

WITNESSING CHRIST IN THE COMPANY OF HINDUS

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This paper envisages a perspective that 'Mission to People of Other Faiths' can be reconceived today as 'Witnessing Christ in the Company of People of Other Faiths'. The first section clarifies the significance of this shift of emphasis and submits it to the august participants of Edinburgh 2010 for approval as a direction for mission-thinking in the days to come. The second and third sections are specifically on witnessing Christ in the company of Hindus. Indian Christian thinkers had and are having numerous dialogues with Hindus and their faith experiences and diverse enriching affirmations of Christian faith have emerged as a result of this and the second section indicates the highlights of a few of these. The third section is on the contributions of a few Hindu witnesses to Christ, specifically Neo-Vedantic understandings and interpretations of Jesus. Finally we provide some concluding observations.

THE RATIONALE FOR WITNESSING CHRIST IN THE COMPANY OF PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

The religious experiences of the people of other faiths may have to help us Christians in understanding and experiencing new dimensions of meanings regarding the person and function of Jesus, regarding the gospel. With humility we may have to accept that there are certain dimensions of meanings regarding Jesus and the gospel which are unfamiliar to us or which are not known to us and people of other faiths can explain them to us. The meaning of Christ and the Christian gospel has to emerge in a process of an inter-religious communication. People from diverse religio-cultural backgrounds will, in terms of their contexts, decide the content of the gospel.¹

The process of hermeneutics or understanding and interpretation is important here. It is the hermeneutical context or the contextual socio-politico-religio-cultural realities which decide the content of our knowledge and experience of the Gospel. Knowledge is formulated in the very knowing process and understanding the Gospel of God in Jesus is a continuous integrated non-dual divine-human process. Nothing is pre-given or pre-formulated. We cannot accept some timeless interpretation from somewhere and make it applicable to our context. Understanding and interpretation belongs exclusively to us and to our context, and there is the possibility for the emergence of new meanings of the gospel in the processes of this.² One important aspect of the Asian/Indian context is religious pluralism and the Christian pilgrimage is progressive integration of the truth that is revealed to others in one's own experience of the story of Jesus. We have a duty to identify the glorious ways in which God's revelations are available to us in other

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¹ K. Aleaz, *Some Indian Theological Reflections*, Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2007, 68.

² K. Aleaz, *The Gospel of Indian Culture*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1994, 177-282.

religious experiences which can help in our experience of new dimensions of meanings of the gospel of God in Jesus.³ Rather than evaluating other religious experiences in terms of pre-formulated criteria, we have to allow ourselves to be evaluated by them in our understanding of the gospel. They in Holy Spirit will provide us with new meanings of the person and function of Jesus, rather than we dictate to them always. From particular Jesus we have to come to a universal Jesus.⁴ Universal Jesus belongs to the whole of humanity in Holy Spirit. Here there is growth and newness in the very content of the conception of the person and function of Jesus emerging.

Here we are challenged to evolve a more comprehensive role for other religious experiences in Christian experience than what has been envisaged in the past. To reduce the role of religions to liberational praxis is a reductionism. To reduce the interpretation of religions solely in terms of Folk tales again would be a reductionism. Of course our focus should be the people, as has been emphasized by the Asian theologians. How the comprehensive religious life of people of other faiths is related to the gospel of God in Jesus is the basic question to be answered in the third millennium.⁵

There is a suggestion here for a relational convergence of religious experiences. An important aspect of relational convergence of religious experiences is mutual conversion. Being born in a religion does not mean that we should die in that religion in the same way as we were born. We can get converted into the true spirit of one's own religion and in that very conversion get converted into another religious experience as well. The faith experience of an Indian Christian is not pre-formulated, but is in a process of formulation through the guidance of Hindu and other religious experiences. Indian Christian theology is a conversion of Christian theology to the Indian religio-cultural context. In the very conversion to Jesus in India, there is a conversion to the religio-cultural context of India, effecting thus a double conversion and this points to the possible relational convergence of religious experiences. Religious conflicts are transcended in such an understanding of conversion.⁶

This points to a perspective in inter-religious relations in which all the religious resources of the world are conceived as the common property of the whole humanity. All religious experiences and traditions are simultaneously ours. We do not have any one particular religious tradition alone as our own and others as belonging to others. All are mine as well as all are for all others. All belong to all. It is a religious perspective in which while remaining in one's own religious faith-experience, one can consider other faiths as one's own, as the common property of humanity, for an increasingly blessed and enriched life. It should be noted that if one is intimately familiar with one's own religious system alone,

³ Cf. K. Aleaz, *An Indian Jesus from Sankara's Thought*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1997.

⁴ K. Aleaz, *The Role of Pramanas in Hindu-Christian Epistemology*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1991, 99-100.

⁵ K. Aleaz, *Religions in Christian Theology*, Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2001, 183-208.

⁶ K. Aleaz, *Theology of Religions. Birmingham papers and Other Essays*, Calcutta: Moumita, 1998, 339-353.

that is a very religiously poverty stricken condition. Here the affirmation is of an inter-connected identity and uniqueness of each of the religious experiences as our own.⁷

HIGHLIGHTS ON CHRISTIAN DIALOGUES WITH HINDU FAITH-EXPERIENCES

Indian Christian thinkers, some of them converts from Hindu faith, since the second half of 19th c., had numerous dialogues with Hindu faith-experiences and in the light of these articulated Christian theological reflections on God and Jesus Christ in diverse ways and these reflections are part of the glorious history of Indian Christian theological heritage. These theological reflections are providing new creative insights regarding the Gospel today. New dimensions of meanings regarding the person and function of Jesus are emerging through these reflections. In terms of these reflections Christians are able to witness Christ in the company of Hindus today. There are interpretations on Trinity as *Saccidananda* as well as on the Christian notion of God as corresponding to *Nirguna* Brahman. Christ is interpreted in diverse ways such as God's appearance in the midst of appearances, embodiment of supreme self-sacrifice, one who has to be placed in Ultimate Reality, who enables us to return to unity and who eliminated *avidya* (ignorance), a case of *vivarta*, as theocentric; as extrinsic denominator (*upadhi*), name and form (*namarupa*), the effect (*karya*) of Brahman as well as the reflection (*abhasa*), pervasion, illumination, unification and delimitation of Brahman in creation, as *Istadevata*, *Ishvara*, *Avatara*, Initiator of new creation and the *True Prajapati*.⁸

To speak of Brahman as *Saccidananda* means that Brahman knows Himself/Herself and from that self-knowledge proceeds His/Her eternal beatitude. Brahman is related of necessity only to the Infinite Image of His/Her own being, mirrored in the ocean of His/Her knowledge. This relation of Being (*Sat*) to Itself in self-knowledge (*Cit*) is one of perfect harmony, bliss (*Ananda*). The Christian doctrine of God as Trinity is exactly the same as the Vedantic conception of Brahman as *Saccidananda*, because in the Trinity the Father's knowledge is fully satisfied by the cognition of the *Logos*, the Infinite Image of his Being, begotten by thought and mirrored in the ocean of his substance and his love finds the fullest satisfaction in the boundless complacency with which he reposes on his Image and breathes forth the Spirit of bliss.⁹ *Saccidananda* is communion of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. It is in Father's self-awareness and presence to Himself in the Son, that everything that is has come to be. Son as he is representative Son of man, is the representation of the created beings in *Cit*; the created beings awake to Being through the Son. *Ananda*, the Holy Spirit is the expression of love in God, love between God and

⁷ Aleaz, *Theology of*, 176-180; W. C. Smith, *Faith and Belief*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 11; *Towards a World Theology. Faith and Contemporary History of Religion*, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981, 4-21; 38-44.

⁸ K. Aleaz, *Dialogical Theologies: Hartford Papers and Other Essays*, Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2004, 111-126.

⁹ Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, "A Vedantic Parable", *Sophia*, Vol.V, No. 8, Aug. 1898, 119; "An Exposition of Catholic Beliefs Compared with the Vedanta", *Sophia*, Vol.V, No.1, Jan. 1898, 11; "Our New Canticle", *Sophia*, Vol. V, No.10, Oct.1898, 146.

humans and love between humans.¹⁰ *Nirguna* Brahman corresponds to Absolute Personality and does not mean impersonal, abstract, unconscious Being. It means that the attributes which relate the Infinite to the finite are not necessary to His/Her being. Therefore it correctly corresponds to the Christian notion of God.¹¹

Jesus Christ is God's appearance in the midst of appearances. In Christ the absolutely transcendental God serves Himself/Herself from Himself/Herself to produce the appearance and to become appearance.¹² The event of Jesus as Christ has to be placed in the Ultimate Reality.¹³ Creation is a case of vivarta as Brahman remains unchanged by effecting the world and similarly Christ's Incarnation is also a case of vivarta because when the divine Logos takes unto Himself/Herself the human nature the novelty which follows this actuation is entirely on the side of the human nature.¹⁴ There is a progress possible from 'Christo-monism' to a theo-centric Christology.¹⁵

Renunciation or Love and Sacrifice which Christ has taught us through his life are the same as giving up duality to find the God behind it. The death on the Cross of Jesus Christ can be experienced and expounded as dying to the body and ego as well as the material world.¹⁶ In understanding the work of Christ people from Hindu background are unable to find meaning in the idea of expiation and juridical justification, rather the function of Jesus is experienced as releasing precious life for humanity and making people his devotees. The role of Christ is not of one that mediates the propitiatory requirement to satisfy a righteous God. Rather, the mediatory potency of Christ is that of a potency of the most decisive paradigm case of radical recentring and self-knowledge. Jesus' acknowledgement of the divine Self as his true Self was so complete and his recentring so maximal that in and through his life, death and continuing presence in the faith of the believing community a potency for the self-realization is released.¹⁷ Jesus is the initiator of new creation. Christian faith is not primarily a doctrine of salvation but the announcement of the advent of a new creative order in Jesus. The good news is the birth of Jesus and the problem of the Christian is to reproduce him. Christianity is not a

¹⁰ Swami Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda. A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1974, 79-80, 82, 88, 91, 95, 97, 98, 176-79, 184-85; *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point. Within the Cave of the Heart*, Bombay/Bangalore: The Institute of Indian Culture/CISRS, 1969, xiv, 80, 96-97.

¹¹ B. Upadhyaya, "Notes", *Sophia*, Vol. I, No. 2, June 23, 1900, 7; Johannis, "To Christ through the Vedanta", *Light of the East*, Vol. I, No.1, Oct. 1922-Vol.XII, No. 7, April 1934; R. V. De Smet, "Categories of Indian Philosophy and Communication of the Gospel", *Religion and Society*, Vol. X, No. 3, Sept. 1963, 20-26.

¹² Cf. Carl Keller, "The Vedanta Philosophy and the message of Christ", *The International Review of Missions*, Vol. 42, 1953, 377-89.

¹³ J. G. Arapura, "The Use of Indian Philosophical Traditions in Christian Thought", *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 29, No.2, April-June 1980, 68-71.

¹⁴ R. V. De Smet, "Materials for an Indian Christology", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XII, No. 4, Dec. 1965, 11-13.

¹⁵ S. J. Samartha, *The Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism*, Madras: CLS, 1981, 8-12.

¹⁶ Cf. Kalagara Subba Rao, *The Outpouring of My Heart* (translation into English of his Telugu compositions, ed. By C. D. Airan), Guntur: Shrimathy Parripati Sita Mahalakshmi Satya Narayan, 1964.

¹⁷ D. D. Hudson, "Hindu and Christian Theological Parallels in the Conversion of H. A. Krishna Pillai. 1857-1859", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 40, June 1972, 196-205; Christopher Duraisingh, "Reflection on Theological Hermeneutics in the Indian Context", *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 31, Nos. 3 & 4, July-Dec. 1982, 271-75.

juridical problem but a problem in genetics. There is no gulf between God and Humans. God and human person have met in Jesus; not merely met, but fused and mingled into one. To be Christian is to gain this consciousness and this sense of harmonious blend with the divine.¹⁸ We can understand and experience the person of Jesus as the extrinsic denominator (*upadhi*), name and form (*namarupa*), effect (*karya*) as well as the reflection (*abhasa*) and delimitation (*ghatakasah*) of Brhman. We can understand and experience the function of Jesus as to manifest the all-pervasive (*sarvagatatvam*), illuminative (*vyotih*) and unifying (*ekikrtya*) power of the Supreme Atman, as to manifest that the Supreme Brahman as Pure Consciousness (*prajnanaghanam*) is the Witness (*saksi*) and Self of all (*sarvatma*) and as to manifest the eternally present (*nityasiddhasvabhavam*) human liberation.¹⁹ The Fall is our fall into the present mode of consciousness, where everything is divided, centered on itself and set in conflict with others. Sin is alienation from our real Self; it is to fall into a separate, divided self. Redemption-atonement is the return to unity; it is awakening to our true being in the Word. In Jesus the sin which brought a divided consciousness into the world is overcome, and nature and humans are restored to their original unity with God.²⁰ Hindu Faith has the conception of sin as avidya i.e., the ascription of a false autonomy to created being. Christ has brought us redemption in the sense that he became the very antithesis of self-assertion taking upon himself all the consequence of human assertion of a false autonomy, even unto death on the cross and drawing the whole creation back to the full recognition of its dependence on its source, the Parent God.²¹

Christ can be conceived as the *True Prajapati* as the Vedas explain to us that *Purusa*, who is later conceived as *Prajapati*, the Lord of creation, sacrificed himself for the Devas, i.e., emancipated mortals.²² The Christ of Hinduism is hidden and unknown. Isvara is the unknown Christ of Hinduism. The role of *Isvara* in Vedanta corresponds functionally to the role of Christ in Christian thought.²³ Fundamentally the Hindu doctrine of Avatara is akin to the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, the distinctiveness being Christ is the Incarnation of the whole Being of God for all times and he came to redeem the sinners.²⁴ It has also been pointed out that the place of Jesus Christ in the Hindu religious heritage of India is as one of the *Ishta Devatas* or chosen deities or favorite deities. Hinduism readily grants such a place to Jesus Christ. From the side of a disciple of Jesus what is needed is, he/she must not deny other mediators between God and humans, other experiences of God's presence in the human heart, the validity of other

¹⁸ Chenchiah, "Jesus and Non-Christian Faith", in *Rethinking Christianity in India*, ed. By G. V. Job et al, Madras: A. N. Sundarisanam, 1938, 49, 54-55, 58-60; "Christian Message in a Non-Christian World. A Review of Dr. Kraemer's Book", in *Ibid.*, pp 16-17, 19, 21-24, 26-27, 35-36, 42-43.

¹⁹ Cf. K. Aleaz, *An Indian Jesus from Sankara's Thought; & Christian Thought Through Advaita Vedanta*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996.

²⁰ Cf. Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, London: Fount Paperback, 1978.

²¹ Cf. Sara Grant, *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian*, Bangalore: Asian Publishing House, 1991.

²² Cf. K. Aleaz, (com & Intro.), *From Exclusivism to Inclusivism. The Theological Writings of Krishna Mohan Banerjee (1813-1885)*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1999.

²³ Cf. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism. Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981.

²⁴ A. J. Appasamy, *The Gospel and India's Heritage*, London & Madras: SPCK, 1942, 256-58, 75-93; V. Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, Madras: CLS, 1930.

Ishta Devatas. Such denials lie outside the positive experience of the Christians and therefore have no validity. As we have the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, others have their own Lords and Saviours. The theory of multiple avatars is theologically the most accommodating attitude in a pluralistic setting.²⁵

A HINDU WAY OF WITNESSING CHRIST

In the Indian Renaissance of 19th and 20th centuries, numerous people of other faiths, especially Hindus, have acknowledged the religious and ethical significance of Jesus for them in diverse ways and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen and Mahatma Gandhi are some of the prominent figures among them. Ram Mohan was all for the ethical teachings of Jesus. Keshub was the pioneer in conceiving Trinity as Saccidananda in terms of the three functions of the one God. Gandhiji very much appreciated the life of Jesus centered on renunciation and he received enormous inspiration from the Sermon on the Mount for his own life and work.²⁶ We in this paper shall specially focus upon the Neo-Vedantic way of witnessing Christ.²⁷

We can identify a development in the conception of the person of Christ in Neo-Vedanta. The later Neo-Vedantins Swamijis Akhilananda²⁸, Prabhavananda²⁹ and Ranganathananda³⁰ are more emphatic on the role of Jesus as an Incarnation as distinguished from an individual human person. According to them, Jesus is one of the *avataras* or the descents of God, born without *karmas* and above *maya*. An *avatara* has the unique power to transmit spirituality, transform human lives by touch, look or wish, and reveal divinity through transfiguration. There is an important difference even between saints and incarnations. Whereas saints are at first bound souls who later became illumined, the incarnations are the veritable embodiments of divine light and power from the very beginning of their lives. As a divine incarnation, Jesus had much compassion and the power to redeem. Also, as an incarnation Jesus was a *yogi* of the highest type who practiced all the yogas namely *karma*, *bhakti*, *raja*, and *jnana*. Jesus as an incarnation had constant vision of God and through *samadhi* he realized the identity and unity of the individual self with the Supreme Self.

²⁵ S. K. George, *Gandhi's Challenge to Christianity*, 2nd Edition, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1947, 48; S. J. Samartha, *One Christ-Many Religions. Towards a Revised Christology*, Bangalore: SATHRI, 1992, p142-50.

²⁶ Cf. M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, Madras/Bangalore: CLS/CISRS, 1970.

²⁷ For a detailed study on the subject Cf. K. Aleaz, *Jesus in Neo-Vedanta. A Meeting of Hinduism and Christianity*, Delhi: Kant Publications, 1995.

²⁸ Swami Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1949.

²⁹ Swami Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, Second Indian Edition, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1979.

³⁰ Swami Ranganathananda, *The Christ we Adore*, Fourth Impression, Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1969.

But, we should note that in the earlier Neo-Vedantins like Swamijis Vivekananda³¹, Abhedananda³² and S. Radhakrishnan³³ the emphasis is more on presenting Jesus as an ideal, perfect human person. The difference between a human person and Christ is a difference in manifestation; but as Absolute Being there is no difference between the two. The resources of God which were available to Jesus are open to all and if we struggle as he did, we will develop the God in us. What Jesus does is setting an example, by showing the path of perfection. True, those earlier Neo-Vedantins also had no problem in worshipping Jesus as Divine; as one who reveals the Absolute, as a herald of truth on earth. So we can say that Neo-Vedanta keeps a balance between following the path shown by Christ and worshipping him. Jesus is simultaneously a Divinity for us to worship and an ideal for us to imitate.

Though Neo-Vedantic Christology may agree that as a divine incarnation Jesus has the power to redeem, transmit spirituality and transform human lives, according to it this is realized not in the way the Christian Church conceives the atonement. In Neo-Vedantic view, the Christian doctrines, especially the doctrine of atonement goes against the spirit of Jesus³⁴. What Jesus does is to show us the way to become perfect, to show us our true nature which is divine, to bring us to realization which involves the regaining of the lost selfhood³⁵. Cross³⁶ signifies dying to the lower self and resurrection means rising to the higher universal Self. Cross is the expression of spiritual power or soul force through which alone we can conquer evil. Cross is the very perfection of the teaching of non-resistance of evil. Resurrection³⁷ affirms that human person is really spirit. Resurrection

³¹ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. I-VIII Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1968-1972.

³² Swami Abhedananda, *Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda* (in ten Volumes), Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1967.

³³ S Radhakrishnan, "Reply to Critics" in *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, ed. by Paul Arthur Schilpp, New York: Tudor Publishing House, 1952, 807-809; *Eastern Religion and Western Thought*, second Ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1940, 32, 53.

³⁴ Swami Ranganathananda, *The Christ We Adore*, 44-48;

³⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vols. I, 328, 341, 381, 468; Vol. II, 307, 481; Vol. V, 293; Vol. VI, 98-99; Vol. VII, 4, 7, 29, 72, 76, 88-89; Vol. VIII, 141, 190, 262.

³⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, 97, 184, *The Heart of Hindustan*, Madras: G. A. Natesan & Co., 1932, 120; "Fellowship of the Spirit" (Address at the Centre for the Study of World Religion, Harvard, 1961) in *Radhakrishnan Reader. An Anthology* ed. By Nagaraja Rao et al., Bombay: Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan, 1969, 468-69; Swami Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, 179, 183, 189, 195, 197; Swami Satprakashananda, *Hinduism and Christianity. Jesus Christ and His Teachings in the Light of Vedanta*, St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1975, 174-190; Bhavani Sankar Chowdhury, *The New Wine of Jesus: Christ Taught Vedanta*, Calcutta: One World Publishers, 1982, 12, 93-95.

³⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, 47, 170, 176, 222, 223, 226; Swami Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ, O Cit.*, 79-80, 198, 200, 201, 204, 209-212;

means the resurrection of the subtle body made of subtle elements. Above all, it is the affirmation of the Neo-Vedantic Christology that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are not so much historical events which occurred once upon a time as universal processes of spiritual life, which are being continually accomplished in human lives. Following the example of Jesus, we can also die and resurrect and Jesus as an *avatara* can of course help us in our endeavour. Thus we may both worship Jesus and follow his path.

CONCLUSION

Search for insights regarding the life and work of Jesus, the meanings of the Gospel of God in Jesus, is an ongoing process and there is a need for Christians to get help from the religious experiences of people of other faiths for this important endeavour. If in the first eighteen centuries, the search was more or less by Christians alone, since then the search has begun in the company of people of sister faiths. But two hundred years or for that matter even two thousand years are nothing compared to the time ahead of us, ahead of creation. Many more dimensions of meanings of Jesus are yet to emerge. This is only the beginning. Hence the importance of the further contributions of sister faith experiences

People of other faiths are not enemies of Christians, rather fellow travelers. Their religions and cultures are no more for destruction by Christian missions; rather they are treasures for the enrichment of the Gospel of God in Christ. Therefore witnessing Christ hereafter is always in the company of people of other faiths. For this the Hindu faith experiences can take the lead as diverse enrichments have already come from that angle.