

TRINITARIAN EXPERIENCE OF A CHRISTIAN AND ADVAITIC EXPERIENCE OF A HINDU

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1.0. Introduction

This essay contains some reflections of an ordinary Christian layman, who thinks that a marginal cross section of can be provoked and motivated into the Spiritual experience of oneness with the Spirit through a comparative study of such Spiritual experience of Hindus. Can the Spiritual experiences of Christians and Hindus be similar? Can we compare the Trinitarian experience of a Christian and the advaitic experience of a Hindu? The average Christians would have considered such questions heretical a century ago. The perception of Christians about other religions has undergone a sea change in the past few decades as a result of various forms of inter-religious dialogue, in-depth comparative studies and prayerful contemplation carried out by a large number of pious and committed theologians who were inspired and encouraged by the Second Vatican Council. The tremendous work being done by the present-day theologians who are impelled by the call of prophetic mission is poised to take us forward to a rightful conclusion and a mature theology of religions. The evolving perceptions are likely to cause consternation among the dogmatic Christians who are unwilling to open up themselves to the theory and practice of the sublime concepts of Spirituality underlying the superficial doctrinal concepts in the Bible. This essay tries to reflect on the doctrines of Holy Trinity and *Advaita* and to conceptualize and characterize an ideal Christian and an ideal Advaitin, with special emphasis on the experience or realization of divinity hidden within oneself. The concepts of the Holy Spirit, the Word and the Father are compared with similar concepts in Hinduism such as the *Ātman*, *Purusha* and Brahman.

2.0. Nature of Doctrines

It is pertinent to reflect on the nature of dogmas and doctrines before

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we look into the doctrine of Trinity. A dogma or a doctrine is a principle or a tenet taught by an authority to be true. A doctrine has its roots in scripture, while a dogma has no scriptural support. The meaning or essence of dogmas or doctrines is incomprehensible to the ordinary followers, who rarely try to comprehend such mysteries. They are expected to believe in them blindly. The Truths or Wisdom concealed in such dogmas and doctrines are seldom understood since no language is adequate to express them fully.

Pearls of wisdom can be divided into two categories. One contains eternal truths and the other contains truths that are valid only within a specific boundary such as geography, culture, community or period of time. Wisdom is experiential in nature. It occurs as a result of long and arduous efforts and practice. It exists in the minds of wise people, and in scriptures. It can be explained but not served to others in a digestible form. For example, one who has experienced God cannot write a bestseller book, "How to experience God in thirty days". Seeds of wisdom do not germinate and bear fruit in barren soil.

Doctrines and dogmas, which contain non-ultimate truths, die out with passage of time, when its inner content becomes no more meaningful. Those, which conceal ultimate truths, do not die out with time, since every now and then there arise a few enlightened persons who expound their meaning and keep them alive. Such doctrines are seldom discarded since the genuineness of the inner content or kernel is not doubted. They lose their mysterious nature when majority of the members of a community becomes substantially transformed or enlightened, so as to understand their inner essence.

Doctrines are like fruits with hard shells. Every religion or tradition may have its own doctrines. They all may be sweet when their hard shells are broken. Intellectual discourses or public debates cannot break the encrustation or shell. The task of breaking the shell is quite tedious and involved. It has to be broken independently by individuals to relish the kernel. The experience of such individuals can be inspiring to others. They are capable of rejuvenating and reinterpreting doctrines using knowledge or information that were not available previously. We may say that those who have broken them have become enlightened during this process. "The unfolding of Thy words gives light; it gives understanding

to the simple" (Ps 119: 130). Those who understand may succeed in transferring their understanding to a few others. The wisdom of enlightened ones when carried forward blindly by others again becomes doctrines. Those who treat doctrines as eternal unexplainable mysteries reject meaningful interpretations given by wise ones.

Breaking the shell of doctrine is not essential for practice of Spirituality. Role of doctrines is indeed negligible in our Spiritual journey. One who has a Spiritual quest does not hold on blindly to the doctrines present in ones tradition. By the time his Spiritual pilgrimage reaches an advanced stage of enlightenment, the doctrines also become comprehensible to him. Even though he may become internally aware about the true meaning of doctrines, he may not feel the necessity of explaining this to others or to convince others. If the Spirit urges him to do so, he takes up the issue of doctrines and interprets them for the benefit of others. Otherwise he goes about carrying out his mission as dictated by his inner Spirit without bothering about doctrines.

One need not be averse to using tools or knowledge that is external to one's tradition to break open the doctrines. As long as they do not spoil or contaminate the inner kernel, any tool can be used. For example, two hard doctrines from different traditions may be compared or rubbed against each other to break open both. Sweetness of both should be tasted without mixing them up. Doctrines from various traditions can hardly ever match one another. But the similarities can sometimes be breath taking. One who has learned to unfold doctrines in one's own tradition may easily unfold the doctrines in other traditions, if he/she wills so. There is no need to do so unless one gets an inner urge to do it.

3.0 Need for Studying and Experiencing the Truth of Other Religions

Should a Christian try to pry open the mystery of doctrines of other religions? Process of a Christian's spiritual pilgrimage could be as follows:

1) The message of Jesus has to be put forth in a convincing manner to others, through the principle of love. There is no question of coercion. There will also be no arguments, except in a friendly atmosphere. I shall

use all my opportunities to do this, so that others too come to the deep inner conviction about the message of Jesus. Let others also enjoy the peace and bliss from communion with God that ensues as a result of practicing the way of life taught by Jesus.

2)The Church has been carrying out missionary activities for quite a long time. What are the reasons for our failure in winning majority of the Hindus, Muslims and others into our fold? What are the forces that prevent them from entering into our fold? Should I not look into their scriptures and their Spiritual experience and compare them with my Bible and my Spiritual experience? Perhaps I can win them over by pointing out their inadequacies and mistakes?

3)Before I try to put forth the message of Christ to others, let me try to understand their ways of worship and Spirituality. Interaction with like-minded people of other religions is likely to be mutually beneficial and fruitful. I wish to see whether I can learn or gain anything from their scriptures and Spiritual practices. As a Christian, I have to accept whatever is true, good, and ennobling. I have to be inter-religious if I have to be truly religious.

A person who seriously pursues the second or third may find that he/she is able to penetrate the symbolic structures of other traditions. Trying to experience God through the symbols or concepts of other religious traditions is a quite serious and salutary exercise. The same ultimate Reality is experienced by each tradition through different symbolic structure, which may not be comparable or compatible with those of other traditions. Even within the same Christian tradition, each person may have an entirely different experience. One may undergo a Trinitarian experience if one dwells upon the mystery of Holy Trinity. Another one who dwells upon the mystery of Eucharist may end up in the Eucharistic experience. A third one may get another experience if he dwells on the concept of sacrifice. A Christians who has not transcended the symbolic structure of his own tradition is likely to find himself in a maze or labyrinth if he tries to experience God through the concept of other religions. If he succeeds, he may realize that beneath the outer shells, the inner kernel of dogmas and doctrines taste equally sweet as in the Christian tradition.

During the process of a comparative study of the doctrines of different traditions, we should not allow the real meaning to be cut or pruned or lost, rather we should allow our wrong perceptions to be cut and pruned. Then a person may come to the conclusion that the final Spiritual experience (or state of consciousness) of oneness with the whole of mankind as well as with the whole of existence is similar, irrespective of the tradition followed. He may not know that such an experience is termed by some as Trinitarian experience or by others as Advaitic experience or as Cosmic Consciousness. Studying such names and terminology are the work of theologians. Experiencing is important, not analyzing or naming them. A Christian who has undergone such an experience may find that his perceptions as an ideal Christian are matching closely with similar perceptions of ideal Spiritual practitioners in other religions. This awareness occurs only if he gets an opportunity to interact with such people or to interpret the real inner meanings of their scripture.

A Christian who has undergone enlightening Spiritual experience through more than one religion may also find that his perceptions are not in agreement with those of his peers and of the doctrinal committee of the Church, even though he is sure about his deep grounding in his Christian belief and practice. A sincere and successful enquiry into the Spiritual experience of followers of other religions by an inquisitive Christian may land him in an unenviable situation. He may become rejected and persecuted by his own community, especially if he lacks the theological language and tools required for effectively communicating his inner knowledge or wisdom to others. Christians who champion the worth and values of other religions besides their own religion normally get the dubious distinction of being "double-religious". They are misunderstood to be indecisive, confused and living under constant tension, just because they are found to struggle hard unsuccessfully to convince others about their inner vision. Christians who do not want to end up in such an unenviable situation should never undertake a serious attempt to experience the truth of other religions. This problem never arises among Hindus, since their tradition allows a wider ecumenical vision. Their tradition accepts truths from outside, such as secular science as well as truths from other religions, as long as they are verifiable through inner knowledge or wisdom as experienced by the "realized yogins." In their tradition, acquired wisdom or inner knowledge (*parā-vidyā*) is superior to

the knowledge given by the literal interpretation of scriptures (*aparā vidyā*). Yogins or Spiritual stalwarts in their tradition have definitely demonstrated that the inner knowledge gained by many of them is indeed complementary and not contradictory. When they come across the Gospel, they quickly grasp and appreciate its message, but at the same time, they feel sorry for those Christians who hang on to its literal meaning and distort the message of gospel.

Rev. S.J. Samartha, points out that true scriptural hermeneutics involves not merely a literal exercise, but a tedious process of Spiritual transformation.

One should note that the Asian religious traditions such as the Hindu and the Buddhist, do not believe that one can develop a scriptural hermeneutics which, by itself will yield the truth. True knowledge is not the fruit of logical investigation or the exegesis of scriptures, but a transformation of the knowing subject. Gregarious (Mar Gregorios, Bishop of Syrian Orthodox Church) connects this with the Eastern tradition. Both Indian philosophy and Eastern tradition, he says, generally hold the view that one can "know" Reality only when one's whole life becomes pure. Gregory of Nyssa emphasizes the need to cleanse the mind and control the passions in order to "see" God. The basic hermeneutic principle is that of "apatheia" or a personality that is not only free from passions, which dominate the mind, and from all evil inclinations, but also is positively developed to conform to the image of God. This emphasis on the discipline of the body, mind and heart (*sādhana*) as a pre-requisite to any hermeneutics is too often neglected by Asian Christians (*One Christ-Many Religions; Toward a Revised Christology*, p.81).

Under the above circumstances, it is quite logical to come to the conclusion that studying and trying to experience the truth of other religions is strenuous and painful especially for Christians, who are likely to face rejection by their peers. However, such Christians who think that they have cracked the mystery of multiplicity of religions remain unperturbed, under the grip of their Spiritual experience. They are ready to stand up for the Truth, whatever it be, braving peer-rejection. They are driven by a vision of "wider ecumenism" towards a Kingdom of Heaven on earth along with like-minded people of other religions.

The dreams of Spiritually enlightened persons from all religions converge to the ultimate objective of building a heaven on earth. They all envision a Kingdom of God with a boundary much wider than that dreamt by the orthodox Christians. They foresee the reign of God, or the divinization of cosmos, where everything is refined and turned back into God. They realize that in the beginning, until human beings were formed with the freedom to "fall" or to differentiate themselves from the basic divine nature, the world fully expressed the underlying divine presence with all its pristine purity, holiness and perfection. Enlightened people work hard to exterminate evil from the face of the earth. They know that evil is not present anywhere else in the universe, except in the minds of humans, who enjoy the unique freedom to express evil besides their basic divine nature.

Dr. Michael Amaladoss S.J., who has studied in detail, the question of "double-religiosity" among Christians, observes that this modern phenomenon is becoming more and more common especially after the Second Vatican Council. He does not feel that "double-religious" Christians are "eccentric individuals" with "idiosyncratic behavior". He suggests that "the phenomenon of double belongingness itself can be seen as a symbol of the call to transcendence and convergence, leading to ultimate eschatological community and harmony" ("Double Religious Belonging and Liminality", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, January 2002).

4.0. The Concept of Holy Trinity

Christians conceive of the absolute Reality as three-in-one person and ascribe masculine gender to this Reality. In the advaitic tradition the absolute Reality, Brahman, is expressed in neutral gender. The well-known Trinitarian concepts in Hinduism, such as creation-sustenance-dissolution and existence-consciousness-bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*) do not compare well with the concept of Christian Trinity. However, the independent concepts of Brahman, *Purusha*, and *Ātman* when brought together as a trio, compare well with the concept of Holy Trinity, provided we are ready to conceptualize the Holy Trinity in a new light as proposed below, different from the traditional understanding.

4.1. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity is the Eternal Word

The Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit are all one and the same with no difference at all. The second Person of the Trinity is the eternal Word or Logos who is a Spirit. He has a wider meaning than that of the incarnate Word of Jesus. Incarnate Word is the self-emptied or humbled form of the exalted Word (Phil 2:6,7). "God has made Himself known in the fullest possible way" through incarnation (*Redemptoris Missio*, n.5). However, no one knows the real identity and name of the Word except He Himself (Rev 19: 12,13). Conformity of mind (*tādātmya*) with Him is essential to know Him fully (1 Cor. 2: 14-16; Gal 4:19; Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49). All Biblical evidences lead us to believe that the second person of the Trinity is a Spirit or dynamic reality who is responsible for causing, shaping up, sustaining, supporting, and containing the universe within Himself and who fills up, permeates, animates, evolves and causes it to return back into its original unseen form within Himself at the end, remaining ever as its indweller. At the end of the cosmic exercise, when everything is successfully concluded and wound up, His cosmic functions also come to an end. He then returns to the First Person of the Trinity who will then become all in all (1Cor. 15:28).

The New King James Version of the Bible depicts the Second Person of Trinity clearly as the Word. "There are three who bear witness in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one" (1 John 7:7). However other versions such as RSV and Jerusalem Bible interpret the same verse like this. "There are three witnesses, the Spirit, water and blood, and the three of them coincide".

4.2. The Word is the Indweller or Self of the Universe

The Word is Spirit. He has a cosmic role, with multiple functions such as creations, sustenance, self-revelation and salvation. The incarnate Word has come to the world in flesh to continue the function of revelation and salvation. We cannot limit the second person of the Trinity within the human person of Jesus. The Word is *Alpha* and *Omega*, the starting point and the ending point of the universe (Rev. 1:11). He gradually unfolds the universe from Himself and reveals Himself indirectly through it. He also reveals Himself and His plans through those whom He chooses, in order to

guide His creation to perfection and salvation. The second person has a much wider meaning in the Bible than what we normally ascribe to Him.

Following are some excerpts from the Bible showing the cosmic role of the Word: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him and without Him, nothing was made that was made" (Jn. 1:1. "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by Word of God so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible" (Hebrew 11:3). "He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times". (1 Peter. 1:20). ... "whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds, who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the Word of His power" (Hebrew 1:2-3.

The Word reveals Himself to all those who seek Him fervently with a simple (purified) heart. He is present in the innermost minds of all humans. He is the one who gives light to all those who come into the world (Jn. 1:9). Neither Jesus nor the scriptures exhaust him fully. He is present throughout the universe, with no discontinuity at all. Everything taking place from beginning till the end of the universe reveals the Word, who is the intelligence or Information that drives it. The universe is contained by the Word (Col. 1:17). The evolution of the universe from the Big Bang to the Big Crunch is an expression or indirect revelation of the Word. the creation, sustenance and final dissolution of the universe are the functions of the Word. Discerning deepest thoughts and desires of the creatures is His function (Heb 4:12). Causing the power of discrimination and conscience and generating divine thoughts in human minds is His function. Bringing the creation back from their differentiated state back to the undifferentiated divine state of oneness with Himself is His function. He reveal His plans to the discerning ones who work as His microphones and extensions in the World. He utilizes them to reform and transform His creation back to their true/intended divine nature. In short, creation, sustenance, revelation and salvation are some of His functions. All these functions are cosmic in nature and hence the word cannot be limited within human flesh or any other framework, even though we can think of them as manifestations that lead us to the ultimate truth. Everything in the cosmos

reveals His glory and nature to a lesser or greater extent. The incarnate Word revealed the personal qualities of the eternal Word with utmost perfection and also demonstrated the functions of self-revelation and salvation.

The Bible addresses the second person as the first-born (Col 1:15) or the only begotten Son of the Eternal Spirit. The Father-Son relationship does not seem to point to the human role of Jesus as Son, but points to a metaphysical relationship between the eternal role (Father/Brahman) and the transitory cosmic role (Word/*Purusha*). The Cosmic *Purusha* in the Upanishads encompassing the universe is envisaged to be self-born (*svayambhu*) or first-born (*AdiPurusha*), who proceeds undifferentiated or undivided from the eternal Spirit, (*Antaryamin, Prana, Prajna, and Prajapathy*). *Purusha*, the active or eternal dynamic Spirit props up and sustains *Prakriti*, the passive ephemeral material world. The Word or cosmic *Purusha* represents or denotes the Spirit that dwells in the universe integrating everything contained in it. The Word is not a human person though he revealed Himself in the limited form of a human person, Jesus. for want of a suitable term, we may use the masculine gender to denote the word.

It has to be pointed out that the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) has not yet yielded to the theological submission that the eternal Word has a wider meaning than that of the incarnate Word. Dominus Jesus says at the end of n. 10: "The theory which would attribute after the incarnation as well, a salvific activity to the Logos as such in his divinity, exercised 'in addition to' or 'beyond' the humanity of Christ, is not compatible with the Catholic faith". This affirmation arises from the undue fear that the new perception will lead to contradictions, such as opposing functions of the eternal Word and the incarnate Word.

4.3. Holy Spirit is the Indweller or Self of Human Beings

Holy Spirit or *Atman* is the Spirit that dwells as the witness, conscience or inner pure consciousness in all human beings, irrespective of whether they accept His presence in them or not. Human body is the temple of God. God dwells in every human being, even though most of the people do not recognize this fact. At a particular point of time during the Spiritual growth of a person, he experiences the presence of God within himself. As

he grows Spiritually further, he feels that his soul (*jiva*) has merged or dovetailed with the inner Spirit. The soul or *jiva* is different from the Spirit or *Atman* in ordinary people, but the soul attains union or communion with the Spirit at an advanced stage of purification during the Spiritual pursuit. When Jesus declared, "I and my Father are one" (Jn. 10:30), He did not mean that His physical body was the epitome of Godhead. It only meant that His inner soul was in perfect communion with the Eternal Spirit. This fact remained true from His birth till death, unlike the rishis of ancient India who attained such a stage of perfect communion with the Eternal Spirit at the height of their long Spiritual *sadhana*. Their declaration "Aham Brahmasmi" meaning "I and the Brahman are one" shows clearly that they had experienced perfect communion with God at the point of this declaration. It need not be interpreted as an act of blasphemy. Such an experience is the right of every human being and is the aim of Spiritual pursuits in all religion. The very purpose of Christ-event was to demonstrate this fact to humanity and to make His "Abba experience" or oneness with Father transparent and model to the whole of mankind (Gal 4:6). He wanted to spread the meaning and message of His life to the entire world through His followers, as to bring in the reign of God or to build the Kingdom of God on earth.

4.4. All Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are one and the Same

The three persons of the holy Trinity - the holy Spirit (*Atman*) understood as the indweller of humans, the Word (*Purusha*) as the indweller of the universe and the eternal Spirit (Brahman) who precedes and surpasses the universe - are all one and the same, with no difference at all. We split them into different persons only to understand the different functions of the same Spirit. The Father, the Word and the holy Spirit are all one and the same with no difference at all. There is absolutely difference between the three persons of the Trinity.

To recapitulate the concept of oneness of the different persons of the holy Trinity, let us consider the third, second and first persons respectively once again. (i) We have tried to conceive of the third person or Holy Spirit (*Atman*) as the indweller of all human, who gives life to all and who impels them all towards perfection and holiness and identity of mind with Him. (ii) We have tried to conceive of the second person or the Word (*Purusha*) as the summation of the overall presence of God within the

universe who creates, sustains, animates and guides the universe from Big Bang to Big Crunch, always remaining as its indweller. This Spirit has the functions of creation, revelation and salvation of the whole of creation. The incarnate Word came to the world in flesh to continue the work of revelation and salvation, and hence Jesus does not exhaust the mystery of the Word. (iii) we have also tried to conceive of the first person or the eternal Spirit (Brahman) as the Ultimate reality who is not limited either within human beings or within the universe, but who encompasses and sustains not merely the universe, but the whole of reality, much beyond our universe, and beyond our comprehension.

We have noted earlier that our true inner or Spirit is pure consciousness. The nature of ultimate reality is pure consciousness. We should delineate the normal consciousness, which we normally experience through the equipment of our mind/brain. The consciousness experienced by a purified soul who is in communion with God is pure and holy and it is an indivisible part of the same ultimate Reality, who permeates the universe and causes matter to be alive. This pure consciousness experienced by a realized soul within himself as the indweller is understood as holy Spirit or the *Atman*. The same Spirit passes through all entities, filling up or hovering over everything within the universe and beyond the universe. We give it different names such as Holy Spirit, the Word and the Eternal Spirit in order to come to the right understanding about its unity and eternity.

5.0. Conceptualizing an Ideal Christian and an Ideal Advaitin

One who merely keeps faith in Christ or who is baptized is normally called a Christian. Any one who merely professes the philosophy of Advaita (non-duality) is normally called an advaitin. However an ideal Christian is one who has become Christ-like and attained oneness of soul with the Father. Jesus is an ideal Christian and an ideal model for everyone on earth. He satisfies the ideal requirements specified by all the religions of the world. An ideal advaitin is one whose self or *jiva* has attained oneness or non-duality with the indwelling Spirit or *Atman*. In this essay, the term advaitin is used to mean only an ideal advaitin.

Some people believe that the physical world is merely an illusion (*maya*) and that our life on earth is meant to be freely enjoyed according to

our will and pleasure. They are not bothered whether their thoughts, words and deeds are likely to infringe upon the rights and freedom of others or to inflict any damage, loss, pain or misery to others and to the environment. An advaitin strongly condemns such casual attitudes. He exhorts everyone to discharge his or her duties towards family and society and to engage in one's chosen field of work with utmost care and concern for others based on the principle of righteousness (dharma).

An advaitin does advocate the concept of illusory nature of the world, but in a quite different metaphysical sense. He emphasizes that the Spiritual reality is the only eternal reality. Physical reality is ephemeral as reiterated in the Bible. The seen world is "...not made of things which are seen" (Heb 11:3). "the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor 4:18). Hence the advaitin asks others to realize the insignificance or temporary nature of the material world and to renounce them internally. This is required to enable them to enter into communion with the inner Spiritual reality or consciousness, who is the indweller of all humans as well as of the whole of reality, cosmic and extra cosmic.

An advaitin is internally aware that at the deepest level, matter is not made up of physical particles, but of an unseen dynamic Reality or intelligence. Others normally misunderstand the concept of advaitins that the external façade of universe is illusory or ephemeral and that the underlying essence or intelligence animating the universe is eternal and unitary. A true advaitin is again misunderstood when he exclaims at the peak of his Spiritual experience, "I am Brahman, you are Brahman, and everything is Brahman". Scientists exploring the deepest mysteries about the constitution of matter have been unable to catch-up with the ultimate physical particles or building blocks that were expected to explain the history, mystery and the future of the universe. Today they are being confronted with the concept that the universe is preceded, constituted and driven by information or intelligence presumably in the form of a non-physical dynamic wave function underlying it. If such a theory gets proven, then the advaitic experience will become meaningful even to the scientists.

Advaitins are internally aware that the unseen Spiritual reality or the ultimate reality (Brahman) underlying the whole of creation is indivisible,

unitary and eternal with no beginning or end, while all physical entities have their own span of life. A flower may live for a day, a man for a century, a star for a billion years and the universe perhaps for a hundred billion years. Eternal reality is subject to change and renewal whereas the underlying reality is changeless and eternal. In this sense, they proclaim the oneness of all existence, and the ephemeral nature of its external façade (physical world). An advaitin who has a wide Spiritual vision envisions everything in the universe to be the manifestation of Brahman. In this sense, you, me and everything else are divine.; such a perception comes at the height of an advaitin's spiritual experience. They exhort everyone to experience this ultimate Reality deep within themselves, as the indweller or self, or as the innermost being or Spirit. They teach that our mind/ intellect can be dovetailed with this Spirit or self through a process of removal of ignorance. This is done by purification of mind or by the purging of all negative or sinful traits from the flesh/genes. This involves leading a purposeful, meaningful and holy life, wherein all fellow creatures are treated with equal respect and love, replacing all selfish motives and desires with an altruistic mentality. An advaitin is not bothered about his personal interest. He is ready to give up everything for the sake of others, since he considers his physical body to be an instrument that is entrusted to him temporarily to fulfill the mission dictated by the inner Spirit, who is the same in all human (*Atman*, the holy Spirit) and who is the same as the cosmic Spirit (*Purusha*, the Word) and the same as the eternal Spirit (Brahman, the Father)

An advaitin hates evil actions, but not evildoers. While encountering an aggressor or an evildoer, he remembers that beneath the external façade of their ignorance, there exist the Spirit, who animates everyone. The advaitin seizes every such opportunity of interaction to shatter the sheath of ignorance (*avidya*) in them and to enlighten them towards the awareness of the inner divinity hidden beneath their ignorance. He convinces them that they too can attain divine nature or oneness with the inner Spirit through the elimination of ignorance. This leads them to purify their minds to achieve union of the soul with the Spirit. The awareness of oneness with the Spirit and of the false façade of ignorance eclipsing the inherent divinity of creation impels the real advaitins to speak about the oneness of existence and of the falsified nature of the external reality, which hides the true inner spiritual Reality. This concept of *maya* is normally

misunderstood by others. However it helps advaitins to face adverse events and circumstances in the world with the balanced and positive approach and to turn such events into factors of change and transformation, beneficial to them and the society at large. An advaitin is able to sense the divine hand beneath every eventuality that unfolds before him, and to take a positive step forward even under the worst situations.

An advaitin always starts from the dualistic concept of the world until he comes to the realization of non-dualism. After realization, he does not claim that his physical body has become Brahman. The identity is only with respect to the soul, which has finally reached the destination after the necessary purification. An advaitin is aware of the steps he has taken to reach the final stage of self-realization or non-dualism. He does not denigrate other spiritual aspirants who hold on to the concept of dualism. But he definitely entreats them to continue the process of self-purification or purging of all genetic and self-made negative instincts in the flesh that act against the voice of the indwelling Spirit or *Atman*. The final goal is unequivocally, full surrender to the *Atman* and the experience of oneness with the *Atman/Purusha/Brahman*.

Even though the concept of Advaita was recognized by the ancient Indian sages more than two thousand years ago, there is no better example of advaitin than Jesus. Normally an advaitin is one who has attained Spiritual heights through purification of body and mind, such that he experiences oneness of his soul with the inner Spirit. He is then led by the Spirit, and all his thoughts and deeds become dovetailed with that of the Spirit. Being the incarnation of the word, Jesus experienced oneness of His soul with the Spirit from birth till death. In this sense, he is quite different from the other advaitins. We also cannot preclude the possibility of other incarnation who would have maintained perfect communion with the Eternal Spirit like Jesus from birth till death. It can be expected that such people also would have proclaimed their oneness with the Spirit and executed His will on earth. Such experience of oneness with the Father is the right of every person on earth.

An advaitin who claims, "I and the Brahman are one" can be judged by the fruits of his words and deeds. The real advaitin does not claim equality with God in the literal sense. He cannot be omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. Let us consider the case of Jesus. his own self-perception was

that of a prophet (Mk. 6:4; Mt. 13:57). His contemporaries also perceived him as the prophet from Nazareth (Mt. 21:11; Mk. 8:28; Mt. 16:14; Lk. 7:39). He did not count himself equal to the Father in heaven. He said, "My Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). We have to remember that He had also said in the advaitic style "I and my Father are one" (Jn. 10:30). Being in the form of a human, Jesus was subject to the laws of nature. He experienced hunger and temptations (Mat. 4:2,3). He confessed, "I can of Myself do nothing" (Jn. 5:30). He also said that only the Father in heaven knows "the day and hour" when the "heaven and earth will pass away" (Mat. 24:36). He experienced agony and weakness in flesh prior to crucifixion (Mat 26: 38-41). He felt forsaken at the time of death (Mat 27:46). All these show that the oneness or non-duality experienced by Jesus with the Father was only at the inner level and not at the external level of His physical being. The Father in heaven is not subject to temptations, hunger, pain, death etc. hence in this sense, there is dualism between the Father and Jesus (the incarnate Word) at the external physical level, while there is non-duality between them at the inner level.

When a person is in perfect and constant communion with God, he does not become omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. He needs to know only what is essential for him to execute the will of God, according to the prompting of the Spirit. The Spirit prompts each word and deed and the flesh complies with it despite some resistance. The Spirit complements his worldly knowledge and capabilities with additional Spiritual wisdom and various forms of gifts needed to execute the divine plan through him. He remains fully surrendered to God day and night and follows the promptings of the Spirit in total, rejecting or neglecting the promptings of the flesh or the body/mind/intellect. Even while executing the divine will, he may not know the totality of the divine plan. But he is content with the wisdom imparted to him and goes ahead with his mission in the world unaffected by anything else other than the prompting of the Spirit.

If anybody thinks than an advaitin is a self-centred person, who is concerned only about his own salvation, with no responsibilities whatsoever to the society at large, he is grossly mistaken. An advaitin is one who has realized or experienced his oneness with fellow human beings he does not focus attention on the external appearance, features and behaviour of others. He respects and treats everyone equally, knowing well

that the Self or Spirit that drives others in the same as the Spirit that guides him from behind his mind and intellect. There is a strong feeling of interconnectedness and inter dependence. He recognizes very well his duties and responsibilities to the society and remains as a strong and powerful link in a chain that connects all creatures. He is desirous of bringing everyone else into the awareness of the Spirit and he is fully devoted to this cause of bringing the reign of God on earth.

It is also a gross misunderstanding to think that an advaitin has to practice vanaprastha, renouncing his duties to his family and the society. It would be correct to say that an advaitin is a self-centred person, whose mind is synchronized with that of the indwelling Spirit or Self, and whose thoughts and deeds are prompted by the Self. Yes, an advaitin renounces the world and all the worldly comforts, rewards and desires inwardly. Anyone can become an advaitin by practicing inner virtues and renunciation. A king, a soldier, a business magnate, or a fashion model can become an advaitin. If a king desires to practice advaitic Spirituality, he has to discharge all his duties to his subjects sincerely and dispassionately, upholding dharma in all respects without desiring personal gains in return for the service as a king. He should be just and truthful and interested only in the welfare of the subjects and not in satisfying his personal needs such as ego, pride, greed, fame, power, and other worldly desires. He should follow the practice of "nishkama karma" (duty with no expectation of reward). However there is no taboo on receipt of legitimate remuneration for services done, on leading a family life, or on enjoyment of rightful needs of the body. When the king, or any one for that matter, is so engaged in his duties, guided by the sarathy (chariot-driver) or the indwelling *Atman* seated behind him inside the chariot of his own body, the five restless horses representing his senses are fully controlled by the rein of his mind and also by the intellect, both of which are fully surrendered to the sarathy seated behind him. The *Bhagavad Gita* pronounces various methods that can be fruitfully employed by spiritual aspirants who are desirous of achieving Yoga (union) of their self (soul, *jiva*) with the Self (indwelling Spirit, *Atman*).

Some advaitins may choose to renounce physically the worldly comforts and opt for a life of solitude and contemplation. Having discharged all their duties to the family and having renounced everything

they had in the world, and having eliminated all their personal egos, they do not have any further personal goal in their life other than the welfare of the world. They channel all their energy through meditation and prayer, aimed at the welfare of the world. They renounce even their desire to leave their physical body for the ultimate union with the Spirit, knowing well that their earthly prayers and meditation contribute to the progressive Spiritual evolution and divinization of the world towards the reign of God on earth.

6.0 Oneness with God is an Experience Common to People of all Religions

The experience of oneness with God is attained only at the highest level of Spiritual progress. This enlightenment or comprehension is common to people of all religions. The Indian sages who attained such a stage after years of spiritual *sadhana* or purification process, experienced oneness of their soul (jiva) with their inner Spirit (*Atman*). They realized that their inner Spirit (*Atman*) is the same as the cosmic Spirit (*Purusha*), and the eternal Spirit (Brahman). At their state of ecstasy, they declared boldly that their souls were one with *Atman/Purusha/Brahman*. At their state of meditation and communion with the Spirit, they transcended the feeling of two-ness or Advaita and felt that they were one with God, even though their physical bodies continued to be subject to the limitations and imperfections common in this world, such as temptations, hunger, pain, death etc.

Enlightenment of a person occurs at a stage when his mind is transformed to such a stage of purification or perfection that his thoughts and actions are fully dovetailed with that of the ultimate Reality through the indwelling Spirit. At this stage, the mind gets filled with the light of knowledge, which enables him to see everything around him a new light or perspective. There will be identity or conformity of mind between enlightened persons of all religions, since the light or knowledge that fills up the mind of all such person is the same, namely the *Vak* (symbolized as *AUM*) or the Word.

Francis de Sales experienced the union with God, while he was in sacramental union with the Eucharist (Ref. Francis de Sales, *The Love of God, A Treatise*, SFS Publications, Bangalore). He retained his external

physical identity as Francis de Sales even while he claimed that his soul was "blended, absorbed and swallowed up in God". Certainly this was not a case of blasphemy. The thoughts and actions of such saintly or enlightened people get synchronized with that of God. When they find no dualism between their soul and the inner Spirit, they cry out, "Abba, Father" and declare boldly like Jesus, "I and my Father are one". (Jn 10:30; 17:21; Rom 8:15). "He who is joined to the Lord is one Spirit with Him" (1 Cor 6:17). Jesus demonstrated His oneness with the Father through his words and actions on earth. Never did he say that the Father. (Mt. 5:48; 1 Pet 1:15,16). He also entreats us to become partakers of divine nature (2 Pet 1:4; Rom 8:16-30). There is also a call in the Gospel for all of us to become Sons of God, by leading a life of perfection and holiness guided by the inner Spirit (Rom 8:14; Gal 4:6-7).

Holiness is the real nature of every man, since our true inner Self is the holy Spirit. This we do not recognize due to our ignorance or *avidya*, the dirt or darkness accumulated in our minds genetically and through our own actions in the world. When we purify or wash away such sinful tendencies or *vasnas* through constant practice or *sadhana* with the aid of our indwelling Spirit (*antaryamin*), the darkness of mind or dirt gives way to the revelation about our own inner divine Self. The concept of sin in Christianity and the concept of *avidya* (ignorance) in Hinduism are hence closely interrelated. *Jnana* (wisdom or knowledge), the saviour who can exterminate *avidya*, is comparable to the eternal Word. Anyone who destroys sin (*avidya*) and declares that he and the Father are one need not be crucified for blasphemy. His genuineness can be verified by judging the fruits produced by his words and actions.

We tend to believe that the target of holiness imposed on us by God is impractical. We tend to tell God, "we are humans, and you have created us as born-sinners. We cannot become perfect and holy. Our soul can never reach union with you, while we remain as humans. Perhaps our soul can merge with you after our death, but never while we live as humans. As long as our physical body exists, we cannot transcend it and reach oneness with you. We can utmost say that we have put on Christ or that Christ lives in me due the sacraments received by me". This kind of humility is indeed essential, before humans and before God, but it should not lead us to the trap of forgetting the goal, which has been set before us by God.

The incarnate Word demonstrated to the world how to discover our oneness (non-duality) with the Father, through our own true inner divine Self, by bringing our souls (*jiva*) into union (Yoga) with Him by a process of reformation or inner transformation. We interpret the mission of Jesus as an act of atonement for the one-time fault of our ancestor. The mission was indeed aimed at drawing the attention of all future generations to the necessity of purging the seeds of sinful traits (*vasanas*) in them, which are partly inherited from ancestors and partly self-cultivated, and to attain divinity or oneness with the Father. The mission of Jesus was designed to redeem the future generations from the clutches of their ignorance (*avidya*) or darkness of minds and to herald the reign of God, where everyone leads a life of purity of heart, in union with the Spirit.

7.0 Similarity of Attitudes Among Those Who Undergo Spiritual Experiences in Different Religions

According to one perception, people from different religions who undergo the highest-level of spiritual experience will have very similar attitudes. They will be extremely balanced and mature in their behaviour. They may not become angry and emotional. However, they may display anger and emotions externally when they lead to a beneficial outcome. They will be extremely humble and unselfish. They will be concerned more about others than about themselves. All their actions will be oriented such that the evolution of creation moves towards perfection and holiness (salvation).

Spiritually elevated persons have their own plans and ideas for future actions, but are fully prepared to change them according to the events that unfold before them. They are receptive to all eventualities and outcomes of actions and do not get perturbed under unfavorable or unexpected circumstances. They know only part of the divine plan in advance and are submissive to the divine will. They have fully surrendered themselves to their "inner voice", who they know to be the ultimate being who moves everything within the universe and even outside it. They are able to clearly distinguish their "inner voice" from their normal intellectual thought stream. They are also capable of subduing the latter in favour of the former. They believe that in a miniscule but special way they are shaping up the universe along with the ultimate Being, thus participating in His functions. They know that the ultimate Being who is present as their inner

being is present everywhere, not only other human beings, but also in everything that exists.

The state of consciousness where one's inner being is merged in a non-dual manner with the whole of cosmos is called by some as the experience of cosmic Consciousness. Universal love is the outcome of such an experience. They find that there is no hatred towards anything or anyone. Such people see everything in the universe as the manifestation of the ultimate Being.

The perception that ideal followers of all religions ultimately reach the similar state of spiritual perfection can be illustrated with an example. Consider a house that has several rooms isolated from each other. Each room represents a particular religious community, with their own unique staircase or method of salvation. The terrace represents salvation or enlightenment or attainment of heaven. The staircase represents the means to reach salvation. Christians are closeted in one room. They believe that the terrace is accessible only from their room. They believe firmly that the staircase in their room is the only way of attaining salvation. They offer worship to the staircase, but most of them do not realize that the staircase is to be utilized during their life on earth. They do not realize that each step in the staircase represents transformations required in the lifestyle practiced by them in the world. They believe that no amount of self-effort can take them to the terrace during their life on earth. They hope that they will be bodily taken to heaven after death by the grace of God if their faith in the staircase is firm. The effort to go to the terrace during their lifetime is curtailed by their ignorance or misunderstanding. But this is not the case with all of them. There are some of them who try to use the staircase or to grow in spirituality and attempt to reach the terrace. They are amply rewarded with spiritual wisdom or enlightenment during their life on earth. Christians who have experienced that their soul has merged or found communion with the Spirit realize that they have reached the terrace or the Kingdom of heaven, which was hidden within them so far. Such Christians who have reached the terrace may come across people from other religions that have reached the same terrace through different staircases. If they happen to enter into a spiritual dialogue, they will find that they are on the same level of spiritual maturity and that there are no differences to reconcile. This would have been unthinkable of while they were inside the

four walls of the room. Such people experience the urge to coax the people in various rooms to fully utilize the staircases in their respective rooms, and to reach the terrace.

Various questions arise in the minds of Christians who are confronted with the perception that all religions are capable of providing similar experience of God to their followers. Which religion is the best? Is God experience enough to attain salvation? Is salvation effective without faith in Jesus?

8.0. Spirituality among the average Christians

According to one perception, one of the best religious traditions that motivates and guides its followers into the experience of the indwelling Spirit is the Advaita. One specialty of this philosophic tradition is that it does not insist on any doctrine, even though it provides symbolic or dogmatic concepts as initial guidance. It is a call for seeking, accessing and experiencing God directly within oneself and is very tempting for many Spiritual aspirants. This tradition offers no short cut to salvation such as faith in some facts or figures. Constant practice is recommended to purify the mind and intellect from all desires arising out of purely selfish motives. Several methods or combinations of methods such as devotion, selfless service and acquiring of Spiritual knowledge, etc. are recommended according to the temperament and intellectual level of individuals to achieve purity of mind, perfection and holiness. The aim is to attain conformity (*tadatmya*) of mind first with the object of devotion (*ishtha devata*) and finally with the self (Spirit). The exhortation to experience oneness with the self through gradual purging of sinful tendencies (*vasana*) from the mind-body system is so clear and specific, that no one becomes unduly complacent about an assured salvation, until they experience it themselves.

According to another perception, Christianity is the best religion due to the following reasons. Through Jesus, we have received historical proof for the existence and nature of God. We also have a very practical model of life based on communion with God. We can shape our way of life based on the real-life model of Jesus. Oneness with others (neighbours) and living for others is shown to be the key to oneness with the Father in heaven. The importance of sacrificial way of life is highlighted. We are

shown in real-life how we should prepare ourselves for facing rejection and crucifixion by others, even when we are right, and others are wrong. We are shown that such a life will be filled with peace, inner content and oneness with the Father in spite of all external adversities. We are shown how great is the responsibility of those who aim perfection and holiness to reform others or to become fishers of men. We are also shown through the life of Jesus how illusory is the worldly or external comforts and rewards and how sweet is the inner content and peace that ensues from practicing a life of perfection and holiness, in communion with God.

Even though Christians have such a great proof and model before us, we seem to have been spoiled like spoon-fed children. There is a perception that the average Christian does not understand the real message of Christ since he tries to grasp it literally. The average Christian is spiritually lethargic and complacent about his free salvation, which he gets as a bonus for his mere faith in Jesus. He feels that by virtue of his baptism, he is saved from eternal damnation. He hopes to get an opportunity to clean himself of his sins at his deathbed through sacrament of reconciliation, in order to go directly to heaven instead of purgatory or hell.

There is a perception that the average Christian is not aware about the concept of Spirituality and does not know what is meant by Spiritual growth. He counts on his sacraments for attaining salvation. He thinks that there is no need for self-efforts to attain perfection or holiness. According to him salvation accrues through the grace of God and not through 'works'. He thinks that it is enough if he keeps his faith in Jesus and if the sins are reconciled or whitewashed periodically through sacraments. He does not know that there is a need to gradually purge the roots of sins from our mind and body to approach perfection and holiness.

Let us explore how the perceptions of an average Christian are likely to evolve if he takes suitable steps for his Spiritual progress.

8.1. Stages of Perceptions during Spiritual Evolution

- 1) I am a Christian. I am saved. It is enough for me. I do not bother about others.
- 2) I am saved. I want to save others too by converting them to Christianity.

- 3) Christianity offers the only way of salvation. let me lead a Christian way of life to attain my salvation.
- 4) Leading a true Christian way of life is very difficult. I want to subdue my human desires that oppose my inner Spirit.
- 5) Now I have certain amount of control over my human nature. I am more and more being guided and influenced by my inner Spirit in my day-to-day life.
- 6) My true inner self or my indweller has almost taken control over my flesh and mind. This does not mean that I am a remotely controlled robot. It is through my own option and willingness that my indweller is controlling me. Temptations still continue to raise their horns and tails.
- 7) I have overcome my temptations. I have become one with the Spirit. I am a Spiritual being. My real nature is Spirit. My body is only an external manifestation or instrument that is to be used to do the will of the Spirit.

9.0. Summary

A comparison of Christian Trinitarian spirituality with Hindu advaitic spirituality may be useful, especially to a marginal cross section of Christians, who consider themselves to be the custodians of salvation, but at the same time are not aware about the need for Spiritual growth or transformation. The objective of this essay will be achieved if it prods and motivates a few Christians towards higher levels of Spirituality or to the experience of oneness with the Spirit hidden within themselves. Spirituality does not depend on the dogmatic or symbolic structures of any religious tradition. However, established concepts or doctrines indeed assist Spiritual aspirants in all religions into the experience of the ultimate Reality within a specific framework. The Biblical concept of Holy Trinity is such a framework. It is seen here in a new perspective. The second person is the eternal Word with a wider meaning than that of the incarnate Word. The holy Spirit, the Word and the Father are indivisible and inseparable from each other. However the division facilitates comprehension of various functions of the same Spirit. The holy Spirit (*Atman*) is perceived as the indweller of human beings, the Word (*Purusha*) as the indweller of the universe, and the Father or Eternal Spirit (*Brahman*) as the Spirit (*Brahman*) as the Spirit that dwells in humans and in the universe, transcending both.

The incarnate Word remained in perfect communion with the Eternal Spirit throughout His life on earth. His "Abba experience" or "oneness with the Father" indicates that His soul was dovetailed with the Father through the Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian experience of Jesus is similar to that of the ancient Indian sages, who claimed oneness of their soul with the *Atman/Purusha/Brahman* at the height of their Spiritual transformation. Jesus can be thought of as a perfect model of advaitin. Ideal advaitins as well as ideal Christians are expected to reach Christ-like perfection and holiness through Spiritual transformation. This is not an impossible task; rather it is the right of every human being, and the aim of all Spiritual pursuits in all religions. Those who achieve this target of "oneness with the Father" are not to be crucified for blasphemy. All those who manage to reach that state of inner union or oneness with the eternal Spirit through various methods prescribed by their respective religions can share a common platform of Spirituality. They all participate in the reformation and progressive evolution of the world towards the reign of God on earth. The Spirit that enlightens all such people may prove to be the same. The new perceptions are getting clearer and stronger day by day, thanks to the bold and tireless spiritual quest pioneering theologians engaged in various forms of inter religious dialogue.