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Knowing Jesus Christ in India Today

THE CONFERENCE REPORT

The papers and the discussion of the papers in the conference may be said to have fallen naturally into two groups each around a common interest or topic.

(1) The first group centred around the topic *Indian Interpretations of Christ* and would include the papers of Dr. D. G. Moses and Fr. Fallon on 'A Critical Evaluation of the Hindu Interpretation', and B. A. Paradhkar on 'Critical Evaluation of Hindu Interpretations of Christ from Vivekananda to Radhakrishnan', which attempted to summarize interpretations of the life and person of Christ by Hindus. Then Dr. V. P. Thomas in his paper, 'Indian Christian Approaches to the Knowledge of Christ', outlined some prominent attempts by Indian Christians to understand Christ.

Discussion of these papers centred around (a) the *criteria* by which we judge a view or interpretation of Christ as Christian, and (b) the *categories* we should use for the expression of an interpretation of Christ.

(a) Should the criteria, for judging whether an interpretation is Christian, be sought in the categories of the N.T. or those taken from the O.T. (which has a special relationship to the Christian tradition), or in the traditional Christian theologies (or have these been too Westernized?)?

(b) The discussion of the categories to be used for expression of our interpretations of Christ raised the problem of the language and concepts to be used. Can we use concepts from Hinduism and Buddhism, or must we take them from the O.T.? Or are not the concepts in fact universal, common to both traditions, e.g. 'sacrifice' (*yajña*), 'word' (*vaç, shabda*).

The question was highlighted by the utilization of concepts such as *avatāra* by men like Appasamy and Chakarai in their theologies. Discussion explored the suitability of using not just the word *avatāra* but the concept of *avatāra* in Christian exposition of the Christ event. It was felt by some that the use of the word itself might be inadequate but the *avatāra* concept must be considered in our formulating of an Indian theology.

It was pointed out also that in the India of today there is an ever-increasing group of de-Hindu-ized Indians for which a totally different approach would be necessary.

Fr. Klostermaier, in his paper on 'Kristavada', showed how he attempted a contemporary formulation of these problems, on the pattern of 'Brahma/Vidya', and the paper by Fr. S. Rajamanickam, 'De Nobili's Presentation of Christ to Hindus', showed how De Nobili had attempted to present Christ to an earlier generation.

(2) The second group of papers sought to explore the more basic problem of *How we know Christ at all*, and in particular examined *Our knowledge of Christ through the N.T.* Fr. J. B. Chettimattam in his paper 'Epistemological Critique of the Knowledge of Christ' grappled with the problem of knowing not only the 'what' and the 'how', but especially the 'who', of knowing. Dr. Rhodes in 'Knowing Christ through the Scriptures' attempted an analysis of the term 'faith' which must be basic to our knowledge of Christ. Fr. Dupuis and Rev. J. P. Alexander on 'Knowing Christ through Christian Experience' examined the various dimensions of the believer's awareness of Christ. Fr. J. M. Pathrapankal in his paper, 'Is there a Scriptural View of the Knowledge of Christ?', posed the problem of the validity of our knowledge of Christ through the Scriptures, and asked, 'Is the knowledge about the life and ministry of Jesus found in the Gospels understood as reliable sources based on eyewitness accounts, unambiguous in itself?'

In the papers of Fr. S. Ravan, 'Knowing Christ through the Scriptures', and Rev. D. H. Milling, 'The Significance of the Historical and Critical Quest of Jesus', the 'Quest for the Historical Jesus' was outlined and evaluated, and in Rev. D. A. T. Thomas' paper, 'A Quest for the Authentic Jesus', an attempt was made to interpret Christology by the use of the concept of sacrament.

Discussion of these papers explored the Jesus of History/Christ of Faith problem, and the whole problem of the historical particularity of Christianity *vis-à-vis* the Hindu mythical approach. The concept of symbol, as used by Tillich, as an adequate term for expressing the meaning of Christ, was also discussed without any agreement being reached.

Here again the suitability of Western concepts and formulations for the expression of the Christ event in India was called in question, and the *avatāra*/incarnation problem was again returned to. It was thought by many that in the Hindu doctrine of *avatāra* there may be a Christology, a Christology of a not-yet-revealed Christ, however imperfect and undeveloped.

In this section also, it was pointed out that on the level of 'experience' the Christian and Hindu do come very close together. In the Hindu religious experience there is a real experience of God, and some suggested that we might go so far

as to describe this experience as an experience of Christ's saving grace.

(3) The final paper was Prof. P. S. Job's, 'Knowing Christ through Christian Service Programmes', exploring the implications for social service of our knowing Christ in India, which was read and discussed.

(4) A feature of the conference was the informal discussion in Workshop Seminars of further problems related to our main conference theme. In what follows, we have not attempted to summarize the conclusions of these discussions, but have contented ourselves with recording a *summary of the issues raised*, to find an answer to many of which will occupy us during the years that lie ahead.

Issues raised in Workshop A

Subject: *Knowing Christ within the Christian Tradition*

A basic question is, What is knowledge of Christ? Which leads on to the further question, What is the relationship of knowledge of Christ to other relational words like faith, love, being found in, etc.? What is the relation between knowledge and experience?

Viewing the Christian faith in its contemporary situation in India, the situation of the early Fathers (and the Apostles) in facing the religious systems of their time is similar to the situation the Church in India is facing in Hinduism, e.g. the despising of matter, an individualistic approach to salvation. In this respect was the ensuing Hellenized theology in the early period an enlightening of the revelation in Jesus Christ or an obscuring, e.g. is the idea of Incarnation as such a concept which must be re-examined? Would not a comparison of method and results between the early period and the contemporary situation be a fruitful avenue of research? Do we not need to evaluate the gain and loss in the proclamation of the Christian faith in its contact with non-Christian cultures?

Can there be agreement on the fundamentals which must be retained in any presentation of the Gospel in the contemporary situation?

Suggested fundamentals

The theology of matter, as seen in the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of Creation.

The consequent affirmation of the very humanity of Jesus, who is still human after the resurrection. The doctrine of man. Man is not at all God, and the end of man is to be with God but not identified with God. And all is through the grace of God. God's grace, his way of dealing with man's predicament, which we call sin, is manifested in Jesus Christ. A corollary of this is

that there is only one incarnation, unique in the sense that it deals with the whole, spatial and temporal, of the one creation.

Man's end is seen in terms of resurrection, in all its aspects, individual, social and historical. The Christ-event is both a climax of a historical process, and the new beginning of a historical process, the beginning of a new humanity, a total historical process which we term salvation-history.

In this redemptive process one finds the recapitulation of humanity, Jesus Christ being its centre of unity. Another aspect is that of reconciliation, a union which overcomes estrangement, estrangement between man and God, estrangement between man and his true self, and estrangement between man and man.

This estrangement is Sin, an estrangement which is brought about by man's self-assertion, both socially and individually. Sin is more than just ignorance, there is an involvement of man's will in turning away from God. Involved in turning back to God is knowing God through Jesus Christ and submission to God which we call faith, loving God and espousing a hope for the future. While knowledge of Jesus Christ is in a sense a prerequisite of entering into a relation of faith, hope and love with him and through him with God, these three gifts are also implicit in knowing Jesus in an ever deepening way. Such knowledge of Jesus is always knowing him as Saviour.

In presenting this state of knowing Jesus a Christology is presumed. *Are there numerous Christologies, even in the New Testament?* Is there in the New Testament one underlying, fundamental Christology? Can we not see a variety of Christologies in Christian tradition?

A further factor in the presentation is the offence of Jesus Christ. What is this offence? Is it to be found at different levels of apprehension, is there an authentic offence which has to be disclosed in order to present the real challenge of the Gospel? Salvation in a sense means not being offended by Jesus Christ (Matt. 11:6).

Is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church a fundamental in the process of knowing Jesus Christ? Is the Church integral to his Gospel? If it be answered yes, then what is it that is fundamental to the Church? Is it the fact that it is a community? What of its institutional structure? It is often pointed out that the Church as organized is an obstacle to people knowing Jesus. Is there not a sense in which redemption through Jesus Christ involves redeeming the institutional, both in the Church and in the world?

What place do the sacraments occupy in the Church? Baptism is despised very often as a symbol of groupism, and a symbol of an abandonment of what is authentically Indian. How do we overcome this? Is it perhaps that the full significance of Baptism cannot be re-discovered without the renewal of the community which is to show forth the fruits of baptism? This means showing the fruits of freedom and openness to the world.

Baptism must be seen not as entry into a separated community but as entry into the truly universal community, of which Jesus Christ is the centre.

In all this it is assumed that the agent of making Jesus Christ known is the Holy Spirit, 'no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:3).

Workshop B

The discussions held by the members of the second workshop aimed at relating more closely the general theme of the Conference to the present-day Indian situation and to the Hindu religious context, so that our theological thinking may be genuinely and creatively Indian.

A double issue was raised: How are we, Christian theologians of India, to deepen and enrich our understanding of Christ and Christology through an effort to assume those religious values, concepts and terms which Hindu tradition and experience have produced, and which may help us to see Christ today with Indian eyes? Secondly, how can we express this understanding of Christ in a manner that will meet the secret workings of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and minds of our Indian fellow-men? How can our Christian *kerygma* be, and even appear, authentically Indian?

Various questions were discussed:

- (a) *Where do we find Christ?* Even outside the Christian tradition, do we find the religious traditions and experiences of non-Christians some anticipations of Christianity? Are some Hindu religious experience such as we, in the light of our faith, can recognize the presence and action of Christ's saving grace? Can we enrich our own Christian experience by the study of Hindu Scriptures? Do we find in Hinduism new dimensions or aspects that can renew or deepen our understanding of Christ?
- (b) *What does Christ mean for us in India today?* Jesus asked Peter and the disciples: 'Who do men say that I am?' 'Who do you say that I am?' Peter answered 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.' We and all in India are asked the same question today by Christ. How are we to answer?

The question discussed as to *how we should understand and express the Messiah idea here and now?* Is this Messiah category in need of transposition and interpretation? Can the *muktidātā* category be used, and does it correspond to the

meaning 'Messiah' had for Jesus' disciples? Can it be Christianized in the same sense in which the Jewish category of Messiah was Christianized by Jesus and the first Christians?

Similarly, *how far can other Hindu categories and traditional terms be made to carry the Christian meaning we intend to convey?* Shall this use of new categories and terms enrich our Christian message? Various terms were examined: *Bhagavān, Mahāpurusha, Param Prabhu, Guru*, etc. Other terms also more directly referring to the divine Person of our Lord: *Param Jyoti, Sabda Brahman, Antaryāmin, Satyasva Satyam*, etc.

The question was raised as to how our Christian teaching can meet the Hindu's *Ātma-jijñāsā*, the search for this deepest and most real Self? Can our *Krist-vidyā* be made to answer the *Brahma-jijñāsā* of Hindu seekers?

The question of dialogue was discussed: *should not a truly religious dialogue start in a religious sharing* before it becomes an exchange of ideas? In the spirit of Indian tradition, can merely logical and conceptual presentation of our message be sufficient, and should it not always primarily be a communion of spiritual experience? This common experience may have to be explained so as to reveal its truly Christian nature and the vital relation it has with the Christ of history, but, is it not important that all dialogue should start with an attempt to find a common ground of humble and prayerful quest?

It was further asked whether our Indian understanding and presentation of Christ the Redeemer *should not start from the realization of the present suffering and anguish*, both material and spiritual, which makes so many aspire to a 'salvation', a way out of the misery and uncertainty that besets so many lives today? If so many deeply feel the need of reaching the Real beyond all the *māyā*, veils and bonds of human existence, is not Christ to answer this search and lead all from unreality to full Reality?

How can Christ, who forgives man's sin and heals his suffering, be meaningfully presented to all in India today in his proclamation of 'the Kingdom that is among us' here and now?