

A Critical Evaluation of the Hindu Interpretation of Christ

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'At sundry times and in divers manners . . .'

Millions of Hindus have held Christ in great and sincere veneration. Many are the ways and channels through which the knowledge of Christ has come to them. The faithful witnessing of individual Christians, the evangelical activity of Christian Churches, the wide dissemination of the Bible and of biblical tracts, Bible correspondence courses, the influence of Christian schools and colleges, newspaper articles and radio talks written or broadcast at the occasion of Christmas and Good Friday: these are some of the more direct ways by which many Hindus came to know and revere Christ. But many more have come to know something of Christ and His message by ways more devious: all school children read the story of Christ in their manuals; students of English literature learn about Him while reading Shakespeare and Milton, Coleridge and Blake, Eliot and Auden; Tolstoy and Dostoevski have been great 'evangelists'; more and more Hindu students, technicians and officials go to Western countries and become acquainted with Christian life as lived in traditionally Christian societies. Besides, from within the Hindu society itself, some knowledge of Christ has been, is being, scattered far and wide among the Hindu masses: Rammohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen and the Brahmo Samaj last century; the writings of Swami Vivekananda, the celebration of Christmas in all the Ramakrishna Mission centres, the yearly Kalpataru festival; the influence of Gandhiji and that of Vinoba Bhave; some poems of Tagore; numerous books and articles on the life of Christ by Hindu writers; the work of some great Hindu artists: all these have fostered respect and devotion towards Christ among the Hindus.

These remarks all refer to the *explicit* knowledge of Christ and the veneration shown to Him by non-Christians. More important, I believe, but also more difficult to assess because invisible or hidden under many guises, is that knowledge of Christ which is gradually penetrating the minds and hearts of many Hindus whose religious aspirations and beliefs are undergoing a slow but profound transformation under the influence of all the Christian

ideas and examples that affect them more or less unconsciously. Hinduism has, during the last century, absorbed and assimilated into its very substance much that is proximately or remotely Christian. Even some Hindu reform movements which arose in direct opposition to Christianity have contributed to this absorption process: competition and rivalry can bring about a large amount of assimilation; and syncretism, however ultimately unsatisfactory it may be, breaks down prejudices and does away with the narrow and intolerant rejection or systematic ignorance of all that is alien to one's own orthodoxy. Hindu India is passing through a momentous crisis; there is a fermentation, a growth, a liberation from many ancient bounds; many Christian elements are leavening present-day Hinduism.

Leaving aside all these considerations about the knowledge of Christ diffuse among Hindus and the changes which, under Christian influence, are taking place within Hinduism itself, we must go even deeper and consider the beliefs and spiritual realizations traditionally associated with Hindu religious life. Can we, in the light of our Christian Faith, discover in those Hindu traditions an authentic, though *implicit*, knowledge of Christ? Christ is the Word of God, and this Word enlightens every man; God's grace is offered to all men, it has never been absent from the spiritual history of mankind; the Hindu religion has been an age-long quest, but there is no sincere and genuine quest that is not in some manner an anticipation and a discovery. Bhaktas who have extolled their Lord's infinite mercy and saving power; worshippers who have adored God as present, tangible, visible in many images and theophanies; mystics who have experienced the supernatural divinization of the finite Self; ascetics, pilgrims, contemplatives who, humbly and lovingly, have walked through many 'nights' of senses and spirit in search of the Absolute; millions of ordinary men and women who, through the faithful observance of daily rituals and sacramental ceremonies, have elevated their lives above the merely instinctive or rational plane of worldly existence: is there not in all these Hindu believers an implicit postulation, an incipient realization of the Christ? Is not the Mediator already in some manner acknowledged by all those who through the mediation of images and rites, spiritual experience, detachment, are searching for salvation and communion with God? Yes, Christ is there known 'through a glass, darkly', yet truly—known by many who do not know His Name. This knowledge of Christ is one of the constitutive elements of Hinduism at its deepest and truest level.

'Hold fast the form of sound words . . .'

When we examine critically this knowledge of Christ found among Hindus and within Hinduism itself, it is important first to remember some principles that may guide us in this work of evaluation.

First, religious traditions generally possess a certain organic unity and totality which, intimately and vitally, affects all their constitutive parts; all the various elements of a particular religion are related to a specific pattern or context; no one element can be artificially isolated from the whole and evaluated separately. We cannot dissect the living body of Hinduism and analyse in separation this or that belief, rite or practice, in the hope of discovering an exact similarity or equivalence with a Christian belief, rite or practice. Everything within Hinduism is Hindu, every part of Hinduism is organically related to the whole. In as far as the knowledge of Christ constitutes a part of traditional Hinduism or has been assimilated within the context of the beliefs and aspirations of modern Hindus, this knowledge must be 'coloured' and qualified by Hinduism.

Secondly, when two different religious or philosophical traditions are brought together in an effort of mutual understanding, there is a first and normal process of assimilation by reduction: wishing to understand, we compare, we look for similarities and establish systems of equivalences; we reduce the specific constituents of the religion we study to categories of our own. This is especially true of all translations of religious and philosophical words belonging to another tradition. When we examine the first expositions and translations of Hindu texts by European scholars last century, we find a considerable amount of such conceptual and verbal assimilation; similarly, when we read Hindu writings about Christianity. This necessary process, the first step towards mutual understanding, leads to many inexact approximations, at times to serious confusions. This is why a further, more critical, work is needed to re-examine all words and concepts used to compare different religious and philosophical traditions, relating them in the specific context of their organic unity and trying to reach the specific value and precise connotations of terms and ideas.

To illustrate what I just said by a concrete example, allow me to relate to you an incident which took place many years ago during a Parliament of World Religions held in London. Each speaker was to describe the specific contribution made by his religious tradition to world religious thought. A Christian scholar, the Russian Berdyaev, spoke of the belief in the Incarnation as the specific Christian contribution. No sooner had he finished his exposition than an irate Hindu scholar, Dr. S. N. Dasgupta, strongly objected to Berdyaev's speech and said that there was nothing specifically Christian about the belief in the Incarnation: this was, in fact, a belief widely accepted by all Hindus and, in Hinduism, there were many 'incarnations', every man was in some sense an 'incarnation'. Berdyaev answered that this quarrel was a verbal one and that, if the word 'incarnation' was used to signify something common to all men, then Christ was not an 'incarnation' and some new and specific term should be

found to express the unique nature of the central Christian Mystery.

We know that the first Christians were branded as 'atheists'; many Hindus today sincerely think that Christianity implies metaphysical 'dualism'. The New Testament writers, wishing to express their faith in the divinity of Christ, constantly refer to Him as 'the Lord'; Jesus Himself never said He was 'God'.

Some of you may have read the account of St. Francis Xavier's first preaching in the streets of Kageshima: having mastered a few words of Japanese and inquired about the right word to use when speaking of God the Creator of the Universe, he began to call his hearers to worship '*Dainichi*'. This Buddhist word is the Japanese equivalent of the Sanskrit *Vairochana*. It was quite some time before it was realized that this word was altogether inadequate and confusing; for many years after this discovery, a Portuguese word *Dios* was used by Christian preachers in Japan. Here in India, even today, we still disagree as to the propriety of the words *Bhagavan* and *Param Atmā* to signify God and the Holy Spirit. Our Christian predication is often misunderstood by Hindus: we speak of eternity and Heaven in terms of endless life and temporary paradise; we speak of the soul or spirit of man, and the only word we can use generally signifies the Self of man; when speaking of the Incarnation, we often use words that mean only the taking up of a human body. Let us not be astonished if many sincere Hindus understand but little of the unique beauty of our Christian *Kerugma*!

The 'Hindu' knowledge of Christ

It is, of course, impossible to state precisely what Hindus know of Christ; there is too much variety between the many forms and degrees in which this knowledge is found. I will only indicate a few more common traits or aspects.

For most Hindus, Christ is a *Mahāpurusha*, one of the great religious leaders of mankind; his ethical teaching, his compassion and forbearance, are acknowledged by all. Many revere Him as an *Avatāra*, one of the many theophanies which take place at different moments of history to help men on their way to the Absolute. Hindu advaitins frequently quote Christ's words: 'I and my Father are one' and see therein a vindication of their non-dualism. The Mystery of the Triune Godhead: Father, Son and Spirit, is reduced to the cosmic category of the Trimurti, the threefold personification of the Godhead's relations to the world. In fact traditional Hinduism does not know of 'persons' but only of finite manifestations of the Absolute or concrete personifications of the impersonal *Ekam-advītyam*. The purpose of Christ's mission is unintelligible in terms of Hindu tradition: for a Hindu, it is unthinkable that God should become man in order that man may become divine; redemption and the divine adoption can only mean liberation from *avidyā* and the restoration

of man to what has ever been his divine nature. The belief in the vicarious sacrifice of the Saviour ; the belief that all men, like members of one body, are mutually related in sin and in grace, death and life, is foreign to Hinduism which has always maintained the law of *karma*. Christ's life is treated by most as one of the great Myths, and the Gospels as *Purānas* in general, much importance is given to the Bethlehem story, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Crucifixion, while the Resurrection is paid no attention to. The very concept of bodily resurrection cannot fit within the Hindu context.

We must, therefore, if a fruitful 'dialogue' is to be established between Hindus and Christians, probe deeper into the more important categories which have been traditionally used by Hindu and Christian believers and thinkers. We must understand more clearly both the differences that exist between such notions and the relations that may exist between them.

Three such categories seem to me to be distinctive of Christian and Hindu thought: those of *Avatāra* and Incarnation, those of Myth and Logos, and those of Sacred and Holy. Our faith in the Incarnation is generally understood by Hindus in terms of *avatāravāda* ; the 'Logos tou Theou', the Message or Word we preach, is accepted in terms of Myth ; the Holy One, whose Name is above every name, is revered as a particular manifestation of that Sacredness which is diffused throughout the universe, one finite expression of the *Para-Brahman* which is beyond all names and forms. The mere question of verbal or conceptual categories is evidently secondary ; what primarily matters is to realize the fundamental difference of religious approach to religious Truth. To preach the divinity of Christ our Lord, His salvific work, the Holiness to which He calls us, must, if it is to bring about a response of Faith, be preceded by a patient 'dialogue' which will help us clearly to see the different significance of these truths in the Christian and the Hindu worlds of thought and belief.

I have insisted upon the difference ; of course, equally important is the relation complementariness which can be discovered between these notions and realizations. The many *avatāras* prefigure and anticipate the one Incarnation ; the many myths are all gathered up and fulfilled in the one Logos ; the sacredness of the universe is a reflection and participation in the Holiness of the Lord and Creator of the world.

Images and concepts may be inadequate, the conscious and explicit 'knowledge' may be only a prefiguration or anticipation ; yet, I believe, many Hindus already know and adore our Lord Jesus Christ, because their implicit commitment far transcends the merely representative level of their conscious awareness. Many may be like Mary Magdalene on the first Easter dawn praying and weeping before the Sepulchre: the love, the faith, the exception are all directed towards the Lord and Saviour, and Christ knows these that are His own. The Sepulchre was empty, the Risen Lord came from another direction and was at first not

recognized. But Jesus revealed Himself—'Mary'—'Rabboni!' The recognition followed, but the 'knowledge' was there before and the *bhakti* of Mary blossomed into Faith, her yearning into the joy of the Resurrection. Let us, confidently, look for this knowledge of Christ in the *sādhana* of our Hindu brethren.

During these days of study and prayer let us deepen our own understanding of the Christian knowledge of Christ and try to realize with a deeper insight the distinctly Hindu beliefs that, by God's grace, are there within the traditions of Hinduism as 'seeds of the Word'.

Before finishing, allow me once more to insist upon this recommendation of Paul to Timothy: 'Hold fast the form of sound words.' Let there be no confusion or lack of precision of our efforts to express our Christian Message. The realization that Christ is there in our Hindu brethren and that His truth already leavens their religious beliefs should not make us forget that our Christian Faith is not a merely human belief, that an 'anonymous Christian' does not possess the Peace and the joy and the Fulness which the Spirit gives to those who have been gathered into the new People of God, that the Hidden Christ already known and loved by millions of Hindus is still to be revealed to them in the glorious light of the Gospel. Let there be among us no 'quarrel of words': Let us go beyond mere conceptual discussions, let us try humbly and lovingly to express in terms of existential and personal life-giving truth the Mystery which was hidden but is now made known in Christ.

Synopsis

1. *Hindus' knowledge of Christ*

Explicit :

- knowledge directly received from Christian predication ;
- knowledge indirectly gathered by contact with Christian culture and society ;
- knowledge spread by Hindu admirers of Christ.

Implicit :

- Christian ideas and values absorbed by Hinduism in recent times ;
- the Christian postulations and anticipations of traditional Hinduism.

2. *Principles of critical evaluation*

- (a) religious ideas must be understood within the whole context of the religious tradition to which they belong ;
- (b) mutual encounter between two religions brings about a first process of inadequate approximations and reductions.

Illustrations :

If, according to Hindus, all men are 'incarnations', then we must tell them that Christ was not an 'incarnation' ;

the 'atheism' of the first Christians, the 'dualism' of Christians as understood by Hindus ; words and concepts to signify God, the Holy Spirit, eternal life, heaven, the soul of man, etc.

3. *Critical consideration of the Hindu 'knowledge of Christ'*

Christ is a Mahāpurusha, an Avatāra . . .

Trinity and Trimūrti . . .

Redemption and adoption vs. liberation and restoration . . .

Vicarious sacrifice and the Law of Karma . . .

History of Myth . . .

Resurrection . . .

Special consideration of three groups of concepts:

Avatāra and Incarnations ;

Myths and Logos ;

Sacred and Holy.

Relational complementariness of different beliefs.

Conscious and representative knowledge vs. real commitment and belief.

Conclusion

Need of precise expression ; need of going beyond more verbal and conceptual understanding.