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THEOLOGY OF ARCAVATARA AND THE EUCHARIST:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of McNulty College of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Master's Degree in Theology

By

Rev. James Olatunde Adeoye

May 2019

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Rev. James Olatunde Adeoye

2019

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY

By

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Approved April 8, 2019

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ABSTRACT

THEOLOGY OF ARCAVATARA AND THE EUCHARIST: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

By

Rev. James Olatunde Adeoye

May 2019

Thesis supervised by Dr. Sebastian Madathummuriyil

The diversity in the world today is undeniable and quite imposing. The claim to uniqueness and universality of faith in each religious system cannot be sustained without factoring the implications and impacts of this claim on the well-being of humanity and reality hermeneutics. The postmodern world favors pluralism, and encourages mutual respect for particular opinion, praxis, faith, theology and all forms of epistemology as they exist in the individual culture, religion and society. With this in mind, this work is a comparative analysis of the notion of avatars in Vaishnavism, a religious sect in Hinduism and the concept of the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic tradition. Among the five auspicious forms of avatars in Vaishnavism, arcavatara is compared with the Eucharist. Vishnu manifests himself in the consecrated images found in the homes and temples of the Vaishnavas to demonstrate his love, to protect them from

evil and to increase righteousness. God manifests Himself too in the Eucharist as a gift of presence and love. 'Bhakti' and reverence to the Eucharist and Vishnu yields union with God. The understanding of God's presence and love is similar in Vaishnavism and Catholicism. This and other points are analyzed comparatively in this work.

Vishnu: Supreme Being, Arcavatara: image-descent of Vishnu, Eucharist: Sacramental Body and blood of Jesus, Avatar: Vishnu's manifestations, bhakti: devotion, Arca: image.

DEDICATION

To the incomprehensible and loving God, who desires the salvation of every righteous man and
woman.

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This thesis would not have materialized if not for the grace of the almighty God and the support and understanding of some good people who have been generous with their time and talents. I appreciate the patience and the directions of Dr. Sebastian Madathummuriyil, Associate Professor of theology, Duquesne University, from whom I got the insight of the topic of this thesis. He did assist me to finish this work at the expected time. Thanks to Dr. Daniel Scheid, Associate Professor of theology, Duquesne University, for reading this work and for his comments and suggestions.

I appreciate my priest-brothers who offered their help at the different stages of this work: Rev. Dr. Solomon Farinto, Rev. Augustine Wayii and Rev. Emmanuel Abbey-Quaye. I am grateful to my Bishop, Most Rev. Dr. Ayo-Maria Atoyebi (OP), who permitted me to pursue my graduate studies. Thanks to my mother, the Virgin Mary, for her intercession.

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Introduction

It has been observed that “the doctrine of arcavatara (image-descent) within the Srivaisnava tradition presents difficulties for a Christian understanding of Hindu belief and practice”.¹ This observation relates to the question of who God is and how his presence and interventions in the world can be understood without minimizing his supreme majesty and unsurpassed dignity.

Substantial efforts have been made to engage Hinduism (Vaishnavism) and Christianity from a comparative perspective. Parrinder Geoffrey, Emeritus Professor of Comparative Religion at Kings College London, examined avatar and Christian incarnation in his work on world religions (1997)². Similarly, Noel Sheth, a Professor of Indian Philosophies and religions, (died 2017), did compare Hindu avatars and Christian Incarnation (2002). Daniel Bassuk of the Theological Seminary, New Jersey, wrote in 1987 on *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity: The Myth of the God-Man*, and comparatively examined the notion of incarnation and Christianity. However, such attempts were mainly in comparing Vishnu avatars with Christian notion of incarnation.

Sufficient attention has not been given to the notion of arcavatara and the Roman Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. This is usually subsumed within the framework of avatars and Christian incarnation. Noel Sheth gives a reason, “the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is not considered an incarnation.”³ He opines that “the more a religion remains within its own ghetto, the poorer will be its self-understanding. It is precisely through comparison and contrast that a faith can come to comprehend itself more deeply”⁴.

¹ Edward Hahnenberg, "Arcavatara: Srivaisnava Image-Descent and Roman Catholic Eucharist," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 37, no. 2 (2000), <http://www.questia.com/read/1G1-75619832/arcavatara-srivaisnava-image-descent-and-roman-catholic>.

² Parrinder, Geoffrey. *Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World's Religion*, (London: Oneworld Publications, 1997), 98.

³ Noel Sheth, “*Hindu Avatara And Christian Incarnation: A Comparison*”, *Journal of East and West*, Vol. 52, No 1(2002), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1400135>, 110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

Edward Hahnenberg, a Catholic theologian, did compare the Eucharist and arcavatara in his article, "*Arcavatara: Srivaishnava Image-Descent and Roman Catholic Eucharist*". He drew attention to the parallels between Catholic practice of capturing the divine presence through works of art, icons, sacramentals and sacraments, and the divine image-descent in Srivaishnavism⁵. He sees the need for dialogue between Srivaishnavism and Catholicism in the area of the relationship of the individual to the community in worship, which is emphasised in Catholicism, and the idea of the intimacy and accessibility of the divine, which characterizes the Srivaishnava worship. He proposes the possibility of comparing the Eucharistic meal with the Vaishnavas sacred meal prasadam, which this work considers to be essentially different. Hahnenberg also observes that, "arcavatara invites not only continued discussion on the nature of revelation and the purpose of worship, it also encourages a better integration, on the part of Catholics, between the sacraments and the revealing Word of God."⁶ Hence, he lays emphasis on an in-depth exploration of the notion of arcavatara and the theology of the Eucharist in comparative theology.

The 20th century Catholic theology witnessed an unprecedented interest in the study of non-Christian religions owing to a paradigm shift in the Catholic Church's approach toward other religious traditions. As *Nostra Aetate* observes, "the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions," (NA 2). The phrase, "extra ecclesiam nulla salus" (No salvation outside the church) represents now an exclusivist position that is no longer defended by Catholic theologians after the clear statements of Pius XII and Vatican Council II on the possibility of salvation for those who do not belong visibly to the church. The Church's position today is that there are elements of salvation in other religions.

⁵ Sri or Lakshmi is the consort of Vishnu, they are both worshipped as the Supreme Being. The religion which recognizes the Lordship of Sri and Vishnu is known as Srivaishnavism or Vaishnavism.

⁶ Edward Hahnenberg, "*Arcavatara: Srivaishnava Image-Descent and Roman Catholic Eucharist*".

What does God's presence mean for the Vaishnavas and Catholic devotees? This study is a comparative analysis of the theology of avatars (God-Descent) and Roman Catholic theology of the Eucharist, with a reference to the liturgical (worship) dynamics of Arcavatara and the Eucharist. The goal is to understand how God's presence is conceived by the worshippers of Vishnu and Jesus Christ, in their religious practices associated with arcavatara and Holy Eucharist. This will help to appreciate the significance and uniqueness of the two traditions and offer reasons for better mutual relationship and possible inter-religious dialogue. When religious views that separate us in a way are better explained and articulated lucidly, it could foster co-existence of peoples in the society and even encourage joint work for peace and justice in the world.

Jean-Luc Marion provides a conceptual framework for theologians to explain Eucharistic presence in a refreshing way as compared to the scholastic-tridentine model built on Aristotelian metaphysics. In this regard, Marion's notion of 'idol and icon' provides two contrasting ways for understanding how the reality of God's presence is actualized 'here and now' in divine worship. Marion argues that the given presence of God is an iconic presence and must be approached with an iconic gaze. That is, gazing at God with the readiness of allowing God to transform us into his reality, his nature of Love. Any attempt to impose on God human ideas of what we think He should be will leave us with an inadequate apprehension of His real self. Idolatrous gaze for Marion, prevents the human person from going beyond the objectified presence of God.

Marion's phenomenology helps us to understand that the various theophanies of God are gifts of God's presence, the 'givenness' of God. He observes that the given presence of God here and now, can be misinterpreted, if human beings fail to look beyond the physicality of God in the present. He proposes an iconic gaze in the divine presence as against an idolatrous gaze which produces a God born of human intention and conditions. An iconic gaze allows God to be who He

wants to be in His different theophanies, and looks beyond the objectified presence of God, to accessing the excess of his reality (which is love) into which He wants to transform the human subject. The conception of the real presence of God in the present seems to intercept in the theophanies of God in the Eucharist and in the image-descent of God, arcavatara. This work discusses comparatively some areas of similarities of the conception of God's presence in the Eucharist and arcavatara, and its implications for worship and social life. Differences abound in various ways God's manifestation has been understood in the Eucharist and in the image-descent in Vaishnavism, these differences are also pointed out in this work.

This thesis is a contextualised comparative theological study. It adopts a comparative analysis methodology. It analyses the theology of God's manifestation and presence in the here and now, in Vaishnavism and Catholicism. The focus is on explaining the theology of arcavatara in Vaishnavism and the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic Church and doing a comparative analysis of the two concepts in order to discover their imports for ecumenism and social engagement. In discussing the efficacy of the Sacrament of the Eucharist and the worship dynamics, some aspects of sacramental theology are employed. What exactly does God's presence in the present mean in Vaishnavism and Catholicism? This will remain our focus question in this work.

Chapter one intends to make a brief overview of the history of Hinduism. In talking about the four major religions In India, (Vaishnavism, smartism, Shaktism and Saivism), Vaishnavism enjoins much attention since the image-descent worship is predominantly of this religious tradition. The notion of avatars is expounded based on Vaishnava theology.

The second chapter will explore various approaches to the Eucharist in the tradition of the Catholic Church, i.e., the different ways the presence of Christ has been understood and explained

by the magisterium of the Church and important theologians and philosophers as well as the reactions of other denominations within Christendom.

The third chapter will undertake a comparative analysis of the theology of arcavatara and the Eucharist. The similarities in the conception of God's presence as real presence that communicates the love of God for devotees are explained. The notion of 'idol and icon' in Marion's phenomenology is used in explaining the adequate way God's presence in the present can be construed. The similarities and differences in the dynamics of liturgy and worship in the two traditions under consideration are also examined. Other consequential differences between arcavatara and the Eucharist are discussed extensively here. Suggestions of conceptual resources for further dialogue are identified.

The conclusion will make general overview of the task undertaken throughout this work identifying important findings of the study. Though this work does not claim to be exhaustive in terms of what can be said about comparing God's gift of himself in the Eucharist and the arcavatara, it will highlight the importance of this comparative endeavour and its significance for ecumenical and inter-religions dialogue which is still at its inchoate stage.

Chapter One

The Notion of Avatars in Vaishnavism

The history of divine-human encounter is as old as the history of humankind. Despite cultural, linguistic, racial or ethnic differences, people have always strived to encounter the divine in represented images, rituals and prayers. Different religious and spiritual traditions believe and claim that the divine is encountered by human beings through these means. The nature of divine-human encounter in Hinduism, which is one of the world's most ancient religions, is fascinating. This chapter will explore the manner of divine presence in Vaishnavism, one of the major traditions in Hinduism.

First, the chapter looks at the historical development of Hinduism and its religions that have survived series of encounters with other cultures. The four dominant religions in India will be discussed. Of course, these four religious denominations are just the prominent ones among many other religious sects in Hinduism. Second, Vaishnavism, one of the four major religions will be examined, its historical development and theology will be focused on. Third, attention will be given to the theology of Vishnu and its incarnations, that is, the notion of avatars. Arcavatara, one of the forms of avatars will be examined and its significance will be explained. The aim of this chapter is to describe what God's presence means to the Vaishnavas, the adherents of Vaishnavism, in their doctrine of avatars. The conception of the presence of God in the religion of Vaishnavism is very much contained in its notion of avatars⁷ especially in the image-descent of God (arcavatara).

⁷ Avatar simply means "descent" or "coming down" or manifestation or incarnation of a deity. The word avatar and avatara means the same thing. While avatar enjoys western usage, avatara is a traditional Indian name for God's incarnations. The two words, "avatars" and "avatara" will be used interchangeably.

1.1 Origin and Development of Hinduism

Culture and religion are perfectly united in Hinduism. 'Hindu' is a medieval name given to the people living by the Sindu (Indu) river valley which later denotes all the people of the Indian Subcontinent. Cybelle Shattuck sees Hinduism as a western coinage which refers to the religious faith indigenous to the Indians and "most of the regional traditions that developed in India."⁸ The history of Indian culture and religions can be classified into pre-Vedic (pre-history) and historical or Vedic periods.

For the pre-vedic era, "concrete evidence comes from the Indus Valley Civilization dating back to approximately 2500-1500 BCE."⁹ Frank Whaling observes, "the present can only be understood by glancing at the whole history of the Hindu tradition in order to identify the rocks whence the Hindu tradition was hewed and the historical background whence it came."¹⁰ The pre-vedic culture shows stone age and elements of metal-using connoisseurs. The historical facts are provided from smorgasbord of archeological evidences gotten from Harappa and the great bath of Mohenjodaro.¹¹ The bathroom and water channels in Mohenjodaro may decrypt the beginning of the purification ritual in modern Hinduism. The core of the civilization of the Indus valley at this time remained impervious to access because their writings and records have not been deciphered¹². Many evidences are malleable; debate is still on-going on early history of the Hindus. More so, there are diverse views as far as locating the inception of Hindu tradition among the people of Indus valley or Dravidian -Vedic Aryans.

The notion of avatars, the incarnation of the Supreme Being, is common to Vaisnavism but is still faintly present in other religions in Hinduism.

⁸ Cybelle Shattuck, *Hinduism* (London: Routledge, 1999), 14.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Frank Whaling, *Understanding Hinduism, Understanding Faith* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2006), 13.

¹¹ Harappa and Mohenjodaro are now parts of modern Pakistan.

¹² Nilakanta Sastri, *Development of Religion in South India* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1963), 49.

Jonathan Kenoyer, Professor of archeology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, speaks about three perspectives of the Indian history and civilization trending in the circle of scholars¹³. The first favors a total dislodge of the Harappan culture and civilization by the Vedic-Aryan warriors riding on their horses and chariots. The Vedic-Aryan replaces the culture, religions and population of the Harappan people. This renders as less insignificant, the effect of the Harappan culture on the emerging Vedic-Aryan cultures and religions.

The second equates Vedic-Aryan culture with the Harappan civilization which is the source of iron technology and horses that were introduced to the Northern Asia. Indian history and civilization are understood here as originating solely from the subcontinent of India. “There was no Aryan invasion or migration of or to India. Indian civilization as cultural memory going back to 24,000 years. Indians produced knowledge within many fields, enormous knowledge transfers from India in every time period”¹⁴.

The third supports Vedic period that saw the migration of the Indo-Europeans, peradventure from Russia and central Asia into the subcontinent of India. These are nomadic-pastoral people who came with their religion and Sanskrit language to India¹⁵. They moved away webs of cultural elements of their host communities. It has been observed that the Indo-European people had contacts with the Iranian ancestors because similarities are noticeable between the early Iranian language and the Sanskrit language.¹⁶ This migration only resulted into cultural exchange between the Harappan tradition and the Vedic-Aryan. The question of the origin of Indians and

¹³ Jonathan Kenoyer, “Culture Change During the Late Harappan Period at Harappa: New Insight on Vedic Aryan Issues,” in *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian history*, Edited by Edwin Bryant and Laurie Patton (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 22.

¹⁴ Raj Vedam, “Indian Civilization: The Untold Story,” India’s Story From Indian Perspectives: Re-establishing Indic Narratives/Retelling Indian History, March 12, 2019. <https://indictales.com/2018/03/09/indian-civilization-the-untold-story-a-talk-by-raj-vedam/>

¹⁵ Cybelle Shattuck, *Hinduism*, 20.

¹⁶ Wendy Doniger, Ann G. Gold and Others, “Hinduism”, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., February 03, 2019.

their culture remains a matter of archeological, historical and political debate. The different historical accounts available are ‘mere guesses’, according to Geoffrey Parrinder, the renowned Professor of Comparative Religion.¹⁷

The Vedic period commencing from 1500BCE was blessed with ten books of the Rigveda “consisting of hymns that were composed chiefly during the last two or three centuries of the second millennium BCE. The religious life reflected in this text is not that of contemporary Hinduism but of an earlier sacrificial religious system.”¹⁸ Peradventure, the Indo-European population in India grew the sacrificial religious system called Brahamanism or Vedism. Vedism precipitated caste system as a form of social category. The Brahmans became the upper caste and high rank religious group. Many of the local goddesses and practices of the lower caste, mostly indigenous Indians, were patterned to conform with Sanskrit -Vedic gods¹⁹. The Brhamans became a seminal group. They claimed superiority over other groups by the virtue of their birth and vegetarian ascetism.

By 550-450 BCE, there arose a revolution in the religious life and experience of the Indians. Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) and Vardhamana (Mahavira) were among those who impugned the authority of the Brahmans and repudiated the Rgveda. These revolutionists claim to know the secret of achieving muskta, the freedom from the bondage of birth and rebirth. They lived ascetic lives. Many people joined them and became their followers. They also have the backing of the ruling families who at the time was tired of supporting the exorbitant religious life of the Brahmans together with their unending sacrificial system. This is how Buddhism and Jainism broke away

¹⁷ Parrinder, Geoffery. *Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World's Religion*, (London: Oneworld Publications,1997), 15.

¹⁸ Wendy Doniger, Ann G. Gold and Others, “*Hinduism*”.

¹⁹ “*Hinduism*”, History.com Editors, A&E Television Networks, August 23, 2018, accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/hinduism>.

from Hinduism as schismatic sects. The new religious sects developed their separate scriptures and improved on the shortcomings of the Veda. “About 500 BCE asceticism became widespread; and increasing numbers of intelligent young men “gave up the world” to search for release from transmigration by achieving a state of Psychic security.”²⁰

By the 2nd century BCE up to the 5th century CE, what is now known as Hinduism tottered with the emergence of two seminal Sanskrit epics namely Ramayana and the Mahabharata²¹. “The worship of Vishnu -incarnate as Krishna in the Mahabharata and as Rama in the Ramayana developed... as did the cult of Shiva, who plays an active role in the Mahabharata.”²² The Vedic god Rudra was given the name Shiva. Shiva came to be seen as the creator, preserver, and destroyer of the universe. There is no gainsaying in the fact that the schismatic ascetic sects such as Buddhism and Jainism which grew with the support of Mauryan and Gupta empires fomented the birth of devotional Vedic religions like Vaishnavism and Saivism and later Shaktism.

1.1.1 Denominations in Hinduism

Today Hinduism has many religious sects but four are major and common, namely, Vaishnavism, Saivism, Shaktism and Smartism. Srinivasa Chari explained that contrary to prevailing misconceptions about Hindu religions, Hindus all worship one supreme being, although by different names. He located the source of the belief system of the different denominations in the Vedanta, Upanisads, Agamas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, puranas and Tamil Hymns of Alvars. For him, the three primal things namely Tattva- Reality, Hita- means of realization and purusartha- ultimate goal, provide a catchment for expressing faith in all pervading God. Tattva is further

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Louis Renou, *Religions of Ancient India* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 50.

²² Wendy Doniger, Ann G. Gold and Others, “Hinduism”,

divided into para (the Ultimate) and apara (what is dependent of the Ultimate). Apara-tattva is further categorized into sentient and non-sentient beings²³. The denominations believe in Karma and reincarnation and in a Supreme Being who creates, sustains and destroys the universe only to create it again in unending cycles. They believe that the goal of human existence is the attainment of freedom of the soul from the process of birth and rebirth. The Hindu sects teach the need for a guru to help the soul to attain freedom. They saw evil as not intrinsic in the world. Temple worship is accepted to the four denominations.

God is Siva for the Saivites, the compassionate one. Saivism does not teach earthly incarnation of the Supreme being. In Shaktism, God is referred to as Shakti or Devi. She has many varied forms both tranquil and irascible. The Feminine Supreme Deity does incarnate in the world. Devi (goddess) is common to both Siva and Vishnu “as mythology makes her the wife of Siva and the sister of Vishnu”.²⁴ The devotees in Smartism are liberal. They worship any of the Indian gods, Siva, Ganesha, Sakti, Vishnu, Surya and Skanda. Earthly Incarnation of every deity is believed to be possible. Vaishnavism worships God as Lord Vishnu together with his incarnations. The notion of avatar is prominent in Vaishnavism.

1.2. Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism is one of the oldest religions in the world. Srinivasachari P.N, the author of *The Philosophy of Visistadvaita*, observed that “Vaishnavism is as old as Hinduism and it has been extolled through the ages as the religion of redemption”.²⁵ The question of Vaishnavism being a monotheistic religion is a matter of on-going debate among western Indologists and Indian

²³ Srinivasa Charis, *Vaishnavism: Its Philosophy, Theology and Religious Discipline* (Delhi: Motilal Banaridass Publishers, 1994.) xxix

²⁴ Nilakanta Sastri, *Development of Religion in South India*, 61.

²⁵ P.N. Srinivasachari, *Philosophy of Visistadvaita* (Madras: Adyar Library, 1978.) 503.

scholars. Even the notion of Vishnu, the Supreme God of the Vaishnavas, as a monotheistic God, is also being contested. S. M. Srinivasa Chari takes up the issue of Vaishnavism as a monotheistic religion in his well-written work, *Vaishnavism: Its Philosophy, Theology and Religious Discipline*. S. M Chari argues that the question can even be twisted to asking whether the Rgveda, the oldest religious text in the world, upholds the theory of one Supreme God. He would answer in the affirmative, claiming Rgveda to be a monotheistic text. The generic accounts of many Indologists are that the Vedic religion as portrayed in the Rgveda, and based on historical evidences, is a polytheistic religion.

The Rgveda has 10 books of hundreds of hymns. The textual facts of these hymns portray the idea of many devatas (Deities) that are distinguishable. According to one hymn, “the number of devatas is 3339.”²⁶ And this may make one surmise that Rgveda and its consequent religions are not monotheistic. S.M Chari insists that it is axiomatically stated in the Taittiriya Upanisad and corroborated by the Mahabharata that “Maha is the Brahman, the Supreme Self and all other devatas (deities) constitute its limbs or aspects”.²⁷ and that “Vishnu is the Unique and unparalleled Deity; He is the Supreme Being (Mahad-bhutam); the other countless beings which are different from each other exist as His different aspects. He pervades all the three worlds and controls them but He himself is untouched by their defects.”²⁸ To argue his point further, Srinivasa says that based on the testimonies of the ancient Vedic commentators namely, Yaska and Suanaka, the many deities which appear in the Rgveda are functional modes of the Supreme Being.²⁹ So the Rgveda is monotheistic. The Supreme Deity, Vishnu, the all- pervading, is the highest God of the Veda. Vaishnavism, the religion that claims Vishnu as the Ultimate Reality (Paratattva) and worships his

²⁶ Srinivasa Charis, *Vaisnavism: Its Philosophy, Theology and Religious Discipline*, 4.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Srinivasa Charis, *Vaisnavism: Its Philosophy, Theology and Religious Discipline*, 4 .

²⁹ Ibid.

incarnations as Supreme manifestations of the Divine, is a Vedic and monotheistic religion. The Vaishnavas seek the realization of the highest spiritual goal through unreserved devotion to Vishnu.

1.2.1. Historical Development of Vaishnavism

P. N. Srinivasachari observes that “every system of faith is, historically speaking, a response to the needs of the age which gave it birth or brought it to the forefront.”³⁰ Vaishnavism has developed based on what the different sacred texts teach and how the different acaryas (religious teachers) comprehended the content of these sacred pages and interpreted them based on the needs and challenges of their time. Beyond reasonable doubt, the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism impugned the complacency created by the status-quo. This challenges Brahmanism and the plethora of indulgences of the brahmins including the stereotypical doctrines of the Rgveda. The birth of non-Vedic sects precipitated the reconstruction of the Vedic religions, and Vaishnavism came to be in this kind of dynamics.

Vaishnavism has been established as a Vedic religion. The Rgveda is the source of all the ideas of Vaishnava doctrines presented in all other sacred texts. Around 8th to 9th century BCE, the Upanisads redefined the authority of the Veda³¹. The criteria for recognizing the Supreme Deity is set forth in the Upanisads namely: all-pervasive, being immanent in all beings as inner controller, ground and sovereign of the entire universe. Vishnu meets all these criteria. S.M. Srinivasa Chari observes that the philosophical foundation of Vaishnavism is also in the Upanisads. Isvara (God) is presented as the Ultimate reality. The cit (soul) seeks spiritual freedom or realization through

³⁰ P.N. Srinivasachari, *Philosophy of Visistadvata*, 16.

³¹ Srinivasa Charis, *Vaisnavism: Its Philosophy, Theology and Religious Discipline*, 15.

bhakti and guru tutelage. The acit (Matter) provides the bodily material for engaging in the continuous process of migration.

The Agamas, a sacred text of nigama, continues the tottering of Vaishnavism by supporting the worship of Vishnu and offering ideas about temple worship and image consecration. Exclusive worship of Vishnu is presented as the highest goal of salvation³². Pancaratra agama equates the names Bhagavan, Vasudera and Narayana as identical to Vishnu. S. M Chari puts the dates of the agamas 3000BCE to 800 CE.³³

After the Agamas, the growth of the philosophy and religion of Vaishnavism was helped by Iihatas, the epics, namely, Ramayana and Mahabharata (which contains Bhagavad Gita, the discourse between Arjuna and Krishna)³⁴. Epics also grow the cult of the goddess Laksmi, the consort of Vishnu. S.M Chari maintains Mahabharata is the most resourceful material in the development of Vaishnavism; and claims it establishes first Krsna, Vasudeva, Narataya and Bhagavan as names of Vishnu. Mahabharata supports the supremacy of Vishnu over any kind of god in Indian mythology.

The puranas doctrine add to the development of Vaishnavism. Vishnu is seen as inseparably associated with Goddess Sri and she is the giver of Moska. Sattvika Puranas proclaim the greatness of Vishnu and the tenets of Vaishnavism. Then we have the Tamil hymns of Alvars (12 Vaishnava saints). The traditional dates of the Alvars are between 4200BCE to 2700 BCE. But for many modern scholars, is between 5th century to 10th century CE.

³² Nilakanta Sastri, *Development of Religion in South India*, 80.

³³ Srinivasa Charis, *Vaisnavism*, 14.

³⁴ Cockbum Thomson, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Discourse Between Krishna And Arjuna on Divine Matters (India: Stephens Austin, 1855)*, 18.

The four thousand³⁵ hymns contain excerpts of Upanisads, Itihasas and Puranas. These hymns cover the basics of the philosophical and religious traditions of Vaishnavism and helped the development of Vaishnavism even after 14th century. The hymns were ample resources in the hands of the great Vaishnava acaryas in the likes of Nathamuni,³⁶ Alavandar and Ramanuja. These acaryas including Yamuna, S. M. Chari observes, did organize Vaisnavism into a system of philosophy and religion. Ramanuja's works and life improved Vaisnavism tremendously. Vedanta Desika and Pillailokacarya continued from where he stopped (1268-1369 CE). The doctrine of bhakti was spread widely by Ramanada (1300-1411 CE) who even regarded Ramanuja as an incarnation of the Lord Vishnu, as Brahman.³⁷ The schools of Vaishnavism extensively flowered Vaishnava religion and philosophy to this day. Dvaita- Vedanta, Suddhadvaita Vedanta, Bengal School and Bhaki school are prominent Vaishnava schools that play pivotal roles in sustaining and growing the religion of Vaishnavism.

The history of Vaishnavism is reduceable to the histories of the different sacred texts and the biographies of different Vaishnava acaryas and possibly the vedic commentators. There are as many historical accounts of Vaishnavism as there are different sects or schools of this religion.

1.2.2. Theology of Vaishnavism

For the sake of clarity, Vaishnavism is a theistic philosophy³⁸. Indian religions usually do not have a dichotomy between philosophy and theology (religion). Rare effort is made to separate theology and philosophy as it is done in western tradition. Recently in Vaishnavism, a great deal of effort has been made to separate philosophy from the theology or religion. Visistadvaita

³⁵ P.N. Srinivasachari,, *Philosophy of Visistadvata*, 511.

³⁶ P.N. Srinivasachari,, *Philosophy of Visistadvata*, 511.

³⁷ Srinivasa Charis, *Vaishnavism*, 32.

³⁸ P.N. Srinivasachari, *Philosophy of Visistadvata*, 501.

Vedanta is the philosophical content of Vaishnavism, and it can be differentiated (but not unrelated) from the religion of Vaishnavism. In discussing the theology of Vaishnavism, it is good to bear in mind that it is an attempt to distil theological thoughts from densely formulated philosophical tradition that have existed for thousands of years. The focus will be on the theology of Vishnu and its incarnations, but a cursory look will be attempted as regards other corpus of Vaishnava theology.

Vaishnavism upholds the worship of Vishnu and Laskmi his consort. It teaches immortality of the soul and the endless entanglement in the process of birth and rebirth until through absolute devotion to Vishnu and proper education in the right living from a guru, one attains moska (perfect union with Vishnu) which means freedom from continuous migration of the soul.

S. M Chari did a good reflection on Jiva, the human person. The human person is seen as an eternal entity. Each person is created for the pleasure of Vishnu. One is made to have no ambition than to satisfy the desire and vision of God. Vishnu becomes the sustainer, controller and dependable fortress and refuge of the human person. Every individual is made free and endowed with free choice: the ability to decide and choose the course of every action. So, everyone is made to be responsible for his or her life.

Because of sinfulness, a state one may find himself or herself out of ignorance, each human person is entangled in a continuous process of birth and rebirth. Freedom from the bondage of karma comes with the grace of God, absolute devotion to Vishnu, and the commitment to rectitude through self-discipline and hard work. "In Vaishnavism, God is regarded both as the goal (Upeya) and the means (upaya). He is Upeya because He alone is to be attained as the supreme goal of life (purusarth). He serves as the Upaya because the ultimate success in the observance of the spiritual

discipline in the form of upasana (meditation) or Prapatti (self- surrender) is achieved by His grace.”³⁹ This simply explains Vishnu as the savior and redeemer of suffering humanity.

The vision of Vishnu for Jivas, as many as they may be, is to be part of his paramapada (Vishnu’s abode) or nitya- vibhuti and offer divine service to him forever. One consequential way of achieving this expectation of Vishnu is through absolute (self- surrender) devotion (Bhakti) to Vishnu. Proper devotion is offered by Vaishnavas through the theory or notion of avatars. Avatars are manifestations (incarnations) of Vishnu in various forms for the love of his worshippers and in compliance with his role as the upaya and benevolent Saviour of humanity.

1.3. Theology of Vishnu and its Incarnations.

Basically, Vaishnava theology hinges on Vishnu as the Ultimate reality, all- pervasive Supreme Being who is the creator, the sustainer and destroyer of the universe. Unlike the unmoved mover of Aristotle who created the world and distances himself from its operations, Vishnu, in his magnanimity, intervenes in the affairs of the world and manifested himself through his numerous incarnations for the purpose of protecting those whom he loves dearly, which are the devotees. Through Vishnu’s incarnations he destroys evil in the world and keeps his favorites save. He also resets the order of creation that has been ruptured by wickedness and evil.

God in Vaishnava theology is known by various names such as Isvara, Narayana, Brahman, sat, atman or Vishnu. S.M Chari speaks about trinity of God namely; Vishnu, Brahman and Rudra based on the evidence of the Rgveda. Surprisingly the issues of superiority still arose as regards which of the gods is superior. Vishnu is upheld as the uncreated, the first cause, who created

³⁹ Ibid. 249

everything there is in existence.⁴⁰ This is only true for the Vaishnavas, other religions within Hinduism do not agree with this exaltation of Vishnu. Each of the tradition praises its own god as the supreme. Since our focus is on Vaishnavism, Vishnu remains the Supreme Lord to be contemplated. This is the way S.M Chari puts it:

After a very careful examination of the sacred texts and after repeated investigation into their support, we come to one obvious conclusion that the deity to be meditated Upon at all times is Narayana. There is no other deity greater than Vishnu. There is no other God higher than Narayana. There is no other Being who is higher than Vasudeva. Thus all the three deities which are synonymous and represent the Supreme God of Vaishnava religion are the same as the Para-brahman, the ultimate Reality of Vedanta philosophy.⁴¹

The goddess Sri or Laksmi is understood to be the consort of Vishnu. She is the mother of the universe. The status of the goddess Sri to her consort is still a subject of debate among the various schools and acaryas of Vaishnavism. She is generally contemplated together with Vishnu. The divine couple make up the Ultimate reality. Some attributes of God in Vaishnavism are as follows: He is the Ultimate reality (Paratattva or Purusottama), absolutely unconditioned existence (Satya), eternal knowledge (Jnana), infinite (Ananta), Omnipotence (Sakti), Omniscience (sarvasaktiva), Lord of all (Aisvarya), self-sufficient (Tejas), among many others in including material and mental attributes.⁴²

⁴⁰ Srinivasa Chari quoted a few scriptural passages supporting Vishnu as the Superior and Supreme Deity. Narayana Upanisads says, "From Narayana is born Brahma; from Narayana is born Rudra." Similarly, Mahabarata states thus, "when the entire universe is dissolved, what remains undestroyed is Narayana, the inner soul of the universe." Brahma and Rudra are born out of Vishnu. All this exaltation of Vishnu has been heavily criticized by the saivites who consider Siva as the Supreme God.

⁴¹ Srinivasa Charis, Vaisnavism, 151.

⁴² Srinivasa Chari, *Fundamentals of Visistadvaita Vedanta: A Study Based on Vedanta Desika's Tattva-mukta-Kalapa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2004), 353.

The Vedanta teaches, “Isvara or God, who is the savior of mankind and who is the bestower of moksha, is to be meditated upon for salvation.”⁴³ Vaisnavism identifies Brahman or atman or Vishnu, as the primal cause that should be contemplated. The meditation of the ultimate reality is made possible by Vishnu as the upaya. He made himself available to the devotees in the avatars. The notion of avatars then relates to how God has made himself available to human beings who desire to behold his presence. God incarnates, descends or manifests himself in human or animal form for the good of the world. The incarnations of Vishnu are called avatars. Avatar simply means the descent or “coming down” of God from his paramapada (abode) to a lower state for the good of the world. Vaisnavism speaks about human and non-human avatars. Vishnu is present and active in the world always through his avatars. The notion of avatars has its origin in the Rgveda hymns. God manifests himself in non-human form. The Supreme Being who exists from eternity, of his volition, descends himself (without losing his power, glory and sovereignty) and manifests himself in different forms for the good of the devotees and the world. The ‘coming down’ of Isvara does not reduce him rather “He becomes great by taking births.”⁴⁴ There are many types of avatars and the number of avatars varies from one school or acarya to the other; because “there are many numbers of avatars that have taken place at different epochs in the continuous process of evolution and dissolution of the universe from time immemorial.”⁴⁵ The scriptural text that advances the understanding of avatars the most is the Bhagavadgita.

The purpose of God’s incarnations or manifestations in the world is to ensure balance in the cosmic order, cycle after cycle. When the forces of evil increase and danger looms, Vishnu manifests himself to adjust good and bad karma. “whenever the denavas, evil men, proceed to

⁴³ Ibid, 136.

⁴⁴ Srinivasa Charis, Vaisnavism, 207.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 208.

excess, I will come down and destroy them”⁴⁶. One of the scriptural texts says “O Birthless Lord of All, thy births among the gods, the rshi, men, animals, and ocean forms, are all intended for the one purpose of punishing the wicked and fostering the good.”⁴⁷ Apart from exacting equilibrium in world order, the satisfaction of the spiritual yearning of the devotees of Vishnu is also consequential. Vishnu through his incarnations preserve the cosmos and keep his loved one safe. He is always ready to extend protection to those who seek his refuge.

Basically, Vishnu manifests himself in its all-pervasive and divine- auspicious forms. As all-pervasive, he contains all there-is in himself and he is the soul of everything and every human being. The divine-auspicious forms concern his manifestations, which are further categorised into five namely: the para- the Supreme form of God in the paramapada (heaven), The Vhuya- his manifestation in the evolution of the universe as regards the creation, preservation and dissolution of the world. The Vibhava-Avatara, Vishnu’s manifestations in specific times in history. The antaryami- Vishnu’s manifestation within the human heart as ‘the inner Controller’. And last but not the least, Vishnu’s manifestation in the images- Arcavatara. The following looks at the modes of Vishnu’s manifestations as Vibhava and Arcavatara which are the most consequential to divine-human encounter.⁴⁸

1.4 Vibhava- Avatara

This is usually taken as the avatara in the strict sense. It refers to the Manifestation of Vishnu by assuming corpus of human beings or other sentient beings. This avatara type is very important to the Vaishnavas. Vishnu, in his divine majesty can directly assume human form. He may also

⁴⁶ Bhagavan Das, *Krishna: A Theory in the study of Avatara* (India: Bharatiya Vidya Bharam, 1990) 13.

⁴⁷ Bhagavada, X, xiv, 20.

⁴⁸ Edward Hahnenberg, "Arcavatara: Srivaisnava Image-Descent and Roman Catholic Eucharist."

decide to indirectly possess or infuse divine power in an individual. Vishnu incarnates not only in human form but in the form of animals and even in the combination of human and animal like Hayagriva -Man with the head of the horse and Narasimha- man-lion⁴⁹.

These “bodies assumed during incarnation are of spiritual character and, therefore, they are not defiled by any kind of defects.”⁵⁰ The number of Vibhava- Avatara are infinite. There are varied accounts of the number of Vibhavas based on the different scriptural texts, epics and religious teachers (acaryas). These incarnations have taken place in the past at different time in history. Ten avataras are very consequential to Vaishnava tradition and they are commonly referred to as Dasavataras . All but two of these avataras are fleeting appearances. Rama and Krsna have elongated appearances. They were real human beings and better examples of righteous living to human beings. Vaisnavism accords great importance to these two avataras. Being human beings, the devotees are able to apprehend the doctrine of saranagati (self-surrender) for the purpose of attaining Moksa. The following are the ten avataras also known as dashavataras are; 1.) Matsya or fish : This intervenes to restore the spiritual knowledge source , the Vadas, 2.) Kurma or Tortoise, protects the immortal nectar for the devatas 3.) Varaha or boar, fulfils the task of uplifting the earth submerged in water. 4.) Narasimha or man-lion: it destroys force of evil by protecting the pious child, Prahlada from oppression. 5.) Vamana or the dwaft, meant to restore three worlds 6.) Parasurama or the Ksatriya king, to subdue the proud kings of the world. 7.) Rama or the prince of Ayodhya, performs the duty establishing righteousness by destroying the wicked forces and revealing the secret of saranagati as a means of attaining God. 8.) Krsna or the son of Vasudeva

⁴⁹ Ibid. 220

⁵⁰ Ibid. 219

also establishes righteousness and imparts philosophical knowledge 9.) Balarama or the brother of Krisna demonstrates divine service to God and 10.) Kalkin for establishing again the lost dharma.⁵¹

Rama and Krsna have inspired the belief in the possibility of great men and women across history that have imparted humanity in the different spheres of life, culture and nations, of being regarded as avatars. Annie Besant, second president of the Indian Theosophical Society, explains that human beings can on their own aspire to becoming avatars of Vishnu. “These then are the two great characteristics of the man who is to become the special manifestation of God- bhakti, love to the one in whom he is to merge, and love to those whose very life is the life of God. Only as these come forth in the man is he on the path that leads him to be- an avatara coming as God to man.”⁵² Besant’s observation can be understood in other words, every human person who is ready to love and completely surrender to God and love others as God loves them in selfless service to humanity can become an avatara. “He must be so devoted as to be willing to remain for the service of the universe while Isvara himself abides in it..... but not devotion alone marks this great one who is climbing his divine path. He must also be, as Isvara is, a lover of humanity.”⁵³ Within a human being who is a potential avatara, there should burn the flame of love for others and for everything that exists.

Bhagavan Das, following the Purana school, advances a thought pattern that corroborates the views of Besant. He opines that every great individual does not appear in human history accidentally. “They appear for special reason in special circumstances.”⁵⁴ The appearance of exceptional human beings who make extraordinary contribution in human history is part of the

⁵¹ Ibid. 221

⁵² Annie Bessant, *Avatara-s* (Adyer: Theological Publishing House, 2002.), 13.

⁵³ Ibid. 12.

⁵⁴ Bhagavan Das, *Krishna*, 3.

nature of the universe “and of birth, the evolution, and dissolution of world- system therein.”⁵⁵ In other words, no human being becomes great and successful without a purpose. Human greatness is part of world-plan of Vishnu. Das speaks about the “Oversoul” meaning the consciousness of God. This Supra-consciousness in his view is behind the unfolding of human history. Since God is present in every human being, the pronoun “we” is a form of the consciousness of the Supreme Being. “we” is the principle that holds and sustains the “I”. This common consciousness that “we” evokes is what Das refers to as the Oversoul or Group-soul. The Oversoul represents Brahma or Isvara (or part of Isvara). This “Buddhi (Oversoul), all-including Supra-conscious wisdom, is said to be the seed-store, the principle, in the Nature of the self, from which all avataras come.”⁵⁶ The human avataras are enlightened souls that work to unite the finite with infinite, the Atmas to the Manas. They act as mediators between God and man. Das categorizes Videha-muktas- sons of God, the mediators, as the prophets, Messiahs or Avataras. “They help to tie the finite soul to the Infinite and immortal, enable it cross the abyss, to become safe emancipated, free (of doubt and fear).”⁵⁷ The human avataras from the explanations of Bessant and Das can be found in every culture and nation. It is not only in India or among the Asian sub-continent tribes that human avatara exist. What again is striking is the equation of the religious founders as the same manifestation of the Supreme Deity, Vishnu.

In Hindu esoteric imagination, the supreme and ultimate reality is believed to reside in the Universal Soul, which is said to pervade the entire manifested cosmos. The cosmos itself is thought to have evolved from this abstract entity, which is formless and devoid of any qualitative attributes (Skt. Nirguna Brahman). It is neither male nor female, and is infinite,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Bhagavan Das, *Krishna*, 12.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

without beginning or end. It is both around us and inside us. The goal indeed of all spiritual practice is to unite with this Supreme Soul.⁵⁸

Das pushes this further to create the impression that every human being who does extraordinary world work among his people or for humanity is an avatar. The interventions they bring about are intended by the divine. Of course, in every nation, there are national heroes and heroines. Das would consider these individuals as manifestations of Vishnu. Vishnu incarnates himself in them and acts through them for the good of the world. We can extend this to cover all human beings who have excelled in their different fields of endeavor and have selflessly sacrificed their time and talents to invent ground breaking things for the good human beings. Vishnu in Das view incarnates and works through them to bring about those new inventions for the good of human beings. All the achievements of humans in the fields of science and technology and even in the religions of the world are not accidental but rather are parts of the world-plan of the Supreme Being who punctiliously keep the cosmic circle in progress. Das is of the view that Vishnu's intervention in various ways in the world should not be taken for granted without recourse to the ultimate reality. Any attempt to enjoy the benefits of Vishnu's manifestation without increased devotion to him leads to doom. Based on Bessant's view, every human being who disposes himself to love God and humanity can rise to the realm of an avatara. This should be the goal of very everyone in life. Jivas, human persons, are made for the Pleasure of Vishnu and he alone constitutes the object of human longing or the ultimate goal to be sought.

⁵⁸ Nitin Kumar, "Vishnu: A symbolic Appreciation of a Dreamy Deity, Article of the month, January 2003. Accessed February 25, 2019. <http://www.exoticindia.com>

1.5. Arcavatara

This type of manifestation is very consequential to the Vaishnavas. Arca refers to the idol of worship. The images are made of gold, silver, bronze or wood depending on the preference of the individual devotee. Some images are movable while other are immovable. Consecrated images are found in the temples and in the homes of Vaishnavas. These images or idols are consecrated following special scriptural rites in the Agamas. Once the image is consecrated, God “assumes a divine body corresponding to the idol made by an individual, enters into it by becoming indistinguishable like water in the milk.”⁵⁹ The invisible and Supreme Deity becomes visible in the arcavatara, in response to the fervent prayers of the devotees and for the purpose of worship. The paramount reason for this kind of descent is the benevolent love that God intends to show to his beloved ones. When Vishnu comes down into the image, he infuses his spirit and the Image becomes nothing else but Vishnu himself. In the acarvatara, “God is fully present in the world as an image in the temples and homes.”⁶⁰

The Vaishnava’s faith after the consecration of the images does not tell him an idol is present but the Supreme Deity, Lord Vishnu, is present in all his glory and majesty without being a subject of imperfection. He does not lose any aspect of his divinity by his descent into the image. Katherine Young in her attempt to present the view of Ramanuja on the reality of God’s presence in the image observes “God already has its own form. But he also adjusts himself to the shape of gods, men, etc., which he does on “his own will”. In doing so God does not share the material nature with other purusas but utilizes his own essential nature (svabhava) when he is “born”.⁶¹ Young alluded to the fact that God freely chose to descend into the image and to conform himself

⁵⁹ Srinivasa Charis, *Vaisnavism*, 223.

⁶⁰ Katherine K. Young, “Ramunuja on “BHAGAVADGITA” 4:11: The Issue of Arcavara”, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 23 No. 2, (1988): 90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 93

to the shape and size of the image. What precipitate the coming down of God is Love. Love for the devotees who call on him in their prayers and dedicate their lives to the service of Vishnu through self-discipline, ascetism and meditation. There seems to be a divine-human exchange here. Without the discipline of Yoga meditation, Vegetarian dieting, prayer and the desire for nothing else but the divine presence of Vishnu, the human mind may not be illuminated or enlightened to perceive the Supreme Deity in the image.

According to Young, Bhagavadgita 4:7 defines the “time and birth” of the Lord Vishnu in the consecrate image. The “time” is “whenever there is the decline of dharma and the emergence of adharma.”⁶² This means that whenever there is a decline of righteousness among human beings with a simultaneous increase in evil and immoral acts, God comes down to put order and balance. Bhagavadgita 4:8-11, based on Young’s explanation, describes the purpose of God’s birth, which is for the protection of those who take refuge in him⁶³. He shows himself to the devotees in the form that they desired; implying ‘that the devotee chooses the time of the arca, for he offers the form (image) and God shows himself accordingly’,⁶⁴ God’s presence means a show of divine love for the human devotees. It means deliverance from the power of evil and unrighteousness (adharma). God’s presence means assurance of divine protection and victory for the Vaishnavas over opposing forces in their lives and in the world.

No incarnation of God is as significant as acarvatara in Vaisnavism. God is not as accessible to his followers in other forms of manifestations as he is in the arcavatara. Para- avarata (God’s self- manifestation in the paramapada) presents Visnu as transcendental reality. In this form, God is not present to the human senses. He is in the paramapada where only the freed souls

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 94

⁶⁴ Ibid.

can attend to his revealed self by offering divine service. It is difficult to contemplate and know the realities in the nitya-Vibhuti. The Vyuha- Avaratara is also out of reach for direct worship and adoration. God in this form is similar to Visnu in the para-avaratara. In the same vein, God's incarnation as Vibhavas; his manifestations in the human and non-human forms have also taken place in the remote past. Vaisnavas believe that the Vibhavas only met the spiritual needs of the worshippers of Visnu who knew them when they did exist. God meets the yearnings and the needs of the people of the time of the Vibhavas by incarnating in human beings and non-human beings for their good. Even the manifestation of Visnu in the form of antaryami is not easily accessible to the human senses. Srinivasa compared the antaryami to wanting to get an underground water. One must face the hurdle of digging deep into the ground before getting access to water. For this reason, "the greatness of arca Idols is extolled by the Alvars and the Vaisnava acaryas."⁶⁵ S. M. Chari observes that there are four types of arcavatara in latter Vaisnavism, these are 1.) Svayamvyakta: This is an iconic manifestation of the Supreme Deity, the Lord Vishnu; out of God's volition, he manifests himself in an Icon form for the good of the devotees. 2.) Daiva: These are Icons that are consecrated by divine beings such as Brahma, through their sacrifices and prayers. 3. Saiddha: These are idols that God incarnated in response to the penance performed by the sages and 4.) Manusa: These are consecrated by human beings for general worship purposes in the Temples and homes. These idols are consecrated and installed in the temples.⁶⁶ The common ones are the last, Manusa. The first three are regarded as most sanctified. The Vaishnavas believe that the divine nature of God is not made imperfect by his incarnations. "The image is the real presence of God himself in the terrestrial realm. As such the term "arca" means not just any image of a deity, but the image that is worthy of worship because it is none other than the Supreme

⁶⁵ Srinivasa Charis, Vaisnavism, 225.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 225.

God.”⁶⁷ Every Vaishnava is expected to worship before the consecrated images daily in the homes or Temples. This daily encounter with the divine helps to grow devotion and self-surrender which is expedient for every mumusku who seeks attaining the state of muska. The knowledge of God is possible not only through God’s illumination but also through grooming by a preceptor or guru. Every Vaishnava is required to have spiritual teacher. For Tamal Goswani, an influential member of Hare Krishna movement, an understanding of the Veda needs having God for a guru or someone who has God for a guru.”⁶⁸ This explains the immense importance of having a guru and striving to be like the guru. For Goswani, there is no difference between hearing directly from Krishna and hearing directly from Krishna via a bona fide spiritual master.⁶⁹

1.5.1. The Significance of Arcavatara

In arcavatara, we have the fullness of God in the form of an image. God makes himself available and accessible to the devotees. Srinivasa observes that God in the arca form is “available for worship to all irrespective of the fact whether one is morally meritorious or sinful.”⁷⁰ God’s presence cleanses the sins and shortcomings of the devotees. God in the arca “transforms the minds of human beings, elevates them to higher spiritual plane..... removes all the sins and thereby makes the persons mentally purer and spiritually richer.”⁷¹ The point to be noted here is, the divine presence of God in the arca removes the sins of the devotees automatically by the virtue of their presence before the consecrated image for worship and meditation.

⁶⁷ Katherine K. Young, “Ramunuja on “BHAGAVADGITA” 4:11: The Issue of Arcavara”, 105.

⁶⁸ Tamal Goswani, *A Living Theology of Krishna*, (England: Oxford University Press, 2012), 115.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Srinivasa Charis, *Vaisnavism* ,226.

⁷¹ Ibid.

God's gracious condescending grows a sense of mutuality between Him and the devotees. "Just as the devotees worship God by seeking refuge in him, so does God worship them by condescending to reveal himself to the sight of his devotees. Just as the devotees seek to approach him, he also "runs after" them. Just as they enjoy conferring forms on him, he enjoys conforming himself to them."⁷² The arcavatara fulfils the desire of the Supreme Deity to have communion with human beings. This divine mutual engagement profits human devotees in so many ways especially when they are elevated to higher spiritual experience. And to keep this God-human relationship going, the devotees' sins are wiped away when they come into the presence of the Lord Vishnu.

There is a reversal of relationships when God descends in to the arcas. God lowers himself to get involved directly in terrestrial affairs of the devotees. This is a form of service the divine is rendering to those who approach him with reverence for affection and protection. The obeisance of the devotees is surpassed by the willingness of God to come among them. The idea of the reversal of relationships "may have an existential dimension in addition to its theological purpose. The images in the temples really were vulnerable, and the devotees had to protect God in this form."⁷³ Pillailokacarya (a Vaishnava teacher) was afraid that the image of God might be destroyed or endangered by the Muslim invaders.⁷⁴ Many a time, it is theologically challenging trying to explain the greatness of a God who seems to be in need of protection.

God's presence in the arca has universal significance. Vaishnavism opens the door to meeting God to everyone in the theology of arcavatara. The import of this is that "unlike other Indian theological traditions, the Shrivaisnava tradition proffers unequivocal eligibility to any human being, both male and female alike. The path and goal are consequently universally open to

⁷² Katherine K. Young, "Ramunuja on "BHAGAVADGITA" 4:11: The Issue of Arcavara", 99.

⁷³ Ibid., 101.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 102.

the populace at large.”⁷⁵ The theology of arcavatara is all inclusive breaking down the barrier of caste, gender and racism. This fact is corroborated by the variety of forms that arcavara takes; the Supreme Deity takes multiple terrestrial forms. The appearance of God in the image-form also towers over other forms of God’s manifestations (Para, Vyuha, Vinhava) because the arca-appearance is not regulated by time, space and election. “unlike the case of (other) incarnations, he (God) remains near at hand without any restriction as regards place, time and the person who is entitled to worship him. He overlooks their offences. He is dependent on the worshippers for all activities.”⁷⁶

Many of the claims of the theology of Vaishnavism, especially with arcavatara, have been criticized by Indologists both from the west and India. To consider Vishnu as the supreme deity with other devatas at his service is not acceptable to all religions of Hinduism. There are disparities too among the views of Vaishnava schools and acaryas. In this chapter we have explained what God and his presence means to the Vaishnavas. Obviously, Vaishnavism contains a lot of mysticism but the great import of its theology of arcavatara is very consequential. God intervening in human affairs out of love and for love and protecting devotees resonate with the theology of the Holy Eucharist which anchors on the real presence of God among us because of his love and mercy for us. Chapter two will explore the theology of the Holy Eucharist and how Catholics conceive God’s presence in the “real presence”.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 104

Chapter Two

The Eucharist: Reviewing the Catholic Approaches

Everything that Catholics believe about the Eucharist hinges on the words and deeds of Jesus Christ and the testimonies of the apostles and Fathers of the Church. The words of Christ, “This is my body”, “This is my blood”; “Do this in remembrance of me”, form the crux of the theology of the Eucharist. The belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is very consequential and organic. It has been reflected on, using resources from phenomenology as exemplified in the works of postmodern Catholic theologians. Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of God as ‘givenness’ and ‘saturated phenomenon’ provides a catchment for new understanding of the Eucharistic presence, efficacy of the sacraments and grace, and the sacraments as gift.

This Chapter, in an attempt to explain what Christ’s presence signifies in the Eucharist, will first look at the Eucharist as the real presence of Christ. Second, the phenomenology of ‘givenness’ of Marion will be used to explain the gratuitous gift of God in the real presence. Third, Eucharist will be examined as a gift of God’s presence. Fourth, the notion ‘idol and icon’ in the phenomenology of Marion will be explained. Five, the significance of approaching the Eucharist ‘iconically’ during adoration will be looked at. Sixth, the Eucharist will be dialectically expounded as a memorial and lastly, the liturgical dimension of the Eucharist vis-a-vis the efficacy of sacraments will be given a moderate attention.

2.1. The Eucharist as the Real presence of Christ

Most Christian denominations believe that Jesus Christ is truly and really present in the Eucharist. The ‘how’ and ‘when’ and ‘for how long’ of this presence’ has been a source of theological and liturgical sectarianism in Christendom. However, the understanding of the manner of Christ presence in the Eucharist among Catholic theologians can at best be described as a “progressive phenomenon”. Augustine of Hippo observes that Jesus Christ gave himself, holding himself in his hands, while saying, “this is my body” to the disciples. He gave his body and blood to the disciples and as they eat and drink, they become part of Jesus Christ. They become victims with him, victims with the responsibility of sacrificing for establishing the reign of God⁷⁷. The presence of the Jesus in the Eucharist is not mere symbols or signs of the divine presence because there is a substantial change of the species of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ in an irreversible manner.⁷⁸ This alludes to the doctrine of transubstantiation which explains how the real presence of Jesus comes about. John Salza observes that the doctrine of transubstantiation is divisive, separating Catholics and other Christian denominations; that the Eucharistic doctrine is as incredible and scandalous as the incarnation doctrine.⁷⁹ The Council of Trent explicates this truth of the teaching of the Latin Church on transubstantiation in these words, “the consecration of the bread and wine effects the change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. And the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called this change, transubstantiation.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Saint Augustine, “Sermons” (273-305), Tr. Edmund Hill, Ed. John Rotelle (New York: New City Press, 1994), 31.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ John Salza, *The Biblical Basis for the Eucharist* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc, 2008), 17.

⁸⁰ Council of Trent, Tr. Theodore Buckley (London: George Routledge and Co., 1851), 73.

Christian denominations seem to converge a bit on the belief in the real presence but as Salza noted, the doctrine of transubstantiation is divisive. Max Thurian, a protestant theologian, argues that the dogma of transubstantiation is not an essential one. The core of the Catholic belief in the Eucharist is the real presence, and this, he claims, is the same belief of the protestant. The dogma of transubstantiation is to protect and defend the Catholic perspective of the real presence. This for him, was a middle age effort to explain the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist to the men and women of that period. He claims that it is a Catholic traditional practice to embody the truth of faith in the thought of a particular period. The Word must “become flesh”, but with the power to resurrect and sanctify the flesh in every period of human history. When the word is covered in the “philosophical flesh” of a particular period, it lacks the force of responding to progress in the thinking of later periods.

Thurian said, St. Thomas brilliantly and masterfully embodied the gospel in the philosophical thought of the medieval era. This is commendable and admirable. However, this denies the gospel the evolutionary force in all ages and time. Thurian argues, that the gospel should be embodied in the philosophy of the modern age and even now, the postmodern era. Thurian speaking of Aquinas states, “we find in him (Aquinas) an excessive natural optimism, which prevents him from seeing the danger that always threatens the Christian truth when it undertakes a philosophical embodiment of a particular age.”⁸¹ This explicates the attitudes of the theologians who developed the dogma of transubstantiation. He argues that theology merely states the mystery of the Gospel, but philosophy explains the mystery to the human mind. While both theology and philosophy can change at any age, only the word of God remains the same. For

⁸¹ Max Thurian, "Toward a Renewal of the Doctrine Of Transubstantiation," in *Christianity Divided, Protestant and Roman Catholic Theological Issues*, by Daniel J. Callahan, ed. Heiko A. Oberman and Daniel J. O'Hanlon (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 198.

Thurian, “it is surprising that for centuries Catholic theology has continued to explain the dogma, of the real presence by transubstantiation, while human thought has moved forward so that this explanation has become quite out of date and unreal.”⁸² The phenomenology of ‘givenness’ and ‘saturated phenomenon’ of Jean Luc Marion, a Catholic Philosopher and theologian, provides a catchment for new concepts to explain the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharistic species.

2.2. Phenomenological Conception of the Real Presence.

Givenness has been central to Marion’s phenomenology from the beginning.⁸³ The phenomenon which gives itself by itself and itself alone is a ‘saturated phenomenon’. Saturated phenomenon concerns solely and specifically the possibility that certain phenomena do not manifest themselves in the mode of objects and yet still do manifest themselves.⁸⁴ It presses urgently on the gaze more than the gaze presses toward it and the gaze receives its impression from the phenomenon before any attempt at constituting it. "These phenomena give 'too much'; their intuitive excess cannot be contained. Marion depicts them as overwhelming and bedazzling. They cannot be grasped or controlled, but blind us with their excess. They defy our attempt to analyze them as deriving from a clear cause. ‘Saturated phenomena’ undo all our usual categories of experience"⁸⁵

In the Eucharistic theology of Marion, Christ is the ‘saturated phenomenon’ per excellence. ‘Saturated phenomenon’ transforms humans into itself rather than mankind transforming it. The human faithful must allow himself or herself to be transformed by the experience of the divine

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Degrees of Givenness: On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 2.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

rather than imposing human categories on the divine. Of course, Postmodern philosophy influenced Marion's thought of the eucharist. In his conception of the real presence, Marion warns about the two 'idolatrics'. These 'idolatrics' imply an imposition of our human conditions on the 'saturated phenomenon', the Eucharistic presence. In lieu of being absolved and transformed into the image of the Eucharistic Jesus, the presence of the two 'idolatrics' conform form Him into our human created image. We will talk more on this when we discuss the concepts of 'idol and icon' of Marion.

The First 'idolatry' is a misguided deification of the real presence. An attempt to reduce the Blessed Sacrament to a thing (in liturgical practices as the Eucharistic adoration and Eucharistic procession). Marion pushes for an appropriate understanding of the real presence. Sebastian Madathummuriyil, an associate professor of theology, Duquesne university, explains that by avoiding the first 'Idolatry' as pointed out by Marion, the dogma of transubstantiation will be represented appropriately. Not just heaping praises on a pathetic "canned" substitute of God in the reserved Eucharist or attraction exhibition as in the display of the Blessed Sacrament, "it is necessary to go beyond the distorted idolatrous concept of the real presence."⁸⁶ The metaphysical conception of the real presence makes the faithful susceptible to the first mode of 'idolatry'. The substantial presence should translate not into reducing the Eucharist to "a delimited thing that is at one's disposal"⁸⁷ or just an object of human manipulation.

The second 'Idolatry' also exists due to the misconception of the real presence, the understanding of the eucharist as meal through which Christ becomes present in the consciousness

⁸⁶ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 245.

⁸⁷ Philipp Roseman, "Postmodern Philosophy and J. L. Marion's Eucharistic Realism", in *Mystery of Faith: Reflections on the Encyclical Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Ed. James McEvoy and Maurice Hogan (Blackrock, CoDublin: Columbia Press, 2005), 233.

of the community. The real presence is mistakenly moved into the human subject. “Christ is now no longer received as a gift through the priest who speaks the words of consecration *in personal Christi*, rather, Christ’s presence is dependent upon the state of mind of the community itself”⁸⁸. Madathummuriyil observes that this will lead “to a minimalist understanding of presence that endures as long as the community is present.”⁸⁹

The community is not responsible for making present the real presence. Christ does not depend on the faith of the Church to be substantially present. It is not the faith of the gathered community that is responsible for the presence of Christ. The gathered community surely needs faith to recognize the Eucharistic Jesus. St. John Chrysostom says, “It is not man that causes the things offered to become the Body and Blood of Christ, but he who was crucified for us, Christ himself.”⁹⁰ Marion emphasized the avoidance of the two modern ‘idolatries’ which prevent a true understanding of the real presence of Jesus. Nicholas Lash fell to the second ‘idolatry’ when he says in his discourse on the presence of Jesus in the world, that Jesus who is present in the worshipping community is even present ‘in us’ and whenever we recognize human brotherhood, “however ‘secular’ or ‘non-secular’ its form, we necessarily recognize the presence of Christ in the Spirit.”⁹¹ Locating the Christ real presence in the consciousness of the human subject, for Marion, breeds ambiguity in the understanding of the real presence . Of course, this is not a denial of the reality of God in human beings.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 247.

⁹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (from now CCC) (Vaticana: Libreria Editrice, 1994), 1375.

⁹¹ Nicholas Lash, *His Presence in the World: A Study in Eucharistic Worship and Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward Stagbooks, 1974), 156.

2.3. The Eucharist as Gift of God's Presence

Marion's philosophy can be defined as a 'phenomenology of givenness'. He conceives of God as 'givenness' and not in terms of being (Supreme Being). "God is not subject to 'being' and the traditional ontological language is inadequate for God (does not 'attain' to God)."⁹² For Marion, "Givenness is central to the 'saturated phenomenon' (God), as it is precisely a phenomenon that is given fully and certainly relies for its justification and description, on a phenomenology of givenness, but this larger context of givenness has been somewhat overshadowed by the saturated phenomenon's specific mode of givenness."⁹³ This specific mode of saturated phenomenon is exemplified in the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist, God gives himself fully and freely. The avoidance of the two aforementioned 'idolatrics', helps the reception and the correct experience of the Eucharistic presence as a gift of God's 'givenness' of Himself unreservedly. Philipp Roseman, explaining Marion's postmodern Christian philosophy, observes that in giving Himself because of love, God abandoned himself and this abandonment becomes gift abandonment.⁹⁴ In the Eucharist, God took the risk of lovingly abandoning himself as a thing. Of course, the term reality (real) from its Latin derivative 'res', means 'thing'. The gift of Eucharistic presence is a 'thing-gift' which depicts God's love and His readiness to be in communion with human beings. The difficulty the 'object-presence' of God in the Eucharist presents is one that can grow misinterpretation of His divinity. There is always a distance between the divine person of Jesus and the finitude of bread and wine. In the Eucharist, Roseman observes, "the reality of Christ is conjoined to the species of bread and

⁹² Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics?: Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 109.

⁹³ Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Degrees of Givenness: On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion*, 1.

⁹⁴ Philipp Roseman, "Postmodern Philosophy and J. L. Marion's Eucharistic Realism", 234.

wine, which ensure a certain limited persistence of the finite (even the accidents).”⁹⁵ What do we make of this gift of ‘infinite-finite’ presence of God in the Eucharist?

What does the Eucharistic presence mean? We know it is a ‘gift of presence’⁹⁶ but what does the seeming absence of God mean in his presence? In other words, in the presence of God, there is silence, there is absence, there is a given gift of presence in the present, but where is God? This question, Madathummuriyil says, it is a basic query regarding the “*how* and *what*” of the sacramental presence, or in other words, of the relationship between the visible and the invisible.”⁹⁷ Marion thinks we face this impasse because of the conception of presence as metaphysical. This means the gap between the finite and infinite is a function of the idea of finite being (the human person) and infinite or Supreme being. This leaves us with an ‘ordinary conception of time’⁹⁸. Marion proposes a ‘non-metaphysical’ model of presence in which the present presence of God in the Eucharist is ‘givenness’, it’s a gift. That is, a gift that reveals God’s full presence here and now, and with the “full capacity to appear itself in excess.”⁹⁹ “The presence available in the present- as the here and now- guarantees the permanence where spirit maintains a hold on human person .”¹⁰⁰

Non-metaphysical presence does not reduce presence to mere absence or emptiness. It towers over the traditional model of explaining presence in the language of affirmation and negation¹⁰¹ to opening up a “zero-naming” model of docility to the sacramental presence. This removes the idolatrous conception of God created by the ‘metaphysical presence’ and “makes an empty space for a new presence”¹⁰² namely, the ‘non-metaphysical presence’ which is saturated

⁹⁵ Ibid, 235.

⁹⁶ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 236.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Philipp Roseman, “*Postmodern Philosophy and J. L. Marion’s Eucharistic Realism*”, 238.

⁹⁹ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 237.

¹⁰⁰ Philipp Roseman, “*Postmodern Philosophy and J. L. Marion’s Eucharistic Realism*”, 237.

¹⁰¹ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 237.

¹⁰² Ibid, 238.

with presence in the present. This is a self-giving of God in maximum phenomenality (as 'saturated phenomenon'). The past and future converge in this presence in the present.

This is a practical theology of absence that helps us to make sense of the perceived absence of God in the Eucharistic presence which is a direct consequence of the irreducible distance of the person of Jesus and the accidents of the species of bread and wine which appear to the human senses. To remove the perceived distance between the infinite and the finite in the Eucharist, Marion uses the idea of the 'idol and icon' in his work, *God without being*.

2.4. Jean-Luc Marion's Notion of 'Idol and Icon' and Distance

To have a proper understanding of God's 'givenness' in the present, Marion develops a distinction between two types of 'gaze' namely, the idol and the icon. The idolatrous view of the divine makes God into the image intended by the human person. God becomes the product of human intention. The idol consigns the divine to the measure of the human gaze like an invisible mirror which only allows the human subject to understand reality just according to the depth of his own intention.¹⁰³ Idolatrous conception of God creates inadequate knowledge of the 'givenness' of God. God becomes the object of human 'fantasies' and somewhat, the object of human domination and possibly, manipulation. It is note-worthy that the human being gazing on the idol has sincere intention to comprehend the divine reality.

An idol is, in fact, a true vision of a God (it is not merely invented or false), but it is one in which the viewer attempts to grasp the divine. The gaze viewing the idol is fascinated, "stopped," and completely held by the divine image presented within it. Yet because this image holds and fills the gaze so completely, "fits" it perfectly, it actually becomes an

¹⁰³ Philipp Roseman, "Postmodern Philosophy and J. L. Marion's Eucharistic Realism", 236.

invisible mirror of the limited conception the viewer has of God. What one "sees" in worshipping the idol is a mirror image of oneself and of one's own vision of the divine.¹⁰⁴

The icon, in alternative, provokes in the human subject, the vision of the divine image. The icon draws human being into the knowledge of itself and making itself the goal to be realized. The reality of the icon is 'imposed' on the one who gazes on the icon "rather than being determined by human conditions for the possibility of perception and knowledge, the icon itself determines, 'starting from itself and itself alone, the conditions of its reality.'¹⁰⁵ The icon makes man, rather than being made by man. The reality experienced as icon modes the human gaze and transforms man into its own form.

Applying this to the Eucharist, the pressing imperative is approaching Christ's 'givenness' iconically. Approaching the Eucharist idolatrously will leave us with mere appearance of bread and wine, which at most can only symbolically signify the presence of Christ in the community. This may blind us from perceiving and acknowledging the existing irreducible distance between Christ's reality (the divine person) and his mode of presence in the Eucharist (under the appearances of bread and wine). "The human being, not expecting the divine to transcend a certain measure, fails to 'transpierce visible things' in order to discover the divine in a dimension that exceeds them."¹⁰⁶ Therefore for better apprehension of the presence in the present, the Eucharist needs to be approached with an iconic mind with the humility and readiness to become what is discovered in the icon.

¹⁰⁴ Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics?: Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy*, 169.

¹⁰⁵ Philipp Roseman, "Postmodern Philosophy and J. L. Marion's Eucharistic Realism", 237.

¹⁰⁶ Philipp Roseman, "Postmodern Philosophy and J. L. Marion's Eucharistic Realism", 236.

2.5. Eucharistic Adoration: An Iconic Perspective

The doctrine of transubstantiation and real presence grew the necessity of adoring the Savior of the world in the Eucharist, “not only during Mass, but also outside of it, reserving the consecrated hosts with the utmost care, exposing them to the solemn veneration of the faithful, and carrying them in procession.”¹⁰⁷

Marion is not against liturgical practice of Eucharistic adoration or Eucharistic procession. But he calls attention to not creating an ‘idol’ out of a seeming difficulty to acknowledge the distance between the reality of the divinity of Jesus and his finite presence under appearances of bread and wine. Christ for him, must not be reduced to a manipulative thing, an object of human making and desire. The Eucharistic presence is a ‘givenness’ of God in the present. A presence that presents an absence. This absence confirms a distance coverable when the Eucharist is approached iconically. Karl Rahner observes that the presence of Christ is not a ‘mono-presence’; God’s presence is everywhere felt at all times. To eschew the problem of duplicity of the presence of Christ in the world (through idolatrous gaze on the Eucharist), the ‘pneumatic self-communication’ of Christ in the Eucharist must be seen (through iconic gaze).¹⁰⁸

The iconic ‘gaze’ requires conversion and the training of the ‘spiritual eye’ so to speak, “as a result of which the believer will increasingly be able to see through the accidents of bread and wine to Christ, who appears ‘behind’ them, as the substance of the Eucharist.”¹⁰⁹ Christiana Gschwandtner, Fordham University Professor of Philosophy, explicates on Marion’s iconic concept thus:

¹⁰⁷ Karl Rahner, *Meditations on the Sacraments* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), 36.

¹⁰⁸ Karl Rahner, *Meditations on the Sacraments*, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Philipp Roseman, “Postmodern Philosophy and J. L. Marion’s Eucharistic Realism”, 237.

Marion claims that when we contemplate or pray before an icon, we find ourselves envisioned by the icon through its inverse perspective (and ultimately become unsettled by God's gaze passing through the icon and toward us). Instead of allowing for a fixed image, the icon becomes a window or a pathway in which gazes (and prayer) can travel back and forth, but which never get fixated on a specific image or concept one could have in one's grasp. We control the idol but, in the icon, control is not possible.¹¹⁰

Approaching the Eucharist as an icon then demands self-sacrifice in view of recovery of personhood and the right identity of the self from the one that transforms and gives gratuitously. This is a paradox of self-giving where one abandons the self to the gaze that envisions. There is a sense of double abandonment in the iconic presence. The divine abandons itself as an 'objectified-gift' of God's 'givenness' in the sacramental presence, and the human subject having an overwhelming experience of the saturated phenomenon, abandons itself too totally to be transformed and recreated into the divine reality that is experienced.

In the Eucharist and in all sacramental presence, Madathummuriyil speaks of a God who gives but retains his identity in the given that is 'nearest' and distant at the same time. For him, "the divine remains a mystery, without being possessed by the human person. Thus, the iconic mode of presence explains presence as givenness as such, before being subject to one's conceptual and linguistic affirmation."¹¹¹ In the Eucharist, as in the sacraments, there is a gratuitous presence of the divine that is not fully depicted to the sensibility of here and now of the presence. For a better and adequate understanding of the infinite-finite divine presence, human beings necessarily need to make effort to experiencing the presence in the present and this comes with openness to vulnerability, humility and devotion in God's presence. It is not about what we make of the divine

¹¹⁰ Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics?: Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy*, 109.

¹¹¹ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 239.

presence but rather what the given presence makes of us through transformation beginning from itself and itself and ending up in itself.

The appropriate human response to the saturating presence of God's 'givenness' should be 'self-givenness'. The readiness and the desire to becoming what we venerate in the Eucharistic presence should be the consequential motive of being in the absent-presence in the present. Jesus says He will draw men and women to himself when He is lifted up.¹¹² The idolatrous gaze may make human beings feel that Jesus 'drawing' us, has an eschatological fulfilment only. Whereas, this is what he does in the Eucharistic presence when we adore with an iconic gaze, we are drawn to Christ to become who He is here and now as we move to the future. So in lieu of idolizing the Blessed Sacrament in the liturgical practices of Eucharist adoration and procession, Marion proposes an iconic gaze in the iconic presence of the Eucharist with the docility to becoming what we adore keeping in mind Christ temporality. What Jesus was in the past and what he will be in the future converge in what he is now. Becoming the image of Christ now, is all that is important and this should be the goal of adoration of the divine presence in the present.

2.6 Eucharist as Memorial

Christianity took its roots from Judaism. The Christian tradition holds that the Eucharistic Sacrifice was instituted at the Last Supper. Christ called his blood, the blood of the "new covenant". But like most Christian mysteries, what is to be recalled in his memory has a Judaic twist. Traditionally, Christian faith pictures the last night Jesus spent on earth, as a fulfilment of what occurred on the last night the Israelites spent in Egypt. Thomas Aquinas explains the relation

¹¹² Cf, John 12:32.

between the Paschal lamb and the New Testament fulfilment in the Christ event in the *Summa Theologica* thus:

The Paschal Lamb foreshadowed this sacrament in these three ways. First of all, because it was eaten with unleavened loaves, according to Exodus 12:8: "They shall eat flesh . . . and unleavened bread." As to the second because it was immolated by the entire multitude of the children of Israel on the fourteenth day of the moon; and this was a figure of the Passion of Christ, Who is called the Lamb on account of His innocence. As to the effect, because by the blood of the Paschal Lamb the children of Israel were preserved from the destroying Angel, and brought from the Egyptian captivity; and in this respect the Paschal Lamb is the chief figure of this sacrament, because it represents it in every respect.¹¹³

At the Last Supper, on the night He was handed over, Jesus instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of His Body and Blood, to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages until He comes, and thus entrust to the Church, His beloved spouse, the memorial of His death and resurrection: a sacrament of devotion, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is received, the soul is filled with grace and there is given to us the pledge of future glory.¹¹⁴

New approaches to the anamnesis¹¹⁵ argue that a metaphysical conception of time makes us to consider the past events of salvation as a bygone, and the future, as already but not-yet. The dimension of time is reduced only to the present. This is understood as an inauthentic or 'un-Christic' mode of temporality where humans live basically in the present in lieu of seeing the present as a product of the past built into the future.¹¹⁶ The Eucharist is not just a memorial of past

¹¹³ *Summa Theologica* 3.73.6

¹¹⁴ Paul VI, "*Mysterium Fidei*", Encyclical Letter, Vatican website, September 3, 1965,

http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_03091965_mysterium.html, Sec. 4.

¹¹⁵ *Anamnesis* recalls the passion, resurrection and glorious return of Jesus Christ: In all Eucharistic prayers part of the words of institution is called the anamnesis or memorial.

¹¹⁶ Philipp Roseman, "*Postmodern Philosophy and J. L. Marion's Eucharistic Realism*", 239.

events namely, the suffering, death and resurrection, but it is an appeal to the Father that Jesus Christ may come in glory in view of fulfilling the promise of eternal life. The Eucharist defines the present distance between Calvary event and the return of Christ in glory. The Cross holds the Parousia promise as exemplified in Christ words, “I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom”¹¹⁷. God’s desire to bring us to the fullness of Christ’s presence is renewed in the Eucharist and this, we earnestly await.

So the commemoration referred to here is not simply the celebration of a memory. If the eucharistic Last Supper needs to be read as anticipation of the Resurrection, the commemoration does not consecrate an event in the past. It re-actualizes every time in the present what happened and what continues still to come to us. Eucharist is not a rehearsal or repetition but a performance, or actualization, of a mystery that is freshly given each time.¹¹⁸

Marion captures his non-metaphysical conception of time in terms of temporality of time. The past exists as a joint gift of the present and the past. Bringing this to bare on the understanding of the Eucharist as a memorial, the past, the covenantal relationship between Israel and God, which is fulfilled in Christ’s blood of the new covenant, is concretely lived in the present in the mysteries of the Eucharist with the eschatological expectation of Christ’s coming in glory. We do not just celebrate the past¹¹⁹, we celebrate the past and the expectant future, here and now, in the Eucharist. The gift of past and future, is a gift of the love of God which is the present reality. Madathummuriyil observes that, in terms of the gift, the community of believers does not engineer the presence at its disposal, rather, the presence is a gift which one can only be in receipt of, as a

¹¹⁷ Cf., Matthew 26:29, Mark 14:25.

¹¹⁸ Emmanuel Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eros, the Body, and the Eucharist*, trans. George Hughes, *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 210.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

gratuitous gift. He explains further that the presence is neither bracketed to a mute thing (objectified presence), nor moved to the conceptual consciousness and making of the community, instead, it is a gift of God to be accepted (God's 'givenness').¹²⁰ The Eucharist is more of a gift than a memorial. Eucharistic presence must be understood starting most certainly from the present, but the present must be understood first as a gift that is given.¹²¹ This present gift (Eucharist) is the gift of the past (paschal mystery) and the future (Parousia).

2.7 Eucharist as Sacrament

The Traditional Christian teaching presents Sacraments as means of communicating the grace of salvation to individual Christian by Christ.¹²² The sacraments are signs of Christ's redemptive act in its actual grasp of a particular individual. "In the fullest sense of the word, a sacrament is the pledge of Christ's availability to a particular individual; the tangible pledge of his willing readiness to enter upon an encounter."¹²³ Grace of salvation is conferred by Christ effectively *ex opera operato* through the action of the priest acting in the person and in the capacity of Christ (*in persona Christi Capitis*).

The metaphor and language of the gift in the concept of 'givenness in phenomenology provides a format, (different from classical sacramental theology enshrined in metaphysics), for reflecting on the relationship between God and the world in creation, the incarnation, the spirit and the sacraments."¹²⁴ According to Joseph O'Leary, an Irish Catholic theologian, in theology,

¹²⁰ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 249.

¹²¹ Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Degrees of Givenness: On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion*, 174.

¹²² CCC 1213

¹²³ Schillebeeckx E, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (Mission, KS: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1963), 81.

¹²⁴ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, "The "Dative Subject" of the Sacrament: An "East-West" Perspective", *Studia Liturgica*, Vol. 43, no. 1 (2013): 111.

the notion of grace has expanded to envelop and surpass rigid substantiality and sharp definitions of traditional dogma. In phenomenology, the notion of givenness (donation) has expanded to embrace and surpass Being. The notions of grace and givenness share certain strengths.¹²⁵

Rethinking of grace and efficacy of the sacrament in terms of God's givenness helps to move from a metaphysical or ontological conception of grace to existentialist engagement with the given in its givenness. This is a phenomenological approach (Marion's phenomenology of givenness) to sacramental grace. The human subject, not denied of free will, is always free to reject or receive gift of grace. If the givenness of grace is received and (return)¹²⁶ efficaciously used, John Milbank, an Anglican theologian, says the human individual will become a being of grace, a gift of grace to others.¹²⁷ Sacrament then is a givenness of grace that transforms the individuals by the power of the spirit into a source of grace to others. But this gift of grace has to be gratuitously received and given in return (depending on human will) by human beings in the mode of love and charity.

The efficacy of the sacrament then is not fixated in the symbols, human agent, language or rituals of sacramental celebration. Sacrament as a gratuitous gift of 'givenness' makes an emphasis on the agency of the spirit and God's activity consequential. Therefore, the efficacy of the sacrament for Madathummuriyil, depends not only on the inherent efficacy of language, symbols, rites and the power of the human agent in the sacramental event, but on the agency and power of the Spirit and God's activity. He refers to this as 'pneumatic augmentation'¹²⁸. In his view, this

¹²⁵ Joseph S. O'Leary, "The Gift a Trojan Horse in the Citadel of Phenomenology?" in *Givenness and God: Questions of Jean-Luc Marion*, by Jean-Luc Marion, ed. Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 137.

¹²⁶ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 260.

¹²⁷ John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysics" *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), 135, 12 November 2008, accessed 23 March 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.1995.tb00055>.

¹²⁸ Many Christian denominations, the evangelical Anglicans and the protestants, refer to the real presence as pneumatic mystery because for them, no one knows how Christ be flesh in the Eucharist.

provides an alternative for traditional Catholic practice of ascribing the efficacy of the sacrament to Christ through the agency of the minister. He believes Catholic sacramental theology must be freed from the entanglements of medieval scholastic influence of Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo. “With due regard for the agency and power of Christ, we can still insist on the agency and power of the Holy Spirit in the sacramental event”.¹²⁹ This will help to place side by side our theological apprehension of the Christological and pneumatological dimension of the Christian revelation. This will enable us to explain the sacraments as the gift of God in Christ and the Holy Spirit¹³⁰ and help the understanding of sacraments as “iconic-symbols”.

Applying this to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, it is first and foremost, God’s gift of grace and presence, which is brought about by Christ and by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. This makes the Eucharist ‘iconic-symbol’, a reality saturated with God’s presence and givenness in the present. This gift of grace (the Eucharist) transforms human beings into its own reality which is love per excellence. This transformation however is dependent on the human readiness to set aside personal inclination to impose the self-regulated conceptions of God on the sacrament of the Eucharist and allow its overwhelming and saturated reality to speak for itself and from itself alone, until the human becomes nothing else but the gift itself.

2.8 Celebration of the Eucharist

So far, we have recovered the Eucharist as the gift of God’s ‘givenness’, the body and blood of Jesus Christ, a saturated presence in the present, an ‘iconic-symbol’ and a sacrament which is efficacious not only through the efficacy of language, symbol or human agency but

¹²⁹ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *“The ‘Dative Subject’ of the Sacrament: An ‘East-West’ Perspective”*, 115.

¹³⁰ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *“The ‘Dative Subject’ of the Sacrament: An ‘East-West’ Perspective”*, 115.

principally ‘through Christ and through the Holy Spirit’. In the liturgy, there is a divine-human encounter. Theophany occurs in every liturgical assembly, an ‘iconic-symbolization’ of the invisible God. The role of the Spirit at the epiclesis¹³¹ is emphasized for a better understanding of God’s gift of Himself in the liturgy. The Western Church also considers the agency of Christ through the minister very important for sacramental efficacy. “However, the gift of presence in the liturgy can be explained only with reference to the givenness of the Spirit which realizes the presence in terms of the past and the future.”¹³²

Against this back ground, the liturgical action of bringing gifts (offertory) involves offering bread and wine as human gifts to God. The creation’s gifts are committed into the hands of Christ, who in his sacrifice perfects all human sacrificial offerings.¹³³ Madathummuriyil observes that there is the need for a pneumatological and phenomenological approach to this liturgical exercise of gift exchange. A re-thinking and re-interpretation of the gift-exchange in the celebration of the sacraments.¹³⁴ The interpretation of the economy (commercium¹³⁵) of exchange of goods does not fit the divine-human exchange in the liturgy, which is the celebration of mystery of redemption. What God gives in the sacrament is not a return for what human beings offer to God from what they have received, it is actually God’s ‘givenness’.¹³⁶ God’s giving is what constitute the divine exchange in the sacrament. This God’s gratuitous giving is not necessitated by human beings’ giving of something in return. What the gathered community brings is just so to speak an appeal

¹³¹ Epiclesis means the invocation of the Holy Spirit during the Eucharistic Prayer.

¹³² Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 316.

¹³³ CCC no. 1350.

¹³⁴ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 297.

¹³⁵ The exchange that takes place in the sacramental celebration is designated by this term ‘Commercium’. Cf., David Power, “Sacrament: An Economy of Gift”, (*Louvain Studies* 23, 1998), 147.

¹³⁶ Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 297.

(oblation) to God to incorporated them (the human gifts) by power of the Spirit, into His ‘giving’, the body and blood of Christ.

What can truly characterize the human participation in the liturgy is thanksgiving. The memory of the deeds of God ignited by the spirit of thanksgiving. God becomes the author of thanksgiving, “human persons are not the author of their thanksgiving, it is God who produces thanksgiving in human persons, even the desire for giving thanks.”¹³⁷ Author usher explains thanksgiving to be glorification of God, and this includes, every kind of gestures and action ranging from prostrating , dancing and singing, to the offering of (prayer) oblation and the participation in communion meal.¹³⁸ He further observes that the liturgy is truly the ‘ritual res publica’ (a public ritual). The liturgy is a community worship in which individuals participate.

Phillip Cary, in his book, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought*, argues that Augustine’s view of the efficacy of the Sacrament is quite external. He said external symbols are giving more importance than the internal work of grace in the hearts of Christians. He observes that what theologians make of the sacraments depends on what they think of the power of Christ’s flesh and blood.¹³⁹ For him, the transforming power of the Eucharist through the Spirit should be considered in explaining sacramental efficacy. This is also what the point of ‘pneumatological augmentation’ of Madathummuriyil is about. He calls for the pneumatic efficacy of the sacraments to be equally emphasized distinctively in the liturgy.

The efficacy of the sacraments for the Roman Church is Christo-centric and the efficacy of the human agent, the priest, is also realized as ex opera operato. Paul VI’s reform of the Order of

¹³⁷ Ibid., 301

¹³⁸ Anton Usher, *Replenishing Ritual: Rediscovering the Place of Rituals in Western Christian Liturgy* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2010), 105.

¹³⁹ Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 240.

Mass after Vatican II emphasizes the important role of the Spirit. Kelvin Irwin considers the recovery of the importance of the Spirit in the Eucharistic liturgy as a good accomplishment. The Church invokes the power and action of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist celebration.¹⁴⁰

The idea of iconic presence in liturgical celebration is quite fascinating and it is a resource for improving the participation of the faithful. This iconic presence covers the whole of the liturgical celebration and not limited to Christ's presence in His body and blood. Jesus leads at every liturgical celebration through the ministry of the priest. "Rightly, then, the liturgy is considered as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy, the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members,"¹⁴¹ (SC 7). Every aspect of the liturgy enjoys the iconic presence of Christ, ranging from the proclamation of the word to singing, and prayers of the gathered community. The mystery of salvation is celebrated and accomplished in the liturgy, (SC 7).

The celebration of the event of Christ in the present has positive implications for the past and the future. The Eucharist is actually a gift of the past and the future. In this sense, "the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist comes to the forefront..... the Eucharistic presence is the presence of the mystery of Christ for the community in the present, between the times, "already" and "not-yet"¹⁴² so the Eucharistic presence "must be explained in terms of the givenness of God as love in the iconic figure of Christ, his death and resurrection, the gift of the Spirit, as well as the Parousia."¹⁴³ Liturgically, anamnesis is future oriented. The celebration of the event of Christ in the liturgy recalls not only the past in the present, but it is valuable for the future.

¹⁴⁰ Kevin Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 264.

¹⁴¹ Second Vatican Council, "*Dogmatic Constitution on the Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium*," 4 Decembe, 1963. In *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: Costello, 1975), Article 7.

¹⁴² Sebastian Madathummuriyil, *Sacrament as Gift: A Pneumatological And Phenomenological Approach*, 295.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 294.

In this chapter, Eucharistic presence has been explained as a real presence of God. The presence of God in the Eucharist is 'iconic'. It absolves human beings into its own reality. The phenomenology of givenness of Marion helps the understanding that the Eucharist is essentially a gratuitous gift of God to his people to establish a viable link between the event of Christ on Calvary and his return in glory. The next Chapter will be exploring possible intercessions and parallels between the notion of avatars, specifically, archavatara and the Eucharist.

Chapter Three

Arcavatara and the Eucharist: Comparative Analysis

In this chapter, we will compare the dynamics of the Hindu worship and the unfolding of God's presence in Vishnu's consecrated images with the Roman Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. First, the significance of this comparative work will be discussed. Second, an attempt will be made to explore the question of whether arcavatara and the Eucharist are comparable. Third, the similarities between arcavatara and the Eucharist will be explained. Fourth, areas of differences between the two concepts, arcavatara and the Eucharist, will be expounded and fifth, attention will be given to the possible platforms of dialogue between Vaishnavism and Catholicism.

3.1. Are the Theology of Arcavatara and the Eucharist Comparable?

One thing we need to bear in mind is that the realities we are comparing hinge on God. The direct (perfect or non-nebulous) knowledge of God in the religions is always colored or limited by culture and history. Elizabeth Johnson, Fordham professor of theology, observes that the way the Catholic Church explains this enigmatic nature of God has been influenced greatly by the neo-scholastic theology. The Church considers as "mystery" anything the human mind cannot comprehend: unless with the aid of divine illumination (In your light, we see light, Psalm 36:9). She argues that the teachings of the Church on mystery may be fascinating, but there is no plurality of mystery because mystery is one and that is God. In lieu of mystery being propositional or existing in the dogmatic statement and doctrinal definitions of the church, it lies in the reality of

the inner being of God as self-giving love. And mystery is not temporary since it endures for all eternity. The mysterious God generously and graciously offers the gift of divine life and salvific grace to everyone in every place and culture and at all time.¹⁴⁴

One major objection that may appear strong enough to preclude this kind of comparative work has to do with the biblical injunction to say no to worshipping images and idols as explicated in Exodus 20:4-6, “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them”.

Vaishnavism do not create a separate God. The images are specially carved in the image of any of the incarnations of Vishnu and consecrated using their scripture and afterward, the Supreme God is seen to be present, and not a representation of him. There is no any other God in Vaishnavism but the Supreme Being, the Lord Vishnu, God almighty and all-loving and all-pervasive God. The bottom line is that there seems to be commonalities among perhaps several religions than many would be willing to accept.

Hans Kung observes this commonality when he writes, “we cannot overlook the pressing truth that outside the Christian faith there are not only primitive but highly developed religions, not only mythological but enlightened, not only polytheistic or pantheistic but also expressly henotheistic or monotheistic religions.”¹⁴⁵ This evidence of interdependence among the world religions deepens the necessity of recognizing and accepting the diversity or pluralism the contemporary world presents to us. Edward Hahnenberg, a comparative theologian, noted in his article that compares the Eucharist and the Arcavatara, that the sanctimonious Christian reaction

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 44.

¹⁴⁵ Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?: An Answer for today*, Tr. Edward Quinn (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 588.

has been shaped by Christianity's early history, its Jewish roots and its interaction with the culture and religious traditions of the Roman Empire, and also by Colonialism .¹⁴⁶

3.2 Significance of Comparing Arcavatara and the Eucharist

From April 22-24, 1976, an inter-religious symposium was jointly sponsored by the Department of Religion, Washington and Lee University, and the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, under the auspices of the Howerton Fund.¹⁴⁷ The speakers were drawn from across the different faith traditions; Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism. On the part of Christianity, one of the goals for the symposium is to search for new ways to express the universality and uniqueness of the Christian faith in the light of the increasing awareness of our religious plural world.¹⁴⁸ As Christendom grapple with the reality of pluralism in the world of many religions, the challenge before the Catholic Church has been to reconcile her belief in the universal will of God to save humanity and the necessity of the Church for salvation.

Will everyone attain salvation through the Church? The earlier position of the Church was, “extra ecclesiam, nulla salus” (no salvation outside the Church). But this stance has since changed. There is a watershed of this stand of the Church in Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (LG 16), where the Council Fathers stated that “those who, through no faults of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace , try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience-

¹⁴⁶ Edward P. Hahnenberg, "Arcavatara: Srivaishava Image-Descent and Roman Catholic Eucharist".

¹⁴⁷ Donald Dawe and John Carman, Editors, *Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World* (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), Viii.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 2.

those too may achieve eternal salvation.”¹⁴⁹ This development is not unconnected to the ground-breaking theological view of the German Jesuit Priest, Karl Rahner (1904-1984), in his notion of ‘anonymous Christians’; that people who have never heard about Christ can still be saved. By their basic orientations and fundamental decisions, Rahner argues, they have accepted the salvific grace of God which can ensure salvation for them. According to Rahner, a person could “intellectually profess disbelief but [be] existentially ... committed to those values which for the Christians are concretized in God”¹⁵⁰ (Romans 2:14-16, Matthew 25: 31-46).

In this vein, *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II Document on the Church in the Modern World, affirms thus, “since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all, the possibility of being made partakers, in a way known to God, of the Paschal mystery.”¹⁵¹ The document states that the grace of salvation is not denied to those outside of the Catholic Church. Human beings have God as their destiny and God grants his grace of salvation to anyone who does his will, without discrimination or exemption. Hence, the International Theological Commission (ITC) observed that the question of the relations among religions is becoming more important daily because for the members of this commission, there is above all, increasing interdependence among the different parts of the world.¹⁵²

There was a draw-back in this inclusive drive in the relation of the Catholic Church to other world religions with the emergence of “*Dominus Iesus*”, a document from the Congregation

¹⁴⁹ Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*”, 21 November 1964, in Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: Constello, 1975), article 16.

¹⁵⁰ John Macquarrie, *Theology, Church and Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 51.

¹⁵¹ Second Vatican Council, “Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern world, 7 December 1965,” in Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: Constello, 1975), article 22 Par. 5.

¹⁵² International Theological Commission, “Christianity and the World Religions-Preliminary Note,” Sec. 10, 1997.

for the Doctrine of the Faith, published in August 6, 2000, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was the prefect at the time. This document is a declaration on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. The Church observes in that document, “it is clear that it would be contrary to the faith to consider the Church as one way of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her, even if these are said to be converging with the Church toward the eschatological kingdom of God.”¹⁵³ This is a subtle Christian exclusivism which has its root in Scriptural passages like Acts 4:12, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” In-as-much the Scripture is inspired, the current reality of diversity poses a challenge to the veracity of the uniqueness of Christianity for human salvation.

Seeing the danger of attempting to build walls around doctrines in the midst of unavoidable diversity, Wayne Teasdale, the author of *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations Across Traditions*, emphasizes the necessity and centrality of faith dialogue among world religions. He believes there is no escape from diversity any longer because the contemporary conditions are forcing acceptance of otherness in every sense of the word especially when it comes to diversities in religions. Dialogue for him is seriously welcome, since for centuries, cultures have isolated the religions; so there is mutual ignorance of one another’s “history, culture, beliefs, rituals and their positive contributions to the world, society and the human community.”¹⁵⁴

In the same vein, Gavin D’costa, the editor of *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, emphasizes the fluidity of the movement of the Spirit,

¹⁵³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Declaration “Dominus Iesus”, on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, 6 August 2000, Vatican website, 13 March 2019, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

¹⁵⁴ Wayne Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations Across Traditions*, (New York: Sheed & Book, 2004), 5.

God's activity has not stopped; the will of God to save humanity makes him to continue to reveal himself as he has been doing from time immemorial. We can then have every expectation that the activities of God in history is still in progress and it is not historically limited to the Christian tradition.¹⁵⁵ Every culture of the world has narrative of their encounter with God. From the periphery to the center of world cultures, from the marginal to the mainstream religions, the ineffable God has encountered human beings, stamping his divine presence in their daily engagement with reality and in their unending search for truth, meaning and the ultimate goal of human existence. Comparative effort in the field of world religions opens up voices from the margins and provide the platform where narratives of God's historical and on-going revelations to mankind can be reported as resources for theology and epistemological synthesis.

The Harvard Professor, Francis X. Clooney, S.J., encourages embracing deep learning across religious borders. He believes religions can learn new insights from one another and experience God's multiple ways of communicating same reality in different ways across cultures and traditions. Comparative religion for Clooney should be given its pride of place in the academic parlance and contemporary learning.¹⁵⁶

Nostra Aetate, Vatican II's *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, declares that the Catholic Church now sees no reason to go against any religious tradition since religions teach humans about God and help to answer troubling questions about human existence, origin and finality. The closeness of human beings in our time comes with some implications for faith and traditions. It declares in the very first chapter, "and so, in our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are

¹⁵⁵ Gavin D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity and religious Plurality" in *Christianity Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religion*, Ed. Gavin D'Costa (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 19.

¹⁵⁶ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2010), 122.

becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship,”(NA 1). It is apparent that the Catholic Church has now accepted the reality that the gracious, merciful and compassionate God is one who loves diversities and did not put “all his eggs in one basket” in fulfilling his mission of salvation in the world. Even in his creation, he made things in varieties; including human beings. God is so mighty and omniscient; his workings are mysterious and incomprehensible. The divine salvific will of God understandably extends beyond the Christian world and the sacraments but because Jesus Christ is God, he has communicated or revealed his salvation in history in many ways in the different cultures and religions of the world. This is the reason this kind of comparative work is expedient for learning across borders of religions and cultures and experiencing the God of variety. Consider the insight of God growing ever clearer said Johnson, whenever people struggle with the meaning of their religious faith in light of the different religious traditions of others.¹⁵⁷

The pluralistic world is one that calls for humility and objective appraisal of faith content in every religious tradition across the globe. Kung corroborates this truism thus:

... it is impossible today for any one religion to exist in splendid isolation and ignore the others. Today more than ever, Christianity too is brought into contact, discussion and confrontation with other religions. To the extension of the geographical horizon of religion at the beginning of modern times there has been added in our own time an enormous extension of the historical horizon.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for The Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2007), 153.

¹⁵⁸ Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian* (New York: Doubleday, Garden City, 1976), 89.

The responses of the different religions to the ineffability of God and his revelations is by and large human responses which will always be limited and even dictated by the dynamics of the historico-cultural contexts that grow these religions. Therefore, this work is a path-way to self-understanding and appreciation of these two faith traditions: Vaishnavism and Catholicism. It is an effort to “learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth.”¹⁵⁹ Where then are the points of interception between the Eucharist and arcavatara?

3.3. Similarities Between Arcavatara and the Eucharist

Although one can find several differences between the idea of presence in the arcavatara and the Eucharistic theology, there several areas of similarities for our comparative engagement. We will explore these similarities under the following headlines.

3.3.1. Similarity Based on God’s Presence

God, in both the theology of arcavatara and the Eucharist, freely manifests himself and offers the gift of his presence. This is corroborated by the phenomenology of givenness of Marion. God, the ‘saturated phenomenon’, is givenness per excellence. His present presence is a gratuitous gift. Even though, God’s presence here and now, is not without a sense of absence and a perceived distance between the infinite and finite reality of God. This distance is coverable for Marion, only through iconic gaze which transforms humans into the reality of God. When the human gaze does not go beyond the presence in the present, the excess of the reality of God remains unknown. Humans then becomes the designer of the God of their own intention since their gaze cannot

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 156.

penetrate the thing-presence of God. Marion proposes an iconic gaze for a better understanding of God in his manifestation here and now. God's presence in the Eucharist and arcavatara holds more than it appears to the human senses.

It is noteworthy that dharma (laws of nature) does not hinder God. This means, God is not under the control of any force or power outside of himself in both mysterious manifestations in the Eucharist and the image-descent of Vishnu. God is a 'saturated phenomenon' that determines the conditions of His givenness¹⁶⁰. No one can explain how God infuses his spirit in the arca or how he substantially changes the species of bread and wine into his body and blood. Something remains true here, "within the context of human lives lived on earth where God is revealed in many ways, including through the world itself and the things on it and that inhabit it"¹⁶¹, arcavatra and Eucharist affirm that God can be substantially revealed and known whenever and however he chooses. This is what Marion refers to as God's presence in the present which may involve absence or 'distance'. If our understanding of God is that of the highest and deepest principle of all¹⁶², the source of life and every existence, the beginning and the end of the created order, then the Lord Vishnu who manifested himself in the images in Vaishnava temples and homes gives himself to Christians in the Holy Eucharist.

Engaging Marion further, the presence of God in both arcavatara and the eucharist is iconic. God reveals in himself conjoined with material things: the arca and the species of bread and wine respectively. In a way, God abandons himself as gift in these objects of human creation. It is so fascinating that both the bread and wine and the arca are consecrated using the sacred scriptures in both Vaishnavism and Christianity respectively. This refers to the words of institution in

¹⁶⁰ Philipp Roseman, "Postmodern Philosophy and J. L. Marion's Eucharistic Realism", 232.

¹⁶¹ Kelvin Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist*, 39.

¹⁶² Hanns Kung, *Christianity & World Religions: Paths to Dialogue*, 260.

Christianity and the agama text in Vaishnavism. The divine presence is real after the words of consecration have been proclaimed with faith and in faith. Yet the distance persists in the human gaze in the divine presence, the distance of the reality of the divinity of God and His finite presence in the present. Albeit, God is fully present. The observable distance, for Marion, is due to the 'fallenness of the human gaze'. In both arcavatara and the Eucharist God's present presence is in excess of divine reality. The reality of God cannot be subjected to human conditions for true meaning and knowledge, humans rather need to subject themselves to the divine with an iconic gaze. Any attempt by humans to impose their own categories in the presence of the divine yields misunderstanding of the divine presence peradventure the reality of God. God's presence in arcavatara and the Eucharist draws human beings to becoming sharers in the divine nature of love.

3.3.2 God's Presence as Real Presence

The real presence of God in the arcavatara and in the Eucharist is evident. Vishnu (God) is really and truly present in the consecrated arcas for the Vaishnavas. Christians believe after the consecration of the species of bread and wine, that Jesus is really and truly present, body, blood, soul and divinity (Catholic twist). For the Vaishnavas, consecrated images do not represent God, the Supreme Being himself is incarnated in the images and he is truly present. The imperfections of the materials from which the images are made do not affect the perfection of Vishnu in the images. In fact, arcavatara is flawless ¹⁶³ and impeccable when the spirit of Vishnu is infused into it: God is perfection personified. The bodies or forms of avatars, in later Vaishnavism, are made up of "pure matter" (Suddha-sattva), "which consists of six perfect transcendental gunas and not

¹⁶³ Noel Sheth, "*Hindu Avatara and Chrsitian Incarnation: A comparison, Philosophy East and West*", Vol 52. No. 1 (January, 2002), 14 December 2018, 108.

ordinary, Prakritic matter, which consists of the three imperfect gunas’’¹⁶⁴. Pancaratra tradition (scriptural Text of c. 600-800 CE) contains the ideas of the perfect nature of avatars. So arcavatara is not only real, it is perfect and divine. Same thing can be said of the Blessed Sacrament, that Jesus is perfectly and divinely present. This is God’s givenness of presence here and now.

3.3.3. Dynamics of God’s Love

Arcavatara and the Eucharist are similar because God’s love is revealed in both. Heaven is wedded to earth in both arcavatara and the Eucharist. God descends to enable human beings to ascend to God. This ascent involves human’s readiness to be transformed by the divine. Human beings are raised to higher spiritual experience through meditation and devotion before the image-descent of God and the Eucharist. God coming down to the earth, shows His disposition of love for the earth and humans.

God’s love shown in the arcavatara and the Eucharist signifies victory over evil and wickedness of the world. Whatever obstacle that can prevent union with God is efficaciously removed, righteousness is inspired in the devotees through the experience of God’s love, and their protection is ipso facto ensured. There is a sense of liberation here, which can imply that God’s presence in the arcavatara and the Eucharist stands for the spiritual freedom of the oppressed. Christian Scriptures reference that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son for the salvation of peoples and the world.¹⁶⁵

This also has implication for soteriology. Jesus continues to transform human beings into his image as often as the sacrifice of the Eucharist is celebrated in his memory. By removing every

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Cf, John 3:16.

obstacle from the spiritual path of every Mumusku (Vishnu's devotee seeking freedom from the bondage of karma), liberty and divine assistance are also granted for the attainment of Moska (salvation or freedom from the migration of souls). The love of God as experienced in His objectified image in both arcavatara and the Eucharist is liberating spiritually and salvific in effect. Nilakanta Sastri, an Indian historian, argues that the early Christian missionaries in India realized the similarities between the Christian God and the divine manifestations of Vishnu. Sastri observes, "this rapprochement between the forms of Siva and Vishnu calculated to proclaim that all divinities are just different manifestations of the Supreme to suit the different contexts, seems to have come about very early in the Christian era."¹⁶⁶

In arcavatara and Eucharist, God becomes accessible, tangible and available to human beings. The Supreme Being can be touched. He is been eaten in the Eucharist. God's simplicity is seen at its peak in the Eucharist and the arcavatara, just because of his love for the worshippers. He desires to be with them. He wants to help them and be part of their daily struggles and experiences. He wants to be part of their story and existence. God wants to be in communion with human beings. As so, God puts himself at the mercy of human beings. He is being cared for, guided and protected in the Eucharist and arcavatara. He just wants to be a God who is with his people. Marion observes that there is the risk of misunderstanding God's divinity. The human being may be fixated and fail to 'transpierce visible things' (due to 'idolatrous' gaze). Whereas, the human person needs an iconic gaze to look beyond the finite reality of the divine.

¹⁶⁶ Nilakanta Sastri, *Development of Religion in South India* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1963), 66.

3.3.4 Liturgical Dynamics

A comparative analysis of the liturgical dynamics of Hindu worship and Christian Eucharist shows that there are important similarities in terms of the different dynamics related to structure as well as various ritual performances.

3.3.4.1 Human Offerings of Gifts and Prayers

Gifts and supplications are offered before Arcavatara and during the Eucharistic celebration. These gifts and prayers that are offered in both cases are directed to the almighty who is present before the devotees or the faithful. They pray to him. They dance and play music in his presence. These liturgical activities are understood as given glory to God and praising him for his goodness. Usher understood these acts of thanksgiving in the liturgy as the glorification of God. So, when a group of people or individual family or individual person come for Puja¹⁶⁷ in the temple or during Eucharistic sacrifice, giving thanks to God is consequential for them. Monetary donations can be made with prayer requests for upkeep the temple priests or for the care of the temple. Mass stipend are given too along with the intentions of the faithful for the same purpose. Puja involves bringing offering or gifts to God represented in the image. These gifts may be flowers or food¹⁶⁸, or even possibly lighting a candle or burning incense. God here becomes like an important guest worthy of honor and gifts. The ritual can be carried out in silence accompanied with prayers and the priest(s) chanting in Sanskrit as the Puja progresses¹⁶⁹. The kind of prayer that is offered in private

¹⁶⁷ Puja is a prayer ritual in Hinduism to host and honor a designated god. In Vaishnavism, Lord Vishnu, is the Supreme Being to whom Puja is offered.

¹⁶⁸ Geddes MacGregor, *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy*, 511.

¹⁶⁹ "Hinduism", Wendy Donger, Edward Dimock and others, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc, January 22, 2019, accessed February 28, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/puja>

or public observance of Puja includes praying for those who specifically asked for prayers for their family, relatives and friends.

Prayers of thanksgiving and petition are offered at every Eucharistic celebration and Puja gathering. Like during Puja, at Mass, the Catholic faithful request prayers for their loved ones and for various needs. God is present and prayer becomes communication between humans and the divine. “Ask and it shall be given you”(Matthew 7:7-8). This biblical injunction is not only carried out at Mass, this is seen clearly practiced when prayers are offered during both private and public puja. Both the Catholic faithful and the Vaishnavas see God as a benevolent Deity that can attend to their needs.

3.3.4.2 Temple and Altar Decoration

Christians decorate Eucharistic altar with flowers and lighted candles. (Candles are kept burning in the Chapels of perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament). The light on the altar depicts Christ as the light of the world and reminds the faithful of what they are called to be (John 8:12, Matthew 5:14-16). God is beauty personified. The Flowers show forth the beauty of creation which is a manifestation of the beauty of God. Flowers in Puja are called Pushpam, they depict fragrance, color, beauty and tenderness. “By offering them to God, a devotee declares the purity and sincerity of his devotion and the tenderness of his feelings and earns his reciprocal love. Flowers also represent whatever that blossoms in you, be it good or evil, intelligence or delusion, and knowledge or ignorance. By offering them to God, you cleanse yourself”.¹⁷⁰ And the light, “deepham”, stands for the world as a world of light and darkness and human minds and bodies are

¹⁷⁰ Hinduismwebsite.com, “*The Symbolic Significance of Puja and Worship in Hinduism,*”
<https://www.hinduwebsite.com/symbolisminpuja.asp>

susceptible to evil inclinations, darkness and delusion. The light symbolically represents knowledge, wisdom, purity and divinity. “By offering it to God we remind him to endow us with these divine qualities and save us from the darkness of the mortal world and the negative consequences of our karma. We request him to show us the light and lead us in the right direction towards liberation.”¹⁷¹

3.3.4.3 ‘Growing’ Relationship with God

Communion with the divine and the work of redemption continues as often as the holy Eucharist is celebrated¹⁷² and Catholics participate actively, consciously and fruitfully. Same can be said for regular participation in Puja; communion with God increases and freedom from the effects of Karma and the cycles of migration of souls is assured through meditation, scriptural reading and prayers. As Rahner mentioned, the practice of spiritual communion is expedient for the spiritual development of Catholics.¹⁷³ This of course means being conscious of Jesus in the heart and establishing relationship of prayer and friendship. When this is done before the tabernacle or in the chapel of Eucharistic adoration, it resonates with a Vaisnava in a deep Puja mediation. Meditation and recitation of the Hindu scripture before arcavatara is part of the five daily religious obligations of the Vaishnavas. The faithful Vaishnavas observe the following religious activities daily: purificatory rites, collecting the requisites for worship, acts of worship, study and contemplation of the meaning of the sacred books, and meditative concentration on the Lord’s image.¹⁷⁴ The sense of faith and communion with the divine is nurtured through frequent Puja or reception (or adoration) of the Blessed Sacrament.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² CCC 1405

¹⁷³ Karl Rahner, “*On Visiting the Blessed Sacrament*”, 201.

¹⁷⁴ “Hinduism”, Wendy Donger, Edward Dimock and others

3.3.4.4 The Use of Scripture for Worship

The two traditions use the sacred scriptures in their worship. Faith in the arcavatara and the Eucharist is based on the scripture and the testimonies of the teachers of faith (arcaryas or tradition). The agamas (scriptura texts) and the hymns of the alvars have a lot to say about the arcas. The religious rite of consecration is contained in the agamas. The origin of the arcas is traceable to the Rgveda (Hindu oldest scriptural text), one of the hymns of the Rgveda refers to the worship of Vishnu. Another hymn of the Rgveda makes an explicit mention of the worship of idols as a means of God-realization¹⁷⁵. Everything about the worship of God's image-descent is doctored by the Hindus sacred scriptures and developed extensively by the acaryas especially Ramanuja. Likewise, the Eucharistic liturgy is primarily based on the Christian scripture especially the words of Jesus saying, "This is my body:" "This is my blood", and "Do this in remembrance of me", Mark 14: 22-26, Luke 22: 14-23, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Mathew 26: 26-27 and 6:25-59. This Christian faith in the scriptures has been nurtured by the tradition of the Apostles and the Fathers and Doctors of the Church dating back to the early centuries of Christianity. Ramanuja (1017-1137)¹⁷⁶ also made a fascinating contribution to the development of image worship in Vaishnavism. The sacred scriptures can then be said to be very important sources of the theologies and worship of arcavatara and the Eucharist. One can check the Vaishnava and Christian scriptures for proper knowledge of what is obtainable in the worship giving to God in the presence of Vishnu and the Eucharist. The scriptures make pivotal contributions to what constitute worship and consecration of arcavatara and the Eucharist. Scriptures are read, Songs and music accompany it. The reading of the scripture is part of the five ways of daily worship prescribed for individual

¹⁷⁵ Srinivasa Chari, Vaisnavism, 223.

¹⁷⁶ Edward Hahnenberg, "Arcavatara: Srivaisnava Image-Descent and Roman Catholic Eucharist."

Vaishnava in relation to the home and temple worship of Vishnu's images. The scriptural texts of the Hindus and the Bible of the Christian faith are consequential for understanding the worship of God in the form of arcavatara and the Eucharist respectively. The Hindu temple priests spend quality time chanting the sacred texts continuously in the temple, while people come in freely for family or individual puja. The priests are often many in the temple.

3.3.4.5 Meditation

The practice of meditation is something that is common to arca worship and the adoration of the Eucharist, (or benediction, or "Visits" to the Eucharistic Jesus in the tabernacle). Meditation or silent adoration or contemplation is always encouraged in the presence of God both in the Eucharist and in the arcas. The concept of "antaryami" is so fascinating in Vaishnavism, as it has been said, it refers to the manifestation of God in the recess of human heart. The emphasis on God living in the hearts of human beings is also a common phenomenon in Christianity. Clooney in his work, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Asri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God*, made an attempt to explore the usefulness of meditation in reaching a better knowledge of the self and God. The self can attain a life changing experience of God through the practice of Yoga meditation. Clooney represented Desika's yearning for the yogi (One who practices Yoga meditation) in these words, "Lord of Yoga, show me your imperishable self [Gita 11:4], and graciously grant that I may see you. [Tiruvaymoli 8:11] and may I see you one day [Tituvaymoli 6.9.4]... ..those who persevere in the yoga of action and the yoga of knowledge are no longer distracted by world or self, and accordingly ascend to a clear vision and deeper union with God."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Francis Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis De Sales and Asri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 54.

Meditation if properly carried out can be a powerful resource in the iconic presence. It can help the iconic gaze.

The longing of the heart is fulfilled during meditation before the arca of God. God meets the spiritual desires of the devotees who seek to behold God in special way. In fact, it is said that Vishnu descends into the arca in response to the prayers of the faithful ones who desire to see his face. This type of yearning of the heart is also captured in the Christian scripture, Psalm 42: 1-6, "as the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God...". Clooney compares the view of Desika with that of Francis de sales on meditation. For Francis De sales, meditation entails growing in spiritual, human and epistemological maturity and most especially in the love for the Eucharist.

3.3.4.6 Priests' Role During Worship

The priests carry out presidential functions in the worship of the Eucharist and the consecrated images of Vishnu. The priests participate in the reading of the sacred Scriptures. They lead the people in prayer. Paul Younger, describes how in the late twentieth century Indian migrants formed themselves into worship communities in Canada and relied entirely on the help of the priests to continue their devotion and worship. He observes, "today there are South Indian ritual specialists brought in for the installation of images, and the priest is required to follow a daily routine in the feeding, bathing, and worshipping of the deity images."¹⁷⁸ These priests are brought in from Southern India to function in this capacity and their upkeep is the responsibility of the community. This is also the practice in the Sri Venkateswara Temple I visited in Pittsburgh,

¹⁷⁸ Paul Younger, "Hindu Ritual in a Canadian Context," in *Hindu Ritual at the Margins: Innovations, Transformations, Reconsiderations*, ed. Linda Penkower and Tracy Pintchman, Studies in Comparative Religion (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 130.

Pennsylvania, United States. The priests sometimes assist adherents with Puja in private homes if invited.

Only the priest enters the inner part of the temple where Vishnu is installed. He brings lighted lamp out for the devotees, and gives them water from the God to drink, he then presents the gifts brought by the people. The people afterwards stay behind to meditate and pray while some of the priests continue to chant the sacred scripture. The priests in the Vaishnava temple wake up the God in the morning and prepare the image for worship. The names of God are chanted to praise Him, the Image is then fed, fire oblation is offered and mantras are chanted.

In the evening, God is swung to sleep and then put to rest till the following morning. Worship takes place in the temple from morning till evening daily. Eucharistic sacrifice is also offered daily in the morning and any time of the day based on the needs of the people, the worshipping community. The faithful can pay visits to the Blessed Sacrament at any time of the day for prayer and meditation.

3.3.4.7 Inclusiveness and Salvation of Souls

The idea of inclusiveness characterizes both the Eucharistic celebration and the cult of arcavatara. The devotees and worshipers are from all categories of the society regardless of race, language, class, caste or gender, everyone is welcomed to worship and adore God. The Indian Dalits, lowest caste of Indian society, have found solace in both Christianity and Vaishnavism. As often as they participate in these spiritual exercises and feel welcome into the embrace of almighty God, the energy for their liberation is generated and the voice of their defence is made strong and the needed solidarity is experienced.

The theology of the Eucharist and arcavatara accommodate the option for the poor, those at the margin; the victims of human history and socio-political and economic unjust structures. The Eucharistic Jesus and the God in the arca are present and real to everyone as savior, human liberator from evil and wickedness and as giver of grace for the fulfilment of the inner yearnings of human beings to know God in His truest nature. While Catholics speak of the salvation of souls, the Vaishnavas talk of liberation from cycles of soul migration to a state of moska. The same final goal that will be achieved through sincere devotion to the Eucharist and the arcavatara is union with God. Both “the way of the monkey” (seeking knowledge and engaging in active charity) and “the way of the cat” (loving God, service to God in meditation and spiritual communion)¹⁷⁹ are inspired by the Eucharist and the worship of arcavatara.

3.3.4.8 Propitiation

Vaishnavas believe in the automatic removal of sins by mere participating in the spiritual devotion of Puja and their daily religious observances. Meditation before the image of Lord Vishnu, wipes away the sins of the devotees. For Catholics too, participation in the Eucharistic meal wipes away only the venial sins¹⁸⁰ and restores life and strengthen the sense of charity. The willingness of God to remove spiritual obstacles on the path of the faithful or the devotee is apparent, which stresses the reconciliatory effect of the Eucharist and the worship arcavatara. Margaret Farley refers to this as “anticipatory forgiveness”, letting go within oneself whatever prevents a fundamental acceptance of the other, even when the other is guilty.¹⁸¹ So God is ready

¹⁷⁹ Hans Kung, *Christianity & World Religions: Paths to Dialogue*, 221.

¹⁸⁰ CCC 1394

¹⁸¹ Margaret Farley, “*Forgive in the Service of Love*”, in *Love and Christian Ethics: Tradition, Theory, and Society*, ed. Fredrick Simmons and Brian Sorrells (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2016) , 167.

to reconcile himself with the faithful or devotees who come into his presence to worship and adore and meditate.

3.4 Possible Differences Between Arcavatara and The Eucharist

Even though great similarities abound between the theology of arcavatara and the Eucharist, there are still differences. The first impression one may have about comparing the theology of Eucharist and arcavatara may be that of two parallels that can never meet or that of complete antithetical concepts. As we have seen, there are points where both concepts intersect. The following are some observable differences.

3.4 .1 Sin and Restitution

The Catholic Church makes a distinction between mortal sin and venial sin. Even though any form of sin is a disobedience against the law of God, only mortal sin can deprive one of eternal happiness with Him if it is not confessed before death.¹⁸² This distinction is not made in Vaishnavism, sin is sin. Mere participation in the Eucharistic celebration or adoring Jesus in the tabernacle or participating in benediction does not wipe away mortal sin in Catholic understanding; there is the need to observe sacramental confession. The sinner is still required, “by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he (the sinner) must “make satisfaction for” or “expiate” his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance’.”¹⁸³ So the one who has obtained God’s forgiveness needs to make up for damaged relationships with others and even God. The general admonition in Catholicism is that one who commits a mortal sin, needs to go to sacramental

¹⁸² CCC 1861

¹⁸³ CCC 1459

confession before partaking in the Eucharistic meal. In the image worship, Vishnu wipes away devotees' sins automatically by mere participation in the spiritual devotion. Vishnu removes worshippers' sins which of course may constitute obstacles inhibiting the experience of the Supreme being in plenitude.

3.4.2 Holy Communion and Prasadam

Another disparity between arcavatara and the Eucharist concerns the remaining food offered during Seva or Puja which is shared by the participants. This food is called prasadam, it is considered to be a sacred food; but not God's real body in anyway.¹⁸⁴ Whereas in Catholic theology, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, is truly and really present, body, blood, soul and divinity, in the Eucharistic meal. One may argue for a sense of communion in the act of sharing and eating of the prasadam together by all present. Even there is a sense of charity on the part of the host of the Seva who provided the food offering. Similar charity is displayed when prasadam from the temple is shared to the poor, but there is an essential difference between the body and blood of Jesus and the sacred meal.

3.4.3 Memorial Event

The Eucharist is the sacrifice of Christ, a memorial (anamnesis) of his paschal mysteries. The Eucharist recalls the covenant between God and the people of Israel and in the present, tells of the future promises of the Parousia. The arcavatara devotional worship is not a memorial of the any redemptive event in the life and history of humanity. God's presence in the image is to meet the immediate desire of the devotees, to save them based on whatever evil or wickedness that confronts

¹⁸⁴ Madras India, *Renaissance of Gaudiya Vaisnavism Movement* (Michigan: Stree Gaudiyah Math, 1978), 202.

them in their live experiences in the present moment. This kind of salvific manifestation of God occurs as often as images are consecrated for the use of worship and devotion. This is not a once and for all intervention. Though one can argue this by saying that the once and for all salvific act of Jesus conforms with the linear nature of Judeo-Christian view of the world while the repeated manifestations of Vishnu in the images fit the cosmic view of reality by the Vaishnavas.

3.4.4 Private Devotion in the Home

The Eucharist is not readily available in the homes of the Christian faithful for veneration. Of course, the Blessed Sacrament may be brought to the homes for the sick and not to be perpetually kept in private homes. This does not mean that God is absent in the homes of the Christian faithful. Private prayers are still being offered to God and Scriptures are read because for Christians, God is everywhere, and He is even in the human hearts. More so, Christians share special relationship with Christ because of their baptism. For the sake of reverence and to curtail abuses, the tabernacle in the Church, in the chapel and the oratories are the places of repose for the Eucharistic Jesus. Perpetual adoration is common in some places now, where the Blessed Sacrament is continuously exposed in a chapel for adoration.

The arca of God is present both in private homes of the devotees as well as in the Vaishnava Temples. Most of the real worship takes place daily in the homes. "The deity's accessibility is at the heart of the Srivaisnava conception of arcavatara."¹⁸⁵ One may argue that the sacramentals and the icons of Jesus and the saints and the Blessed Mary serve this purpose for Catholics in their homes. But Vaishnavas receives God as a guest in their homes daily and practically prepare for Him as His host, they offer Him sixteen upacaras and in return they ask God's favors in their

¹⁸⁵ Edward Hahnenberg, "*Arcavatara: Srivaisnava Image-Descent and Roman Catholic Eucharist*,".

prayers. The feelings and praxis in home worship and the way God is being encountered and received in the homes are not the same in the two traditions.¹⁸⁶

3.4.5 The Resurrection of the Body

The theology of arcavatara does not involve the promise of bodily resurrection even though one can attain freedom from migration of souls through sincere devotion. Attainment of union with Vishnu is the goal of every devotee and obviously resurrection of the body is not part of the details. The Eucharist gives an eschatological hope, those who partake of the Eucharistic sacrifice and meal are promised bodily resurrection by Jesus.¹⁸⁷ The main point here is eternal union with God and that is clearly the primal goal in the two traditions.

3.4.6 Communitarian Twist

The communitarian dimension of the Eucharist has been brought out more directly since second Vatican Council (1963-1965). So, the Eucharistic liturgy is the celebration of the community of the Church in all its dimensions with the headship of Christ. The worship of the images emphasizes personal union with Vishnu and love of Vishnu over and above the responsibility to love other human beings. Hahnenberg asks in his article on, "Arcavatara: Srivaisnava image-Descent and Roman Catholic Eucharist", "does arcavatara devotion, which so richly emphasizes the relational love (bhakti) between the deity and the devotee, contain an inherent dynamism toward others?"¹⁸⁸ The love and the protection of Vishnu does not have missionary characteristics. In other words, it does not involve necessarily, the sending out of the

¹⁸⁶ Hanns Kung, *Christianity & World Religions: Paths to Dialogue*, 224.

¹⁸⁷ Cf, John 6:40, 44.

¹⁸⁸ Edward Hahnenberg, "Arcavatara: Srivaisnava Image-Descent and Roman Catholic Eucharist,"

devotees to go and lay down their lives (show the same love) for their neighbors in the community. The manifested love of Vishnu is individual-centered or cosmic-focused, the communitarian value is nebulous. Of course, this does not mean that Vaishnavas do not live out moral values at all. Only that it is not specifically stated that the Lord Vishnu commands the devotees to love others as He has loved them except by inference.

3.4.7 Liturgical Regulations

There is more freedom in the worship of God in the arcas, worship is perfect once the scriptural text and the instructions of the arcaryas are followed. Individual innovations and personal preferences abound during the devotional worship at the homes of the devotees.¹⁸⁹ The demand of the modern life has also reduced faithful commitment to following all the stipulations of traditional devotional worship of the arcavatara. The Roman Catholic Eucharistic celebration and administration is more centrally controlled by the authorities of the Church. Local adaptation also follows a set of uniformity of the local church.¹⁹⁰ So by and large, the Eucharistic celebration is not a private celebration even though individuals could have their private devotion to the Eucharist at any convenient time.

3.5. Possible Areas for Dialogue

In the light of this comparative analysis of the similarities and differences of divine presence in Aracavatara and the Eucharist, it is important to identify certain important areas of theological engagement.

¹⁸⁹ Hanns Kung, *Christianity & World Religions: Paths to Dialogue*, 243.

¹⁹⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concillium*, 26.

3.5.1. God's 'Givenness' in the Present

The notion of God's presence in both Catholicism and Vaishnavism is close, especially the idea of God coming to be with his people to strengthen them and nourish the spiritual self on the pilgrimage of life. This is God's givenness. A gift of his 'saturated' presence in the present. This spiritual presence can be explored to the point that a Catholic who Joins a Vaishnava friend in Seva or Puja does not feel the urge of rushing to the confessional afterwards. Similarly, Vaishnavas who follows neighbors who are Catholics, to an adoration chapel would be able to feel comfortable that God is present in the Eucharist and meditate accordingly. The task in this theological exchange is defining what constitutes idolatry as expressed in 1 Corinthians 10:7, 14; 1 John 5:21; Leviticus 19:4 and Exodus 20:3-6 among others? The central warning of the biblical passages is to keep off from Idol worship. The worship given to arcavatara is "Latria", meaning adoration, which is God's due based on Catholic theology. Catholics venerate the saints and their icons (dulia) and give hyper veneration (hyper-dulia) to the Blessed Mother and her icons.¹⁹¹ Vaishnavas belief that God the almighty is in the consecrated images of Vishnu. Dialogue and understanding are required to see what Vaishnavas see in the consecrated images. Marion's Phenomenology of givenness explains the presence of God as a gift in the present. Effort is required in the spirit of dialogue to clarify what this gift of givenness of God's presence means in both religious traditions. And this should grow mutual respect and understanding between Christians and Vaishnavas.

3.5.2 Ethical Dimension of Worship

The worship (or "eating") of the Eucharist results into the call to Christ's mission in the world. The mission of love, forgiveness and care for others sacrificially like Jesus himself did. Every

¹⁹¹ Hanns Kung, *Christianity & World Religions: Paths to Dialogue*, 259.

participation in the Eucharist is a reminder of the mission of Christ and the urgent need to contribute one's quota in this salvific mission. The Eucharist strengthens the faithful to participate in the work of love and service in the human community. Most importantly, anywhere there is human suffering or need, Jesus in the Eucharist strengthens his faithful ones to go and make his presence felt.¹⁹² Also in Vaishnavism, the meditation and spiritual devotion of the Vaishnavas can become resources for community engagement and social involvement. It can build up energy for the struggle against unjust structure that keep those at the margins perpetually enervated and disadvantaged. Vaishnavism is already an inclusive religion without discrimination or sectarianism in the acceptance of members. In the area of work for the poor and fighting for justice, Vaishnavism and Catholicism can collaborate especially for the protection of the "untouchables", the Dalits of the Indian society. According to V. T. Rajsheka, the author of *The black Untouchables of India*, "It is the blackest lie to say that Hinduism promotes tolerance and non- violence."¹⁹³ He is speaking from the historical experience of the Indian black population that continues to suffer injustice and oppression in their own homeland. The theology of arcavatara and the Eucharist can provide needed zeal and resources for this important drive.

3.5.3 Care of the Environment

In 1996, more than two thousand scientists issued a joined declaration that the current human activities on earth put the environment at risk, jeopardizing a safe environment for the future of the human society, plant and animal kingdom.¹⁹⁴ The major problems we are currently generating for the environment affects the following: the "macro problems of global warming and the growth

¹⁹² Cf, Matthew 25:31-46.

¹⁹³ Rajshekar V. T., *Dalit: The Black Untouchables of India*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 1987), 47.

¹⁹⁴ T. J. Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 223.

in the hole in the ozone layer; the question of whether resources can keep up with population, especially as regards the availability of water and grain; and problems of environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity.”¹⁹⁵

In 2015, Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si’ (Care of Our Common Home)*, expressed a great concern on how fast human beings care less about the environment which for him, is ‘our common home’(LS 14). Pope Francis said, I urgently appeal then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. He therefore calls for urgent actions to be taken to protect this gift of God, the environment. “We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all”¹⁹⁶. Everyone’s talents and proactive efforts are required to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God’s creation.

In arcavatara and the Eucharist, God who loves the world and mankind, and demonstrated this love in his manifestations, is worshipped and venerated. This should lead Vaishnavism and Christianity to “cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents,”¹⁹⁷ in on-going dialogue for the good of humanity.

3.5.4 Working for Justice and Peace in the World

Mankind lives in a wounded world. Learning from the history of inhuman treatment of indigenous peoples is consequential. Anti-Semitic and hate, and religious fanaticism have left

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Pope Francis, “*Laudato Si’ (On Care For Our Common Home)*”, May 24 2105, accessed March 27 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

many wounded as individuals and groups. The unjust political, social and economic injustice going-on in many nations of the world and even among members of the community of nations, is dividing mankind day after day. The Oxford Professor, Niggel Bigger, observes that the peace effort being made most times are without justice, because "the past and its unredressed grievances are best buried by deliberately forgetting them, by sweeping them under the carpet, by drawing a thick line between past and present, turning around, and walking resolutely off into the future."¹⁹⁸

The Lord Vishnu who manifests Himself in the images to improve righteousness and balance in the cosmic order, and Jesus Christ, God in Christianity, who embraced seeking the wellbeing of the oppressed and marginalized, would want human solidarity in fighting for Justice and peace in the world where their presence in the present is manifested. The epistemological insights of these God's theophanies, should inspire Vaishnavas and Christians to grow desire to work together in forming human conscience for peace and true justice in the world.

In this chapter, the differences and the similarities between the theology of arcavatara and Roman Catholic Eucharist have been pointed out. This is in no way exhaustive. The Eucharist and God's image-descent in Vaishnavism, can be seen from diverse perspectives, especially for the purpose of ecumenism and dialogue. This work is a contribution to igniting desire for communication and theological exchange between Catholicism and Vaishnavism. The comparative engagement continues, and I hope it will bring humanity to a sense of oneness, friendship and salvation that God desires for all.

¹⁹⁸ Nigel Biggar, "Chapter 1- Making Peace or Doing Justice: Must We Choose?" in *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict*, ed. Nigel Biggar, Expanded ed. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 4.

Conclusion

In the light of this comparative study, it becomes evident that a better understanding of the divine-human encounter can be achieved only by rightfully acknowledging the revelation of God to world's various cultures and religions throughout history and their manifold ways of representing and experiencing the divine. God loves being in communion with human beings. He has not abandoned humankind since the beginning of time, he has always communicated Himself. The maximum idea we have about God is just a minimum of who God truly is.

In the first chapter we have seen that Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world. The notion of God's manifestations or incarnations in Vaishnavism, is explained with a particular focus on the image-descent of Lord Vishnu, arcavatara. The Lord Vishnu is said to manifest Himself in the world to express his love for the devotees and protect them from evil while resettling possible disorder in the universe. Vishnu is also the ultimate goal of existence and He is responsible for the creation, sustenance and the dissolution of the world. This Supreme God is fully and really present in the homes and in the Vaishnava temples as consecrated images. It is explained that for the Vaishnavas, God is seen as a welcome guest, a King, in their homes and temples. He is worshipped and adored daily. Faithful devotion to Vishnu leads to liberty from migration of souls due to karma influence. It is very fascinating learning that the human beings who live exemplary lives can aspire to be avatars. Something like aspiring to be saints in the view of Christians. A human avatar must bring about extraordinary interventions in the world around him or her, as to make the presence and might of Vishnu felt greatly.

The Eucharist is discussed as the real presence of Jesus in chapter two. God's presence, using Marion's phenomenology of givenness, is a gift with an excess of existence. Christ is the 'saturated phenomenon', whose reality is not created or imposed by the conditions of human perception or

knowledge but rather commencing from itself and itself alone, schools the human persons and transform them into its own reality. The present presence of Christ, in the Eucharist, is not just a memorial of the past, it is a confluence of the past and the future. The Eucharistic celebration in the present vivify the distance between the paschal mystery and the second coming of Christ. we did explain that Christ's presence here and now, is made efficacious by the power of the Holy Spirit through Christ. Hence, the life-giving Spirit of God should be given its pride of place in the liturgical celebration of the sacraments and in the iconic dynamics of the given presence in the present. The perceived absence in the divine presence may tempt human beings to keep the reality of God within their own horizons and try to force God into intentional human modes due to idolatrous gaze. In God's presence, to truly adore him, we need to let "God be God" for us. All we need to do is to abandon ourselves into God's hands in response to His own 'gift abandonment'.

A comparative analysis is done in the third chapter, we explained that the presence of God in the arcavata and the Eucharist should be approached iconically, for adequate understanding of the divine reality. Vaishnavas do not worship an alien God in the images. They worship, adore and offer prayers and gift to God, Lord Vishnu, the Supreme Being. The image of this God conforms with the Christian New Testament image of God. God is loving, merciful, conqueror of evil and wickedness and protector of his faithful ones. This is also the image of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. "God is with us" best describes God's presence in the Eucharist and the arcavata. God makes friends with humans in the Eucharist and the arcavata. He is not their judge but the one who forgives and draws them close to himself to raise them to a higher spiritual experience. God wants to listen to mankind in the Eucharist and arcavata, and the human response must be unique, inclusive and universal because of the His ineffability.

God is incomprehensible. He is a mystery unsurpassed. No single culture or religion can claim to know God absolutely. Aquinas commenting on the inability of human beings to comprehend God-reality states, “hence in the last resort, all that man knows of God is to know that he does not know Him, since he knows that what God is surpasses all that we can understand of him.”¹⁹⁹ Kung also concludes that Christianity is one religion among many²⁰⁰. It is note-worthy that the Catholic Church sees in Jesus Christ, the fullness of God’s revelation and the image of the invisible God. Jesus is substantially equal to God in glory and majesty. Jesus Christ is God for Catholics. This truism must regard the reality of the world of today that favors pluralism of faith, religions, cultures, politics, and socio-economic ideologies.

In the end, one can say that the Vaishnavas’ notion of God’s presence and that of the Eucharistic presence of Jesus, present to us a wealth of resources for collaboration and dialogue between Vaishnavism and Catholicism. The Catholic Church needs to be willing to see how God has chosen to be with peoples in other cultures. Vaishnavism provides a good entrance into this inter-religious engagement, especially in the notion of arcavatara which has so much in common with the Eucharistic presence. Vaishnavism can learn from Catholicism, more about building up a theology of arcavatara that involves the sending forth of the devotees to sharing the love of God they have experienced in their encounter with God in the human community where challenges abound in the face of injustice and inhumanity of humans to humans. Catholicism has an opportunity of enlightening and remodelling her notion of what constitutes idolatry in collaborative theological engagement with Vaishnavism. Effort needs to be made in recognizing the claim to uniqueness and universality in each religion, but this in lieu of impeding dialogue

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *De potential*, 7.5.14.

²⁰⁰ Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?: An Answer for today*, 587.

should facilitate an epistemological platform for knowing where each religion is coming from and how best they can theologically exchange ideas ecumenically.

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