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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

THE first four articles in this issue offer new perspectives on an old theme, namely Hindu interpretations of Jesus. While it is true that many traditional Hindu views of Jesus continue to retain widespread popularity today, the most notable of which regards him as one of many *avatars*, the last half-century has seen the emergence of strikingly new Hindu perspectives and approaches to grasping his meaning and significance.

In the first article I list four fairly recent developments in Hindu thinking about Jesus. Some of them are more widely accepted than others, but all of them help expand the context of Hindu and Christian reflection on the person and work of Christ. These four developments are 1. The belief that Jesus traveled to India and there learned Hindu and Buddhist wisdom, which he then made the center of his Gospel. 2. The conviction that not only Jesus, but some Hindu masters, as well, caused their own resurrection from the dead and thereupon appeared to their disciples. 3. The growing familiarity among Hindu scholars with the contemporary uncertainties that plague modern Christian biblical studies. These uncertainties about the person and message of Jesus seem to them to legitimize the possibility of allowing competing Hindu interpretations. 4. In stark contrast to the other three, the recognition of the need for fellow Hindus to become more aware of the presuppositions and commitments they bring to their understanding of Jesus and to take more seriously traditional Christian perspectives.

In the second essay K. R. Sundararajan offers reflections on the Christian teaching of the suffering of Christ from a Hindu perspective and shows us the similarities and differences between mainstream Christian and Vaiṣṇava thought on divine suffering. Though the suffering of *avatars* is widely accepted in popular Hindu piety the approach to this topic is more complex in official Vaiṣṇava theology, in particular as represented by Rāmānuja and post-Rāmānuja schools. From the general Hindu perspective, Sundararajan points out, the

Ultimate Reality is never subject to suffering even in its incarnate state, since it is eternally free of *karma* and *saṁsāra*. But in a notable exception the post-Rāmānuja Tenkalai tradition comes close to Christian teaching about a suffering savior, for "the savior God enters and even experiences the sorrows of humankind." But Sundararajan is quick to add that it is unclear whether this has redemptive implications. He adds one further point that distinguishes Hindu and Christian teaching: the Christian understanding of redemption through vicarious suffering and death is difficult to harmonize with Hindu teaching in general and Vaiṣṇava teaching in particular.

Ravi Gupta next presents the teaching of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896-1977), the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, an important Hindu missionary movement in the West. In contrast to a broad stream of neo-Vedāntic and non-dualist Hindu interpretations of Jesus Prabhupāda articulated his own particular understanding of Jesus in the context of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. Jesus is seen as the ideal example of a Vaiṣṇava, a *sādhu* displaying the sublime qualities typical of previous Vaiṣṇava saints. He is regarded as an *avatar*, but not an *avatar* of the highest type, since he was not a direct descent of the divine. Jesus is held in especially high esteem by Prabhupāda for his readiness to suffer in carrying forth his mission of spreading God consciousness to humankind. Yet while Prabhupāda accepted and praised Jesus for his suffering on the cross he rejected the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection. Gupta concludes his essay by underscoring that it was not the intention of Prabhupāda to wholly subsume Jesus within his own Vaiṣṇava tradition, but rather to encourage Christians to live out their Christian calling by being wholehearted devotees of Christ.

In the final essay Francis X. Clooney, S.J. does not take up directly the theme of Hindu views of Jesus, but instead reflects on the impact of Sanskrit as well as Hindu philosophical and devotional terms as they are

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used in the *Śrī Iesu Sahasranāma* (“Thousand Names of Jesus”), composed by Prof. K. U. Chacko and published in Kerala in 1987. Clooney places this devotional text in a long tradition of Christian Sanskrit literature dating back to the seventeenth century. The text, which is modeled after various Hindu “thousand-name” compositions to God, was composed for the sole purpose of devotional recitation; it does not therefore include a theological commentary. Clooney nonetheless finds theological significance in the fact that the text is as much Hindu and Vedic as it is biblical in its orientation and therefore open-ended in its meaning. The text suggests “a universal, inclusive Christology: Christ for the world, Christ accessible in many languages and within

genres inscribed within those languages.” Moreover, he adds, Chacko’s choice to compose a text in Sanskrit fused with both Hindu and Christian meanings allows him to avoid the extremes of, on the one hand, restricting the use of Sanskrit to Hindus (*a la* Hindutva demands) and, on the other, the rejection of Sanskrit altogether by anti-Brahminical and Dalit movements. Clooney thus sees one of the paradoxical accomplishments of this Christian text to be its articulation of new Hindu meanings for Jesus through the medium of a novel use of Sanskrit.

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