

commentators. On the other hand, much of this interpretation cries out to be re-thought against the background of the historical setting of the Scriptures, the coming of the Lord in the fullness of time and within Israel. To ignore all that is to be launched into a shoreless sea in which many of men's conclusions will seem strange indeed.

That is why there is so much to be done, so great a need for thorough Biblical study and for sharing the fruits of that study with the Church and with the man-in-the-street, that the word may not be obscured. If we have such purposes as these before us we shall know that the success of this Society will not be measured by the degree of recognition it gains in the international journals, but by the extent to which it really does help the Church to lay hold on its heritage and to make the word of God known to the people of the land.

The Use of the Bible by Indian Christian Theologians

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The title as formulated is both vast and vague; the vastness justifies the limitation of consideration in the first and longer part to two writers, and only to a limited selection of their writings—decided primarily by easy availability and limitations of time. The vagueness of the topic justifies the double character of the paper: the first part descriptive and the last part a brief introduction to a discussion of principles. For the first half of the paper, the only Indian Christian theologians that I will be concerned with will be the two leaders of the Madras Group, the late Mr. P. Chenchiah and the late Mr. V. Chakkarai Chettiar. Old numbers of the *Guardian* and the *Christian Patriot*, periodicals in which a great part of their writings appeared, were not at hand, and therefore I base my statements on Mr. Chakkarai's two books, *Jesus the Avatar (JA)*, C.L.S., Madras, 1926, and *The Cross and Indian Thought (CIT)*, C.L.S., Madras, 1932, and the contributions of both these gentlemen in *Rethinking Christianity in India (RCI)*, Madras, 1938. I believe that even though references and examples are taken only from these limited sources, they are representative writings and therefore capable of giving us their basic attitude to the Bible.

Ever since I began to hear about and read these gentlemen, I have entertained great respect for their venture and ability, often coloured with a slight uneasiness about some of their conclusions. A re-reading of the books mentioned confirms my earlier impression. Any criticism that I make must be understood against the background of my respect for the quality of their work, as well as for the earnestness of their convictions and concerns. We are not, in this paper, concerned about their general theological views, but only with their use of the Bible. The writings under review do not specifically discuss the question of the authority of the Bible, but use it as the writers think fit, and our remarks are only inferences drawn from the way they use the Bible.

One or two general impressions may be mentioned first. It is only to be expected that a number of Sanskrit terms would be used in these writings, but one gets some surprise when prophets are called *rsis* and apostles *bhaktas*. The Scriptures become *sruti*. These usages can be discussed and criticized in some ways because technical terms belonging to one system of thought need considerable modification and internal transformation before they can be made to fit into another system. The ideas surrounding the term *rsi*, for example, the long and arduous discipline and training, detachment from the affairs of the world, these are not true of the Old Testament prophets. While the term *sruti* is in some ways parallel to revelation, the perspective in which the *Vedas* are seen as *sruti* is considerably different from that in which the Bible is called revelation.

A more important point is that on the whole these writings contain comparatively few references to the Bible. But being true to the Bible is not the same as quoting frequently from it. In Chakkarai's *The Cross and Indian Thought*, there are few quotations in the text itself, but there are considerable catenas at the head of each chapter. This must not be taken to mean that these writers are not familiar with the Bible and related literature.

Their views on the Bible may be discussed in four sections: first, concerning the Old Testament; second, concerning New Testament books other than the Gospels; third, concerning the Gospels; and last, concerning the whole Bible, taken as a book, or books.

While the Madras Group consisted of people who were bound closely together by ties of personal friendship and similarity of approach to religious questions, it is not to be expected that their views were identical always. Mr. Chakkarai, for example, held that we cannot escape the fact that Jesus stood in direct historical continuity with Jewish history in a way that is without parallel in any other religious situation. He speaks of the critic who cannot understand how Jesus as a prophet of God could identify himself with such a fanatical and nationalistic conception as that indicated by the term Messiah. He says: 'It is, of course, disagreeable that the modern world should be compelled to take cog-

nizance of such an order of things in the Semitic consciousness, but the dominant fact stands that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah of the Jews, prophesied by the *rsis* of the Old Testament. Not all the ingenuities of scholarship can take away this fact; for it runs through all the synoptic Gospels. It is in the Fourth Gospel that this conception recedes into the background and that the conception of Jesus as the pre-existent Son of God takes its place' (*JA*, p. 49). (One may add, in passing, on the last comment that while there is emphasis on the pre-existence of the Son in John, the idea that it does not stand in the relation of continuity to the Old Testament may be the result of a superficial view).

On the other hand, there are, in the writings of Chakkarai himself, and even more in those of the others of the group, a tendency to devalue the Old Testament, partly in comparison to the New Testament and partly in comparison to the Indian Scriptures. On the first page of *JA* we read: 'God has spoken in divers manners and at different seasons through his prophets and *rsis* to men, revealing to mankind His holy will and mind, line upon line, here a little and there a little. Such was the considered verdict of one of the most philosophical thinkers of the New Testament. It would not be inappropriate and without justification if the same conception of God's dealings were applied to other races than ancient Israel. God has never left Himself without a witness at any time to interpret his mind to men. Thus as we gaze at India's religious past, we discern the long stream of prophetic [*sic*] consciousness from the days of the *Rg Veda* down to Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya and Keshub Chunder Sen.' G. V. Job, another member of the group, says: 'If the Old Testament represents the cradle and the swaddling clothes of Jesus, the *Upanisads* prove the cosmic claim which St. John the Divine makes for the Lord in those striking words which introduce his story of the Incarnation. Christ is indeed the real light that enlightens every man. There is no real barrier between the two movements. To argue that the Old Testament forms an integral part of Christianity which asserts itself as a record of God's self-disclosing and recreating revelation in Jesus appears somewhat artificial and strained' (*RCI*, p. 20).

When we come to the New Testament we find that these writers usually draw a distinction between the Synoptic Gospels as a source of information about the words and deeds of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament. The Fourth Gospel occupies a unique position in Chakkarai's thought. It is the result of 'dhyana on the person of Christ, assuming the nature and importance of an historical narrative. In one supreme sense the Fourth Gospel is the truest of all the Gospels, because it goes deepest into the workings of the Spirit of Jesus as reflected in the mind of a highly sensitive *bhakta*, whoever this John was... The Fourth Gospel is the most spiritually alive of the Gospels—the *jnana kanda* of Christian *Sadhana*, and receives ever fuller explanation and vindication in the spiritual experience of the Christian

consciousness' (*JA*, p. 26 f.). Chakkarai rejects any idea that Paul or John was the creative genius of the primitive Church. 'We prefer to believe that Christ was greater than Paul and wiser than the anonymous writer of the Fourth Gospel' (*JA*, p. 18), a sentiment with which we have no difficulty in agreeing.

It is the reference to the historical Jesus that is the basis of the division of the New Testament into two parts. We read: 'The New Testament is composed of two sets of books; the one set describes the life and teachings of Him who is called Jesus, and the other contains the doings of some of His *bhaktas* after his death and their thought in the form of letters to their converts . . . It is then the Gospels that are insisted on as the only authoritative document of the Christian Church with respect to Christ's Person' (*JA*, p. 14). It is our 'duty to examine first the life of our Lord on earth and to ascertain what kind of man He was' (*ibid.*), which necessitates this special attention to the Gospels. Chakkarai is not unaware of the fact that the Gospels are not biographies; he recognizes that they are written by *bhaktas* and for *bhaktas*, and that many events in the Gospels are already interpreted in the light of the ideas prevailing in the Church at the time when they were written. But in spite of all this, both his books are based on the assumption that from the Synoptic Gospels we can gain reasonably certain information not only about the external event of Jesus' life, but also about His inner consciousness as well. He argues that even though the Gospels were written after the Epistles, the words and deeds of our Lord recorded in them were uttered and done long before Paul became His *bhakta* (*JA*, p. 17). Therefore they claim priority both in time and in importance. This may sound somewhat naïve to those who are impressed and influenced by Form-Criticism. Mr. Chakkarai wrote before Form-Criticism was well known in this country. On the other hand he was by training a lawyer and some, who find the current assertions (or should I say that they are already becoming dated) about the impossibility of knowing anything really about the life of Jesus unsatisfactory, may take encouragement from the fact that a lawyer familiar with rules of evidence found these records reliable.

While there is general acceptance in Chakkarai of the Gospels, especially the Synoptics as sources of knowledge about Jesus, there is a latent rejection and denial of all written authority, and in this Mr. Chenchiah seems to take an even more extreme position. Ultimately the only acceptable authority in religious matters for these gentlemen is *anubhava*, experience, which alone is really vital. 'Quotations from the New Testament or the Old Testament, as in the case of the Apostle Paul and Stephen who tried to prove that Jesus is the Christ by apt references to the Old Testament, cannot establish any conclusion, unless there is at the back of them the necessary Christian experience. The New Testament and the Old Testament in which the coming and the work of the *Avatar* of God are described are themselves books of

religious experience in the language then current either in the market or in the schools. The question to be determined, first of all, is what is the quality of the religious experience, and, secondly, what conclusions can be derived from them' (*JA*, p. 10).

Chenchiah, as I said, puts it even more emphatically. His statements are motivated by a strong antagonism to the pretensions of the Church—whether true or false, or partially true and partially false is open to discussion—which, he fears, leads in the direction of an idolatry—Churchianity. He thinks that 'the Christian does not go to Jesus direct, but clings to the Church as the author of his salvation. The lodestar magnetizes the Church and it is the Church that sets out to save and conquer, nominally through Christ, but virtually by the power of which it has monopoly' (*RCI*, p. 51). A few lines earlier he says, 'the calamitous fact is that doctrines, institutions, sacraments and priests and pastors all join together under the name of the Church and take the place of Jesus, whom they in doctrine exalt as God'. Reproducing the *adhikaravada* of Hinduism, Chenchiah says, 'There will be many who are intellectually undeveloped. They need a High Church. Many who are intellectually normal, they need the Protestant Church. But those who seek the vision of our Lord, need no Church, high or low. They need to escape from it' (*RCI*, p. 99 f.). There is no question, as the Gurukul Study puts it, as to where he will put himself (*CTAH*, p. 49). He speaks of coming 'into contact with the Raw Fact of Christ' (*RCI*, p. 53; capitals are Chenchiah's). He holds that when a man does this he invariably upsets law and order, and the Church is always on the side of law and order. In reviewing Dr. Kraemer's book, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, Chenchiah wrote: 'Let it be clearly understood that we accept nothing as obligatory save Christ. Church doctrine and dogma, whether from the West or from the past, whether from Apostles or from modern critics, are to be tested before they are accepted. We do not see any reason why Aristotle or Plato, Kant and Hegel should be regarded as safer guides for Christian theology than the Indian philosophers, Sankara and Ramanuya. We do not see why we should accept the Roman Catholic or Anglican conception of the Church or indeed any conception of the Church at all as essential to Christianity' (*RCI*, App. 8).

Both Chakkarai and Chenchiah emphasize, and rightly, the need of continuous contact and communion with the Living Lord. This communion is not to be bound by any limits. It is recognized by both, and specifically by Chakkarai, that 'the supreme knowledge of God, *paravidya* (saving knowledge) . . . cannot come into our possession except through Him' (*JA*, p. 165). But this *paravidya* is not reduced to writing so as to be read by all. It is asserted that the experience of God is not verbal. 'To the spiritual man the world brims over with God, and he sees his Lord everywhere, and therefore *no special voice is required*. That is

to say the experience of God in the *Atman* is not a verbal declaration but a strong and steady fountain of *santi sivam* and *advaitam* as the Upanisads put it and as the peace that transcends thought and word as St. Paul has it' (*JA*, p. 28. Italics mine). With the plea for a life of transforming communion with the living Master, a plea that they very effectively make, we can wholeheartedly agree. Any religion that does not have the indwelling of Christ in the Spirit at its core is far from the religion of the New Testament. But again and again we come across the assumption that we have a direct line of contact with the living Lord in which we can transcend both the New Testament and the community of faith. 'St. Paul and St. Peter and the other apostles are not (to the Christian) absolute guides. Accepting light from these quarters, he still believes that Jesus and his demands alone are obligatory' (*RCI*, p. 49).

The Gurukul Study has pointed out many points where these writers, especially Chenchiah, can be criticized. We are concerned only about their attitude to the Bible. The danger in their claim to a direct line of contact with the Master, transcending or sidestepping both the Bible and the Church, seems to be something more than that of subjectivism. It is not merely that, in emphasizing the *anubhava* that I have of Jesus, I run the risk of taking something that is really for me, rather than Jesus, to be final. This danger is in some degree present in all our thinking, and will remain so as long as we have to stay inside our own skins. We cannot know Jesus except as we know Him. The Scriptures and the Church provide some check so that our phantasies may be corrected. But we know the Scriptures and the Church also only as we apprehend them. The need of such checks is not clear in the writings of Chakkarai and Chenchiah.

It seems that these writers deny some genuine and vital aspects of the incarnation when they assume the possibility of an immediate contact with Christ through the indwelling of the Spirit, whom Chakkarai calls 'the incarnation of Jesus Christ'. He has the following sentence in italics: 'Jesus Christ is the Incarnation or *Avatar* of God; the Holy Spirit in human experience is the Incarnation of Jesus Christ' (*JA*, p. 121). To begin with, this is a very strange use of the term 'incarnation', which must mean embodiment in some sense. Here I am not trying merely to pick a semantic quarrel with these writers, but to point out that their emphasis on the present Christ seems to endanger the fact of the past Christ. There is a repetition of past tenses in the New Testament (and the Old Testament) which we cannot escape. We may believe that God reconciles the world unto Himself in Christ, but only as something derived from and dependent on the fact that God *was* in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. The march of aorists and perfects not only in the Gospels but in the Epistles denotes the historical character of the Incarnation which we cannot escape.

This historical character gives at least one aspect of the

uniqueness of the apostolic witness recorded in the New Testament. The authority of the New Testament is the authority of an event—of something that happened at a definite place and time. The apostles and the Church are bound up with the event. The event 'happened to persons, among them, and within them; and their response is intimately and inseparably part of it. The Church is more than the social consequence of the event; more even than the social milieu in which it occurred; it belongs to the very existence of the event itself' (CF, p. 59). It is this involvement in the community and concern with the event, an event in the past, that these theologians under consideration, especially Chenchiah, try to avoid, and in that attempt they reject some aspects of the incarnation.

Further, this shows a failure to recognize the nature of the authority of the New Testament. We know Christ only by participation in the life of the community, by being one with the primitive community in its response to the Lord by faith and 'direct contact with the primitive community is made possible through the Bible' (CF, p. 62). It is the event as a happening in the past which provides the basis of a canon of the New Testament. 'It is the importance of the event as distinguished from the continuing Church which explains and justifies a New Testament canon; that is, the very existence of the New Testament as a closed collection bears witness to this importance' (CF, p. 65). The insight which was sought to be expressed under the categories of age and apostolicity is 'that the norm in Christianity is an historical event. The essential mark of canonicity is therefore proximity to the event' (CF, p. 69). This is the way that John Knox states the problem of the authority of the New Testament: 'The authority for the Christian, then, is the authority of the event, for our knowledge of which in its initial impact we are dependent upon the experience of the primitive community which it called into being. But we are put in direct touch with this experience only in and through the documents which that community produced. Here we have the clue to the understanding of the paradoxical character of the Bible's relation to the community. On the one hand it is less than the Church because it grew out of the life of the Church and has meaning only within the context which that life still provides, but on the other hand it is greater than the Church because it brings us the only record we have of the event through which the community was brought into being and therefore provides the only means for its constant renewal' (CF, p. 63).

We can now try to lift up one very basic difference between the Christian and Hindu attitudes to their scriptures. In the paragraph that was just read, we used Dr. Knox's words to show the event-centred character of the Bible and the close interrelation between the Bible and the Church. These are specifically the ideas which Chakkarai and Chenchiah seem to reject. In this rejection they seem to adopt an attitude to the Bible somewhat similar to the traditional Hindu attitude towards the Vedas. The ancient

and traditional authorities in Hinduism consider the Vedas 'as *nitya*, eternal, *nirdosa*, devoid of defects, *svatah pramana*, self-evident, and *apauruseya*, impersonal. The Vedas are not produced by any human being' (Madhva, quoted in *BS*, p. 61). 'Scriptures are self-revelations . . . Cognitions arising from them are not sublimated by any other cognition and therefore they are ever valid' (V. A. Ramaswamy Iyer, *HPEW*, p. 259). Modern exponents tone down the *apauruseya* character of the Vedas somewhat. Govindlal Hargovind Bhatt calls them 'records of the higher mystical experiences of seers and sages' (*HPEW*, p. 360).

Radhakrishnan goes even further in giving emphasis to the human agency in the origin of the Vedas, as well as the concrete situations in which they arose. He holds that their truth is self-evident. 'The authoritativeness of the Vedas in regard to matters stated in them is independent and direct. Just as the light of the sun is the direct means of our knowledge of form and colour . . . the Vedas are the authoritative utterances of inspired seers claiming contact with transcendental truth. They are the statements of their metaphysical experience . . . *Scruti* has no authority in the realm of the perceptible. It is the source of knowledge in matters transcending sense-experience' (*BS*, p. 19). Commenting on one of the Brahma sutras (I.1.3) which reads *sastra yonitvat* (from its being the source of Scripture or from Scripture being the source of its knowledge), Radhakrishnan says: '*Sastra* is the source of divine knowledge. The Scriptures register the experiences of the seers, they are the *apta vacana*, the sayings of the inspired men, who have time and again been illuminated by the light of God . . . The Vedas are received by men. They speak to men in their concrete situations. It is not necessary to close the door to future revelations' (*BS*, p. 113).

In this last quotation, Radhakrishnan qualifies the affirmations about the timeless character of the Vedic truths, even though it still does not have any 'event-centred' emphasis. But Chakkarai and Chenchia, on the other hand, seem to plead for a timeless, history-less truth and spirituality. In an eloquent passage emphasizing the need of the life of the Spirit, Chakkarai wrote: 'If the East, represented by the religious genius of India, is to offer its solution of spiritual problems and its contribution to the enrichment and liberation of Christianity from the thraldoms of ecclesiasticism and dogmatism, it can only do so through channels dug by the *Paramatman*. Under its [*sic*] inspiration alone could the rigidities and antagonisms of Western externalism and particularism be washed off as by a new baptism. *The oriental consciousness must in reason and as a matter of God-ordained decree ground itself in the Spirit-realm* (author's italics). That which is called history of the historical Jesus, and the *pramanas* of ratiocination, perception, and *sruti* must be subordinated, and take their place round this central truth of Christianity. The spirit of Jesus is the organic principle of Christian history, thought and life' (*JA*, p. 158). This falls short of the New Testament view

of life and history. The highest defence we can make of the Gospel must take a double form. At its simplest, we must say, it happened, and therefore it is so ; it took place and therefore the present experience is possible ; Jesus came, was born, lived, suffered, died, rose again, and therefore the life of the Spirit is a reality now. 'This was the Lord's doing (aorist) and it is marvellous in our eyes' (Mark 12:11). Chakkarai's statement has the second part of this affirmation, but not the first. The best defence of the *Vedas* is, basically, it is so or it must be so. The *Vedas* are true, they are self-certifying.

The idea of time, with which history is inseparably linked, bristles with philosophical difficulties. Wheeler Robinson has suggested that 'the time process can be said to exist for the sake of creating the actual, that which is brought into being once and for all and cannot, *qua event*, ever be altered' (*RR*, p. 60). If this is true, and as I believe it is, it appears that we in India need to study and discuss further the question of the authority of the Biblical Revelation in the context of the Hindu view of the *Vedas*. We have to say these things have happened ; 'for this thing was not done in a corner' (Acts 26:26). Present experience is vital, and without it there is no real religion. But present experience that does not proceed from a past event never can have the certainty that belongs to an event as an actuality. Once having happened, it can never be altered.

Books referred to:

- JA* ... *Jesus the Avatar*. V. Chakkarai. C.L.S., Madras, 1926.
- CIT* ... *The Cross and Indian Thought*. V. Chakkarai. C.L.S., Madras, 1932.
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- RR* ... *Redemption and Revelation*. H. Wheeler Robinson. Nisbet, London, 1942.
- HPEW* ... *History of Philosophy, Eastern and Western*. Vol. I. Eds.: Radhakrishnan and others. Unwin, London, 1952.
- BS* ... *The Brahma Sutra*. Radhakrishnan. Unwin, London, 1960.
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