

# Dupuis, J. Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism

## ***B. Particular and Universal***

I have suggested elsewhere that the constitutive uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ must be made to rest on his personal identity as the Son of God (see Dupuis 1991b, 192-97). No other consideration seems to provide such an adequate theological foundation. The "Gospel" values which Jesus upholds, the Reign of God which he announces, the human project or "program" which he puts forward, his option for the poor and the marginalized, his denouncing of injustice, his message of universal love: all these, no doubt, contribute to the difference and specificity of Jesus' personality; none of them, however, would be decisive for making him or recognizing him as "constitutively unique."<sup>23</sup>

The universality of Jesus-the-Christ cannot, however, be allowed to overshadow the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth. It is true that Jesus' human existence, once transformed by his resurrection and glorification, has reached beyond time and space and become "transhistorical"; but it is the historical Jesus who has become that. The universality of the Christ who, "being made perfect," became "the source of eternal salvation" (Heb 5:9) does not cancel out the particularity of Jesus, "made like his brothers and sisters in every respect" (Heb 2:17). A universal Christ, severed from the particular Jesus, would no longer be the Christ of Christian revelation (see Reid 1990; see also Perkinson 1994). To stress the historical particularity of Jesus is not, in fact, without bearing on an open theology of religions. Nor is it indifferent in a context of interreligious dialogue. This, no doubt, is why, in such a context, the Indian Theological Association looks to the kenotic Christ as the model that provides both guidance and inspiration:

We look at Christ as one who, by emptying himself, takes us to the ineffable mystery of God. His *kenosis* signifies "not clinging to" his divine status (Phil 2:6). It was an act of unconditional surrender to the

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Father. It was a presence in submission to his Father's universal salvific will. Christ accepted the human condition to the ultimate consequences. He gave himself totally to others; he did not hesitate to set aside even some of the religious convictions of his people in order to be faithful to his mission. This led him to the final expression of *kenosis*, namely, the death on the Cross, consecrated by the resurrection and symbolized in the Eucharist.

The kenotic Christ is present in every human vicissitude as servant and leaven. He belongs to the whole of humanity. Through this servanthood he gives himself incessantly to men and women of all cultures and leads them unobtrusively to their self-realization. His is a liberative action which makes the person whole, transforms the cultures it encounters by forming them into a community of love in which the other is respected and accepted in his or her self-understanding. (Indian Theological Association 1991, nos. 26–27, p. 346)

The historical particularity of Jesus imposes upon the Christ-event irremediable limitations. This is necessarily part of the incarnational economy willed by God. Just as the human consciousness of Jesus as Son could not, by nature, exhaust the mystery of God, and therefore left his revelation of God incomplete, in like manner neither does or can the Christ-event exhaust God's saving power. God remains beyond the man Jesus as the ultimate source of both revelation and salvation. Jesus' revelation of God is a human transposition of God's mystery; his salvific action is the channel, the efficacious sign or sacrament, of God's salvific will. The personal identity of Jesus as Son of God in his human existence notwithstanding, a distance continues to exist between God (the Father), the ultimate source, and he who is God's human icon. Jesus is no substitute for God (see Duquoc 1984).

If this is true, it will also be seen that, while the Christ-event is the universal sacrament of God's will to save humankind, it need not therefore be the only possible expression of that will. God's saving power is not exclusively bound by the universal sign God has designed for his saving action. In terms of a Trinitarian Christology, this means that the saving action of God through the nonincarnate Logos (*Logos asarkos*), of whom the Prologue of John's Gospel states that he "was the light that enlightens every human being by coming into the world" (Jn 1:9), endures after the incarnation of the Logos (Jn 1:14), even as God's saving action through the universal presence of the Spirit, both before and after the historical event of Jesus Christ, is real. The mystery of the incarnation is unique; only the individual human existence of Jesus is assumed by the Son of God. But while he alone is thus constituted the "image of God," other "saving figures" may be, as will be further explained in the next chapter, "enlightened" by the Word or "inspired" by the Spirit, to become pointers to salvation for their followers, in accordance with God's overall design for humankind.

Admittedly, in the mystery of Jesus-the-Christ, the Word cannot be separated from the flesh it has assumed. But, inseparable as the divine Word and Jesus' human existence may be, they nevertheless remain distinct. While, then, the human action of the Logos *ensarkos* is the universal sacrament of God's saving action, it does not exhaust the action of the Logos. A distinct action of the Logos *asarkos* endures—not, to be sure, as constituting a distinct economy of salvation, parallel to that realized in the flesh of Christ, but as the expression of God's superabundant graciousness and absolute freedom.

The particularity of the Jesus Christ-event in relation to the universality of God's plan of salvation opens to sensitive theologians new inroads for a theology of religious pluralism that would make room for diverse "paths" to salvation. Some outstanding examples may be referred to briefly.

Claude Geffré sees the paradox of the incarnation to lie in the simultaneity of the particular and the universal: Jesus Christ is, according to an expression of Nicholas of Cusa that has been taken over by Paul Tillich and Hans Urs von Balthasar, the "concrete universal." The particularity of the event, however, leaves room for holding together, within the one divine plan, the universal significance of Jesus Christ and the saving value of other traditions. Geffré writes:

Jesus is the icon of the living God in a unique manner, and we need not wait for another "Mediator." But this does not lead to identifying the historical contingent aspect of Jesus with the "Christic" or divine aspect. The very law of God's incarnation through the mediation of history leads [us] to think that Jesus does not put an end to the story of God's manifestations. . . . In conformity with the traditional view of the Fathers of the Church, it is, therefore, possible to see the economy of the Son incarnate as the sacrament of a broader economy, that, namely, of the eternal Word of God which coincides with the religious history of humankind. (Geffré 1993b, 365–66; 1993a; 1995)

Edward Schillebeeckx asks how Christianity can maintain the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and at the same time attribute positive value to the different religions. He notes that "Jesus is indeed a 'unique,' but nevertheless 'contingent,' i.e., historical and thus limited, manifestation of the gift of salvation from God for all men and women." But Schillebeeckx goes on to say:

The revelation of God in Jesus, as the Christian Gospel preaches this to us, in no way means that God absolutizes a historical particularity. . . . We learn from the revelation of God in Jesus that no individual particularity can be said to be absolute, and that therefore through the relativity present in Jesus anyone can encounter God even outside Jesus, specially in our worldly history and in the many religions which have arisen in it. The risen Jesus of Nazareth also continues to point to God beyond himself. One could say: God points via Jesus Christ in the Spirit to himself as creator

and redeemer, as a God of men and women, of *all* men and women. God is absolute, but no religion is absolute. (Schillebeeckx 1990, 165–66; 1994; see also Menard 1990, 55–78; 1994, 283–96)

Even before this, Schillebeeckx had written the following:

Theology, talk about God, is more than Christology; in other words, while as Christians we can and may make Jesus the Christ the center of history for ourselves, we are not at the same time in a position to argue that the historical revelation of salvation from God in Jesus Christ exhausts the question of God, nor do we need to. Although we cannot attain Jesus in his fullness unless at the same time we also take into account his unique relationship with God which has a special nature of its own, this does not of itself mean that Jesus' unique way of life is the only way to God. For even Jesus not only reveals God but also conceals him, since he appeared among us in non-godlike, creaturely humanity. As man he is a historical, contingent being, who in no way can represent the full riches of God... unless one denies the reality of his real humanity.... So the Gospel itself forbids us to speak of a Christian religious imperialism and exclusivism. (Schillebeeckx 1987, 2)

Christian Duquoc likewise warns about absolutizing the particularity of God's manifestation in Jesus Christ:

By revealing himself in Jesus, God has not absolutized a particular event. He shows, on the contrary, that no particular historical event is absolute and that, in virtue of this relativity, God can be met in real history.... The fundamental particularity of Christianity requires that differences be allowed to endure, not that they be abolished as if God's manifestation in Jesus had brought religious history to an end. (Duquoc 1977, 143)

The Trinitarian perspective on the theology of religious pluralism would call for similar remarks where the abiding universal presence of the Spirit is concerned. Trinitarian Christology shows that the particularity of the Christ-event leaves space for the action of the Logos *asarkos*; Spirit-Christology helps, likewise, to see that the Spirit of God is universally present and acting, before and after the event. The Christ-event is as much the goal of the working of the Spirit in the world as it is its origin; between one and the other there exists a "mutually conditioning relationship," by virtue of which the Spirit can rightly be called, throughout salvation history, the "Spirit of Christ" (Wong 1994, 627; cf. Rahner 1981b, 46). God's saving economy is one, of which the Christ-event is at once the culminating point and the universal sacrament; but the God who saves is "three," each being personally distinct and remaining distinctly active. God saves with "two hands."

### C. Searching Christology

That Jesus Christ is the “human face of God” means that in him God becomes God-for-human-beings-in-a-fully-human-way. In the light of this unveiling of the unseen God through the human face of Jesus, the Christian faith is able to appraise all the more positively the personal advances of God toward men and women to which, according to their own faith, their religious traditions bear witness. This requires substantiation with a concrete example.

We have remarked in the preceding chapter that the Hindu classical tradition probably offers, in the *saccidananda* doctrine, the concept of God closest to the Christian Trinity that the history of religions has to offer (see pp. 274–278, above). A striking parallel exists, likewise, between the *avatara* concept of the Hindu bhakti and the Christian concept of the incarnation. If this other parallel is verified, it will be legitimate to conclude that, in spite of the differences on either side, Hinduism has the singular distinction of offering elements of doctrine similar to, though not identical with, what constitutes the substance of Christian faith: the Trinity and the incarnation. This calls for some explanation.

According to the traditional understanding of Hindu theism, the *avatara* is a divine “descent” (from the root *tri*, “to come,” with the prefix *ava*, “downward”) to the world, a manifestation of the supreme Brahman in human form. The purpose of this descent is to establish or reestablish dharma (right, law, religion) in the world and to destroy *adharma* there. The basic text for the concept of the *avatara* in Hindu theism is to be found in the Bhagavad Gita (4, 5–10, esp. 6–8), where Krishna declares to Arjuna:

Unborn though I am, though my Self is unchangeable,  
 though I am Lord of Beings —  
 in joining myself to the [material] nature (*prakriti*) that is mine,  
 I come to be [in time] by my own creative energy (*sambhavamy atma-*  
*mayaya*). [v. 6]  
 For, each time the law and the right (dharma) are in abeyance,  
 and impiety (*adharma*) rears its head,  
 I engender myself [on earth] (*atmanam srijamy aham*). [v.7]  
 For the protection of the good and the destruction of malefactors,  
 and to reestablish right (dharma),  
 I come to be (*sambhavamy*), from age to age. [v. 8]

The Hindu theologians of the classic Vedanta, such as Shankara and Ramanuja, and after them, Chaitanya and Jiva Goswami, and modern authors, have interpreted the concept of the *avatara* and its principal source, just cited, in different ways. Without entering here into a detailed discussion, the following may be said. While Krishna surely represents the Absolute (conceived as personal God [*Vishnu*] along classic bhakti lines) (see Sheth 1984; Vempeny 1988), his earthly manifestation in human form has received different interpretations. Taking *maya* in the sense of “illusion,” Shankara reduced the human

existence of Krishna to a mere appearance. Against him, Ramanuja understands *maya* as God's "creative power" and concludes to an authentic human existence of Krishna. Modern commentators, among them S. Radhakrishnan and Sri Aurobindo, generally follow the realistic interpretation. Thus writes Radhakrishnan: "There is no suggestion here that the becoming of the one is a mere appearance. It is intended realistically."<sup>24</sup> The interpretation of Krishna's human existence as mere appearance represents, therefore, but one particular Hindu Krishnaite theological current. According to this interpretation — to put it in Christian terminology — the doctrine of *avatara* is both docetist and gnostic. The concept does not imply a real human existence as does that of incarnation.<sup>25</sup>

More problematic, however, is the historicity of the Bhagavad Gita's Krishna figure. Hindu interpreters do not attribute to the historicity or nonhistoricity of Krishna any special relevance as regards his soteriological significance. That the Krishna story is taken as historical event or legend or myth is inconsequential for his saving value (Vempeny 1988, 325–76). Sri Aurobindo writes:

The life of Rama and Krishna belongs to the prehistoric past which has come down only in poetry and legend and may even be regarded as myths: but it is quite immaterial whether we regard them as myths or historical facts, because *their permanent truth and value* lie in their persistence as a spiritual form, presence, influence *in the inner consciousness* of the race and the life of the human soul.<sup>26</sup>

For Christian faith, on the contrary, the incarnation means the personal entry of the Son of God in the history of humankind and the world. The Word of God, made man, is truly and authentically a human being; having become a member of our human family in history, he has lived a human life, "in every respect tempted as we are" (Heb 4:15). He died for our salvation and was buried; raised from the dead, he was constituted Christ and Lord by God (Acts 2:36).

What positive significance can, then, the Christian faith attribute to the Hindu bhakti doctrine of *avatara*? When comparing *saccidananda* and the Christian Trinity, we noted two different ways of evaluating the respective beliefs of the two traditions (see pp. 276–78, above). For the "fulfillment theory," the *avatara* doctrine represents what may be called the best "stepping-stone" in Hinduism to the mystery of Jesus Christ, inasmuch as it embodies the universal human aspiration to enter into contact with the Ultimate Reality of the Divine

on a human plane — a desire, however, that must remain forever unfulfilled unless God takes the initiative of stooping down to us in becoming human.

Can we go further? It seems that we can, especially if we consider the “worship” rendered in diverse Hindu traditions to the “sacred images.” The worship of sacred images is distinct from idolatry insofar as the cult offered them by the devotees is directed not to the material image but to the symbolic and “sacramental” presence of God in the image. The Hindu ritual makes clear reference to a “consecration” ceremony (*prana pratistha*), an invocation, that is, pronounced by a priest by which God is begged graciously to come and dwell in the sacred image.<sup>27</sup> Before such time as the invocation has been pronounced, no act of worship is possible.

The sacred image is thus venerated as embodying, according to the faith of the devotees, a sacramental presence of the Godhead. This — to avoid misunderstandings — does not mean that idolatry does not exist. But idolatry is a corruption of image worship. Instead of being directed, through the sacramental sign, toward the God whose presence is ascertained by religious belief, the cultic act now stops at the image itself. Idolatry, then, consists in the human being's will to lay hold of God, to make God into one's own possession. Idolatry, therefore, is always cult of the self, while veneration of sacred images is divine worship.

Going beyond the fulfillment theory, the theory of the presence of Christ will hold that the worship of sacred images can be the sacramental sign in and through which the devotee responds to the offer of divine grace; it can mediate secretly the grace offered by God in Jesus Christ and express the human response to God's gratuitous gift in him. It can, then, truly be seen as a privileged instance of what Karl Rahner called “searching Christology” (Rahner 1979) — a search that starts from God.

These conclusions will be provisional, pending what must be left to be said in the next chapter on “paths to salvation.” The uniqueness and the universality of Jesus Christ are neither absolute nor relative. We have called them “constitutive” insofar as the Christ-event has a universal impact: in it God has brought about universal salvation; Christ's risen humanity is the guarantee of God's indissoluble union with humankind.

Can such universality be called “relational”? Yes, in the sense that it is to be viewed in the framework of God's overall salvific design for humankind. In this plan of God, as will be further shown hereafter, the other religious traditions represent true interventions and authentic manifestations of God in the history of peoples; they form integral parts of one history of salvation that culminates in the Jesus Christ-event.

In this sense, one may speak of the “complementary uniqueness” of the mystery of Christ in relation to the religious traditions (Thompson 1985, 385);

but the expression risks stopping at the fulfillment theory. “Relational uniqueness” will be preferred (see Geffré 1993b, 1995) — not, however, in the sense intended by Paul F. Knitter, for whom “relational uniqueness” refers, beyond what he sees as an outdated Christocentrism, to the theocentric model.<sup>28</sup> For, while it is true that “Christian singularity gains nothing by standing in absolute isolation,” but must on the contrary situate itself “within the totality of religious expressions” (see Breton 1981, 149–59), the Christian faith cannot stand without claiming for Jesus Christ a constitutive uniqueness: in him historical particularity coincides with universal significance.