of many religions that surrounds us, and in a short paper it cannot be other than extremely cursory and inadequate.

At an obviously superficial level we might try to list some of the beliefs and practices that we notice at first glance that we do share with the members of some of the non-Christian religions in India. We share, e.g., with Islam, and possibly Zoroastrianism, the notion of a creator God who is omnipotent, omniscient etc., and of the concepts of a final judgment, heaven, and hell.⁴ With most forms of Hinduism we share a belief in incarnation; and, unlike Muslims, but like Hindus, exhibit a willingness to use representations of deity in general worship. With Buddhists and Jains, but unlike classical Hinduism, we reject caste distinctions, but like all three we value, even if we rarely practice, otherworldliness. We share

²*Philosophical Investigations*, the seminal discussion of Seeing-As is in Pt. II, Sec. XI

³Rush Rhees, "Religion and Language", *Without Answers*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, 121.

⁴Scholars tell us that the religion of Babylon during the Jewish Exile was Zoroastrianism and that our belief in heaven and hell owes something to this.

much of our moral principles with all nearly all other religions. This is something we might expect on the basis of Christian teaching⁵ and also on ordinary biological theory.⁶ So we see there is a whole range of similarities between Christianity and the other religions. These may be seen as providing a basis of appreciation and a degree of co-operation between them.

But we might begin the comparisons at the other end and ask: Are there any beliefs that are central and absolutely essential to Christianity and are not shared by any other religion? (Of course as every religion is distinct from the others, and has a separate history, and so would have some distinctive features, so this question can also be asked from the perspective of any of the other religions.) When we ask this from the Christian viewpoint, we come up with the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ and their salvific significance. Here is an absolutely unique and unparalleled feature among religions,⁷ which transforms our attitude to suffering and the form and meaning of Christian community worship, which has become eucharistic. Let us briefly look at each of these factors separately. For Buddhism and all other major indigenous religions, suffering⁸ is just an evil to be circumvented and the recipe for this is to avoid rebirth. This is to be achieved primarily by the cultivation of wisdom through meditation and detachment from worldly concerns as the essence of the eight-fold path. In the advaidic tradition suffering is part of *maya*, but the remedy for it is much the same as in Buddhism: wisdom coupled with yogic meditation and breathing and postural exercises. The technique for both seems to be one of self-development somewhat parallel to what a physical culturist might engage in while developing his body. In Christianity the attempt to get closer to what is ultimately real consists in the development of a personal relationship with the divine, and any matter

⁵Rom 2:15.

⁶A society whose members help each other will flourish; whereas one whose members are mutually antagonistic will destroy itself.

⁷C. S. Lewis says that stories about dying gods and even of offering bread as his body exist in the Gothic myths, but that he later came to the conclusion that the gospels were historical and then saw the Gothic religious myths as the foreshadowing of a reality that came with Christ. See inter alia *Surprised By Joy*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942, 223f .

⁸The normal translation of *dukha* in Four Noble Truths is ‘suffering’, but perhaps the Buddha was referring to the general inadequacies of our normal earthly lives.

of posture or position or physical condition is entirely subordinate. And the attitude to suffering in this life is not one of simple, negative avoidance; even quite ordinary Catholics are encouraged to see it offering the possibility of some participation the momentous and tremendously consequential sufferings of Christ. For the Christian saints this sharing in the divine salvific act has been given by St. John of the Cross the vivid name of ‘the dark night of the soul’, and may be sought to be at least partially understood in the carefully documented account of such experiences in the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.⁹ The rationale of suffering used as a means of salvation is classically given by St. Anselm in his *Cur Deus Homo* which, though not definitive, continues to be the Catholic orthodoxy. In brief it states that man cannot offset sin towards God by his own efforts, and God, as God, cannot simply cancel out sin without trivializing it, and so the Incarnation becomes necessary, along with the Passion. Of course suffering in itself continues to be an evil, but is now one that can be made to yield a real good.

Let us see how Catholic worship has been transformed. As a consequence of Christ’s passion, the community worship of Catholics centres on the Eucharist which is seen as the body of Christ. The Real Presence is the corner stone of Catholic teaching on the Eucharist, and the recent papal exhortation,¹⁰ affirms it unambiguously and there is even mention of the term ‘transubstantiation,’ a theologian’s word that has restricted currency these days. The real presence is indeed one of the mysteries of the faith, but a mystery is not just an area of total blankness; reflection on Christian mysteries may throw light on some aspects of Christian doctrine and practice. This is what is aimed at in this article: not the dissolution of mystery (which would be humanly impossible), but the use of its penumbral glow to try to understand something of its operation. These matters of meaning and interpretation may indeed be peripheral, but since this doctrine is one that separates us from some of our fellow-Christians in the reformed churches, considering the grey areas may not be an entirely idle pastime.

First, what does ‘presence’ mean in ‘real presence’? In relation to ordinary physical objects, to say that something is present is to refer to its spacio-temporal observability, i.e., to say that it can, in principle, be seen by the naked eye or discerned with the help of instruments if we and the

⁹*Come Be My Light*, New York: Doubleday, 2007.

¹⁰Benedict XVI’s Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritas*.

object are appropriately located in relation to each other. Obviously Christ is not present in this way in the Eucharist. We all know that if we examined a consecrated host under a microscope we would find it no different from what it was before consecration. What then does it mean to say that it is now really Christ's body? It might help to ask the parallel question: what does it mean to say that God is present everywhere? There is an obvious incoherence about a non-physical object having a location. A child might picture omnipresent God as a kind of mist or gas spread into all places. But Aquinas defines God's omnipresence as his knowing all things directly, being able to act everywhere in control of things, and sustaining by his power of all that exists. Does this make God's omnipresence merely a metaphor? By no means! All language about God is analogical, but his knowledge, power and providence are real. Can this serve as a model to answer the parallel question, what does it mean to say that Christ is present in the Eucharistic host? But before we do so let us first ask what 'body' means in the statement that the bread is changed into the body of Christ. (I shall not repeat the question in relation to wine, as blood is part of the body – which is why laypeople lose nothing save some symbolism by receiving the Eucharist under a single species.) What does 'a person's body' ordinarily mean? We think of it as the physical entity through which an individual person acts on the world around him. E.g., I can change the position of my chair, but only by changing the position of parts of my body; in this case, by moving my arms in ways conducive to altering the position of my chair. I use my arms to lift the chair and put it down where I want it to be. I act directly on my body as a means of acting indirectly to effect a change in what is not my body. So can we say that the host is the body of Christ because he uses it directly to give its recipients the grace that they need? Does this make the real presence only a metaphor? Of course not, as Christ does really give us his grace by means of the host, his body. It is anathema for a Catholic to suppose that the recipient is merely psyching himself into feeling more spiritual by the use of emotive imagery about the host.

The traditional way of describing the Eucharistic change is to say that at the consecration, the substance of the bread and wine are transformed into the substance of the body and blood of Our Lord, while the accidents (species) of the bread and wine remain. This is called transubstantiation and is the formula used by Trent in the sixteenth century. The language of 'substance' and 'accidents' is largely anachronistic, as it is linked to Aristotelian concepts of form and matter,

actuality and potentiality, cause and effect, and even the entirely obsolete idea that all things are composed of earth, water, air and fire. Many of Aristotle's above terms have become part of everyday language, but have quite extensively changed their meanings in their later domicile. And the Church is in no way committed to the Aristotelian-Thomist metaphysics (or world-view), which was the proper home of this vocabulary. But it does seem committed to the substance-accidents terminology when speaking of the Eucharistic change; it is used in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and in the earlier encyclicals issued by previous popes. So it's worth trying to make something of it. I've come across seminary textbooks that give incorrect and confused interpretations. E.g., in one, it is supposed that 'substance' refers to an immaterial substratum that underlies the qualities of an object, and it is this mysterious stuff that changes. This notion of 'substance' was propounded by John Locke in the seventeenth century, so it could not have been intended in the Tridentine formulation in the sixteenth. What the council emphasized was that the essential nature of the host changed at the consecration; from a substance that provided physical nourishment, it changed into a substance that imparted God's grace (which is inseparable from Himself) to those in a suitably receptive state. This formulation is meant to affirm what Jesus said, but employs the vocabulary of medieval scholasticism which was still used in the sixteenth century, and so attracts theological hair-splitting. Aquinas himself wondered how, if only the accidents (or appearances) of bread and wine remain, consecrated bread and wine, if taken in sufficient quantities, could still physically nourish and intoxicate you. He considered the possibility that perhaps, as the sight of meat heartens you and the fumes of wine inebriate (as one might feel giddy in a wine-cellar), so the accidents of the bread and wine might be responsible for the power to nourish and intoxicate. But he rejected this, as eating and drinking are far more affecting than even a great deal of ogling and sniffing! Whether the substance of bread and wine remains along with the substance of the body and blood of Christ in the consecrated host, became a divisive issue between Catholics and Lutherans; the latter called their view 'consubstantiation' or 'sacramental union'. Catholics held that the substance of bread and wine no longer existed after consecration and the Lutherans believed that it did. I don't know what hangs on this dispute. If I had to defend the Catholic position I would do so pragmatically by suggesting that, in the quantity normally taken at a communion service, the bread and wine no longer physically nourishes or inebriates, and so is substantially

only the body and blood of Christ, dispensing his grace. I think this is not too far from Aquinas’ own solution, when he says that it is the ‘dimensive quantity’ of the bread and wine that has physical effects, though he complicates it by introducing the highly theoretical Aristotelian concept of ‘matter,’ which cannot exist without ‘form,’ that supports the accidents.

Transubstantiation is not a quasi-explanation of what happens at the Eucharistic celebration; it is only a description in the Thomistic language then prevalent, that leaves the mystery of God’s salvific action unaffected. It emphasizes that God really acts at this point, ruling out the notion that the Eucharist is only an evocative human rite. To try to provide mechanisms from medieval analyses of reality, suggesting the processes by which Christ strengthens the faithful does not seem a fruitful theological activity, though it was sometimes engaged in. As the Apostolic Exhortation says, the Eucharist “is the gift that Jesus Christ makes of himself, thus revealing to us God’s infinite love for every man and woman.” It is well to leave it at that.

We might, at this point, consider how the Eucharistic feast differs from Hindu *prasada*. To answer this question we need to advert to the classical doctrine of Divine Simplicity. God is simple in that he has no qualities separable from himself. Tom is stout, but he could become lean and still be Tom. God is merciful, but if per impossible he ceased to be merciful he’d cease to be God. Tom’s short temper might conflict with his benevolence; but such conflict has no foothold in God’s nature because of his simplicity. All his qualities are essential qualities. The scholastic tag is ‘God’s essence and existence are identical.’ So the Eucharistic grace is God’s gift of himself, allowing us to partake in his sacrificial death and its salvific consequences, while itself being the object of worship.

Hindu *puja* takes the form of bathing, dressing and feeding the installed idol. *Prasada* is the remnants of the feeding, shared by the devotees. Eating it may be (in part) parallel to eating of the burnt offerings that the Jews submitted to Yahweh; but only in part, because the Jews saw their offering as penitential, whereas the Hindu’s is one of service. The Jewish act is their penance; the Eucharist re-presents God’s act of vicarious penance.

The Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus is, of course, a central doctrine that is the basis of the Christian conception of human salvation, so all I’ve focused on two spin-offs of a central teaching. The central doctrine is itself something that is not common between Christianity and any other of the religions we meet. As it is something that every Christian who

believes it deeply values, he would never consider his religion as being assimilable by or identical to any other. But couldn't most followers of any religion find something in his own religion that he deeply values and which makes his religion similarly unique? I think he could; and if he'd spell it out it would provide a basis for a rational comparison. We do have this with Islam, but not with most others. If we did, we could all make frank and, I hope, friendly choices, though for the present only at the academic level! In the course of time, carping about conversions might come to be a thing of the past – or is this only a pipe dream?