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Hindu Avatar and Christian Incarnation: A mystery of the Presence of God

Flora Visser

Twelve years ago, I was introduced to a guru-avatar, Mata Amritananda Mayi, who for the first time had come to Canada upon the invitation of her Hindu followers. Friends had told me that this remarkable woman had a powerful message of love, and I was curious to hear this from her. The public program was in a large hall, and literally thousands of people had come to see her, many of whom had to wait outside in corridors and adjacent conference rooms. After I had received a token for darshan, I listened to her address and, surrounded by the milling of large numbers of people and deafened by Hindu music so loud that it nearly burst my eardrums, I waited for hours to receive a personal hug. When I finally was in front of the Mata and received her embrace, everything around me seemed to disappear and a profound sense of peace came over me, a feeling that lasted for a long time. This experience led me to make the following comparative study of the Hindu avatar and the Christian Incarnation. In doing so, I found that these two concepts are quite similar, taken in the context of their respective cultures, and that devotion to either one, the avatar or the Christ, bridges the distance between God and the believer.

Development of the doctrine of Avatar

Hinduism can be best characterized as encompassing a broad range of related philosophies and a large variety of religious practices and local deities. Common beliefs are: the acceptance of the *Vedas* as revealed sacred texts; a belief in a supreme being, Brahman, which can be personal or impersonal and may have a variety of forms; a belief in an immortal soul that reincarnates after death until it reaches liberation; and an understanding of history as a cosmic cycle of creation, preservation and destruction. (Oxtoby, Amore, Hussain, & Segal, Eds., 2012, p. 281, 299)

The earliest texts are the *Vedas* (c. 1500-600 BCE); these texts about ritual and sacrifice were later interpreted into a more metaphysical understanding in the *Upanishads* (c. 700-600 BCE) in the form of dialogues between teacher and students; those dialogues include early discussions of the basic philosophical concepts, central to Classical Hinduism: 'karma' - the law of cause and effect; 'samsara' - reincarnation of the soul through many births until all karma is resolved; 'moksha' - liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth through transforming experiential wisdom; and the relationship between the 'atman', the soul, and 'Brahman', the supreme being. (Oxtoby et al, Eds., p. 289)

During the Classical period of Hinduism (c. 200 BCE-1100 CE), a number of philosophers re-interpreted the teachings of the *Upanishads* and integrated these with newer literature, and based on this work the six major branches of Hindu religious philosophy were established. One of those schools, Vedanta, based on the writings of the *Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, seeks to answer questions about the Supreme Reality (Brahman) and its relationship with the world and the human soul. An early philosophical stream in this school is Advaita Vedanta, developed by Shankara (c. 800); this philosophy adopts a position of non-duality (advaita) and poses that all of reality is Brahman;

Brahman and the atman are identical, and the perception of difference is an illusion (maya), liberation follows when the soul realizes this. (Oxtoby et al, Eds., pp. 281, 289, 303) This view was criticized by later philosophers (c. 1000-1100 CE) and new interpretations of the texts developed into Theistic Vedanta, which considers soul and matter to be separate, but still closely connected to the Supreme Lord, who both pervades and transcends the universe, and presumes that intense devotion to this Lord can ultimately lead to liberation. (Oxtoby et al, Eds., p. 304)

Apart from the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* the inspired scriptures of Classical Hinduism include the *Puranas* (c. 300-1000 CE) in which the emphasis shifts to the deities that are still worshipped to-day; the *Ramayana* (c. 500 BCE-200CE), a tale about Rama with inspiring stories that are still performed in dance and drama; and the epic poem, the *Mahabharata* (c. 200 BCE-200 CE) that describes a struggle for power between two ruling families. (Oxtoby et al, Eds. pp. 291, 295) Placed within the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita* (c. 200 BCE-200 CE), a dialogue between Arjuna, a warrior, and Krishna, his charioteer, who reveals himself to be the Supreme Lord. In this dialogue, Krishna explains three paths leading to liberation, the path of action, the path of knowledge and the path of devotion. The path of action (karma yoga) is one of selfless service that destroys negative karma; the path of knowledge of the nature of the universe (jnana yoga) brings realization, and in the path of devotion (bhakti yoga), the supreme Lord offers liberation to those devotees who surrender to him. (Oxtoby et al, Eds., p. 294)

The Vedas and the Upanishads did not discuss the concept of avatar; however, during the time of the formation of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, it was believed that God could descend to earth, and this was formulated in seminal form in the *Bhagavad Gita*. (Bassuk, 1987, p.3) Krishna explains to Arjuna when and why he, the Supreme Lord, descends to the world:

“I have been born many times, Arjuna, and many times hast thou been born. But I remember may past lives, and thou hast forgotten thine. Although I am unborn, everlasting, I am the Lord of all, I come to my realm of nature and through my wondrous power I am born. When righteousness is weak and faints and unrighteousness exults in pride, then my Spirit arises on earth. For the salvation of those who are good, for the destruction of evil in men, for the fulfillment of the kingdom of righteousness, I come in the world in the ages that pass. He who knows my birth as God and who knows my sacrifice, when he leaves his mortal body, goes no more from death to death, but he in truth comes to me.” (Bhagavad-Gita: 4: 5-9)

This text has been influential in the development of the concept of avatar in various philosophical schools, in particular in Vaishnavism, one of the branches of Vedanta in the Bhakti tradition that originated in south India (c. 500 CE) and spread throughout India. This movement began when poet-saints (Alvars) sang devotional songs in the vernacular as they pilgrimaged through India in praise of Vishnu and Shiva, emphasising the supremacy of Vishnu and his incarnation as Rama or Krishna in order to save all beings. (Oxtoby et al, Eds., p. 309) This avatar concept counter-balanced the remoteness of the Supreme Being described in the Upanishads, and brought God into a more intimate relationship with humankind. (Bassuk, 1987, p.2) Many of the devotional songs were integrated into temple worship and transformed the religious expression towards a personal loving relationship

with the supreme Lord who manifests himself in various forms as Lord Vishnu, Lord Rama, and Lord Krishna.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna explains that he, the Supreme Lord, has come, and will again come to the world, in order to restore righteousness, grant salvation to the devotees and destroy the wicked. The *Puranas* and the *Ramayana* also reflect this purpose, and Vishnu is described as the Supreme Lord (Brahman) who assumes a variety of forms to preserve the world. (Bassuk, 1987, p.23) In the *Ramayana* the Supreme Lord, Vishnu, transforms himself into Rama, a hero who saves the world from the evil demon Ravana. In this myth Rama represents and upholds morality and law (dharma) and Ravana represents the forces of evil and wickedness (adharma). (Bassuk, 1987, p.32) In later developments Rama becomes the 7th and Krishna the 8th of the 10 avatars of Lord Vishnu. In time, this concept of avatar develops further, and new avatars come to the world for other reasons than offering salvation, for example, to introduce a new school of knowledge, or new forms of devotional practices. (Sheth, 2002, p. 99) Similar avatars are accepted in other theological schools beside Vaishnavism, and many have different names.

In modern Hinduism, quite a number of historical Hindu saints, such as Ramakrishna, Aurobindo, Meher Baba and Satya Sai Baba are regarded to be avatars as well. (Bassuk, 1987, p.194) Some modern avatars are still current, as for example Mata Amritananda Mayi. (Warrier, 2003, p.215)

Various theories have been proposed to explain the development of avatars; among these are (1) Visnuization, in which a figure of an earlier text evolved into an avatar; (2) apotheosis, a human hero who was later divinized, for example Rama; and (3) composite personality, as for example baby Krishna, the child god and the adult hero. (Sheth, 2002, p.101)

Development of the doctrine of Incarnation

Christianity developed out of a movement within 1st century Palestinian Judaism, at a time when the Jewish world was undergoing social change and tension; Palestine had been annexed in 63 BCE by the Roman Empire, and the Roman rule combined with the Hellenistic cultural influences, challenged the traditional way of life and Jewish identity. (Borg & Wright, 1989, p.14) The Jewish religion was divided; however, and all factions shared the belief in one God, YHWH, who had made a covenant with them and had given them the Torah, practised circumcision and set themselves apart by keeping the Sabbath, observing dietary rules, and following standards of morality laid out in the Ten Commandments. (Powell, 2009, p.18) To the Jewish people, the flow of history was determined by God and followed a linear pattern, starting with the creation of the universe and closing when the Messiah would come to liberate them and establish his everlasting kingdom of justice and peace. The Christian movement followed this Judaic understanding of history, proclaiming that God's promise had been fulfilled and liberation had become a reality. However, the understanding of the kingdom was quite different from what was expected; instead of an earthly kingdom, it was to be a kingdom of righteousness, peace, love and joy.

The central figure of Christianity is Jesus, and what we know about him comes from the New Testament Gospels (c. 65-90 CE), written more than 30 years after his death. He is described as a remarkable itinerant Jewish preacher and powerful healer, who, accompanied by a number of followers, travels through and visits the area and villages of Galilee. His teaching is mostly addressed to the Jewish population, quoting from the scriptures and

discussing topics of Jewish interest, such as how to follow God's commandments. He rebukes the religious leadership and calls out for justice for the poor and oppressed. Most significantly, he announces that God's kingdom has come near, and describes this kingdom of God in terms of the here and now, as well as for the future. His powerful healings, his revolutionary teachings and his popularity brings him into conflict with the religious leaders. He is arrested by religious leaders, and tried and sentenced to death by crucifixion by the Roman authority. All four gospels claim that two days after his death, Jesus had risen from the death and had appeared to his disciples. Based on this belief in the power of the resurrection, and the triumph of life over death, the Christian movement was founded.

The New Testament consists of writings from the second half of the first century CE. It includes 3 synoptic gospels describing the life and teachings of Jesus, and the gospel of John which includes long discourses about the nature of Christ. Other writings of the New Testament are the Acts of the Apostles, the undisputed Pauline letters (51-63 CE); disputed letters, and a number of other letters by various authors, and Revelation. These New Testament writings have been viewed and interpreted in different ways; the main difference concerns the authority of the writings. For many, the narratives of the life of Christ and the instructions for the believers, are revealed by God; however, a more liberal view considers them inspired human writings. In the first understanding Jesus is God incarnate, who died and was resurrected to save mankind – and these events are considered historical acts of grace by God. The second view sees in the Gospels a developing Christology, most clearly worked out in the gospel of John, the latest of the gospels and in the epistles of Paul. (Borg, 1989, pp. 3-15)

The combined New Testament writings present Jesus in two ways, firstly as the Jesus of history who lived in Palestine and who did many amazing things and was crucified, and secondly the mythical presentation of Jesus as the exalted eternal being, who was resurrected and continues to reign from heaven and who dwells in the hearts of those who believe in him. (Powell, 2009, p.64) The weaving together of these two into one, the 'Christ of Faith' can be understood as a timeless, powerful personification of God's love and liberating, life-giving power. The following, well-known verses of the gospel of John (85 CE) summarize essential tenets of the Christian faith:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. (1:1-4)

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son full of grace and truth. (1:15)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (3:16)

It took almost four centuries for this movement to become an established religion. The early church believed that Christ's second coming was imminent; however, as time passed this expectation faded and fundamental questions about the identity of Christ became central issues, in particular whether Christ could be both, fully human and fully God. The

disagreements were resolved through a number of Councils, first at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and finally at the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), when both the Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches accepted the formulation of the Doctrine of the Trinity, which states that the Father, Son and Spirit are “one God in essence, distinguished in three persons” and that in Christ are two natures, fully divine and fully human, in a hypostatic union. (Migliore, 2014, pp. 72-75)

Throughout history, Christ’s work of reconciliation has been interpreted in several ways: (1) the traditional, Patristic understanding that in Christ’s death the powers of evil and death were defeated; (2) the satisfaction theory by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) further developed by John Calvin (1509-1564) into substitutionary atonement, where Christ voluntarily took on the punishment for the sins of the people, so that those who believe in him may be saved; (3) Peter Abelard’s (1079-1142) moral influence view, which understands the work of Christ to bring about a positive change in humanities morality. (Migliore, 2014, pp. 187-198) Today the idea of salvation as a promise of life after death has shifted toward towards a new appreciation of the world itself, in which Christians can find meaning and purpose. (Jones & Lakeland, 2005, p.64)

Comparison of Avatar and Incarnation

What stands out in the development of the concepts of the avatar and the Christian incarnation, are the difficulty Christian and Hindu philosophers had in reconciling the metaphysical paradox that is inherent in the idea of God being both human and divine; how can a perfect, eternal God also be an imperfect, temporal being? In early Hindu texts, Krishna and Rama are considered to be divine and fully human, made of imperfect matter, and their human experience of pain, hunger, grief and death are described in very realistic terms. Later Vaishnavite theologians developed the idea that the body of the avatar is made of special perfect “pure matter”, explaining the described human qualities as appearances so people can identify with the avatar, and thus resolved the human-divine paradox. (Sheth, 2002, p.99) The Christian theologians found a different solution to this metaphysical problem in the notion of a hypostatic union of the human and the divine nature of Christ.

The concepts of the Hindu avatar and Christian are similar in many ways. A number of resembling qualities of the avatar and the incarnation are outlined by Sheth: both are within and also transcend human reality and are not bound to the laws of nature like ordinary human beings; the birth stories are usually miraculous and accompanied by special signs. (Sheth, 2002, p 104) Significantly, both the Hindu avatars and Christ, reveal God’s involvement with the world, and emphasize the importance of love: the avatar stresses loving devotion to God, ‘bhakti’, expressed in ritual, song and prayer, selfless actions of love and a moral and respectful life, in the Christian concept the primary focus is on the love of God to the world, and the call for brotherly/sisterly love and for selfless love. Both, the avatar and the Christian incarnation offer liberation. In the Hindu concept, the avatar may help the human develop positive dharma, to reduce the number of following rebirths, or may give immediate realization to the devotee, who then merges with God and is free from the cycle of death and rebirth. In traditional Christianity the believer is offered salvation through the forgiveness of sins and receives the promise of eternal life with God in his kingdom. More recently, the focus of liberation has shifted to Christ’s role in the ongoing creative process of renewal and on the praxis of liberation. (Oxtoby et al, Eds., 2005, p.188-190)

Specific differences between the concept of avatar and the incarnate Christ must be noted as well. First of all, there is only one incarnation and many repeated avatars. Sheth explains this difference in terms of the different concepts of time; the Christian concept is linear, with only one opportunity for salvation; the Hindu concept is cyclical and avatars return in mythic cycles, in the same way that people re-incarnate many times. (Sheth, 2002, p.106, 107) In Christianity, salvation is accomplished not just by the incarnation, but in particular by Christ's suffering, death and resurrection; this 'scandal of the Cross' is uniquely Christian, and connected with this understanding is the concept of substitutionary atonement. This view of salvation has been problematic for theologians throughout the centuries, and more recently, Feminist Theologians have critiqued this severely. (Jones & Lakeland, Eds., 2005, p.171) The Hindu concept of the law of karma precludes the idea that one being can pay the price for the transgressions of another. (Barua, 2011, p. 389)

The Hindu Christ

After the classical period of Hinduism, in the bhakti tradition and particularly in the Vaishanava faith, important living saints, were also considered to be avatars. The first one of these was Chaitanya (1480-1533), followed by several others, including Ramakrishna (1836-1886). Ramakrishna practiced several religions and came to the conclusion that all religions lead to the same goal - to God. In 1887 he had a mystical vision of Jesus, and officially validated Jesus as a genuine spiritual master through whom the Hindu devotee could reach the spiritual goal: liberation of the cycle of death and rebirth. (Bassuk, 1987, p. 95) This Hinduization of Jesus, was followed by consequent avatars, some of whom claimed to have merged with Jesus. (Bassuk, 1987, p.194) Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), who was a scholar of comparative religion, understands Jesus to be the saviour of humanity by awakening human beings to the eternal Christ within, and states: "the Incarnation is not a historical event...it is an event which is renewed in the life of everyone who is on the way to the fulfillment of his destiny." (Barua, 2011, p.166) This view is not very different from the Christian understanding of Christ being one with, or indwelling the believer.

Encounter with a Modern Hindu Avatar

Mata Amritanandamayi, also called Amma, is a highly regarded Hindu guru with many followers in India and throughout the world. Her devotees believe her to be an avatar, who has descended to earth to fulfil a divinely ordained mission. (Warrier, 2003, p.215) She herself declares that her religion is 'love', and she has come to alleviate human suffering and restore selflessness, love and compassion to the world. Amma communicates her message of love by enfolding people in a 'divine' embrace at public meetings, and she attends to the needs of the poor in India through a large charitable network 'Embracing the World' supported by pro-bono labour and financial donations. This remarkable woman is from a small village in South India and belongs to the Hindu bhakti tradition. She has very little education and her spiritual insights and claim of enlightenment are based on her 'strength of spontaneous ecstatic visions and mystical states'. (Warrier, 2003, p.216) Her teachings are commonly called Neo-Vedanta, a simplified form of Vedanta, based on the *Bhagavad Gita*; with a primary focus on selfless love, followed by traditional Hindu devotional practices, such as mantra recitations, communal worship in song and special rituals to approach a deity. She is known to have performed miracles of healing and other supernatural occurrences. Warrier, in her study of the 'Mata Amritanadamayi Mission' conducted

interviews with Hindu followers of Amma, many of whom described personal experiences of grace and guidance from Amma. (Warrier, 2003)

Conclusion

After my first meeting with Amma, mentioned before, I have attended her yearly public programs in Toronto, and have visited her ashram in India a number of times. My personal experience has been one of astonishment and wonder about the transforming love of God coming through her, and this experience has encouraged me to go deeper into my own Christian faith. Exposure to Amma has given me a better understanding of how it must have been for the disciples of Jesus; they called him Messiah, Son of God, and Lord to give expression to their experience of his transforming love and spiritual power. These experiences continued long into their memory, leading to Jesus' exalted position in the Christian faith. Jesus' example of love encourages the believers to follow in his footsteps and to seek the righteousness and peace, love and joy of his kingdom.

A comparison of the two concepts, understood in the context of their respective religions, leads me to the conclusion that the Hindu Avatar and the Christian Incarnation are quite similar, and that both bring the believers closer to the mystery of God's transforming love and help them to live a life of love and service.

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