

## HINDU ĀVATĀRA AND CHRISTIAN INCARNATION: INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AFTER PEDRO ARRUPE

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### Introduction:

Pedro Arrupe and Interreligious Dialogue

The Advantages of Comparison

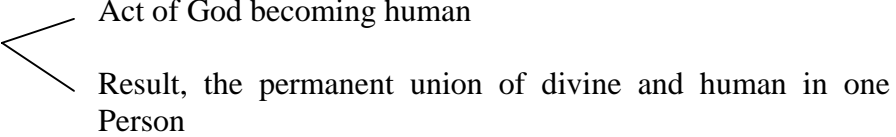
### I. The Development of the Doctrine in the Two Traditions

#### (a) Hinduism

- Etymology: *ava* (down) + *tī* (to cross) = descent. Most typical of Vaiṣṇavism.
- The doctrine in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (4. 5-9): to protect the good, destroy the wicked, restore righteousness. The body of *avatāras* is (1) real and (2) made up of imperfect matter or *prakṛti*. *Prakṛti* consists of the three *guṇas*: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Only later on the idea of *śuddha-sattva* or “pure-matter” developed.
- Ten standard *avatāras*: the Fish, the Tortoise, the Boar, the Man-Lion, the Dwarf, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, the Buddha and Kalkin: animal, animal-human, human forms. Also plant and stone forms.
- Full and partial *avatāras*.
- The five forms of Viṣṇu: (1) *Para* (Highest), (2) *Vyūha* (Grouped): Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, (3) *Vibhava* or *Avatāra*, (4) *Antaryāmin* (Inner Controller), (5) *Arcāvatāra* (Descent for the sake of worship [*arcā*]). Sometimes 2-5 are all considered as *avatāras*: *Vyūhāvatāra*, *Antaryāmin-avatāra* and *Arcāvatāra*
- Primary (*mukhya*) *avatāras* or *Sākṣād-avatāras* are Viṣṇu himself. Secondary (*gauna*) *avatāras* or *Aveśa-avatāras* are creatures into whom Viṣṇu enters for a particular purpose.
- Various founders and saints as *avatāras*
  - ↳ Mira Richard – Paris, of Egyptian parents
  - ↳ Meher Baba – Parsi, *avatāra* of Christ
  - ↳ Satya Sai Baba – *avatāra* of Christ and Shrdi Sai Baba

- Theories: (1) Viṣṇuization (2) Divinization (3) Composite Personality: child god – adolescent lover – prince.

(b) Christianity

- Etymology: *in + caro* (flesh) = enfleshment.
- Incarnation 
  - Act of God becoming human
  - Result, the permanent union of divine and human in one Person
- The New Testament: a functional approach: life and activities of Christ: (a) Ascending Christology: Philippians 2: 6-11: (1) Preexistence (Divine) of Word (2) emptying of himself (3) glorification; (b) Descending Christology: human being who was glorified: worked miracles, was crucified, but in the end glorified: Acts of the Apostles 2.22-36, 5.30-32.
- Early and Medieval Church: metaphysical approach: the being of Christ.
  - (1) The ‘Word-Flesh’ Christology of Alexandria: emphasis on the Divine Word, while the humanity was underplayed. Preserved the unity of the Person of Christ, but not so much the duality of two natures (divine and human). Christ’s humanity is body only, not soul.
  - (2) The ‘Word-Human Being’ Christology of Antioch: tendency to consider Christ’s humanity as subsisting in itself, so only a moral or accidental unity between the Word and the humanity of Christ. Preserved the duality of natures, but not so much the unity of Christ. Full humanity, body and soul.
  - (3) Council of Chalcedon (451 CE): synthesis of Alexandrian and Antiochene: two natures united in one person. One Subject or Person (*hypostasis*), but two natures. Christ’s human nature has a human soul and a human body.
  - (4) The Third Council of Constantinople (681 CE): in Christ there are two wills and two operations, divine and human.

The union of the divine and human natures, subsisting in the one Person of the Word is called Hypostatic Union.

- Implications or Consequences of this hypostatic union:
  - (1) The divine Sonship of the human Jesus: the human Jesus is the true Son of God, and not merely an adoptive Son.
  - (2) The possibility of worshipping Jesus in his human nature since it is hypostatically united with the Word.
  - (3) Cross-predication: attributing to Christ the human being the predicates that are proper to the divine, and to Christ the divine the predicates that are proper of the

human nature. E.g., one can say “God suffered and died” or “Jesus is creator”, since there is only one Person or Subject, but one cannot say “divinity [the divine nature] died” or “Christ’s humanity is creator”.

- (4) Jesus’ human nature is *de jure*, and not just *de facto*, holy and sinless because of its intimate union with the Word, in whom it subsists. Hence it is worthy of adoration: it is adored not for its own sake and merely as flesh, but as united to the Word.
- Depending on their Alexandrian or Antiochene orientations, theologians also discuss such other questions as the following:
    - (1) Given the fact of the hypostatic union, *how* exactly can two complete natures (divine and human) be united in one being?
    - (2) How can God remain unchanged in himself and yet be subject to suffering and death?
    - (3) In connection with Jesus’ self-consciousness and knowledge: Does he have a human psychological ego (as distinct from the one metaphysical ego of the Logos) in addition to the divine ego? Did he enjoy the beatific vision? Did he possess infused knowledge? Did he acquire knowledge, as human beings do?
    - (4) In connection with Jesus’ human will: How does one maintain Jesus’ freedom together with his sinlessness? Even though he was sinless, did temptation exercise an attraction on him?
    - (5) In connection with Jesus’ divine and human operations: how does the divine nature operate through Christ’s humanity: does his humanity exercise moral causality or is it a mere instrument?
    - (6) Similarly there has been discussion on the necessity of the incarnation: some, like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, hold that, had human beings not sinned, there would have been no incarnation. Others, like Irenaeus and Duns Scotus, claim that the incarnation was part of God’s plan even before sin came into the world: Christ was to be the crowning glory of creation.
  - Other ways of perceiving Jesus Christ in the Christian Tradition: Three groups:
    - (A) Views that challenge or diminish Jesus’ full humanity:
      - (1) Gnosticism: According to Gnosticism there is a radical dualism between spirit and matter, which is evil. Hence God cannot assume a human body.
      - (2) Docetism: Christ is divine but only appears to be human; he is not really human.
      - (3) Apollinarianism: Christ is human, but does not have a human soul;
      - (4) Monophysitism: Before the incarnation there were two natures: divine and human; but after the incarnation there remains only one divine nature, since the human nature is absorbed into the divine nature;

- (5) Monotheletism: Christ has only one, divine, will; he has no human will;
- (6) Monenergism: There is only one, divine, action in Christ; he has no human operation.

(B) Doctrines that deny the divinity of Christ:

- (1) Ebionism: Christ did not pre-exist and is not divine.
- (2) Arianism: Christ has a human dignity superior to all others, but he still remains a creature, subordinate to the divine. Cf. Unitarians.

(C) Understandings that do not maintain the hypostatic union:

- (1) Adoptionism: By nature Jesus was only human, but at his baptism he was adopted as God's Son. Hence the human nature of Christ does not have its foundation in the Second Person of the Trinity.
- (2) The *habitus* view: The Word assumed humanity as a garment.
- (3) The *assumptus-homo* doctrine: The Word assumed a complete human nature and therefore a human person too.

Thus, (1) some stressed the divine over the human (2) others emphasized the human over the divine (3) a third group maintained only a moral or accidental unity of the two. natures (4) and the Catholic view is: two natures hypostatically united in the one Person of the Word.

## II. Comparison

### (a) Similarities

Both are immanent yet transcendent [not bound by all laws of nature (e.g., walking on waters), miraculous conception and birth] and free (not bound by sin or *karman*). God loves the world. The world is important. Both speak of selfless involvement in the welfare of the world. Jesus comes to establish a kingdom of justice and peace, he heals lepers, is a friend of tax collectors. Similarly, on the Hindu side, we have the idea of the *Rāma-rājya* (the reign of Rāma); the idea of God being actively involved in the world (cf. *The Gitā*): Tilak, Gandhi. In both, human beings are raised to a higher dignity: adopted sons and daughters of God; Aurobinodo's and Radhakrishnan's interpretations of *avatāras*.

Sometimes the two concepts have been misused by people with vested interests: e.g., the oppression of Dravidians by Aryans; Christ has been linked with military conquests, colonization, destruction of cultures, intolerance, exploitation of the poor. Vāmana; Rāma & Rāvaṇa; Paraśurāma: brahmins over kṣatriyas, and then Rāma vs. Paraśurāma: kṣatriyas over brahmins.

In an open letter to Pope John-Paul II when he visited Peru, representatives from different indigenous movements wrote the following:

John Paul II, we, Andean and American Indians, have decided to take advantage of your visit to return to you your Bible, since in five centuries it has not given us love, peace or justice.

Please take back your Bible and give it back to our oppressors, because they need its moral teachings more than we do. Ever since the arrival of Christopher Columbus a culture, a language, religion and values which belong to Europe have been imposed on Latin America by force.

The Bible came to us as part of the imposed colonial transformation. It was the ideological weapon of this colonialist assault. The Spanish sword which attacked and murdered the bodies of Indians by day and night became the cross which attacked the Indian soul.<sup>1</sup>

## (b) Differences

1. There are many and repeated *avatāras*, while Christ comes only once.

- This is in keeping with the respective cyclic 
 $\left\langle \begin{array}{l} \text{evolution and dissolution} \\ \text{rebirth} \end{array} \right.$ 
 and linear view: towards a final goal, therefore once and for all.
- In Christianity God manifests himself in the form of fire, etc. Similarly there are several appearances of the Risen Christ, but these are not incarnations, not new enfleshments.
- The Second Coming of Christ (His return in glory to judge the world, punish the wicked and reward the just): but Christ does not abandon his risen body. On the other hand, *avatāras* abandon their bodies. Exceptions: E.g., in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism *avatāras* are eternal. Still there is a difference: many eternal *avatāras* vs one in Christianity.
- St. Thomas Aquinas: Many and repeated incarnations are possible: (1) the other two Persons could have become incarnate; (2) possible for all three Persons to assume one and the same human nature, or (3) possible for a Person to take up more than one human nature. This possibility brings the Christian concept of incarnation closer to the Hindu one.
- Some theologians also speak of the possibility of another incarnation on another planet or another galaxy.

2. *Avatāras* and incarnation are both real. But the former are perfect, the latter is imperfect.

- In the *Gītā* the *avatāra* is imperfect, because his body is made up of imperfect *prakṛti*, but in later texts the *avatāra* is perfect. In *Gītā*: unlike Christ, Kṛṣṇa is not

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Pablo Richard, "1492: The Violence of God and the Future of Christianity," *Concilium* 1990, no.6 (December): 66.

hypostatically united with *prakṛti*, and he has no human soul: no union between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*.

- In later Vaiṣṇavite texts, God cannot be imperfect. No imperfection in *avatāras* because they have bodies made of perfect ‘pure matter’ (*śuddha-sattva*), which is made up of the six transcendental or perfect *guṇas*,<sup>2</sup> and not the three imperfect *guṇas* of *prakṛti*. On the other hand, Christ is subject to hunger, thirst, suffering, etc. since he has an imperfect human nature. The *suffering* Christ brings salvation.

The mystery of the incarnation: how can God be both perfect (as God) and imperfect (as human being)

- Although Christ has imperfections, he does not have the imperfection of sin. After his resurrection he is no more subject to human needs: he is able to pass through walls. Although he eats (to show that he is alive), he does not need to eat. In fact, the Christian understanding is that even ordinary people will not have such needs after their resurrection. Even before his resurrection, Christ does not have the imperfection of sin [according to the Catholic Church, human beings commit at least venial sin] but that does not make him any the less real.
  - Similarly, Mary is conceived without original sin and yet is a real human being. Hence it is possible (from the example of Christ) to conceive of a real incarnation, but without any of the imperfections pertaining to the human form.
  - Distinction between ‘real’ and ‘historical’: *Avatāra* is real but not historical. Christ is both real and historical. To be historical is to be subject to time (which is due to matter), to imperfections.
    - Is Kṛṣṇa or Rāma historical? Gautama Buddha not “historical” for Hindus. Christ is historical. However, God the Father and the Holy Spirit are not historical, but they are nevertheless real. Similarly, the *avatāra* is real, but not historical.
  - Soul-body in Hinduism (unlike Christianity): Soul does not really suffer; only because of mistaken identity of the soul with the body that it imagines that it suffers.
3. *Avatāras* have different purposes and, unlike the incarnation, not every *avatāra* grants ultimate salvation
- Not every *avatāra* grants salvation: e.g., Narasimha saves his devotee Prahlāda from persecution; Buddha is generally said to mislead the wicked (Buddhists).

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<sup>2</sup> These six *guṇas* are: *jñāna* (omniscience), *aiśvarya* (activity based on independent lordship) *śakti* (ability to become the material cause of the world), *bala* (force, i.e., absence of fatigue in producing the world), *vīrya* (virility, i.e., changelessness in spite of being the cause of the world), and *tejas* (self-sufficient splendour, i.e., without dependence on any other in producing the world); see Schrader, *Introduction to the Pāñcarātra*, pp. 36-39, 55.

- Christ comes primarily, if not exclusively, to bring salvation, and that too, through the Cross.
- Both come also to bring justice and freedom in the world, in addition to salvation in the next world.

Liberation theologians

*Avatāras* more liberative, often through violence:

PARADOX: { Christianity: Christ non-violent; Christianity violent  
Hinduism: *Avatāras* violent, Hinduism non-violent

- Some apparently unethical behaviour on the part of *avatāras* is explained away by Hindus. The problem of evil in Hinduism (something positive for which God is also responsible) and Christianity (a privation, for which God is not responsible).
- More differences; eg., *avatāra* manifests the Absolute; incarnation manifest Trinity.

### III. Conclusion

Not so incompatible as may appear at first sight. Differences spring from different world views.

- Different kinds of God's presence: omnipresence, in holy places and events, presence of Christ in the Eucharist and of the deity in an image, presence in our hearts. *Avatāra* and incarnation: a-historical and historical presence. Each presence has different implications: importance to matter in Christianity, but not so in Hinduism.
- The similarities help better self-understanding as well as mutual understanding. We begin to see how our doctrines fit into our worldview (cyclic, linear); involvement in the world, not running away, etc.
- Complementarity can take place in two ways:
  - (A) The other tradition doing something that is proper of one's own tradition.
    1. Hindus taking the baby Kṛṣṇa or Rāma more seriously than Christians take the baby Jesus: this can inspire Christians to take the Child Jesus more seriously.
    2. The ideal of working for the welfare of people is present in Hinduism, but its implementation is more prominent in Christianity. This can inspire Hindus to

rediscover the value of social welfare and thus carry out the teaching of Kṛṣṇa, and establish the kingdom of Rāma.

(B) Due to contrasting world views.

1. The Hindu *avatāra* doctrine can be a healthy corrective to the overemphasis on the historical in some contemporary Christologies.
2. The Christian conviction can contribute to Hinduism a deeper sense of history and commitment to the world, helping it to discover the redemptive and healing values of suffering. (Gandhi used Christian idea of suffering).

Thus the ongoing mutual encounter of the two concepts of *avatāra* and incarnation will help adherents of the two traditions to better bridge the gulf between God and humanity, heaven and earth, and the sacred and the profane.