

SOLIDARITY AND INCARNATION

IN SRI AUROBINDO AND

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the relation of similarity and difference in the comparative study of religion, by examining the doctrines of *avatara* and incarnation. These doctrines are first considered using a comparative approach, summarizing some of the research that has been done in the general area of *avatara* and incarnation. A more systematic approach follows, examining the understanding of incarnation in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sri Aurobindo. The focus is on the differences between these two thinkers, especially in terms of particularity and universality and in terms of the purpose of incarnation. Similarity arises, though, as both Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer move from the presence of God in humanity to a sense of solidarity with humanity. Aurobindo's understanding and Bonhoeffer's understanding result in the view that the Divine is present in the world. This breaking down of the duality between God and the world heightens the sense of solidarity in each thinker's work, as each one speaks of the presence of Christ or the Divine in the community and in the neighbour.

This study demonstrates the interplay between similarity and difference in the comparative study of religion. Beginning with the seemingly similar ideas of *avatara* and incarnation, it then focuses on the difference between these ideas, returning to similarity as the notion of solidarity is introduced. In the similarity and difference between *avatara* and incarnation, solidarity itself appears to have a mediating role. It allows for the claim that there is common ground to begin with, and when differences are discovered or brought together, solidarity with the other keeps difference from becoming division.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Val, Ben, and Joe, who did so much to encourage me and nudge me along while the writing took shape. Thanks so much!

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## *1.1 Posing the Question*

Should the comparative study of religion focus on similarity or difference?

To pay attention to similarity would appear to be the positive option, for this seems to reinforce the notion that the key to understanding between peoples is the recognition of what is held in common – common humanity, common needs for safety and community, common longing for ‘security,’ and common strivings for things that we name ‘fulfillment’ or ‘satisfaction’ or contentment. This search for what is common expresses itself in religious understandings as well, as conversations about religion often focus on what is common – one God, a search for meaning and purpose, and plausible answers to questions posed by suffering and death.

Such searching for the common is well enough intentioned, as it is often seen as a way to establish understanding between people. Partners in dialogue ask, “On what can we agree?” A focus on what is common, though, is also fraught with difficulty; for what is found to be common is often little more than what is determined to be the lowest common denominator, and one thread in an entire fabric of belief is identified as the most important thing while the rest is ignored. The search for what is common also runs the risk of defining what is common or what is most important in terms that are chosen by the one embarking on the search. So a Christian, for instance, might study another religion with the assumption that all religions are proposing an answer to the problem of a broken relationship with God, or a Buddhist might approach another religion seeking that religion’s response to the question of suffering or of the ultimate nature of reality. The search for what is common always carries with it the risk of casting the world in the mould of the seeker, assuming that all people always are asking the same questions, solving the same problems, and understanding the world in the same way.

On the other hand, the search for difference is also fraught with difficulty. If the world appears to be deeply divided along religious or political or economic lines, looking for difference can mistakenly be seen as a way to deepen such divides and to emphasize the many ways in which people are simply not able to communicate with or understand one another. In addition,



just as the search for similarity can cast the world into the mould of the seeker, the search for difference can cast the world, in the seeker's eyes, into categories of uniqueness,<sup>1</sup> superiority and inferiority, of strength and weakness, of good and bad; again defining the world in the terms that are set by one's own point of view or one's own religious tradition.

Does a focus on difference, though, necessarily lead to this kind of divisive end? Or does an appreciation of difference in fact carry with it the possibility of deeper understanding between peoples? Does it not, in fact, come closer to accomplishing what the most well-meaning search for commonality seeks to find: respect, compassion, co-existence, learning, and acceptance?

The idea for this thesis was sparked by a growing awareness of the interplay between similarity and difference between religious traditions. Ideas in Hinduism that first struck me as strange seemed, at a second look, to be similar to those in the tradition with which I am most familiar – Christianity. The idea of similarity initially drew me into this area of study, but as my studies have continued, I have begun to resist the impulse to explore similarity, or to assume that similarity somehow points to identity or commonality. Instead, I have sought to uphold difference, partly as a way of trying to arrive at a deeper understanding of the 'other' – the other *idea* or, indeed, the other *person* – and partly as a way of respecting the integrity of the other. In this sense, Carl Olson serves as a helpful guide in the comparative task:

Within the context of this comparative process of recognizing, identifying, and articulating differences, we liberate ourselves by increasing our self-awareness, and we liberate the other by letting them be who they are. If we can recognize the differences between their understanding and our own, we are on our way to the termination of interpreting the other through our personal mode of understanding and allowing them to stand, undistorted by our understanding, in their own authentic mode of being.<sup>2</sup>

Taking difference seriously, then, is not only an important task for academic study. It is an important consideration in any conversation between those who differ.

This thesis will seek to make the point that any comparison needs to take seriously and to articulate differences between the things being compared and the context in which they are

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "On Comparison," *Roman Religion*, edited by Clifford Ando, 23-38 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 23ff. Smith distinguishes between *difference* and *uniqueness*, the latter of which almost inevitably leads to value judgements and claims for superiority.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Olson, "Eliade, the Comparative Method, Historical Context, and Difference," *Changing Religious Worlds*, edited by Bryan Rennie, 59-78 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 75.

expressed. Such a focus, though, does not inevitably need to lead to division, conflict, and claims for superiority. In fact, the opposite is the case: an appreciation of difference is essential to a sense of solidarity with the other, and a comparative task that focuses on difference is in fact a way that leads to deeper understanding and deeper appreciation of the one whom we might call ‘other.’ The thesis will argue this point by means of a study of the ideas of incarnation in Christianity and the *avatara*<sup>3</sup> in Hinduism, considering them in terms of similarity and, especially, difference.

## ***1.2 Similarity and Difference in the Study of Religion***

While studies in religion over the past decade have focused increasingly on difference, early theorists tended to focus on similarity or on the search for common roots or a single explanation of the origin and the nature of religion. Durkheim, Freud, and Marx, for example, sought to account for religion by way of sociological, psychological, and economic explanations respectively.<sup>4</sup> Later thinkers, such as John Hick, sought to identify common historical and psychological roots, most notably in the area of varieties of beliefs about incarnation.<sup>5</sup> Others, such as Mircea Eliade, criticized reductionist approaches and proposed that the sacred be treated for what it claims to be, something with a life of its own that does not need to resort to reductive explanations drawn from other disciplines.<sup>6</sup>

In turn, critics of Eliade, such as Jonathan Z. Smith, have accused him of a reductionism of his own, claiming that while he does not reduce all religion to a single cause he is still guilty of reducing religions to a variety of common themes which display a similarity across religious boundaries. Smith criticizes Eliade’s approach, claiming that it is ahistorical<sup>7</sup> and overlooks real differences between religious traditions in the search for similarity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Terms transliterated from Sanskrit, such as *avatar* or *Brahman*, will be rendered in italics throughout this thesis. When quoting other sources, the usage of the author being quoted will be retained.

<sup>4</sup> See Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) for a concise summary of these positions and of the work of Eliade.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, translated by Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 23.

<sup>8</sup> Olson, 60.

Smith's critique goes beyond simply being a critique of Eliade, though. For Smith, if the purpose of comparison is to find and compare common features or to discover common origins, then the entire comparative enterprise is called into question, for

similarity and difference . . . are the result of mental operations. . . . Comparison, in its strongest form, brings differences together within the space of the scholar's mind for the scholar's own intellectual reasons. It is the scholar who makes their cohabitation – the 'sameness' – possible, not 'natural' affinities or processes of history.<sup>9</sup>

The possibility of comparison – indeed, the very existence of something called 'religion' that can be the object of comparative study<sup>10</sup> – is a product of the academic mind which serves academic purposes.

Comparison cannot concern itself with the search for similarities or common origins that are only apparent, yet at the same time the study of religion cannot simply say that all beliefs are 'unique,'<sup>11</sup> thus rendering comparison a pointless exercise. Smith finds the comparative enterprise to be of value when it seeks "to explore the dimensions of incongruity that exist in religious materials."<sup>12</sup> For Smith, difference is what makes comparison interesting.<sup>13</sup>

John Clayton works along similar lines in an article that deals extensively with the Indian debating tradition of *vada*, a tradition that Clayton identifies as taking otherness very seriously while also allowing for serious and respectful critique of the position of the other. In the same way that Smith is critical of the search for similarity and common origins, Clayton criticizes Hick and also discredits the notion that religions are seeking a common goal: "The goals aimed at are as tradition-specific as the paths taken. Indeed, the goal is constituted as goal by the path

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, "On Comparison," 36.

<sup>10</sup> See Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. by Mark C. Taylor, 269-284 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Smith notes: "It is as if the only choices the comparativist has are to assert either identity or uniqueness, and that the only possibilities for utilizing comparisons are to make assertions regarding dependence. In such an enterprise, it would appear, dissimilarity is assumed to be the norm; similarities are to be explained as either the result of the 'psychic unity' of humankind, or the result of 'borrowing.'" Smith, "On Comparison," 32-33.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 293.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 14. Quoted in Smith, "On Comparison," 32.

chosen.”<sup>14</sup> What Clayton emphasizes is the tradition-specific nature of any religious language, noting that “apparently similar language, therefore, can have a dissimilar meaning when used within different religious contexts because of the different ways in which such language is embedded in individual doctrinal schemes and spiritual practices.”<sup>15</sup> Apparent similarity is precisely only that – apparent – and a deeper look at “religious contexts” and “doctrinal schemes and spiritual practices” will reveal that difference rather than similarity is the norm.

Clayton does not wish to rule out similarity, though. He simply does not see it as a necessary outcome of the comparative task. What he calls for is

a reorientation of the philosophy of religion, away from the pretension of philosophy’s providing a common foundation for religious claims and toward the more modest aim of philosophy’s providing a common discourse in which the nature of religious difference can be clarified. . . . *Seeing the difference is the beginning of understanding.*<sup>16</sup>

Like Smith, Clayton sees difference as the thing that makes comparison interesting.

Finally, Wendy Doniger has been critical of Eliade and those who have followed him, but she also sees that critics have been too eager, in the name of difference, to do away with the likes of Eliade: “For postmodernism, sameness is the devil, difference the angel. . . . This is one of the many reasons why, in the discipline of the history of religions, universalist comparative studies of the sort that Mircea Eliade once made so popular have been, by and large, fired from the Western canon.”<sup>17</sup> Difference may make comparison interesting, but Doniger insists that similarity also allows for understanding things in a different way, and in an even deeper way. Further, similarity does not need to be obvious. It can be sought (or simply suggested) between widely different myths, traditions, and beliefs. For example, she makes thematic connections between Shakespeare’s *All’s Well that Ends Well* and the story of Judah and Tamar in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>18</sup> For Doniger, difference does not suggest isolation or incomparability, and hers is an approach that seeks to reconcile similarity and difference: “I want to make peace

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<sup>14</sup> John Clayton, “Enlightenment, Pluralism and the Philosophy of Religion,” *Hermeneutics of Encounter: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Oberhammer on the Occasion of His 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, edited by Francis S. D’Sa and Roque Mesquita, 35-59 (Vienna: Gerold and Company, 1994), 44.

<sup>15</sup> Clayton, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Clayton, 59 (italics Clayton’s).

<sup>17</sup> Wendy Doniger, “Myths and Methods in the Dark,” *The Journal of Religion* 76, no. 4 (1996): 532.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 533.

between premodern typologies and postmodern *différance* in comparativism, to bring into a single (if not necessarily harmonious) conversation the genuinely different approaches that several cultures have made to similar (if not the same) human problems.”<sup>19</sup> To rework Smith’s notion that *difference makes comparison interesting*, perhaps it could be said after reading Doniger that *similarity makes difference interesting*.

### ***1.3 Similarity and Difference – Avatar and Incarnation***

This thesis will explore some of these themes of similarity and difference through a comparative study of *avatara* and incarnation. Doniger suggests that the act of comparison involves looking at a myth (or, in this case, at a doctrine) through a microscope and through a telescope: “Through the microscope end . . . we can see the myriad details that each culture, indeed each version, uses to bring the story to life . . . . But through the telescope end, we can see the unifying themes.”<sup>20</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, to engage in the comparison of *avatara* and incarnation is to look through the telescope end and to suggest that there is a unifying theme that ties these two together. To look in detail at particular thinkers, like Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer, is to look through the microscope end and to see the difference between the two thinkers and the two traditions from which they come. Rather than privileging either one of similarity or difference to the exclusion of the other, I will seek to keep them in tension,<sup>21</sup> considering the interplay between them.<sup>22</sup>

The first step will be a consideration of a variety of approaches to the topic of *avatara* and incarnation. Throughout this section the themes of similarity and difference will appear repeatedly. Although all of the writers considered will claim to see incarnation and *avatara* as different, some will be seen either to be making a reductive move, tracing the two things to a common origin in history or to a common psychological root in human nature. Others will be

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. (italics Doniger’s).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 544.

<sup>21</sup> Following Carl Olson: “Although it is probably not totally possible to overcome one’s ethnocentrism, the comparative method does have a useful hermeneutical role to play in understanding the religious beliefs, actions, and phenomena connected with the other when it is used in such a way that sameness and difference are kept in creative tension with each other within an overall historical context.” Olson, 76.

<sup>22</sup> Or, as Mark C. Taylor suggests, the interplay between “the familiar and the strange.” Mark C. Taylor “Introduction,” *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor, 1-19 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 18.

seen to be giving priority to one over the other, such that *avatara* is evaluated in light of the Christian doctrine of incarnation. This in itself will be a reductive move and one which does not give the ‘other’ its due. Other writers will be shown to be focusing on difference in a variety of ways, with some seeking to make that difference into a creative one as they speculate about the impact of *avatara* on Christian doctrine or vice versa.

The second part of the thesis will move away from these broadly comparative approaches. In this section the two doctrines will be examined in the work of an individual thinker in each tradition, putting off comparison for the time being and taking a more systematic approach in order to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the doctrines within their respective traditions. Rather than treating them as reducible to a universally held position, they will be seen as functioning in specific ways in the work of these thinkers. This deeper understanding of the doctrines in each instance will highlight their difference from one another, suggesting that they are not reducible to a common origin or, if such a suggestion is made, it is itself pointless because the roles that they play in their religious traditions are so very different.

The two thinkers who will be considered are Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sri Aurobindo. These two have not been chosen because they can somehow be seen to speak on behalf of their respective religious traditions.<sup>23</sup> Rather, they have been chosen because each of them demonstrates an active engagement with the world and a deep concern about the well-being of their nations and their communities. Their lives demonstrated a strong sense of solidarity with those around them; the second part of this thesis will examine the relationship between that sense of solidarity and each thinker’s particular understanding of the incarnation of God in the world.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to consider the *interplay* of similarity and difference. After spelling out the differences between *avatara* and incarnation, a point of similarity will come into focus – solidarity. This shift will bring back similarity, not as an *a priori* matter, but rather as a point of arrival, a kind of ‘post-critical’ similarity. Coming to similarity at this point holds the two doctrines in tension, and it will be shown that, even or especially with difference

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<sup>23</sup> As Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer do not speak for or represent all of Hinduism or Christianity respectively, it is also worth noting that neither of these traditions speaks with one unified voice on the matters addressed in the discussion of *avatara* and incarnation. As the differences between Bonhoeffer and Aurobindo will be considered here, it is also the case that a comparison of Bonhoeffer with another Christian thinker or Aurobindo with another Hindu thinker could prove fruitful.

being upheld, difference need not be divisive. For both doctrines – the Christian doctrine of incarnation and the Hindu doctrine of the *avatara* – contribute to a sense of solidarity with the other. Solidarity becomes a starting point for discussing difference, and it remains a point of possible agreement that keeps difference from becoming division.

The thesis, then, will begin with an apparent similarity: The similarity between the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of God in Christ and the Hindu understanding of the incarnation of God in Krishna. From here it will move to difference as these two figures and the idea of incarnation that they represent are examined more deeply and shown to be very different. Finally, the thesis will return to similarity as the different ideas of incarnation are seen to encourage similar responses of solidarity in the area of ethics and action. The flow of the thesis is a model of the interplay of similarity and difference.

## 2. APPROACHES TO AVATARA AND INCARNATION

Of all the material that has been written on the subject of *avatara* and incarnation, a few works stand out as representative of the variety of approaches that have been taken, issues that have been raised, and conclusions that have been reached. We will turn at this point to the works of Geoffrey Parrinder, Daniel E. Bassuk, Richard DeSmet, Noel Sheth, Julius Lipner, and Regunta Yesurathnam. It is worth noting that none of these works are written by authors who identify themselves as writing exclusively from a Hindu perspective<sup>1</sup>.

### 2.1 *Geoffrey Parrinder*

In *Avatar and Incarnation*,<sup>2</sup> Parrinder calls into question the easy “approximation or identification” of the concepts of *avatara* and incarnation, and instead sets out to explore the question of how much or how little ground exists between the two concepts.<sup>3</sup> As he notes similarities and differences Parrinder is not interested in seeking any sort of a “lowest common denominator,” something which he sees, for example, in the work of Radhakrishnan.<sup>4</sup> Instead, what he seeks to do is to clarify similarities and differences, and to do this he looks at the history of the *avatara* doctrine and at broad themes within the doctrine.

Parrinder’s work displays a breadth of knowledge of the history and the diversity of belief in the *avatara*. While most of his discussion focuses on the Krishna *avatara*, he devotes attention to Shaiva movements as well,<sup>5</sup> and to the role of the Rama *avatara* in the Ramayana.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There does indeed seem to be comparatively little written about *avatara* and incarnation from a Hindu perspective. Without further study of the reasons behind that observation – study which will not be undertaken at this time - one can only speculate that the whole question of the comparison of these two is a more pressing matter for Christians or, at least, “Westerners,” for whom the historicity and the particularity of Jesus Christ play a more decisive role. If, in some schools of Hindu thought and belief, Christ can be numbered as just one of many *avatars*, issues of uniqueness and universality do not command such immediate attention.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation: The Wilde Lectures in Natural and Comparative Religion in the University of Oxford* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, “Similarity and Opposition,” 87ff.



As he develops his treatment of Krishna, he draws on popular traditions, the classical philosophers, poets and Upanishads, and modern thinkers such as Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, and Sri Aurobindo. The picture that is painted in Parrinder's work is a complex one, bringing to light a multi-faceted world of belief and practice surrounding the *avatar*.

The breadth of Parrinder's work is also what makes the work problematic at times. In considering the doctrines of *avatara* and incarnation, Parrinder casts his net so wide as to lose focus. For example, "Buddhas, Jinas, and Sufis"<sup>7</sup> makes for interesting reading, but it has the character more of an appendix, an interesting afterthought, than of a crucial piece of Parrinder's argument. The work seems to be a collection of interesting snapshots of moments in the history and the relationship of *avatara* and incarnation. Apart from general assertions that the two cannot be equated, Parrinder's work does not seek to say much more than that they appear similar but are different.

The chief problem of Parrinder's work begins to appear in his treatment of the Christian doctrine of incarnation. The difficulty is twofold. First, the Christian doctrine of incarnation receives an overly simplified treatment. It has already been noted that Parrinder devotes detailed study to the history of *avatara* doctrines in their breadth and complexity, and this is a strength of the work. A similar treatment of the breadth and complexity of Christian notions of incarnation is missing, however, and Christianity is presented as having a very uniform view of incarnation, unlike the rich and variegated (and conflicted) view of incarnation that his reading of Hindu views of the *avatara* suggests. Rather than being an omission, this simplicity reflects an assumption that Christianity is somehow normative in the same way for all Christians, setting a univocal standard by which the doctrine of another tradition can be judged.

Second, this over-simplification of Christian tradition allows Parrinder to make sweeping claims in favour of the Christian notion of incarnation. If the Christian doctrine is seen as relatively uncomplicated, it becomes easier to use it as a standard by which to evaluate the other. So, for instance, the *avatara* is "weak" in "humanity and history,"<sup>8</sup> and Christ is credited with a certain "moral superiority."<sup>9</sup> While Parrinder rightly points out that Christian thought is more concerned than Hindu thought is with history as understood in the West, he seems to see

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., "Avatar in Rama,: 63 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., "Buddhas, Jinas, and Sufis," 131-205.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 235.

this as elevating the incarnate one of Christianity above the *avatara* of Hinduism: “In so far as the historical words and deeds of the Saviour can be established so much less can their contents be distorted by inferior imitators.”<sup>10</sup> The historicity of the Incarnate One of Christianity is not treated simply as an observation of difference; it comes to be treated as a mark of superiority.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Parrinder evaluates other non-Christian traditions based upon his Christian notions of orthodoxy, even using terms for what the majority Christian tradition has identified as heresy to characterize elements within these traditions. So he discusses the “docetism” that pervades Buddhism, and the “adoptionism” that characterizes Islam’s position, criticizing these positions on the basis of terms which could be said to carry only negative baggage from the Christian point of view.

Throughout the work, such bias does not show itself in the form of antipathy toward the traditions that Parrinder studies. It is, rather, simply an assumption that shows itself often, perhaps unwittingly,<sup>12</sup> and seemingly with gracious intent: So followers of other religions are “our brothers in faith. . . . [and] Christ is present to true believers by grace.”<sup>13</sup> Parrinder is certainly conscious of and ready to acknowledge difference. The difficulty in his work seems to be that the West is seen as the gracious perspective which will embrace and swallow up that difference.

This is seen once more as Parrinder sees Christ as “completing” and “opening a new way.”<sup>14</sup> He characterizes this “new way” as a way in which love and suffering are key, which in itself could stand as a very significant observation about what it is that is unique to most Christian notions of incarnation – the presence of suffering in the life and death of the incarnate one. When this observation is coupled with Parrinder’s comments about “completion,” however,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>11</sup> This criticism of Parrinder is also made by Bassuk (cf. Daniel E. Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity: The Myth of the God-Man*, Foreword by Robert S. Ellwood. (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1987), 50.).

<sup>12</sup> It is possible that even someone like Parrinder, widely regarded as a great comparativist, has difficulty in acknowledging the perspective from which he speaks and speaking from that perspective in a “self-conscious” manner.

<sup>13</sup> Parrinder., 269. This perspective is similar to that of Karl Rahner, particularly his idea of “anonymous Christianity.” For a concise introduction to this idea, see Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 5, 115-134 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966).

<sup>14</sup> Parrinder, 279.

the observation moves beyond description and becomes evaluative. Suffering provides what other traditions have all been lacking; hence this way is the one that completes all the others. This is one of the major flaws of Parrinder's work: Difference leads all too readily to evaluation.

In noting differences, he does tend towards an evaluation of such differences in favour of Christianity. In noting similarity, however, he avoids this. So, for example, while he notes the ways in which the difference between *avatara* and incarnation reflect a difference between the Indian (cyclical) and Western (linear) views of time and history, he also downplays the significance of this difference, noting that even if the *avatara* appears repeatedly, each *avatara* is “the incarnation for the age.”<sup>15</sup> The *avatara* and Christ, then, take on roles of comparable singularity and significance for those who are their followers.

Perhaps the most notable similarity – if it can be called a similarity – arises when Parrinder discusses death and resurrection. To be sure, his discussion uses terms from the Christian tradition, and this highlights the difference between the two. This difference, though, leads to a common observation of the two, namely that death and resurrection are required of both Christianity and Hinduism.<sup>16</sup> While Parrinder's work is somewhat tainted by a kind of assumption of superiority for Christianity, he sees Christianity's own terms referring back to itself and calling forth its own need for rebirth and reform. Speaking in this way about the life of Christianity, one wonders whether Parrinder would be comfortable making the same point using the Hindu notions of dying and rebirth, a repeated event. Perhaps such imagery would even better suit the story of Christianity, since the call to “reform” and “rebirth” is one that has echoed in the life of Christianity throughout all of its history.

## **2.2 Daniel E. Bassuk**

In *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity: The Myth of the God-Man*,<sup>17</sup> Daniel E. Bassuk seeks to examine similarity and difference in the doctrines of *avatara* and incarnation in as unbiased a manner as possible: “Without making any value judgements on the intrinsic merit or reality of the God-man's existence or achievements, this book elucidates how the God-men of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 235. This will also be noted several years later in an article by Julius Lipner (see below, 25).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>17</sup> See above, p. 11, n. 11.

Hinduism and Christianity are similar yet demonstrably different.”<sup>18</sup> Although the subject matter is similar to Parrinder’s, Bassuk’s approach is significantly different. He searches through the sources to find the roots of what came to be the more developed doctrines of *avatara* and, later on in the book, incarnation. Beginning with Vedic literature, he surveys the classical *avatars*, ranging from the classical enumeration of the ten avatars of Vishnu to some of the broader lists given, for example, in the Bhagavata Purana. He notes similarities along the way,<sup>19</sup> but sees problems arising as the two traditions, Hinduism and Christianity, become more acquainted with each other. By the nineteenth century, Westerners are seen to be making claims that Krishna is simply a “corruption” of Christ, and Hindu writers in turn are suggesting that Christ could only be Rama or Krishna.<sup>20</sup> Bassuk is quick to downplay any such claims of influence in either direction, asserting instead that the different historical consciousness of each tradition makes such influence highly unlikely.

Following the discussion of the classical avatars, Bassuk considers the case of six modern *avatars*,<sup>21</sup> from Chaitanya (1486-1533) through to Satya Sai Baba (1926-2022<sup>22</sup>). What is most interesting about Bassuk’s observations is that, by the time of the last of the six he considers, there is in fact an identification of the *avatar* and Christ, as Satya Sai Baba “claims to be a reincarnation of the historical Jesus.”<sup>23</sup>

The second section of Bassuk’s book is entitled “The God-Man in the West,” in which he examines “certain transformations which the avatar concept underwent as it was transplanted to the West.”<sup>24</sup> Here again, Bassuk’s view is broad, moving from figures such as Thoreau and Emerson through movements such as the Theosophical Society, the Self-Realization Society, the Hare Krishna Movement, the Baha’i Faith, the English Avatar Movement, and concluding with a

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<sup>18</sup> Bassuk, 10-11. “God-man” and “God-men” will be standard terms used by Bassuk throughout the work to refer to avatars and incarnate beings.

<sup>19</sup> Noting, for instance, a similarity between some elements of the Book of Revelation and the myth of the Kalkin avatar. Cf. *Ibid.*, 45ff.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 47ff.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, “Modern Avatars of India,” 51-96.

<sup>22</sup> The year 2022 is the date that Satya Sai Baba himself has identified as the date of his death. *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

brief foray into science fiction.<sup>25</sup> Bassuk makes the interesting observation that what begins as the introduction of the avatar Krishna into western society changes into an understanding of avatarhood in which Christ has become the centre:

The avatar concept, born and bred in India, has become a radically transformed cross-cultural phenomenon. The supreme position of Krishna has been replaced in the west by Christ, who is regarded as the full and complete Avatar, an Avatar of love, a saviour figure, and a Son of God. The Avatar has been transmogrified and its image has become inextricably interwoven with the cultural horizon in which it is found.<sup>26</sup>

Bassuk moves on from here to a consideration of the history of the doctrine of incarnation in Christianity. The historical development is not given nearly as thorough a treatment as that given to the avatar doctrine, but the treatment is similar and is more comprehensive than Parrinder's. Bassuk traces the roots of incarnation far back into Ancient Near Eastern history and mythology, finding in Greek myth and poetry, in Egyptian mystery religion, and even in the claims of Alexander the Great much of the raw material that would go into the making of the Christian myth of the God-Man. All of this provides evidence enough for Bassuk to claim that a "mythology of descending gods who appear on earth had already been used to interpret the lives of historical figures and existed early enough to be available for Christian appropriation."<sup>27</sup>

Referring to the work of Michael Goulder,<sup>28</sup> Bassuk builds his argument further through considerations of the work of St. Paul, (who is seen to be appropriating themes of incarnation from Samaritan mythology<sup>29</sup>), early Christian writers, writers throughout the history of Christianity (Thomas Aquinas<sup>30</sup> and Rudolf Bultmann, for example), and modern day claimants to divine status, such as Reverend Sun Myung Moon. Throughout this section, Bassuk works

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<sup>25</sup> Considering the works of Poul Anderson, Roger Zelazny, Frank Herbert and Michael Moorcock. Ibid., 152 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Michael Goulder, "Jesus, The Man of Universal Destiny," in John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 48-63; and Goulder, "The Two Roots of the Christian Myth," in Hick, 64-86.

<sup>29</sup> Bassuk, 168 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Bassuk, DeSmet, Sheth, and Lipner (see below, 17ff, 20ff, 23 ff) all make reference to Thomas Aquinas on the question of avatars, noting that Aquinas himself thought it quite possible that there could have been multiple incarnations, and that any member of the Trinity could have become incarnate in a multitude of forms at a multitude of times. As it is, though, Aquinas concludes that it is proper that only the Son became incarnate at one time. Cf. Quenton Quesnell, "Aquinas on Avatars," *Dialogue & Alliance* 1, no. 2 (Sum 1987), p 33-42.

with an understanding that the historical and the mythological are brought together in sacred texts. The New Testament itself, and of course the image of Jesus that is presented therein, is seen to be modulating “between history and myth,”<sup>31</sup> and these are themes picked up throughout the history of Christian thought.<sup>32</sup>

What is most interesting is the direction that Bassuk’s work takes as his study concludes. He has traced the development of *avatar* doctrine in the East and of the doctrine of the incarnation in the West. He has seen the *avatar* taking root in the west, and has made the interesting observation that over time and over the course of the move to the west the *avatar* comes to be more closely identified with Christ. He does not, at this point, see the two having a common origin – in fact, he is at pains to point out that Christianity and Hinduism develop independently,<sup>33</sup> and he notes five important distinctions, named as pairs, between the two:<sup>34</sup>

- 1) Soul and sole: the oneness of the individual soul with the supreme soul, and Christ as the sole incarnation;
- 2) The serpent as good and evil (this seems to be a stretch for Bassuk, as he seems to be suggesting that the image of the serpent is of equal importance in both traditions, a suggestion that seems unlikely);<sup>35</sup>
- 3) Reincarnation and Resurrection: the two traditions have very different understandings of death and (re)birth, hence the God-men of these traditions play very different roles;
- 4) Baba and Abba: The notion of the avatar as ‘Baba,’ father, as distinct from the notion of God as ‘abba’ (Aramaic “father”) of the incarnate one;
- 5) Hindu Love and Christian Love: “Abba, the Christian God, loves to save; Baba, the Hindu Avatar, saves who love.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bassuk, 172.

<sup>32</sup> One wonders at this point whether Bassuk is being anachronistic, reading a modern distinction between the realm of history and myth into first century works written in a milieu that very likely did not hold to such a distinction.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 183 ff.

<sup>35</sup> Julius Lipner makes the argument that items to be compared need to be similar in terms of “priority status,” that is, they need to be of similar importance within the traditions being compared for the comparison to be valid. Using this criterion, it seems like a considerable stretch to claim that the image of the serpent has a similar priority status for Hinduism and Christianity. Cf. Julius Lipner, “Avatara and Incarnation?”, *Re-visioning India’s Religious Traditions: Essays in Honour of Eric Lott*, edited by David C. Scott and Israel Selvanayagam, 127-143 (Bangalore: I.S.P.C.K., 1996), 129.

Having noted these differences, though, Bassuk does begin to make the move of claiming a common origin as he concludes his work in the Epilogue.<sup>37</sup> He begins to show his hand in this regard even near the beginning of the work as he poses the question, “From within what perspective of divine-human relationships does the belief in the God-man originate and operate?”<sup>38</sup> The entire work moves toward a similar conclusion, that the notions of avatar and incarnation are rooted in archetypes, they are patterns abstracted from events, “certain events [which] lend themselves to immortalization.”<sup>39</sup> Finally, looking even beyond the notion of the archetype, Bassuk suggests that both *avatara* and incarnation have their roots in a basic human need:

We humans take delight in the idea of a divine visitation, a divine descent, whether it be Superman, an Avatar, or an Incarnation, because we would really like to see something of God. . . . Avatarization and incarnation are both aspects of the mythicization process and are rooted in that matrix.<sup>40</sup>

In the end, it appears that Bassuk has two ways of understanding similarity and difference in the doctrines of *avatar* and incarnation. Considered synchronically, the difference is very real and needs to be maintained: If we isolate each of the doctrines in their context, they are clearly not the same thing. The diachronic view points to a different conclusion, however, for as Bassuk considers the doctrines in terms of their historical development he sees both rooted in the myth-making process, which itself grows out of a simple common human desire to see God. With his interesting conclusion that the *avatar* Krishna in the west has given way to the *avatar* Christ,<sup>41</sup> he even seems to see similarity arising at “this end” of the synchronic view, at least in the Western world.

Both Parrinder and Bassuk take very broad approaches to the subject matter, and each one seeks to hold the doctrines of *avatara* and incarnation somewhat at a distance (although one might argue that Parrinder shows a bias in favour of the Christian doctrine at times.). Neither one takes an approach that gives much consideration to the importance of *avatara* and

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<sup>36</sup> Bassuk, 191.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 192-198.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. above, p. 14, n. 26.

incarnation in their respective religious traditions. In other words, not much attention is given to questions of the significance of the *avatar* for the devotee of Krishna or of the incarnate God for the Christian.

A number of shorter works will begin to turn our attention to questions such as these. Each of the following works offers a more focused look at the topic than either Parrinder or Bassuk, and each of them, intentionally or perhaps unintentionally, raises issues that are significant in considering the importance of the doctrines under considerations for believers in each tradition.

### 2.3 *Richard DeSmet*

In the essay “Jesus and the Avatara,”<sup>42</sup> Richard DeSmet offers a brief and focused perspective on the *avatara* doctrine, particularly as it appears in the person of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. Central to his discussion of the *avatar* Krishna in the Gita is the *Sankhya* nature of Krishna and the ways in which that nature compares with the nature of Christ.

DeSmet begins with the origin of the Bhagavad Gita, which he sees as having come into being in response to the “crisis” of the spread of Buddhism and Jainism; a crisis which presented two options for the religious thinker: to adopt the new way, with its focus on non-violence, ultimate salvation, and renunciation; or to remain faithful to the old ways of Brahmanism, caste duty (including the duty of the warrior), and the strict following of *dharma*? In response to this dilemma, “a man of genius . . . conceived a bridge-teaching which would resolve the dilemma by adequately merging the ideals and virtues of the old and the new religions.”<sup>43</sup> This same “man of genius” needed a herald and teacher of *dharma* who would embody the best traits of the great teachers of the newly-arising traditions. The teacher and the framework for the teaching found a perfect home in the *Mahabharata*, the great Indian Epic, in which a “new episode” – the Bhagavad Gita – was inserted, and whose great charioteer Krishna was adopted as the authoritative and divine central figure, the descended God, the *avatar*. For DeSmet, Krishna the *avatar* is fabricated in response to a need, and DeSmet is quick to characterize the Mahabharata

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<sup>42</sup> Richard De Smet, “Jesus and the Avatara,” Jerald Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Frenhout, and Anton Wessels, editors, *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, 153-162 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.



as a “highly creative piece of literary fiction.”<sup>44</sup> In itself, this may or may not pose a problem from the perspective of scholarship, but it may pose difficulties in light of later moves in the article, moves which take DeSmet’s article beyond comparison and into the realm of evaluation.

The article’s treatment of Krishna focuses on *sankhya* ontology and on Krishna’s status within this ontology.<sup>45</sup> The *sankhya* view of human nature does not suggest that *purusha* and *prakriti* unite to form a true human nature. Rather, they only come near to each other in the human being. *Purusha* resides in *prakriti* and illumines it, but the two are never united in what one could call a united “human nature” that stands on its own as a unified entity. *Sankhya* ontology does not allow for what western thought sees as a united human nature, so Krishna cannot be seen (from a western perspective) as having taken on human nature. In this case, claims DeSmet, “we cannot say that the Lord took up a human nature with consequences which extend to the whole human genus. [God’s] union with (a human body) is not hypostatic, but manifestative, or at most instrumental.”<sup>46</sup> Since the underlying understandings of human nature are different, Krishna cannot be said to have taken on human nature in the same way that Christ may be spoken of within Christianity as having taken on human nature.

It is indeed interesting that DeSmet focuses on Krishna in terms of this *sankhya* anthropology, and that he relates this to the hypostatic union of the two natures in Christian doctrine. The comparison is interesting in that it views both figures – the *avatar* Krishna and the incarnate Christ – in terms of understandings found within each respective tradition. In this way, DeSmet’s comparison sheds clear light on an important difference between Krishna and Christ.

At several points in the article, however, it appears that DeSmet sees the *avatar* as somehow falling short of the incarnate one of Christianity. Like Parrinder and Bassuk, he devotes very little attention to any development of the Christian doctrine of incarnation.<sup>47</sup> Even so, he feels justified in making claims such as the following: “To sympathetic Christians,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 155-159. *Sankhya* is a type of dualist realism. For an introduction to this school of thought, see *Samkhyakarika*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., trans. S. S. Suryanarayana Sastri (Madras: University of Madras, 1948), and G.J. Larson, *Classical Samkhya: an Interpretation of Its History and Meaning* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979).

<sup>46</sup> DeSmet, 159.

<sup>47</sup> To be fair to DeSmet, it should be noted that he assumes that the reader already has a reasonably thorough knowledge of these matters (153). However, the non-critical view of the “incarnation side” of the comparison lends it a certain amount of credibility as the assumed norm against which *avatara* is measured.

[*avatara*] is fascinating as the closest *pre-figuration* in another religion of the *incarnation* central to their own religion.”<sup>48</sup> To suggest that the *avatar* is a pre-figuration – particularly a pre-figuration of a figure from another religious tradition – is to suggest that the *avatar* is incomplete, awaiting fulfillment in another to come. Earlier in the article, DeSmet had already implied that the Hindu perspective is missing something that the Christian perspective provides: “the Gita is unacquainted with what Christ was to reveal: that the incarnate God is better seen in the humblest and most despised.”<sup>49</sup> Clarification of difference begins to give way to notions of inferiority and incompleteness.

In the concluding remarks on similarities and differences,<sup>50</sup> some interesting similarities are noted: both Krishna and Jesus are “generated by a free initiative of divine power;” their lives take the shape of regular human lives (they are born, they work, they teach, and so on), and the motive for the incarnation of each is the compassion of God. However, the same inclination seen above – the inclination to see Christ as the fulfillment of what in Krishna is incomplete – appears as the comparison continues:

Krishna’s efficacy reaches only his devotees; that of Christ even his enemies.... [Only] Christ teaches that the service of the Lord cannot be true apart from love for one’s (even inimical) neighbour. . . . Krishna dies, but does not rise in a glorious humanity. Christ does rise from the dead in a glorious body, a living promise of our own glorious resurrection in him.<sup>51</sup>

DeSmet (like Parrinder at times) has difficulty allowing comparison to stand without becoming evaluation. His work has the benefit of displaying a rich understanding of the *sankhya* view of human nature, and this makes for some interesting comparison between the doctrines of *avatara* and incarnation. He also does suggest that the study of *avatara* doctrine can be of great value for Christians,<sup>52</sup> but he does not spell out what that value might be. Despite the strengths of the essay, the tendency to see incarnation as the fulfillment of *avatara* doctrine seems difficult for DeSmet to shake. Difference is clearly acknowledged and articulately expressed. Yet difference gives way to an evaluative comparison, with Christianity appearing in the more favourable light.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 161-162.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 153.

## 2.4 Noel Sheth

Noel Sheth takes a broad and nuanced approach in his article “Hindu *Avatara* and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison.”<sup>53</sup> Like DeSmet, from the very beginning of the article Sheth proceeds with the understanding that the comparison of *avatara* and incarnation stands to benefit Hindu and Christian alike:

Such comparison not only facilitates better mutual understanding but also helps each tradition to understand itself better...The similarities with other traditions help us to appreciate the larger significance of our beliefs and practices, and the differences give us insights into the unique features of our own tradition.<sup>54</sup>

With such an introduction, one would expect Sheth to pay close attention to the doctrine of each tradition under consideration, and this is in fact what he does. He begins with a survey of the development of the *avatara* doctrine, in which he treats the doctrine as rich and multifaceted, developing in many directions and understood in a variety of ways throughout the Hindu tradition. He identifies the Bhagavad Gita as the source of the first formulation of the doctrine, but beyond this he is diligent in pointing out the variety of perspectives that exist in belief in the *avatara*.<sup>55</sup> Pancaratra doctrine and Nimbarka doctrine, the perspectives of the Gita and the Puranas, Bengal Vaishnavism with its belief that Krishna is the source of all the *avatars* (including Vishnu!),<sup>56</sup> along with the examples of founders of sects and modern day saints who come to be seen as *avatars* – all of these become examples of the richness of perspectives on *avatarhood* that exist within Hindu tradition.

In addition to noting the diversity within Hinduism itself, Sheth points out the variety of perspectives on the development of *avatara* doctrine that have arisen in Western and non-Vaishnava circles.<sup>57</sup> Sheth demonstrates that there is no single perspective on *avatarhood* from the perspective of either Hinduism or of non-Hindu scholarship.

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<sup>53</sup> Noel Sheth, S.J., “Hindu *Avatara* and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison.” In *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 52, Number 1 (January 2002): 98-125.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 99ff.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>57</sup> As examples, Sheth refers to three theories that have been proposed: Vishnuization (an *avatar*, such as the fish, comes to be seen as an incarnation of Vishnu only later in the tradition), Apotheosis (a human hero is later divinized), and Composite personality (For example, Krishna the child, the lover, and the hero – three different Krishnas - are combined into one “composite personality.”). *Ibid.*, 101.

What distinguishes Sheth's approach from those of Parrinder, Bassuk, and DeSmet is that Sheth continues on from this point to give equal treatment to the development of the Christian doctrine of incarnation, a doctrine which is shown to be as nuanced and multi-faceted as the *avatara* doctrine. Just as the Hindu sources present many different pictures of Krishna (and other *avatars*), so also the New Testament presents a variety of perspectives on Christology, ranging from what Sheth characterizes as the high Christology of Paul to the lower Christology of Acts.<sup>58</sup> From this point Sheth traces the development of Christological doctrine through two schools of thought (the Alexandrian and Antiochean),<sup>59</sup> which are eventually synthesized in the notion of hypostatic union, articulated by the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>60</sup> Before and after Chalcedon, perspectives arose which were judged heretical by the church,<sup>61</sup> and even within the orthodox mainstream of Christianity understandings of the incarnation continue to evolve over time, resulting in what Sheth sees today as the widespread adoption of a more characteristically Protestant Christology that focuses on the work of Christ (as opposed to a medieval Catholic scholastic view that focuses more on the *being* of Christ.).

As a result of this, claims Sheth, "the hypostatic union is now being reinterpreted in relational and Trinitarian terms. Unlike in medieval times, the relation of Jesus to his Father is more important than the relation of his humanity to his divinity."<sup>62</sup> As a result of this relational interpretation, contemporary Christian thought is dealing more with themes of Jesus' significance for the poor, for women, for the environment, and for interreligious dialogue.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> According to Sheth, the Alexandrian school emphasized the divine Word (logos) and "underplayed" the humanity of Christ, while the Antiochean emphasized the full humanity of Christ, somewhat at the expense of the unity of Christ's two natures. Ibid., 101-102.

<sup>60</sup> In the year 451 C.E. Ibid., 102

<sup>61</sup> Sheth summarizes these on page 104 as positions that either "challenge or diminish Jesus' full humanity," "deny the divinity of Christ," or "do not maintain the hypostatic union."

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, revised ed., translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988); Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Pamela Dickey Young, *Christ in a Post-Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives, ed., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).

Sheth's treatment of the doctrine of incarnation is significant in that it does not treat Christian doctrine as an assumed norm against which other traditions are to be measured. Nor does it treat Christian doctrine in general, and incarnational doctrine in particular, as something that is understood and interpreted by all Christians in the same way. This upholding of the diversity within both Hindu and Christian traditions also affects the flavour of Sheth's comparison and his conclusions regarding similarity and difference in the doctrines of *avatara* and incarnation.

Sheth notes that both doctrines lend themselves well to an engagement with the world:

Both the *avatara* and the incarnation are immanent. . . . They reveal God's personal love and concern. . . . In both cases, the descent of God enables human beings to ascend to God. Human beings are raised to a higher dignity; they are divinized in Hinduism and made adopted children of God in Christianity.

Both conceptions give importance to the world and justify selfless involvement in the world, rather than renunciation of the world.<sup>64</sup>

Having noted this positive similarity, Sheth also points out a negative implication of this same similarity, noting that both Hinduism and Christianity have made use of the *avatar* and Christ to shore up the reigning powers over against those who are weaker or regarded as inferior.<sup>65</sup>

Differences are presented throughout the article as being nuanced, and never absolute.<sup>66</sup> For example, the multiple appearances of the *avatar* are unique to Hinduism, yet similar (if not identical) themes can be seen, for example, in the theophanies of the Old Testament, or in Christ's post-resurrection appearances or the doctrine of the second coming of Christ. At the same time, while the one-time-only incarnation is unique to Christianity, a kind of particularity can be seen in Hinduism in, for example, certain understandings that one avatar is *the* incarnation of Vishnu, or that an avatar appears and is *the* avatar for that age. The difference remains, but there is still room to consider similarity.

In addition to the nuanced nature of difference, Sheth notes two other differences. First, the differences are due to contrasting worldviews.<sup>67</sup> What this observation does is remove the question of evaluation from the comparison (as distinct from, for example, Parrinder, who

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<sup>64</sup> Sheth, 104.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 106 ff.

<sup>67</sup> "It makes sense to have many and repeated *avatars* in a cyclic worldview, and similarly one sees the point in the incarnation taking place once and for all in a linear worldview." Ibid., 113.

evaluates the *avatara* doctrine as lacking in historicity and, therefore, lacking in veracity).<sup>68</sup> Second, the doctrines, with their differences, are seen to be complementary and mutually challenging. Even the elements within each tradition that make them most unique – the *avatar*'s stated purpose of the restoration of *dharma*, and the importance of Christ as “the *suffering Savior*”<sup>69</sup> – can complement the faith and understanding of Christians and Hindus:

[T]he strong emphasis on the reestablishment of righteousness in the *avatara* stories can give greater encouragement to Christian liberation theologians in their quest to discover liberative elements in Christ's incarnation. . . . On the other hand, the distinctive emphasis on the suffering Saviour in Christianity can be an inspiration for Hinduism to discover the redemptive and healing values of self-suffering.... Mahatma Gandhi integrated this Christian understanding of suffering into his theory and practice of non-violence (*ahimsa*).<sup>70</sup>

Sheth's nuanced approach to *avatara* and incarnation opens doors into areas for further consideration. He takes seriously the interplay of similarity and difference, and of all of the writers we have considered thus far, he explores most deeply the implications that a comparative study of *avatara* and incarnation could have for theology and faith in either tradition.

## 2.5 Julius Lipner

In his essay entitled “Avatara and Incarnation?”<sup>71</sup> Julius Lipner moves in a direction similar to that of Noel Sheth. The similarity lies in Lipner's interest in not simply examining two ideas that appear similar, but also in considering how these ideas might mutually affect each other and the people to whom these ideas are significant. More particularly, he poses the question of whether the terms *avatara* and incarnation can be used interchangeably.

The essay begins with a consideration of similarity and difference, a theme which is important for Lipner's argument. On the one hand, he is not interested in working with a “container theory”<sup>72</sup> of language, in which context is given no regard and words are simply seen as containers of meaning. To see the matter in this light, one could simply see *avatara* and

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. above, pp. 10-11, nn. 8, 9, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Sheth, 109: “It is this...that is uniquely Christian.”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. above, p.15 , n. 35.

<sup>72</sup> On pp. 127-128, Lipner cites Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 11, against the container theory of language.

incarnation as two words that could be set side by side, corresponding to each other and likely meaning the same thing. On the other hand, he is not comfortable with the kind of “over-contextualizing”<sup>73</sup> that will disallow any meaningful comparison on the grounds that the contexts that give rise to ideas and concepts are so unique that comparison is impossible. Instead, Lipner works with the understanding that “difference is the other face of similarity,”<sup>74</sup> and “difference” is that which can clarify meaning, deepen understanding, shed light on questions of identity, and encourage creative reflection on one’s own tradition.

Lipner identifies two major similarities for consideration: Similarity of priority (the incarnation in Christianity and the *avatara* in Vaishnava Hinduism have a similar priority, hence the validity of the comparison)<sup>75</sup> and similarity of benevolent intent (in both cases, the appearance of God comes about as a result of God’s benevolent intentions).<sup>76</sup> The major differences which Lipner identifies are by now familiar: *avatars* are multiple while the incarnation takes place only once;<sup>77</sup> the two doctrines arise from different worldviews; the purposes of each type of divine descent or appearance are different.

These oft-cited differences, however, begin to appear more nuanced in Lipner’s view. Initially it appears as though the most significant difference between the two doctrines lies in the fact that for Christianity the purpose of the incarnation – in a particular time and place – is that of universal redemption, while in Vaishnavism it is generally understood that each *avatar* comes – to a particular time and place – for a particular purpose.<sup>78</sup> However, simply to apply the terms

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<sup>73</sup> Lipner, 128. Lipner also cites Peter Donovan, “The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism,” in *Religious Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 1993): p. 224, as an example of the criticism of overcontextualizing. Although Lipner does not give further specific examples of ‘over-contextualizers,’ he suggests, with Donovan, that post-modernism has so thoroughly stressed “the unique” that it allows for no legitimate comparison. This focus on uniqueness has had the unexpected effect of allowing conservatism to break free from critical thought or critical self-examination.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>77</sup> Lipner does consider Aquinas’ argument (cf. p. 14, n. 30), but concludes that “it is true to say...that it is a doctrine for Christianity (Thomas Aquinas included) that *in fact* God incarnated only once in Jesus.” (131).

<sup>78</sup> See Ibid., 133 ff. For instance, the *matsya* or fish *avatara*, widely regarded as the first of the *avatars* of Vishnu, comes to rescue Manu from the floodwaters.

“universal” and “particular” to the respective doctrines of Christianity and Hinduism becomes problematic.

Lipner sees, in the repeated appearance of the *avatara* and in the Hindu notion of a universe pervaded by the presence of God, a heightened emphasis on divine care and compassion. This repeated appearance

highlights on the one hand the divine concern for the whole of creation by attention to a wide range of objectives and individuals. . . . Through the divine diffusiveness that that *avatara*-concept represents, the whole of creation, encompassing different times and spaces, is sacralised by the assumption of its various parts in God.<sup>79</sup>

Hence in the particularity of the appearance of the *avatar*, Lipner sees a strong expression of universality. Conversely, the universal implications of the Christian notion of incarnation, coupled with a language of faith that articulates the transcendence of God very well, comes to be seen as rather particularistic. The language of transcendence and the uniqueness of the incarnation distance humans from God and from the non-human world, a distance which “has found expression in a range of sombre ecological and other consequences.”<sup>80</sup>

The other oft-cited difference, that between the cyclic worldview of Hinduism and the linear view of Christianity, also becomes more nuanced in light of the doctrines of *avatara* and incarnation. The focus on the historical contingency of the *avatara* and (in some traditions) on the uniqueness of each *avatara* to a certain era gives to the *avatara* a heightened sense of contingency, opening the way to an understanding of history that is not simply cyclical, repetitive and fatalistic, but which allows for notions of progress within history.<sup>81</sup> Christianity, on the other hand, does not simply function with a linear worldview, for the incarnation takes place “*within* the sequence of events in the world rather than at the chronological beginning or end,”<sup>82</sup> and the event of the incarnation is understood to affect and “take up” the whole of history

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.. Although Lipner does not address this in his essay, it is noteworthy that linearity can also pose problems for Christian thinking, if ‘linear’ implies the existence of past, present, and future. Hans Schwarz notes that Christian thought distinguishes between the ‘everlasting,’ in which time continues to move forward, and the ‘eternal,’ in which there is no distinction between past, present, and future: “In God . . . all the different times coincide.” (Hans Schwarz, “Eschatology,” in *Christian Dogmatics, Volume 2*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, 471-587 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 570.).



– the beginning and the end. In both cases, the God who descends does so into a particular flow of events.

The real difference, according to Lipner, is on the level of contingency. The *avatara* appears according to the needs of a time and a place, while the coming of the incarnate God of Christianity is not dependent on particular circumstances or efficacious only for those in that particular place or era.

At this point, Lipner begins to take up the question of the compatibility of the notions of *avatara* and incarnation. He insists that the terms cannot simply be interchanged, for the unique “emotional and theological freight” carried by each term would render such a move “linguistically inadmissible and religiously highly dubious.”<sup>83</sup> For Christians within and outside of India, however, the two terms can exist side-by-side, particularly if the term *avatara* is understood for Christians more along the lines of theophany and manifestation. Thus, for Lipner, it would be quite admissible for Christians to maintain their view of the uniqueness of the incarnation in Jesus, while at the same time expanding their understanding of the appearance of God in the world by making use of the term *avatara* “to refer to divine theophanies in other subjects, both human and non-human.”<sup>84</sup> The use of the term *avatara* could well enrich Christianity without detracting from its central claims about the incarnation. The question Lipner leaves open, though, is whether a similar use of “incarnation” – with all of its issues of uniqueness and non-repeatability – could be considered acceptable by Hindus.<sup>85</sup>

## 2.6 *Regunta Yesurathnam*

Regunta Yesurathnam<sup>86</sup> approaches the topic in a manner similar to that of Lipner. While Lipner sets out to consider whether the terms *avatara* and incarnation can be used interchangeably, Yesurathnam’s article focuses on the question from the perspective of Indian Christianity and its ability to communicate the meaning of the doctrine of incarnation within the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>86</sup> Regunta Yesurathnam, “The Adequacy of the Concept of Avatara for Expounding the Christian Doctrine of Incarnation.” *Dialogue and Alliance* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 43-52.

Indian context. Beyond simply considering the adequacy of the *avatara* doctrine for explaining incarnation, the question is put more directly near the end of the article: “Is Jesus an avatar?”<sup>87</sup>

The response to this question is worked out against the backdrop of a brief history of the idea of incarnation. Yesurathnam entertains the idea that incarnation has its roots in Egypt, and he touches briefly on the existence of hints of incarnation throughout the ancient world: In the cult of the Emperor in the Roman Empire, in divine mythical saviours such as Isis and Adonis, in the Tibetan Llamas, in early Parsi and Semitic ideas and in the Indian notion of *bhakti* (“the most wonderful conception of the divine outside biblical revelation”).<sup>88</sup> All of this points to a widespread human longing to worship a tangible god, and it “proves that the idea of incarnation is not confined to any particular religion, nation, or people. . . . Whatever its origin, the idea of incarnation has become a universal idea.”<sup>89</sup>

Such a view of the apparent universal scope of the notion of incarnation is not all there is to the picture. In all of these instances of what might loosely be called incarnation, there is a tendency to ascribe divinity to a powerful or heroic human figure, but something else appears as early as 3500 B.C.E. in India: the idea that the divine also moves downward, into the realm of human affairs.<sup>90</sup> This is what makes the question of *avatara* and incarnation so compelling for Yesurathnam, for both doctrines have at their centre the idea of God “coming down” into the human world. It is this coming down that makes the two so similar to each other yet distinct from the vast array of understandings of incarnation and incarnate figures already seen in the historical sketch he presents earlier.

In addressing the question of the adequacy of *avatara* for explaining incarnation in Christianity, Yesurathnam turns to Indian Christian theologians and suggests an interesting distinction in their approaches that will lead them to give different responses to the question of Jesus as an *avatar*. On the one side, Christian thinkers who align themselves with a monistic or *advaitan* perspective will have difficulty with the use of the term *avatar* to identify Jesus. In the *advaitan* tradition, the *avatara* is seen as a form of *maya*, a kind of illusory expression of ultimate reality. The *avatar*, as such an expression, comes into the human world to convince people of their unity with the one ultimate reality, Brahman. Christians identifying with such a

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 44.

worldview<sup>91</sup> could not, according to Yesurathnam, adopt the use of the term *avatara* for Jesus, for Jesus is believed to be a full incarnation of God whose purpose is something other than convincing humans of their identity with the Ultimate.<sup>92</sup>

The matter will appear differently from the perspective of those who identify more closely with the theistic perspectives of Indian thinkers such as Ramanuja and the *visistadvaita* school of Vedanta which he represents. In this tradition, God, the world, and humanity are real; the *avatara* is also quite real, and devotion to God through the *avatara* is a means to salvation. The *avatara* reveals, in fact *is* a revelation of, the presence and the grace of God to the devotee, who in turn expresses loving devotion to this personal God. Yesurathnam cites several examples of Indian Christian theologians<sup>93</sup> who identify with this position and have little trouble using the term *avatara* – although with some reservations – for Jesus, who is also seen to be a gracious personal incarnation of a personal God, whose will it is to save the devotee.<sup>94</sup>

In answer to his own question, Yesurathnam does not seem willing to say simply that Jesus is an *avatar*. The term itself carries much meaning that does not necessarily apply to the Christian doctrine of incarnation, but it is perhaps the best term available at the current time if one wishes to express with a single term what the Christian notion of incarnation means to an Indian audience.<sup>95</sup> At this point, Yesurathnam puts forward two conclusions: First, that the use of multiple terms from the one tradition might be necessary to explain the corresponding term in the other tradition. Such interchanging of terms has to “do full justice to both the Christian and Hindu traditions.”<sup>96</sup> This is a strong point of Yesurathnam’s article – while he speaks in terms of the ability of Christians to communicate in an Indian context, his concern for the integrity of both traditions suggests an interest in dialogue and understanding rather than simply conversion. The second conclusion, citing the work of Robin Boyd, is that the term *avatara* can add something to Christology, moving it away from the static to the dynamic: “It takes Christology away from the categories of substance and person (hypostasis) – out of the realm of being into

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<sup>91</sup> Brahmbandav and Swami Abhishiktananda are cited by Yesurathnam as examples. Ibid., 50.

<sup>92</sup> Yesurathnam, 49 ff.

<sup>93</sup> Such as Bishop Appasamy, Chakkarai, and Sadhu Sunder Singh. Ibid., 50.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 51.

the realm of action.”<sup>97</sup> Yesurathnam sees this as a favourable thing, and while Christian theologians might argue about whether the doctrine of incarnation is necessarily static without the perspective that something like *avatara* doctrine adds, his conclusion does suggest a dynamic way of considering the topic of *avatara* and incarnation; for the *avatara* doctrine is seen as somehow *acting upon* the Christian doctrine of incarnation. In other words, as is the case with thinkers such as Sheth and Lipner, each perspective is seen as potentially being enriched by the other. And as is particularly the case with Sheth, Yesurathnam sees the interplay of the two doctrines moving in the direction of the dynamic rather than the static.

## 2.7 Conclusion

Each of the works considered in this chapter approaches the topic of *avatara* and incarnation from a comparative perspective, holding the two up to scrutiny, seeking differences and similarities, and where applicable, evaluating the two doctrines and systems of thought in which they live and breathe. Several of the writers have attempted to approach the topic from an ‘unbiased’ perspective, avoiding evaluative moves and seeking to understand each on its own terms. Some have succeeded to a certain degree, while others have clearly tipped their hand in favour of, in each case, the Christian understanding of incarnation over against the Hindu idea of the *avatara*, and thus, revealing their own biases. Three of the writers under consideration – Sheth, Lipner, and Yesurathnam – have approached the matter with a view toward answering the question, “How might the one doctrine affect the other?” How might the Christian notion of incarnation be affected by a serious consideration of the Hindu belief in the *avatar*, and vice-versa?

In doing so, these last three have also taken the discussion further in the direction of a consideration of the doctrines of *avatara* and incarnation in the context of the lives of devotees and believers. In the chapters that will follow, rather than simply holding up the notions of *avatara* and incarnation and then comparing them (apart from a context),<sup>98</sup> and rather than seeking to stand at a distance and take the doctrines apart, the focus will turn to a deeper examination of each of the notions of avatar and incarnation from the perspective of particular

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<sup>97</sup> Robin Boyd, *Kristadvaita* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1977), 148. Cited in Yesurathnam, 51.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Lipner, 128.

devotees and believers within each tradition. It is proposed that this approach will give further insight into questions of ethics and belief, and will lead to a deeper understanding, not of the ways in which doctrines themselves are similar or different, but in the ways in which doctrines, with their similarities and difference, take shape in or in fact shape the lives of persons of faith.

### 3. DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: THE PARTICULARITY OF INCARNATION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who has come to be recognized as one of the most significant figures in Protestant theology in the first half of the twentieth century. Terms coined in Bonhoeffer's works are widely used in Christian circles, even by those unfamiliar with his works. Beyond the circles of the church, Bonhoeffer is known for his political activities in opposition to the Nazi regime, activities which led to his imprisonment and, eventually, his execution.

Bonhoeffer's political activities were deeply rooted in his Lutheran Christianity, and even his opposition to the Nazi regime had its roots not so much in political theory or humanist ideals, but in an understanding of the proper relationship between church and state and of the ways in which the two should function in society. Even in the context of his most secular thought, Bonhoeffer saw himself above all as a pastor and a theologian of the church, and as such, as a servant and follower of Christ.

The work of Bonhoeffer the theologian will be considered, paying particular attention to his thinking about incarnation as this thought takes shape in three different works: *Lectures on Christology*, *Discipleship*, and *Letters and Papers from Prison*.<sup>1</sup> From the start, it will be seen that the decisive matter for Bonhoeffer is to reckon not with incarnation as a doctrine but with the person who is said to be the incarnate one: Jesus Christ. This reckoning with the person will also be seen to draw Bonhoeffer more deeply into an active engagement with the world.

#### 3.1 *Lectures on Christology*<sup>2</sup>

Central to Bonhoeffer's *Lectures on Christology* is the question, "Who are you?" Who are you, this incarnate one? Who are you, Jesus Christ?<sup>3</sup> The question appears repeatedly

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to further works, when appropriate, will be through secondary sources.

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Lectures on Christology*. Translated by Edwin Robertson (London: Collins and Sons; New York: Harper and Row, 1966, 1978). It should be noted that the lectures on Christology as we have received them are not Bonhoeffer's own words, but are the result of the work of his former student, close friend, and colleague Eberhard Bethge, who compiled the text based on the notes of students who attended Bonhoeffer's lectures at the University of Berlin in 1933.

throughout the work, and will be seen to be the question that continues to focus Bonhoeffer's thought throughout his career.

This approach to Christology rules out questions about *how* the incarnation takes place, *how* it is that God and humanity could come together in one person, or *how* it is that one might understand the idea of two natures and one person. The possibility of explaining the incarnation is put aside altogether, as is speculation about a pre-existent "human nature" coming together with a pre-existent "divine nature" to make this unique person, Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> In Bonhoeffer's understanding, the *person* Jesus Christ is always the starting point for theology and Christology. So rather than needing to be explained, Christ is simply the given upon which all thought is based: "God in timeless eternity is not God; Jesus limited by time is not Jesus. Rather we may say that in the man Jesus, God is God. In this Jesus Christ, God is present. The one God-Man is the starting point for Christology."<sup>5</sup> The point is pushed even further – beyond Christology – toward the end of the work when the claim is made that "nothing can be known either of God or man<sup>6</sup> until God has become man in Jesus Christ."<sup>7</sup> The *how* of speculation gives way to the *who* of faith, a question that is addressed to one who is already presumed to exist; for Bonhoeffer, then, the discussion will always steer away from talk of *incarnation* as a doctrine to talk of *the incarnate one*, the person.<sup>8</sup>

Bonhoeffer does not understand this approach to be anything new in Christology or theology. He returns to the Chalcedonian definition of 451 C.E. to support this notion of the importance of the "who" question. The Chalcedonian definition states simply that in the person Jesus Christ, the same Christ is to be acknowledged in two natures – divine and human – without

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>6</sup> Although inclusive language is preferable, noting or changing every use of the word "man" in the translations of Bonhoeffer's work that are available would make for a cumbersome and repetitive use of parentheses or notations of *sic*. In direct quotations, the original terminology will be retained.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 101. Clifford Green sees this line of thought developing in Bonhoeffer's later works, such as *Ethics*, in which Green understands Bonhoeffer to be saying that "God became human in order that we might become human. The incarnation is about the humanization of the human race, not its divinization." (Clifford Green, "Human Sociality and Christian Community," *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by John W. de Gruchy, 113-132 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 121.)

<sup>8</sup> *Lectures on Christology*, 104.

confusion of and change in the natures, but also without separation and without division.<sup>9</sup> The definition itself spells out that what can be said about Christ is only what cannot be said of Christ (there is neither confusion nor separation of the divine and human natures). For Bonhoeffer, the definition once more rules out speculative inquiry about the “how” of the incarnation, or “objective talk” about pre-existing deity or humanity. Although the Chalcedonian definition has been accused of being at the root of a dry Scholasticism, Bonhoeffer disagrees with this accusation,<sup>10</sup> insisting that the definition points to a living person as the proper starting point for Christology, that of the person of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture.<sup>11</sup> Here again, Bonhoeffer is insisting that the question of Christology is not “how” – how do the natures come together, how can they be neither confused nor separated, what is the nature of the natures “before” the incarnation, and so on – but “who” – “Who are you?” The Chalcedonian definition eliminates the objectifying “how” questions and leaves only the one question: “Who are you?” The Chalcedonian definition is itself ultimately the question, ‘Who?’”<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Bonhoeffer is reluctant to ask the question of *why* the incarnation takes place. Little if any attention is given to such a question. If the incarnation is the only starting point for Christology, then to search for a purpose that gives rise to the incarnation, or to devise a divine scheme of justice that needs to be satisfied, is to make the incarnation a secondary matter. If the incarnation is the result of some sort of logical necessity, then that logical necessity becomes the decisive matter. To speculate that the incarnation had to happen in order for such and such to happen is the same as to speculate on the objective nature of the divine or the human before the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout this section of the *Lectures on Christology* Bonhoeffer speaks in terms of “the facts” and “the given facts,” by which he refers to the Biblical witness to Christ. This emphasis on Christ *as revealed in Scripture* is not a call for biblical literalism or a kind of “Bible believing” Christianity as it is commonly understood. Rather, Bonhoeffer is distinguishing between *reflection* that begins with Christ and *speculation* that begins with metaphysics. He insists that the starting point for theological reflection is the person of Christ as revealed in Scripture, rather than speculation about pre-existing divine nature and human nature that somehow come together in Christ, who is then revealed in Scripture.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 102. The translator of this edition speaks in the preface of the Chalcedonian definition in Bonhoeffer’s eyes as “cold, statue cold, [requiring] the warm breath of life before it can be recognized as anything to do with Jesus Christ.” (21). The translator himself seems to have overlooked Bonhoeffer’s comment linking the Definition with the “who” question, a link which for Bonhoeffer turns the discussion away from cold speculation.



incarnation. To ask the question of *why* or even to speak of the purpose of the incarnation would be to make the incarnate one beholden to that purpose or to a particular theological scheme.

It is more accurate to state that Bonhoeffer speaks of the results of the incarnation or of the meaning of the incarnation: If we begin with the incarnate one, what does that say about God? About humanity? About the world? Bonhoeffer will say, then, that the incarnation unveils the image of God,<sup>13</sup> and that it makes faith possible.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, it is always understood to be an act of divine freedom: “A speculative basis for the doctrine of the incarnation in an idea of God would change the free relationship between Creator and creature into a logical necessity. The incarnation is contingent. God binds himself freely to the creature and freely glorifies himself in the incarnate one.”<sup>15</sup> Rather than beginning with a predetermined purpose which the incarnation then fulfills, Bonhoeffer begins with the person – God freely becoming incarnate – and proceeds from there.

For Bonhoeffer, the question “Who are you?” assures that Christology will always be dealing with an actual person rather than with an abstraction or a set of ideas, or even with eternal or timeless truth. For if Christology is somehow concerned with truth, this truth is never understood to be a “thing” which is available for one to use at one’s convenience, nor is it “eternal truth,” a set of principles and ideas that are never changing. Instead, truth is seen to be tied to the person of Jesus Christ, whom Bonhoeffer always understands to be present in the living encounter. Of this incarnate one, the question of how or why will not do: “Only the question “Who are you” will do.”<sup>16</sup>

### 3.1.1 *Christ pro me*

This incarnate one is always understood by Bonhoeffer to be the one who is present *pro me* – “for me.”<sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer’s intent in using the term *pro me* is to underline two things: First, that Christ is always to be spoken of as a *person* – not a principle or an idea or an influence or a personality<sup>18</sup> – who is *present* in the world, most notably in the Word, the Sacrament, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 43-55.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 44.

Church;<sup>19</sup> second, that the incarnate one is always properly spoken of in relation to and in the context of human history, real events, and real people – Christ is present *for* all of these.

Although the use of *pro me* suggests an individualistic approach which sees Christ primarily in terms of the relationship to the individual, it is important to note that Bonhoeffer also uses the term *pro nobis* – for us – at other points in *Lectures on Christology*: “The humiliated one is the form of Christ *pro nobis*. . . . In this form he purposes and wills us to be in freedom.”<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy that these lectures were delivered in 1933, the year in which Hitler became chancellor of Germany. His inclusion of the term *pro nobis* in the context of freedom suggests that Bonhoeffer already clearly sees the social threat posed by Hitler, and the social implications of the incarnate one for those who live under that threat. Ernst Feil draws attention to this as a significant shift for Bonhoeffer:

What is significant here is that Bonhoeffer quietly changed the *pro me* into *pro nobis*, “for us” . . . , thereby laying the groundwork for his Christological expression, “Christ – the one for others,” which emerged in his final letters. The aspect of sociality comes to full expression only in that change; the vicarious nature of Jesus Christ is itself understood in social categories, for it is not only for me but also for us.<sup>21</sup>

The use of *pro me* or *pro nobis* does not intend to draw attention to “me” or to “us;” it is one of Bonhoeffer’s ways of insisting that Christ always exists for the other. There is no such thing as Christ “for himself,” Christ’s being and acting *pro me* or *pro nobis* are at the core of the being of the incarnate one – “the essence . . . the being of the person himself.”<sup>22</sup> Christ is the one “for others,” and to think of him otherwise “is not only useless . . . it is even godless.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See below, pp. 42 ff.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>21</sup> Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. by Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 75.

<sup>22</sup> *Lectures on Christology*, 47. Again, cf. Green in reference to Bonhoeffer’s earlier work, *Act and Being*: “God’s being is being-in-relation-to-us. This is the meaning of the incarnation: God with us, and God for us.” (Human Sociality and Christian Community, 114.). This understanding of the incarnation is clearly a social understanding, which will be developed more fully. Green claims that already in Bonhoeffer’s earliest work, *Communio Sanctorum*, creation, sin, and revelation “can only be understood in terms of sociality” (113). As Bonhoeffer’s work on Christology develops, it will become clear that the same could be said of his understanding of incarnation.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

### 3.1.2 *Christ the Centre*

Another way of speaking that characterizes Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ is of Christ as the centre.<sup>24</sup> As Bonhoeffer focuses on Christ as the one for others, he speaks of Christ being at the centre in three different ways: Christ as the centre of human existence, Christ as the centre of history, and Christ as the centre between God and nature.<sup>25</sup> In this case Christ as "centre" does not only refer to a centre around which all else revolves, but particularly to a centre that stands between, at the boundary between the old existence and a new existence. Bonhoeffer describes this as a paradox, for "in the fallen world the centre is also the boundary."<sup>26</sup>

In terms of Christ the centre of human existence, Christ is understood by Bonhoeffer to be the boundary between the old self and the new self, "between 'I' and 'I.'"<sup>27</sup> Humanity has failed to fulfill the law of God, and in so doing has failed to be truly human, to be all that God intended humanity to be. In this sense humanity stands judged by Christ who is fully human, who keeps the law. Christ stands in humanity's place and fulfills this law, doing for humanity what it could not do itself and thus making humanity fully human. Christ as the centre of human existence thus judges and justifies humanity.

In a similar way, Bonhoeffer understands Christ to be the centre of history: history is full of promise, but this promise always falls short and history itself is seen to be under the same judgement as humanity. Christ as centre exposes the false Messianic claims of the state and of all those who would redeem history, and is himself understood to be the Messiah – the hidden Messiah<sup>28</sup> – who fulfills that promise: "The Messiah, Christ, is at one and the same time the destroyer and the fulfiller of all the messianic expectations of history."<sup>29</sup> Christ both judges and justifies history, as he does humanity.

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<sup>24</sup> The first English edition of *Lectures on Christology* was in fact titled *Christ the Center*. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, introduced by Edwin H. Robertson and translated by John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).)

<sup>25</sup> *Christology*, Ibid., 60ff.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 62 ff.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 62. It is noteworthy that Bonhoeffer also sees the Church, as the presence of Christ in the world, as being at the centre of the State – Christ the centre of history is present (yet hidden) as the Church at the centre of the state (63 ff). Bonhoeffer claims that the church does not need to be recognized as such by the state (as it clearly was not by the National Socialist government), and it could be argued that one of Bonhoeffer's theological difficulties with the

In a different way, Bonhoeffer understands Christ to be the centre between God and nature. Unlike humanity and history, nature does not stand under judgement, but is bound by the sin of humanity and history. A sign of Christ between God and nature is seen in the sacraments, when the elements of nature in bondage become part of the new and free creation.<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer sees nature in bondage as unable to speak, whereas nature redeemed freely proclaims the word of God, with no human explanation needed.<sup>31</sup> Christ as the centre, then, is understood by Bonhoeffer to set nature free to praise God.<sup>32</sup>

Christ being at the centre simply means that Bonhoeffer sees Christ as the one through whom all promise is fulfilled – promise for humanity, for history, and for nature. At this point it becomes possible to speak more clearly of the purpose of the incarnation without at the same time tying the incarnation to some kind of logical necessity or pre-existent set of conditions that necessitate incarnation. The state of humanity, history, and nature are simply givens, and the incarnate one stands at the boundary, moving all that is from judgement to justification, from bondage to freedom. This is the purpose of the incarnation, then – to move the world from bondage to freedom.<sup>33</sup> Christ as the centre means that Christ *pro me* is the true human, the fulfiller of the law, the liberator of creation, the one at the centre or the boundary between the old “fallen” world and the “new world of God.”<sup>34</sup>

### 3.1.3 *Christ Humiliated*

Bonhoeffer asserts that Jesus Christ is “God who became man, just as we became man. He lacks nothing belonging to man.”<sup>35</sup> The most important point for Bonhoeffer, though, is not simply that God became human. The incarnation as such is not the decisive issue. What matters

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Nazi government was that it inverted this relationship, and saw the State as being at the centre of the Church

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>32</sup> See below, p. 78, n. 2.

<sup>33</sup> This will come up later on in *Discipleship* when Bonhoeffer discusses the church’s dying and rising with Christ – a movement from old life to new life, from bondage to freedom. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 4. Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey. Translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 214 ff.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 65. See below, pp. 40ff., for further discussion of Christ as ‘mediator.’

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

the most is that this incarnate one is also the humiliated one. If Christ poses difficulty for human reason, this difficulty is not that divine and human nature come together in the one person Jesus Christ. The difficulty for human understanding is that this incarnate one – the divine-human – should become humiliated, should take on the “likeness of sinful flesh.”<sup>36</sup> As with the question of the divine and human natures, Bonhoeffer does not attempt to explain this in terms that would answer the question of “how.” The given is simply that the incarnate one takes the form of sinful flesh. As has already been seen, the most important thing for Bonhoeffer is that Jesus Christ is “God for us.”<sup>37</sup> “God for us” is the incarnate one, and the scandal of this incarnate one is that “this incarnate one is also the crucified,”<sup>38</sup> or, to use the kind of language that Bonhoeffer favours, the incarnate one is also the humiliated one. While the church might claim to know the exalted Christ – risen from the dead and ascended into heaven – this exalted one is always also the humiliated one.

This becomes the most important matter for Bonhoeffer’s *Lectures on Christology*, and any positive claims about Christ are made in the light of the humiliation. So Christ is present as the Word<sup>39</sup> – as the living Word of God, a living address to humanity; and as the humiliated word, in the weakness and fallibility of preaching, of human words. Christ is present as Sacrament, risen and present but also hidden in water, wine, and bread, the elements of nature in bondage. Christ is present as Church, which is understood by Bonhoeffer to be the embodied presence of Christ on earth, but which is also clearly weak, “sinful flesh.” In all cases, Christ as Word, Sacrament, and Church is exalted and humiliated. Whatever might be said about the exalted Christ, God incarnate, it must also always be said that this same one is the humiliated

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 103. Cf. Green as well, who points out that Bonhoeffer, in *Creation and Fall*, reworks the understanding of “image of God” to be a reference not to a particular human or divine quality, but rather to God’s relatedness to the world and hence humanity’s relatedness to one another: “In contrast to all individualistic interpretations of the image of God, Bonhoeffer insists that this image or likeness must be understood as a particular relationship between persons. . . . Being-free-for-the-other-in-love images God’s loving freedom for humanity. . . . Since God’s being is being-for-humanity, so human relationships image this in one person ‘being-free-for-the-other’ in love.” (116 -117). Here we see theology and anthropology both beginning with the incarnation; Christ, the incarnate one, is free for the other; God’s being is to be free for the other; to be human is to be free for the other.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Christ present as Word, Sacrament, and Church, see Ibid., 49-59.

one, who took on sinful flesh, scandalized the righteous and upright, offended the pure, suffered and died:

In the humiliation, Christ, of his own free will, enters the world of sin and death. He enters it in such a way as to hide himself in it in weakness and not to be recognized as God-Man. He does not enter in kingly robes of a . . . ‘form of God’ . . . His claim, which he as God-Man raises in this form, must provoke contradiction and hostility. He goes incognito, as a beggar among beggars, as an outcast among outcasts, as despairing among the despairing, as dying among the dying. He also goes as sinner among sinners, yet how truly as . . . ‘the worst sinner’ . . . as sinless among sinners.<sup>40</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, this raises a central problem of Christology: “Has Jesus as the humiliated God-Man entered fully into human sin?”<sup>41</sup> He echoes the Chalcedonian Definition in terms that preserve the unity and the distinctness of the sinful and the sinless, such that the paradox is always maintained:

He is wholly in the *homo ioma sarkos* [likeness of sinful flesh] and condemned as we are, and he yet is without sin. The *homo ioma sarkos* is also fastened upon him with its realm of sin, but it is fastened upon *him*, who yet is without sin. Without trying to balance, we have to say, it is *he*, not the *homo ioma sarkos*, who is without sin – but he will not be separated from this *homo ioma sarkos*. Christology cannot by-pass this paradox.<sup>42</sup>

The *Lectures on Christology*, with their clear emphasis on the centrality of Christ – not only for Christians and for the church, but for humanity, history, and nature – might be seen as an unfolding of an exclusivist approach, for all clearly hinges on Christ and on no other. It is essential to remember, though, that for Bonhoeffer Christ is always the one who exists “for others”<sup>43</sup> and who became incarnate in the context of weakness and humiliation. He is therefore

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 107

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 109

<sup>43</sup> For a further working out of this idea in relation to Latin American Liberation theology and, to a lesser extent, the thought of Gandhi, see Glyn Richards, “Faith and Praxis in Liberation Theology, Bonhoeffer, and Gandhi.” *Modern Theology* 3, (July 1987), 359-373.

Counter to the suggestion that his thought is exclusivist, it is also noteworthy that Bonhoeffer had once planned to travel to India to visit Gandhi, stating in correspondence with a friend that “there must be other people in the world who know and who can do more than we. And in that case it is simply philistine not to go and learn from them.” (Feil, 197) For more on Bonhoeffer and Gandhi see below, 80ff.

never to be seen in terms of superiority, exclusivity, and power. As Bonhoeffer concludes this section of the lectures,<sup>44</sup> he applies the same kind of language to the church:

All that (the glorification of God) we know today only through the encounter with the humiliated one. It is with this humiliated one that the Church goes its own way of humiliation. . . . The church also can be exalted or lowly, so long as in both cases it is the way of Christ with it. This way is the enemy of pride, whether it is wrapped in the purple robe or the crown of martyrdom is set upon it. The Church gazes always only at the humiliated Christ, whether it itself is exalted or made low.<sup>45</sup>

Whatever the situation of the church, Bonhoeffer uses language that will not make allowances for power and triumph in the image of the church and its people.

### **3.2 *Discipleship***<sup>46</sup>

*The Lectures on Christology* emphasize the person of Christ being at the centre of all theological thought and of the life of the church. As the work progresses, Bonhoeffer begins to focus on the church and its sharing in the suffering of this one who is at its centre. *Discipleship* continues this line of thinking, paying close attention to the Christological themes developed in the earlier work and paying increased attention to the working out of these themes in the life of the church. As *Discipleship* draws to a close, Bonhoeffer's thinking continues to move outward, insisting that the church which bears the name of the incarnate one is rightly understood to exist *for the world and in the world*.

#### **3.2.1 *Christ as Mediator***

As Bonhoeffer developed the idea of Christ as the centre in *Lectures on Christology*, he began to speak of Christ as mediator, and he worked out this idea more fully in *Discipleship*. The theme is certainly familiar to Christian thought, with Christ often spoken of as the mediator between God and humanity. This way of understanding Christ as mediator is part of

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<sup>44</sup> The next and final part of Bonhoeffer's lectures on Christology was entitled "The Eternal Christ." The translator's note in this section simply says, "There is no trace of any notes on the third part of this lecture series. It is thought that it was never completed." (Ibid., 117)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>46</sup> This work is more commonly known as *The Cost of Discipleship*. The most recent English translation, the critical edition included in the Fortress Press series "Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works," is simply entitled *Discipleship* – a direct translation of the German title *Nachfolge*. This title will be used throughout this paper, rather than the more familiar title of earlier editions.

Bonhoeffer's understanding, but he sees Christ as mediator in a variety of other ways and, one might argue, in much more radical ways. The claim he makes is that Christ, as the incarnate one, comes between the disciple and everything that one comes to think of as "natural" or "ordinary" life. The disciple is tied only to Christ, is bound to Christ, and so has no more "immediate connections with the world."<sup>47</sup> The disciple has no immediate connection with God, with her-or-himself, with the world, with history, with the neighbour, with 'the way things are.'

On the one hand, this suggests a certain separation from the world,<sup>48</sup> and Bonhoeffer writes with a sense of the isolation of the individual in the face of God and the world.<sup>49</sup> The intention, however, is not to separate the Christian from the world but to change the way that the Christian understands him-or-herself in relation to the world:

In becoming human, [Christ] put himself between me and the given circumstances of the world. I cannot go back. He is in the middle. He has deprived those whom he has called of every immediate connection to those given realities. He wants to be the medium; everything should happen only through him.<sup>50</sup>

Following this line of thought, Clifford Green suggests that for Bonhoeffer Christ is also mediator in the same way that "beliefs, images, and stereotypes [are mediators of] our experience."<sup>51</sup> Christ, as the person *for others* who stands between the believer and the world, mediates experience and action in such a way that the disciples, for example, refrain from judging, resist imposing their own will on the neighbour, and act with deeds of love and mercy for the other.<sup>52</sup> Christ as mediator shapes perception, and shapes human action as well.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>48</sup> In fact, *Discipleship* is sometimes seen to have sectarian and legalistic undertones, undertones which Bonhoeffer recognized later on (see *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged ed., edited by Eberhard Bethge, trans. by Reginald Fuller, Frank Clark et al (New York: Collier Books, 1972), 369). Bonhoeffer did not, however, see these undertones as reason to distance himself from what he had written: "Today I can see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by what I wrote."

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition," *Discipleship*, 10 ff.; Geoffrey B. Kelly, "The Influence of Kierkegaard on Bonhoeffer's Concept of Discipleship," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 1974): 148-54, for closer examinations of the influence of the thought of Kierkegaard on Bonhoeffer's work at this time.

<sup>50</sup> *Discipleship*, 93.

<sup>51</sup> Green, "Human Sociality," 126.

<sup>52</sup> See *Discipleship*, 169-175, for Bonhoeffer's detailed comments on judging, imposition, and love.



So on the one hand, Christ is seen to divide, to stand between the disciple and the world. Yet for Bonhoeffer the most important thing will be that the one who divides by standing between the disciple and the other is also the one who unites the disciple to the world in love, and whose suffering unites the community of disciples to the whole world in suffering. As the community of disciples – the church – bears suffering, it is united through suffering with God, and it is united through suffering with all those around it who bear suffering.<sup>53</sup>

### 3.2.2 *Christ as Church*

With Christ – the one for others – as the starting point of theology, and with Christ understood to be the mediator of all relations with others and with the world, it is not surprising that Bonhoeffer will understand theology and the life of the disciple to be social, to be concerned about relations with the world. Likewise, just as Christ *pro me* broadens to become Christ *pro nobis*, so also Christology broadens to become social, to become ecclesiology. Ernst Feil makes the observation that “Every feasible theology is christology (*sic*) for Bonhoeffer, and, since Christ is both man and humankind and exists not for himself or the individual but for all, every such theology is also ecclesiology.”<sup>54</sup> From the beginning, then, theology is social in nature; theology is ecclesiology.

In the *Lectures on Christology* Bonhoeffer had already begun to speak of Christ as being present not only *in* the church but also *as* the church.<sup>55</sup> In *Discipleship*, the reality of the incarnation in/as the church is clearly connected to the reality of the incarnation in/as the physical body of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer’s chapter on “The Visible Church Community” begins with the following statement: “The body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth.”<sup>56</sup> This statement moves in two directions. On the one hand, it is a simple affirmation of Bonhoeffer’s belief in the reality that God is present in the world as the person Jesus Christ – the incarnation takes place in a real body, a physical body that takes up a particular space in a particular time. Throughout *Discipleship*, though (even before the chapter on the visible community), it is clear that Bonhoeffer is also working with the idea of *the church* as the body of Christ, in which Christ becomes incarnate, taking up physical space in the world:

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>54</sup> Feil, 67.

<sup>55</sup> *Lectures on Christology*, 58ff.

<sup>56</sup> *Discipleship*, 225.

Since the ascension, Jesus Christ's place on earth has been taken by his body, the church [Kirche] (*sic*).<sup>57</sup> The church is the present Christ himself. . . . While we are used to thinking of the church as an institution, we ought instead to think of it as a *person* with a body, although of course a person in a unique sense.<sup>58</sup>

Here again, Bonhoeffer refuses to speak of incarnation, of Christ, or of the church in abstract form:

A truth, a doctrine, or a religion needs no space of its own. Such entities are bodyless. But the incarnate Son of God needs not only ears or even hearts; he needs actual, living human beings who follow him. That is why he called his disciples into following him bodily. His community with them was something everyone could see. . . . Here were bodies that acted, worked, and suffered in community with Jesus.

The body of the exalted Lord is likewise a visible body, taking the form of the church-community.<sup>59</sup>

If Christ is understood to be incarnate in the church, and if Christ is also understood to be “the one for others,” then the church, according to Bonhoeffer, must understand itself to be for the other, for the neighbour. The editors of the English edition of *Discipleship* state Bonhoeffer's position thus: “The Christian life that emerges from the empowering presence of Jesus Christ in people's lives is the life of Christ himself, always directed to being for others, being for God's world. In Christ one embraces both God and the world.”<sup>60</sup> Note the incarnational move – the life of the Christian is the life of Christ – and note that that incarnation is understood to take shape in the life of the church directed in the same direction as the life of Christ – toward the other.

This position is significant for Bonhoeffer in that what had come to define the church of Germany in the 1930s was the same thing that had come to define the German state – the idea of

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<sup>57</sup> Just prior to this, Bonhoeffer makes an almost parallel statement: “Since Pentecost Jesus Christ lives here on earth in the form of his body, the church-community.” (218) In the critical edition of *Discipleship*, the German word *Kirche* is translated “church,” and the German *Gemeinde* is translated “church-community.” In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer often appears to use the two terms interchangeably, with the following distinctions: *Gemeinde* always refers to the visible church community, the community of disciples living in a particular time and place; *Kirche* may also be used refer to this visible community, but when Bonhoeffer refers either to the church in its broader sense – the whole communion of saints – or to the church as an unfaithful or divided institution, he uses only this term.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, “Editors' Introduction to the English Edition,” 9.

nationhood and the idea of belonging reserved only for a particular people. While the German church joined the state in defining who could or could not belong, Bonhoeffer stressed that the very idea of incarnation, and so the very life of the church, could only be understood in terms of its being *for others* rather than in terms of included insiders and the *excluded* other. The connection is very important for Bonhoeffer: incarnation, love for the world, and the love of the church *for the world* all belong together.<sup>61</sup>

It is important to note that for Bonhoeffer this is not simply ethical exhortation. If ethics for the disciple and the church were to mean the application of timeless ethical principles, then theology and the church would remove Christ from the centre and replace the incarnate God with those principles.<sup>62</sup> For Bonhoeffer, one does not seek to be ethical in order to become more like Christ. Rather, because the incarnation is always the starting point for theological reflection and for the self-understanding of the church, the community of disciples understands Christ to be incarnate in it already. Rather than acting to become more like Christ, the church understands itself to be Christ's body already, and so acts accordingly – being *for others* as Christ is for others. The church does not seek to shape itself into the form of Christ. Rather, Christ is understood to be incarnate in the church: “It is the very image of God, the form of Christ, which seeks to take shape within us (Gal. 4:19). . . . Christ does not cease working in us until he has changed us into Christ's own image. Our goal is to be shaped into the entire *form* of the *incarnate*, the *crucified*, and the *transfigured* one.”<sup>63</sup>

Bonhoeffer clearly insists, though, that this incarnation of Christ *in* the church or even *as* the church does not amount to “a mystical fusion between church-community and Christ.”<sup>64</sup> There is not a simple identification of Christ with the church, for a distinction still needs to be

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<sup>61</sup> This incarnational/ethical theme is noted by other commentators on the thought of Bonhoeffer. John D. Godsey points out what he sees to be an overarching theme in Bonhoeffer's theology: that the incarnation in the church not only calls the church to an ethic of love, but it makes this very ethic possible: “God's love for the world, incarnated in Jesus Christ, provides the foundation, norm and possibility for all Christian love.” (John D. Godsey, “Bonhoeffer's Doctrine of Love,” In *New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics*. Edited by William J. Peck, 189-234 (Lewiston/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 232.). Again, Clifford Green speaks of incarnation, in Bonhoeffer's understanding, as being the “paradigm for responsible vicarious action for others.” (Clifford Green, “Human Sociality,” 128.)

<sup>62</sup> Larry Rasmussen, “A Question of Method,” in *New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Ethics*, ed. by William J. Peck, 103-138 (Lewiston/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 108ff.

<sup>63</sup> *Discipleship*, 284-85.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

maintained: While Christ is in unity with the church, he is still “Lord of” the church, “the head of the body.” So while the church can identify itself as the body of the crucified and risen Christ, the church still waits for Christ who is to come again. In language that once again echoes the language of the Chalcedonian definition, Bonhoeffer puts it thus:

The same Christ who is present in his church-community will return from heaven. In both cases it is the same Lord and it is the same church; in both cases it is the very same body of the one who is present here and now, and the one who will return in the clouds. However, it makes a serious difference whether we are here or there. Thus, both the unity and the distinction are necessary aspects of the same truth.<sup>65</sup>

The church stands as one with the crucified and risen Christ, yet that same crucified and risen one is seen to stand *over* the church; the church still waits for that one to come.

This is an important distinction, for it raises the question of *how* the church’s claim to identity with Christ might be evaluated. Bonhoeffer’s view of incarnation in the church could easily be used to identify the church uncritically with Christ. Yet Bonhoeffer himself did not simply accept the church’s claims for itself, and he was clearly not willing to identify the state church of Germany as the living Body of Christ in the world. It is significant that Bonhoeffer places so much emphasis on being shaped into the form of the *incarnate* one who is also the *crucified* one.<sup>66</sup> One cannot speak of the incarnate one without also speaking of the suffering of that one, and if that same Christ is understood to be incarnate in the community of the church, then the church needs to be willing to see itself as the suffering church:

In the community of the crucified and transfigured body of Jesus Christ, we take part in Christ’s suffering and glory. Christ’s cross is laid upon the body of the church-community. All sufferings under this cross are Christ’s sufferings. . . . Such vicariously representative action and suffering, which is carried out by the members of the body of Christ, is itself the very life of Christ who seeks to take shape in his members<sup>67</sup>

At this point Bonhoeffer distanced himself from the prevailing understanding within the German church that aligned it with a powerful and triumphant state. As it is with Christ – being for others, loving the world, suffering – so it is for the church in which Christ is incarnate – being

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> This theme began to take shape quite early in Bonhoeffer’s career. Edwin Robertson sees it appearing already in Bonhoeffer’s inaugural lecture of 1930 (cf. Edwin Robertson, “Translator’s Preface,” *Christology*, pp. 10 ff.

<sup>67</sup> *Discipleship*, 221-222.

for others, loving the world, suffering.<sup>68</sup> In this way, the community of disciples understands itself always to be bearing the image of Christ, an image which more often than not includes suffering, and which shapes the life of the church: “But now the final word about those who as disciples bear the image of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Jesus Christ, and who have been transformed into the image of God, is that they are called to be ‘imitators of God.’”<sup>69</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, it is clear that Christian discourse about humankind as the “image of God” or the church as “the body of Christ” is not simply speculation or figurative speech. As God becomes incarnate in a real person, Jesus Christ, so the image of God and the incarnation take shape in real form – in humanity, in the church. As Christ acts, so the church acts. For Bonhoeffer, when the disciple encounters the other, inside or outside the church, the disciple encounters that one as Christ encounters them: “Disciples can encounter other people only as those to whom Jesus himself comes.”<sup>70</sup> In this understanding of the incarnation taking shape in the community of disciples, a way of compassion and solidarity is seen to be taking shape.

### 3.2.3 *Christ as Neighbour*

The compassion and solidarity that grow out of this idea of the incarnation of Christ in the church show themselves in the life of the church. There are points within *Discipleship* at which it appears that the presence of the incarnate Christ is confined to the church, and so serving Christ becomes a matter of serving one’s brothers and sisters within the church.<sup>71</sup> There

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<sup>68</sup> Later on, in *Ethics*, this understanding will be worked out more fully in terms of *conformation*. Larry Rasmussen highlights Bonhoeffer’s understanding that ethics, for the Christian community, is a matter of being formed and being conformed into the image of Christ, the incarnate one. According to Rasmussen, Bonhoeffer sees an “ontological coherence of God’s reality and the world’s in Christ,” (Rasmussen, “A Question of Method, 108.), so therefore to act in “conformation to Christ” is to act “in accordance with reality.” (Ibid., 106) If Christ is “humiliated,” the church acting in accordance with reality will be just as likely to see itself as “humiliated” than as “exalted.”

<sup>69</sup> *Discipleship*, 288. The editors note the similarity between the German title of this work, *Nachfolge*, and Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitatio Christi*, the German translation of which is titled *Nachfolge Christi*. For Bonhoeffer, “discipleship” is intimately linked with “imitation.”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>71</sup> Cf, for example, Ibid., 198 (“Every service done to [the disciples] is done to Jesus Christ himself.”), and 213ff (Chapter Ten: “The Body of Christ”), in which Bonhoeffer discusses the community of disciples and his claim for its unique communion with Christ.

are also points at which this sense of incarnation in the church leads to an understanding that one is also served by Christ in the neighbour, especially the neighbour in the church.<sup>72</sup>

Bonhoeffer will not limit his understanding of the presence of Christ exclusively to the community of the church, though, for he also sees the incarnation beyond the church. Once again, this understanding is rooted in his own grounding in orthodox Christian thought. Since Jesus is believed to bear the whole of human nature and so to be *fully human*, all humans are understood to be “with Christ.”<sup>73</sup> The community of disciples, then, is called to serve people inside and outside itself as though serving Christ.

Early on in *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer makes the same point: “Because the Son of God became a human being, service to God in worship can no longer be detached from service to sisters and brothers. . . . In Jesus, service to the least brother or sister and service to God become one.”<sup>74</sup> It could be argued at this point that Bonhoeffer is not talking specifically about incarnation but is again functioning in the realm of ethical exhortation, suggesting that if the community of disciples wishes to show itself to be sincere it should be loving the neighbour. Two things need to be kept in mind, though. We have already seen how Bonhoeffer wants to resist turning ethics or theology into principles and maxims to be applied to specific situations.<sup>75</sup> Bonhoeffer would not be content with simply saying that it is important to follow one’s words with appropriate actions. More important, though, is the insistence that the body of Christ takes shape in the world, that the incarnation is flesh and blood, in the form of a person rather than in the form of an idea or a principle. When Bonhoeffer, then, claims that “in Christ’s incarnation,

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<sup>72</sup> Although Bonhoeffer does not pick up the theme in *Discipleship*, Green sees this notion being worked out differently in *Communio Sanctorum*: “God’s otherness is embodied precisely in the other person who is real and present, encountering me in the heart of my existence with the judgement and grace of the gospel. In this way Christ is present *pro me . . .*” (“Human Sociality”, 124) A similar development occurs in *Life Together*, which Green quotes: “By hearing the word of God’s forgiveness pronounced by another, . . . I experience the presence of God in the reality of the other.” (“Human Sociality,” 126, quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. D.W. Bloesch and H.J. Burntress (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 113.

<sup>73</sup> *Discipleship*, 217. Note, however, that Bonhoeffer does follow this with a discussion of the special relationship of Christ to the church, which he discusses in terms of baptism, death and resurrection. Although all humans are “with Christ,” the church is with Christ “in a special sense” – in faith. This special relationship, however, does not preclude the understanding that Christ is present in those outside the community of the disciples.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 226 ff., and Rasmussen, “A Question of Method,” 108 ff.

all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the of God,”<sup>76</sup> he has real “humans” and a real “image of God” in mind. The disciple does not serve humanity as a matter of applying an ethical principle. One serves humanity because the incarnation requires space, the incarnate one takes up physical space, the image of the incarnate God is truly borne by humanity; and so the church, the body of the incarnate one, serves God by serving humanity.

This concreteness of the incarnation continues to lead to a sense of solidarity throughout *Discipleship*. Solidarity, suffering and love come together as the work draws to a close:

Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance. In community with the incarnate one, we are once again given our true humanity. With it, we are delivered from the isolation caused by sin, and at the same time restored to the whole of humanity. Inasmuch as we participate in Christ, the incarnate one, we also have a part in all of humanity, which is borne by him. Since we know ourselves to be accepted and borne within the humanity of Jesus, our new humanity now also consists in bearing the troubles and the sins of all others. The incarnate one transforms his disciples into brothers and sisters of all human beings.<sup>77</sup>

*Discipleship* is primarily addressed to the church, and concerns itself with the way the church is to understand itself and its life together. It yields a kind of social ethic, insisting that Christ is incarnate in the community of the church, in which Christ’s image is formed. With its emphasis on “conformation” to the image of God, *Discipleship* gives rise, as Larry Rasmussen points out, to what is “predominantly a churchly ethic.”<sup>78</sup> But throughout the work, and increasingly in Bonhoeffer’s later works, the focus shifts away from the church and towards the world, and the incarnation takes shape in “the expanded ethic of the Christian in the world.”<sup>79</sup>

### **3.3 Letters and Papers from Prison**

In Letters and Papers from Prison,<sup>80</sup> we see the latest developments in Bonhoeffer’s thought, including the beginnings of the development of his thinking about “religionless

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<sup>76</sup> *Discipleship*., 285.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>78</sup> Rasmussen, “A Question of Method,” 114.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Enlarged edition. Edited by Eberhard Bethge, trans. by Reginald Fuller, Frank Clark et al (New York: Collier Books, 1972).

Christianity.”<sup>81</sup> What has come to be known as religionless Christianity could just as easily be called “Christocentric Christianity,” for in developing this idea in the *Letters and Papers* he continues to develop themes that began to take shape in his earlier works, throughout all of which the question of the significance of Christ remains at the centre. The decisive question raised in *Letters and Papers* is simply the now familiar question, “Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?”<sup>82</sup> In *Letters and Papers*, we see most clearly how this focused Christological thinking continues to move Bonhoeffer into the world, which is where he sees the church, the community of the incarnate one, finding its life: “In Bonhoeffer’s thought this concentration [on Christology] does not lead to isolation from other theological and non-theological themes. Rather the centrality of Christ serves as the decisive motive for opening the horizons of the church towards the world in its concrete reality.”<sup>83</sup> The focus on Christ corresponds to a growing openness to the world.

What is central for Bonhoeffer is the incarnation of God in the here and now, in the everyday things of life. In place of the *deus ex machina*, the God who mysteriously operates behind the scenes to control the things that cannot be understood, Bonhoeffer sees the incarnate God as one who lives not in the realm of the unknown, but in the things that are known. For Bonhoeffer this is essential, for the God who exists only as the explanation of things that are mysterious will soon be eliminated altogether as humanity’s understanding of the no-longer mysterious things of the world relegate God to fewer and fewer places of mystery:

If in fact the frontiers of knowledge are being pushed further and further back (and that is bound to be the case), then God is being pushed back with them, and is therefore continually in retreat. We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don’t know; God wants us to realize his presence, not in unsolved problems but in those that are solved.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> For a thorough treatment of the much discussed but largely misunderstood notion of religionless Christianity, see, for example, Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity*, translated by Doug Stott, Foreword by Eberhard Bethge (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>82</sup> Andreas Pangritz, “Who is Jesus Christ, for Us, Today?” In *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by John W. de Gruchy, 134-153 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>84</sup> *Letters and Papers*, 311.



For Bonhoeffer, the point is not to suggest that God is somehow one who solves problems for people. Rather, the point is a Christological point: As the incarnate one became incarnate in a particular time and place, and as Christ is present, taking up space, in the church and in the world, so for Bonhoeffer, God in Christ is only to be found in a particular time and place, not only in mystery but in the things that we know.<sup>85</sup>

In place of the *deus ex machina* Bonhoeffer sees the God who is present in what is known, even and especially when what is known is hardship and suffering. In place of the *deus ex machina* is the suffering God, and “only the suffering God can help.”<sup>86</sup> Here again, Bonhoeffer begins with Christology, with the incarnate one who suffers, and this one is seen to be one who “wins power and space in the world by his weakness . . . .”<sup>87</sup> Clearly, Bonhoeffer sees God to be on the side of those who suffer and who are weak, not on the side of an oppressive state and an institutional church that continues to seek to define itself in the terms of a powerful nation and a perfect race. Rather than siding with the powers that be, the church “is summoned to share in God’s sufferings at the hands of a godless world.”<sup>88</sup>

Once again, the suffering God is seen to be incarnate in the suffering of the church and in the suffering of humanity. This unity of Christ with all who suffer also underlies the unity of all that is. Geoffrey B. Kelly argues, against those who split the secular from the sacred, that “Bonhoeffer maintained that, in the reality of Jesus Christ’s human solidarity with all peoples, including the hated Jew and the despised socialist, God invests the world with a unity in which one’s faith and one’s ‘worldliness’ must be reconciled.”<sup>89</sup> For Bonhoeffer, this reconciliation happens when the disciple and the church live fully in the world, as God became incarnate and lives fully in the world. This is the religionless Christianity of *Letters and Papers from Prison*: God is incarnate in the everyday realities of the world, and the community of disciples is called to live its own life there.

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<sup>85</sup> For a discussion of the relationship of this thinking of Bonhoeffer to liberation theology, cf. Richards, *Faith and Praxis in Liberation Theology*, 363 ff.

<sup>86</sup> *Letters and Papers*, 361.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly, “Prayer and Action for Justice: Bonhoeffer’s Spirituality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by John W. de Gruchy, 246-271 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 248.

### 3.4 Conclusion

Bonhoeffer's theology is radically Christocentric, focusing on Christ as *the* one in whom God becomes incarnate. This is the starting point for all thought about God or humanity. For Bonhoeffer, though, this does not lead to exclusivism or to a sense of Christian superiority. From beginning to ending, 'incarnation' is really concerned with 'the incarnate one,' a living person who exists in solidarity with the world, whose very essence is to be "for others." Bonhoeffer insists that Jesus Christ is always to be understood as the one who exists not for himself but for others – Christ *pro me*, Christ *pro nobis*. As Bonhoeffer also understands the incarnate one to be taking shape in the life of the church, so also the church can only rightly see its own life moving in the same direction: "The church is the church only when it exists for others."<sup>90</sup>

This understanding of the incarnation, and of the Body of Christ in the world, calls the church into a life lived in solidarity with the world. For Bonhoeffer, the community of disciples will find their life nowhere else but in the world in which Christ becomes incarnate:

The Christian . . . has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself ('My God, why has thou forsaken me?'), [the Christian] must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in . . . doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ.<sup>91</sup>

Real living, for Bonhoeffer, involves taking seriously "not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane."<sup>92</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, God is uniquely incarnate in the person Jesus Christ. In this particularity, there is unity and solidarity with all.

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<sup>90</sup> *Letters and Papers.*, 382.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

#### 4. SRI AUROBINDO: THE UNIVERSALITY OF INCARNATION

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950, born Aurobindo Ackroyd Ghose) is widely recognized as one of the most influential thinkers and spiritual figures to arise in India in the first half of the twentieth century. Raised in England, receiving an English and Christian education,<sup>1</sup> he returned to India in 1893<sup>2</sup> and immersed himself not only in India's intellectual and spiritual traditions but also, from the years 1903-1910,<sup>3</sup> in the political struggle against British rule. As a result of his connection with the Nationalist movement, he was accused in 1908<sup>4</sup> of being involved in a bomb plot. Although he was eventually acquitted, he did spend one year in prison, and during this time he had a number of spiritual experiences that profoundly affected his thinking.<sup>5</sup> After his release from prison, he began to withdraw from political activity, settling in Pondicherry where he spent the latter forty years of his life.

Although his own life appeared to be one of gradual withdrawal from active life, his teaching and writing continued to reflect the assumption that human spiritual development and engagement with the world are intimately connected. In his approach to the subject of the *avatara*, Aurobindo insisted on seeing the spiritual and the material coming together; what are conventionally seen as two different worlds are in fact complementary, mutually affecting each other. Based on the depth of his understanding of the pervasiveness of the Divine<sup>6</sup> in all, he saw matter and spirit always together and in relation to each other: matter itself is an expression of Spirit, and it is in the material world that spiritual evolution takes place.

Aurobindo's understanding of *avatara* and incarnation weaves its way throughout his broader perspective on humanity, history, and the Divine. In order to follow his train of thought,

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<sup>1</sup> Georges van Vrekhem, *Beyond the Human Species: the Life and Work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother* (St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House, 1998), 3-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. Vrekhem (10) notes that Aurobindo was first accused and acquitted in 1907.

<sup>6</sup> Following Aurobindo's usage, when "divine" is used as an adjective, it will be written with a lowercase "d." As a substantive, it will be capitalized.

we will begin with a consideration of his *Essays on the Gita*,<sup>7</sup> noting his perspective on the *avatar* Krishna and on the ways in which that perspective expands to a broader view of incarnation in humanity. Second, by drawing on the *Essays on the Gita* as well as on *the Life Divine*<sup>8</sup> and *The Mind of Light*<sup>9</sup> we will examine how this notion is rooted in Aurobindo's understanding of non-duality, which sees divinity and humanity, spirit and matter, as being real and being essentially the same. From there we will move to a consideration of this broader notion of incarnation and its connection to Aurobindo's evolutionary perspective. Finally, the chapter will conclude with reflections on the relationship between *avatar* and incarnation, evolution, and solidarity.

#### ***4.1 Essays on the Gita – the External and Inner Avatar***

Aurobindo's approach to the *avatar* is set within the overall purpose of his study of the Bhagavad Gita:

Our object . . . in studying the Gita will not be a scholastic or academical scrutiny of its thought, nor to place its philosophy in the history of metaphysical speculation, nor shall we deal with it in the manner of the analytical dialectician. We approach it for help and light and our aim must be to distinguish its essential and living message, that in it on which humanity has to seize for its perfection and its highest spiritual welfare.<sup>10</sup>

The *avatar* Krishna is the central figure of the Bhagavad Gita, and will be central to Aurobindo's early discussions in *Essays on the Gita*. In Chapter IV.5,6 of the Gita, Krishna makes the following claim for himself:

Many births of mine have passed, O Arjuna, and so is it with you also. I know them all, but you do not know them.

Though I am birthless and of immutable nature, though I am the Lord of all beings, yet by employing My own Nature (Prakrti) I am born out of My own free will.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (Twin Lakes, Wisconsin: Lotus Light, 1995). It should be noted that the Gita itself does not stand alone: It is a small but very significant part of the broader Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*.

<sup>8</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1987.).

<sup>9</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Mind of Light*, Introduction and Annotated Bibliography by Robert A. McDermott (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Quotations of the Bhagavad Gita are from *Sri Ramanuja Gita Bhasya, With Text in Devanagari & English Rendering, and Index of First Lines of Verses*, Translation by Svami Adidevananda (Mylapore, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, no date).

Aurobindo's view of the *avatar* follows this teaching of the *Gita* up to this point.<sup>12</sup> Krishna is "God himself descended into humanity,"<sup>13</sup> the Divine taking on a human birth and living life behind the veil of human flesh. While ordinary humans are born and reborn through no will of their own, in accordance with the dictates of their *karma*, Krishna's birth is an act of his own will – "I create myself by my own *maya*" (IV.7).<sup>14</sup> As a human actor in the human field of action, Krishna also acts as the Divine – albeit the Divine hidden in human form – who alone knows the purpose of each of his incarnations, and who is in fact the one guiding all of the events that unfold in the human realm, directing "from behind a veil."<sup>15</sup>

[Krishna] stands behind the great action of the Mahabharata, not as its hero, but as its secret centre and hidden guide. That action is the action of a whole world of men and nations . . . . Until the moment when all has been pushed to the terrible issue of the struggle on the field of Kurukshetra and the Avatar stands at last, still not as fighter, but as the charioteer in the battle-car which carries the destiny of the fight, he has not revealed Himself even to those whom he has chosen.<sup>16</sup>

There is mystery in Krishna's activity: Krishna is the "secret centre and hidden guide." But this mystery underlies the everyday and the tangible, the things that are not hidden. If Krishna is the actor and the director of all that happens, it remains important to locate Krishna within these events. The historical situation in which the Divine appears is important, and Aurobindo picks up this point.<sup>17</sup> The Divine does not become embodied randomly or on a whim, but rather comes into the world in particular situations, in response to particular events.

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<sup>12</sup> His emphasis will eventually differ from the emphasis of the *Gita*, however. See below, n. 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> The translation of Ramanuja's *Gita Bhasya* translates *maya* - left untranslated in this citation - with the term *magic*. Aurobindo does not understand *maya* to be 'magic' or 'illusion,' but rather understands *maya* to be creative, projective power, the power of the Divine to self-project in the world.

<sup>15</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> Julius Lipner, for one, agrees with Aurobindo on this point regarding the particular historical circumstances of the *avatar*. An understanding of the Divine being universally incarnate does not suggest that the particular circumstances of the manifestation of the *avatar* are unimportant. In fact, Lipner suggests that this is one of the significant differences between the understanding of incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity: In Hinduism, the contingency of the appearance of the *avatar* is stressed, for the *avatar* appears according to the needs of a particular time and place. See above, p. 26.

Aurobindo thus considers the historical situation of the incarnation to be of some importance.<sup>18</sup> However, the importance of historical considerations begins to recede as the purpose of the incarnation comes into focus. BG IV.7,8 hints at this:

Whenever there is a decline of Dharma, O Arjuna, and uprising of Adharma, then I incarnate Myself.

For the protection of the good and also for the destruction of the wicked, for the establishment of Dharma, am I born from age to age.

Although the Gita is located in a specific historical context, we see here that the purpose of the incarnation is related to the more general situation of the decay of *dharma*, which can and does happen in any era. In any such situation, the *avatar*'s role is spelled out to be that of restoring *dharma*, and here Aurobindo follows the Gita in stressing Krishna's role as the restorer of *dharma*.

Although Krishna is still seen to be responding to a particular situation by descending into a time of particular need, for Aurobindo the restoration of *dharma* and the particular historical figure Krishna take on a secondary importance – or, in the case of the historicity of Krishna, a greatly reduced importance, almost to the point of insignificance. The restoration of *dharma* is not an end in itself. The *avatar* does not simply come into the world to readjust the world and to force a correction of the way things are by acting upon a passive humanity. If this were what the descent of God were intended to accomplish, the descent would be entirely unnecessary. If “setting the world right” were what is needed, then a powerful God could accomplish this simply by acting from the heavens.<sup>19</sup> Restoration of *dharma*, though, involves not just a reordering of world affairs, but more importantly it refers to a change that will take place in humanity. The *avatar* manifests so that human nature can see and conform to what it sees in the *avatar*.<sup>20</sup> If the particular *avatar* is considered to be important, it is only important

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<sup>18</sup> So he does note that “the historical Krishna, no doubt, existed” (*Essays*, 12), although the context of the comment and the remainder of this chapter point towards a very limited significance of this historical Krishna.

<sup>19</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 140.

<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that this emphasis on Krishna as exemplar is Aurobindo's emphasis. In BG IV.8 Krishna speaks of playing a more active role, acting on the world as a protector and saviour rather than simply serving as an example: “For the protection of the good and also for the destruction of the wicked, for the establishment of Dharma, am I born from age to age.” Aurobindo places relatively little emphasis on this role of Krishna as saviour. This will

because the *avatar* demonstrates to humanity what it must become: “The Avatar . . . is the manifestation from above of that which we have to develop from below.”<sup>21</sup>

Clearly the descent of the *avatar* and the restoration of *dharma* serve a more important purpose, that of assisting the ascent of humanity “into Godhead.”<sup>22</sup> The work of the *avatar*, then, does have a double sense:

It has an outward side of the divine force acting upon the external world in order to maintain there and to reshape the divine law by which the Godward effort of humanity is kept from decisive retrogression and instead decisively carried forward . . . . It has an inward side of the divine force of the Godward consciousness acting upon the soul of the individual and the soul of the race, so that it may receive new forms of revelation of the Divine in man and may be sustained, renewed and enriched in its power of upward self-unfolding.<sup>23</sup>

The descent does not stand on its own as an important event. Its importance is always tied to the enabling of humanity’s “upward self-unfolding.”

There is a deeper level on which the particularity of the historical *avatar* fades in importance. Although the *avatar* comes at a particular time in response to a specific situation, the *avatar* is not unique in the sense of being a fundamentally different being. The Divine does not only descend in the birth of Krishna, or Rama, or of the Kalki *avatar* yet to come.<sup>24</sup> It would be quite accurate to say that the Divine “descends” to earth in the birth of all beings, as Aurobindo points out: “This eternal divine Consciousness [is] always present in every human being.”<sup>25</sup> The divine presence is understood in two ways. Sometimes – indeed very rarely – this presence comes about directly as a result of divine knowledge and will, with full self-consciousness, and this embodied Divine becomes “the guide, teacher, [and] leader of the

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be noted as a significant difference between Aurobindo’s view of the *avatar* and Bonhoeffer’s view of Christ. See below, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 148.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 140. Regarding the ascent of humanity, see below, “Evolution and Supermind” pp. 64 ff.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>24</sup> The Kalki *avatar* is believed to be the final *avatar* of Vishnu, and will destroy and recreate the world at the end of the Kaliyuga. Cf., for example, “The Puranic Avatars: The Buddha and Kalkin,” in *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit*, translated and with an introduction by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 231-237.

<sup>25</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 11.

world.”<sup>26</sup> This is the *avatar*. In all beings, though, the Divine is present yet hidden, and the person in whom the Divine dwells might feel “something of the power or light or love of the divine Gnosis informing or conducting them.”<sup>27</sup> It is this latter sense that seems to be most important for Aurobindo. For this divine light, power, or presence within each is the same divine presence as that in the *avatar*. The external manifestation in the ‘historic’ *avatar* is different than the internal manifestation which dwells in every human being only in degree of consciousness: Krishna is fully self-conscious of his divinity, and thus not bound to the law of *karma* that binds the rest of humanity to the cycle of death and rebirth. The divinity of the rest of humanity is veiled, and it is this which must be revealed. Krishna, then, is seen by Aurobindo to be a model of divine self-consciousness to which all of humanity can strive.

The difference between the two types of incarnation can be further expressed in terms of knowledge and ignorance. The presence of the *one* Divine in the *avatar* and in the ordinary person is seen in apparently opposite terms: “The language of the Gita shows therefore that the divine birth is that of the conscious Godhead in our humanity and essentially the opposite of the ordinary birth even though the same means are used, because it is not the birth into the Ignorance, but the birth of the knowledge . . . .”<sup>28</sup> The difference between the two types of birth is not, however, absolute. Although Aurobindo speaks of the two as “essentially the opposite,” it is clear that they do not present a duality. The same Divine is born in both cases, and the movement from ignorance to knowledge does not suggest a change into a different type, a step directly from one type to another, but rather an evolutionary change, a stage-by-stage movement in which one person, infused by the same divine presence, moves from being ignorant of his or her true identity to being fully knowledgeable of the divine presence.

For Aurobindo, then, the Divine eternally incarnate in all represents the highest possibility and the most important focus. This sense of incarnation is more important than the Divine fully manifest in Krishna, or in any of the *avatars*:

When we thus understand the conception of Avatarhood, we see that . . . the external aspect [i.e. The appearance in Krishna] has only secondary importance. Such controversies as the one . . . over the historicity of Christ, would seem to a spiritually-minded Indian largely a waste of time . . . . If the Christ, God made man, lives within our spiritual being, it would seem to matter little whether or not a son of Mary

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 147-8.



physically lived and suffered and died in Judea. So too the Krishna who matters to us is the eternal incarnation of the Divine and not the historical teacher and leader of men.<sup>29</sup>

Divine and human come together in every birth, and this is what is most important for Aurobindo. The inner *avatar*, incarnate in all, is the expression of divinity that matters the most.

#### 4.2 *Uniting Divinity and Humanity*

The task of the *avatar* is to descend into the human realm; humanity's task is to ascend to the Divine. Although he speaks of the Divine and the human, the descent and the ascent, for Aurobindo the two will always go together. Whether he speaks of inner divinity and outer manifestation, or of inner *avatar* and external *avatar*, central for Aurobindo is the concern to hold the human and the Divine together as one. For Aurobindo, this holding together of the Divine and the human is fully exemplified in the *avatar*:

The Avatar is always a dual phenomenon of divinity and humanity; the Divine takes upon himself the human nature with all its outward limitations and makes them the circumstances, means, instruments of the divine consciousness and the divine power, a vessel of the divine birth and the divine works. . . . [T]he object of the Avatar's descent . . . is precisely to show that the human birth with all its limitations can be made such a means and instrument of the divine birth and divine works, precisely to show that the human type of consciousness can be compatible with the divine essence of consciousness made manifest, can be converted into its vessel, drawn into nearer conformity with it . . . .<sup>30</sup>

On one level, the two types of birth – the human and the divine – are the same, for the same Divine is born in Krishna that is born in any other person. On a deeper level, both types of birth of the one Divine are embodied in Krishna himself: The Divine takes on human form in Krishna's human birth, and that human form becomes the means through which the Divine works. Because this “dual phenomenon” is seen in Krishna, it is also seen in humanity: the Divine is manifest in the human birth, and in this human form consciousness is drawn nearer to the Divine. In the birth and the life of Krishna, the Divine descends and ascends; in the birth and life of humanity, the Divine descends and ascends.

It remains essential for Aurobindo that this underlying unity of divinity and humanity be affirmed. On the one hand, dualistic thinking threatens this unity, for such thinking will divide

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 155.

the Divine from the human, spirit from matter. Yet Aurobindo also sees monism threatening this unity, and he sees two types of monism contending with each other: One is a monism of matter that denies the reality of spirit, the other is a monism of spirit that denies the reality of matter. These are two misguided views of reality that broadly represent the west and the east respectively.

Aurobindo refers to the first of these views as ‘the materialist denial.’<sup>31</sup> The materialist denial is a denial of the Spirit, a denial which says that anything that is not readily apparent to the senses is a fabrication, an illusion, perhaps even a projection of hopes. Aurobindo sees this as the negative side of materialism: It becomes a “Monism of Matter”<sup>32</sup> that denies the reality of Spirit. According to this view of the world, Reason is limited to the domain of the senses and cannot go beyond the senses to any deeper knowledge.<sup>33</sup>

The second kind of denial is the refusal of the ascetic<sup>34</sup> – the refusal to accept the material world as having any significance. In denying the material world as simply an illusion of the senses,<sup>35</sup> the ascetic falls into a kind of monism of spirit, and fails to grasp Reality “in its full extent and comprehensiveness,”<sup>36</sup> an extent and comprehensiveness which embraces the material world.

Both views offer an incomplete focus, a misguided emphasis on the one to the exclusion of the other. So Europe has experienced “the fullness of riches and the triumphant mastery of this world’s powers and possessions” while at the same time it has moved towards “an equal bankruptcy in the things of the Spirit.”<sup>37</sup> India, on the other hand, has experienced “a great heaping up of the treasures of the Spirit,” but has also found “a great bankruptcy of Life.”<sup>38</sup> The one view refuses to see any reality or value outside of the material; the other view refuses to see any reality or value in the material.

While rejecting the monisms of the materialist and the ascetic, Aurobindo at the same time insists that both perspectives have a positive expression. So materialism is an affirmation of

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. *The Life Divine*, chapter 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *The Life Divine*, Chapter 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

matter and of the reality of the world of the senses, and it has done humanity a service, for it has swept away “the most perilous distortions and misleading imaginations,”<sup>39</sup> it has done away with “perverting superstitions and irrationalising dogmas.”<sup>40</sup> By removing what distorts and misleads, materialism has enabled the advance of knowledge, and materialism itself brings knowledge to the point where it is able to move beyond the limits of the senses and into a deeper inquiry. Likewise, the perspective of the ascetic has a positive expression, for it recognizes a realm of knowledge and inquiry beyond the uncertain and changing realm of the senses:

[T]here is, attainable to us, a consciousness yet more transcendent, – (*sic*) transcendent not only of the ego, but of the Cosmos itself, – (*sic*) against which the universe seems to stand out like a petty picture against an immeasurable background. . . . [It is] the one thing free from change, birth, [and] death . . . .<sup>41</sup>

As materialism brings knowledge to the limits of the senses, the ascetic view opens up a perspective beyond those limits.

Neither view is complete in itself, then, and Aurobindo sees the material and the spiritual as equally important and tied to one another:

The affirmation of a divine life upon earth and an immortal sense in mortal existence can have no base unless we recognise not only eternal Spirit as the inhabitant of this bodily mansion, the wearer of this mutable robe, but accept Matter of which it is made, as a fit and noble material out of which He weaves constantly His garbs, builds recurrently the unending series of His mansions.<sup>42</sup>

Spirit inhabits matter, and matter is the means by which Spirit dwells in the world.

Aurobindo goes further and avoids both dualism and monism by continuing to emphasize that everything is an expression of God; the material world is itself *Brahman's* self-expression. He is not treading any new ground at this point. There are certainly echoes of Ramanuja and the idea of the world as God's body, with the multiplicity of matter simply expressing the multiple aspects or qualities of God.<sup>43</sup> The notion of the infinite taking on the finite is nothing new to the tradition to which Aurobindo belongs.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Ramanuja's commentary on Chapter 10 of the Bhagavad Gita, especially verses 19ff, for a clearer expression of Ramanuja's understanding of the world as attributes of God and the world as God's body (*Sri Ramanuja Gita Bhasya*, 325-353.).

It is not surprising, then, that Aurobindo will even speak of God taking on limitations when taking on human qualities, and this will extend to his understanding of the *avatar*:

Even human sorrow and physical suffering he must assume and use so as to show, first, how that suffering may be a means of redemption, – as did Christ, – secondly, to show how, having been assumed by the divine soul in the human nature, it can also be overcome – as did Buddha. . . . [T]he Avatar of sorrow and suffering must come before there can be the Avatar of divine joy.<sup>44</sup>

Aurobindo even suggests that the *avatar*, whose consciousness of divinity far exceeds that of other humans, might still be taking on the human trait of a limited consciousness of divinity – for if the *avatar* appears in successive generations, at different points in time in an evolutionary process,<sup>45</sup> then surely the final *avatar* will be one who has fully evolved in divine consciousness. So Krishna, for instance, could still be understood to be incomplete – the fullest expression yet, but not the fullest expression that could be.<sup>46</sup>

To speak in this way of divine limitation poses no problem for Aurobindo. What might appear to Western consciousness to be a limitation of the infinite is, in Aurobindo's view,<sup>47</sup> simply an expression – one of countless expressions – of the Divine's being. What appears to be divine limitation is simply the Divine becoming what the Divine will become.

Even if the Divine appears to become limited, this self-limitation is a power of the Divine – a “power of self-limitation for a particular working, . . . one of the powers we should expect to exist among the manifold energies of the Infinite.”<sup>48</sup> As a divine power, even self-limitation is no real limitation: “The Absolute is not really limited by putting forth in itself a cosmos of relations; it is the natural play of its absolute being, consciousness, force, self-delight. The Infinite is not limited by building up in itself an infinite series of interplaying finite phenomena; rather that is its natural self-expression.”<sup>49</sup> Earlier in *The Life Divine*, Aurobindo speaks of the same Infinite as being “so free that it is not even bound by its liberty. It can play at

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However, Aurobindo sees the approaches of all three of the major teachers of the schools of Vedanta – Sankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva – as deficient, each one overemphasizing one aspect of Brahman/the Divine to the exclusion of the others (*Life Divine*, 149).

<sup>44</sup> *Essays*, 156.

<sup>45</sup> See below, “Evolution and Supermind,” pp. 64ff.

<sup>46</sup> *Essays*, 157.

<sup>47</sup> He also argues that this is the prevailing Indian worldview. See below, p. 63, n. 55.

<sup>48</sup> *Life Divine*, 595.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

being bound without incurring a real bondage.”<sup>50</sup> This play takes place for a reason: the infinite takes on a multiplicity of forms – and limits itself in these forms – so that the individual can evolve from ignorance into a deeper understanding of the unity in the multiplicity of the Divine.<sup>51</sup>

This incarnation in the multiplicity of forms extends to the human world, but also to the non-human and to the non-sentient world. Aurobindo tells of a vision he received while he was in jail:

I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell, but it was not the tree, I knew it was . . . Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me His shade. . . . As I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch, I felt the arms of Sri Krishna around me, the arms of my Friend and lover. . . . I looked at the prisoners in jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them I saw Vasudeva, it was Narayana whom I found in those darkened souls and misused bodies.<sup>52</sup>

In this we see an example of the breadth and the universality of the notion of incarnation for Aurobindo. Troy Wilson Organ describes it well: In Aurobindo’s understanding, “the cosmos is a working out of the being of *Brahman*. Without this manifestation, *Brahman* would not be the All. The world process is not a regrettable fate, nor a moral retribution, nor a tragic experiment, but a joyous expression of fullness of being.”<sup>53</sup> The Divine taking form in the world is not an unusual occurrence. It is simply the way the Divine expresses its infinite possibilities.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>51</sup> See “Exclusive Concentration and the Ignorance,” *The Life Divine*, 581-595.

Aurobindo likens the “concentration” of the divine in the individual being to the concentration of an actor in a drama or an artisan in a craft, such that the actor becomes so involved in the work being done that he or she becomes oblivious to the world around and indeed even to the other aspects of his or her own life and being, even though these other things continue to exist. The divine concentrates in the individual in such a way that the divine becomes unaware of the divine in all, in other aspects of the divine being. Thus the individual, (and therefore the divine) can experience the joy of self-discovery, the joy of the broadening awareness of the interconnectedness of all the multiplicity of forms, the joy of moving from ignorance to true knowledge.

<sup>52</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Speeches and Writings*, 90. As quoted in Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*, 68. See below, p. 78, n. 2, for further discussion of the presence of Krishna and Christ in nature and humanity.

<sup>53</sup> Troy Organ, “The Self in Aurobindo.” In *Philosophy for the Left Hand* (New York, Peter Lang, 1990), 112.

This view of the Divine taking on a multiplicity of forms serves to underline an important element in Aurobindo's thought and, it could be argued, a central perspective in much of Hindu thought: If there is to be talk of incarnation in Hinduism, it is most important to speak as broadly as possible of this incarnation, just as Aurobindo spoke of the trees and the walls of his cell, as well as his fellow prisoners, as embodying the divine presence. In *Essays on the Gita*, he makes the comment that this general notion of incarnation is in fact what makes the particular notion of the *avatar* so easily received in the Indian consciousness, which has a "strongly [held] belief in the reality of the Avatara, the descent into form, the revelation of the Godhead in humanity."<sup>54</sup> In Indian thought, this is simply how the Divine is manifest in the world – it is the logical outcome of a worldview that is millennia old.<sup>55</sup>

The divine presence, then, does not single out the *avatar* as unique – divine self-consciousness does – for the Divine is present everywhere. Thus, as a manifestation of the Divine, it is not the external *avatar* who matters.<sup>56</sup> The important *avatar* is always the inner *avatar*, the Divine present in all beings, in all forms. This stress on the inner *avatar* overcomes both dualism and monism, and locates the incarnation of the Divine in all that is. What the West

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<sup>54</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 10

<sup>55</sup> Aurobindo contrasts this with his understanding of Western thought: "In the West this belief has never really stamped itself upon the mind because it has been presented through exoteric Christianity as a theological dogma without any roots in the reason and general consciousness and attitude towards life." (*Essays on the Gita*, 10) Western thought, particularly Western Christianity, has presented incarnation as a particular and unusual event that establishes the uniqueness of one person. Incarnation is itself often thought of as what makes the incarnate one – for instance, Christ – unique.

It could be asked whether Aurobindo is representing the notion of incarnation in the west accurately, though. Although Western thought does not demonstrate the same general notion of incarnation that Aurobindo argues Indian thought has, the notion of God incarnate in Jesus is so ingrained in the west that it could hardly be said that it "has never really stamped itself on the mind." Further to this, the notion of a particular incarnation is not unique to Christianity. In *The Myth of God Incarnate*, Michael Goulder and Frances Young engage in an interesting discussion about the origins of belief in incarnation, linking the notion of the divine birth in the exceptional individual (prophets, teachers, royalty, etc.) to a variety of Middle Eastern, Greek, and Roman motifs (Michael Goulder, "The Two Roots of the Christian Myth," in *The Myth Of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977), 64-86; Frances Young, "Two Roots or a Tangled Mass?", in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 87-121).

<sup>56</sup> Once again it should be noted that Aurobindo's emphasis on the internal avatar differs from the *Gita's* contention that Krishna the *avatar* comes to earth with a particular intention to save, not only to be an example or a teacher.

might call incarnation (with all of its connotations of uniqueness) is simply a matter of manifestation.

As Troy Organ points out, this view of incarnation as universal manifestation ensures that it is not a static view, but is rather a dynamic one in which *Brahman* is truly becoming something. Aurobindo sees the world as “the progressive self-manifestation of *Brahman* in time,”<sup>57</sup> and the act of creation is connected to “*Brahman*’s movement of self-knowledge”<sup>58</sup> in which he “find[s] himself in the apparent opposites of his being . . . .”<sup>59</sup> Terms such as “progressive,” “movement,” and “finding” imply that divine revelation is an ongoing process, an uncovering, an advancing revelation. *Brahman* is revealed to *Brahman*’s own self in the progressive revelation of creation: “Aurobindo regarded the physical world of essential value, since it was for him the progressive self-manifestation of *Brahman* in time.”<sup>60</sup> The creation of the world is *Brahman*’s self-projection, a self-projection that happens in order that *Brahman* might see what it will become.<sup>61</sup>

#### ***4.3 Evolution and Supermind***

At this point, the most distinctive feature of Aurobindo’s thought begins to become clear. This is his evolutionary perspective, a perspective that will also have implications for the consideration of the role and the importance of the *avatar*.

Aurobindo has already identified the problem of human ignorance. Ignorance does not see unity: It sees plurality or duality. The individual in a state of ignorance sees himself or herself as a centre of perception surrounded by sense objects, things that are perceived and experienced, and that are separate from the individual. With this perception, people learn to see the world as fundamentally divided between subject and object, between themselves – individual and independent entities – and all of the independent entities and selves that surround them. Persons in bondage to ignorance see themselves as separate from the material world, separate from the ‘animal’ world, and separate from the Divine. Finally, such a perspective becomes a

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<sup>57</sup> Organ, 107.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., quoting *The Life Divine*, 591.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 107

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

kind of dualism of matter and Spirit. There is a material, differentiated world, and there is an impersonal and undifferentiated Divine.

What Aurobindo has proposed in order to mediate between these two is the concept of Supermind.<sup>62</sup> Supermind is “a Truth-Consciousness...always free from the Ignorance that is the foundation of our present natural or evolutionary existence.”<sup>63</sup> It is “an eternal reality of the divine Being and the divine Nature,”<sup>64</sup> eternal, uncreated, and unchanging. Yet at the same time Supermind is the means of the divine self-projection, which gives rise to the world, to the whole process of creation including the creation of humans who are in bondage to ignorance. As such, Supermind is a Truth-consciousness that at one and the same time sees the divine unity, is the means through which the divine unity comes to be expressed in the diversity of creation, and is the source of an “involution,”<sup>65</sup> from divine perfect consciousness to the Ignorance which is inherent in the life of the Divine embodied in material form.<sup>66</sup>

As the means through which the Divine becomes expressed in the multiplicity of forms, Supermind is also itself hidden in the world, “concealed behind this manifest mind, life, and Matter . . . .”<sup>67</sup> As Supermind descends into the world, and as Supermind is already concealed within all that is, so Supermind will also act upon humanity, enabling humanity to continue to evolve in consciousness and to move closer to the goal of divine self-consciousness.<sup>68</sup> The evolution of which Aurobindo speaks is thus an evolution of humanity back to its divine origins,

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<sup>62</sup> A full discussion of Supermind is beyond the scope of this paper. See *Life Divine*, Book One, Chapters 14-18 (pp. 122-172) for a more detailed introduction to Supermind. See also Sri Aurobindo, *The Mind of Light* – one of Aurobindo’s last writings - for a concise yet very full treatment of Supermind.

<sup>63</sup> *Mind of Light*, 79.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>65</sup> By ‘involution’ Aurobindo means the movement by which the Divine becomes involved in the world of matter and, ultimately, ignorance, out of which divine consciousness will evolve. See *The Life Divine*, 112ff., 129.

<sup>66</sup> *Life Divine*, 145-146.

<sup>67</sup> *Mind of Light*, 80.

<sup>68</sup> Aurobindo sees this kind of evolution as simply a continuation of the same process of evolution that has seen life arise from previously inert matter, and mind (particularly the limited but still highly developed mind of humanity) arise from life. Evolution is always an ongoing modification of previous forms (cf. *Mind of Light*, 55). The descent of the Supermind is an evolution into the very depths of matter. The ascent of humanity to Supermind, to the divine consciousness, is a retracing of this evolution in the opposite direction, an evolution that has always been in process.



an evolution back to divine consciousness which first gave rise to humanity and to the created world.

The reality of Supermind for Aurobindo breaks down the duality between matter and spirit. Supermind is “an already- and always-existent plane of being, the nexus of Spirit and Matter, holding in its truth and reality and making certain the whole meaning and aim of the universe.”<sup>69</sup> Supermind is so inherently tied up with the universe that the evolution of the universe becomes not just a possibility but “the inevitable consequence contained not only in Nature as a whole but even in material Nature.”<sup>70</sup> Evolution, as Aurobindo understands it, is not one possible option for the material world. It is simply the universe becoming what it is.

Thomas Aykara sees Supermind as the one thing that establishes and holds together the unity within the diversity, the divine presence in all; it is the mediator, the means of *Brahman's* self-extension into external manifestation, the bridge of the gap, the combiner of “the impersonal Being, personal God and individual self into three inseparable and equally real modes of the supreme Reality.”<sup>71</sup> Because of Supermind, the created world exists; because of Supermind, the possibility of realizing one's own and the created world's identity with the Divine exists.

What the *avatar* presents to humanity is a model of this higher stage of consciousness, a stage that has moved beyond the ego-centric way of seeing and has evolved to the point of seeing all as a whole. The *avatar* sees the perceived diversity of the world absorbed in a fundamental unity, and sees the unity of the Divine expressed, embodied, in the multiform universe. This is not a consciousness that belongs to a different kind of being, it is simply a higher stage of consciousness to which all of the world is evolving, or could evolve.<sup>72</sup> The *avatar* is fully

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Aykara, “Meeting Between East and West: the vision of Sri Aurobindo.” *Journal of Dharma* 27, no. 2 (2002): 174.

<sup>72</sup> In *The Mind of Light*, however, Aurobindo shows signs of ambiguity regarding the question of whether all will evolve to the same level: “How far this would go, whether the whole of humanity would be touched or only a part of it ready for the change, would depend on what was intended or possible in the continued order of the universe. If the old evolutionary principle and order must be preserved, then only a section of the race would pass onward, the rest would keep the old human position, level, and function in the ascending order....But...a total change of the mental principle, such as has been suggested, cannot be ruled out as impossible.” (*The Mind of Light*, 96-97).

conscious of being divine,<sup>73</sup> is fully conscious that the Divine pervades all, and so naturally the *avatar* sees the unity both *in* the diversity and *underlying* the diversity. A human still living in ignorance is not fully conscious of this, but since this is the consciousness of the one who pervades all, this consciousness can evolve in all. While the *avatar* Krishna (or any other *avatar* in his or her own era, for that matter) is unique in this divine self-consciousness, the goal of human existence, in fact the goal of the cosmos, is to develop and go beyond this divine self-consciousness to perfect knowledge, which sees the Divine as the all-pervasive source of all.

While the *avatar* does present this model of consciousness, and in an evolutionary perspective – based on the idea of Supermind – what becomes evident throughout all of Aurobindo’s thought is that the *avatar* as historical figure is not of any greater ultimate value than the inner *avatar* in all. The external *avatar* merely points to the inner *avatar* and what it will become. *Brahman* is incarnate in all, and all is evolving towards Supermind, so incarnation, avatarhood, or whatever it might be called, is most importantly understood as the inner Divine which all seek to recognize and which is evolving to Supermind. The contradiction between matter and spirit is resolved, as matter is the means of *Brahman*’s self-revelation. Far from being illusory, matter is the ground within which evolution takes place. The human being, properly understood, is simply “the Divine in the individual ascending back out of limited Nature to its own proper divinity.”<sup>74</sup> Spirit is manifest in all beings, with humanity as the highest expression. Spirit is not something to be thought of only as something to be realized in the next or in another life, it is rather something towards the realization of which humankind evolves now. Even history comes to be seen in this evolutionary perspective: “The history of the cycles of man is a progress towards the unveiling of the Godhead in the soul and life of humanity; each high event and stage of it is a divine manifestation.”<sup>75</sup> It is not only human individuals or the human race that evolve; all of matter evolves, and all of time is evolution.

The concept of evolution is important, for it distinguishes Aurobindo’s approach from one which would see the renunciation of matter and the denial of the body as necessary for

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<sup>73</sup> See above, p. 57.

<sup>74</sup> *Life Divine*, 150.

<sup>75</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 361-362. Although Aurobindo is writing at this point about the *Vibhuti*, and therefore is emphasizing the highest points of history and the great figures of history, it is clear that he sees this same evolution taking place universally, not only in high points of history or heroic figures.

spiritual growth. Organ points this out and emphasizes that evolution is something that affects all matter: “The evolutionary ascent to the spirit is an evolution of all planes of being, and no lower plane is to be sloughed off in the attainment of salvation.”<sup>76</sup> Aurobindo argues that it is essential that all of nature be seen as something that will be integrated into the Divine in this whole evolutionary process. Rather than being sloughed off, nature is taken up and integrated into the Divine. Rather than being seen as illusory, nature is real, and is on an evolutionary path toward higher consciousness. If all of creation, including humanity, is a projection of *Brahman* in the world, then to leave the material world behind would be to leave *Brahman* behind and to deny the fullness of *Brahman* as expressed in multiplicity. Indeed, Aurobindo states that “we climb ill if we forget our base.”<sup>77</sup> To leave behind the body is to leave behind a part of what is real and can only lead to an incomplete consciousness.

Finally, evolution is simply seen as the natural way. It is not the special privilege of a select few or the life’s work of a chosen group. Humans naturally aspire to the Divine, and “at the heart of this existential aspiration is the mutable Becoming of the immutable Being, a self-projection of *Brahman* into the conditions of space and time.... Man becomes the incarnation of the Logos, the expression of the creative power; the absolute becomes involved in matter.”<sup>78</sup> As the absolute projects itself and becomes, so the material world into which that absolute projects is itself becoming, evolving, seeking its own origin. Thus, the descent of the Divine is at the heart of the ascent of the human. The two are the same. There is no duality, there is simply evolution – from the depths of ignorance into which the Divine has descended, to the heights of consciousness to which humanity ascends.

With this evolutionary approach, the importance of humanity could be said to equal the importance of the *avatar*. For if the *avatar* comes to show humanity what it might become, humanity itself is seen to have a similarly lofty purpose:

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<sup>76</sup> Organ, 113.

<sup>77</sup> *Life Divine*, 36. In his discussion of this same matter, Organ points out that from the beginning to the end of the evolutionary process, humankind is understood to be divine through and through, and so “Man does not become *Brahman*; he is *Brahman*.” (Organ, 117).

Having noted earlier (see above, p. 60, n. 43) the similarity between Aurobindo and Ramanuja, it is worth noting at this point that Aurobindo differs from Ramanuja on the matter of renouncing or not renouncing matter. For while both claim that the created world is in some way an attribute or expression of God, Ramanuja sees matter as something “which deserves to be abandoned.” (*Sri Ramanuja Gita Bhasya*, 327).

<sup>78</sup> Aykara, 171.

Brahman is in this world to represent Itself in the values of Life. Life exists in Brahman in order to discover Brahman in itself. Therefore man's importance in the world is that he gives to it that development of consciousness in which its transfiguration by a perfect self-discovery becomes possible. To fulfil God in life is man's manhood.<sup>79</sup>

As Organ says, "Man must enlarge himself without losing himself; he must become God without ceasing to be man."<sup>80</sup> Humanity does not leave the material world behind to ascend to spirit. The world of matter is *Brahman's* own way of being in the world, and it is within (not away from) this world that evolution takes place.

The descent of God and the ascent of humanity come together in the evolving consciousness, in the Supermind. The descent and the ascent are simply two divine movements: the involution into matter, and the evolution of consciousness to the Divine. At this point, it appears that a shift has appeared, and the *avatar* is not even as important as previously claimed in the *Essays on the Gita*. In *The Life Divine* and in *The Mind of Light*, the descent of God and the ascent of humanity can happen without the *avatar*. Yet it remains important to state that the ascent of humanity can happen only because the Divine has descended and is always already present in humanity.

#### ***4.4 Incarnation, Evolution, and Solidarity***

One might expect to see this importance of humanity in the evolutionary process leading to a strong sense of solidarity, for if all humans share this value, then those who know this will feel a kinship with others. Aurobindo's work does indeed demonstrate this sense of solidarity based on notions of the value and importance of humankind, but the solidarity has deeper roots, roots that have already been touched upon.

Aurobindo has argued that the highest aspiration for a person is to achieve that higher Truth Consciousness, to "become God" – the God which one already is – to discover *Brahman* as being fully within oneself. The sense of solidarity in Aurobindo's work becomes more prominent as he emphasizes the importance of discovering that divine presence outside of oneself as well: "The liberated soul extends its perception of unity horizontally as well as vertically. Its unity with the transcendent One is incomplete without its unity with the cosmic

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<sup>79</sup> *Life Divine*, 36.

<sup>80</sup> Organ, 115.

Many.”<sup>81</sup> Note the importance of this lateral extension. It is not enough to be aware of one’s own unity with the Divine. If this is not accompanied by an awareness of unity with all that exists, then it is an incomplete unity. This kind of broadening of the sense of unity is not optional in Aurobindo’s thought, it is a requirement for the liberated soul: “The individual being does not and cannot lose the consciousness of its identity with all beings and with the One Being.”<sup>82</sup> The theme of the unity that underlies the diversity and the unity that expresses itself in that same diversity is a theme that feeds a sense of solidarity and is expressed here. Organ notes this same connection between the inner and the outer: “Until man turns his vision inward, he is separated from other selves and from God; in other words, he is separated from his own true being.”<sup>83</sup> While this could suggest a withdrawal to the inner life (“until the vision is turned inward”), the connection between one’s “own true being,” “other selves,” and God suggests, once more, a unity of the inner and the outer.

K.D. Verma sees a similar unity between inner and outer in all of Aurobindo’s thought. While it may be easy to divide Aurobindo’s life into two distinct phases – a political era and then the deeper and more reflective spiritual era – Verma sees Aurobindo’s spiritual vision in both of these eras, underlying all of his political activity and nationalistic aspirations, as well as his broader social and political vision. He notes: “Aurobindo’s spiritual vision had enabled him to invest divinity upon his country, his land, and his nation, to see in each man the sleeping divinity that needs to be awakened, and to believe firmly that the solemn . . . affirmation of the will of the people can wipe out the stains of slavery.”<sup>84</sup> Not even the nation as a form of matter is sloughed off, and the importance of the nation is tied to the elimination of slavery. Moreover, the vision goes beyond nationalism, for “the divinity that was once attributed to the state is now vested in mankind as a whole, the divine humanity.”<sup>85</sup> A worldview that sees the Divine in all could not stop with nationalism. The “inner divinity” in the nation is also the inner divinity in the individual, and in either case it is tied to the good of others.

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<sup>81</sup> *Life Divine*, 40.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>83</sup> Organ, 116.

<sup>84</sup> K.D. Verma, “The Social and Political Vision of Sri Aurobindo,” *Through a Glass Darkly: Essays in the Religious Imagination*, ed. John c. Hawley, 206-227 (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 210.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

This sense of connection with others – whether “others” means individuals or the nation – is seen as being much more than some kind of optional activity in which one might participate. It is essential to any spiritual quest, and Verma points out that “Man creates his new higher self by participating in the good of others.”<sup>86</sup> The movement seems to be from the outer life to the inner life: One does not become liberated, enlightened, and then somehow “apply” that to relationships with the world; the search for the good of the other is in fact the means to one’s own awakening divinity.

It seems possible, though, to see the relationship the other way, with one’s internal quest taking priority over the recognition of the Divine in the other. Verma suggests this as well: “The individual has the unquestionable right to strive to achieve the highest form of wisdom, since it is only by awakening divinity in oneself that one would know how to apprehend divinity in another.”<sup>87</sup> Here priority seems to be given to the inner quest, which then affects one’s outer vision. In these two cases it could be tempting to see two contradictory visions, in which either the inner or the outer receives priority. If a dualist worldview is maintained, then the two visions are contradictory – either the inner comes first and then the outer, or vice-versa. The underlying theme of all of Aurobindo’s vision, though, is that of unity, the unity that underlies all diversity. In this vision, the inner and the outer are not two separate realms vying for priority, but are, rather, united – for *Brahman* is manifest in all matter. In Verma’s reading of Aurobindo, this unity yields a kind of cycle, then: a cycle of evolution and solidarity. Seeking the good of others leads to the growth of one’s inner self, one’s own awakening inner divinity opens one’s eyes to see the divinity in others, which strengthens the natural urge to seek the good of others, and the cycle continues on. There is no duality, so the good of others, the divinity of oneself, and the divinity of the other are simply assumed, interconnected, one and the same.

This outward looking nature of the inward quest appears often in Aurobindo’s work, but most notably in *Essays on the Gita*:

The man born to the divine birth has found the Divine not only in himself, but also in all beings. He has realised his unity with all and his equality is therefore full of sympathy and oneness. He sees all as himself and is not intent on his lonely salvation; he even takes upon himself the burden of their happiness and sorrow by which he is not himself

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 221.

affected or subjected. The perfect sage . . . is ever engaged with a large equality in doing good to all creatures and makes that his occupation and delight....<sup>88</sup>

Once again, there is not a duality of the inner search and the outer life. The Divine is manifest within and without, and the inner quest is tied to the outer life.

In the context of comparative thought and the challenge of religious pluralism, Aurobindo sees unity behind the diversity of the world's religious traditions: "The divine manifestation of a Christ, Krishna, Buddha in external humanity has for its inner truth the same manifestation of the eternal Avatar within in our own inner humanity. That which has been done in the outer human life of earth, may be repeated in the inner life of all human beings."<sup>89</sup> Here we see again the significant priority that is given to the (universal) inner *avatar*, for the particular incarnations in historical figures are only isolated instances of the universal incarnation in all. Behind the varieties of *avatars*, *vibhutis*, religious figures and everyday people this inner incarnation reveals a fundamental unity.

Aurobindo seeks to express this underlying unity as broadly as possible, seeing it underlying not just the multiplicity of religious figures but the multiplicity of belief as well:

A unity behind diversity and discord is the secret of the variety of human religions and philosophies; for they all get at some image or some side clue, touch some portion of the one Truth or envisage some one of its myriad aspects. Whether they see dimly the material world as the body of the Divine, or life as a great pulsation of the breath of Divine Existence . . . whether they worship [God] with universality as the cosmic Being or limit [God] . . . in humanity only . . . whether they perceive [God] as the Lord of Nature, Father and Creator, or as Nature herself and the universal Mother . . . the truth behind must ever be the same because all is the one Divine Infinite whom all are seeking. Because everything is that One, there must be this endless variety in the human approach to its possession . . . . All religions are seen as approaches to a single Truth . . . . For that which all our mind-knowledge and sense-knowledge and suprasensuous vision is seeking, is found most integrally in the unity of God and man and Nature and all that is in Nature.<sup>90</sup>

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

If solidarity is understood as a sense of being united – a sense of being united that inspires action together or action on behalf of – then Aurobindo's work and thought clearly

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<sup>88</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 189-190.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>90</sup> *The Life Divine*, 699-701. The entire quote should be consulted to appreciate fully the breadth of unity that Aurobindo is seeking to express.

expresses a kind of solidarity. At the heart of all that he writes is the understanding that behind what we see and experience as multiplicity is indeed really a unity – for the Divine is involved in everything that is. Multiplicity, rather than being understood in contrast to unity, is simply an expression of the infinite possibility of the Divine. To be fully conscious of this unity, to know oneself and all else as divine, is the highest human aspiration. Solidarity is inseparable from enlightenment, and to recognize this common divinity is to recognize one’s unity with God, with the other, with all others, with the world.

Solidarity takes shape on a number of levels. In light of the breadth of this vision of unity behind diversity amongst religious traditions, Thomas Aykara sees implications for those who work in theology and the study of religion. He concludes that Aurobindo’s synthesis calls on theologians of the future to

open themselves [to the depth and power of human consciousness], and integrate their resources into the faith, lived out daily, in which they encounter in concrete form the human consciousness of God. The emergent mysticism of Aurobindo, constitutively integrating unity in diversity, can possibly inspire theologians to create a more open and assimilative theology, especially in the field of theology of religious pluralism.<sup>91</sup>

According to Aykara’s reading, theology itself can become an expression of solidarity.

In Aurobindo’s own words, the vision of unity – with the incarnate Divine at the heart of all – also brings together the perspective *and* the action of the contemplative and the activist: “[T]he quietism of the impassive soul . . . and the kinetism (*sic*) of the soul giving itself to Nature . . . are not a reality and a falsehood in perpetual struggle nor yet two hostile realities, one superior, the other inferior . . . ; they are the double term of the divine manifestation.”<sup>92</sup> Because the Divine is manifest in all, and because the Divine acts in all, all paths are paths of the Divine. In this way Aurobindo seeks to express the unity of the Gita’s vision, but he also expresses the possibility of a unity or a solidarity between the monastic and the secular, between the ‘ivory tower’ and the street, between all realms of endeavour, in the East or the West, that are seen as being in conflict with one another or at least separate from each other.

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<sup>91</sup> Aykara, 176.

<sup>92</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 135.



Finally, there is solidarity of purpose behind all of this action. The one who sees the Divine in all is constantly seeking to help others to reach the same vision:<sup>93</sup> The liberated soul sees God [in all] and has at heart for all the same equal kindness, the same divine affection. Circumstances may determine the outward clasp or the outward conflict, but can never affect his equal eye, his open heart, his inner embrace of all. And in all his actions there will be the same principle of soul, a perfect equality, and the same principle of work, the will of the Divine in him active for the need of the race in its gradually developing advance towards the Godhead.<sup>94</sup>

The expression of unity in multiplicity is at the heart of Aurobindo's vision, and it gives rise to a sense of solidarity that includes all peoples, all of Nature, all realms of action, the variety of paths, and the goal and purpose of life. This solidarity is seen in the life of the enlightened one, who seeks the good of all, and who works for the "holding together of the peoples, *cikirsur lokasamgraham . . .*"<sup>95</sup> It is more than simply a solidarity that grows out of an ethical exhortation, however. Aurobindo the mystic and Aurobindo the activist are united by one vision of unity, a vision that sees the inner *avatar* at the heart of all; and all is evolving to a higher consciousness, a knowledge of oneness with this inner *avatar*.

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<sup>93</sup> Aurobindo notes the similarity of this to the Buddhist ideal of the *Bodhisattva*. See, for example, *Life Divine*, 40.

<sup>94</sup> *Essays on the Gita*, 174.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

## 5 CONCLUSION: SOLIDARITY AND INCARNATION

### *5.1 Similarity and Difference*

This thesis has addressed a topic that initially seems to be a comparison of similar themes or similar doctrines. Central to Christian theology is the figure of Jesus Christ, who is widely believed by Christians to be the incarnation of God – God in the flesh, living among the people of earth. Central to many movements within the Hindu tradition is the figure of Krishna, who is widely believed by Hindus to be the incarnation of God, descending to earth in human form to live among the people of earth. The similarity between the two seems obvious.

Yet a closer examination of *avatara* and incarnation has revealed that the similarity is limited and even superficial. Looking for and considering the similarities between Christ and Krishna, and between the broader notions of *avatara* and incarnation, proves to be a limited undertaking, for the search for similarity soon gives way to the uncovering of profound differences between the two.

Solidarity, however, continues to emerge as an idea that can hold together similarity and difference. Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer, as different as they are, were chosen for further study because a sense of solidarity can be found in their works. When further study revealed the deep differences between their understandings of incarnation, solidarity emerged again as a common theme that arises from their different perspectives. Solidarity – not similarity – seems to make possible not only the comparative task but also continuing conversation between those who truly differ.

In the initial chapter of the thesis, *avatara* and incarnation were considered alongside one another in the works of six thinkers, whose varieties of conclusions arose from a similar basic approach, an approach akin to setting the two objects of study on the table and examining them in order to discover the ways in which they are similar or different. All of the writers in question sought to look for similarity and difference. None began with the assumption that *avatara* and incarnation are the same thing under different labels.

The treatment was not always even-handed, though. In at least one case (Bassuk), the attempt to respect difference eventually succumbed to an approach which located the origin of “the god-man” in a common human desire to see God. Difference was respected on the one hand but reduced to a simple unifying human desire on the other. In two cases (Parrinder and DeSmet), the attempt to respect difference was more successful in that the reductionist move to a common origin was not made. The attempt began to fall short, however, when the examination of the doctrines in question became an evaluation of the doctrines. This evaluation found the Hindu notion to be inferior – in terms of historicity, morality, and suffering – or at best to be incomplete, finding its eventual fulfillment in the Christian tradition. In these cases, the Christian perspective was treated as the standard by which the Hindu belief is evaluated.

The last three writers considered in the first chapter of this thesis sought to maintain difference and to avoid either the reductionist move or the evaluative move. Sheth, Lipner, and Yesurathnam examined the notions of *avatara* and incarnation and made deliberate attempts to ask further questions regarding the ways in which these two affected each other. Rather than evaluating the Hindu understanding of *avatara* in light of the Christian understanding of incarnation, they considered the ways in which the two might affect each other. Sheth and Yesurathnam focused their reflections on the ways in which Christian thought might be challenged by the *avatara* doctrine; Lipner considered this and began, if only briefly, to ask the question of how Hindu understandings of the *avatar* might be affected by the Christian notion of incarnation. These latter three began to take the discussion in a different direction, for in their brief studies, the doctrines of *avatara* and incarnation were treated not simply as objects to be examined but also as living beliefs of living people; beliefs and people whose similarities and differences call for and inevitably produce interaction, conversation, and change.

The focus of the thesis then changed, narrowing to a consideration of *avatara* and incarnation in the work of two particular thinkers from within Hinduism and Christianity. In the thought of Sri Aurobindo and Dietrich Bonhoeffer the ideas around incarnation and *avatara* were not examined at a distance – “on the table,” as in the previous section – but were seen to be part of the overall thinking and living of these two individuals. The works of Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer reveal that *avatara* and incarnation are certainly not the same and are, in fact, similar

only in appearance. Seeing the two doctrines at work in these individual believers yields a deeper understanding of the profound difference between the two doctrines.

## 5.2 *Particularity and Universality*

It soon becomes apparent that Christ and Krishna are very different figures for these two thinkers, and the difference is most apparent in terms of particularity and universality. For Bonhoeffer, the particularity of Christ is essential. He very clearly claims that the particular person, Jesus Christ, is *the* incarnation of God. This incarnation is not a principle applied to this person, but this person is himself *the incarnate one*. The centrality of this incarnate one is most important, and is expressed on a number of levels; Christ is at the centre of history and humanity and nature. Moreover, Christ stands at the boundary between the individual, the world, God, and one's own self. The radical claim that Bonhoeffer makes is that all talk of God or humanity needs to begin with Christ, who is true God and true human. He argues that Christ alone reveals who God is, and that Christ alone reveals who humanity is.

This idea of particularity is important for Bonhoeffer, and it is important to note that only Christ is understood to be the full incarnation of God. Bonhoeffer does speak of Christ being present in and as the church, taking up space in the world in his body, the church, and as being present in the neighbour – both inside and outside the church. For Bonhoeffer, though, this sense of the presence of Christ is not ultimately a generalized incarnation or manifestation in all. There is not a broad principle of incarnation, but there is rather a particular person who is understood to be God incarnate. Because this incarnate one reveals fully who God is and who humanity is, the community of disciples seeks to understand itself through this incarnate one – as being for others, as being subject to suffering and humiliation – and to understand the world and the people in it as the place in which this incarnate one is present – in suffering, in humiliation, in all those one is called to love. A particular person is understood to be God incarnate, and the disciple learns to see everything in light of this particular incarnate one.

For Aurobindo, this notion of particularity is not to be found. In terms of the *avatar* Krishna, it is not important to claim a particularity in the same way that Bonhoeffer does. Krishna is not understood to be unique as *the* incarnation of the Divine. Rather, Krishna is unique in his *self-consciousness* of being divine. While Bonhoeffer sees Christ as the particular incarnation of God – fully God and fully human – and as present in the church and in the world,

Aurobindo sees Krishna as the descent of God into human form, the descent of the same God who is manifest in all beings, indeed in all that is. For Aurobindo, the particularity of Krishna fades significantly, and there is not a centrality of the historical figure Krishna to correspond to the centrality of Christ in Bonhoeffer's mind. For Bonhoeffer, the particular incarnation is primary, and any sense of a universal incarnation is secondary. For Aurobindo, the universal incarnation is primary, and the particular is secondary.<sup>1</sup> Aurobindo's point of departure is always the Divine who is manifest – incarnate – in all. The Divine is manifest in all – in the *avatara* and in all that is – and the disciple learns to see all that is in light of this manifestation of the Divine in all.

### 5.3 *The Purpose of Incarnation*

In addition to this difference of particularity and universality, there is a significant difference between Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer in their understanding of the purpose of the incarnation and the work of the one in whom God is incarnate.

For Bonhoeffer, it would be possible to speak of Christ as the justifier and liberator – the justifier of humanity and history, and the liberator of nature.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that it is through the incarnate one that these things take place, and only through this incarnate one are the divine promises to be fulfilled. Christ as the incarnate one *for others*, and Christ as the incarnate one who is humiliated, is one whose life does something for humanity and for all creation. Although Bonhoeffer clearly emphasized the importance of human action and responsibility, he also saw the incarnate one as one who acts in the world and acts for the world to do something that the world cannot do for itself. In other words, the incarnate one – Jesus Christ – does something in

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparison of Bonhoeffer with a Hindu figure who sees the particular incarnation in Krishna as primary, it would be helpful to look at a thinker such as A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. above, p. 37. In his discussion of Christ as the centre, Bonhoeffer gives only limited attention to a treatment of Christ as liberator of nature. He sees the sacraments as signs of Christ's liberation of nature, as Christ is 'humiliated' by taking the form of water and bread and wine, and these elements of nature are set free 'to praise God.' Sacraments, then, are a sign of Christ's *liberation of nature*, not of an *incarnation in nature*. Although his particularist understanding of incarnation does not allow him to move in the direction of Christ *incarnate in nature* - and thus in the direction of a universal incarnation more akin to Aurobindo - a fuller treatment by Bonhoeffer of Christ *between* God and nature might have made for further interesting comparison with Aurobindo's perspectives on universal incarnation.

the world to fulfill the divine promise. In this sense, the incarnate one is always understood to be a saviour.

For Aurobindo, the *avatara* acts in the world more as a teacher and an example than as a saviour. While he does indeed speak of the *avatara* as the actor who controls the events of the world (or at least the events of the epic Mahabharatta), he does not see Krishna, or any other *avatar*, as one who does something to the world to save it. In fact, Aurobindo does make the claim that if this were what the *avatar* were to do, there would be no need for the descent of God in human form: The Divine could simply act from on high by divine decree to do whatever must be done. Instead, Aurobindo understands Krishna to be the *avatar* who comes into the world to show humanity what it will become, to show humanity its own possibility of being fully conscious of its own divinity and indeed of the divine presence in all. Krishna, then, is an example to humanity of the fulfillment of its own promise, its own potential. Aurobindo goes further than this, though, and sees humanity fulfilling a similar function within the world. If Krishna shows humanity what kind of consciousness it can achieve, humanity itself is understood to be Brahman's way of embodying the possibility of this consciousness in the world. Krishna is the embodiment of perfect divine self-consciousness, humanity represents the possibility of this divine self-consciousness in the world.

To put the difference another way, Aurobindo sees the incarnate one as one who teaches the world how to fulfill its own promise, while Bonhoeffer sees the incarnate one as one who does something in the world to fulfill the divine promise; For Aurobindo, the incarnate one shows the world how to save itself, while for Bonhoeffer, the incarnate one saves the world.<sup>3</sup>

These differences are important. If the apparent similarity of Krishna and Christ were simply to lead to the conclusion that each is an example of a saviour figure, a divine teacher, or even, as Bassuk and others seek to do, a 'god-human' or 'human-god,' then the two would be reduced to variations on a theme or of a religious 'type.' If these important figures are understood only as variations of a certain type, then the respective traditions in which they are

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. above, p. 36ff., and p. 55ff. The distinction between the incarnate one as exemplar (Aurobindo) and the incarnate as saviour (Bonhoeffer) cannot be generalized to reflect their respective religious traditions. For Aurobindo, the *avatar* as exemplar is central, even though some movements within Hinduism would see the *avatar* as a saviour (and the *Gita* itself inclines this way). Likewise, while Bonhoeffer stresses Christ as Saviour, the understanding of Christ as exemplar can also be found within Christianity.

worshipped can also too easily be reduced to variations on a theme. Uniqueness takes a back seat to similarity. Examination of the two in terms of their differences, though, yields a much deeper picture of each. Without evaluating the merits of one in terms of the other, it has been seen that in the thought of Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer the figures of Krishna and Christ are understood very differently, in terms of universality or particularity and in terms of their purpose and work.

#### ***5.4 Different yet Similar***

The circumstances in which Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer lived and worked share some significant similarities. Aurobindo had lived and studied in England, being exposed at an early age to religious, philosophical, and social thought much different than that of his native India. In his life experience he had had extensive contact with ‘the other.’ Bonhoeffer also had experience outside of his home country, studying and working at various times in the United States and England, as well as visiting Mexico with the French pacifist Jean Laserre.<sup>4</sup> Although this exposure remained within ‘the west,’ it does indicate an openness to a broader range of thought, and his interest in visiting and learning from Gandhi reinforces this impression of openness to ‘the other.’<sup>5</sup>

In their own home countries, the two also found themselves in similar circumstances. Both India and Germany at the time were at significant and turbulent crossroads in their national histories. India was moving from colonial rule to independence, from bondage to freedom; Germany was moving the other way, slipping into totalitarian rule. Both Bonhoeffer and Aurobindo were imprisoned as a result of their opposition to the reigning political authorities, and each experienced a shift and a deepening in their thought during the experience of imprisonment.

Given the character of the political events, and given their involvement in these events, it is not surprising that both Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer eventually move away from discussions that might be content with focusing only on the person of Krishna or Christ – examining them

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<sup>4</sup> Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 197.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Bonhoeffer’s interest in and contact with Gandhi, see Feil, 197ff., 240 n. 248; and Larry Rasmussen, “The Ethics of Responsible Action,” *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by John W. de Gruchy, 206-225 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 207ff.

“on the table,” again – and they move their discussions to the person and work not of the incarnate one or the *avatar* but of the disciple, the devotee, the community. Krishna as one in whom the Divine is manifest is seen to be one who is not reducible to a doctrine, but who shows the devotee, indeed all of humanity, what it can become. Likewise, Christ as the incarnate one *for others* in Bonhoeffer’s thought does not become an object of extended study, but rather comes to be seen as the subject who acts on the church and who calls the disciples to be people *for others*. Although there are deep differences between their understandings of Krishna and Christ, both Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer see them as ones who call their followers to a task, whether that task is to follow the incarnate one or to seek to attain the same divine self-consciousness that belongs to the *avatar*.

Similarly, both Bonhoeffer and Aurobindo express a deep sense of solidarity that grows out of their understanding of what incarnation means and how it takes place in the world. We have seen how the particularity of Christ stands out in Bonhoeffer’s thought. Yet the particularity of Christ does not lead Bonhoeffer to a position from which he judges the other, particularly the non-Christian other. For Bonhoeffer it is essential that this particular incarnate one exists *for others*, and is somehow present in living form – in the church – and in all of humanity. The incarnate one is a particular flesh-and-blood human, so this incarnate one is also present in particular flesh-and-blood humans, in particular times and places, and especially in those who are suffering. For Bonhoeffer, the disciple of Christ must feel a sense of solidarity with the other, for Christ lived for the other. On a different level, though, it is clear that for Bonhoeffer all of humanity – even “the hated Jew and the despised socialist”<sup>6</sup> – is united by God’s incarnation in Christ, for all of humanity now bears the image of God. Rather than dividing the world, the uniqueness of the incarnation unites the world, and calls the disciple to solidarity with the other.

The suggestion that Bonhoeffer extended this sense of solidarity beyond the exclusive confines of the church is strengthened by his brief contact with Gandhi and by his interest in learning from this follower of another religious tradition. Larry Rasmussen points out that “already in 1932 this young German professor was attracted to Mahatma Gandhi because he

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<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly, “Prayer and Action for Justice: Bonhoeffer’s Spirituality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by John W. de Gruchy, 246-271 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 248.



sensed that a kind of exhaustion had befallen Western Christian spirituality and ethics. ‘Christianity in other words and deeds’ might be discovered, by contrast, in Gandhi and the East.”<sup>7</sup> Very early on, then, Bonhoeffer was looking beyond the Christian church that he knew, not only expressing solidarity with the other who suffers, but also finding solidarity with the other from whom he might learn.

Aurobindo’s sense of solidarity grows out of his belief in the manifestation of God in all. From his experience of being surrounded by *Narayana* in prison to his insistence that all of the material world is a working out of the being of *Brahman*, Aurobindo’s work is infused with a sense of the all-pervasiveness of the Divine, and the task of humanity is to attain to a fuller consciousness of this divine presence and indeed of each person’s own divinity. Yet Aurobindo does not call the devotee to a work of self-realization that focuses only on one’s own unity with the Divine. One’s own sense of unity with the Divine must be matched by a sense of unity with others. As was pointed out by Verma, the relationship between the good of others and one’s own self-understanding is reciprocal: Seeking another’s well-being is a path to recognizing the divine in oneself, and recognizing the divine in oneself opens one’s eyes to see the divine in the other – the other religion, the other nation, the other person.<sup>8</sup>

It is this sense of solidarity that appears to be the most important thing in the comparison of Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer. Although each understands the idea of incarnation very differently, it appears that for both of them incarnation overcomes the duality between God and the world. Aurobindo’s universalist sense of incarnation moves him to see the Divine manifest in everything, and to call the devotee to learn to see the world and all its people in this same way. Bonhoeffer’s particularist notion of incarnation is also one that overcomes the duality between God and the world, for in this particular flesh-and-blood person he understands God to be fully present in the world as a real human being. It has also been shown that for both of these

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<sup>7</sup>Larry Rasmussen, “The Ethics of Responsible Action,” 207. ‘Christianity in other words and deeds’ is Rasmussen’s translation of an expression in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Brief an Helmut Roessler,” *Ökumene: Briefe Aufsätze Dokumente 1928-1942, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958), 61. Feil notes that this interest in the practice and faith of Gandhi was a source of bewilderment for Karl Barth and others who might otherwise be seen as allies of Bonhoeffer (240, n. 248).

<sup>8</sup>K.D. Verma, “The Social and Political Vision of Sri Aurobindo,” *Through a Glass Darkly: Essays in the Religious Imagination*, edited by John c. Hawley, 206-227 (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 217-221. See also above, p. 71.

thinkers, incarnation overcomes the duality between people, for both Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer speak (albeit in different ways) about seeing the Divine, seeing God, in the people and the world around them. The differences in their perspectives are important, yet solidarity continues to emerge as a point of contact between these different perspectives.

This thesis began with a notion of similarity: within two religious traditions there is a “god-human” figure, a divine incarnation or a divine descent who holds a central position within those traditions. A closer look at the significance of these two particular figures revealed that the similarity is not a deep similarity, and that the differences do in fact run very deeply. Yet it is possible to move from that place of recognizing deep difference to a place where the different views still reinforce a sense of solidarity.

Similarity and difference, then, are not absolute. They exist in a dialectical relationship which keeps comparative religious thought moving, rather than settling into a reductionist position on the one hand or to a position that sees difference as ultimately dividing, on the other. The idea of solidarity enables this movement in comparative thought to continue.

### ***5.5 Further Directions***

Further study could be pursued in a number of directions at this point. The theme of incarnation and solidarity could be further examined. Having begun to look at the theme in Bonhoeffer and Aurobindo, it could be expanded to include other thinkers, perhaps representative thinkers for whom solidarity and liberation have been important themes. What is the role of incarnation in the thinking of these? Is there a role? How does a solidarity informed by incarnation differ from one that is not? On the Christian side, much has been made in liberation theology of Christ’s identification with the poor and oppressed in particular historical instances. Edilberto Merida’s sculpture of the crucified Jesus as an indigenous Peruvian comes to mind.<sup>9</sup> Is this kind of image of solidarity enhanced or impeded by the particularity of incarnation that is so prevalent in Christianity? Is this kind of image of solidarity enhanced or impeded by a more universalistic notion of incarnation that is present in much of Hinduism?

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<sup>9</sup> This image can be seen on the cover of Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, revised ed., translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

The consideration of the views of both Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer would suggest that there is no clear answer to this question. Perhaps, rather, the particular and the universal come together in the notion of solidarity. The particularity of the incarnation in Christianity is universalized in the infinite particulars of human life, and the universality of the incarnation in Hinduism takes concrete form in specific people and places. Solidarity universalizes the particular and specifies the incidence of the universal.

More broadly speaking, this could lead to considerations of the relationship between theology and praxis or between thinking and acting. For Aurobindo or Bonhoeffer (or for other thinkers inclined towards solidarity), do the ideas inherent in an inherited religious tradition shape the way they view the world and act in the world, or does a life experience that calls for solidarity shape the ideas of the thinker? On the one hand, this is obviously a “chicken-and-egg” kind of question that has no clear answer. On the other hand, it is interesting to see how solidarity takes such strong shape in such a variety of cultures and traditions. The experience that calls for solidarity also calls for a reading of one’s religious tradition in light of that experience. Then, of course, this understanding of one’s tradition leads to a different view of one’s situation.

Similarly, it could be fruitful to consider the relationship between incarnation and solidarity in feminist thought. If one holds to a particularist notion of incarnation, what is the role of a male incarnate being in theology that seeks to work from a feminist perspective? Again, is either perspective – the particular or the universal – understood to help or to hinder feminist theological reflection? Does that particularity pose a problem for feminist thought?

To continue the broader purpose of this study, one could continue to look at similarity and difference in comparative religious thought and in the encounter of different religious traditions. Having now looked at similarity and difference in light of two particular thinkers from different traditions, perhaps more attention could be given to what happens when a thinker from one tradition encounters the ideas of another tradition or of the religious “other.” What is the interplay of similarity and difference in such encounters? Here again, solidarity could be seen to be playing a significant role, but in this case ‘solidarity’ would not only imply connection to those who suffer; it would refer to a sense of connection with the ‘other,’ particularly the religiously ‘other.’

This direction would perhaps be the most interesting one to pursue, and the study could proceed in a number of directions. For instance, Mohandes K. Gandhi refers often to his encounters with Christianity. His contact with Christianity is well known, and he himself notes on several occasions how he has been influenced by certain teachings of Christianity, particularly those found in the Sermon on the Mount. Similarly, Aurobindo had extensive contact with Christian thought, and several articles have looked more deeply at that contact.<sup>10</sup> It may be interesting to look at Gandhi or Aurobindo or to other Hindu approaches to Christianity and ask “How does the incarnate one of Christianity affect the view of the *avatar* among Hindu thinkers?”<sup>11</sup> Along this line, one can only speculate about what may have happened in the thought of Bonhoeffer if he had been able to carry out his plans to travel to India to work and study with Gandhi. How would this encounter have affected his own view of the incarnate one and the particularity of the incarnation?

A further pursuit of questions such as these is important in that it treats what are usually called doctrines and ideas not as objects to be examined at a distance (again, “on the table”), but as living things that shape the ways that people understand the world and their place in it. By considering the thought of Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer in isolation from each other, this thesis has treated doctrine in such a way. The interesting next step would be to look more closely at what happens when these ways of understanding the world come into contact with each other. The comparative study of religion needs to take this into account, for ideas always exist in communities of people who come into contact with each other and who have an influence on each other.

Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s work would be a helpful starting point in this regard. In *Other Peoples’ Myths*<sup>12</sup> she considers what happens to all kinds of people – scholars, laypeople, devotees and doubters – when they encounter the religion of the other. More particularly, she

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Aurabinda Basu, “Sri Aurobindo on Christ and Christianity,” in *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity*, edited by Arvind Sharma, 182-212 (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Aurabinda Basu, “An Indian View of Christ,” in *Religion in the Pacific Era*, edited by Frank K. Flinn and Tyler Hendricks, 179-187 (New York: Paragon House, 1985), and Deepak Sarma, “Is Jesus a Hindu? S.C Vasu and Multiple Madhva Misrepresentations,” in *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin* 13 (2000): 19-25.

<sup>12</sup> Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Other Peoples’ Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1988).

asks what happens when one encounters the myths of another, concluding that “we may take other peoples’ myths as a source of advice about what to do about our lives.”<sup>13</sup>

At one point Doniger tells the Indian story of King Bhoja, who while bathing finds that a tiny fish has entered his head, and the presence of the fish in his head eventually drives him crazy. She suggests that the king’s real difficulty is that he “cannot stand having other peoples’ ideas inside his own head.”<sup>14</sup> This is precisely what is happening, though, when one encounters the ideas, beliefs, and myths of another religious tradition – the welcoming of the ideas of another into our own heads. “The way to learn about others,” she continues,

is not to become a fish forever (to convert, to [for example] become a Hindu) but to remain yourself as you get inside a fish for a little while or live among the fish, a Jew or Christian among the Hindus. To attempt to do this is to attempt to become . . . *both* things at once, taking a fish or a Hindu into your head while maintaining it as your head at the same time.<sup>15</sup>

The language and the imagery is odd, but Doniger touches on questions of similarity and difference, and how these play out in the encounter of two different traditions. What happens when other fish swim around in one’s head? What happens when they appear to be the same? To be different? Doniger insists that these encounters change the people involved.

Doniger’s perspective is still somewhat of an outside perspective, though. Autobiographical accounts would shed a different light on the matter of similarity and difference. Swami Abhishiktananda (born Henri Le Saux) is a Christian who embraced both an *Advaitan* worldview and the life of the *Sanyassin*, and much of his written work seeks to express the results of the meeting of these two worldviews with the Christian faith he continued to hold.<sup>16</sup> To use the terms that Doniger suggests, Abhishiktananda’s work is an articulation of what happens when two fish swim in the same head.

As a similar approach, but dealing more specifically with theology and Christology, the work of Raymon Panikkar bears further study. In *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of*

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 80

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>16</sup> See Henri Le Saux, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997) and J. Monchanin and Henry Le Saux, *A Benedictine Ashram* (Douglas: Times Press, 1964).

*Man*,<sup>17</sup> Panikkar (who identifies himself at various times and often at the same time as Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and Secularist)<sup>18</sup> seeks to articulate Christian Trinitarian theology in light of the three Hindu paths of *karmamarga*, *bhaktimarga*, and *jnanamarga*. Along a similar line, one of Panikkar's most well known (and unfortunately named) works is entitled *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*.<sup>19</sup> Although the title would suggest that in this work Hindu thought is simply subsumed under Christian thought (along of the lines, for example, of Parrinder's view of Christ as the fulfillment of Hindu ideas about the *avatar*), Panikkar does seek to uphold the integrity of both traditions, which would make this a particularly interesting study when viewed in the light of similarity and difference. In a later work, Panikkar even suggests that difference is essential and that plurality in the world and even in one's own thinking is necessary and healthy. A study of Panikkar's work would be interesting alongside, for instance, the work of Radhakrishnan on the Hindu side or John Hick on the Christian side.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, a more purely autobiographical account could be found in the work of Dianna L. Eck, particularly in her work *Encountering God: a spiritual journey from Bozeman to Benares*.<sup>21</sup> In this work Eck, a Christian who teaches Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University, gives an account of her extensive contact with Hinduism, which for her has been both deeply academic and deeply personal. Of particular interest in this work would be Chapter 4, "The Faces of God: Discovering the Incarnation in India."<sup>22</sup> In this chapter she articulates the ways in which her encounter with Krishna and with the devotees of Krishna has affected her own faith and her own understanding of who Christ is. A further study of some of Eck's work would provide an opportunity to explore the topic of similarity, difference, and

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<sup>17</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man: Icon, Person, Mystery* (New York: Orbis, 1973). Note that Panikkar's given name is variously spelled "Raimundo," "Raymon," or "Raymond."

<sup>18</sup> See Raimon Panikkar, "The Dawn of Christianness." *Cross Currents* (Spring/Summer 2000), 185-195; "Eruption of Truth: An Interview with Raimon Panikkar." *Christian Century* 117 (Aug 16-23, 2000). 834-836; Fred Dallmayr, "Rethinking Secularism (with Raimon Panikkar). *The Review of Politics* 61 (Fall1999), 715-735.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1964.).

<sup>20</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony: Essays on Contemplation and Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: a spiritual journey from Bozeman to Benares* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.)

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-117.

solidarity on a very different level. Hers is not a comparison of two doctrines as they are laid out on the table, nor is it an examination of two thinkers from different traditions seeking to articulate their theological and philosophical perspectives. Hers is a specific example of a working out of the theme of similarity and difference in the ideas of incarnation and *avatara*.

All of these suggestions for further explorations have in mind a broader and deeper look at the interplay of similarity and difference in the study of religion. Focusing on difference respects the identity of the other, avoids reductionism, and deepens the understanding of the other. Yet all of these suggestions for further thought are concerned with what happens when ‘others’ are brought together, when the ‘different’ come near to each other in solidarity.

### ***5.6 Conclusion – Solidarity, Similarity, and Difference***

This thesis began with an exploration of similarity and difference in the comparative study of religion, noting that the recent tendency has been to focus on difference. The examination of the works of Sri Aurobindo and Dietrich Bonhoeffer was carried out with a view towards focusing on the difference between these two thinkers in their understandings of incarnation. The study has led to a deeper understanding of each thinker and also to an appreciation of the important role of incarnation in their thought. The understanding of incarnation and the role that it plays in their respective traditions has been seen to be very different, yet it has been shown that this difference does in fact give rise to similarity as well. Both Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer move from the presence – differently understood – of God in humanity to a sense of solidarity with humanity. In both thinkers, it can be seen that the doctrine of incarnation breaks down the sense of duality between the Divine and the world. Aurobindo’s universalist understanding of incarnation and Bonhoeffer’s particularist understanding of incarnation both result in the view that the Divine is truly present in the world. This breaking down of the duality between God and the world also heightens the sense of solidarity in each thinker’s work, as both Bonhoeffer and Aurobindo speak of the presence of Christ or the Divine in the community and in the neighbour.

The study of *avatara* and incarnation in Aurobindo and Bonhoeffer has demonstrated the importance of the interplay between similarity and difference in the comparative study of religion. It began with the seemingly similar ideas of *avatara* and incarnation, it focused on the difference between these ideas, and it returned to similarity as the notion of solidarity was

introduced. In the similarity and difference between *avatara* and incarnation, solidarity itself appears to have a mediating role. It allows for the claim that there is common ground to begin with, and when differences are discovered or brought together, solidarity with the other keeps difference from becoming division.



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