Why Jesus Is Not an Avatar:
A Critique of the Indian Hindu and Christian Incarnation Idea of Jesus as 'Avatar' on the Basis of Nicene Affirmation for Future Missions

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Abstract: Christians believe and confess that God in His chosen time sent His son incarnated in human flesh for the salvation of humans and all creation. This 'incarnation' idea has been equated with the Indian Hindu religious idea of 'Avatar' by Indian Christians to inculturate the Gospel message in Indian terms. The Hindus, on the other hand, have used it to challenge Gospel proclamation. The author in this article argues that based on the Nicene Affirmation of Christian faith, the 'Avatar' concept brings along with it a religio-cultural baggage that does not adequately explain the uniqueness of Jesus' incarnation, and also misleads people from a proper understanding of God and His work of salvation in Jesus Christ. This has consequences for the teaching and mission of the Church.

Introduction

The incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is an important—even *the* important—event in human history. We also note at the outset that Christians do not understand transcendence in a generic—or even an absolute—way, but rather in a specific modality of God's self-manifestation through the incarnation, namely in Jesus Christ who therefore comes to constitute the founding reference of Christian religious experience.[1] Thus, the incarnation is the root of all classic Christian Trinitarianism.[2] Interestingly, the Hindu religion and culture in India also point to stories of the incarnation of gods as 'avatar.' In fact, this idea of avatar is so common in the Indian language that most of the time 'incarnation' is immediately translated as 'avatar' even when translating Christian texts. For example, in my native language, Malayalam, 'incarnation' is translated as 'avatar.'[3] Also, in the Malayalam translation of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds in The Lutheran Hymnal, the word 'incarnation' is translated as avatar. In short, translations of Christian writings,

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songs, and theology in Indian languages widely use the word 'avatar' for incarnation without completely considering the other ideas that relate to the word 'avatar.' Historically, many Hindu writers, leaders, philosophers, and even missionaries used the word 'avatar' for Jesus' incarnation. Some Indian Christian theologians have borrowed the term 'avatar' to explain the theology behind the incarnation of Jesus. Therefore, in this paper I first explain the 'avatar' concept in the Hindu understanding, then compare the Nicene Christian understanding of Jesus' incarnation with attempts to see Jesus as 'avatar,' and finally explain why Jesus is not an 'avatar' on the basis of Nicene affirmation.

The Hindu Idea of Avatar (Incarnation)

The word 'avatar' means 'coming down of deity to earth.' It consists of two Sanskrit words, namely 'ava,' meaning 'downwards,' and 'tara,' meaning 'crossing or descent.' In Hinduism the word 'avatar' usually refers to 'the coming down or descent of God in some visible form.' In the latter half of the first century BC in India, the concept of avatar developed through the Bhakti movement, the Hindu tradition's 'Devotion' movement. The two epics of India, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, popularized the idea of avatars. The heroes of these epics, Rama and Krishna, were avatars. In popular Hinduism, an avatar is an incarnation of a Supreme Being or Ultimate Reality 'Brahman' manifesting in various shapes and forms.[4] This is a deliberate descent of the deity into the mortal realm with a special purpose.[5]

In Hinduism, beneath the Supreme Being, Brahman, there are three gods: Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva. Most of the time, the god Vishnu comes as avatars; however, there is also talk of Shiva coming as avatars. Nevertheless, traditionally, avatars in Hinduism are usually connected with the coming of Lord Vishnu on the earth in different forms and the worship of Lord Vishnu as Supreme Brahman-Vaishnavism. The explanation given for these avatars is that they happen in the carrying out of Vishnu's work in human life. For example, whenever a great calamity overtook the sons of men, or the wickedness of demons (Asuras) proved an insuperable obstacle to their progress and happiness, Vishnu the preserver came to earth as an avatar to rescue men; when his special work was done, the avatar returned to Vishnu and merged in him.[6] Thus, in Hinduism 'Dasavatara' (Ten incarnations) are the great particular incarnations of Vishnu. The Hindu holy book, *Garuda purana*, includes the entire list of Vishnu's avatars (1.86.10–11). The number of his incarnations varies from one Hindu writing to another. The epic of India *Mahabharata* contains three lists of Vishnu avatars, the best known of which are *matsya* (fish), *varaha* (tortoise), *kurma* (boar), *narasimha* (half man–half lion), *vamana* (dwarf), *parasurama* (sage with axe), *sreerama* (hero of Ramayana), *sreekrishna* (central character of *Mahabharatha*), *balarama* (brother of Krishna), and Kalki (the destroyer who will come in *kali yuga,* the age of strife and vice when evil

will be destroyed, bringing rejuvenation of the universe). The first nine have already come, and Hindus are still expecting Kalki, the tenth avatar.[7]

Furthermore, Hindus believe that whenever there is a decline of righteousness, a god incarnates. For example, one of Vishnu's avatars, Krishna, says in the *Bhagavad-Gita*: "For the protection of the good, for destruction of evil, and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being age to age" (*Bhagavad-Gita*, 4.8). Moreover, these avatars come in each *mahayugas* (4 million years or as the need arises) and keep the balance of good and evil. The *Bhagavad-Gita* is also significant as a scriptural form in that it contains the idea of revelation occurring through avatar.[8]

The Hindu Idea of Jesus as an Avatar

Many Hindus believe that Jesus is an avatar. Like other deities, such as Krishna and Buddha, Jesus is also considered an incarnation.[9] Most Hindus consider Jesus as a Western avatar[10] and employed this idea widely in the latter nineteenth century and early twentieth century when Hindu missions propagated Hinduism in India and the Western world using 'Jesus the avatar' as a starting point. Hindus generally familiar with the events of the Christ's story understand the significance of His life through the 'avatar' concept. Also, it is common to find images of Jesus along with those of Hindu deities in homes and public places like stores, hotels, and even in Hindu vehicles. The great Hindu leader and saint, Swami Vivekananda, taught that Jesus is a 'Saktha Vesha avatar,' or an empowered incarnation.[11] Thus, according to the Hindu concept of avatar, Jesus is a deity belonging to the fourth layer of gods, beneath the Supreme Being 'Brahman'; the three gods: Brahma, Vishnu, Siva (Maheswara); and the avatars of the god Vishnu.

Furthermore, Jesus is considered as a man-god. He is a creation of God. Sometimes Hindus compare Jesus with Buddha. Swami Vivekananda argued that Buddha is Christ because Buddha said he would come after 500 years.[12] Another great Hindu leader, Kesab Chandra Sen, who was inspired by Jesus, interpreted Jesus as an avatar, the perfect realization of a god in man, achieved on the basis of union but not identity.[13] Also, in his discussion of avatars, another Indian philosopher Aurobindo places the avatar as exemplar. The avatar shows us how suffering and sorrow can become a means of redemption and how the divine soul in human nature can overcome suffering. Suffering in this view is redemptive, not because someone is suffering for us, but because it is our own suffering. He taught that Christ merely shows us how it is possible.[14] Further, the great philosopher and former Indian President, Radhakrishnan, accepts Christ as a divine incarnation or, more precisely, sees Christ as an avatar both in the sense of a descent of God and also as an example of the human realization of divinity.[15]

Similarities Between the 'Avatar' Concept and the Christian Understanding of 'Incarnation'

In an avatar, a god becomes a man. Traditionally in Hinduism, it is unanimously agreed that the avatar originates in heaven, which makes the god-man qualitatively different from man, god, and all human beings.[16] The incarnation in Christianity is also "at a certain point in human history where [sic] God (in heaven) acted in a unique way through once and for all sending his son."[17] However, for Hindus it is not necessary for the avatar to be a human being; yet, after the fourth avatar, only human beings have become avatars. Avatars also live with people. They may be kings or saints, and even a holy man like Buddha is considered as an avatar. For Christians, however, 'incarnation' is God becoming man 'for us' and living amongst us.

Furthermore, every avatar has a purpose and essentially functions to bless the devotee by destroying evil forces and establishing righteousness (*dushta nigraha sista rakshana*). Thus, for Hindus an avatar is a god who comes and establishes *dharma* (right duty and order). Similarly in Christianity, the incarnated God has a unique purpose: to redeem fallen people and creation. The Hindus pray to the avatars and believe that these prayers and praise goes to Vishnu. The popular avatars of Vishnu, namely Lord Krishna and Lord Rama, are symbols of Hindu life and are Hindu gods. The incarnate Jesus is God; He came from the Godhead, lived among us, and is the very embodiment of Christian life. When Christians pray to Jesus or in Jesus' name, they believe that the Triune God in heaven is listening and answering their prayers. Even though an avatar has both human and divine nature, which they reveal in certain incidents, they otherwise act as natural humans. Similarly, in the incarnation of God in Jesus, we see both human and godly natures, understood as a 'hypostatic union,' different from avatars. In Jesus the union of divine and human nature is permanent, but the avatars lack such permanence. The avatar's divinity is seldom revealed like that of Vishvaroopam[18] of Krishna. Some of the avatars do claim a historical basis such as Buddha, Rama and Krishna. They were born to human parents, lived among people, and died. Similarly, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is based on historical claims like the historical life of Buddha. The incarnated Jesus Christ was born two thousand years ago, had a mother, lived among people and died, only to rise from the dead.

Differences Between Avatar and Incarnation

According to Hindu understanding, an avatar is not fully god. Because only a portion of a god is coming to earth, the avatar is called '*amshavatara*' (portion).[19] After completing his duty, he dissolves into the supreme god. There are also *purna* avatars (full incarnation), but even they are seen as the portion of a god coming down to earth. Krishna, for example, is considered a '*purnavatara*,' but still considered to be an appearance of god, not the full embodiment.[20] Jesus, however,

does not have partial humanity or divinity like an avatar, but rather is understood in terms of His hypostatic union with God the Father. Also, as noted before, an avatar is a periodical, or temporary, incarnation that repeats after certain ages (*Mahayuga*). On the other hand, the incarnation of Jesus is a once-and-for-all event. It is complete; there is no need to revise it, and there is no cyclical coming of His incarnation again.

Furthermore, an avatar has nothing to do after his duty is completed. He will be killed or dies and goes back to his previous existence. An avatar does not keep a footprint after his responsibility is finished. That does not mean the people do not worship avatars, only that the avatar is not there with them. Thus, when a devotee prays to an avatar, he is actually worshiping Vishnu, and those prayers go to Vishnu. But the incarnated Jesus is always understood as being 'with us' (Immanuel) and sits at the right hand (session) of God and will come back to judge (Mt 26:64). Avatars, on the other hand, cannot come back, because they are not there; they dissolve in a god.

Also, it is not necessary for an avatar to be related with history. For example, Narasimha (man lion) avatar came from a pillar, and Vamana avatar has no parents. In a real sense, avatars have no historical background, and their lives are related to the Hindu cyclical conception of time (*yuga*). Moreover, depending upon their evaluation, Hindus change their avatars, as in the case of Buddha, who is not a real avatar of Hinduism but is brought in by replacing Krishna's brother Balarama, who was the actual avatar in this tradition. In any case, popular Hinduism considers Balarama as the avatar, but they also accept Buddha as another avatar.

Furthermore, avatars never take away sin. Taking away sin is not their way of acting and not their purpose for coming to earth. Their purpose is to kill the sinful person or change sinful events by destroying them. In Hinduism, the idea of taking away sin by a god does not exist. Rather, everyone must get rid of his own sin by various means. No god will take away one's sin. On the contrary, the purpose of Jesus' incarnation is to take away sins and lead people to salvation. He did this by sacrificing Himself, not by killing someone else to establish '*dharma*' or restore righteousness.

The Christian Use of the Word 'Avatar' and Summary of Indian Christian Theology Discussion of 'Avatar'

As already mentioned, Indian Christians have used and still use the word 'avatar' for Christ's incarnation. They translate the word incarnation into 'avatar' in songs, liturgy,[21] theology, and other writings. It is interesting that in the IELC[22] Lutheran Malayalam hymnal the word 'avatar' is used in songs only since the 1950s. Before that time, song and hymns, both translated and written (the first Lutheran song in Malayalam was written in 1911), never used the word 'avatar.' This may be due to the Lutheran theological understanding and also to show strong opposition to

Hindu ideas. (LCMS Missionaries were very particular about that; for example, they never allowed the crucifix on the altar, thinking that it may lead to a Hindu-model worship of deities and idols). The native songwriters and translators used the words *janmameduthu* (took birth here), *vannupirannu* (came and was born), *janichu* (was born), and *jathanai* (was manifested) for incarnation. But in the later period the word 'avatar' is used, and, as we examine the Christmas songs in the Malayalam[23] language Lutheran Hymnal, this change is very evident.

As we look further into Indian Christian mission history, the Jesuit missionary, Roberto De Nobili (1577–1656), used the word 'avatar' in the seventeenth century.[24] Also, Protestant Indian Christians coming from high caste Hindu backgrounds, like Sadhu Sundersingh, Bishop Appasamy, and V. Chakkarai, accepted the term 'avatar' and gave their interpretation to it. They were more attracted to the Hindu Bhakti movement and tried to introduce Jesus as avatar, which has some resemblance with the Bhakti avatar concept, so as to engage Hindu tradition with Christianity. Sadhu Sundersingh (1889–1930) was a Sikh[25] by birth but converted to Christianity. He led an ascetic life and propagated Jesus as an avatar in whom God revealed Himself. He was influenced by the devotional life and claimed to have been converted due to a revelation of Jesus as an avatar. According to his thought, Jesus as God's avatar is like a king moving incognito among people. His purpose is to carry those who want to cross the river of this world to heaven. Just as milk in a red bottle is not recognized as milk by the peasant, Jesus' divinity is hidden by His humanity until people have direct experience of Him.[26]

Another Indian Christian theologian, R. C. Das, opines,

> Jesus Christ answers the aspiration of Hindu bakti traditions which is rooted in the avatar. Whether incarnation and avatar are the same or not, the central and important fact is that the Hindu accepts the needs of incarnation and does not care for metaphysical difficulties or scientific objection raised against it. In its emotional aspects the motive of avatar is analogous to that of the Christian incarnation, which is that of god's concern for creatures. And the final choice between avatar of Hinduism and Christ is made by a sincere seeker after truth and goodness on the level of moral excellence of the incarnate one.[27]

Prominent Indian Christian leader, Bishop Appasamy (1891–1975), along with others, came to the conclusion that avatar is a concept that can be decidedly useful in Indian Christology. They believed that in its literal meaning of 'one who descends' can be justified scripturally, for example by Ephesians 4:9–10, where the word 'ascended' implies that he also descended to the lower level down to the very earth. Also, they found that the idea of 'descend' has a prominent place in the Nicene Creed, where it is said that Jesus came down from heaven.

In addition, the term 'avatar,' both in the nominal form and in the verbal form, meaning 'descends,' is often used to mean 'incarnation' in the popular language of Christian piety, especially in hymns and Christian carols. Indian Christian leader, V. Chakkarai (1880–1958), in his book, *Jesus the Avatar*, uses the avatar concept for the basis of Christology. He contends that in Jesus, the avatar, the un-manifest God becomes manifest and we can come to know Him through the way of *bhakti* (devotion). He becomes man, but, whereas all other men are dominated by illusion, Jesus is the '*sat purusa*' (pure essence man) in whom *maya* (illusion) is cast aside. An important part of Chakkarai's exposition is the theme of the continuing avatar. According to Hinduism, the avatar comes to earth for only a short time and thereafter merges once more into the godhead. Against this understanding of avatar, Chakkarai stressed the continuing manhood of Jesus. Once incarnated, He remains the God-man, even after the ascension, and for that reason can be our mediator and indweller. Therefore, Chakkarai prefers to interpret the avatar as dynamic rather than static, and he is interested not only in how the divine and human coexist in Jesus, but also in the factor of who Jesus is and what He does in the world. He is interested in the fact that, in Jesus, God has thrown Himself into the rough and tumble of human life.[28] Chakkarai takes his interpretation of kenosis in 'continuing avatar'[29] and uses it to identify the moment at which the Jesus of history passes over into the Christ of faith. That moment he believes is the cry of dereliction on the cross, when Jesus plumbs the very depth of humiliation and separation from the Father. The depth of non-being and this abyss of kenosis become the start of His glorification.[30]

Another Indian Christian, Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai (1895–1967), uses the term *prajnana* (primeval intelligence) with avatar. The Word of God (*prajnana*) took a body in the man Jesus and, as the heat of the sun's light is no different from the heat of the sun's disc itself, so this incarnate *prajnana*—the avatar, Jesus—is fully God.[31] He is the true avatar the one who descends to the place where we are in to the turmoil and pain and dirt of human existence into the ultimate bitterness of death. Thus, Jesus Christ is the incarnation, or avatar, of God; and the Holy Spirit in human experience is the incarnation of Jesus Christ.[32]

The Christian Confession of Jesus (According to Nicene Affirmation) in Comparison with Jesus as Avatar:

In Christianity, the incarnation is not mere theophany. John 1:14 explains it well: "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The ideas of '*homoousios*' and 'hypostatic union' follow this scriptural understanding. For Christians, Jesus is the 'only begotten,' generated out of the Father, that is to say, out of the Father's essence (*ousia*) and is thus true God. Athanasius firmly says that He is God from God. Jesus is divine, that He is God in the flesh. On the other hand, avatars are not the real complete essence of a god; and they come into the world from time to time from a god, which means that they are not the 'only one.' Also, an avatar, in his different

manifestations, is not a god, but rather part of a god descending in a particular form for a particular reason. Also, they only 'wear' the human body, and so the pain or suffering they feel is illusion. One might note here a comparison with the heresy of Docetism, in which Christ's bodily existence is considered mere semblance with no true reality.

The Indian Christian understanding of Jesus as an avatar like an incognito king among his people or the idea of emotional catharsis of people over the avatar cannot be accepted. Jesus really is king; but when the avatar aspect is put on Him, He becomes like the avatar, Buddha, who was a king but abandoned everything and walked among people. Jesus is not an avatar like Buddha, because His self-emptying is for us upon the cross of suffering. Also, if we accept the idea of an avatar for the purpose of catharsis and allow Hindus to choose a better moral avatar, we end up decreasing the idea of Christianity. The fundamental understanding of Christianity is not catharsis but salvation, and Christ's incarnation is not for showing the people His ethical characteristics but to redeem His people from their sin. Such an act would place Jesus at the lower level of avatars, comparable with other Hindu deities and avatars, something that the Nicene fathers would have strongly fought against.

On the other hand, Christians affirm in the Nicene Creed that Jesus was generated, or begotten, not created. Therefore, according to His essence He is equal to the Father, and all things in heaven and earth have come into being through Him. To put the matter antithetically, it must not be held of the Son that He began to exist at a certain time, neither that He comes out of nothing, nor out of another being, nor that He has been created or is changeable or mutable.[33] He is unique and He is incarnated. He is not a creature and He has not been created.

The Arian controversy revolved around these very matters, and the orthodox Christians strongly rejected the position that Jesus was below the Father and insisted on the scriptural position that He is God. In some sense, Hindu beliefs about avatars support Arianism. For example, an 'avatar' is not equal to a supreme being. An avatar is not the begotten son of a god, and he is not of the same substance of a god. Also, there was a time when an avatar did not exist; and though the avatar is a created thing, he is worthy of worship. Therefore, if Jesus is an avatar, these attributes relate to Jesus too. Robyn Boyd opines on this issue of avatar that "today in India many people who are willing to accept Jesus as an avatar, like Ram Mohan Roy,[34] who was influenced by Unitarianism, perhaps even as the great avatar, but are unwilling to call him the only avatar of supreme god. This attitude is a form of Arianism."[35]

In contrast to such similarities of the Hindu avatar with Arianism, the Scriptures provide the right understanding that Jesus is not made, but is the second person in the Godhead. From the understanding of Nicene fathers, it is clear that Jesus is the Creator with God. He is not separated from Him, and there was not a time Jesus was not. In the case of avatars, they come only at a particular time and finish their

responsibilities. They have nothing to do with creation. The patristic scholar Anatolios opines that

> Athanasius' theology is focused on the unity of creation and redemption. On the *Incarnation*, Athanasius explains the necessity of beginning his discourse about the humanization of the Word by speaking of creation: "First we must speak of creation so that we may consider it fitting that its renewal was effected by the Word who created it in the beginning. For it will prove to be not the least bit contradictory if the Father worked its salvation through the same one by whom he created it."[36]

Thus, the fundamental understanding of the Trinity as seen in the Nicene Confession is not affirmed here in the concept of avatar. It is important that the Christian confession of Jesus also affirms that Jesus is not a portion of God. Athanasius says that Christ was not limited in power, knowledge, and effect in the workings of His human mind and body during the time of incarnation.[37] When He came to earth, He was fully God and fully human. The Nicene fathers were clear to distinguish the true sonship of Christ clearly from all creatureliness. They not only took care to emphasize the incomprehensibility of the eternal generation of the Son but also stressed His human nature. Gregory of Nazianzus argues about the true human nature of Christ, saying that He has both divine and human nature in Him. For example, Gregory addresses the issue of Christ's teaching and suffering, concluding that its purpose was to "measure by all comparison with his own sufferings, so that he may know our condition by his own, and how much is demanded of us."[38] As for the subjection of Son to Father, Gregory defined it as "the fulfilling of the Father's will." By taking on humanity's disobedience and rebellion, the Son overcomes it in submission to the Father. The cry of dereliction on the cross was not due to the withdrawal of either the Father or His own Godhead, but of His humanity representing us.[39]

Here we can compare Indian philosopher Aurobindo's (1872–1950) idea of the suffering of Jesus in that he understands Jesus as an example of one who shows us how we can suffer and also as teaching us a new and higher way of living. The failure of the avatar concept is clear here, because the entire discernment of suffering and pain is diminished to a lower level. That means that the pain and suffering of the avatar Jesus according to Aurobindo is only a model and not related to salvation, and the pain of this avatar is only an illusion or the bad karma of the particular avatar in his previous birth. For example, the avatar Krishna was killed by an arrow of an aboriginal because he killed king Sugreeva in Krishna's previous birth as Rama.

Significantly, the Nicene fathers sought to stress the soteriological argument according to which One and the same has created us out of nothing and redeemed us from sin. Thus, only the true God is able to redeem man. Avatars, on the other hand, cannot take away the sin of people; rather, they can only change the situation by destroying or killing people or creatures. So Christ is different from an avatar also in

this sense. Jesus is not a lesser god or a secondary position in the godhead; He is equal to God and there was no split in the Godhead when Jesus became man. More importantly, Jesus has come to 'redeem and save' fallen creation not to destroy and kill fallen creation.

It is also interesting that when we go through new Hindu writings about avatars the Hindu writers give new attributes to them. For example, Lord Rama is considered as an avatar of honesty, sincerity, and love,[40] whereas a close look finds the avatars to be mere killers of creatures or people who are considered to be evil. If they come to the world to kill people, then how are they the embodiment of love? There is no doubt that most of the interpretations are influenced by Christian ideas. Interpretations of the avatar are done with a Christian understanding, knowingly or unknowingly. The re-establishing of righteousness is based on killing of somebody, which is the Hindu understanding. No avatar sacrifices himself to bring back righteousness or for salvation of the world. Here the Hindu-Christian dialogue scholar Robinson cites Radhakrishnan and opines that for Hindus, a crucified Jesus, "a suffering god a deity with a crown of thorns cannot satisfy the religious soul."[41] If this is the case, then an avatar has nothing to do with a loving god and economy of god. Using the concept of 'avatar' to explain Jesus and His incarnation appears to be based on reversed thinking in which the avatar is the main theme and the ontology of Jesus is of secondary importance that can somehow be superficially fixed or ignored.

Further, Jesus' incarnation was historical and has historical evidences. When the synoptic Gospels tell about Pontius Pilate being the governor of Judea, they are providing historical support.[42] Such historical evidence distinguishes Him from 'avatars' and shows that Jesus is not an avatar, because avatars have no such historical claim but are rather mostly presented in Hindu myths. However, when the Nicene fathers said that Jesus is true man, they thereby also insisted upon His historicity with it, which has no loose ends. It is interesting that some Hindu advocates speak of recent avatars of Ram and Krishna as historical figures and hold festivals in locations connected with these avatars' "lives," possibly in reaction to the Christian emphasis on the historical grounding of the life of Jesus.

Also, it is very important to remember that Jesus is not an avatar like Buddha or any avatars. He is not a unique avatar. The word 'avatar' has baggage with it, and when we accept the word 'avatar,' the baggage also comes with it. Klaus Klostermaier opines that "the theological problem of Christ in India has always appeared to be that India does not wish to recognize the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the savior Jesus Christ and has always harped on the fact that there were many saviors—that Krishna and Rama and all the other avatars stood on a same level with Christ."[43] So it is clear that Christ cannot be called the "only avatar." In Jesus, the "God part" was not added to Him, for He is truly God. Also, He is not a "man-god" as some people think of it, that is, a man to whom a god's attributes were added later.

It seems clear that when Indians call Jesus an 'avatar' they just want to explain Christ from their background understanding of polytheism. Thus, when Christian theologians use the term 'avatar,' one must remember its religio-cultural importance and significance. The term 'avatar' used as an analogy to explain 'incarnation' has a fitting connection to Jesus' coming down to earth within a Hindu view of understanding. For dialogue and harmony, it may be a possible way of using this term. However, the usage of this word must be carefully limited given its cultural and theological understanding. One has to keep in mind that the person and work of Christ cannot be fully revealed in the avatar concept. Ignoring this fact will lead to syncretism or a misunderstanding of God's economy, as well as misinterpretation of God's soteriological work in Christ. As a result, the Nicene thrust of Triune God understanding might be at risk, because the avatar concept fully denies the triune concept of God. If the avatar idea denies the triune concept, then what will remain in Christian understanding? Here Nicene understanding has a big role to play. If the Nicene Creed insists upon the understanding of the Triune God, then the concept of 'avatar' will lose its identity. A proper triune understanding, that is an economical and soteriological understanding of God, is incomprehensible through the avatar concept.

Indian Christian theologians have tried to merge the Hindu aspect of avatar with Jesus Christ. For example, when Chakkarai explains Jesus as a 'continuing avatar,' he is qualifying and modifying the avatar concept with a Christian understanding. From my perspective, qualifying an idea and putting Jesus into something that is in contrast with His person and work is a wrong way of formulating theology. It must be done from the understanding of the Word of God. If we merge or qualify an idea which is alien from a scriptural understanding, that will only bring more confusion to believers. For instance, when a problem of explanation arises on certain issues of understanding, such as, 'Did Jesus the avatar kill anybody who was evil to retain righteousness?' then theologians have to find quotations from the Bible or make more re-interpretations. Here the argument of Athanasius regarding discerning the 'mind of Scripture' is very important. Athanasius, while standing firm for a Nicene understanding of faith, argues that one should learn to read properly (*kalos*) with the 'sense' (*dianoia*) right.[44] This means that when we understand and formulate theology we should keep in mind the 'mind of Scripture,' because the words from a cultural setting can mislead the whole understanding of what is being explained. Especially when we see the Hindu concept of 'avatar' for what it is, the use of this word can destroy and distort the original meaning of how we, as Christians, understand the incarnation of Jesus. Thus, with a proper understanding and mind of Scripture, we cannot express our faith through concepts and ideas that lead us to a perverted understanding of scripture and theology. Such formulations can be seen from the Hindus who wisely interpreted the verse, "I and father are one" (Jn 10:30), and argued that Jesus is the first Advaitin[45] who realized that He is Brahman. Along

with such understanding, we can also see that the Hindu understanding of pantheism (god is in everything) is explained through this interpretation of the verse.

Furthermore, when the Nicene Creed expresses Jesus as the only begotten Son of God, a Christian basic understanding about Jesus as 'Son of God' is affirmed. However, 'avatar' does not include the idea of sonship, and so an 'avatar' cannot refer to the Son of God. Rather, avatars were allowed to have sons, and Hindu gods also have sons. Moreover, for Christians, Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, whereas an avatar cannot be. Also, the pre-existence of an avatar is not found in Hindu understanding, whereas the Nicene Creed affirms Jesus as "begotten of His Father before all worlds." Here, too, Jesus does not fit into the realm of avatar, because an avatar is made for a special purpose of tackling a current situation or problem. Thus, in my opinion, many Indian Christian theologians have looked at the avatar concept of Jesus superficially. When we enter more deeply into understanding the avatar concept, such a framework of understanding Jesus is more problematic.

As we have seen, many Indian Christian theologians have begun with soteriology and then explained the ontology of God by using the concept of 'avatar.' Thus, if economy is the starting point, then Jesus' incarnation is the main theme. Still the question arises, then why accept the idea of 'avatar'? No avatar has suffered, been buried, only to rise on the third day, and ascend into heaven to sit at the right hand of Father and to come again to judge both the living and the dead, and whose kingdom will have no end.[46] If this is the Nicene Christian affirmation of the incarnated Son of God, then how can the concept of 'avatar' be used to explain Jesus Christ, beginning with the economy of God? Rather, it is important to know that the Nicene way of thinking leads us to the real economy starting point: for fallen creation's salvation He came down from heaven. Thus, the Hindu 'avatar' concept does not sufficiently explain the Christian theological idea of Jesus' incarnation.

Proposals for Future Missions

I would like to make several proposals on the basis of the above study. Using the word 'avatar' as a translation for incarnation, that is, Christ's incarnation, should cease. It seems easy to borrow a word from Hindu understanding and use it as a Christian word, but the idea of avatar is wrongly used for Jesus, both theologically and practically. Some may say the word is easy to communicate Christian understanding to Hindus, but this is not true. Following are some examples of words from the Malayalam language that we Christians use for basic theological terms: The word 'salvation' is translated as '*raksha*' (protection and redemption), while Hindus use '*moksha*' (liberation); we call God '*Daivam*' while Hindus call Him '*Iswara*'; our word for the Holy Spirit is '*parisudhadmavu*,' a concept or word that Hindus do not have; we translate resurrection as '*punarudhanam*,' and crucifixion as '*krusikaranam*,' both concepts foreign to Hinduism. For ascension we use the term '*swargarohanam*.' Hindus have that concept but rarely use the same word. For the

second coming, we use '*randam varavu*,' yet another concept that the Hindus don't have. It is evident that for most of the basic understanding of Christianity we have coined words or used special words that have no rich Hindu theological background. So we can change the word and can go back to the real understanding and re-establish the real biblical teaching about incarnation.

I also prefer catechizing Christians about the differences between the word 'incarnation' and 'avatar.' References to Christ as 'avatar' clearly lack the universal and historical dimensions found in Christianity. A proper study must include the specific beliefs about the Trinity and incarnation, because the idea of 'avatar' strikes at the root of Trinitarian belief. Such a study will help Christians to be aware of the pluralistic trap set by Hindus. Hindus have made the deities or gurus of religions like Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism 'avatars' and then swallowed those religions slowly into Hinduism. The 'avatar' concept was an instrument for this process.

Another major area of Christian theology to study carefully is Christology. Theologians still tend to use the word and concept of 'avatar' for Christ's incarnation; however, because there is not 'only one' avatar, Christ naturally becomes one among many, thus devaluing Christ and His work. Already Hindus consider Jesus in the fourth layer of their gods; continuing to use the word 'avatar' for His incarnation will only confirm and strengthen this teaching.

Another proposal is to avoid syncretism with Hindu ideas. For example, Hindus use Jesus as the avatar and thereby attract people to Hindu worship and cults, especially in Western countries in cults like Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Sai Baba, Ramakrishna mission, Yoga, and Transcendental Meditation. Hindu cultic groups manipulate the avatar idea and explain Jesus as one among the spiritual leaders. For instance, recently I was shocked to see a book from St. Louis by a Hindu monk[47] that explains Jesus' incarnation and compares it with Buddha and Krishna, presenting Jesus as a god like them.

Conclusion

In short 'incarnation' is not equivalent to 'avatar,' and the concept of avatar does not interpret the idea of incarnation fully. Christ's incarnation is a unique incident, occurring only once in human history. It has no resemblance to any other incident, and this uniqueness is affirmed in the Nicene Creed. So we should retrieve the Nicene understanding of Christ's incarnation based on its original understanding in Christian theology and ground ourselves with a 'mind of Scripture' and formulate theology, not on 'avatar' to explain and present Jesus Christ, but upon the pure Christian Trinitarian idea that leads us to the real understanding of our Lord's incarnation.

Endnotes

[1] Anscar J. Chupungco, *Fundamental Liturgical Study* (Minnesota: Pueblo Book, 1998), 175.

[2] Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, ed., *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 9.

[3] *Malayalam Hymn book* (India Evangelical Lutheran Church, Kerala, India, 2012), 6, 21.

[4] K. M. Sen, *Hinduism* (England: Penguin Books, 1972), 73, 74.

[5] Swami Satprakashananda, *Hinduism and Christianity* (St. Louis: Vedanta Society, 1975), 32.

[6] Rev. E. Osborn Martin, *The Gods of India* (Delhi: Indological Book House, 1988), 99.

[7] Martin, *The Gods of India*, 107–117.

[8] Harold Coward, ed., *Hindu Christian Dialogue* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 233.

[9] Satprakashananda, *Hinduism and Christianity*, 33.

[10] Though Jesus was born in Asia, Indians still consider him as a Western God.

[11] *Complete Works of Vivekananda*, vol. 8, "Notes of class talks and lectures"

[12] Ibid.

[13] Coward, *Hindu Christian Dialogue*, 166.

[14] Ibid., 172.

[15] Bob Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus* (UK: Regnum, 2004), 11.

[16] Daniel E. Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity* (USA: Humanities Press International, 1987), 7.

[17] Gerald O'Collins, *Incarnation* (London: Continuum, 2002), 1.

[18] In the battlefield of Mahabharatha, the warrior prince Arjuna is revealed the theophany of Krishna (or Vishnu) through a vision. Viswaroopam means full manifestation of a god. Sometimes the avatars manifest themselves fully to satisfy the devotee.

[19] Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*, 6.

[20] Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation* (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1970), 20.

[21] *Malayalam Hymn book*, 6, 240, 241.

[22] India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC) was established through the work of LCMS missionaries and their Indian native co-workers between 1895 and 1958. Before it was MELIM (Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission or popularly known as Lutheran Mission).

[23] This is the author's native language. Malayalam is spoken by around 40 million people.

[24] Michael Amaldoss, *The Asian Jesus* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 105.

[25] Sikh religion has drawn a lot of elements from both Hinduism and Islam.

[26] M. M. Thomas and P. T. Thomas, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology* (Thiruvalla: CSS, 1998), 184.

[27] Ibid., 179.

[28] R. H. S. Boyd, *Kristadvaita: A Theology for India* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1977),145–148.

[29] In Hindu bhakti understanding god is revealed and he is the good one or perfect one and can be seen. But avatars were not perfect persons, moreover they were worse than others. For instance, Lord Vishnu descends as avatar Vamana to stamp the generous and popular Asura King Mahabali into hell. Still people say the avatars are good only on the basis of tradition and seeking help for their daily problems.

[30] Boyd, *Kristadvaita*, 151.

[31] Ibid., 155.

[32] Ibid., 242.

[33] Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 104.

[34] A nineteenth-century intellectual from Bengal in India who in interaction with Christianity and Islam formed the Brahmo Samaj and saw Jesus as the greatest moral teacher.

[35] Boyd, *Kristadvaita*, 140.

[36] Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 49–50.

[37] Feenstra and Plantinga, *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement*, 120.

[38] Edward R. Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers* (London: Westminster Knox Press, 2006), 181.

[39] Ibid., 179, 180.

[40] Sen, *Hinduism*, 74.

[41] Robinson, *Christians Meeting Hindus*, 278.

[42] Bjarne Skard, *The Incarnation: A Study of the Christology of the Ecumenical Creeds* (Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), 16.

[43] Klaus Klostermaier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindavan* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 114, 115.

[44] Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 36, 38.