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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

Keshub Chunder Sen's Doctrine of Christ and the Trinity: a Rehabilitation*

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Keshub Chunder Sen, who flourished as leader of the Brahma Samaj in the latter half of the 19th century, has occasioned more mutually contradictory responses to his teaching on Christ and the Trinity than perhaps any other theologian since Christianity began. It is our purpose in this paper to examine what precisely he did teach on these subjects and, hopefully, to relieve him of the charge of heresy (if we must use the term) and of commendations falsely grounded. Our primary data will be that famous lecture of his which represents a mature stage of his thinking and on which most of the debate has centred, namely, 'That Marvellous Mystery—the Trinity',¹ first delivered in 1882. But first we must make some reference to the positions taken largely in response to this lecture.

The late R. C. Zaehner (1962) describes Sen as becoming 'an increasingly fervent admirer of Christ, *even accepting his divinity and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit*'.² Of course 'divinity' is an ambiguous word, but since Zaehner makes no attempt to qualify it, we must assume that it carries for him the connotation it bears in '*the doctrine of the Holy Trinity*', that is 'essential deity'. Most recently David L. Gosling (1974) has remarked that Sen '*believed in the Trinity*, which he related ingeniously to the Upanishadic definition of Brahman as *Saccidananda*'.³ Equally sympathetic is Robin Boyd (1969) who asserts that 'his thought moves steadily in the direction of *full acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity*'.⁴ Admittedly Boyd detects in Sen's lecture 'a tendency towards modalism',⁵ but he declines to treat this as a serious fault on the grounds that the word 'Person' is so misleading anyway in the Indian context and that 'Sen is perhaps here feeling his way towards a completely new and fully Indian formulation of the

* This paper was first presented in almost its present form at a plenary session of the Bangalore Christian Theological Association on June 24th, 1975.

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¹ *Lectures in India*, Vol. 2, London etc: Cassell and Co., 1904, pp. 1-48.

² *Hinduism*, London: Oxford University Press, 2nd Edn., 1966, p. 154. (Italics mine and also elsewhere).

³ 'Christian Response within Hinduism', *Religious Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Dec. 1974, p. 434.

⁴ *Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Madras: C.L.S., 2nd Edn., 1975, p. 34.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 35.

mystery, in terms of *Sat, Chit, Ananda*.⁶ Boyd could equally well have excused Sen on the grounds that nearly every Western exposition of the Trinity from Tertullian to Barth barely escapes the charge of modalism, except the Athanasian Creed which safeguards itself by being not an exposition at all but a bald statement full of the starkest of paradoxes. At any rate Boyd implies that Sen finds a place for Christ within the Godhead.

At the opposite pole is Fr J. B. Chethimattam's view (1969) that Sen took 'Jesus Christ as *a mere man*'.⁷ Similar is the reaction of Sen's contemporary and one-time disciple, Brahmabandhab Upadhya (1895). In an article, 'Why did not Keshub Chundra Sen accept Christ?' he asserts categorically that Sen 'was *dead opposed to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity*' and that 'he did not believe that Jesus is an eternal Person'.⁸

Then there are mediating responses of various kinds. P. J. Santaram (1964) notices that Sen speaks of Christ 'as the Second Person of . . . the Trinity', but carefully adds that 'he has his own interpretation of the Trinity'.⁹ Sen's view of the pre-existence of Christ in terms of 'an idea' he describes as '*not quite up to the Christian understanding of him*',¹⁰ and he characterises him generally as coming '*nearly to accept the adoptionist theory*'.¹¹ Marcus Braybrooke (1971) puts his finger on the real truth of the matter, as we shall realise below, when he writes that Sen 'does not. . . accept the *orthodox* doctrine of the Incarnation. . . (yet) he claimed he made Christ the final authority'¹² —and in such a way, feels Braybrooke, as to be acceptable to 'many a modern missionary'.¹³ J. N. Farquhar's response (1914) is very equivocal. He too notices that Sen's 'Christ is definitely called the Logos, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity',¹⁴ but he makes no attempt to discuss what Sen means by these terms except to express some surprise that Sen could then go on to 'declare all religions true'.¹⁵ He admits that Sen attempted 'to hold in his own mind, at the same moment, the essential principles of Hinduism, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and his old theism'¹⁶ but it is worth noting that he does qualify the Trinitarian doctrine Sen tries to hold as 'Christian'. Indeed Farquhar goes as far as to say that Sen was 'driven steadily. . . nearer an *adequate* account of Christ's

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷ *Dialogue in Indian Tradition*, Bangalore: Dharmaram College, 1969, p. 149.

⁸ *Sophia*, Vol. II, Feb., 1895, p. 14.

⁹ *Religion and Society*, Vol. XI, No. 3, Sept., 1964, p. 10.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 10.

¹² *Together to the Truth*, Madras-Delhi: CLS-ISPCCK, 1971, pp. 78 f.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁴ *Modern Religious Movements in India*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1929, p. 62.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 64.

person and relation to God',¹⁷ and that 'his deepest theological beliefs were *fully* Christian'.¹⁸ But in the same sentence he adds (by what logic I find it difficult to infer) that 'he never surrendered himself to Christ as Lord'. Now Farquhar does draw attention to inconsistency in Sen's thinking, a feature which another one-time disciple of Sen, Manilal C. Parekh, analyses in much greater detail.

Parekh (1926) criticises Sen's Trinitarian doctrine for being 'on the whole. . . akin to Arianism. . . though at times it approached what is called Semi-Arianism'.¹⁹ Not altogether an exemplar of consistency himself, Parekh commends Sen's understanding of Christ as the Logos for being 'as broad as that of the most catholic of the Fathers of the Christian Church',²⁰ and then goes on to criticise it for serious inconsistency, for vacillating between impersonal and personal views.²¹ This seeming inconsistency he attributes to 'the remnants of that Unitarianism',²² which Sen's early association with the Brahma Samaj had instilled into him and which prevented him from seeing that a full-orbed doctrine of an essential Trinity was necessary for understanding God not as 'a mere abstraction' but as 'in His essence. . . Love'.²³ Nevertheless Parekh concedes that the lecture under discussion was a great achievement 'making true Hinduism and *true* Christianity one thing in God',²⁴ and that 'the Person of Jesus Christ' presented therein was none other than 'the chief influence of his (sc. Sen's) conscious as well as subconscious life, the very centre and source of his moral and spiritual being'.²⁵

Greatly indebted to Parekh's analysis is M. M. Thomas' appraisal (1970) of Sen's Christ and Trinity. Thomas, however, fruitfully shifts the debate from the measure of Sen's faithfulness to Christian orthodoxy to his 'idea of Christ as divine humanity'.²⁶ He appropriately highlights how Sen 'makes the surrender of the human will of Jesus to the will of the Father in love the basis of his transparency for the manifestation of the Divine Sonship'.²⁷ But Thomas utters his own word of criticism:

In some of his (sc. Sen's) christological formulations, especially when dealing with the universal reality of the Logos and the universal presence of Christ and the universal activity of the Holy Spirit, one has the suspicion that Keshub had given up

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 66 f.

¹⁹ *Brahmarshi Keshub Chunder Sen*, Rajkot: Oriental Christ House, 1926, pp. 170 f.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 172.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 173.

²² *ibid.*, p. 173.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 180.

²⁶ *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, Madras: CISRS-CLS, 1970, p. 70.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 71.

the centrality of the historical Jesus as the Word Incarnate and as the basis and criterion of the Holy Spirit.²⁸

When we turn to examine what Sen actually did say in his lecture, one thing is clear, that those who criticise him, either mildly or vehemently, for not holding *the* doctrine of the Trinity are quite right, if by *the* doctrine of the Trinity is meant what is usually meant: three eternal distinctions within one divine essence. Therefore, to say he 'believes in', or 'accepts the doctrine of', the Trinity, or even that he 'moves steadily in the direction of full acceptance of the doctrine', is misleading. On the other hand the corollary is not that he was an Arian, a Semi-Arian, a Unitarian or an Adoptionist. It is an oversimplification perpetrated by much popular theology that ancient heresies are still found but decked up in modern dress. Very rarely do ancient heresies exactly repeat themselves especially where their original cultural context no longer obtains. This observation, of course, implies that for the same reason the ancient orthodox answers may no longer apply—a view which I shall be assuming throughout the rest of this paper, but which would be beyond the scope of the paper to justify.²⁹ Now part of the trouble has been that Sen's theology has been evaluated by theologians for whom for the most part the ancient answers are definitive. This is well illustrated by Parekh:

He (sc. Sen) was never at his best in philosophic speculation. His heart was always in advance of his head, but the same may be said of the early Christian Church, for it was three centuries before the Church attempted to formulate a rational explanation of its heart's faith. That this attempt was in any degree successful was due to the fact that it possessed in Athanasius, a man whose heart and head were in entire unison. . . and whose advocacy more than any other single agency it was that made the truth expressed in the Nicene Creed, the bed-rock of all Christian speculation.³⁰

We will not judge Sen by that 'bed-rock' but rather see in his theology an honest attempt to make sense of the New Testament data in the light of his own experience of Christ and of the needs of his

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁹ I can only refer the reader to recent literature radically examining the whole question of the development of doctrine:

Robert Evans, 'Review of M. Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine*', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1, 1970, pp. 111 f; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena*, Yale University Press, 1969—*Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine*, London: Hutchinson, 1971; Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine: a Study in the Principles of Early Doctrinal Development*, Cambridge University Press, 1967—*The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, London: SCM Press, 1974, chap. 1, *et passim*; Robert Wilkin, 'Review of Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine*', *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 49, 1969, pp. 312 f.

³⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 171.

contemporaries. We shall be more hesitant than his critics to dub his thinking inconsistent and his theology unsystematic. Certainly his lecture under view is a veritable mixture of ontological language and value language, but if this is recognised his theology can be accorded a large measure of consistency. Full allowance must be made for his habitually rhetorical way of speaking and for his extensive use of poetic imagery and language; and one must recognise, as I believe Sen himself did years before the emergence of the philosophy of linguistic analysis, that theological language is not the precision-tool which theologians in the past have imagined it to be.

In the foregoing material we have moved to and fro between the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology in a rather carefree manner. A rigid distinction between the two is of course artificial, but now for the purpose of clarity of thought some distinction must be made, and we address ourselves first to Sen's Christology. It is the opposite procedure, starting from his affirmations about the Trinity, that has misled several of his commentators into treating his theology as virtually orthodox.

Christ

Sen roundly denies that Christ is God in any ontological sense. Certainly this involves some misapprehension of the niceties of orthodoxy, for it is against the idea of Christ as an incarnation of God the Father that he usually militates. 'Never say Christ is the very God of the universe, the Father of all mankind',³¹ he keeps on reiterating. But it is clear that he attributes no essential deity at all to Christ. Christ shows us neither 'how God can become man nor how man can become God'.³² Homage to Christ is 'not the worship of Divinity but the worship of humanity'.³³ Properly 'we *worship* the Father' while 'we *honour* the Son'.³⁴ Christ is 'not a man-God'³⁵—an implied criticism of Alexandrian Christology and, for that matter, of the Chalcedonian and every other Christology that posits only one experiencing subject in Jesus Christ and that the divine.³⁶ On the contrary Christ 'was the Father's begotten Son, a child, a creature'.³⁷ Hence the charge of Arianism (and Semi-Arianism?³⁸). But the charge can-

³¹ *Lectures in India*, Vol. 2, p. 37; cf. p. 24 'But if you say Christ is your God and Creator, a repetition of the Jew's Jehovah, the very Father in human form, there is no Son in your theology . . . If Christ says unto you, I am the very God, the Father supreme, in human shape, he is a deceiver . . .'

³² *ibid.*, p. 20.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 18 f.

³⁶ Even where two natures are posited, the human nature only becomes an *hypostasis* in the *hypostasis* of the divine Word.

³⁷ *Lectures*, p. 21.

³⁸ If Arianism is peculiar to the early Christian era, the same is doubly true of Semi-Arianism. Its epitaph is very appropriately spelt out by that treasury of theological whimsy, Ambrose Bierce's *The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary*, (Penguin Books, 1971), p. 165: 'HOMIOUSIAN, n. In ecclesiastical

not be substantiated. The concern of Arianism was a thoroughly Greek one—to relieve God himself of any kind of contact with the world. This was done by envisaging in a place between God and the world a metaphysical agent of creation and redemption. Nothing could be further from Sen's way of thinking. As we shall see shortly, for him God himself both creates and redeems. Christ is a creature for Sen because he treats the word 'Son' as it is normally and primarily treated in both the Old and the New Testaments, as a relationship to God to which his creature man is called, a relationship Jesus of Nazareth so perfectly exemplified. And, therefore, it is to the man born of Mary, to the incarnate Christ only, that Sen applies the term 'Son of God' in any full-blooded personal sense.³⁹

If the term 'man-God' is excluded, the time-hallowed term 'God-man' is not,⁴⁰ but Sen interprets it in his own characteristic way. It is identical in meaning with his other term 'Divine humanity'.⁴¹ 'Here man remains man', he writes, 'and God is only superadded to his nature. Humanity continues to be humanity, but Divinity is engrafted upon humanity'.⁴² Now Christ is Divine because he is the incarnation not of deity but of 'Sonship'.⁴³ He is the incarnation of that perfect relationship of love and obedience to God to which every man is called,⁴⁴ and which God is powerful to give according to the measure of man's openness to him.

In him (sc. Jesus Christ) we see human nature perfected by true affiliation with the Divine nature (sc. God). And in this affiliation we see the fullest realisation of the purpose of Christ's life and ministry. He shows us...how we can exalt our humanity by making it more Divine, how while retaining our humanity we may still partake more and more of the divine character. It was for this purpose that Christ came into this world.⁴⁵

Sen does admit that through the Son, Jesus Christ, the Father is manifested to men,⁴⁶ but such statements as this are held in tension with

history one who without having committed actual crime believes that the Son is not exactly the same as the Father. An Arian by another name, smelling as sweet'.

³⁹ *Lectures*, p. 14; *et passim*.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 25; *et passim*.

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 18 f; cf. p. 20 'He is humanity pure and simple in which divinity dwells'.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 22; cf. p. 26.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 22 f; 36; *et passim*.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 17, 41, *et passim*; cf. more explicit statement on the theme, reminiscent of Johannine theology and Mt. 11:27 and parallel, contained in a letter to Max Müller of 9th July, 1881 (cited by Parekh, *op. cit.*, pp. 149 f): 'I recognise divinity in some form in Christ, in the sense in which the Son partakes of the Father's divine nature. We in India look upon the son as the father born again. The wife is called *Jaya*, for in her the father is born in the

others which suggest that both ancient Judaism and Hinduism have sufficiently revealed the Father and that what is unique about Christ is his revelation not of Fatherhood but of Sonship.⁴⁷ But the tension is resolved when we come to appreciate Sen's real concern here, which is rightly to concede that outside the Christian dispensation there are genuine experiences of the Fatherhood of God and at the same time to emphasise that God's Fatherhood is nowhere known in detachment from a relationship of sonship to him; and Sen knows of no example of sonship of such incomparable quality as Christ's —one of 'true filial love', of obedience without servitude.⁴⁸ Moreover it is not by contemplation of Christ as an epiphany of God that we come to know who the Father really is, but solely by appropriating in our lives Christ's pattern of sonship:⁴⁹ 'If you do not go through the Son you have no access to the Father. If you have wandered away in disobedience, return to obedient sonship, and you are reconciled to the Father'.⁵⁰

It was this burning concern which I believe drove Sen to set up that 'man of straw', his notion that Christians treated Christ as an incarnation of the Father. Ostensibly he detected a popular avatarism among Christians which he seems to have treated as a kind of Sabelianism or Docetism.⁵¹ I doubt whether he was much troubled by the Serampore missionary Marshman's description of Jesus as 'Jehovah God',⁵² nor is the now familiar caveat, 'Jesus does not exhaust the meaning of God', very appropriate to his pattern of thought. What must have troubled him was the pessimism concerning man's nature which was prominent in much Protestant theology from the 17th to 19th centuries and which was represented by many of Sen's missionary opponents. Given man's hopelessly stubborn nature the most that men could hope for was the Father's forgiveness, and this Christ was reckoned to have secured at one stroke by his sacrifice on Calvary. Not that Sen on the other hand minimised in any way what happened on the cross,⁵³ but the prevailing Protestant emphasis did tend to make Christ's whole life of servanthood and sonship somewhat redundant.

shape of the son. Hence the Hindu, while regarding the father and son as distinct and separate persons, connects them in thought by some kind of identity. This identity does not merge the son in the father, does not by pure fiction exalt the son to the position of father, but leaving the absolute relationship intact, maintains nevertheless a unity or likeness of nature. Looking upon Christ's relation in this light we can readily comprehend the divinity of Jesus as contradistinguished from his "Deity". True sonship, such as it was in Christ, must be divine'.

⁴⁷ *Lectures*, pp. 22-24.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 22 f.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 22-25, 34-36.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp. 37 f; *et passim*.

⁵² So M. M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 69. From a purely orthodox point of view Marshman might have been able to get away with this by appeal to the doctrine of *Perichoresis*.

⁵³ cf. *Lectures*, p. 21; 89 ff (from 'Asia's Message to Europe').

Christ was worshipped and adored almost exclusively for securing the boon of pardon from the Father. He might just as well have been an incarnation of the Father himself. Sen saw what was lacking; Christ needed bringing into the midst of men as their Brother⁶⁴ into whose likeness they had every hope of growing.

Christ is also Divine-humanity for Sen because he is the end-product of a process of evolution, extending from the beginning of creation, through the lowest forms of life, right up to the creation of man.⁶⁵ And Christ is the perfection of humanity.⁶⁶ True man indeed he is, 'a mere man' never!⁶⁷ At every point this process has been directed by the Word or Logos of God.⁶⁸ And finally the Logos was responsible for Jesus Christ.⁶⁹ Mention of the Logos enables Sen to speak of the pre-existence of Christ, the Son of God, but this is not understood as personal pre-existence; he is pre-existent as a fertile idea in the mind of God:

Even the co-eternity of the Son with the Father, (we have) fearlessly upheld and proclaimed. As the *sleeping* Logos did Christ live *potentially* in the Father's bosom, long, long before he came into this world of ours.⁶⁰

For Sen the Logos represents God's ideas and intentions for the universe and especially for his creature man, or at the very most God's creative power. It is synonymous with 'Will',⁶¹ 'wisdom from the Divine Mind',⁶² and 'primary creative Force'.⁶² In this way God is shown continually to have been expressing both his thoughts and power in creation and thereby putting something of himself into creation. In Jesus Christ, however, his intentions for the world are most fully expressed and in him is seen the fullness of his creative power.⁶³ With P. Chenchiah behind us in India and P. Teilhard de Chardin and others⁶⁴ in the West, evolutionary Christologies such as Sen's have become almost commonplace. What is not so commonplace is recent research into the semantics of pre-existence in the New Testament and contemporary Judaism, which seems to be establishing

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶⁷ cf. p. 56 and fn. 7 above and fn. 117 below; in fairness to Fr. Chethimattam who was present for the original presentation of this paper, it must be pointed out that he expressed a desire in the ensuing discussion to amend his phrase, 'a mere man', to 'man only'.

⁶⁸ *Lectures*, p. 12.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 31 f.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶³ *ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

⁶⁴ e.g. W. N. Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate*, London: Nisbet, 1959,—*Christology Reconsidered*, London: SCM Press, 1970.

most remarkably the very position Sen held on the subject.⁶⁵ This is well illustrated by the following comment of the modern New Testament scholar, G. B. Caird. Referring to the authors of Colossians, Hebrews and the Fourth Gospel, he writes:

... they ascribed pre-existence to Jesus because they wanted to claim for him all that the Jews had claimed for the Torah (and Word and Wisdom, Caird had argued earlier), because they believed that in him God's purpose for man, and therefore for the whole cosmos, had become an earthly reality. This way of approaching New Testament Christology would disencumber us from the outset of one of the more vexatious problems of classical christology. In the debates which followed in succeeding centuries one of the major questions was: how could Jesus Christ be both man and God, without either diminution of his Godhead or absorption of his humanity? For the New Testament writers this question never even arose. They held that the union of the human and the divine which had been achieved in Jesus was precisely that which God had intended from all eternity as the destiny of man.⁶⁶

In similar vein Sen continues his argument. Evolution does not stop with Jesus, for he has made it possible for others to become sons of God like him. Just as Origen once said, 'From the one Christ have come many Christs, imitators of him and formed after him who is in the image of God',⁶⁷ so Sen writes, 'The problem of creation was not how to produce one Christ, but how to make everyman Christ. Christ was only a means, not the end. He was the way'.⁶⁸ And yet again:

The Father continually manifests his wisdom and mercy in creation, till men take the form of pure sonship in Christ, and then out of one little seed-Christ is evolved a whole harvest of endless and ever multiplying Christs.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ cf. especially G. B. Caird, 'The Development of the Doctrine of Christ in the NT' pp. 75-80, in N. Pittenger (ed.), *Christ for Us Today*, London: SCM Press, 1968; J. A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, London: SCM Press, 1973, chap. 5; J. M. Gibbs, 'Jesus as the Wisdom of God: the Normative Man of History moving to the Cosmic Christ', *Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 24, Nos. 3 and 4, July-Dec., 1975, pp. 108 ff.

⁶⁶ *op. cit.*, p. 79; Caird, however, finds it more difficult than J. A. T. Robinson (*op. cit.*, pp. 161-9, 178-9 fn. 182) does to treat the pre-existence implied in Phil. 2:6, 7 and 2 Cor. 8:9 as a personification, but he rightly makes no judgement as to which of the two alternative models is the definitive one, personified pre-existence or personal pre-existence. R. G. Hamerton Kelly (*Pre-existence, Wisdom and the Son of Man*, Cambridge University Press 1973) distinguishes between ideal and actual pre-existence and further subdivides the two categories; but in his tentative exploration of the relevance of such language for Christology today, he seems over-bound to the mythological-cum-metaphysical structures of biblical thought.

⁶⁷ *Jo.* 6. 3. (Migne 14.212c).

⁶⁸ *Lectures*, p. 15.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 16.

Certainly the process of Christification is not confined for Sen to those who enjoy conscious knowledge of the Christ-event. He agrees with the early Greek Apologists that the Logos is at work in different degrees in all men,⁷⁰ and like the Apologists, the Fourth Evangelist and like Philo⁷¹ even, he can name this Logos 'Son of God'.⁷² He claims for him 'all literature, all science, all philosophy, every doctrine that is true, every form of righteousness etc'.⁷³ Addressing his fellow countrymen he avers, 'If Christ is universal Sonship, then undoubtedly as far as ye are good and true ye are sons of God and partakers of Christ'.⁷⁴ It is such passages as these which must have caused M. M. Thomas to suspect that Sen had 'given up the centrality of the historical Jesus as the Word Incarnate'. But if we understand Sen's references to the universal Christ as primarily personifications (which we must do if we have any respect for Sen's integrity), if we understand them as ciphers of the values and activity of the God who 'has left himself nowhere without a witness', then the Christian has nothing to fear from Sen's theology. All that is good and true in this world is from God,⁷⁵ but ultimately this all exists to foster that personal truth and personal love which were so gloriously embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. Wherever truth and goodness are found, they can be deemed as anticipations of the truth and goodness of Jesus. 'Thus all reason in man is Christ-reason', writes Sen, 'all love is Christ-love, all power is Christ-power . . . He is the *Chit*-Christ'.⁷⁶ Men everywhere may come to the Father through experiencing the values of sonship,⁷⁷ but *it is Sen's own experience* (and this is crucial) that these values are most clearly apprehended in the Christ of the New Testament scriptures. As a matter of fact the 'historical Jesus' (viz. Christ-event) is for Sen the grand norm by which the experience of sonship in all other men is evaluated. He readily confesses: 'In the *Christ of the Gospel* we have true Sonship, an example and a blessing unto the world'.⁷⁸

The Holy Spirit

A consideration of Sen's Christology is not complete without some reference to his understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit. The

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 32 f.

⁷¹ *de Agri*. 51.

⁷² *Lectures*, pp. 32-34.

⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 33 f.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 24 f: Sen's beautiful meditation on the role of Mary in the production and education of Jesus (*ibid.*, pp. 27-31) serves to show how very important the historical Jesus was to him. It takes up the real concern of those early Christian confessional formulae which underscore the historical context of Jesus' birth (e.g. Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8; Gal. 3:16; 4:4; and the Old Roman Creed).

Spirit's relation is twofold: to Christ himself on the one hand and on the other hand to the many Christs who come into being through him.

It was the Holy Spirit who was responsible for the kind of person Jesus was. To draw upon an earlier lecture of Sen's, it was because Jesus was so open to the Father, denying himself altogether, that he created in himself a vacuum into which came pouring the Spirit of the Lord.⁷⁰ He became transparent to God, manifesting the divine life as no man had ever done before.⁸⁰ Nothing could be further from the crude moralism of ancient Adoptionist heresies than this. Sen carefully safeguards the initiative of God at every point. We have seen already how he contends that what happened in Jesus was planned by God from the very beginning; all creation, all history, all sacred history had been moving providentially towards the Christ-event.⁸¹ The Holy Spirit is shown not only descending on Jesus at his baptism but as actually begetting him.⁸² In all this Sen is touching upon a very ancient Christology which has roots in the New Testament, which flourished in several of the Apostolic Fathers and which survived right into the 3rd century—namely, a Spirit-Christology, which explains Jesus as a man perfectly and permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit.⁸³ There is also a hint in Sen's lecture of a special form the Spirit-Christology once took—Christ as an incarnation of the Holy Spirit. The Book of Wisdom⁸⁴ and several of the early fathers⁸⁵ hesitated to make a hard and fast distinction between Logos-Wisdom and the Holy Spirit, and so does Sen:

Begotten by the 'volition' of Almighty God, as Tertullian says, the Spirit-Christ spread forth in the universe as an emanation from the Divine Reason, and you can see him with the eye of faith underlying the endless varieties of truth and goodness in ancient and modern times.⁸⁶

Jesus Christ does become for Sen the special locus of God's presence and activity, that is of the Holy Spirit⁸⁷. In an intriguing illustration

⁷⁰ *Lectures in India* (1901), Vol. 1, p. 365.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 373.

⁸¹ *Lectures in India*, Vol. 2, pp. 11-15 *et passim*.

⁸² *ibid.*, pp. 41 f.

⁸³ For data and scholarly treatment, cf. H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, Vol. 1, Harvard University Press, 1956, chaps. VII-XI; G. W. H. Lampe, 'The Holy Spirit and the Person of Christ' in S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton (eds.), *Christ, Faith and History*, Cambridge University Press, 1972, pp. 111-130; H. J. Carpenter, 'The Birth from the Holy Spirit and Virgin in the Old Roman Creed', *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. XL, 1939, pp. 31-36. For more popular treatments, cf. H. P. Van Dusen, *Spirit, Son and Father*, London: Adams and Charles Black, 1960, chaps. 2, 3 and 6; Norman Hook, *Christ in the Twentieth Century: a Spirit-Christology*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1968, *passim*.

⁸⁴ Wis. 1:6, 7.

⁸⁵ For data cf. M. Wiles, 'Some Reflections on the Origin of the Doctrine of the Trinity', *J.T.S.*, New Series, Vol. VIII, Pt. I, Apr., 1957, pp. 92-106.

⁸⁶ *Lectures*, pp. 32 f.

⁸⁷ cf. p. 26.

he refers to objects called Benares boxes.⁸⁸ The outer box is the material human self. Open this and you find another box; the box of humanity. Open that box you find yet another box within—Jesus Christ encased in humanity. Then deep within Jesus you find the Holy Spirit. Open the box representing the Holy Spirit and at last you come upon the 'invisible supreme essence'. Thus Christ becomes the link between our humanity and God because he possesses the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit that was in Jesus makes it possible for others to become Christs. Sen argues that while the Holy Spirit is present and powerful today, Jesus himself is powerless to save men.⁸⁹ 'He may teach, he may reveal, he may show the way, but he can never give us the power of overcoming sin'.⁹⁰ He cannot give us strength we need to follow his example nor convert us nor make us new creatures.⁹¹ Only the Holy Spirit can do all this. He is 'our Saviour'⁹² and 'Sanctifier'.⁹³ Jesus himself depended entirely upon the Holy Spirit. He was baptised by the Holy Spirit, a sign that the Spirit came from outside of him, 'down from above'.⁹⁴ And so it is with us: our life 'must come to us not from Christ, but from the Holy Ghost'.⁹⁴

Do you wish, my countrymen, to become sons and heirs of God? Then you must invoke the very same Spirit by whom the Son of God was baptised eighteen centuries ago, and draw your inspiration from the very source from which Christ drew his. To the Holy Spirit belongs the glory of begetting and baptising the Son of God, as scriptural history testifies; and to him alone belongs the power of converting all mankind into sons of God.⁹⁵

Yet there is no exaltation of the Holy Spirit at the expense of Jesus. Sen does not belittle in any way Jesus' salvific function: 'Christ is but an example in history, an objective portraiture of faithful sonship'.⁹⁶ But it is this objective portrait which is converted into a subjective portrait by the Holy Spirit. Christ without the Holy Spirit is a 'mere historical character'; through the Holy Spirit this same Christ becomes 'a sanctifying power within us'.⁹⁷ It is Christ whom the sinner accepts when the Holy Spirit works in his heart.⁹⁷ In the light of this and the following passage it is difficult for M. M. Thomas' objection to be sustained, namely that Sen had 'given up the centrality of the historical Jesus . . . as the basis and criterion of the Holy Spirit'.

In one favoured spot on earth is the Eternal Son reflected; thence the concentrated rays of heaven's light are diffused by the

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 39 f.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 40.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 40 f.

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 43.

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 41.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 41 f.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 40.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 41.

inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the length and breadth of the world. Far away, in an obscure place, Nazareth, a mighty wave of light rears its head. Lo! it moves the sea of humanity, causing myriad waves of light to foam and sparkle on its surface, and stirring their waters from its deepest depths into a surging and glowing sea of divinity. Already the Holy Ghost has shaken the foundations of our carnal nature, and brought Christ into us all. Christ is not lo! here, lo! there, but within. Truly the Holy Ghost has leavened us with the Christ leaven, and established the Logos within us as the divine son subjectified. Christ! art thou within us or before us in the outside world? A voice answers from the depths of my heart and your hearts, 'Here I am'. Our own consciousness bears testimony to this indwelling Christ, a part of our very nature, a new life begotten by the Spirit.⁹⁸

The Trinity

Only now are we in a position to examine Sen's observations on the Trinity. His oft-quoted definition runs:

The apex (his model is a triangle) is the very God Jehovah, the Supreme Brahma of the Vedas. Alone in his own eternal glory, he dwells. From him comes down the Son in a direct line, an emanation from Divinity. Thus God descends and touches one end of the base of humanity, then running all along the base permeates the world, and then by the power of the Holy Spirit drags up degenerated humanity to himself. Divinity coming down to humanity is the Son; Divinity carrying humanity up to heaven is the Holy Ghost. This is the whole philosophy of salvation. Such is the story of human redemption.⁹⁹

Here it becomes a little difficult to isolate Sen's precise meaning, but we can grasp the general idea. The Sanskrit name he settles on for God is not *Brahman* but *Brahma*. Maybe this is not the most effective way of engaging Vedantists in dialogue, but it does save Sen from all those philosophical complications Upadhyaya later struggled so manfully with and which the early fathers found themselves immersed in in their dialogue with Middle and Neo-Platonists; and Sen's caution does enable him expressly to identify Brahma with the biblical Jehovah and the Father of the New Testament Scriptures (if not of much later Trinitarianism.) This Brahma-Jehovah-Father alone is God in the full sense of the word—not exclusively God Absolute, but also God as he comes into relations, especially as the Creator and source of all things.¹⁰⁰ But this God stoops down to the world, as it were, revealing himself decisively in the sonship of Jesus Christ, but also revealing something of himself (and there, by anticipation, revealing Christ)

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 42 f.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 10-14.

wherever men enter into a genuine experience of sonship to God, and, not least, transforming countless men and women of subsequent generations into the likeness of Christ. But this 'transforming' activity of God in contradistinction to his revealing activity, Sen calls the Holy Spirit, and he has solid Christian support for this. The Holy Spirit unites others to Christ, raising them regenerated into God's presence and making them divine as Christ is divine. Thus on a previous page he explains:

The Lord of heaven and earth came into this world, and manifested Himself in the Son, that he might go through the whole length and breadth of humanity, illumining and sanctifying all generations of mankind with the radiance of Divinity. Behold Christ, Christ, Christ, everywhere, in all ages and in all nations. Here you see the spread of Divine Sonship, like a sweeping flood of light and life, carrying all mankind heavenward. Do you know what this is? It is the Holy Spirit. Yes, after the Son comes the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost drags Christ-life into the hearts and souls of all men, breaking and annihilating the sins and iniquities of ages, and makes all mankind partakers of Divine life.¹⁰¹

But more needs to be said about the relationship of the Holy Spirit to Christ in the context of Sen's Trinity. It is significant that he calls the Holy Spirit 'Saviour', while in the same context he calls the Son 'Brother' only.¹⁰² The Father is worshipped¹⁰³ and prayer can be addressed directly to the Holy Spirit,¹⁰⁴ while the Son is merely 'honoured'.¹⁰⁴ The Father 'manifests' himself in creation,¹⁰⁵ but who is he who manifests himself in the Son? Again the Father.¹⁰⁶ We have already seen that what was actually *incarnate* in the Son was not Godhead but Sonship, and we have also seen that the secret of Christ's divinity is the same as the secret of the believer's divinity—the Holy Spirit. In Sen's Trinity the Father and Spirit hold a special place which is distinguished from the Son's. Father and Spirit are both categorically 'God', but not so the Son. God manifests himself *in* the Son (the preposition is important) but he gives life to humanity *as* the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁷ God is the Holy Spirit for Sen and the Holy Spirit is God. He can go as far as to assert, 'The identity of the Father and the Holy Ghost few will question'.¹⁰⁸ Many in fact have done,¹⁰⁹ but part of the purpose of this article has been to free Sen from the judgement of, for instance, the Athanasian Creed. We know pre-

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 17, 22.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁹ Including Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya in most caustic language: 'Well, a Christian child who has learnt his catechism but imperfectly will at once question the identity of the Holy Ghost with the Father', *op. cit.*, p. 15.

cisely what Sen means, that there is a real continuity between God and his action, between the Person and his Spirit and it makes little sense today to hypostasize the two. The Father is God both as he is in himself and as he reveals himself in creation, in history and in the Son. The Holy Spirit is God personally and powerfully at work in Christ the Son and in all who follow Christ. By the criteria of orthodoxy we have strictly a Binity of Father and Holy Spirit rather than a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But such a conclusion only makes sense if we continue to assume that the hallowed juxtaposition of Father, Son and Holy Spirit must imply a homogeneity between the three persons; and this is precisely what the New Testament does not assume. Sen includes the Son in his Trinity because he wants to underline the uniqueness and decisiveness of what the Father and Holy Spirit have done in and through Jesus, because he believes that no adequate definition can be given of God without reference to Jesus Christ, his Son. And this seems to me to be the pattern of thinking behind much New Testament bi-partite and tri-partite confessional formula.¹¹⁰ It was the same pattern of thinking which threw up in Israel such confessional patterns as one God—one Israel or one God—one Name—one Israel.¹¹¹ Not that Israel was God, but Israel was the Son, the people God had chosen and the Jew believed that in any definition of Yahweh's nature, even of his unity, you could not help but refer to the reality of this people of his. This kind of perspective which gives such a *decisive* role to the Son, though a creature, in man's experience of God, cannot be confused with Unitarianism.

Sen rightly recognised that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the 'dominant symbols'¹¹² in the New Testament which point to the reality of God, and therefore he rejoiced in the more inclusive symbol, 'the Trinity', but he did realise that the three members of this symbol did point to the reality of God in different ways, and not as sharing the same divine essence. It is in the context of this rather loose, yet I believe, dynamic understanding of the Trinity that he draws on the term, *Saccidananda*, and therefore this piece of pioneering in indigenisation must not be made to carry more than it can bear.¹¹³ It may well be that Upadhyaya, who saw the similarity between the orthodox understanding of the inner life of the God of the Trinity and the Vedantic understanding of *Saccidananda*,¹¹⁴ was more faithful to both

¹¹⁰ e.g. 1 Cor. 8:6; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Mt. 28:19.

¹¹¹ For data cf. W. Roy Pape, 'The Origins of Trinitarian Doctrine', Letter to the Editor, *Theology*, Vol. LXXVIII, No. 662, Aug., 1975, pp. 429 f.

¹¹² To use a phrase of C. C. Richardson (*The Doctrine of the Trinity*, New York: Abingdon Press, 1958); the whole of Richardson's thesis bears many resemblances to Sen's teaching.

¹¹³ This seems to me a particular failing of Robin Boyd (*op. cit.*, pp. 35, 69, 79, 219 n.3, 235, 239) which is perpetuated in his latest book, *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church*, Cambridge University Press, 1974, pp. 21 f.

¹¹⁴ *Sophia*, Vol. V, Jan., 1898, pp. 10-14; *The Twentieth Century*, Vol. I, May, 1901, pp. 115-117; translation of his Sanskrit hymn, 'Vande Saccidananda' in *Prayer Book and Hymnal*, 38th International Eucharistic Congress of Bombay, 1964, (Hymn No. 2) (cf. *Sophia*, Vol. V., Oct., 1898, pp. 145-147).

traditional Christianity and traditional Hinduism, but Sen seems to me to have been more faithful to the New Testament witness and his application of *Saccidananda* to this has a legitimacy and fruitfulness all of its own:

God coming down and going up—this is creation, this is salvation. In this plain figure of three lines you have the solution of a vast problem. The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost; the Creator, the Exemplar, and the Sanctifier; I am, I love, I save; the Still God, the Journeying God, the Returning God; Force, Wisdom, Holiness; the True, the Good, the Beautiful; *Sat, Chit, Ananda*; 'Truth, Intelligence and Joy'. . . You have three conditions, three manifestations of Divinity. Yet there is one God, one Substance, amid three phenomena. Not three Gods but one God. Whether alone or manifest in the Son, or quickening humanity as the Holy Spirit, it is the same God, the same identical Deity, whose unity continues amid multiplicity of manifestations. Now He is, now He moves, now He returns; now in His own glory, now in the Son's glory, now in the glory of the converted sinner; but it is the same God throughout . . . The true Trinity is not three Persons, but three functions of the same Person.¹¹⁵

Unlike the majority of Sen's commentators, I can only stand amazed at the clarity and coherence with which he treats the subjects of Christ and the Trinity and at the way in which he anticipates theological perspectives which are being taken for granted by many modern scholars as being basic to the New Testament witness. It also seems to me that he provides a very open (yet not uncommitted) basis for Christians engaged in inter-religious dialogue, but to follow that up would demand another paper and a much wider field of data.

However, this is not to say that Sen cannot be faulted. The sectarianism of his Church of the New Dispensation and his own seeming pride and conceit do nothing to build up one's confidence in his doctrine of the Holy Spirit.¹¹⁶ But it must be borne in mind that it was his theological views and attitudes, long in advance of his time, that excluded him from the Christian Church of his day. He therefore lacked the special authority and support which members of the historic fellowship have come to know, as a matter of experience, in their worship, life and service together. He was bound to seek authority and support elsewhere—in an appeal to the Holy Spirit and especially in a view of the Spirit which tended to isolate him (sc. the Spirit) from that community which, for all its faults, we still believe to be his most distinctive *locus*. Within this community today Sen could have fruitfully expounded his theology. He could have *worshipped* Christ even, unashamedly, as Christians have done down the ages and will want to keep on doing. He would of course have had to distinguish in his own mind and for

¹¹⁵ *Lectures*, pp. 16-18.

¹¹⁶ cf. *Lectures*, pp. 43-48; 49-119 ('Asia's Message to Europe'), *The New Dispensation*, Calcutta: Brahma Tract Society, 2nd Edn., 1915-16, Vols. I and II, *passim*.

other like-minded people the difference between treating Christ as God ontologically and treating him as having the value of God. Many Christians would still have hesitated to follow him in opting for the second alternative;¹¹⁷ but his emphasis on the Son of God who calls us all 'to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ', this would have been for all. In his own day such a message was long overdue; it is no less urgent today.

¹¹⁷ This was made clear in the discussion following the original presentation of this paper. For many of the participants authentic Christian faith in Christ had to be articulated in terms of belief in his being God-become-man. Hence Fr. Chethimattam's description of Sen's Christ as 'mere man' or 'man only'. For the representative Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, the dogma, 'God became man and that God-made-man in the individual Jesus Christ', belongs to the essential substance of the Christian faith, however, differently it is expressed or explained from age to age and culture to culture ('Jesus Christ', *Sacramentum Mundi*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, Reprint 1975, Vol. 3, pp. 196 ff). The majority of Protestant Theologians would agree. Of course it has long been taken for granted (though not seriously enough heeded) that theologians of the calibre of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich would demur (cf. especially R. Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1952, Band II, pp. 246 ff; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, London: James Nisbet & Co., 1957, Vol. II, pp. 109 ff). But when the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University and Chairman of the Anglican Theological Commission, Maurice Wiles, also demurs (cf. 'Does Christology rest on a Mistake?' *Religious Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Mar., 1970, pp. 69-76; *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, London: SCM Press, 1974, chaps. 3 and 4), there is hope that Sen's and similar Christologies might also be considered as authentically Christian.