

JESUS CHRIST, THE AVATAR

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Introduction

One of the clarion calls that pope John Paul II rang out to the Churches of Asia in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, is that they should discover and show forth to the peoples of their continent the Asian face of Jesus.¹ Such an invitation is first and foremost addressed to the theologians of Asia to take up the task of interpreting anew the mystery of Christ in the cultural categories and thought patterns of Asia and as suited to its present day context and concerns. It is also, however, an undeniable endorsement of such efforts already made in various parts of Asia. The Churches of Asia can not live an authentic Christian life and bear an effective and meaningful witness to Christ by holding on to the European ways of understanding and articulating the mystery of Christ, whether they are the ancient ones inherited from the missionaries or the more modern ones imported from the theological schools of Europe. Fully Asian, but authentically Christian, are the essential characteristics of any Christology that seeks to meaningfully present Jesus Christ to the peoples of Asia today.

Fortunately for India, Indian Christology is not a totally novel venture that has to be started from a scratch. For over two hundred

¹ John Paul II, *Church in Asia* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1999), no.20, p.33

years Indian thinkers, both Hindu and Christian, have sought to experience the mystery of Christ from the vantage point of their rich and varied religious and spiritual traditions and to express it in diverse ways suited to the Indian context and concerns. So the Pope's call is to be taken as an invitation to consolidate the gains accruing from the creative efforts already made as well as to give a new momentum to such new efforts. Of course, some of the older models may need to be examined, corrected if needed or complemented with additional insights as suited to the varied and ever changing situation in India.

One of the first and perhaps the most common way in which the Indian minds have attempted to understand the mystery of Christ is by the Indian model of *avatar*. Not only do the Hindus who have come to know Jesus find it easier to accept him as an *avatar*, but also it is the most popular way the Indian Christian communities have come to call him spontaneously. That is why almost in all the major Indian languages the title attributed to Jesus most frequently from the earliest times is that of *avatar*. Not only the ordinary Hindus and Christians have come to refer to Jesus as *avatar* but also many modern Hindu thinkers and Christian theologians have no hesitation to propose it, though with different meanings, as the model best suited to present Christ in the Indian context.

This article is an attempt to study the ways in which the Hindu and Christian thinkers of India have sought to apply the model of *avatar* to the mystery of Christ and to expand the understanding of the concept of *avatar* in such way that while retaining its original Hindu meaning it is also able to accommodate the Christian insights, both classical and contemporary. Thus it has three parts. Part one reviews the contributions of the most important Hindu thinkers who accept Jesus as *avatar*.² Part two will present the views of the Christian theologians, particularly bishop A. J. Appasamy and V. Chakkarai who adopt the model of *avatar* to

² Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan are the most prominent Hindu thinker who accept Jesus as an *avatar*.

explain the mystery of Christ. In the concluding section some of the advantages of the Christological adaptation of the model of *avatar* will be highlighted.

1. One among the Many

The prolonged and profound encounter of Hinduism and Christianity, though dating back to only a little over two centuries, has been certainly quite productive.³ One of the noteworthy effects of this encounter is the great fascination that the person of Jesus has evoked in many Hindus and the way in which they sought to accept and accommodate him within their Hindu religious scheme. In fact, it can be asserted without any hesitation that, of all the religions in the world including Judaism and Islam, no other has come to accord to Jesus Christ a place higher than that accorded by Hinduism, though not as a whole but at least by many of its members some of whom are its most prominent proponents in modern times. One such view is to regard and revere him as one of the final and finest *avatars* of God.

The first prominent proponent of the view that Jesus is an *avatar* is Sri Ramakrishna Pramahansa. His reputation as a living saint, the wonder that he aroused by his frequent mystic trances, and the appeal of his simplicity of life and teachings not only made him very popular but also made his views about Jesus widely acceptable among many Hindus.

Sri Ramakrishna saw Jesus as "the master Yogi, who is in eternal union with God" and as "Love Incarnate".⁴ But he also believed that Jesus is an *avatar* of God. However, for him, Jesus is

³ Though Christianity in India claims its origins from the ministry of Thomas the Apostle not much is known about its encounter with Hinduism. Its geographical marginalization in Kerala until the sixteenth century, and its minority status and preoccupation to preserve its identity faced with Hinduism with its characteristic capacity to assimilate anything new could have been the major factors that inhibited such an encounter. See Robin Boyd, *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church: The Cultural Context of the Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 3

⁴ M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Madras: CLS, 1970), 116

not the only *avatar* nor the unique one. He is another one just like Rama, Krishna or Buddha.⁵ The essential content and purpose of all *avatars* is also the same i.e. they are models of and means to the realization of attaining union with the one absolute God. "It is one and the same Avatara that, having plunged into the ocean of life, raises up in one place and is known as Krishna and diving again rises in another place and is known as Christ."⁶ Sri Ramakrishna was not a philosopher, but a mystic. His understanding of Christ is not based on any profound exposure to Christian teachings nor does he articulate it in a systematically worked out theological scheme. Rather, it is a vision of Christ derived from his mystic experiences.

If among the pioneers of modern Hinduism Sri Ramakrishna is the first one to suggest that Jesus is to be considered as an *avatar*, it is his disciple Swami Vivekananda who gave a more systematic elaboration to that view.

For Swami Vivekananda, *vedanta* is the real universal religion of all humanity and it is with the *vedantic* perspective that he basically approaches and interprets the mystery of Jesus Christ. Jesus, for him, is a *vedantin*, one in whom the basic principle of *vedanta* is realized and exemplified. In other words, Jesus is a *jivanmukta* who through yoga realized the absolutely selfless identification with God and manifests him to others. Christhood or Buddhahood are, for Vivekananda, only religio-cultural variations of the *vedantic* ideal which is attainable and should be attained by all. "Christ and Buddha were the names of a state to be attained. Jesus and Gautama were the persons to manifest it."⁷ It is in this *vedantic* sense of being liberated from *maya* and realizing ones true identity with God through Yoga, and not in the Trinitarian sense, that Vivekananda sees Jesus as one of the many *avatars* of God and accepts his divinity. "If I as an oriental have to worship Jesus of

⁵ M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, 116 -7

⁶ A reported saying of Sri Ramakrishna as cited in M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, 125

⁷ *The Complete Works of the Swami Vivekananda* Vol. VII (Almora: Advaitashrama, 1969), 20

Nazareth there is only one way left for me, and that is to worship him as God and nothing else.”⁸

Sri Aurobindo is another prominent Hindu thinker who regards Jesus as an *avatar*. *Avatar* in his view is anyone who has attained an identity of consciousness with God. This is not a mere human process. It may also be attended by the reciprocal action of God entering into the human. He recognizes Jesus as one who has attained such consciousness and therefore a partial *avatar*, one among the many such as Sankara, Chaitanya, or even Kali and himself.⁹ “Christ realized himself as the Son who is one with the Father – he must therefore be an *amsavataram*, a partial incarnation.”¹⁰

Mahatma Gandhi is also willing to accept Jesus as an *avatar* of God, though it is not his preferred title for Jesus. According to him Jesus is one of the great teachers or prophets of humankind who have manifested God and his will to the human beings. It is in this meaning that he calls Jesus an *avatar* which does not in any way imply his divinity or atonement. “I could not believe that Jesus was the only incarnate Son of God.... If Jesus was like God or God Himself then all men were like God and could be God Himself.”¹¹

Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan can be said to be the one who gives the fullest elaboration of the Hindu view of Jesus as an *avatar*. He harmonizes the two ways of understanding *avatar* as descending and ascending. The *avatar* is, on the one hand, as traditionally explained, the descent of God into human history to overcome evil and to establish justice and righteousness. On the other hand, it is also the emergence of the God-realized human being. “It is not only the descent of God into humanity, it is also the

⁸ *The Complete Works of the Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. IV, 1972, 143

⁹ George Nedumpalakunnel, *Realization of God according to Sri Aurobindo* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 1979) 266.

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga Part I*, Vol 22 of *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1970) 408.

¹¹ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of the Experiments with Truth* Vol 1 of *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad : Navajivan Publishing House, 1968), 202.

ascent of man into the situation of divinity."¹² These are two reciprocal movements of the same process of which the one can not be reduced to the other. As Radhakrishnan so succinctly expresses it, "God descends when man rises."¹³ Thus, in fact, the *avatar* is the realization of the Upanishadic principles, "That thou art" and "I am Brahman." Jesus is, for Radhakrishnan, one of the supreme instances in which the divine realizes itself as human and vice versa which constitutes him an *avatar*. "Jesus is the example of a man who has become God and none can say where his manhood ends and his divinity begins. Man and God are akin."¹⁴

A Dissenting Voice – Keshub Chunder Sen

In contrast to the above-mentioned thinkers there were, of course, many other Hindus who despite their knowledge about Jesus Christ saw no place for him in the Hindu view of God-man relationship. There were also some reformers like Ram Mohan Roy who, though having great reverence towards Jesus, could not accord him the status of an *avatar* for the simple reason that they saw no need for any kind of *avatars*.¹⁵

Keshub Chunder Sen is another Indian reformer who is rather unique in his rather ambivalent attitude towards accepting Jesus as an *avatar*.¹⁶ The various *avatars* which Hinduism venerates are, for him, significant moments in God's creative process realized as progressive evolution. "Lo! the Hindu avatar rises from the lowest reality of life... to the perfection of humanity. Indian avatarism is, indeed, a crude representation of the ascending scale of evolution."¹⁷ Sen, on the one hand, has no hesitation in asserting

¹² S. J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Madras: CLS, 1974) 106.

¹³ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1949 2nd ed.), 155

¹⁴ S. Radhakrishnan as cited in Samartha, *The Hindu Response*, 107

¹⁵ For a more detailed description of Ram Mohan Roy's view of Jesus see Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, 14-29

¹⁶ It must be noted that K.C. Sen never became a Christian though in 1872 he declared himself and the members of his *Brahmo Samaj of India* as non-Hindus. For more details see Nemai Sadhan Bose, *The Indian Awakening and Bengal* (Calcutta: Firna K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969), 145-6

¹⁷ David Scott (ed.), *Keshub Chunder Sen: A Selection* (Madras: CLS, 1979). 226

that Jesus is the peak expression of this evolutionary process of avatarism. "Having expressed itself in endless varieties of progressive existence, the primary force at last took the form of the Son in Jesus Christ."¹⁸ Despite such readiness to accept Jesus as the submit of *avatars*, Sen is also very vehement in his call not to present in India Jesus as *avatar*. One of the main reasons for making such a call is the fear that it may add to, what he considers as, the widely prevalent idolatry of gods and goddesses in India. "Tell our people distinctly that Christ is not an incarnation like the myriad of deities worshipped in this land... If to this nation you offer Christ as a new *avatar*, you plunge a country already darkened with superstitions into an abyss of deeper darkness."¹⁹

Sen's objection to presenting Jesus as *avatar* is also based on strictly theological reasons. Though he concedes that there are many significant similarities between the doctrines of Hindu *avatars* and the Christian incarnation he finds them outweighed by the dissimilarities. The numerical difference that while Hinduism accepts many *avatars* Christianity accepts only one incarnation is one such dissimilarity. What is of greater importance is that whereas in Hinduism the *avatar* is the appearance on earth of God himself, in Christianity it is only the Son of God who becomes incarnate. Contrasting the *avatar* of Krishna with Christ, Sen asserts emphatically, "Krishna is nothing if not the Almighty God. Christ is nothing if not the Son of God. It is heresy to talk of Krishna as the Son. It is heresy to accept or preach Christ as the Father."²⁰ Christ, for him, is divine not because he is God himself but because he is "an emanation from the Creator."²¹ His divinity is that of God's indwelling. He is divine "as the father dwells in the son, not as God Himself transformed into humanity."²²

The above-presented brief survey of the understanding of Jesus Christ as *avatar* by Hindu thinkers clearly shows that they have, each with his variations, accorded to him a very high status

¹⁸ Scott, K.C.Sen, 226

¹⁹ Scott, K.C.Sen, 241

²⁰ Scott, K.C.Sen, 312

²¹ Scott, K.C.Sen, 313

²² Scott, K.C.Sen, 313

that can be assigned to a God-man in Hinduism. However, it must be kept in mind that they have done so only in terms of the basic Hindu religious thought frame. Christianity, however, does not find such Hindu reception of Christ as reaching far enough to recognize in it the fullness of its belief in Jesus Christ. So we now turn to some Indian Christian thinkers who have attempted to harmonize the Christian faith in the incarnation of Christ with their reinterpretations of the Hindu concept of *avatar*

2. Jesus – the Transcending Fulfillment of Avatar Ideal

Though *avatar* is the Indian category that the ordinary Indian Christians spontaneously adopted to refer to the mystery of Christ, the Christian theologians, with some exceptions,²³ have been generally rather reluctant to use it as a valid Christological model. Many have even rejected it outright since they saw it as very inadequate to express the real Christian faith in Christ.²⁴ Of the many specific reasons for such a rejection two are most important. First, the Hindu concept of *avatar* is by its very nature and definition pluralistic in the sense that *avatars* are, in theory as well as fact, many. The basic text from the *Bhagavadgita* on which the *avatar* doctrine is founded is itself clearly indicative of the plurality of *avatars*. "For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age" (*The Bhagavadgita* 4:7-8).²⁵ Such a plurality is not merely a theoretical possibility but is a factuality in so far as Hindus believe in and worship many *avatars*, the most popular of whom are Rama and Krishna. Ascribing the title of *avatar* to Jesus, the Christian theologians fear, would bring him down to the level of being one among the many manifestations of God and would deny his uniqueness as the only saviour of all humankind.

²³ The most prominent such exceptions are bishop A.J.Appasamy (1885 – 1975) and Vengal Chakkarai (1880 –1957), two protestant theologians from South India.

²⁴ Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), generally acknowledged as the pioneer of Indian Christian theology is the clearest example of such rejection. For more explanation see Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1969), 45-46

²⁵ Translation by S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*, 154-5

The second main reason why Christian theologians have been hesitant to use the model of *avatar* to refer to Jesus is that the Hindu *avatars* have often been understood as belonging not to the realm of reality but to that of *maya* or illusion. For, according to the *advaitic* school of thought, the Absolute can not really get entangled with the relative, the pure Being can not come to belong to the order of becoming, the Infinite can not in any way be contained or conveyed through the temporal, and the spirit can not be bound to the physical. In brief, God can only be God and he can never become identified with any earthly reality. Because of this presupposition, in traditional Hinduism the *avatars* have been often considered as only appearances which entailed no becoming in God. Thus Rama and Krishna were more divine apparitions in earthly human form than real historical human persons.

Such an understanding of *avatar* precluded its application to Jesus Christ, who in the Christian faith is God become man, and the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14). Jesus was not just an appearance but a true person of flesh and blood who through his historical human life, death and resurrection has revealed God. The New Testament does emphasize the reality of the Divine Word's enfleshment in Jesus: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life..." (1 Jn 1:1).

However, some Indian theologians have found in the concept of *avatar* a very valuable and even a very rich model to understand and articulate the mystery of Jesus Christ in the Indian context. This, of course, they do by taking into account some of the newer interpretations offered by the modern Hindu thinkers in which the *avatars* are situated in the evolutionary perspective and their historical and human condition more fully affirmed. A.J. Appasamy and Vengal Chakkarai are the most noteworthy Indian theologians who have ventured to elaborate an Indian Christology centred on the concept of *avatar*.

Jesus the Bhakta-Avatara

A. J. Appasamy starts his Christology with the historical Jesus and presents him as the supreme *bhakta*. This alone, in his view, will enable us to bring out the meaning of Christ to his Indian followers. The main thrust of his major writings is that Jesus is the prototype of the man of God who has realized in his life and

especially his death the ideal of *bhakti* communion with God to the fullest degree and the most perfect extent possible.²⁶ Through his intense and unmatched *bhakti* which is the evocation in love of the indwelling divine presence into his consciousness and personal being, Jesus has become the supreme revelation of God.

The model of *bhakta*, however, though it is best suited to describe the human and historical Jesus proves inadequate to express the new and revolutionary dimension of his reality revealed in and through his resurrection. This calls for a complementary model to describe the full mystery of Christ, and Appasamy finds *avatar* as the most suitable model for such a purpose. "The resurrection of Jesus gives" as Appasamy puts it, "a completely new perspective to the life and death of Jesus. In the light of the resurrection we must believe that Jesus was no mere man but the *avatar* of God who had come down to the world to redeem us..."²⁷ It reveals his Messiahship and divinity. By his resurrection, Jesus is constituted in the Christian faith experience not only as the supreme *bhakta* who ascended to God but also as the supreme Lord of *bhakti* who descended to the human beings. The title *bhakta* may well describe the human side of Jesus' communion with God; but it is inadequate to express the unparalleled divine love and self-giving that occurred in Jesus.²⁸ For a *bhakta* or "a devout man can never rise to be an incarnation, but God comes down into a human being and thereby makes him an incarnation."²⁹

Appasamy also carefully distinguishes the *avatar* of Christ from the Hindu *avatars*.³⁰ Whereas the latter are only partial *avatars* in whom only some element or aspects of God are embodied, the former is the full incarnation of God (*purnavatara*) in whom "the

²⁶ The most important Christological works of A. J. Appasamy are *Christianity as Bhakti Marga: A Study of the Johannine Doctrine of Grace* (Madras: CLS, 1926), *What is Moksha? – A Study in the Johannine Doctrine of Life* (Maras: CLS, 1931) & *The Gospel and India's Heritage* (London: SPCK, 1942)

²⁷ Appasamy. *Gospel and Heritage*, 246

²⁸ Appasamy. *Gospel and Heritage*, 247

²⁹ Appasamy. *Gospel and Heritage*, 252

³⁰ Appasamy. *Gospel and Heritage*, 246-264

fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9). Secondly, the purpose of Christ's *avatar* is more sublime when compared with those of the others. Christ's *avatar* does not include at all the destruction of the evil-doers, as is the case with other *avatars*, but has the sole purpose of the salvation of all, including the sinners. The third distinction is that Christ's *avatar* has an once-and-for-all character in contrast to the repeated and cyclic occurrence of the Hindu *avatars*. Not that there is in the Christian view any inherent impossibility of God becoming incarnate more than once, but that in the Christian faith it is Jesus alone who is experienced as the unique factual and historical incarnation of God. Another important distinction is that, in the Hindu understanding, what is important is not the historicity or the actual personality of the *avatar* but the timeless principle or eternal ideal that he personifies.³¹ For the Christian, however, the historicity and the human personality of the *avatar* are crucial. For the Lord of the Christian *bhakti* is not a fond fantasy conjured up by some pious human mind or a collectively created myth embodying the sublime dreams and ideals of a people, but an actual person with whom one seeks interpersonal communion.

Once these distinctions are made clear, Appasamy believes that the Hindu concept of *avatar* can be used to refer to the Christian incarnation. Not only is there a basic affinity between these two doctrines, but also it is the only word available in many Indian languages to translate the word 'incarnation'. Besides, in many of them it is already being used, for a couple of centuries and even more, to refer to the Christian mystery of incarnation.³²

Jesus Christ - the Avatar of Divine - Human Kenosis

For V. Chakkarai, *avatar* is undoubtedly the best available model to rethink the mystery of Jesus Christ in present day India.³³ He does recognize that there are some differences between the

³¹ Appasamy. *Gospel and Heritage*, 263

³² Appasamy. *Gospel and Heritage*, 256

³³ The major Christological works of V. Chakkarai are *Jesus the Avatar* (Madras: CLS, 1926, 2nd ed. 1930) and *The Cross and Indian Thought* (Madras: CLS, 1932).

Hindu *avatars* and the Christian incarnation.³⁴ The latter implies a more intimate union with God than the former. The Hindu *avatars* are, according to him, more comparable to the theophanies in the Old Testament.³⁵

Chakkarai's *avatar* Christology starts with the emphatic assertion of the full humanity of Jesus. "He is the true man, the ideal man or the man in all men."³⁶ Basing himself on Hindu anthropology in which there is a radical continuity between God and man, Chakkarai attempts to show that in Jesus the human quest for God and God's search for humanity have coincided. In Jesus, the perfect realization of 'sonship' was also God's perfect realization of 'fatherhood'.³⁷ God's *kenosis* met in him with the most perfect responsive *kenosis* of humanity. In Jesus the divinization of the human person is also his fullest humanization and his humanness has become the supreme expression of God.

By calling Jesus "the *avatar* par excellence"³⁸ and using the term *avatar* to refer to the Christian 'incarnation', Chakkarai attempts to reconcile the two concepts. By the super-imposition of the two he gives the term *avatar* the depth of the Christian concept of incarnation while retaining the breadth of reference it has in Hinduism. Thus *avatar* is, for him, not a series of apparently isolated and unconnected interventions of God in history as the Hindu tradition would suggest; nor is it nothing more than a specific historical event which took place at one particular point in time and space as believed in traditional Christianity. Rather, it is a cosmic process that stretches from the beginning to the end of creation. It is "a process coeval with all that is."³⁹

³⁴ Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 136 - 8

³⁵ Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 136

³⁶ Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 136 - 4

³⁷ Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 214 - 5

³⁸ Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 219

³⁹ Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 222. Elsewhere Chakkarai is even more explicit "What we call incarnation may belong as a link to a vast and almost infinite chain of existence. The life of Jesus we are considering may be the breaking on the shores of our time and world of a life that has pulsed before in other worlds". - Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 7

Combining the insights of the evolutionist philosopher H. Bergson and the process philosopher A.N. Whitehead with the *vedic* conception of creation as emerging from the sacrifice of the *primaeval purusha* (*Rig Veda* 10:90), Chakkarai identifies the immanence of God as the divine *vac* of the Hindu scriptures and the *logos* of the Bible. Its self – emptying sacrifice that provides the creative dynamism and direction for the ever-continuing evolution of the universe reaches its zenith on the cross of Jesus. This eternal process of incarnation or progressive immanence of God which has been the driving force of the cosmic evolution, has become at the resurrection of Jesus the explicitly emergent Deity.⁴⁰

The eternally kenotic Deity that has become fully and clearly recognizable in Jesus and particularly at resurrection, had already surfaced, though only faintly and inchoatively, in the lives and personalities of so many prophets and saints of not only Judaism but also other religions. The divine consciousness touched theirs, but still remained apart and other than their individual personalities.⁴¹ But it was in Jesus Christ that the divine consciousness became identified with the human and has continued as the abiding and animating foundational presence of the Christian community and the transforming and recreating power of the entire humanity as well as the whole universe.⁴² In Jesus the outflow of divine *kenosis* attained its full level and became a new creation. In the Spirit this new fullness of *avatar* or incarnation reaches to every heart. "Not only man entered on a new phase of life but God, too, did so in the incarnation."⁴³

Chakkarai sees the death and resurrection of Jesus as the climaxing moment of this divine and human *kenosis*, though it had continued all through the life of Jesus with its special moments of realization at his prayer and selfless service. It is the cross, however where he made himself a total nothing being "plunged into the

⁴⁰ Chakkarai, *Cross and Thought*, 273 – 84.

⁴¹ Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 133

⁴² Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 133

⁴³ Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 137

nirvana or suniam where God is not"⁴⁴ that he was filled with the plenitude of God's being. In Jesus' death and resurrection man's self-emptying is reciprocated by God's self-giving. God's saving Word pours in, in all its fullness, in response to the self-emptying of the flesh. Man's *bhakti* and God's *sakti* are historically merged. In short, Jesus on the cross, the resurrection being only the explicitation of the glory of the cross, is the culminating moment of the ongoing divinisation of man and humanization of God. As Chakkarai himself puts it, "the first Easter joined together energy and love, laying the foundation of the Christian view of the *Avatar* of God in Jesus Christ."⁴⁵

Concluding Considerations

The use of the Indian model of *avatar* to refer to Jesus Christ, does not, of course, exclude the use of other Indian Christological models. As there is a plurality of Christologies in the New Testament and the subsequent history of theology, in India also we need today more than ever a plurality in the interpretations of the mystery of Christ. In fact, apart from *avatar*, other Christological models such as *jivanmukta* and *sadguru* have also been proposed and they do provide complementary perspectives on the mystery of Christ. However, *avatar* is a model that has not only popular appeal and acceptability but also has in addition some theological advantages is so far as it offers the Indian Christian community rich possibilities to address more effectively some of its current concerns of vital importance.

First of all, the *avatar* model helps Christology to better harmonize its essential dimensions of ascent and descent, the dichotomizing of which has plagued most traditional and modern theological attempts at articulating the mystery of Christ. Chalcedonian Christologies were basically descending and they ended up often so much emphasizing the divinity of Christ as to make his humanity seem like nothing more than a mere appendix. On the contrary most of the recent Christological approaches,

⁴⁴ Chakkarai, "Indian Christianity, and its Critics," *The Guardian* 22 (1944), 185-6

⁴⁵ Chakkarai, *Avatar*, 153

which are invariably ascending, confront difficulties when they come to the question of establishing his full divinity. The concept of *avatar* has, of course, been in the past traditionally understood only in terms of the divine descent, as the term itself literally means. The human element was often explained away as a mere appearance in lines similar to those of Christian docetism. But the current understanding of *avatar*, following the interpretations of Sri Aurobindo and S. Radhakrishnan, include the ascent of the human into the divine corresponding to the divine descent. Thus in the Christological use of the model of *avatar*, the divine and the human do not compete with each other nor the one cancels the other, but rather the divine makes the human possible and the latter becomes the symbol or sacrament of the former. In the interpretation of Christ as *avatar*, the human attains its fullest and finest form precisely because God is most present, and God is fully manifest because the human is at its truest and best. Human ascent to the divine is the other side of the process of the divine descent into the human. What is involved here is not the reduction of one to the other, but a reciprocity of relationships in which one makes the other possible. Such an approach to Christology presents the divine not as something alien and a totally unrelated other intruding into the human but as the grace of human fulfillment. It will be what P. Schoonenberg long ago called for - "a Christology of human final completion."⁴⁶ Christ the *avatar* would, thus, be the supreme example of theandric becoming in which the human is truly centred on itself only when it is truly centred on God, and God's self-realization as human is the grace that makes possible the human realization as divine.

The *avatar* model also provides traditional Christian understanding of incarnation a greater breadth enabling it better embrace the whole of salvation history. In the traditional understanding, incarnation was just a single event that occurred only at a particular point in history. But the understanding of it as *avatar* in the expanded and evolutionary framework, as suggested by theologians like V. Chakkarai, makes possible to encompass in it the entire human as well as cosmic history and see it as the

⁴⁶ Piet Schoonenberg, *The Christ* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1972), 98

culminating moment of the one continued process of God's identification and emergence in the earth and the human as suggested in the prologue of the gospel of John. The Word that became human in Jesus Christ (Jn 1:14) is the same in whom all things were created in the beginning (Jn 1:3), and who was "the light of all peoples" (Jn 1:5) and who "was in the world" and who "came to what was his own" (Jn 1:10).

Such an understanding of the incarnation as a mystery that unfolds itself all through history reaching its climax in Jesus Christ, provides us with a better ecumenical perspective to rightly situate and positively estimate the various manifestations of God in other religions as well. They can be understood and accepted as manifestations in other ways and in other moments of history of the same Word who finally "became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14) in Jesus Christ. Of course, in the Christian experience Jesus world remain the definitive and supreme revelation of God from whose perspective only the other manifestations will be valued. However, they will not be rejected as rivals or neglected as unrelated. Rather they can be welcomed as high points of God's continual self-manifestation in human history and as those who may show forth complementary aspects of the divine truth that have not been realized or recognized in the historical Jesus. In the multireligious context of India such an *avatar* Christology certainly will serve as a better basis for inter-religious dialogue and cooperation.

The *avatar* Christology is also better suited to the context of India today which is characterized by massive poverty and systemic injustice and where the masses of the oppressed are longing for liberation. The concept of *avatar* implies an inescapable dimension of liberative action in so far as its very *raison d'être* is nothing else than the overcoming of the historical evil and the establishment of the rule of justice and righteousness here on earth. Thus Jesus Christ the *avatar* will not only be a liberator of the poor and oppressed but also one who will inspire his followers to realize in this land the rule of God which means nothing other than the fullness of life and liberation for all.