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Indian Approaches to Christology: Contribution of the Syro-Malabar Church

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Original contributions to Christology, or to any other branch of theology, from the ancient Church of the St Thomas Christians of Malabar were scant. Away from the centres of Christianity it was not involved in the Trinitarian or Christological controversies that rocked the early Church. Though claiming its foundation from St Thomas the Apostle and tracing its original liturgy to Addai and Mari, apostolic disciples, from the most ancient times the Indian Church was dependent on the church of Chaldea for the supply of its bishops and even of priests. These bishops were pastors wholly dedicated to the spiritual guidance of their faithful and not theologians who could enter into any kind of debate or dialogue with the Hindu scholars. Even with the advent of the Portuguese in the 16th century and with the influx of a number of erudite men from the West, this situation did not change. Persons like the Jesuit Francisco Roz, the Franciscan Friar Vincent and the Dominican Didacus were scholars. But their main interest lay in imparting to the people what they learned in the theological schools of the West rather than creating any new line of theological thinking congenial to the Indian situation.

In spite of these limitations and the drawbacks of a well established and closed Christian community away from the dynamic centres of Christianity, through the long centuries we may note a few specific trends that are of significant value for the formulation of an Indian Christology. Among these we may list the long enduring positive aspects of the Nestorian line of thought separated from its polemic exaggerations, advantages of a terminology drawn from the wealth of the Indian religious tradition, a devotional emphasis that sought an intimate experience of the mystery of Christ in the place of a mere speculative analysis and an attempt at re-mythologization that shows a Hindu-Christian dialogue in Christology.

The Nestorian Contribution

When Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople was condemned for heresy he was banished to the eastern confines of the empire where he was received as a persecuted saint by the Chaldean church. His Christological teaching as well as his opposition to the Alexandrian school became a special heritage of the East Syrian church. An anaphora attributed to him also came into use. Theological books

written in this Nestorian context were the main source-material for the spiritual life of the Church in Malabar.

But, for the Malabar Christians the theoretical discussions and political undercurrents that divided Alexandria and Constantinople were totally irrelevant and even unknown to them. What they learned was that in Christ there are two natures (*kyāne*) two individualities (*knome*) and one person (*parsopa*). There were manuscripts in Kerala in general use among the clergy that explained in detail the implications of these and other theological terms and their relevance to the veneration of the humanity of Christ. In the wake of the Chalcedonian definition of two natures and one person in Christ, the Western church had lost somewhat a sense of the individual humanity of Christ. Christology was almost exclusively a discussion of the Logos. Human nature in Christ became almost an abstraction, a far cry from the teaching of the early Fathers who considered the humanity of Christ not a *substantia secunda*, a mere specific nature, but a veritable *substantia prima*, a concrete compendium of all humanity. This post-Chalcedonian distortion was to a certain extent corrected by the new humanism of the Middle Ages evinced in the new devotional trend initiated by St Francis of Assisi, the special devotions to the infant Jesus of the crib, and to the passion of Christ, the crucifix and the way of the Cross. But this revival followed a rather sentimentalist line.

But the recognition of the distinct individual humanity of Christ as a special *knoma* apart from the divine *knoma* by the Kerala Christians under the Nestorian influence has a special significance in the Indian context. In South India, Hinduism followed the Āgamic tradition which considered the particular mystery of the deity and the human individuality of the divine *avatār* the focal point in which the devotee had to concentrate all his attention. In fact, the deity was supposed through that particular human individuality to dwell in the midst of the people and share in all their human experiences. This emphasis on the localised particular human individuality of the deity was the central point in the medieval South Indian bhakti movement in which Hindus, Christians and Muslim Sufis shared the same religious experience. There are scholars who think that this specific aspect of the Bhakti movement could not come from Hindu or Muslim traditions but was a specific contribution of the Eastern Christians. The Malabar Christians venerated the humanity of Christ to such a point as to consider Jesus of Nazareth almost a human individual taken over by the Logos. The Divine Office praised the Logos for having extricated the individual man Jesus from death, taken him to heaven and made him lord and master of all things.

Similarly the Nestorian insistence that the Blessed Virgin Mary should not be called 'Mother of God' but only the 'Mother of Christ' did not adversely affect the Marian devotion in Kerala. With the emphasis on the concrete humanity, Mary who was one flesh with Christ assumed the aspect of an almost divinised humanity. Her feasts, especially those of her nativity and dormition assumed special importance with a good deal of local colour, ceremony and tradition.

Theological Terminology

When the Western missionaries, starting from the 16th century, tried to provide a Christian literature in the local language, Malayalam, another step in this Indian Christology was initiated. Francis Roz who seems to have made the first attempt in this line did not break any new ground. He was satisfied with using Latin and Syrian terms whenever a theological concept was involved without bothering to coin new terms. The most significant in this respect among the missionaries were a German scholar called Father Ernest (locally famous as Padre Arnos) and the Carmelite Paulinus. The latter strove a good deal to popularise Sanskrit among the missionaries and the Indian Christians, composing a grammar and a dictionary of the language. Padre Arnos wrote treatises in Malayalam on all the important points of faith. His doctrine was the classical theology of the West with nothing original about it. Yet, he created a new theological terminology drawing heavily from the Hindu religious background. He gave a historical narrative of the Incarnation; but his terminology brought in the shades of meaning of *vāk* (word) *śabda* and *nāda* (sound) to bring out the divine personality of the Logos, and the *avatāra* concept to emphasize the incarnational implications. Divine life of grace was both *vara*, a gift, and *prasāda*, the divine good pleasure, as well as *kṛpā*, compassion.

The Christian Sahasranama

One who really captured the Hindu sense of the divine incarnation in expressing Christian faith was Sri I. C. Chacko, a Sanskrit scholar of this century. Imitating the one thousand names ascribed to Vishnu by the Hindus, emphasizing especially his feats in the various avatars, Sri Chacko composed a hymn of thousand names of Christ. This prayer of thousand names brings home vividly to the mind of the devotee the meaning and implications of the divine appearance in the flesh. It was not a merely blind imitation of the *Sahasranāma* in purely external form. There is behind it a theology common to both the Bible and the Hindu Scriptures: to learn the name of a thing was to attain an intimate knowledge of it. To discover the name of Prajapati designated as the mysterious *Ka* = what, was to perceive the mystery of the cosmos. Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman, and other gods had their mysterious names indicating their special divine function in the universe. For the Hebrews, God so far transcended all human imagination and understanding that His name could not be pronounced by man. The early Christians identified Christ, the Logos, with the divine name. Thus calling on the Incarnate God through a thousand names was to penetrate deeper and deeper into the mystery of the Incarnation. The recitation of these divine names was also a meditative device on the lines of the traditional Hindu *bhajan* for concentrating one's mental attention, emotions and whole being on God.

In spite of the common catechetical source from which he drew his material Sri Chacko showed rare insight in choosing his terms for presenting the mystery of the Incarnation. To give only one example, for him Christ's suffering and death were not merely an expiatory

sacrifice satisfying for human sin, but a real creative *tapas*. As Prajapati created the universe through his *tapas*, an intensification of inner energy, so also Christ's redemptive death was a creative or recreative penance. He gathered back the whole universe thereby into himself.

Sri Chacko's Sanskrit hymn was not intended for the public and for popular devotion. It could be understood only by scholars who had a good grasp of Sanskrit. Still, it marks a definite theological attempt, very valuable in creating an Indian Christology.

The Christian Elegy

Another special approach to the life of Christ employed by Kerala Christian writers to impress the mystery of the Incarnation on the minds of the people were the *pānas* or elegiac compositions intended to be sung in homes where a funeral wake was observed. Padre Arnos composed a *pāna* on the life of Christ, especially His suffering and death, which was sung till recent times by people on funeral occasions. Another important work in the same line was the *Ātmānutāpam*, Repentance of the Soul, composed by Father Kuriakos Elias Chavara. He drew his material mostly from Italian sources. But his mode of presentation is deeply Indian: the reader is not a spectator but an actor in the drama of the life, sufferings and death of Christ which he goes through in an experiential way.

A Hindu Remythologization of Christ

The Hindus among whom Christians lived were not entirely inactive regarding the mystery of Christ. They understood and appreciated the faith of the Christians. While elsewhere in India the Hindu Reformers tried to present Christ as a great moral teacher and the universal humanity's unique model, the Kerala Hindus concentrated their attention on the universality of the divine plan of salvation. 'As it was the will of the Supreme Deity to save the white Europeans through Christ, so it was his good pleasure to save us Malabarians through the blue-black Krishna', said the Malabar Brahmins to the Dutch Christian missionaries who approached them with the Christian message in the 17th century. An unknown Hindu author wrote an avatara history of Christ in this vein. He interpolated it into a copy of the *Bhavishyapurana*. According to the author a Hindu monarch, the grandson of Vikramaditya, after having subdued all the land of Aryavarta made a short tour beyond the confines of his kingdom and came to the land of the Mlecchas or Non-Aryans. There he met Christ and asked him who he was and what was his religious message. Christ tells him that he is the Son of God come down to destroy Masi, the demon, who by her lies was deceiving all men, and also to teach the Mlecchas, who were without any spiritual guide. Here the author finds an ingenious Sanskrit etymology for the Syriac word *Mesiha*, Christ, as *Masi+han*, the killer of Masi the demon. The king recognized the divinity of Christ, adored him, and then returned to his own kingdom with the realization that God has his

own designs also for the non-Aryan peoples. Perhaps, the universality of the economy of the redemptive plan and the diversity of divine ways in dealing with the salvation of peoples and nations should be a basic point in an Indian Christology.

On the whole we do not have abundant or exceptionally outstanding contributions to Christology from the Syro-Malabar church. But the few we have indicated above may be of some significance in consciously building up an Indian Christology.