

# **The One Incarnation of Christianity and the Many Avatars of Hinduism**

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## **1. Introduction**

It is easy to focus upon details in the field of comparative religion. Often over-arching structures tend to be overlooked. One of these structures has to do with the relationship between philosophical terminology and theology. Biblical scholars have much too long taken for granted that the Bible can be understood "correctly" only with the help of Western, basically Greek and Latin, philosophical and religious terminology, and that, for instance, Indian and Chinese patterns of thought more or less by definition are heretical or, still worse, pagan. One of the important contributions made by many Indian theologians of today is their constant striving to use native, in this case, Indian philosophical and religious concepts in their attempts to express a relevant Christian theology. It cannot any longer be presupposed that Greek or Scandinavian or modern American cultures self-evidently are more Christian than are those Asian cultures, which are steeped in the concepts of religions like Hinduism and Buddhism.

One of these Asian concepts with a background in Hinduism and Buddhism is the concept of avatara. This concept does not in any way rule out the Christian idea of Incarnation. The real difference between an incarnation and an avatara has nothing to do with its being historical or not, and nothing with its being repeated or not. There is nothing that per definitionem rules out the existence of one singular avatara or of repeated incarnations. Instead, the real difference between the Eastern and the Western religious systems has to do with eschatology. This can be expressed in a straightforward way: Either the world is eternal and it will never come to an end, or it will end suddenly, once and for all. If Jesus, or any other religious figure, is the Messiah in the strictly eschatological sense of that term, history by necessity will come to an end, when this Messiah appears on earth (again). After that, world history will not repeat itself. This eschatological perspective distinguishes the great monotheistic religions of the West from the great Asian faiths like Hinduism and Buddhism with their cyclical view of history, which is expressed with the help of a totally different vocabulary. We may think of concepts like karma, samsara and nirvana.

## **2. Eastern and Western Concepts of Time and History**

The three "Western" monotheistic religions, in chronological order Judaism, Christianity and Islam, share a linear view of history. The one and only God created the world at the beginning of time. Only God, and maybe some few sacred "things" very close to him, such as the Torah and the Quran, are eternal. History unfolds in a linear direction, but only for a limited period of time, never to be repeated and never to turn back. The moment that just passed by will remain in the past forever. In reality, according to a literal reading of the Bible, at home among conservative Jews and Christians, the created world has existed only for a relatively short period of time. According to the traditional Jewish calendar, today when this lecture is being read it is the 24 Iyar 5761 after God created the world. For Hindu thinkers, however, "salvation" history (if that concept can be considered legitimate) is so unimaginably long, next to eternal, that it tends to lose all temporality.

### 3. Revelation: Semitic and Indian Views

Of course, the concept of revelation is central in the world of religions. In this regard the three monotheistic religions are distinctly different from great Asian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. All agree that God reveals himself all through history, and the fourfold Medieval Christian interpretation of the Old Testament as a *preparatio evangelica* is a good example of how God acts in history, understood in a strictly linear way. However, Judaism, Christianity and Islam each accept only one full revelation. For the Jewish people this revelation was given through Moses. The Mosaic Law can never be replaced or superseded, but it must be reinterpreted for every new age with their vastly different conditions of life. An ordinary Talmud page provides a good example. The Mosaic Law is its undisputed basis, but it is penetrated with the help of commentators through the ages like Rashi (1040-1105) and the Tosafot. The Hebrew Bible is always studied with commentaries, never uncommented upon. Thus, in spite of the immense importance given to the Bible, Judaism has nothing that corresponds to the principle of *sola scriptura* in much of Protestant Christianity.

The Muslims also express the conviction that God's revelation has a distinct climax in history. They locate this climax in the revelation geographically to Mount Hira outside Mecca, where the archangel Gabriel gave Muhammad the Quran word for word in Arabic. Muhammad is the final prophet who surpasses all other prophets, Abraham, Moses and Jesus included. His revelation will never be made obsolete through any new divine message. However, the links between the Hebrew Bible as it is interpreted by Jewish legend on the one side and the Quran on the other can be illustrated with the help of a short narrative about their common founding father, i.e. Abraham. Thus the old Jewish midrashic story of how the young Abraham, after having worshipped false gods himself, smashed the idols that were manufactured and sold by his father Terah (Rabbi Hiyya, ca. AD 210, according to *Genesis Rabba* 38 on Gen 11:28; see also an early text like *Jubilees* 12:2-5) later found its way into the Quran as Sura 21:51-71.

### 4. Many Avatars in a Cyclic Concept of Time

As we have already noted, the situation is vastly different on the Indian and Chinese subcontinents. There the world-view is cyclical rather than linear. History repeats itself, maybe in eternity, no divine revelation and no divine figure is unique, and the gods abound in number, at least on the surface. The concept of "Hinduism" as a unity that brings together a multitude of Indian faiths under one heading is a relatively recent Western creation. We can still describe Hindu and Mahayana mythologies as fairly consistent systems that include a myriad of Gods and divinities. Many of these Gods have an outspoken sexual character. One may only think of the Shiva-lingam to be found everywhere in the streets of India. There is in fact a clear connection between a cyclical world-view with its roots in the vegetation cycle or in male and female fertility and a polytheistic pantheon. Sometimes this may conceal a deep-rooted monotheism as in *bhakti* Hinduism, the different divine revelations in reality being the same revelation, repeated for a new age or for other people. This is the case with the various avatars of Vishnu in Hinduism. Most pious Hindus find no difficulties in accepting other Gods than their own God, and they often include Jesus and the Virgin Mary among these other Gods. This shows that these revelations are not considered as contradictory, however contradictory they may seem for those

steeped in Western philosophy. They rather complement and strengthen each other. New avatars of Vishnu appeared (ten times) whenever it was deemed necessary in order to save the world from catastrophe. As a consequence, these Hindu "subreligions" are very seldom antagonistic but almost always accept and tolerate each other. The Shiva-worshipper self-evidently accepts the Krishna-worshipper's faith without himself or herself feeling any need to convert to Krishna, or vice versa.

We have already seen that the strictly linear view of history that is prevalent in the Jewish, the Christian and the Muslim faiths with their monotheism is different. History runs from a concrete point of departure, when the one and only God created the world at the beginning of time (Genesis 1-2), to a likewise distinct end (Matthew 24-25). Then God once and for all will defeat all evil and recreate a perfect and eternal world for all those who have sided with the good powers, as well as an eternal hell (Revelation 20-22), described in a most concrete way by early Muslim theologians and, probably under their influence, by an author like Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) in his *Divina commedia* and by countless Medieval church artists. Western cosmology and eschatology clearly rule out the possibility of a cyclical revelation. The full revelation, the receiving of which is a unique historical event, is prepared through prophets and teachers, wise men (seldom women), priests and cult servants. This full revelation is only one, and it will never be replaced.

The Mosaic Law, received at Mount Sinai, will remain the blueprint for the ethos of believing Jews to the end of times. Much later the Rabbinical authorities of the Mishnah and the Talmud consistently worked out all the details for a life in accordance with the Law even during all those centuries when there was no realistic possibility for such a life. For the Christian Church the revelation in Christ, or rather the revelation of Christ, shows humankind once and for all what God is like and how God's servants on earth are to live their lives (e.g., Matt 5:3-12, Phil 2:5-11 and John 13:12-17). This may even be the point behind God's becoming incarnated as a human being. Finally, Muslims are convinced that the revelation given by the archangel Gabriel to Muhammad in Arabic is the true incarnation of God in this world. Thus the Quran plays a role comparable to that of Jesus Christ in Christian tradition. Muhammad himself, however, is never more than an instrument for this revelation.

## **5. Uniqueness of Religions**

Since these monotheistic faith systems are all looked upon by their adherents as being unique in the strict sense of that word, they also tend to be conceived of as contradictory to each other. Consequently, a very heavy element of rejection of all other religions crept into the history of religions with Christianity and later on with Islam. Judaism, however, basically being the faith of one single people with whom God had entered in a special covenant, very seldom required a universal following. The uniqueness that is characteristic of the Semitic strand of religions went together with the strict logic of Greek philosophy and science. This became a reality for the Church already in the very first centuries of her existence, when she formulated her dogmas with the help of Greek concepts and in the Greek language. Much later, the influence from Aristotelian philosophy was profound in the 12th and 13th centuries AD both among Christian and Muslim thinkers. It was concluded that two religious statements cannot be logically contradictory and both of them true at the same time. The difference compared with the South

and East Asian religious world is striking. For instance, Chinese popular piety can express an individual eschatology in the most different ways without anyone being bothered by the fact that they logically exclude each other.

With the emergence of modern rationalism in the Western world the concept of truth changed its meaning. No longer was it only a matter of logical coherence. With rationalism truth in a secular sense, open for unbiased experimental verification, came to dominate science and scholarship. This became a reality for Jews and Christians in Western and Central Europe, for Roman Catholics but especially for most Protestants. It is ironical that those Protestants who later on were those who reacted most vehemently against the development that took place in the 19th century with scientists and scholars like Charles Darwin, Gregor Mendel and Alfred Loisy, became more "logical" and pseudo-empirical themselves than any other theologians. Many of the new discoveries certainly turned out to be "dangerous" for the faith, and they could not always be easily refuted in a trustworthy way. The arguments brought up especially by American Fundamentalists and their followers against the scientific onslaught on traditional beliefs became more and more strained and artificial, and they could no longer be defended by competent scholarship. The way to handle the numerous finds of fossils is typical. These were stated to be the remains of antediluvian animals and consequently only some few millennia old. There emerged a very real conflict between modern science and Western faiths, Jewish, Catholic and Protestant. In the end, this conflict contributed heavily to the secularization of Western society.

The Orthodox and the Eastern Churches as well as the Muslim world were hardly influenced by this development. Still less influenced by the Western development were the great Asian religions with their millions and millions of adherents among the masses in countries like India and China. Thus the influence of the British colonial power in India was mostly limited to certain strata of the society, the vast majority of poor farmers living as if nothing had ever happened. And nothing did happen in their world. However, during the last half century the situation has changed profoundly with the development of modern technology and modern means of communication, the influence of radio and TV being felt almost everywhere. Within the next few decades this will probably lead to a universal mass-technological culture with IT-technology, the use of the English language and massive private consumerism all over the world. This will be a reality both in rich and poor countries, at least for those who are more or less affluent in the poor countries. No culture and no religion will prove immune against the influence from this secular globalization.

## **6. Historicity Rediscovered**

The adherents of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism have done very little historical-critical research on their own faiths. A secularized way to study one's own religion is the result of Western rationalism, and it is only now slowly starting to make its impact upon the non-Western world. It is far too early to predict the outcome of the encounter between a critical way to relate to one's faith and a traditional piety. Christianity, however, with its linear view of history and a conviction that its sacred scriptures, the gospels among them, contain historically trustworthy information, true also in the secular sense of that word, must be capable of standing up to the critical questions of the modern age. As a result, it may be more vulnerable to modern criticism than the various Indian branches of religiosity. Now and then polemicists in other religions have

made use of this in anti-Christian propaganda, showing that even Christian scholars find faults and mistakes in the Bible, while the sacred texts of their own faiths uncritically are said to be perfect. Muslim publishers in Egypt have thus misused parts of Rudolf Bultmann's scholarship on the gospel tradition in that way.

The different branches of "Hinduism" presuppose that history is cyclical, and the narratives about the Gods have seldom been intended to be understood in a historicizing way. It is only a recent development that the narratives about Krishna (the eighth of Vishnu's ten avatars), to take just one example, have been read as historical. As a consequence, various events in Krishna's life have now been given an exact geographical location starting with his birth and youth in Vrindavan south of Delhi. A similar historical understanding of the Rama myths led to the outburst of religious hatred in 1989-90, when a Hindu mob desecrated and destroyed Babur's mosque from the 16th century in Ayodhya in the Ganges valley. Ayodhya is one of the most important places in the Ramayana epic, being the capital of the kingdom to be inherited by Rama. When the place where Rama is said to have been born lately was identified with the very spot where Babur's mosque had been erected, the whole story left the realm of myth and was made into an historical narrative. Consequently, it was brought into the sphere of critical historical research. However, the traditional mythological character of the whole religious concept in the great Asian cultures is contrary to such an historical reading, which may be considered as the result of Western, ultimately Christian, influence.

The fact that the Bible reckons with a linear history makes world history in its secular sense important for the salvation of humanity. Here we find the basic difference between Western and Eastern religiosity. The Biblical perspective makes the physical world holy, against for instance Gnosticism, even in the sense that it itself can be an instrument for the final salvation. Human endeavors are made holy, and humanity becomes a partner in God's work. The prime example of this sanctification of human history is to be found in the narrative about the Annunciation for the Virgin Mary in Luke 1:26-38, as this has been understood in Catholic and Orthodox theology. Roman Catholic interpretation makes the Annunciation the very focus of divine-human "co-operation" in salvation history. It was only when the Virgin Mary said her final words *ecce ancilla domini fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me" that the Incarnation could take place and salvation became possible. The gospel narrative about the Virgin Mary's willingness to make eternal salvation possible through her unique role in human history provides the linear history with one single focal point in God's dealing with humankind. The texts about these overwhelming events in the life of the young girl from Nazareth originally did not serve a Mariological purpose but were in the service of Christology and soteriology.

The historically unique character of this event was later on emphasized through the use which Medieval Christian theologians made of the Old Testament as pointing forward to the Christ-event, thus already the high priest typology in Hebrews. There is no need to elaborate on this well-known typological reading of Biblical texts. I will only exemplify with an often discussed text from Isaiah, all through church history read as a prophecy of the virgin birth, Isa 7:14, "... the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel". A linear view of history is presupposed when Old Testament texts like this one are consistently read as pointing forward to "the One Incarnation of Christianity". It was considered as self-

evident that Isaiah, who lived in the 8th century BC, could foretell what was to take place more than 700 years later and which was once and for all to change the course of history.

The Muslim understanding of the virgin birth is totally different. The Muslims interpret the fact that Jesus had no human father as a proof that God is absolutely superior to his creation. God can do such a striking miracle against all possibilities of biology (Sura 19:16-22), but this does not change the course of history. Jesus is a great prophet in Islam, never to be criticized, but he is inferior to Muhammad, about whom nothing similar is ever told. The conviction that Mary was a virgin when she bore Jesus consequently is a Christological and soteriological statement for the Church but a theological statement for Muslim believers.

A comparable temporality is to be found in Islam. However, the great Biblical figures mentioned as prophets in the Quran are all considered as more or less contemporaneous with each other, and there is no development to be traced even between an early prophet who fell in sin like Adam and a late one like Jesus. But Muslims still reckon with prophecies that point towards the future. Thus many Muslim theologians read Deut 18:15, 18 "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like myself, from among yourselves, from your own brothers; to him you must listen" as a text pointing forward to Muhammad in a way that can be compared with the Christological interpretation which is expressed in the New Testament. Deuteronomy 18 is quoted in Acts 3:22 and 7:37 and is alluded to several times.

Religion in the Holy Land, however, has not always had this linear character. The earliest layers of Israelite / Canaanite religion had the same cyclical character as the one that dominates traditional Hindu religiosity. Canaanite fertility goddesses were similar to, or rather identical with, all those Mother figurines with exaggerated sexual parts which have been found all over Europe and the so-called Middle East and which go back some 25 000 years in time ("Venus from Willendorf"). Thus the question has been posed whether Melchizedek, the mysterious priest-king in Jerusalem, who received Abraham when the latter returned from his victorious battle against Chedorlaomer (Genesis 14), later himself to become a Christological typos, was really so different compared with the earliest Indian rishis. Maybe he was a fairly traditional priest of the cyclical vegetation cult that emphasized the divine character of fertility. Only much later, maybe when an Israelite temple cult was established in Jerusalem in the 10th century BC, the god of linear history was identified with the God worshipped by the patriarchs and by a figure like Melchizedek.

It is no coincidence that the earliest Israelite calendar, the so-called Gezer calendar, probably more or less contemporaneous with the establishment of the temple cult, describes a cyclical agricultural year, which was much earlier than the historicized Jewish festivals that later on became so important. In fact, many of these festivals originally belonged to the agricultural or pastoral year and emphasized the rhythm of nature with its constant change between the arid heat in the summer and the cool and wet winters, which were so necessary for the survival of the people and their herds. Probably the similarities between the early Canaanite religion and the various Indian cults were much more evident than has normally been taken for granted.

## **7. Focus on the Uniqueness of Christ**

However, a totally new development took place, which replaced the earlier way to organize human existence. The emphasis moved from the vegetation and fertility cycle to history. Specific events in the linear history of Israel (see "creedal" passages like Deut 26:5-10 and Joshua 24:2-13) became the focus of worship, e.g., the liberation from Egypt at Pesach, the giving of the Mosaic Law at Shavuoth and the forty years spent in the Sinai desert at Sukkoth. This meant that the divine revelation in the world was understood as a series of unique once and for all events (celebrated yearly, liturgy itself being basically cyclical) instead of a series of constantly recurring events. Here we find the really important difference between the great religions of the East and the monotheistic religions of the West, with Christianity focusing upon one single absolutely unique revelation in a historical person, Jesus Christ.

This far-reaching change in the early Israel and its religion probably took place later than has normally been taken for granted. We read about "JHWH and his Asherah" in a couple of inscriptions from the 8th century BC, in a caravanserai in Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the northeastern part of the Sinai Peninsula and as well as in a Judean tomb at Khirbet el-Kom near Hebron. Syro-Palestinian inscriptions like these seem to imply that Asherah was the consort of the God of Israel. Even later, around 410 BC, this conviction that the God of Israel was accompanied by a female divinity was taken for granted as something self-evident in a number of papyrus letters from the Jewish colony at Elephantine in Egypt. Evidently, this mirrors a belief that had earlier been widely spread in Samaria and then been brought to Egypt by people moving there from north Israel. It was certainly considered as "heterodox" by the contemporaneous Jews living in the temple enclave around Jerusalem. It was not only the old Canaanite religion with its worship of fertility gods like Baal, Anat and Asherah that was intimately connected with the vegetation cycle. Also the early Israelite religion was clearly colored by such associations. It is probably impossible to state exactly when it lost its age-old connection to the vegetation cycle. The change may be dated to exilic times. The Josianic reform in the late 7th century BC (2 Kings 22-23) attempted to create a clear demarcation line between the two religious patterns. But in the thirty years or so that still preceded the Exile Israelite worship had a much more cyclical character than has normally been supposed.

In spite of all the differences between the three monotheistic religions of today on the one side and Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism with their immense multitude of gods, at least on the surface, on the other side, there may be found an underlying similarity. Thus all the prophets mentioned in the Quran might be compared, as far as phenomenology of religions concerns, with the ten avatars of Vishnu, saving the world at every occasion when this was proven to be necessary. But Buddhist bodhisattvas, various divinities like Tin Hau and Kun Iam in popular south Chinese piety, and Catholic saints provide other, and probably better, parallels. While this may be true from a secular academic perspective, the adherents of the various religions will hardly accept it. Normally, they rather tend to emphasize the differences. The recent development on the Indian subcontinent is revealing, beginning with its partition in the late 1940's according to religious diversity. While the vast majority in Pakistan is Muslim, India is officially secular but in reality heavily dominated by Hinduism. Especially with the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party as a radical pro-Hindu party in 1988 this trend has become very clear. The demolition of the mosque in Ayodhya, already mentioned, might be considered as a symbolic event, which emphasizes the differences between two religious systems and even the enmity between many of their followers.

## **8. The One Incarnation of Christianity and the Many Avatars of Hinduism**

What has been stated above may now be summarized. The main difference between "the One Incarnation of Christianity" and "the Many Avatars of Hinduism" is not to be found in the concepts of incarnation and avatara. There is nothing that rules out a multiplicity of incarnations, neither is there anything that rules out that an incarnation may be mythological while an avatara may be historical, even in the literal sense of that word. The difference lies rather in two different concepts of time. Is time a linear concept, with yesterday for ever remaining in the past and with tomorrow all the time coming closer, suddenly as well to disappear in the past, never to come back? Or is time a cyclical concept, for which yesterday and tomorrow more or less are the same thing, and where what happened in the past will come back one day, maybe after such a long time that it more or less makes the whole temporality meaningless. What is typical for a linear view of history is that it will end one day, the very last day, when everything of this world will remain in the past forever. Here we find the place for eschatology, maybe in the person of a Messianic figure, the final incarnation of God in this world or the last of all possible avatars. It is this eschatological perspective rather than the difference between monotheism and polytheism that makes up the real difference between the Western Semitic religions on the one side and Hinduism and Buddhism on the other.