

CHRIST WITHOUT BORDERS

Jacob Parappally, MSFS

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Introduction

India encounters Jesus Christ beyond all dogmas about him. This was shown in the past by various authors when they wrote about the “unknown Christ of Hinduism,”¹ “the unbound Christ of Hinduism,”² “the acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance,”³ and so on. Indian thinkers and mystics criticize the Christian preoccupation with dogmas and doctrines about Jesus Christ that do not let the mystery of Christ be experienced by those who do not share the Western Christian worldview. Raimon Panikkar is right in asking whether Indians or other people of Asia should first go through a “circumcision of the mind” by accepting Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Mediterranean imagery of Jesus and then try to understand him in those alien categories of thought.

In Asia broadly and India particularly, thousands of people experience Jesus Christ beyond the boundaries of the church and its dogmas. They have discovered the mystery of Jesus Christ through their own worldview and express it through their own forms of thought. Do they not contribute something more to the knowledge of Christ that surpasses understanding and enlarges the traditional

¹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Bangalore: ATC Publications, 1982).

² Stanley J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ of Hinduism* (Madras: CLS Publications, 1974).

³ Madathilparampil M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Madras: CLS Publications, 1970).

Christian understanding of the mystery of Christ? Jesus Christ is the mystery of God in history. As the one who transcended history, it must be admitted that no dogma, however constitutive it is for our Christian faith, can exhaust the mystery of Christ. Even the most celebrated Chalcedonian Formula does not claim to have said everything that can be said about the mystery of Christ.

Dogmas express only the minimum about the mystery that is revealed through the Scriptures. They are necessary to preserve the content of faith experienced and shared by the apostolic community. Now questions are raised in diverse cultures that encounter the mystery of Jesus Christ with or without the knowledge of any dogmatic formulations about him, whether the content of the dogmas itself is limited because they have taken into account only the Jewish and the Hellenistic worldviews in the beginning of their formulations. Those first disciples who were Jews would not have been able to go beyond proclaiming Jesus as a prophet, “mighty in deed and word” (Lk 24:19), the expected Messiah, “the Son of Man,” after their encounter with the risen Lord because their worldview and their belief systems provided only such categories. Even if they knew for certain that the experience of the risen Lord was different from what they were speaking about him, they had no terminology to express it. Thanks to the Hellenistic worldview, which some of them had access to through their education or through the Hellenistic context in which they lived because they were in the Diaspora situation, they could better express that experience through the titles “Son of God” and *Kyrios*.

A new culture, a new language, and a worldview different from the original worldviews in which the gospel was proclaimed could contribute to the understanding of the inexhaustible mystery of Christ. Therefore, the content of faith expressed by dogmas may not be a set of truths but symbols of truth that are meant to lead the believer to surrender to the reality communicated through them.

Now the question is: Have we said everything about the mystery of Christ that can be articulated about this mystery that surpasses all understanding? Have we really understood what “the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ” is? Should we not take the experience of those who encountered the reality of Christ informed and enriched by their own cultures and language seriously to expand our vision of Christ? Can some Indian insights into the mystery of Christ complete what is lacking in the traditional proclamation about Jesus Christ? These insights are not strangers to the Christian tradition but have been neglected or abandoned in the course of time for the sake of more appealing, easier ways, which were convenient for the church.

The Indian Worldview and Christological Thinking

The Christic experience and the consequent transformation of persons and societies is possible only if the insight into the mystery of Christ is made available in a way that is meaningful to persons who are confronted by the gospel. However, there are individuals and groups who respond to the message of the gospel even if it is presented in a foreign idiom and language. The spread of the Christian message on all continents and the subsequent growth of the church are examples of such an acceptance of Jesus Christ. But the life-giving message of the gospel remained in these isolated groups without much impact on the larger society because these groups of Christians remained as exclusive groups and insulated themselves from any influence from the surrounding cultures. This is true of the Indian context of Christian proclamation. The vast majority of the people of the Indian subcontinent remained unaffected by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

The history of Christological development includes many attempts to overcome the one-sided understanding of Christ. The easiest solution was to deny either the humanity of Jesus or his

divinity. They emphasized either the historical dimension of his personhood or his transhistorical dimension. Some emphasized the cosmic Christ or the immanent Christ as the center of the believer's being. Such mutually exclusive positions and theological opinions have narrowed and sometimes distorted the image of Christ.

In the unique, specific, decisive, and historical existence of Jesus Christ as the final and full revelation of God, when received within the Hebrew worldview, he was seen as the Messiah, the fulfillment of Hebrew prophesies. The Jewish expectation of the messiah had to undergo a lot of transformation to become the Messiah of the apostles' experience after his resurrection. He was understood as the one who leads everyone to the eschatological fulfillment of history.

If the Hebrew worldview of history begins with God and ends with God, the flow of history to its God-intended finality has been thwarted by humans' misuse of their freedom. This usurpation of God's sovereignty by playing God by way of directing the world to a different and self-destructive course is a sin from which humans are to be saved. In Jesus Christ, the world is brought back to its God-given course of liberation. Jesus, unlike other humans, is the God-intended human, the God-become-human. In his total freedom, by submitting to God's plan in total obedience, Jesus redirects history from its perverse course to its eschatological finality, as God determined before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:3).

In this worldview, history becomes especially important. The history of humans and their world becomes the history of God Himself. It is a neat scheme where everything falls in line. But questions remain: how does an experience of God, humans, the world, and their relationship become meaningful in a culture in which reality cannot be understood and explained in terms of a linear history that has a beginning and an end? A worldview that provides meaning for human and world history as having

its beginning and end in God does not make any sense to those billions of people who do not share this view of history as having a beginning and an ending. In the Indian worldview, time is cyclic. It has no beginning or end. It goes on and on.

In the Indian worldview, what is transhistorical is more important and more liberative than what is historical. Whatever is of this world is nothing compared to the absolute reality that transcends this world. Anything historically limited is only one dimension of reality, and therefore it is a symbol of reality. In this worldview, history moves in a cyclical order, and it is a misery to go through this cycle until final liberation is obtained. The final liberation, then, is a release from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

One of the greatest intuitions of the Indian mind is that the absolute and the world are distinct but not separate. They are not one but also not two; it is *Advaita* (not one—not two). Everything that exists is radically related. In this worldview, the encounter with the absolute is not outside oneself but is an experience within. Since the absolute and the relative are inseparable—not one and not two—one cannot speak of an objective encounter with a reality outside of oneself, even with the absolute reality. Rather, one speaks of a subjective, transformative experience that changes one's vision of everything that exists. Any objectification of such an experience is for the sake of communicating it to others who have not yet received such an experience. The articulation of such an intense existential experience can only be through symbols and metaphors that can evoke a similar experience in others who are graced to experience it. Therefore, the revelation of the mystery of the absolute, the world, and humans is not from the outside, as it were, but a discovery from within.

Christ without Borders articulates theological insights into the mystery of Christ from Indic experiences of Jesus Christ that go beyond Christological dogmas expressed in Greek categories of thought. How does a historical existence—like that of Jesus, who

was encountered after his death as the one who is the beginning and end of everything that exists, as the one beyond space and time—fit within the Indian worldview? Does the Western obsession with the historical reality of Jesus reduce him to the status of a mere sage or social reformer or, at the most, rank him as one among the founders of the world's numerous religions, contrary to the apostolic experience of him after his resurrection? What is meaningful in one worldview cannot be translated into another worldview without robbing it of its all-encompassing meaningfulness. In this case, the mystery of Jesus Christ must be re-visioned in the Indian worldview for Christ's own sake and for the sake of all who are graced to encounter him.

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