

# Incarnation as Avatar

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## Introduction

*Avatar* is one of the earliest, and arguably the most popular, of Indian categories in which Hindus and Christians of India have sought to understand and accept the mystery of Jesus Christ. This is true not only with regard to many ordinary Hindus but also many modern Hindu thinkers and reformers.<sup>1</sup> *Avatar* has proved to them to be the easiest and most suitable category to accept the divine claims of Jesus without much upsetting their traditional belief system. He is regarded by them as one among the many divine descents that have intervened in the course of human history to eliminate evil and to restore the order of righteousness. Even this partial and evidently inadequate reception of the mystery of Christ by the Indians, it must be admitted, has contributed enormously to the evangelization of the soul and culture of India, in so far as it has helped them to accept and assimilate many central values of Christ. Some of these values, though alien to many age-old socio-cultural structures and traditions of India, have become enshrined into the

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<sup>1</sup> Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi are some of the eminent Hindu thinkers who consider Jesus as an *avatar*. For more details see the relevant chapters in M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1970.

very constitution of the Indian state, in no small part under the impact of Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

However, such an easy accommodation of Jesus Christ into the Hindu scheme of the plurality of *avatars*, has certainly not been found as adequate and acceptable to the Christians of India. Though Hinduism, as represented by some of its most simple as well as enlightened minds, has come forward to accord to Jesus the highest place that it can possibly offer to any god-man, the Christians find such a recognition as failing to express in full the faith they seek to share. Such an easy reception of Jesus Christ into a ready-made Hindu scheme, they fear, may also prevent the Hindus from recognizing not only his singularity and uniqueness, but also from receiving and responding to the unique gifts and challenges that he offers them so that they may have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10).

This fear, however, has not deterred the Indian Christians from themselves accepting and presenting to others Jesus as *the avatar* (of course, not as *an avatar* i.e. one among the many). In fact, from a very early period of Christianity's spread in India, Christians in India have found in it not only a readily available but also the most easily intelligible category for appropriating the mystery of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> Even today *the avatar*, or one of its vernacular variants, remains a commonly used category by which

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<sup>2</sup> The Preamble to the Constitution of India resolves to secure for all its citizens Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity (see Paras Diwan (ed.) *Constitution of India*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1979, p. 12). This constitution with its emphasis on such very Christian values is a far cry from the *Manudharma Sastra* which had provided the legal framework for the traditional caste-based societies of India.

<sup>3</sup> Already in the seventeenth century Robert De Nobili has used the category of *avartato* to denote Jesus Christ. See M. Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*, Chennai: IDCR, 2005, p. 126.

most Christian communities of India refer to him. Quite a few Indian Christian theologians have also proposed it as one of the valid and valuable Christological models to understand and articulate their faith in Jesus as "the Word become flesh" (Jn 1:14).<sup>4</sup> Of course, they do also agree that for *the avatar* to become an appropriate Christological model, it needs to shed some of its shortcomings and be enriched by some specific Christian meanings. Thus corrected and complemented the indigenous category of *the avatar*, they suggest, could also become an appealing Christological model in the process of evangelizing the vast masses of India, most of whom continue to remain followers of the *bhakti* traditions that are focused on one or the other of the Hindu *avatars*.

The appropriation of the category of *the avatar* as a Christological model, to be authentically Christian, calls for a reinterpretation of it with the needed correctives and complementarities, of which three are most central. They are related to the issues of the *historicity*, *integral humanity* and *uniqueness* of the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ.

## 1. Mythical or Historical

In Hinduism today there is a growing tendency to regard the *avatars* as historical. The human *avatars*, especially those of Rama and Krishna, are widely believed to be historical. Of course, it is to be granted that the human figures of the *avatars* could have been historical heroes<sup>5</sup> though the chronological dates and the topographical sites of their lives cannot be arrived at even with a

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<sup>4</sup> Among the Indian theologians who employ the *avatar* as an Indian Christological model the most prominent one is V. Chakkarai. See his *Jesus the Avatar*, Madras: CLS, 1930.

<sup>5</sup> G. Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, London: Faber and Faber, 1970, p. 227.

minimum of accuracy. The traditional narratives about their lives and achievements are also mostly legendary. The earliest source of knowledge about them are the great Indian epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* which are mostly the products of admirable mythological imagination that show the least concern for history.

The claim that the narratives about the *avatars* are mostly mythological and not historical does not much disturb the typical Hindu mind nor invalidate its faith in them. Even for those who may regard the *avatars* as historical, their historicity is not a matter of serious theological significance. For, what is important for them, is not the historical persons of the avatars but the eternal truths they symbolize. In this regard what Mahatma Gandhi asserts about Jesus is even more applicable to the Hindu *avatars*: "I may say that I have never been interested in a historical Jesus. I should not care even if it was proved by some one that the man called Jesus never lived, and what was narrated in the gospels was a figment of the writer's imagination. For, the Sermon on the Mount would still be true for me".<sup>6</sup>

But when the Indian Christians proclaim Jesus as the *avatar*, they firmly believe that he was a historical human being in and through whom God the Word decisively and definitively entered into human history. Not only the New Testament gospels bear authentic and reliable witness to his historical human life climaxing in his death and resurrection but also offer ample evidence to the origin of the ecclesial movement from his historical ministry. Being a historical human being is not accidental to the mission of Christ nor incidental to God's plan of salvation of humankind. Rather, it is the climaxing moment or the central event of God's salvific plan carried out in human history. Vat. II explicitly asserts, "The Church

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<sup>6</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963, pp. 65-66.

likewise believes that the key, the centre and the purpose of the whole of man's history is to be found in its Lord and master".<sup>7</sup>

This essential historicity of the incarnation of Christ is emphasized by St. Paul when he states that, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:3). The Apostle's Creed also is particular to situate historically Jesus' life and death as having happened in the reign of Pontius Pilate who was governor of Judea from A.D. 26-36.

Such historicity of the incarnation is vital because it is the quality of Jesus' historical life, message, ministry and especially his death, whose meaning the disciples experienced more fully in his resurrection, that lead them to the faith in him as the God become human. Thus, the faith in Christ does not derive from some timeless myth or sublime philosophy but from the life, death and resurrection of the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. Besides, myths may represent the highest and noblest of human spiritual aspirations and hopes which, however, may remain forever unrealized. But the historical incarnation in Jesus embodies the actual realization of the divine plan and promises which exceed the farthest reaches of human aspirations.

## 2. Theophony or Epiphany

Another area in which the Christian concept of incarnation significantly differs from that of the Hindu *avatars* pertains to the kind of humanness assumed in both. For most Hindu thinkers *avatar* is a theophony that assumes the appearance of an earthly being suited for the purpose of each divine descent. Even in popular Hindu devotion and *puranas* which regard the *avatars* as assuming

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<sup>7</sup> Vat. II, *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*, no. 10.

a physical human body involving birth, growth and death, once the purpose of the avatar is accomplished the body is just cast aside as superfluous. Whatever be the form of humanness that the *avatar* assumes, either only human appearance or real physical body, such assumption is only temporary. In the *avatar*, the divine never becomes authentically and fully human and there is no genuine nor permanent union of the divine with the embodied human nature. In this matter what G. Parrinder points out about Krishna is applicable to all *avatars*: "there is never any suggestion that Krishna was a man among men, for he could not really divest himself of divine power".<sup>8</sup>

Some modern Hindu thinkers, however, present an interpretation of *avatars* from below. According to them, the *avatars* are not divine descents but human ascents into God. As Ramakrishna has put it, "they are human beings with extraordinary original powers and entrusted with a divine commission".<sup>9</sup> In other words, they are not God but great human beings endowed with divine powers to carry out the divine purpose and plan.

But the Christian incarnation is not God's mere appearance on earth as human as he did to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18), nor with an ad hoc assumption of a human body. It rather involves on the part of God becoming authentically human in which he enters into a permanent and full union with enfleshed human nature. The Johannine gospel articulates it with sublime succinctness as follows: "the Word become flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). The human enfleshment of the Word is real and epiphanic which is described by St. Paul as involving a kenosis or self-emptying of the divine (Phil 2:6). The kenotic union of the

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<sup>8</sup> G. Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, p. 227.

<sup>9</sup> Ramakrishna as cited in G. Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, p. 230.

divine with the human in Jesus Christ is such that the *Letter to the Hebrews* claims that "he had become like his brothers and sisters in every respect" (Heb 2:17), though "without sin" (Heb 4:15). This union is epiphanic in so far as it is the human that reveals the divine. Thus, it is by the human heart of Jesus that divine love and compassion were experienced and expressed to others, it is by his human speech that God's life-giving words were uttered, it is by his human hands that people came to experience the divine touch of healing and it is through his death and resurrection that humanity's reconciliation with the Father and salvation were effected.

This union of God the Word with the full human nature in Jesus is also permanent and eternal. Not only God's infinite love is supremely expressed by Jesus' suffering and death in his embodied human nature, but also the power of God's love raised him from the dead in his body, though glorified. This glorified bodily human nature enters into the very mystery of the triune God when Jesus ascends to and sits at the right hand of the Father (Mk 16:19). Because of this intimate and irrevocable union with the divine the bodily human nature is so elevated as to become the means of human salvation. As Pope Benedict XVI has so eloquently expressed it, "Now the one who is himself the Word takes on a body, he comes from God as a man, and draws the whole of man's being to himself, bearing it into the Word of God, making it "ears" for God and thus "obedience", reconciliation between God and man (2 Cor 5:18-20). Because he is wholly given over to obedience and love, loving to the end (cf. Jn 13:10), he himself becomes the true "offering". He comes from God and hence establishes the true form of man's being".<sup>10</sup> Thus, Jesus is able to offer us his flesh and blood as the sacrament of union with him that leads to

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<sup>10</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, New York: Doubleday, p. 334.

eternal life: “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day... those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (Jn 6:54-56).

Such a tremendous affirmation and elevation of the human nature and the human body, in consequence of their union with God the Word in the incarnation, goes far beyond anything envisaged in the Hindu *avatars*. The Indian Christians’ adoption of *the avatar* as a Christological model can authentically reflect the true Catholic faith only if it is understood as involving the union of the divine with the full human nature with its essential corporality.

### 3. Many or One

While in popular Hindu belief the number of *avatars* are commonly accepted as ten, the classic formulation of the *avatar* doctrine found in the *Bhagavad Gita* does not specify any particular number, but clearly presumes the possibility or even the actuality of a plurality of them: “...age after age I come into being”.<sup>11</sup> Thus, as V. Chakkarai points out, “periodicity and multiplicity of these divine self-manifestations, if we may so call them, are their striking characteristics”.<sup>12</sup>

However, the belief in the plurality of *avatars* does not have much practical significance in the religious practice of the Hindus. For, *avatars* are believed to happen only periodically, that is ‘age after age’, and each age or period spans out for so many thousands of years that ultimately for practical purposes there is only one *avatar* for the present age.<sup>13</sup> Also even those who theoretically

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<sup>11</sup> *Bhagavad Gita*. 4:8.

<sup>12</sup> V. Chakkarai. *Jesus the Avatar*, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> G. Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*. p. 224.

accept the plurality of *avatars* as a part of their belief system invariably consider only one of the human *avatars*, mostly Krishna, as supreme and worship him as their personal deity.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the plurality of *avatars* seems to serve mostly as a useful scheme to provide some space for the devotion to the various deities prevalent in different Hindu religious groups and thus to promote tolerance without disrupting the supremacy accorded to Krishna.

In the Christian faith the Incarnation is a unique, unrepeatable and unparalleled event, absolute in its salvific significance. While God is believed to have manifested himself on different occasions in many and various ways (cf Heb 1:1-2) and has never been absent from human history, it is only in the incarnational event of Jesus of Nazareth, climaxing in his death and resurrection, that God himself has become fully human. Though there is a continuity and even progression among the various manifestations, the incarnation is an once-and-for-all event that differs from the others not only in degree but in its very nature. For, "The whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9) in Jesus. As Pope John Paul II points out, not only the uniqueness but also the scandal of Christianity consists "in the belief that the all-holy, all powerful and all knowing God took upon himself our human nature and endured suffering and death to win salvation for all people (cf. 1 Cor 1:23)".<sup>15</sup>

Jesus is not only the supreme and fullest revelation of God, but also it is in and through him for once in human history a human being has fully opened himself to God in total self-emptying love and obedience to his will. Thereby Jesus has become for all human beings the unique mediator of the fullness of life and salvation to which God has destined them. That is why the Christian faith proclaims, "we believe that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, in

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<sup>14</sup> G. Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, p. 224.

<sup>15</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Church in Asia: Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, no. 12.

the one saviour because he alone – the Son – accomplished the Father’s universal plan of salvation. As the definitive manifestation of the Fathers’ love for all, Jesus is indeed unique, and ‘it is precisely this uniqueness of Christ which gives him an absolute and universal significance, whereby, while belonging to history, he remains history’s centre and goal’.”<sup>16</sup>

However, as taught by Vat. II, and explicitly affirmed by Pope John Paul II, the Church is called upon to “gladly acknowledge whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all people”<sup>17</sup> and the Christians have to “while witnessing to their own faith and way of life acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is legitimate and even necessary to carefully explore what spiritual value we can find in the great Hindu *avatars*. Certainly we can not consign to the realm of total error and evil the great Hindu *avatars* who with the many noble qualities they symbolize have inspired, though not without deficiencies and distortions, millions of Hindus for at least a couple of thousand years to seek after truth, justice and harmony.

Besides, if Christianity has to be truly inculturated in India and become authentically Indian while remaining faithfully Christian, at least in the level of dialogue of scholarly exchanges theologians have to examine if the Hindu scheme of *avatars*, with its concepts of partial (*amsa*), and full (*purana*) *avatars*, can serve, of course, with the needed modifications, to accord a positive role to the great Hindu *avatars*, as at least remotely preparatory for Jesus Christ. However, it must be emphasized that whatever positive role we might assign to the Hindu *avatars*, it should not in any way

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<sup>16</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Church in Asia*, no. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Church in Asia*, no. 31.

compromise the centrality of Jesus Christ in God's plan of salvation and his uniqueness as the only saviour of humankind.

## Conclusion

With the corrections and complementarities the Christian faith calls for, of which three main ones have been elaborated above, the Indian category of *the avatar* could be used as a much needed Indian Christological model. Of course, the model of *the avatar* alone will never suffice. Equally modified other models are also required because each model has its own limitations and none of them by itself can ever express the inexhaustible riches of the mystery of Jesus Christ.

In fact, the concept of *the avatar* has been in use as a Christological model in the Christian communities of India for at least four centuries. Such a use, it must be noted, has certainly not lead to the dilution or decrease of the Christian faith in India nor lead hardly any Indian Christian to deny the uniqueness of Jesus as the definitive and supreme revelation of God nor to equate him with the Hindu *avatars*.

In addition, it is also my humble conviction that in the pedagogy of progressive evangelization of India, *the avatar* can serve as an excellent introductory model in the gradual presentation of Jesus to the Indians. Such a progressive pedagogy has been explicitly recommended by Pope John Paul II: "the presentation of Jesus Christ as the only saviour needs to follow a *pedagogy* which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery. Clearly the initial evangelization of non-Christians and the continuing proclamation of Jesus to believers will have to be different in their approach".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Vat. II. *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, no. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Church in Asia*, no. 20.