

Towards an Indian Christology

V. P. THOMAS *

Ever since the dawn of the twentieth century a need has been seriously felt for interpreting Jesus Christ and Christianity in Indian terms and concepts and cultural forms. Many have come forward to develop Indian Christian art, Indian Christian music, Indian Christian architecture and Indian Christian theology. Attempts have been made by many persons in different parts of India, both Indians and missionaries, to formulate Indian terms to convey Christian thoughts and doctrines. At the heart of this movement is the thought implied in the analogy of the seed and the soil. The seed of the Christian faith is to be sown in the Indian soil and then allowed to grow under the conditions of Indian climate and environment. The assumption is that Christianity thus evolved will be an Indian Christianity in thought, worship and practice. It was felt that the Christianity preached and established in India had the Western garb, and hence it remained foreign to India. If Christ can be rescued from the Western garb and clothed in Indian garb, he and his religion will be more intelligible and acceptable to the Indian people. It was also felt that such an Indian understanding of Christ may bring out certain aspects of the person and work of Christ, which were not emphasized in the West. The 'Oriental Christ' is a favourite expression in India. The Indian interpretation of Christ was going on both outside the Church and inside the Church. We know how Keshab Chandra Sen, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and others began to interpret Jesus in Indian terms using Indian concepts. Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan have given their own interpretations of Christ, which are familiar in India. Within the Church, Sadhu Sundar Singh's contribution in this respect is noteworthy. In our own day A. J. Appasamy, P. Chenchiah and V. Chakkarai have given us challenging and thought-provoking ideas and have indicated many possible lines of interpretation towards Indian Christianity and Indian Theology. There may be many others of whom the writer is not aware, but who are to be remembered in this connection. There

* A paper read at the Conference on the Indian Understanding of Jesus Christ, November, 1963, organized under the joint auspices of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, and the Indian Christian Theological Association.

are also a few artists and poets who were inspired by the same motive. This conference itself is an evidence of the growing feeling among Indian Christians and missionaries that Christianity in India must reflect the cultural and thought forms of India. Only when Christianity is naturalized can it be appealing to the Indian people.

I fully participate in this movement and am convinced of its relevance. However, certain questions come to my mind. Can we legitimately speak of Indian Christology, or an Eastern Christology or a Western Christology? Is Christ and Christianity divided along racial or national or cultural lines? Don't we read in the New Testament that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, no Greek or barbarian, no bond or free, no male or female? Don't we sing 'In Christ there is no East or West'? The Christian revelation is universal and it cuts across all barriers of race and culture. Whatever we hold in Christian faith, about Christ, God, Holy Spirit, Man, Sin, Redemption, etc., must be true to all people everywhere. So we cannot legitimately talk of Indian Christology as if it is different from Christologies of other lands. In what sense, then, can we speak of Indian Christology? In making the universal Christian faith intelligible to a particular group of people, their particular thought patterns and cultural expressions have to be used as vehicles of thought and expression. The Indianization involved is in the technique of communication, and not in the essentials of the Christian faith. So, in forming an Indian Christology, we are not changing, mutilating or modifying Christ to suit our taste and interest, but we are using a medium of communication familiar to the people and are interpreting Christ, using thought forms and concepts that are intelligible to the people concerned. This is what the early Church did as she proclaimed Christ to people of Jewish and Greek backgrounds.

In the particular expressions and interpretations of Christ there may be differences, and sometimes the process may obscure the person whom they try to proclaim. Even within the same cultural group there may be different portrayals of Jesus. We may not have just one Indian Christology but many Indian Christologies. While Christ is eternal, our doctrines about him vary and are subject to change. Our particular representations or interpretations need not claim infallibility.

We must recognize there are dangers in our attempt at an Indian Interpretation of Christ. The terms we may use have a certain connotation to the Hindus. When we use them, we put into them Christian content, but the hearers may understand them with a Hindu content. This danger is not anything new. It was there in the first century. When the early disciples used Jewish and Greek terms to tell who Jesus was, there was a certain amount of confusion. This is reflected in the New Testament writings. When John used the word 'logos' he was not thinking in terms of the logos concept of Philo or of the stories,

but he was thinking of the pre-existent Word who became flesh and dwelt at a certain period in history. The Christological controversies of the early Church were partly due to the confusion that arose from the use of Jewish, Greek and Latin terms and concepts. The words which we select may not always convey our Christian concepts. Dr. R. M. Clark, in an article in the *Indian Journal of Theology* (Vol. XII, No. 4, pp. 143-144) on Dayal Christananda's *Gita aur Baibal*, expresses his doubt whether the author's use of Hindu technical terms may lead to real understanding and confrontation. While we have to use Indian terms and expressions we must always be certain that we explain the content we put into them. Terms and concepts are related. When we use a term, how much of the concept behind it are we accepting and how much Christian content are we putting into it? These are to be clearly understood and explained.

We may also face the danger of overlooking the New Testament witness and the accumulated experience of the Christian Church in our enthusiasm to interpret Christ and make him Indian. Tendencies of this sort are already seen in some of the Indian Christian thinkers. The artists and poets are tempted in another direction. Some time ago I saw a painting by a Christian artist in which Jesus was painted blue like Krishna with a dot in the forehead. My immediate reaction was to question the wisdom of it. Does it represent Christ or misrepresent him? Does it lead a Hindu to a confrontation with Jesus or just give him a satisfaction to know that Christ and Krishna are the same?

USE OF METAPHYSICAL TERMS

Certain metaphysical terms and concepts are still used in connection with philosophical and religious discourses. Traditional interpretations of them may be a stumbling-block to an understanding of the reality of God, reality of the world and the possibility of real incarnation. Here we shall not go into detailed discussion. I shall only make some suggestions regarding some of them, namely :

Infinite and finite ; absolute and relative ; eternity and time.

God is the Infinite, the Absolute and the Eternal. These concepts, as traditionally understood, are qualitatively different from the finite, the relative and the time process. Since the Infinite alone is real, the rest is unreal. This is the argument of *Maya Vada*. In our conception the Infinite and the finite are to be related in such a way that (to the Infinite) the relative and the time process can in some sense manifest the Absolute and the Eternal. Transcendence and immanence are also metaphysical terms which are used as mutually exclusive. Transcendence is traditionally understood in terms of special distance, and immanence in terms of identity. These terms, in the theistic and Christian faith, are to be understood in terms of presence.

Another term, most important of all, is the term personality. God as a personal being is at the heart of the Christian faith and experience. The God of the Bible is not an abstract 'it', but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God may be Infinite, Eternal and Transcendent but, if he is not personal, there is no possibility of having a world that is real and purposeful. Also there is no possibility of incarnation. The world, if real and meaningful, must be the result of the creative activity of a personal God. Likewise, only a personal God can incarnate Himself. Only a personal being can act creatively and redemptively.

Is there a clear concept of personality in the Indian systems of thought? If so, we can make use of it in our Indian interpretation of God, and his Incarnation. Dr. Clark, in the article referred to above, says that it is difficult to find a suitable term for the concept of personality. *Vyaktitva* and *purushatva* are the two terms used. The first identifies personality with individuality and the second 'tends' to shade off into the meaning of mere masculinity. If we use any of these terms we have to put into them the deeper meaning of personality as the ability for creative and redemptive action, ability for freedom, love and fellowship.

In using the word personality, we may be accused of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism cannot be avoided. We can only speak in terms that are known to us and meaningful to us. When we say God is personal, we are using the highest category known to us, and attribute to Him those qualities which transcend the limits of time and space, qualities such as power to think, to self-determination, to purposive action, to love and to redeem. In Indian thought, *Saguna Brahman* is spoken of in personal terms, but *Nirguna Brahman* is characterized as either impersonal or suprapersonal. In the Indian Christian thought the two concepts can be brought together. The term 'suprapersonal' may be explained to mean hidden depths, deeper levels of personality.

TOWARDS AN INDIAN CHRISTOLOGY

New Testament Basis

When we speak of Indian Christology we immediately face the question of our source of authority. Our chief source is the Gospels and other N.T. writings. We must not forget that Christ portrayed in the N.T. is the Christ held in faith by the writers. Personal experience and reflection have conferred together in the portrait of Jesus found in the N.T. We cannot separate the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith as found in the Gospels. The Gospels are not biographies. Through historical events in the life of Jesus the writers were trying to witness to a Saviour. 'Back to Christ' has been the chief call of Sadhu Sundar Singh, Appasamy, Chenchiah and others. The problem is how we can get at the real Christ. The person and work of Christ cannot be

properly understood apart from the experience and faith of the Gospel writers, and also apart from the life and faith of the Christian community in which the Gospels and the rest of the N.T. were written. Further, the writers were communicating what they believed of Jesus in the concepts and thought patterns known to those people to whom they were writing. We cannot understand the Christ of the N.T. without a proper understanding of the Jewish and Greek backgrounds.

Our attempt must be to find out exactly what the writers were trying to convey. Demythologizing may be necessary to a certain extent in our attempt to get at the Word within the words of the authors. We have to go beyond the particular cultural, philosophical and religious categories of thought and expression which the writers were using. So our first and most important task is to grasp the real Christ to whom the N.T. writers give witness, keeping in mind the faith of the community as well as the categories of thought used by the writers. Scholarship is not enough. Devotion also is needed. In our Indian background a great deal of emphasis is put on *dyana* and *bhakti*. Personal devotion and faith are also needed in understanding Christ in the N.T.

New Testament Christology

Dr. Radhakrishnan points out that there is no unanimity of thought among Christian scholars regarding Jesus the Christ as seen in the N.T. A detailed discussion on N.T. Christology is not expected in this paper, but let me point out the main currents of thought in the N.T. which are important for Indian Christology as I see it.

The unanimous witness of the N.T. is that Jesus Christ is God, incarnate in real human form for the purpose of seeking and saving lost humanity. When I say unanimous witness, I am not oblivious to modern N.T. scholars, like Oscar Cullmann, who point out that in the N.T. there is no standard Christology, but only various attempts at Christology. What I mean is that, taking the N.T. witness as a whole, we find sufficient unanimity among the authors as to the Christ whom they were attempting to proclaim through various titles and concepts known to the people of their day.

The Gospels and other N.T. writings maintain that the Incarnation was a real historical event. Because, in traditional Indian thought, history has only a relative importance, there is a temptation not to regard as significant the historicity of Jesus. Is the fact of the historicity of Jesus Christ a hindrance to the acceptance of the Christ who is beyond history and Lord of history? One of the points raised by Dr. Radhakrishnan against the uniqueness of Christ is that the Absolute cannot in any real sense manifest itself in the world of relativity. The metaphysical presupposition of the Absolute and the relative makes him

hesitate to give reality to the historical event as such. However, there is in India today an attempt to re-evaluate the traditional indifference to history and historical events. For Christology, history is important, because it helps us to understand the real humanity of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation is not a mere appearance. The human experiences recorded in the Gospels are genuine experiences. Jesus was not, like Bishop Robinson's parody, 'God Almighty walking about the earth, dressed up as a man. He looked like a man, he talked like a man, he felt like a man, but underneath he was God, dressed up like Father Christmas' (*Honest to God*, p. 66). Unless we understand the historical manifestation, we cannot really accept the real humanity of Jesus Christ.

The Gospels in their testimony go beyond the historicity and real humanity of Jesus. As the disciples lived and moved with Jesus, there grew in them an inner compulsion to declare him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. This is what happened at Caesarea Philippi. In the order of discovery, Jesus was first human and then divine. But in the order of being, Jesus was first God and then man. The two are not opposed to each other. It is with the ontological conviction that St. John begins his Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God: the Word was God'. It seems to me that the inner core of the N.T. testimony is that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God, and that he is the 'Word' become flesh.

'I am in the Father, and the Father in me' (John 14: 10).

'I and the Father are one' (John 10: 30).

'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14: 9).

Dr. Appasamy is of the opinion that the above verses do not mean identity of nature or essence, but only a moral identity, an identity of will and purpose. 'The union between God and Christ which is spoken of in the Fourth Gospel is a union of love and work, and not an identity in the essential nature' (*The Gospel and India's Heritage*, p. 38). This moral identity is, I suppose, within the reach of any devout *bhakta*. I doubt whether Appasamy is true to St. John's view of Jesus Christ. In the Incarnation of Jesus Christ it is the 'Word' that became flesh and dwelt among us. I am aware of the verses that imply a subordination of Christ to God. These verses are in my opinion to be understood as applicable to the incarnate state of the Son of God, and not to the pre-incarnate state.

How God became incarnate can, at least in my view, only be understood in terms of a *Kenosis*. Is the Pauline idea of *Kenosis* intelligible to the Indian mind? If God is personal, then *Kenosis*, self-limitation, is not unreasonable or impossible. Appasamy, Surjit Singh, Bishop J. A. T. Robinson and others seem to think of *Kenosis* as the *Kenosis* of the self of the man Jesus. In their opinion Jesus emptied himself of the self, and it is in making himself nothing that he became transparent to God

and thus was able to disclose God. But a *Kenosis* is necessary in order to identify himself with man, and live and work under human conditions. The humanity of the Incarnate Son was not emptied of its self, but becomes completely responsive to the divine.

If we take the N.T. witness and try to understand what the writers were trying to convey to the people of their day, we can see clearly that in their minds there was no hesitation as to the fact that the Jesus of history was really God incarnate. Cullmann's *Christology of the New Testament* deals with the special titles attributed to Christ and recorded in the N.T. He maintains that they represent various Christological interpretations. The early Christians in using these titles were not merely reproducing their Jewish and Greek contents, but they were trying to witness to a person whom they knew as a personal Saviour. These titles were meant to convey the divine origin of Jesus Christ.

In the opinion of many Christian and non-Christian thinkers, Jesus made no claims of his deity. It is not for Jesus to make claims for himself. It is for his believers, on the basis of personal experience, to make claims for their Lord and Saviour. However, in the records we do come across claims that Jesus made.

'I and the Father are one' (John 10:30).

'No one knoweth the Father except the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him' (Matt. 11:27).

'By me if any man enter in, he shall be saved' (John 10:9).

Similar verses can be multiplied. These claims seemed to have aroused no adverse question from the crowd, except from the self-righteous leaders of the time. From Jesus' claims, as indicated above, the Jewish leaders understood him as claiming himself to be God (cf. John 10:33). He taught as one having authority. He spoke of himself as the final judge of men (Matt. 25:31-33; Mark 13:26-27). He claimed the right to forgive sins, and did forgive sins, which only God can rightly do (Mark 2:1-12). He called for man's absolute devotion and surrender to him (Matt. 10:37; 11:28-29). Various testimonies are recorded as to the divine Sonship of Jesus. John and Paul speak of the pre-existence of Christ and of his glorious coming. All these show that Jesus is more than the most perfect man, and is God himself, incarnate in the human situation.

The main interest of the N.T. writers was not metaphysical but soteriological. John says, 'These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name' (John 20:31). Through the pages of the N.T., the authors were lifting up and proclaiming a Saviour, who by his incarnation, death and resurrection had wrought redemption for men, which they could appropriate by faith, by *bhakti*. Who can redeem except God? It is interesting to note that Christologies that deny the deity of

Christ will not have much to say about the redemptive work of Christ through his death on the cross and through his resurrection.

Jesus Christ's essential unity with God is the basis of his uniqueness. The early Church claimed uniqueness for Christ, not on the basis of comparison with other possible *avataras*, but on the basis of Christ's unity with God, and of the adequacy of the redemptive work of Christ in the life of believers. If God came down and became man, that event is bound to be unique and singular. We may agree with Dr. Radhakrishnan that there cannot be a complete manifestation of the Absolute in the world of relativity. The notion of *Kenosis* certainly implies that, in the incarnate state, we have God's manifestation only in so far as it is possible within the conditions of human existence. In the traditional Christian terminology, we are used to saying that in Jesus Christ we have the full, perfect and final revelation of God. These expressions are misleading. There is finality in what God has done in Christ—that is redemption. Since it was God, who was reconciling the world unto himself, there is no need of its repetition. But that act is being made real in the life of every believer in every age. The concept of the Holy Spirit is important at this point. 'Full revelation', as used above, does not mean that God in his fullness is exhausted in the historic Jesus Christ. What is revealed and what is done in the incarnate Christ is adequate for the redemption of man. This adequacy may be thought of in terms of finality or completeness. But, as to the total vision of God, St. Paul says, 'Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face' (1 Cor. 13:12).

In the Incarnation, we not only have a revelation of God in so far as it is possible under human conditions, but also a revelation of man as he ought to be. According to Radhakrishnan, every *avatara* is a 'manifestation in the actuality of history of what is potentially possible for every person'. 'The divine sonship of Christ is at the same time the divine sonship of every man' (*The Philosophy of S. Radhakrishnan*, p. 68). Radhakrishnan holds this view for reasons other than the Christological position outlined above. For Radhakrishnan, Jesus Christ is man made perfect. So in him he sees what is potentially possible for every man. In our view Jesus Christ is God-man. He has, as incarnate, lived a real human life under human conditions without sin. In him we see what a man can be without the dehumanizing effect of sin. There is a real difference between the two views, but we can use Radhakrishnan's concept as a point of contact for further conversation.

The two-nature doctrine of Jesus Christ as stated in the Chalcedonian formula may be irrelevant in India. However, we must maintain the unity of the person of Christ by the use of some other terms and concepts. The personality concept may offer some interesting possibilities. Dr. Surjit Singh suggests that the unity in Jesus Christ of divine and human is not a matter

of essence, but is rather relational (see *Preface to Personality*). What the Chalcedonian formula wanted to maintain was—(i) the essential unity of God and Christ in his pre-incarnate state, and (ii) the unity of the personality of Jesus Christ in the incarnate state. If the above Christology is accepted as relevant to India, then the understanding of the being of God demands a trinitarian concept. The Trinity in terms of the Nicene or Chalcedonian concepts may be meaningless in India. Those terms are foreign. However, the depth of the being of God as revealed by the fact of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit cannot be explained merely in terms of monism (*Advaita*) or in terms of *Trimurthy* (tritheism). Here again the concept of personality is helpful. C. S. Lewis, in his book, *Beyond Personality*, points out that the being of God is three-dimensional Personality, while our personality is one-dimensional. The possibility of using the term *saccidananda* is to be explored further.

In our thought, the person of Christ and the work of Christ must be held together. Jesus Christ is the Saviour of mankind. The purpose of incarnation is not merely to show an example or to be a prototype of the new creation, but to redeem, to recreate. This is the Gospel that Christians and the Christian Church are committed to proclaim. Sinful humanity stands in need of this good news. 'God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself' (2 Cor. 5:19). Can we have such an experience of reconciliation, and can we effectively proclaim it, unless we believe that in Jesus Christ it was God who was seeking to save the lost? In developing a theory of atonement, or interpreting the experience of redemption, I believe that the concept of mutual identification, mystic union, between Christ and the believer, is to be given serious consideration. In this connection we must welcome the contribution made by Appasamy and Chakkarai.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This conference has made it clear that the task of an Indian interpretation of Christology and Soteriology has been well begun, and certain clear tendencies have been established. We need to carry this movement forward. Obviously this is the task of many minds, indeed of the Church as a whole. We need to pursue further our search for appropriate terms and concepts out of the wealth of Indian philosophical and religious thought. Often we betray our inadequate understanding of the Hindu scriptures and modern interpretations of traditional concepts. We need to have an appreciative and receptive attitude, which will provide a healthy atmosphere for better understanding, and fruitful conversation and confrontation with our Hindu brethren.

In this conference, we were introduced to the writings of many Hindu thinkers, who are seeking to understand Christ

and the Christian faith. These views of Christ are very illuminating and stimulating, and we need to acquaint ourselves with them. They may offer helpful suggestions towards an Indian interpretation of Christ.

While there is immense value in interpreting Christ in terms and concepts of Indian philosophical thinking, there is another area where the Indian Church can make a real contribution to Christology. As said earlier, *dyana* and *bhakti* have a real place in Indian religious life. The experience of the worshipping Church is important. Out of this devotional life of the Church, there may come a Christology that is truly Indian. We need to explore real possibilities in this respect. In the last analysis, the finality and uniqueness of Jesus the Christ, and the adequacy of his redeeming work, will be recognized by others only as they have a correct understanding of the total N.T. witness, and as they see the living Christ in the life of the individual and in the corporate life and worship of the Church.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. V. P. Thomas is Registrar of Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur.

The Rev. D. I. Vedanayagam is a Presbyterian of the Church of South India in the Diocese in Madras.

The Rev. Duncan B. Forrester is on the staff of Madras Christian College, Tambaram.