

# Confrontation Between Hinduism and Christ

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The problem of Christ and world religions is both significant and urgent. It is significant because the very universality of Christ is at stake in the current dialogue among the great religions of the world. The problem is urgent, because, now that the old solutions no longer hold, we must find a new answer to the problem. The whole Church is everywhere on the move and so is seeking out new paths; and in this particular case what she is looking for is a response that is free at once of the exclusiveness that has sometimes unhappily characterized the end of syncretism. We have now, I believe, reached a turning point in the history of Christianity: even Vatican II has already considered other religions as paths to salvation.

In the first part of this paper I wish to speak of three aspects of the *confrontation of Christ by Hinduism*, and in the second part I shall try to conclude the discussion by showing what a *confrontation of Hinduism by Christ* might suggest.

## I—HINDUISM'S ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST

1. My first section could be entitled: '*The Misunderstanding*', for we cannot deny that there is a fundamental misunderstanding in the dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism. All the historical exceptions only prove the rule of what the Abbé Monchánin called 'the great misunderstanding'. I should like to begin by quoting a proverb known in many languages which asks: 'What is the first requirement if you want to teach Gopal Sanskrit?' A rationally minded person would immediately answer: the first requirement is that you know Sanskrit. But the Indian answer is quite different: it says that the first requirement if you want to teach Gopal Sanskrit is that you know Gopal. Accordingly, the first thing those who tried to present the Christian message to Gopal need is not so much that they know the message but that they know the man who is to receive the message. We must admit that it has been very rare for anyone to know what Gopal thought or believed. What is Hinduism like, seen from within? What is this religion with its multifarious rites and bewildering exuberance? When we concentrate all of our attention on the message or on the messenger, and exclude the man who is to receive the message, we are apt to forget that the three cannot be separated, because ultimately every being is nothing but relatedness.

I shall try to describe how this misunderstanding has arisen.

Although this will only be a rough caricature of the situation it will show what I mean. I shall express myself as a Hindu in good faith who has heard about Christ and who reacts as follows: 'Hinduism and Christ' . . . that is to say, myself, a Hindu, confronted with the Christian message. My first reaction would be the typically Indian one of hospitality: I will welcome this Christ and this Christian from across the sea, who says that he comes with a message of salvation. I shall try to integrate this Christ into my pantheon, receive him with an open heart, try to understand his message, and even to worship him. All this presents no problem to me. I will give Christ a place of honour. I will be moved by the Sermon on the Mount, moved also by Gethsemane, and perhaps even fall in love with the story of his life told by these messengers who speak of a saviour and of universal love. But I still remain a Hindu living in the context of at least forty centuries of deep-rooted pluralism, and it now appears that this Christ whom I was ready to worship, whom I even consider as Son of God, this Christ whom I have accepted (I am still speaking as a phenomenologist), wants to dominate. He tells me I must reject all other gods. 'You have accepted me', he seems to say, 'and now you must allow me to take the place of all your other gods. You must believe that all the prophets who came before or after me were of no importance whatsoever. They must disappear and I must be the One. I am going to abuse your hospitality by telling you to break your idols, leave all else and follow me.'

This is the misunderstanding stated in an imperfect and oversimplified form. I know that the first Christian reaction will be to tell me that all this is not exactly true, that Christ brings peace, and so on. But this does not alter the facts: my reaction as a Hindu is as sincere and as prevalent as the Christian one. This only goes to prove that there is a fundamental mistake somewhere in the transmission of the message: the messenger may have failed to discover who 'Gopal' is. The misunderstanding arises when a messenger in all good faith brings a message claiming to be universal, but which appears sectarian, biased and intolerable to the person who hears it.

2. *The confrontation is ambiguous from the start.* Three elements characterize this ambiguity:

**(a) An element of rejection**

A Christian would say that Christ is a stumbling-block. A phenomenologist might say that he came to overturn everything. Christ seems to demand a conversion amounting to death, and thus he incurs rejection. He may be refused because it is suspected that he will overturn everything. That would be too hard to accept and would mean too radical a change. It is in this way that Christ truly becomes a sign of contradiction.

### (b) An element of scandal

Christ may come to overturn everything, but Christians come to disturb. (I think there is an essential difference here.) They bring disturbance either through external means or through their culture. Here we can quote Gandhi, who represents a certain characteristic state of mind in India today, and who said of Christians as Christ said of the Pharisees (Matt. 23, 3), 'Observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach but do not practise.'

Genesis tells us that man was made to be a vegetarian, but he has not remained so; the New Testament preaches non-violence but we cannot forget everything that has happened since; Christ himself tells us to love our enemies, but we seldom see Christians doing so. . . .

The argument that we should not judge Christianity by the unworthiness of certain of its members is not valid for us, since one finds the same contrast between Hinduism, which demands a life of absolute purity, and the degeneration of certain Hindus. The Bhagavad Gītā contains a doctrine as sublime as that of the Gospels, but this type of academic comparison is irrelevant when it comes to a violent confrontation between the two religions. The Gospel tells us to love our enemies: the 'Manavadharmasastra': 'Love him whom you hate, bless him who does harm to you. Do you not see that the tree also shelters the one who wills to cut it down?' The argument, then, is not valid, because it is not two doctrines that we are comparing. Christianity sets out to be an historical religion, an incarnate force. Therefore to say: 'We Christians are poor sinners, but we preach a marvellous doctrine', simply is not acceptable in India or elsewhere.

### (c) An element of attraction

Another element besides those of rejection and scandal is to be found in this confrontation: an element of attraction. In India Christ exercises great charm and attraction. At the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, India, and especially Bengal, discovered for herself the story of this Christ who is alive everywhere. Certain neo-Hindu movements were born out of his radiant image. There are Indian *gurus* of great and profound spirituality who tell me: 'The final stage in spiritual evolution is the discovery of Christ.' They realize that Christ is the most sublime Epiphany that has ever existed on earth. Yet these men never think of becoming Christians or joining any church or organization, not only because there are many different Christian Churches and sects, but because they realize that the Christ they love is beyond everything, even beyond the Church which calls itself Christian. They speak of 'an awareness of Christ' which Jesus expressed when he said: the Father and I are One.

If I tried to sort out the various elements in this attraction, I should mention three factors of some importance. There is a fourth

factor, more mystical in nature, [i.e. more mystical in nature, even of the order of grace,] the order of grace, but I shall leave this aside since the phenomenologist cannot know what goes on in the depths of the soul, or in the heart of different cultures, civilizations and religions.

The strong attraction that Christ exercises at present on Hinduism can be summed up under the following three headings:

*A suffering god.* In many Hindu homes one sees an image of Christ. The most popular is that of Christ kneeling in prayer in Gethsemane.

Hinduism attempts to go beyond the great scandal of pain and suffering by denying the existence of this pain and this suffering. Then they see that in Christianity pain and suffering have entered into the very heart of this God who came down to earth. (India has no difficulty in admitting that Jesus is God, but in a sense that might not be acceptable to Christians.) Indians see that Christianity has the courage to admit the existence of suffering and even to give it a place in the life of the one they consider as saviour. This idea they find immensely attractive and they are moved to see Christians admitting the idea of a suffering God, whom they nevertheless continue to recognize as God.

*A divine man.* I say 'a man' because India has always been in danger of falling into what Westerners would call 'angelism' or even 'divinism.' The more a 'guru' or spiritual teacher abstains from food and laughter, the more he rises above human weaknesses and the accidents of life, the more of a master and superior he is considered to be. Both traditional and modern India are greatly drawn to the idea of a divine man who laughs, eats, is no ascetic—for Christ is no ascetic in Indian eyes—who is truly a man and does not deny his humanity.

*A human god.* What surprises and delights Indians, is a god who is not mythological, but who is an historical god, a god involved in the life of mankind, who lives that life with all simplicity. Indians have always had an intuitive knowledge of the mysterious union between the human and the divine.

These, then, are the three elements that make Christ so extraordinarily attractive. Combining them with the elements of rejection and scandal, we can reach an overall view of what I have called the phenomenological encounter between Hinduism and Christ.

Let me sum up the attitude of Hinduism confronted with Christ: it will accept him, love him, try to integrate him, assimilate him, but it will not admit his intolerance of all others, his exclusiveness. Whether he is right or wrong, this is what the Hindu thinks and says. It is interesting to note that the oft-repeated formula concerning Christian absolutism is Hegelian in origin: '*Absoluthheitsanspruch*', which in Hindu eyes appears either ridiculous or sectarian. Put simply, Hinduism would like to embrace Christ but would not want

to be stifled by him. Thus there is a misunderstanding, an ambiguity, inherent in the confrontation. I think that my description of it has been fairly accurate and the very fact that a Christian may not accept this point of view proves once again that the whole problem must be rethought.

Now, in the second part, I want to take up the converse theme, and speak of Christ *vis-à-vis* Hinduism.

## II—CHRIST'S ENCOUNTER WITH HINDUISM

Invariably Christ demands reversal and total conversion and therefore a change in the very way of posing the problem: just as we speak of Hinduism's encounter with Christ, should we not also speak of Christ's encounter with Hinduism?

How can we escape the deadlock that we have reached? It is all too easy to say that the others are lacking in goodwill; to say that, although centuries have passed, we have still failed to convince them because they have rejected truth, light, and Christ, the saviour, is to over-simplify the problem.

I am now going to put off my phenomenologist's guise and speak quite simply, as a man impelled by a living faith in Christ, about the essential reality of a true, historical and sacramental Christ.

This second part will also be divided into three headings:

### 1. *Extrapolation*

First, I am going to consider the question in a theological light. Mathematicians will understand at once what I mean by extrapolation.

No law in physics or mathematics is valid outside the interval for which it is formulated and beyond which one must be careful not to extrapolate unduly. To my mind, in all our Christian thinking we have extrapolated to a certain extent. I can explain by way of an example. If we open the Gospel in the Bible, we find cosmological examples above all. Everyone admits, for once, that when Matthew says that 'the shadows covered the earth' at the death of Christ, this does not mean that the shadows actually extended to Patagonia.

When we are told that the flood covered the whole earth, no-one today would take this literally. If we do this in cosmology, we should do the same when we think of a nation's culture or of anthropology. I fear that we have not yet thought out or lived Christianity in an extra-Mediterranean religious and cultural context. When St Paul, for example, criticised the pagans of his time, he was not thinking of the Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, etc., and it would be an unjustifiable extrapolation to include them. The truth is just the contrary: in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, slave nor barbarian. This suggests to us that religious pluralism may possibly be justified from the Christian point of view, but this is a question that must be reserved for Vatican III or IV. . . . Philo-

sophical and theological pluralism are now generally accepted. No one is obliged to adhere to any one philosophical or theological system in order to profess the Christian faith. Nor is it necessary to belong to any one cultural system in order to be a Christian. We have not yet sufficiently thought out and developed the justification of religious pluralism, which would be to admit that other religions have their place in the Christian economy of salvation.

Christ's encounter with Hinduism. First of all, we must examine this phenomenon of extrapolation and ask ourselves whether the usual views on Hinduism are not in fact a gratuitous extrapolation of statements to be found in the Old and New Testaments.

For instance, it is a gross extrapolation to say that the anathemas of Isaiah, the Psalmist or the New Testament apply to what is called 'idolatry' in India. Such anathemas cannot be applied to realities other than those against which the sacred writers directed them.

## 2. *The specifically Christian characteristics of the act of faith*

What are the characteristics of the act of faith? Let us take the passage in Matt. 14, 13, where Jesus asks his disciples: 'Who is the Son of Man?' and Peter gives his famous reply: 'Thou art the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.' In the context of Peter and of Israel this reply constitutes the Christian act of faith. Yet a simple linguistic analysis will show the reply to be completely unintelligible or distorted in a context different from what we might call the 'Judaic-Christian' one. The Messiah is he who has been desired, hoped for, awaited. But India has never awaited anyone and has never shared Israel's hope. It means nothing to her to be told that Christ is the Messiah. If you tell a Hindu that Christ is the Messiah, he will accept him in the way I sketched at the beginning: 'Here is Christ, the saviour; let us accept him', but it will be 'their' Christ, 'their' saviour. We have been outside this whole programme of salvation, but we are ready to accept him because we realize that there are other religions and other prophets beyond our frontiers. For the message to be intelligible, we must first try to find out what the predicate of the sentence is. 'I come to announce the Messiah'; 'Thou art the Messiah, the son of the living God'. All these and similar sentences have a completely different meaning in India. Someone recently reminded me of a phrase used in certain 'post-theist' circles: God, we don't know him! It is Christ we must try to understand. Each generation must try to find the predicate of the sentence that makes the act of faith specifically Christian. The question 'Who am I?' demands an existential reply. If we answer with a formula, then we must discover a formula that will be valid in a certain context, and try to transplant it in such a way that it does not lose its vitality. Otherwise we shall be preparing the way for a misunderstanding. St Paul in his epistle to the Romans (10, 20), quotes a phrase from Isaiah: 'I have been found by those who did not

seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.' Here the accent is not on the Messiah. We shall have to reconsider the whole of Christology. . . .

It seems to me that there are three stages in the process of the universalization of faith: Christ *in* Israel before his death. The exclusiveness of Jesus within the frontiers of the chosen people of Palestine cannot be denied. A second stage during which Christ, after his death, acts *through* Israel. His message of salvation is universal. I think that this is the stage at which we find ourselves at present. Perhaps we shall find a solution to our problem if we now begin to think of universalizing faith in Christ, not only through Israel, but apart from Israel. An almost identical dialectic (for want of a better word), can, it seems to me, be found in the history of the councils of the Christian Church. Beginning with the Council of Jerusalem, the problem has always been the same. Open the Acts of the Apostles (15, 1) and you will find: 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' In the same way we still insist that if you do not accept certain rites, certain doctrines, customs, philosophy, culture and way of living and thinking, you cannot be a Christian. The solution to the problem has never varied from the Apostles' Council to Vatican II. On the one hand there are certain concessions: it is no longer necessary to be circumcised, to adhere to a given formula, etc.; on the other hand, we see—let us call it a 'compromise'—tradition must be respected, one must not break too quickly with the past, things must be done by stages. A tension always remains.

'Thou art the Messiah, the Son of the Living God', answers Peter. In order to tackle the problem of Christ's encounter with Hinduism, I must discover who this Christ is. When you talk to me about a Messiah, this means very little to me. I hear you speak of the Son of God but as for us Indians we are all sons of God, and even God himself, so that it does not impress us. In order to find an answer to this urgent and burning question we here have to see 'Who this Christ is' who comes face to face with Hinduism. What Christians come to reveal to India is a living Christ, a Christ who was in the beginning before Abraham, who is the Creator, Alpha and Omega, the Only Son and also the First-born of all creatures. I should like to follow the Council of Chalcedon and play with four adjectives: the Christ the Christian comes to proclaim is Christ *present, active, unknown, and hidden* within Hinduism. The same Christ who lives and acts in the Hindu is the one whom the Christian recognizes as Jesus of Nazareth. If I can discover this Christ hidden within Hinduism, then, my message will be intelligible. Unless I know Gopal I cannot teach him Sanskrit. This Christ present, active, unknown and hidden may be called Isvara, Bhagavan, or even 'Kṛṣṇa', 'Narāyana' or 'Siva'. The Christian who wishes to be understood by a Hindu must be capable of declaring with all the necessary subtlety that 'Bhagavan

or 'Isvara' was made manifest in Jesus of Nazareth. It is only by finding the predicate of the specifically Christian act of faith that it can be made understandable. When this happens, Christ will become, perhaps for the first time, a true sign of contradiction and the sort of too-easy understanding which I mentioned before—'First I accept you and then I am scandalized because you want to change everything'—will no longer arise.

### 3. *The challenge*

Now for the third point. I shall try to define the challenge that arises from the confrontation between Christ and Hinduism: Hinduism is challenged to 'come down to earth', or rather into history; Christianity is challenged to rise a little higher. The Christ who confronts Hinduism is the same who confronts Christianity. There are not two Christs. Christ is all in all. Unless Christians are to remain content with belonging to a sect that has existed for twenty centuries in a small corner of the earth, we must admit that the Christ who confronts Hinduism is the same Christ as the one which Christianity must confront. Christ is trans-historic as well as historic. To destroy the historical factor is to rescind the Christ, but reducing him to historicity is to destroy him. This challenge is important, since to say that Christianity is merely an historical fact is to destroy and sterilize it, at least in Indian eyes. But, on the other hand, to say that Christianity can do without history is also to destroy it. Christianity is the *Epiphany*, the real manifestation in history of the mystery hidden since the beginning of time. But the historical order is not all that there was at the beginning nor all there will be at the end. India understands this very well. The Christ that confronts Hinduism presents himself as its death and resurrection. Christ's encounter with Hinduism means death, but this death is the conversion and resurrection through which it will reach plenitude. To avoid any misunderstanding I must add at once that *to the Hindu*, Christian faith is not the sociological form into which it has crystallized today, but a converted Hinduism. For this Hinduism which has reached its fulness, conversion is not alienation, but a passage into a new life, that continues and fulfils the former life. Christianity in India is a Hinduism that believes in a living Christ. It is not a confrontation between one sociological religion and another, but Hinduism confronted by Christ and transformed by him. Here is the dialectic of death and resurrection. Today's Christian must follow his Master and love with a love that gives life and brings death. But we know that love has always been stronger than death.