

JESUS THE GURU

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An Appraisal of the Appropriateness of the Paradigm

In his best-known work, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer surveyed the writings of nearly two hundred and fifty theologians and concluded that each epoch found its reflection in Jesus; and each individual created sketches or images of the historical Jesus in accordance with his/her own character.¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, in his *Jesus through the Centuries*,² points out that our pictures and images of Jesus has changed over the centuries and across the culture. In the second century, for example, Jesus was preached as the light of the Gentiles; to the Romans, Jesus was preached as the King of kings; in the third century, Jesus was proclaimed as the cosmic Logos. In the Byzantine culture, Jesus is the perfect icon of God and the inspiration of all its mystical devotional literature. In medieval times, Jesus is depicted as a monk who transforms the world through monastic discipline and self-denial and embodies the ideals of poverty, charity and obedience. Today, the image of Jesus as the liberator, who

¹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910), 4.

² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1985.

challenges every oppressive social and political or economic system, has captured the enthusiasm and commitment of more Christians. Thus, there are paradigms about Jesus Christ galore.³

From the perspective of Asia's religious traditions, the first persons to undertake serious theological reflection on Jesus were not Asian Christians but Indian Hindus.⁴ Among other faith traditions, it is a truism that only Hindus have worked out such elaborate images of Jesus such as: Jesus as Supreme Guide to human happiness (Raja Ram Mohun Ray); Jesus as true *Yogi* (Keshub Chunder Sen); Jesus as *Jivanmukka* (Vivekananda); Jesus as *Satyagrahi* (Mahatma Gandhi); Jesus as *Advaitin* (Swami Akilananda). Indian Christian theologians, too, using the Hindu philosophical vocabulary, elucidated their experience of Jesus and evolved their own images and sketches. Chief among them are: Jesus as *Prajapati* (K.M. Banerjee); Jesus as *cit* (Upadhyaya); Jesus as *Avatar* (A.J. Appasamy, V. Chakkarai) and Jesus as *adi Purusha* and *shakti* (P. Chenchiah) and Jesus as *Guru* (Abhishiktananda).

Unearthing one or a few of such categories to interpret Jesus today, for the Indian mind, becomes not only necessary but also urgent. The image of guru, it is maintained, provided the most generally acceptable and universally intelligible understanding of

³ In the late 1960s, Hugh Anderson, noting that over sixty thousand so-called biographies of Jesus had been published, asked, "who of sufficient range of intellect and breadth of vision is to survey and measure an enterprise so massive, to bring some order into the chaos of the Lives of Jesus?" in *Jesus*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1967, p.16. The late 1980s, which marked, in the words of Marcus Borg, "a renaissance in Jesus scholarship," have seen a burst of interest and scholarly activity around the question: What was Jesus like as a figure of history before his death? "A Renaissance in Jesus Studies," *Theology Today* 45 (1988) 280-292. One readily notices the multiplicity of portraits or mutually exclusive models of the historical Jesus. Ben Witherington III identifies six of them: (i) Jesus, the itinerant cynic philosopher; (ii) Jesus, man of the Spirit; (iii) Jesus, the eschatological prophet; (iv) Jesus, the prophet of social change; (v) Jesus, the sage - the wisdom of God, and (vi) Jesus, the marginal Jew or Jewish messiah. For a clear understanding of the portraits and the publications that are associated with this, see Arul Pragasam, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus," *Vidyajyoti* 62 (1998), 251-270, and "In Search of the Eschatological Jesus" *Vidyajyoti* 64 (2000), 422-437.

⁴ R. S. Sugirtharajah, "An Interpretative Foreword," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed., Sugirtharaj (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 4.

Jesus the Christ.⁵ Hence, I shall, at first, (i) briefly explain the concept of Guru, and his/her importance for the *shishya*, (ii) how the image of guru was used to connote Jesus Christ by different theologians, specially by Abhishiktananda, and (iii) will finally analyze the usefulness and appropriateness of the concept. It is our contention that the image guru seems more appropriate today to interpret the nature and function of Jesus Christ.

The Nature and Work of the Guru

There is a complexity of views regarding the nature and work of the guru in Hinduism.⁶ For example, in the Brahmanas, the guru is seen as the venerable person who initiates the *sisya* to the Vedas, in the Upanisads, the guru reveals the way to *moksha*/liberation, in the Dharma literature, the guru is the forefather who hands down the Vedas and the *acaras* (conduct of life) to the student, in the Vedanta schools, the guru is seen as the perfect, who having crossed the ocean of samsara by overcoming duality, helps to student to reach the same. One can extend the list, but for us, it suffices to say that the image of the guru, though many-faceted, can be said in a *generic sense* as that of leading the disciples towards liberation/*moksha*.

Such a guru is defined as a 'venerable, respectable person, a spiritual parent or preceptor from whom a youth receives the initiatory mantra or prayer, who instructs him/her in the *Sastras*.' The guru has been described as "the center of sacredness" and the unifying force of Hinduism.⁷ He/she is expected to possess the qualities required of the disciple which include tranquility, self-control, not being attached to any enjoyment, visible or invisible. The guru is considered as *jivanmukta* – a liberated soul while alive,

⁵ X. Irudayaraj, "The Guru in Hinduism and Christianity," *Vidyajyoti* 39 (1975), 338-351. Vandana, "Guru as Present Reality," *Vidyajyoti* 39 (1975), 352-357; "The Guru-Shishya Relationship in the Indian Tradition," *Third Millennium* 3 : 2 (2000), 60-68. Sam P. Mathew, "Discipleship in Mark's Gospel and the Guru-sishya Relationship in Sankara's Teaching," 357-378, in *Indian Interpretation of the Bible*, ed., Augustine Thottakara, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2002. Catherine Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation*, Leuven: Peeters Press, 1991.

⁶ X. Irudayaraj, "The Guru in Hinduism and Christianity," 339.

⁷ D. Miller, "The Guru as the Center of Sacredness," *Studies in Religion* (1976-77), 527-333.

and this liberation is regarded as a permanent state. He is "a knower of Brahman, he is established in Brahman."⁸ A guru has to lead a 'blameless life' i.e., a life from faults such as deceit, jealousy, egotism, self-interest. He is a person of compassion and favour and has to lead others to such a life.⁹ Truth, *satya*, or being truthful becomes a quality of the guru, who is thus regarded as worthy of respect and reverence.

"In the midst of the highest heaven there is a shining light; he who has no Guru cannot reach the palace; he only will reach it who is under the guidance of a true Guru." From this famous maxim of the 15th century poet Kabir one can understand the importance attached to a guru. So much of reverence is given to the guru and some times, both God and the guru are put on par, if more reverence is not given to the guru. The following words of Kabir indicates the factor clearly: "If guru and God both stand before me, Whose feet shall I touch first? I shall touch those of the guru. For he has revealed God to me." It is also believed that "the guru can save from Brahman's anger, but if the guru himself is in wrath, there is none in the world who can save." Thus, the importance of having a guru is clearly emphasized and the exaltation is so great that the guru almost nearly eclipses god himself. For sure, then, the guru remains the skeleton of Hinduism.

Disciples are explicitly encouraged to see their guru as god; "let thy teacher be unto thee like a god"¹⁰ and "if these truths have been told to a high-minded man who feels the highest devotion of God, and for his Guru as God, then they will shine forth, - then they will shine forth indeed."¹¹ Thus, the guru is not only exalted and revered very highly but also often deified. "The Guru was

⁸ *Upadesasahasri*, 2.1.6.

⁹ *Upadesasahasri*, 2.1.6.

¹⁰ *Taittiriya Upanishad* 1.11.2, See Catherine Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation*, 33.

¹¹ *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* 6.33. See, Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation*, 33. Ramana Maharshi understood the guru to be an internal reality in which there is no "difference between God, Guru and Self." For him, the awareness of the guru as an external reality is based upon the illusion of duality. "Because you identify yourself with the body, you think the Guru too is the body. You are not the body, nor is the Guru. You are the Self and so is the Guru." A. Osborne, *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi*, (London: Rider, 1962), 99, 101.

considered venerable in the beginning, began to be treated in course of time as sacred and divine, and later, became the object of devotion and worship, representing and mediating the divine."¹² A disciple is expected to show reverence to the master to touch the feet of the master with veneration or sometimes fall prostrate before the master. *Guru-seva* – dedicated service to the Master, and *Guru-Bhakti* – undivided love for the Master are greatly highlighted. In the Bhagavat Gita, ch 4:3, for example, we read, "seek that enlightenment by prostrating, by questions, and by service." Thus far, we have shown who a guru is and his importance for a shishya to attain liberation.¹³ We shall now see how this image of guru is used to understand the person of Jesus Christ.

The Image of Guru as Applied to Jesus Christ in Christian Theology

From the very beginning of the Christian mission in India, Christ has been presented as guru. Robert de Nobili, one of the very first Catholic missionaries to India, spoke of Jesus as guru.¹⁴ Nobili's conception of Jesus Christ as Guru is seen as the "most important contribution" to Christianity in India.¹⁵ The term guru can be applied to both the Father and the Son, but also to any teacher, priest, missionary, and to any one who does the function of leading the disciple towards salvation.¹⁶ De Nobili used the term *carguru* (true guru, guru of truth) to refer to Jesus' activity during

¹² X. Irudayaraj, "The Guru in Hinduism and Christianity," 340.

¹³ Following the tradition of Shankara, Gnanananda advocated guru-bhakti as the sufficient way to liberation.

"A true disciple has no sadhana to perform, He has only to surrender himself completely to his guru."

"If one has guru bhakti, that alone is sufficient; there is nothing beyond it, nothing else is required." *Sadguru Gnanananda*, Bombay: Bharat Vidya Bavan, 1978, p.100, 104. This book was compiled by the disciples of Gnanananda.

¹⁴ See Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, reprinted 2000), 11-13.

¹⁵ Jeyaraj, "The Contribution of the Catholic Church in Tamilnadu in the 17-19th Centuries to an Understanding of Christ," *The Indian Journal of Theology*, 23 (1974), 185.

¹⁶ Stanley Jones relates, how after failing to gain converts, he started to proclaim the living Christ as guru and thousands of Hindus surrendered to Jesus Christ after. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of Indian Road*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), 111-115. See, C. Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation*, 97.

his public life: "God became human guru" and "Jesus was the *carguru* who came to teach perfectly truth to the whole world."¹⁷ The term *tevyā guru* (divine teacher) was used only with reference to Christ. De Nobili emphasized the distinctiveness and the newness of Jesus Christ as guru: the divine guru teaches by his own actions; He exemplified not only renunciation but also service unto death; He taught not merely the way to personal realization, but gave the new commandment to love one another.

Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, who came to be regarded as the father of Indian Catholic theology, also used the term guru to denote Jesus. He used this term not so much to compare as to contrast Jesus Christ with other gurus.¹⁸ Upadhyaya was of the view that "Christ fulfilled the universal desire of the Hindus who had ever been looking forward to the advent of a sinless Guru (a Sat guru, a *Nishkalanka Avatar*)."¹⁹

Abhishiktananda gave a fresh look at the concept of guru.²⁰ Rather than adopting the term guru to fit traditional Christology, he attempted to understand the figure of Jesus Christ anew on the basis of his experience of the Hindu gurus. He writes that "it is possible to refuse to believe in the divinity of Christ, and in particular, many are unable to accept it in the terms in which it was defined by the Church Councils. But the unique greatness of Christ's personality and his authority as a guru or spiritual leader of mankind can never be disputed."²¹ Abhishiktananda understood the guru as one "in whose heart the Invisible has revealed himself

¹⁷ Soosai Arockiasamy, *Dharma, Hindu Christian, according to Robert De Nobili* (Rome: Gregoriana, 1986), 233.

¹⁸ Julius Lipner and Gispert-Sauch, ed., *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya*, Bangalore: UTC, 2002. This is the second volume. The first volume edited by Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya: The life and Thought of a Revolutionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. See also Timothy Tennent, *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations: The Legacy of Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.

¹⁹ C. Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation*, 99.

²⁰ For clear understanding of Abhishiktananda, his life and theology, see James D. M. Stuart, "Swami Abhishiktananda," *Vidyajyoti*, 38 (1974), 80-83; *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told Through His Letters*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1989; Vandana, ed., *Swami Abhishiktananda: The Man and His Teachings*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1986.

²¹ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974), 79.

and through whom his light shines in perfect purity." For him, a guru is:

Most certainly not some master or professor, or preacher or spiritual guide, or director of souls who has learned from books or from other men what he, in his turn, is passing on to others. The guru is one who has himself first attained the Real and who knows from personal experience the way that leads there.²²

From within the framework of Advaita Vedanta, Abhishiktananda writes that that real guru "is *akhandā*, undivided, he is *advaita*, non-dual. The Self is visible only to the self, and the true guru is no one but 'oneself' in the depth of self."²³ The guru has to lead the disciples to the experience of *advaita*, non-duality, and this is considered as the goal and essence of the guru-disciple relationship. Abhishiktananda, then, takes this thought and applies it to Jesus Christ.

Abhishiktananda argues that the Jews, the Greeks and the Romans took from Jesus' message only what fitted their established worldview and beliefs. Had Jesus moved within the Indian context, he would have been regarded as a guru, and probably his message would have been understood as that of *advaita* Vedanta. For Abhishiktananda, non-duality is closer to the nature and teaching of Jesus. He understands the experience of Jesus as that of *saccidananda*, and the expression, "I and the Father are one," as referring to the awareness of the non-duality of *atman* and Brahman. Abhishiktananda refers to Jesus as the *taraka*, the boatman who helps the disciple cross safely from the shore of death, darkness and non-being to that of immortality, light and being: 'Jesus effects the passing from *tamas* (darkness) to *jyothi* (light), from the *asat* (non-being) to *sat* (being), from *mrityu* (death) to *amrita* (immortality).'²⁴ Along the lines of the Hindu

²² Abhishiktananda, *Guru and Disciple*, 28, 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, (45).

²⁴ *Journal*, 1954, 117. He paraphrases the famous verse from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 1.3.28. Abhishiktananda's approach was not systematic or methodical, it was not much an intellectual exercise as an existential struggle. Hence, it is his *Journal* which remains of particular relevance for Hindu-Christian dialogue. See C.Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation*, 76. Henceforth, in our citations, next to the *Journal*, we have given the year in which it appeared.

understanding of the guru as one who, in emptying oneself realizes oneself, Abhishiktananda understands the life of Jesus Christ as a process of self-emptying which leads to the realization of the divine. Jesus' atoning death on the cross, too, got a reinterpretation in Abhishiktananda's thought. He moved away from the traditional understanding of Jesus' death as "a vicarious offer of reconciliation," and interpreted it in mystical terms as "exemplifying the self-mortification" necessary to reach salvation. He writes that "my guru is essentially a 'Donation.' It is in donating himself that he realized God. And the essence of his teaching is also a call to donate oneself, to love."²⁵

Abhishiktananda also uses the term *sadguru*, meaning real or true guru to establish the ontological uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus Christ or to distinguish Jesus Christ from other gurus. The prefix *sat* is a superlative "which in its original Hindu meaning does not possess exclusive connotations. The term *sadguru* is used by disciples to express their faith in the authenticity of their guru, their belief or experience that the guru can really lead to realization or liberation."²⁶ Abhishiktananda seems to apply the term *sadguru* in an exclusive sense to Jesus Christ. "The Sadguru is the Master of truth pre-eminently, the real and good Teacher, the 'Good Master' (Mark 10:17) He alone introduces others to the Real, to *sat*; he alone communicates to his disciples his own Spirit; his words are spirit and life, and are seeds which bring forth fruit in the heart of those who receive them with faith and love (Luke 8:15). Only he can speak of Being, *sat*, and lead men to it, who himself dwells in the bosom of the Father, the Origin and Source of all that is."²⁷

Abhishiktananda focuses so much upon the Christ as inner guru or *purusha*. Although this term is used in a variety of meanings in Hindu traditions, in the Rig Veda, it refers to the primordial anthropomorphic being of cosmic dimensions, the archetype through whose sacrifice the universe was created. Abhishiktananda uses this understanding of *purusha* to render

²⁵ *Journal*, 1952, p.52; *Journal*, 1956, p.229.

²⁶ C.Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation*, 103.

²⁷ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, 202.

Christ as primordial man and as cosmic sacrifice. "Christ is truly the Man who was mysteriously foreseen in the old myths – the cosmic purusha, for instance, of the Rig Veda, the primordial man whose sacrifice gave birth to the whole universe and to each of its component parts."²⁸ However, most often he uses the term *purusha* for Christ in the Upanishadic sense of atman, or true Self, which is not different from Brahman. Abhishiktananda claims "Christ is above all the *purusha* in the depth of my Self", he is "the place of the essential Encounter" and "power of total realization."²⁹ Thus, Abhishiktananda, at times, using the superlative form of *purusha*, *satpurusha*, indicated the ultimate of the understanding of Christ as more than "being involved in Space and Time, it is the absolutely highest level of consciousness, this last point beyond which there is only the passage to the Father."³⁰

Thus, several other theologians also developed the understanding of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the Hindu conception of guru. The similarities between the Hindu figure of guru and Jesus Christ were emphasized, only to demonstrate the superiority of the latter.³¹ The Hindu characteristics of the guru were considered only in so far as they fit in with the traditional Christian understanding of Christ. The superiority and unicity of

²⁸ Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, 203.

²⁹ *Journal*, 1966, p. 127, 135.

³⁰ *Journal*, 1955, p. 167.

³¹ For example, "if a guru teaches through silence, how much more is it true today for the risen Jesus? If a guru appears when the disciple is ready, what about Jesus who is pure availability? Again, if a guru is with his disciple, what about Jesus who has promised to be always with his disciples till the end of the world? He is the only guru who wants to be permanently present in the hearts of his disciples." Emmanuel Vattakuzhy, *Indian Christian Sannyasa and Swami Abhishiktananda* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1981), 186-187. "In the guru the shisya discovers his own individuality. Christ is the only saving guru for all men since in his death and resurrection all can discover their own final glory and self-fulfillment. Christ is God's decisive, eschatological and soteriological presence to the individual."³¹ John Chethimattam, "Theology as Human Interiority: Search for the One Teacher," *Unique and Universal, Fundamental Problems of Indian Theology* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1972), 188-189.

Christ is presupposed and superimposed upon the definition of the guru.³²

Uniqueness of Christ and the Concept of Guru

A pertinent question at this juncture would be the appropriateness of the image of guru in Christology. Any interpretation involves a risk and so is the case with this concept of guru. This image of guru, besides being acknowledged as a very useful term to connote the fact of Jesus, is not widely used and cared for. It has not been sufficiently researched in Indian Christological thinking. The main reason, among others, was what has always been known as the 'stumbling block' in the dialogue with the other religious traditions, namely the uniqueness of Christ, uniqueness understood here in terms of ontology. Christology asserts that Jesus is literally divine and literally human. As divine, Jesus is not analogous to God, or as-if-God, but is actually and literally God-incarnate. He is also truly and literally human. Jesus, called the Christ, is one person with two natures, divine and human.

Following this is the crucial claim that in the person of Jesus, God gives nothing less than God-self and that, therefore, one cannot but talk of Jesus as being "fully God and fully human," and as uniquely complete and final self-revelation of God to humankind.³³ This uniqueness of Jesus was not spelled out in an intelligible way using the image of guru. Many have attempted to elucidate this uniqueness of Jesus Christ with various theories and

³² Prasannabhai, "Sadguru," *Vidyajyoti* 40(1976), 315-320.

³³ That is why the early Councils, safeguarding against heresies, taught us to "acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once and both divine and human. Against *Arianism*, the Council Nicaea (325) used the term *homoousios* to reaffirm "Christ is divine." Against *Apollinarianism*, the Council of Constantinople (381) affirmed that "Christ is human." Against *Nestorius*, the Council of Ephesus (431) professed that Christ's two natures (his divine being and his human being) are not separated. Then, against the *Monophysites*, the Council of Chalcedon (451) professed two integral natures, divine and human in the one person of Jesus Christ. For further details of the Christological controversies of the fifth and earlier centuries, see Gerald O' Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 153-202.

concepts. None had succeeded. What has been proposed by one has been critiqued by another, indicating either a flaw in the proposed theory or a tendency to emphasize either the divine or human nature in Jesus.³⁴

So is the case with Abhishiktananda and the image of Jesus as Guru. His attempt, known as a "live exercise in cross-cultural or dialogical hermeneutics," to understand Christ in terms of Guru and purusha finally ended up being very "abstract."³⁵ The above mentioned ontological uniqueness of Jesus Christ, in Abhishiktananda's view, though unwittingly, was understood as relational, relative and at times mystical. His attempts to understand Jesus Christ as Guru, although positively valued, were criticized as being incomplete. Jacques Dupuis writes that Abhishiktananda's views create more problems than they solve, they pose a dilemma "between history conceived as an epiphenomenon of relative value and history invested with ontological density."³⁶ Abhishiktananda was seen a pluralist theologian *avant la lettre*.³⁷

³⁴ A saint and scholar, second to none, St. Thomas Aquinas himself showed that how difficult it is to talk about the unity of the two natures in Christ. He wrote: "To explain this union perfectly is beyond man's strength." *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book IV (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1975), 195, quoted in S.Davis, *The Logic and the Nature of God*, 118. I think he summed up our problem long before. In addition, the words of William Temple that "if any man says that he understands the relation of Deity to humanity in Christ, he only makes it clear that he does not understand at all what is meant by an incarnation", (*Christus Veritas*, London: Macmillan, 1924, p.139) is sufficient to show how complex is the issue at hand. B. Hebblethwaite, "The Incarnation and Modern Theology," in *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, ed., Michael Goulder (London: SCM Press, 1979), 28.

³⁵ C. Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation*, 114.

³⁶ Jacques Dupuis, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 90.

³⁷ C. Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation*, 116.

However, what is essential is this. In today's world, there is a critical need for Christians to articulate God's mighty deeds through Christ in a fresh way. The gospels of Jesus Christ must be thought about, examined and interpreted in order that they speak to us, the Indian multitude. This is not only necessary but also urgent. Saying this does not mean that we have to debunk anything regarding Christ's ontological uniqueness. But I think that we are at a point of time in which we have to concentrate on interpreting God's action within us, and God's call to all of us to be transformers of society and of the world, in light of what God accomplished in Jesus Christ.³⁸ For this task, the concept of guru seems very appropriate.

Jesus: The Sadguru *par excellence*

There are striking similarities as well as differences between Jesus the Guru and the gurus of Hinduism in general, as we have enumerated above. Both are teachers, and their teaching based on their God-experience; both require renunciation on the part of the disciples, and emphasize the need for liberation for the disciples. However, unlike the Gurus of the Upanishads, who are engaged in a dialectical discourse with the disciples in the process of learning, Jesus is engaged in conflict with the religio-political leaders. Jesus, as the guru in Hinduism, not only taught with experiential knowledge of the scriptures, but, more importantly, with authority and power.³⁹ The authority of Jesus was of a very different kind. For Jesus had no official standing in the society. He did not command the power of wealth, for he was a "wandering

³⁸ Saying this does not amount to calling the doctrine of Incarnation as metaphorical or that we should do away with it. It was meant to be literal and not metaphorical. At the heart of the Christian faith is the conviction that God has expressed himself concretely in our history, and has become part of the form, meaning and texture of that history, as human person.

³⁹ Howard Clark Kee writes that "Mark's favorite designation for Jesus is teacher. ... Jesus does not appear as a rabbinic interpreter of the scriptures, but as a charismatic, divinely authorized spokesman for God." See his *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 117.

charismatic" having 'nowhere to lay his head' (Mt 8:20).⁴⁰ He was academically unschooled, and cultically incompetent, since he was not born into a priestly family (Mt 1: 1-17).⁴¹ Thus, his authority derives not from the traditional institutions of his society, but from his own personal charisma. As Max Weber would call it, Jesus' was a "charismatic authority" which rests on "devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him."⁴²

In our culture, as we have shown above, the disciple is expected to show reverence to the master, to touch the feet of the master with veneration or sometimes fall prostrate before the master. But in the case of Jesus, it is the other way around. Jesus kneels down before the disciples and washes their feet. In washing the feet of his disciples Jesus reveals his immense love for them. In this act Jesus teaches his disciples in turn to do the same among themselves. In this act of humility, he becomes a model of a leader who serves the community. He has shown that power and authority are to be used in service to promote the welfare and well-being of others.

In contrast to the traditional Indian view of *guru-seva*, and of the form of worshipping and serving God in one's guru, Jesus comes as one who serves, he tells us "that the greatest among you must be your servant (Mt. 23"11). In the Upanishads, although a bond of love between the guru and shishya is mentioned, Jesus the guru calls the disciples not just as shishyas but as *preshta*, dear ones. He says, "I do not call any longer servants... instead call you friends," (Jn 15:15) and makes known all that he has 'heard of the

⁴⁰ Gerd Theissen, *The Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1978), 47-48. Theissen understands Jesus as the prophet of social change. See, G. Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest for the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987; *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991; and also Richard Horsely, *Jesus and Spiral of Violence*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987; *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*, New York: Crossroad, 1989.

⁴¹ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 236.

⁴² Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 328.

Father.' Thus, what makes Jesus so significant is his consciousness of God, his awareness of God as Abba Father.⁴³ It is because of this, that Jesus had a huge impact on those who met him then and encounter him now. What makes Jesus' experience of God unique is not its psychological impact or the knowledge derived from it or anything at all in that line, but the fact that the Son in His human consciousness met His Father.

All great men are God's special gifts to mankind; Christ is God's self-gift. And so our faith tells us that if Socrates is wise, Christ is Wisdom; if Krishna is Manifestation, Christ is the Manifested One; if Buddha is the Illumined, Christ is the Light; if Mohammed is the prophet, Christ is the Word. Like Moses, these men served God as servants; Christ did it as the Son (Heb 3: 5-6).⁴⁴

As Koangaji, a famous Buddhist leader, writes Jesus is the saint of all the saints who have already lived in the world and of those yet to come.⁴⁵

⁴³ J. Jeremias has argued that Jesus' custom of addressing God as "Abba" (Father) in prayer is distinctive; the Aramaic address (abba) is a caritative (= Daddy) and implies intimate, family relationship. See, J. Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 9-30. See also Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 402. R. E. Brown notes that "we have a number of examples of Jews addressing God as "Father" or "My Father" as they prayed in Greek (Maccabees 5:7; Wis 14:3; Sir 23:1); and now there is an example of a Dead Sea Scroll prayer-psalm addressing God in Hebrew as "My Father" (4 Q372). In the Greek of the Gospels various expressions are used by Jesus to address God as "My Father" and "Father" (pater mou, pater), and we cannot simply assume that all represent Aramaic 'abba'." Jesus claimed a special, familiar relationship to God as his father beyond the general relationship postulated in contemporary Judaism. "An Introduction to New Testament Christology, 86. Dominic Crossan writes: "Jesus' message of the "unmediated presence of God ... was based on mystical experience." D. Crossan "Materials and Methods in Historical Jesus Research," *Forum* 4 (1988), 11. See also M. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, n. 40.

⁴⁴ Felipe Gomes, "The Uniqueness of Universality of Jesus," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 1 (1983), 25.

⁴⁵ A. Alangaram, *Christ of the Asian Peoples*, Bangalore: ATC, 2001, 125-126. To acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and Saviour is only meaningful in so far as we try to live as he lived and to order our lives according to his values. We do not need to theorize about Jesus, we need to 're-produce' him in our time and our circumstances ... so that our search, like his search, is primarily a search for orthopraxis (true practice) rather than orthodoxy (true doctrine). Only a true practice of the faith can verify what we believe. Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity* (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), 139-140.

Conclusion

"The basic locus of Christology is the place where faith and life meet."⁴⁶ The locus for us is our soil, rather as Felix Wilfred said, "the dusty soil."⁴⁷ For this land, one can engage in constructing several images of Jesus Christ. For our oppressive poverty and religious pluralism, it is my contention, that the significance of Jesus Christ could well be explained by the image of guru, not simply as a guru but as the Guru par excellence.

Jesus, like the gurus of the great traditions, and, at times, more emphatically than they, *taught* about God, *showed* the way, rather the *liberative way* to God-experience and, *proclaimed* the path of salvation. Along with Abhishiktananda, we, too, can say that "Nobody has seen the Father, but he who has gone down to the bosom of the Father. No one has realized God as he did. No one has been able to possess as he did the sense of divine Consciousness. Christ is the Master Guru."⁴⁸ My heart urges me to agree with the poet: "If Christ could be presented to India in his naked beauty, free from the disguises of western organization, western doctrines and western forms of worship, India would acknowledge Him as the Supreme Guru and lay her richest homage at His feet."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (New York, Orbis Books, 1985), 34.

⁴⁷ F. Wilfred, *From the Dusty Soil*, Trichy: Jothi Press, 1995.

⁴⁸ *Journal*, 1952, p.51.

⁴⁹ Quoted from the famous Indian Christian poet Narayan Vaman Tilak (1862-1919) by Jack Winslow, *Narayan Vaman Tilak: The Christian Poet of Maharashtra* (Calcutta: YMCA, 1930), 118.