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Incarnations, Christian and Hindu: Christology in Conversation with Vaishnavism

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I. Introduction: Learning Christianity by Means of Hinduism

The contemporary discipline of comparative theology is often pursued in a way that would seem incompatible with core evangelical commitments. But the work of understanding a religious tradition different from ours on its own terms as a means of understanding our own tradition better has much to commend it. In particular, confidence in the Christian gospel can be bolstered as we examine strikingly similar teachings in other faiths and thereby see the distinctiveness and winsomeness of our own teaching more clearly.

Toward that end, this essay looks at Hindu and Christian understandings of 'incarnation', considering the classical Christian teaching in light of Indian concepts that are often regarded as similar to it. We will look specifically at the branch of Hinduism known as Vaishnavism—that is, Hindu devotion to the god Vishnu—since most (though not quite all) talk about incarnations among Hindus comes from this source.

As many readers may be unfamiliar with the history and theology of Hinduism, I wish to begin by removing one common misconception. It is often assumed that similarities regarding a single notion like 'incarnation' will inevitably prove inconsequential in light of the much larger dissimilarities between Christianity and Hinduism as comprehensive religious outlooks. There is some truth to that point, but Hinduism is an extraordinarily diverse phenomenon, and so it matters very much which particular tradition one is considering. There exist vibrant, sophisticated expressions of classical Hinduism (for example, the popular school of thought known as Visistadvaita Vedanta, or 'qualified nondualism', that originated with the eleventh-century Vaishnavite saint Ramanuja) that are explicitly and unequivocally monotheistic (not monistic or polytheistic); rooted in *bhakti*, or personal love and devotion (rather than in *jnana*, knowledge or philosophy); and utterly dependent on the gracious initiative of God (rather than on human spiritual

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attainment). This God-loving, grace-based version of Hinduism may surprise some of us, for it comes much closer to the ordinary intuitions of historic Christianity than we might have expected.[1]

For the purposes of the present essay, it is especially significant that this more user-friendly expression of Hinduism is not similar to Christianity in only a vague, generic way. Rather, Vaishnavism is intensely committed to a doctrine of incarnation. More specifically, it frequently expresses its teaching about a personal God and a saving love using the important and rather technical language of *avatars*.

This word has become widely known in the West, though often in contexts I can't imagine a Hindu holy man approving. The term itself derives from Sanskrit roots that mean 'to cross (over)' and 'down'. Hence, Hindus use the term to refer not, of course, to personas in virtual technology, but to the 'descent', 'manifestation' or 'incarnation' of a deity in recognizable, embodied form.

For Vaishnavite Hindus, the loving initiative of God is concretely expressed in exactly this way: God himself (Vishnu) enters our world for us and for our salvation. What are we to make of this surprising parallel between Christianity and Hinduism?

II. One Revelatory Incarnation or Many?

As is generally known, standard Hindu doctrine affirms multiple avatars or incarnations, each of which is an occasion for the overflow of divine favour into a broken world; by contrast, the Christian doctrine speaks of only one incarnation, the unequivocally final coming of Jesus Christ into our midst. This difference regarding the number of incarnations is an apt place to begin, because its significance is sometimes thought to be self-evident, as if simply declaring that 'they have many incarnations, but we have only one' clearly and obviously explains what distinguishes the two approaches.

But I'm not sure that the significance is really so clear and obvious. What exactly is at stake here? *Could* there be more than one incarnation, on Christian grounds? Interestingly, no less a Christian luminary that Thomas Aquinas thought so. He maintained that, in actual fact, there was only one incarnation, but he saw no reason to deny that there could be more than one if God so desired.[2]

This way of thinking is, of course, somewhat shocking to us (and I frank-

1 For more on Ramanuja, see the fine discussion by Julius Lipner in *The Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedantic Theology of Ramanuja* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1986), especially chap. 7. Some aspects of Ramanuja's teaching would require further exploration (beyond the scope of this essay) to consider the extent of their similarity to Christianity.

2 See *Summa Theologia* iii, 3, 7. For reflection on the significance of Aquinas's speculations for evaluating the differences between Christian and Hindu approaches to incarnation, see Noel Sheth, 'Hindu *Avatara* and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison', *Philosophy East and West* 52, no. 1 (January 2002): 107; Julius Lipner, '*Avatara* and Incarnation?' in David C. Scott and Israel Selvanayagam (eds.), *Re-visioning India's Religious Traditions: Essays in Honour of Eric Lott* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, for the United Theological College, Bangalore, 1996), 131.

ly have no idea what some of Aquinas's odd speculations on this topic actually amount to), but the point is that the difference in number may not be conceptually absolute. The Bible speaks of just one incarnation, and that settles the matter both for Aquinas and for us. But could there have been more? What is gained or lost by the Christian insistence on the singularity of Christ's incarnation?

We may be tempted to think that the justification for a single incarnation grows out of the finality of the revelation that Jesus provides, since the Bible states clearly that Jesus represents the full, complete revelation of God (cf. Heb 1). Yet it is hard for this claim to stand on its own theologically without some other line of argument undergirding it. From a Hindu point of view, it seems simply absurd to imagine that a single, finite image could decisively capture the infinite mystery of God. Wouldn't an infinite series of diverse images get at the incomprehensible truth more effectively? If we think of Jesus primarily as a revelation, then it could be quite reasonable to conclude that our preoccupation with Jesus alone is regrettably narrow.

In fact, this apparent narrowness has prompted some Christian theologians to expand the Christian vision precisely by supplementing it with insights that come from (among other places) Vaishnavism. I do not endorse this move, but its logic is very instructive.

For example, Lutheran theologian Kristin Largen advocates what might be called a mutual enrichment model for drawing together Vaishnavite and Christian approaches to God. In her book *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ*, she argues that Hindu images of Krishna's childhood playfulness can enrich Christian devotion to Jesus. She writes, 'The young Krishna does not desire to be worshiped in awe, nor does he desire to be feared; instead, Krishna desires that his devotees enter into an intimate relationship of pure love and devotion with him, modeled on the [relationship] a mother has with her child.'[3]

Largen does not mean to reject images of God that involve awe and fear; rather, we can accept them alongside their Hindu counterparts. Thus we end up with two different sets of images (Christian and Hindu), which together reveal God in richer ways because of their complementary nature.

Note the emphasis here on how the images *reveal* God. If we think of incarnation primarily as a mode of revelation, then this wider, more comprehensive account of that revelation can hardly be objected to.

III. The Nature of a Hindu Incarnation

We will return to the emphasis on revelation in a moment, for it will help us to understand not only why there can be more incarnations in Hinduism than in Christianity, but also why Hindu incarnations have their particular character. But first we need to ask explicitly: what is that character? What does it mean for Vaishnavites to speak of an incarnation?

3 Kristin Johnston Largen, *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ: A Comparative Theology of Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 50. For related observations about Christian and Hindu practice, but without the same syncretistic overtones, see Sheth, 'Hindu *Avatara*', 122, note 74.

We can begin by correcting a simple mistake. Some Christians have imagined the various avatars in Hinduism to be docetic 'appearances' or 'projections' of Brahman, not 'real' in any significant sense. But the sacred texts of Hinduism (most prominently the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the doctrine of avatars first makes an unambiguous appearance) and the classical commentaries on those texts show without a doubt that the avatars are, in fact, real embodiments that have real effects on the world.[4]

In the Gita, the avatar is Krishna, the charioteer and counsellor for the befuddled warrior Arjuna, who is wrestling with how to fulfil his religious duty in a world gone mad. Krishna does not simply pop into Arjuna's visual field like Hamlet's ghost; rather, he is a regular character in the story. He is born, grows up, eats and drinks, drives a chariot and even dies. There is every indication that this is a real, concrete embodiment, one (the Gita says) that includes 'material nature' (*prakrti*).

Even for the famous eighth-century Hindu monist Sankara, whose interpretation of Hinduism is well-known in the West and would make the docetic claim appear supremely plausible, this avatar is every bit as real as his environment (though the entire environment is not real in any unqualified sense). For Ramanuja and the rest of Hinduism's non-monist tradition, it is all the more certain that Krishna is real.

But the reality of the incarnation is not the whole story; there are still at least four important differences between Krishna and ordinary mortals like Arjuna and us. First and most obviously, Krishna is divine. He is the great God Vishnu, whom foolish people overlook when they gaze upon the manifestation (the physical embodiment) and fail to recognize the higher essence.

Second, Krishna has taken his current form not (like ordinary mortals) as a result of the inexorable workings of karma, but by his own free decision and power, which suggests that his entire existence is not quite like ours; it is sovereign, free, unconstrained.[5]

Third, the actual matter of Krishna's body may differ from our own. I say that it *may* differ because, in fact, the Vaishnavite tradition is mixed on this point. There is some indication in the Gita itself that Krishna has an ordinary material body like Arjuna's, but many in the tradition (most notably Ramanuja himself) say that Krishna's material form is derived from a

4 See the seminal work of Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 119. For a similar discussion, see Lipner, '*Avatara* and Incarnation?' 138; Sheth, 'Hindu *Avatara*', 108. For a different (and unconvincing) conclusion, see Robert W. Stevenson, 'The Concept of *Avatara* in Ancient and Modern Commentaries on the *Bhagavadgita*', *Journal of Studies in the Bhagavadgita* 3 (1983): 61.

5 Lipner maintains ('*Avatara* and Incarnation?' 137) that this difference between Krishna and ordinary human mortals makes the Vaishnavite account fundamentally different from orthodox Christianity's account of Jesus, since Jesus is said to be fully human, like us in every way except for sin. But the phrase 'except for sin' strikes me as doing exactly the same theological work for Christians that Krishna's freedom from karmic determination does for Hindus. So I would argue that this is actually a parallel between the Vaishnavite and Christian accounts, not a significant difference.

pure and divine kind of 'matter' that is unique to the deity.[6] We need not resolve that question here.

Finally, Krishna has no human soul or spirit; he is simply Vishnu. In this respect, the Vaishnavite teaching is somewhat reminiscent of fourth-century Apollinarianism in Christianity (the 'God in a body' Christology, where Jesus is understood as fully divine on the inside but with a physical body like ours on the outside).

IV. The Purpose of a Hindu Incarnation

Whatever we make of the various details, all these points indicate that the divine Self of the avatar dominates the Hindu portrayal. Krishna, for all his involvement in ordinary life events like chariot driving, is always presented as displaying what Geoffrey Parrinder describes as a kind of transcendent divine 'aloofness'.[7] He is interested in our world; he comes to instruct and aid us in our weakness; hence, he willingly takes part in our little drama—yet he is never subject to it.[8]

In this respect, as many people have pointed out, the avatar is not unlike the theophanies of the Old Testament. Consider the three men who appear to Abraham in Genesis 18, or the mysterious figure who appears to Samson's parents in Judges 13. In such stories, a certain human ordinariness is initially presupposed in the figures, but they turn out to be not human at all in any serious sense—and once their special, divine character becomes known, no one is interested in the human ordinariness at all. When Jacob realizes that he has been wrestling with God in Genesis 32, he fears for his life, but he never stops to marvel theologically that deity and humanity have come together in a permanent hypostatic union. On the contrary, once deity is revealed, supposed humanity is forgotten altogether. It is not even a subject of speculation, for the reality of God relativizes all such considerations.

Hinduism follows this same line of thought, and insofar as Hindu incarnations can be viewed as parallel to Old Testament theophanies, the approach seems sensible. Like Old Testament Jews, Vaishnavites happily celebrate a multitude of instances of God appearing among us, a multitude of so-called 'incarnations', that are (in the words of Richard De Smet) 'not hypostatic, but manifestative, or … instrumental'.[9] God does not *become* a man; instead, he shows himself *as* a man, and in this way he is present among us to provide what we need, namely a revelation of God or of God's truth that can restore the cosmic order (*dharma*) whenever ignorance

6 See Steven Tsoukalas, 'Krishna and Christ: The Body-Divine Relation in the Human Form', in Catherine Cornille (ed.), *Song Divine: Christian Commentaries on the* Bhagavad Gita (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 152–53.

7 Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, 226. Lipner agrees: 'In the Krishna-narratives, the divinity of Krishna is often barely containable' ('*Avatara* and Incarnation?' 138).

8 Lipner succinctly makes a perfect contrast with Christianity: 'Krishna could not be a Man of Sorrows in the way Jesus was perceived to be, and has never been thus described' ('*Avatara* and Incarnation?' 138).

9 Richard De Smet, 'Jesus and the Avatara', in Jerald Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels (eds.), *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 159.

and corruption and evil have grown strong enough to threaten it seriously.

Of course, this deliverance is only local, not universal, but Vaishnavites (like Old Testament Jews) are content with that, at least for the moment. God's coming among us at all is an event to be celebrated; one doesn't necessarily assume that its effects will last long in the cosmic scheme of things. The truth is reaffirmed, to be sure, but the people who have seen the truth will all too soon wander back into their blindness. The frightful disaster is averted and we are at peace, but only until the next potential disaster looms on the horizon. The marvellous appearances of God offer great instruction and comfort and even rescue to God's people, but they do not provide ultimate rescue, for Hindus any more than for Jews. They do not finally, decisively, unequivocally change things.

And on the Hindu account, we see *why* they do not unequivocally change things: it is because the world does not need final, unequivocal change. The world is a troubled place, no doubt, but that trouble can be addressed and escaped if we follow good instructions in order to penetrate the veil that has fallen over our minds. The wheel of karma has captured us, and its power needs to be broken, but it *can* be broken by understanding the ultimate nature of things more fully.

An 'incarnation', according to this view, simply reveals that ultimate nature. It reveals God's kindness and love, and it reveals our own deepest nature as well. When we have seen wickedness all around us for so long that we ourselves have begun to copy and internalize it, then God manifests himself to point out the lie, renew our failing vision, and draw us back into the union of love proper to a Creator and his creatures.

This is a lovely vision in many ways, and Christians can affirm large swaths of it. But Christians who know their early church history also remember the great champion of a similar understanding of the nature of brokenness in our world. That champion was a fifth-century British monk named Pelagius, who steadfastly insisted that believers must learn to recognize the evil in the world and separate themselves from it—and that they *can* recognize it and separate from it, with the help of God's gracious instruction. Christians, led by the indomitable Augustine, found much that was true in this teaching, but also a fatal optimism about human nature that could not be sustained either by Scripture or by human experience.

According to the historic Christian view, human brokenness runs deeper than Pelagius thought; it runs into the very nature of our humanity. As Parrinder has noted,[10] however strong Hindus believe the chain of karma to be, however difficult it may be to break, it is never understood as entailing a comprehensive Fall that corrupts the whole human person. Yet this is exactly what Christians insist upon.

V. The Distinctiveness of Christ's Incarnation

It is in light of this large-scale problem that Christians understand the nature and role of God's incarnation in Christ. Where Hinduism offers a 'manifestative' or instrumental understanding of incarnations, in which

10 Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, 238.

God appears in human form or adopts human features to accomplish certain short-term objectives, Christianity speaks very self-consciously of the hypostatic union of deity and humanity in Christ. God truly becomes man, though without ceasing to be the fulness of the eternal God, and this unprecedented union permits two impossible things to happen, both of which lie utterly outside the imagination of Hindu teachers and seers.

First, when God becomes a man, *he suffers and dies*. Jesuit Indologist Noel Sheth argues that this element constitutes what is 'uniquely Christian' about the Christian view of the Incarnation.[11] God becomes astonishingly subject to the conditions of this sinful world, in such a way as to overcome the deep liability that humanity incurred by violating the very character of reality.

This part of the human problem is what we Christians refer to as *guilt*, which makes humanity subject to divine wrath. This part of the solution may be summarized in the breathtakingly simple word *atonement*. An unimaginable exchange has taken place to allow the Creator to bear the guilt of his creatures, to allow the Moral Lawgiver to receive the punishment for moral lawlessness. The paradoxes here can be piled to the sky, but the basic fact is that *the living God dies on behalf of sinners*. No wonder Paul describes this as a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, yet to us the power and wisdom of God.

Second, not only does God become a man to suffer and die, but he then *rises from the dead precisely as a man*, thereby doing something shocking to human nature itself. Christ is the beginning, the 'firstfruits', of a much larger program, and those who are united with him are in for quite a ride.

The Athanasian Creed famously declares that deity and humanity become one in Christ 'not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God'. Redemption is not simply a return to innocence; eschatological humanity is something higher and greater than unfallen humanity had been. We are reminded that the eternal God has accomplished something unimaginable: he has drawn a mere creature, a mere image, a mere reflection into his own eternal reality. We become, in the words of 2 Peter 1:4 (KJV), 'partakers of the divine nature' in Christ.

Sin's penalty is paid and sin's power is broken precisely because the nature of the one penalized, the nature of the one in bondage, has now been united forever to the personal righteousness and power of God himself. Those who are in Christ are no longer merely themselves. In the marvel of God's gracious work, they are drawn into the very life of God. The broken puppet Pinocchio is not merely mended; he becomes a real boy.

Thus we come, via a rather roundabout route, to be reminded of what Christians have always believed, and perhaps also to see its significance more clearly by contrast with its Hindu competitors. We might have thought that Hinduism, with its talk of multiple divine incarnations and of Atman being the same as Brahman and so forth, was presenting too lofty a picture of divine-human interaction. But it is not so; in fact, almost the reverse is true.

Clearly, the monistic Hinduism of

11 Sheth, 109 (cf. 111, 115). See also Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, 213.

Sankara, with its unrelenting insistence that 'all is Brahman', keeps its adherents from grasping even what it means to say that a true creature becomes a partaker of the divine nature. With no real doctrine of creation, everything intrinsically partakes of the divine nature, and so Sankara's notion of salvation ends up being a rather ho-hum affair. Nothing really changes, ever.

The monotheistic Hinduism of Ramanuja, by contrast, does have a real doctrine of creation, and so we expect salvation in this view to have something more of a Christian feel to it. And it does, after a fashion; something *does* change. For Ramanuja, forgiveness and restoration are obtained through a combination of sheer personal grace on God's side and intense love and gratitude on the human side. This is real forgiveness and real restoration, and that's good. Yet from the Christian vantage point, it is still *mere* forgiveness and *mere* restoration; both are simply revealed, *not unimaginably achieved*. It is a forgiveness without the staggering anomaly of God's atoning death, and a restoration that involves merely a return to innocence, not a hypostatic union between creatures and their Creator.

VI. Conclusion: Remembering What We Know

The real power of the Christian vision of the God-man becomes clearest right here, when contrasted with a tame, sensible, reasonable alternative like that offered by Hinduism. The Vaishnavite account shows God whittling himself down to our size, so that we can understand him and benefit from his presence; what is more sensible than that?

But the Christian account turns this on its head. God does not just appear among men but rather becomes a man, to do things for and to humanity that are frankly scandalous. A more serious human disease required a more radical treatment, and so God did not just provide a perfect law (as Judaism holds) or an ideal prophet (as Islam contends). He did not even just come himself and appear among us, as Hinduism holds (in line with the Old Testament theophanies). Instead, the eternal God sweeps into creation to take human nature upon himself, to link human nature permanently to the divine nature in a hypostatic union, and thereby to redeem as well as to remake humanity. This is the colossal achievement that the incarnation in its distinctive Christian sense offers.

I do not view Hinduism in general, or Vaishnavism in particular, as self-contradictory or ridiculous. On the contrary, the Hindu outlook seems to me to make very good sense. If anything, it is the Christian vision that does not make (ordinary) sense. Instead, it involves what Christians have always very intentionally referred to as a mystery, and a mystery as vast and luminous as the incarnation ought to shock us. But we Christians tend to become accustomed to our mysteries, and we forget how shocking they are. I find that Hinduism's doctrine of avatars helps me to remember the shock.

In this respect, sympathetic Christian engagement with Hinduism offers two somewhat surprising advantages. First, it may have apologetic value, not by demonstrating incoherence in the Hindu outlook, but instead by assuming basic coherence and then offering a richer, more provoca-

tive, more exhilarating coherence as an alternative. This kind of strategy may inspire fresh conversations with traditional Hindus, but even more so, it could help us reach the multitudes of Westerners who are drawn to the exotic East primarily out of disenchantment with the commonplace ordinariness of their home culture and its prosaic traditions. Apologetics in this mode aims precisely at dispelling these illusions of ordinariness and showing us instead where true adventure lies.

But second, even for convinced Christians who do not need a promise of intellectual adventure to draw them to Christ, engagement with Vaishnavism has an intriguing pedagogical value, as it leads us to understand the distinctiveness of our own tradition more clearly and vigorously. To believe that God became a man in Christ is certainly a good thing, as far as it goes. But to indwell the classical biblical logic of the hypostatic union, with its unimaginably lofty implications for our understanding of the divine achievement and of human destiny—well, this is something different altogether. The Christian vision of a single, once-for-all, world-shaking incarnation displays a higher drama and a fuller glory than we can easily bear in mind.

Understanding clearly what a tame, sensible 'incarnation' would look like (compliments of Vaishnavism), and then asking how the Christian doctrine of incarnation goes further and reaches deeper can help us to see afresh—and with increasing wonder—the marvels we have already seen in our faith. Here we find the centre of what Lesslie Newbigin called a 'universal history' that Hinduism cannot match.[12] The highest achievement of Vaishnavite theology may be to point us to a gospel that is dazzlingly, breathtakingly higher still.

12 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 90.