

Catholic Encounter with Hindus in the Twentieth Century

In Search of an Indian Christianity

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Introduction

The positive encounter with other religions encouraged by *Nostra Aetate* includes openness both to those intellectual and spiritual traditions, and to those social and ethical traditions, which might serve for the inculturation of Christian faith and practice. Christians should 'while witnessing to their faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture' (NA 2).¹ In the case of the Indian Catholic community, the need for the Church to become more fully an authentically Indian institution continues to be pressing in post-independence India, with the foreign and colonial origins of the Catholic Church still manifest in the dominant theological and liturgical styles of the Church.²

Deciding what kind of inculturation there should be into Hinduism has, however, proved a complicated and divisive matter in the 40 years since Vatican II. In 1981 the Indian church historian Mundadan, looking back over 25 years of Hindu-Catholic relations, noted a shift from an emphasis on intellectual and spiritual engagement to one on a social concern for the humanitarian realities and needs of current Indian society.³ The stress on social emancipation in

¹ *Nostra Aetate* is to be understood within the wider context of other Conciliar documents, especially the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*). The continuing need for inculturation into Indian (and other Asian) traditions is recognised and encouraged by recent documents such as *Ecclesia in Asia* (1996) and *Fides et Ratio* (1998).

² See, for example, S. Arulsamy, 'Latin Church in India: Question of Identity and Present Challenges,' *Jeevadhara* Vol. XXXIII No.196 (2003), 289-309 and Archbishop D'Souza in M. Amaladoss, T.K. John, G Gispert-Sauch (eds) *Theologizing in India* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1981), 14-20

³ A.M. Mundadan, 'Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Past Twenty-five Years,' *Jeevadhara* Vol.XI No. 65 (1981), 375-394; The Jesuit theologian Redington likewise distinguishes between a 'first generation' of Hindu-Christian dialogue emphasising intellectual and spiritual engagement and a 'second generation' movement emphasising liberation and social

the context of interreligious encounter has continued to gain prominence since then. In an important statement by the Indian Theological Association 'inter-religious liberative praxis' and a 'liberative hermeneutic of religions' are put forward as determining the nature of inter-religious dialogue and inculturation.⁴ Such terminology reflects the influence of the wider paradigm of liberation theology and its Asian form, in which the fundamental religiosity and religiously plural nature of Asian societies are recognised and understood to be integral to any solution to poverty in Asia.⁵

In India a particular focus for social concern is the situation of that section of Indian society, which refers to itself as the Dalits (the 'oppressed'), those who have experienced social and religious oppression by the Hindu caste system, in which the Brahmins have foremost place.⁶ This can lead to a wholesale rejection of the intellectual and spiritual traditions found in Brahmanical Hinduism, in favour of an inculturation into Dalit traditions alone.⁷ This stands in marked contrast with the attitude of earlier generations of Catholics who were concerned to make Christianity attractive to Brahmins and other high caste Hindus. The intellectual and spiritual engagement that dominated Catholic encounter with Hinduism for most of the twentieth century and which is referred to by Mundadan was with Advaita Vedanta, a tradition which seemed to have prestige within Brahmanical Hindu society.

After situating *Nostra Aetate's* brief statement on Hinduism against the complex and divergent reality of the Hindu traditions, this article will consider the encounter with Advaita. This remains problematic for conceptual and dialogical reasons, as well as social concerns. Instead other forms of Vedanta might now be explored as alternatives to Advaita, if inculturation into Vedanta still seems desirable. This is followed by an outline of the shift to social concern for the Dalits. While this shift does manifest a change in priorities and a critical attitude towards caste and any ideology which supports it, it

transformation.

⁴ 'Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism: Our Ongoing Search.' Statement of the Indian Theological Association Thirteenth Annual Meeting, 1989' in K. Pathil (ed), in K. Pathil (ed) *Religious Pluralism: An Indian Christian Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1991), 338-49; 340. The papers and statements of the Association for 1988 and 1989 are contained in this volume.

⁵ A major influence on the work of Indian theologians in this regard is the work of the Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris. He argues that any genuinely Asian liberation theology has to promote both human liberation and interreligious dialogue. A. Pieris *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988).

⁶ The Indian terms used present problems for pronunciation. Instead of introducing diacritics I have used standard versions of these terms when current. Other terms are simply left without diacritics.

⁷ A sophisticated study of this is in M. Barnes S.J. *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 133-181.

need not take the form of a total rejection of all inculturation into the intellectual and spiritual traditions fostered within Brahmanical Hinduism. Rather it points to a positive encounter with *bhakti*, the devotional theistic traditions, Vedantic and otherwise. This shift to *bhakti* Hinduism co-incides, in fact, with a greater intellectual and spiritual openness to Hindu theism in general by Catholics in the second half of the twentieth century.⁸

1. *Nostra Aetate* and Hinduism

For its part, *Nostra Aetate*'s brief reference to Hinduism avoids stating any explicit preference for any particular tradition:

Thus in Hinduism men explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. They seek release from the trials of this life by ascetical practices, profound meditation, and recourse to God in confidence and love. (NA 2)

This is, not surprisingly, a very generalised and limited description of the rich and complex reality of the Hindu traditions. What is termed 'Hinduism' is in reality a family of religions, in which there are fundamental divergences in belief and practice between and within any of the aspects *Nostra Aetate* mentions. Moreover, Hindu identity has often been defined by social rather than doctrinal criteria, around ritual and social duties specific to different groups and individuals. It is thus striking that there is no mention of the traditional social structures of Hindu society, in particular, the caste system. Nonetheless *Nostra Aetate* does point to a basis upon which a positive encounter with Hinduism might be built, be it conceived as 'dialogue and collaboration' (NA 2) with Hindus or as inculturation into the Hindu traditions in pursuit of an Indian Christianity.

Advaita and *bhakti* manifest one such fundamental divergence within Hinduism. As the Indologist Friedhelm Hardy has put it, 'the religious history of India is marked by the conflict and the interaction of two major trends: to conceive of the Absolute either in terms of a (mystical) state of being or as a personal God.'⁹ In *Nostra Aetate*'s

⁸ In a standard study of the evolution of Indian Christian theology, Robin Boyd depicts Christian theologies in India, Catholic and Protestant, as generally leaning either to Advaita or *bhakti*. In R. Boyd *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974), 252-3. For the history of and theological reflection on Christian encounter with Hindus see especially H. Coward (ed) *Christian -Hindu Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990); J. Brockington *Hinduism and Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1992); B. Robinson *Christians meet Hindus* (Delhi, 2004)

⁹ F. Hardy *Viraha Bhakti: the Early History of Krishna Devotion in South India* (Oxford: OUP, 1983) 13.

terms, these are two different ways in which Hindus 'explore the divine mystery.' At the same time there did emerge a set of religious perspectives that gained pan-Indian acceptance. For his part, Hardy goes on to outline what he terms a 'normative ideology,' based on the insights expressed in the body of sacred texts called the Upanishads, centred around Brahman, the ultimate reality and causal principle of the universe, and the depiction of empirical human existence as a cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) determined by actions which bring consequences in present or future life-times (*karma*), from which release (*moksa*) is sought through physical and spiritual disciplines (*yoga*).¹⁰

The Upanishads are also known as the Vedanta, the 'end of the Vedas,' being the final part of the Vedic revelation, and the normative ideology based on them may also be called Vedanta. Although it represents a new way of thinking breaking into an older Brahmanical or Vedic religion centred on sacrifice and on ritual and social duties, the Vedantic ideology was adopted and developed as the ideology of Brahmanical Hinduism. Vedanta also developed into those systematic traditions of exegesis, commentary and reasoning which expound the Vedantic texts and ideology, the Vedantic schools themselves. There are, of course, many other intellectual and spiritual traditions in Hinduism other than the Vedanta. Nonetheless, either denoting the normative ideology or the systems that later developed, Vedanta has had a particular importance that continues to the present. In the Vedanta, as in other Hindu traditions, have developed what *Nostra Aetate* calls the 'accurately defined insights of philosophy, 'ascetical practices' and 'profound meditation.' (NA 2) ¹¹

Advaita Vedanta, whose principal teacher is Shankara, is a form of systematic Vedanta, which manifests the trend to conceive of the Absolute as 'a (mystical) state of being.' Advaita means 'non-dualism' and is standardly taken to affirm that ultimately only Brahman exists and that the empirical world and its distinctions are only a provisional reality. A maxim often held to encapsulate Advaita is that 'Brahman is reality, the world is false, the soul is only Brahman, nothing else.' In Advaita the goal is standardly taken to be release from the falsity of the world in the realisation of the non-duality of the soul and Brahman.

¹⁰ Ibid. 13-17

¹¹ *Fides et Ratio* refers to and calls on Indian Christians to engage with these intellectual and spiritual traditions, 'Our thoughts turn to Eastern shores, which have been enriched from of old with ancient traditions of religion and philosophy. Amongst these India takes a prominent place. An immense spiritual impulse compels the Indian mind to an acquiring of that experience which would, with a spirit freed from the distractions of time and space, attain to the absolute good. It is in this process of seeking for liberation that the great metaphysical schools are constructed. This is the time above all for Indian Christians to unlock these treasures from their inheritance which can be joined to their faith and so enhance the richness of Christian teaching.' (FR 72)

The modern perception of Hinduism by Christians and educated Hindus has been significantly shaped by the neo-Hindu movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which emerged in Calcutta, the capital under British rule until 1911. Many neo-Hindus promoted a rationalist and ethical interpretation of Vedanta, set in contrast to popular Hindu theism, especially image-worship. With this neo-Vedanta they sought to develop a Hinduism that could challenge Christianity, especially Christian missionary polemic against Hinduism as idolatrous, polytheistic and lacking ethical focus. Prominent neo-Hindus, moreover, such as Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), depicted Advaita Vedanta in particular as the high point of Hinduism, with other forms of Vedanta inferior stages towards it. Though in reality hardly representative of Hinduism as a whole, neo-Hindus were successful in promoting their understanding of Hinduism, so that often it was taken for granted that intellectual Hinduism was co-terminus with Advaita Vedanta.¹²

In contrast to Advaita, Hindu theism represents the second trend to conceive of the Absolute 'as a personal God,' manifest in the many different theistic traditions, especially in the pan-Indian Shaiva, Vaishnava and Shakta traditions, into which the many more local traditions often tend to be assimilated. Theistic Hinduism affirms the reality and value of duality and sees the goal as communion with a personal God, the attainment of which is reliant on divine grace. The principal way by which this goal is pursued is through *bhakti*, devotion, which can take many forms. Above all it is *bhakti* theism that finds expression in 'limitless riches of myths' and is lived out by 'recourse to God in confidence and love.' This is the most widespread Hindu religious identity, which the theologian, Mariasusai Dhavamony, has described as the 'warp and woof' of popular Hinduism.¹³

Bhakti theism, with its focus on an individual and immediate relationship with God that is open to anyone irrespective of caste offers something of a counter to the ritualism and caste restrictions of Brahmanical religion. However, the theist conception of the Absolute came also to be one way in which the Vedantic ideology found expression, be it in theistic texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, or in systematic theistic Vedantic traditions. In contrast to Advaita, the main schools of theistic Vedanta, Visistadvaita, whose principal teacher is Ramanuja (1017-1137) and Dvaita Vedanta, whose principal teacher is Madhva

¹² For an outline and discussion of neo-Hinduism see W. Halbfass (ed) *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 227-350 and Halbfass *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: SUNY, 1988), 197-262. The terminology of neo-Hinduism and neo-Vedanta is taken from Hacker. The same movement is often referred to as the Hindu renaissance or Hindu reform, or as modern Hinduism.

¹³ M. Dhavamony *The Love of God According to Saiva Siddhanta* (Oxford: OUP, 1971),

(c.1198-1278), understand Vedanta to be in agreement with Vaishnava theism rather with the non-dualism of Advaita.¹⁴

From the time of the Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656),¹⁵ concern among Catholics to present Christianity in such a way that it would appeal to high caste Hindus encouraged inculturation into Brahmanical Hindu social and religious traditions. De Nobili, for his part, allowed caste marking and caste distinctions to continue within the Christian community. He sought to converse with and convert Brahmins in the south Indian temple-city of Madurai at a time when the Portuguese were only managing to convert low caste Hindus, being regarded with disdain for their way of life by high caste Hindus. Moreover, for Catholic theologians, routinely trained in Thomism, systematic Vedanta represented something similar to western scholasticism, a resource that could be used just as Thomas had used non-Christian accounts, one which was well suited for expressing Christian monotheism. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century encounter with Hinduism Catholic theologians seemed to accept the prestige given to Advaita by the neo-Hindus, though they contested the interpretation of Advaita by neo-Hindus or even traditional Advaitins. Instead they argued that Advaita, understood correctly, did not teach an impersonal monism as commonly accepted, but was compatible with the Thomist account of God and creation.

2 Catholic Encounter with the Vedanta

2.1 *The Choice for Advaita*

The intellectual and spiritual encounter with Advaita Vedanta in the twentieth century has its immediate foundation in the pioneering work of the Bengali Brahmin convert, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), who, though marginalised and misunderstood at the time, was a great influence on subsequent Catholic encounter with Hinduism.¹⁶ Like de Nobili Upadhyay engaged with the culture of Brahmanical Hinduism and adopted the clothes and manner of life of the Hindu

¹⁴ Visistadvaita is 'non-dualism of the differentiated,' usually, but misleadingly, translated as 'qualified non-dualism.' Dvaita is 'dualism.' There have also been a number of other theistic Vedantic systems, especially the Dvaitadvaita or Nimbarka and the Suddhadvaita of Vallabha.

¹⁵ For the life and work of de Nobili see A. Sauliere SJ *His Star in the East*, revised and re-edited by S. Rajamanickam SJ (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1995). For a description and appraisal of the missionary period of encounter, including de Nobili see Halbfass (1988) 36-53. For de Nobili as a model for a modern intellectual encounter between Christian and Hindu theology see F.X. Clooney SJ *Hindu God, Christian God* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 3-7 and as a model of inculturation see Barnes (2002), 143-53

¹⁶ For the life and work of Upadhyay see J.J. Lipner *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary* (Delhi: OUP India, 1999)

renouncer (sannyasin) to promote dialogue with Hindus and in pursuit of an Indian Christianity. Upadhyay strove to live out and promote his own dual identity as both a Brahmin and a Christian and like de Nobili was prepared to allow a version of caste as compatible with Christianity. He also made an attempt at setting up a monastic community on the traditional Hindu pattern of the ashram.

Though he initially rejected Advaita Vedanta, Upadhyay later argued for its convergence with the Thomist account and suitability for expressing Christian teaching.¹⁷ In choosing Thomism he was following the emphasis on neo-scholastic Thomism in the Catholic Church in the later half of the 19th century. Likewise the choice of Advaita reflected the prestige being given to it by Upadhyay's contemporary Vivekananda. This prestige was reflected in the introduction Thibaut added to his still widely used translation of the commentaries of Shankara and Ramanuja on the Vedantic *Brahma Sutra* text, a translation with which Upadhyay was well acquainted.¹⁸

Upadhyay's choices for the shape of an inculturated Christianity were further developed in subsequent Catholic theological and spiritual encounter with Hinduism. Just a decade after Upadhyay's death, there began the sustained intellectual encounter undertaken by the 'Calcutta School' of Jesuits, including Pierre Johanns (1885-1955), Pierre Fallon (1912-1985) and Richard de Smet (1916-1998).¹⁹ They undertook serious study of the various traditions of Hinduism, as well as sought to identify what might be used for expressing Christian faith in Hindu terms. Their Christianity was Thomist in character and there was a clear preference for systematic Vedanta, and a tendency, though not an altogether exclusive one, to favour Advaita. De Smet furthered and refined this encounter in the time leading up to and after the Council. His approach has been promoted by others,

¹⁷ Lipner (1999), 178-204, 255-280

¹⁸ G.Thibaut *The Vedanta Sutras of Badarayana with the Commentary By Sankara, Sacred Books of the East* Vol 34 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), ix-cxxviii. Upadhyay, for instance, used Thibaut and his early views on Advaita were informed by Thibaut's introduction, which reflects the understanding of Advaita being put forward at the time, though without the admixture of the more constructive elements introduced by the neo-Vedantins. Thibaut commends Shankara's commentary as expressing the orthodox Brahmanical theology, as philosophically the important product of Indian thought, as most generally thought to be the right understanding of the Sutras and Shankara's school as that to which the majority of the best thinkers of India have belonged.

¹⁹ The main writings of Johanns on the Vedanta are gathered in T. de Greef, J. Patmury (eds) *The Writings of P.Johanns, To Christ through the Vedanta* Vols 1 &2 (Bangalore: United Theological College, 1996), is an English translation of *Vers le Christ par le Vedanta, Louvain: Museum Lessianum, 1932*, being the collection of a series of articles which were originally printed in the journal, *The Light of the East* (1922-34) edited by Johanns and Georges Dandoy. Articles on Hinduism by these and other Jesuits of the same and subsequent generation are found in the various stages and reprints of *Religious Hinduism* (3rd edition, Mumbai: St Pauls Press 1996), edited by R. de Smet, J.Neuner.

especially his student Sara Grant RSCJ (1922-2000)²⁰ and, further afield, the American theologian, Bradley Malkovsky.²¹ The work of these Jesuits and their successors has done much to shape Catholic perspectives on Hinduism itself and on the possibilities for the intellectual encounter between Catholic and Hindu thought, be it in India or further afield.

This encounter between Thomism and the Vedanta is also evident in the well-known and highly influential work of the Indian and Spanish theologian Raimundo Panikkar (1918-), who has furthered the intellectual encounter between Catholicism and Hinduism, as well as theological reflection on religious pluralism and the nature of inter-religious dialogue. The scope of Panikkar's work and his outlook have developed considerably over the decades. Nonetheless the encounter between Thomism and Advaita Vedanta forms the heart of his best-known work, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*.²² In the final section he presents a Christological commentary on one of the *Brahma Sutras*, in which Christ is understood as the creative principle of the world, *Ishvara*. Panikkar depicts his endeavour as a constructive reading of the text in a way that parallels Thomas' use of his Greek sources.²³

Upadhyay's efforts also proved a source of inspiration for a more spiritual and contemplative encounter with Vedanta in the form of the ashramic movement.²⁴ The best known of the Catholic ashrams is Saccidananda Ashram established in 1950 by the French priest Jules Monchanin and French Benedictine Henri Le Saux (Abhishikatananda) (1910-73) in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, later to be joined and succeeded by the English Benedictine, Bede Griffiths (1906-93).²⁵ Sara Grant, for her part, was joint head of the Christa Prema Seva Ashram in Pune, established in 1927 and re-founded in 1972.²⁶ Here too there is a marked preference for Advaita Vedanta,

²⁰ S. Grant RSCJ *Sankaracarya's Concept of Relation* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999); S. Grant RSCJ *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-dual Christian* (edited by B.J. Malkovsky) (ed, University of Notre Dame, 2002)

²¹ B.J. Malkovsky (ed) *New Perspectives on Advaita Vedanta: Essays in Commemoration of Professor Richard de Smet S.J.* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); The Personhood of Samkara's *Para Brahman* in *Journal of Religion* 77 (1997), 541-562.

²² R. Panikkar *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964). In the second edition of this book (1981) Panikkar moves away from the idea of the Vedantic account being brought to fulfilment or completion in the Christian one towards the idea that both traditions represent complementary insights into the divine Mystery.

²³ Panikkar (1964), 126-131; (1982), 155-162

²⁴ Lipner (1999) 205

²⁵ For an outline and exposition of the work of Monchanin, le Saux and Griffiths see J. Trapnell in ed. A. O'Mahony, M. Kirwin (eds) *World Christianity: Politics, Theology, Dialogues* (London: Melisende, 2004), 257-284; Grant recounts her own experiences in (2002), 63-78.

²⁶ Grant (2002), 63-78.

though in this more contemplative approach there is an emphasis on the experiential rather than intellectual encounter. An important aspect of this has been the contemplative exploration of the Advaitic experience of non-duality with Brahman, conceived under the three-fold description *sac-cid-ananda* (being, consciousness and bliss), in relation to the Christian experience of interpersonal communion with God, conceived as the three Persons of the Trinity.²⁷ In his detailed account of this, Abhishiktananda explores an inward meeting between the Advaitic and Christian experiences, viewed either as a progression from one experience to the other, or as a creative 'symbiosis' of the two experiences.²⁸

2.2. *The Catholic Understanding of Advaita*

We have noted that the particular choice of Advaita Vedanta was influenced by the desire to present Christian faith in a form attractive to the upper castes of Brahmanical society and because of the prestige being attached to Advaita. A particular concern was to avoid Christianity being dismissed by Advaitic Hindus as spiritually and intellectually inferior, for within the Advaitic paradigm theistic religion is seen as a lower and provisional stage, a stepping-stone to the Advaitic experience. Advaita thus reconciles the first and second trends in Hindu religious thought by subordinating the theistic account and finally doing away with it. However, thus understood, Advaita Vedanta would seem conceptually, as well as spiritually, incompatible with the Christian account of God and the creation. However, those Christians drawn to inculturation into Advaita have argued for an alternative reading of Advaita that turns out to converge with Christian theism.

To appreciate and appraise their endeavour it will be useful to outline the standard reading of Advaita in more detail.²⁹ As commonly understood, Advaita, as radical non-dualism, is held to maintain that the soul (*atman*) is strictly identical with Brahman. Brahman only is ultimately real (*paramartha-sat*) and empirical duality, be it of

²⁷ This parallel was first explored by the neo-Hindu Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-84), followed by Upadhyay who composed a Trinitarian hymn in Sanskrit. This hymn is still used today in the Indian Church.

²⁸ Abhishiktananda, Swami (Henri le Saux) *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to the Advaitic Experience* (1974), the translation and second edition of *Sagesse Hindoue, Mystique Chrétienne: du védanta a la Trinité* (1965). Like Panikkar, Abhishiktananda has moved from a fulfilment to a more complementary account of the two traditions.

²⁹ Influential and short introductions to Advaita include E. Deutsch *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), Hiriyanna, M *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995 (Indian Edition), 151-174.

the material world, or of finite selves, is only apparently or practically real (*vyavaharika-sat*). Within the Vedantic tradition Brahman is said both to be immutable, but also to be the substantive, as well as the efficient cause, of the world, transforming itself into the empirical world. To reconcile these two ideas Advaita maintains that the world is only the illusory transformation (*vivarta*) of Brahman into the world. The personal creative Lord (*Ishvara* or *saguna brahman*) of theism is only part of that illusory manifestation and real only on the level of apparent or practical reality. In reality Brahman remains immutable and impersonal or supra-personal in nature, without attributes (*nirguna*).

It is important, however, to note a nuance in the Advaitic gradation of reality. For the level of the practically real (*vyavaharika-sat*) is held to be very real for those who remain and act on its level, on which ritual and social duties hold good. This level has a reality which is higher and distinct from a third level of reality in Advaita, that the individual imagination, which is only fictitiously real (*pratibhasika-sat*).³⁰ Only when the liberating realisation of the non-duality or identity of the soul and Brahman comes about is the world on the level of practical reality seen as lacking substantial reality and value, as illusory in nature.

On this reading many Christians have concluded that Advaita is as such incompatible with the Christian account.³¹ Pierre Johanns takes Advaita to teach the world to be the illusory manifestation of Brahman, but in order to produce a Vedantic account which would express the Thomist one, seeks to amalgamate Advaita with theist Vedanta, especially the Visistadvaita of Ramanuja, in which the personal nature of Brahman and the distinction of the soul from Brahman, even in the state of release, are affirmed.³² Johanns feels unable to accept Ramanuja's account on its own as compatible with the Thomist account, because he feels that Ramanuja's account of the relationship between Brahman and the world is pantheistic.³³

Other Christian thinkers have argued instead that the standard reading fails to give a true account of Advaita and that properly understood it is compatible with the Thomist account.³⁴ The most systematic and enduring attempt has been that of de Smet and his

³⁰ For an account of the various schemes for distinguishing reality in Advaita see Hacker in Halbfass (ed) (1995), 137-154.

³¹ Upadhyay himself initially rejected Advaita on the basis of the version he found in Thibaut. Lipner (1999), 133ff.

³² Johanns (1996), 10-18

³³ Johanns (1996), 186-206; 32-33.

³⁴ Lipner (1999), 255-280. Upadhyay directly rejected the account found in Thibaut. Instead, he argued for a set of correspondences between the Thomist and Advaitic correspondences between the accounts. In Lipner's view, however, Upadhyay's basis for arguing such convergence is an often loosely defined Advaita that had been previously re-read in neo-Scholastic terms.

successors, especially Sara Grant.³⁵ They argue that we should distinguish the account of Shankara, the principal teacher of the Advaitic system, from later Advaitic tradition. A fundamental part of their argument is based on the acceptance of western critical methods in dealing with Advaitic texts, accepting only some of the works traditionally ascribed to Shankara as genuine.³⁶

De Smet³⁷ argues that in Shankara's account the distinction between the ultimately real and practically real should be taken as one between self-subsistent being and contingent being. Likewise, Shankara's affirmation of the identity of the soul with Brahman is to be understood as indicating that the soul has no independent existence.³⁸ Statements that seem to deny the real production of the world only deny that Brahman undergoes change in the production of the world. Moreover, rather than relegating *Ishvara* to a lower level of reality, Shankara often uses the term *Ishvara* and Brahman interchangeably. When he does deny that *Ishvara* is Brahman and talk of *Ishvara* as belonging to the practical level of reality, this again serves only to deny that Brahman in itself has really distinct attributes and is really related to the world as creator and lord, in the sense of undergoing change.³⁹

Shankara's account can, thus, be said to be compatible with the Thomist account of God and creation, concerned to express the same non-reciprocal relation of dependence that Aquinas does through his account of mixed relations. De Smet is keen to assert that the central concept of non-dualism in Shankara is not the same as monism, for it affirms dependence not identity of being.⁴⁰ In the released state (*moksa*) there is an epistemological rather than an ontological shift, in which the world does not cease to have reality, but is perceived clearly to be contingent, to have no existence independent of Brahman as its cause.⁴¹ Based on his reading of Shankara, de Smet calls

³⁵ The life and work of de Smet is portrayed in Malkovsky (2000), 1-17.

³⁶ Grant (1999, 2002) has further articulated de Smet's lines. Some western Indologists, such as Hacker have also wanted to distinguish between genuine and spurious works of Shankara and between Shankara and later Advaita. See Halbfass ed. (1995). De Smet knew Hacker's work, though he wanted to go further towards a realist reading of Shankara.

³⁷ De Smet, R, *Religious Hinduism* (1996), 80-96. Also see 'Sankara and Aquinas on Creation' *Indian Philosophical Annual* 6 (1970); 'Is the Concept of Person Congenial to Sankara's Vedanta' *Indian Philosophical Annual* 8 (1972)

³⁸ De Smet (1996), 90-92

³⁹ In the Thomist account the world is said to be really related to God, as created being, but God only notionally related to the world, as creator, since a real relation would indicate that God undergoes change in creating (ST 13, 7; 45,3). The parallel between Shankara's account and the Thomist account of mixed relations is explored in some detail by Grant (1999).

⁴⁰ (1996), 95

⁴¹ The epistemological difference between *samsara* and *moksa* are more fully developed in Grant (1999), 59-79

for inculturation into Advaitic categories in preference to those of *bhakti*.⁴²

For de Smet the difference between Shankara and Aquinas is thus one of expression, not of content. Shankara affirms contingency by a more negative approach, valorising finite being negatively against absolute being, whereas Aquinas has a more positive approach, using the language of participation.⁴³ De Smet and his successors have also come to talk of the Advaitic account as a complementary expression that might enrich the Thomist account and Christian experience. De Smet remarked that Shankara's account had taught him personally to be aware of 'God's non-dual presence within.'⁴⁴ Grant argues that non-dual language and experience, as well as the Vedantic emphasis on the immanence of Brahman, challenges tendencies in western theological discourse towards a dualism between God and the world, in which God is depicted as outside and remote from the world.⁴⁵ Her suggestions have been taken up by the American Thomist, David Burrell, in an exploration of the way Aquinas uses non-Christian accounts as intellectual resources for developing his doctrine of creation. Accepting Grant's account of the complementarity between Shankara's non-dualism and the Thomist account of creation, Burrell suggests that non-dual language is not to be feared as pantheistic and can be useful in expressing the unique and inseparable relationship of creation, helping us to 'think both creator and creature together.'⁴⁶

2.3. *Problems with the Christian Reading of Advaita and the Theistic Alternative*

This attempt to argue for an alternative reading of Advaita remains problematic as an act of theological inculturation. Conceptually it has won very little acceptance as an account of Shankara's teaching. De Smet presents his understanding of Shankara as being an exposition of the account and he has been charged with assimilating the two accounts into each other, rather than showing an objective convergence.⁴⁷ Certainly his successors, such as Grant, are more cautious about identifying too complete a correspondence between the accounts. Grant is prepared to acknowledge that Shankara

⁴² De Smet (1996), 95

⁴³ Malkovsky (2000), 15-16

⁴⁴ Malkovsky (2000), 11-12

⁴⁵ Grant (2002), 54-6

⁴⁶ D. B. Burrell, 'Act of Creation with its Theological Consequences,' in T. Weinandy, D. Keating, J. Yocum (eds) *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 27-44; 38-40

⁴⁷ As E.J. Lott *God and the Universe in the Vedantic Theology of Ramanuja* (Madras: Ramanuja Research Library, 1976), 159-60

probably did not think that the released soul continued to have a distinct identity, thus conceding the central doctrine of Advaita that the soul is ultimately identical with Brahman. Instead, she argues that we can read Shankara's account in such way that, within its terms, scope can be given for affirming the continued difference of the soul.⁴⁸

Thus a Christian account of God and creation in Advaitic terms is more easily justified as a creative adaptation or re-reading of Shankara, just as Aquinas adapted the Greek and other resources he made use of.⁴⁹ Advaitic Trinitarian and Christological accounts are likewise creative interpretations of Advaita in the encounter with Christian faith. However, this has to reckon with the problem of the reception by Hindus of such an account of Advaita. Unlike the ancient Greek culture with which Thomas engaged, the Hindu culture is a living tradition, interpreted by those who adhere to it. As Grant and Malkovsky have been ready to admit, neither this interpretation of Shankara, nor the modern historical critical approach to the Advaitic corpus which supports it, have won any significant acceptance among Advaitins, who continue for the most part to accept the standard account of Advaita and, in traditional manner, to read Shankara and the later Advaitic accounts as in doctrinal continuity with each other.⁵⁰ This means that such Christian inculturation into Advaita is open to considerable misunderstanding on the part of Hindus or rejection as the product of an alien interpretative method supporting an incorrect interpretation.

While any Christian inculturation into Hindu culture is bound to be transformative to some extent, the problem with such use of Advaita is that so fundamental a discontinuity with the standard account that it undermines the dialogical success of such inculturation. In this regard Panikkar has made some important observations on what is involved in successful inculturation into the traditions of Hinduism. He has promoted the term 'interculturalism' as better expressing that what takes place is an exchange between Christian and Hindu religious cultures. This recognises that Christianity in India already has a cultural expression and that it engages with a Hindu culture that is the living concern of Hindus. Panikkar argues that this cultural exchange is the more successful, the more it is understood appropriately by both the Christian and the Hindu cultures and acceptable to them.⁵¹

In effect, on this Christian reading, Shankara is taken out of the first trend of Indian thought and placed within the second theistic trend. It

⁴⁸ Grant (1999), 189-191; 2002, 53. Also Malkovsky (2000), 12

⁴⁹ As Panikkar (1964), 132-138

⁵⁰ Grant (2002), 4; Malkovsky (2000), 13

⁵¹ R. Panikkar, 'Indic Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism from the Perspective of Interculturalism,' in Pathil (1991), 252-299.

might seem just as good to develop a Christian Vedanta using one of the existing theistic Vedantic accounts. Despite the prestige given to it, Advaita is only one system of the Vedanta and it is only Advaitins who rank other Vedantic schools below Advaita. For the adherents of theistic Vedanta, among whom are also members of the higher castes, Advaita is not accepted as the pinnacle of Hindu thought and spirituality, but reckoned an erroneous system, based on incorrect exegesis of the Vedantic texts and faulty reasoning.

An attractive alternative to Advaita is the theistic Vedanta of the south Indian teacher Ramanuja.⁵² Ramanuja's Vedantic tradition came to be known as Visistadvaita, the 'non-dualism (*advaita*) of what is differentiated (*visista*),' often, but less correctly rendered as 'qualified non-dualism.' In this system Brahman and the personal God are explicitly identified and the permanent reality and distinction of God, the material world and souls are affirmed. At the same time, the relationship is also described as *advaita* (non-dualism), because material things and souls are contingent on Brahman for their existence at all times. Ramanuja's central conception of this relationship is that the entities of the world form the body of Brahman. The final goal is the blissful realisation of this relationship and of the direct knowledge or vision of Brahman. This comes about through *bhakti*, which Ramanuja depicts in Vedantic terms as a form of devotional meditation on the Vedantic texts, a steady calling to mind of God that leads into vision of God. This process and the attainment of the final goal are dependent on divine grace.⁵³

The principal advocates of a positive engagement with Ramanuja have until recently been Protestant Christians. Above all, Appasamy, a bishop of the Church of South India, sought to develop a Christian theology which draws heavily on the Hindu *bhakti* traditions, worked out in the terms of Ramanuja's account.⁵⁴ Catholic theologians such as Johanns and de Smet, on the other hand, rejected Ramanuja's account as pantheistic because he seemed to them to end up affirming a substantial unity between Brahman and the world.⁵⁵ This

⁵² For an account of Ramanuja's thought see J.J. *The Lipner Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedantic Theology of Ramanuja* (Albany: SUNY, 1986); for a clear account of Visistadvaita and Sri Vaishnavism see S.M Srinivasa Chari *Visistadvaita* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988); *Vaishnavism: Its Religion, Theology and Religious Discipline* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994)

⁵³ For an exposition of Ramanuja's account and its relation to the Thomist account of creation, see R.M Ganeri *The Vedantic Cosmology of Ramanuja and its Western Parallels: from contrast to complementarity: the embodiment cosmology of Ramanuja and the doctrine of creation of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford, 2003), D.Phil Thesis.

⁵⁴ A.J. Appasamy *Christianity as Bhakti Marga* (Madras: Christian Literary Society of India, 1930); T.D. Francis (ed) *The Christian Bhakti of A.J. Appasamy* (1992) 321-332. An outline and appraisal of Appasamy is in Boyd (1974), 118-143.

⁵⁵ For an outline and appraisal of Johanns and de Smet on Ramanuja see Ganeri (2003), 7-25.

interpretation of Ramanuja can, however, be shown to be mistaken. A careful reading of his work, giving due priority to his embodiment cosmology, makes clear that the relationship is one between self-subsistent being and contingent being, for the embodiment relationship is a two-substance dualism. As such his cosmological account is compatible with the account of creation found in Aquinas.⁵⁶ In fact, the type of Christian re-reading of Shankara we have considered ends up interpreting Shankara's non-dualism in ways that bear a remarkable likeness to the account given by Ramanuja.⁵⁷

In the final quarter of the twentieth century Catholic theologians have also gradually come to show interest in and openness to Ramanuja and to his tradition of Vedanta. For her part, Grant is more open to Ramanuja than de Smet and ready to see his system as complementary to that of Shankara.⁵⁸ As the theologian Julius Lipner has noted, Ramanuja's account, as Visistadvaita, is also characteristically Vedantic, emphasising the non-dualism of Brahman and the world and the immanence of Brahman in the world. It has the same potential to complement and enrich the existing Christian account, be it in the evolution of an Indian Christianity or more widely.⁵⁹ Ramanuja's distinctive concept of the world as the body of God might itself have something to offer, if appropriated as a metaphor to express the Christian account of creation.⁶⁰ Ramanuja's account might, then, be considered at least an alternative to Advaita, if inculturation into systematic Vedanta is sought. Moreover, as a system it is free from the difficulties we have identified with Advaita, for there is no need to argue for a re-reading of his cosmological account that is fundamentally at odds with the way modern Visistadvaitins understand it.

3. The Shift to Social Concerns and to a New Encounter with *Bhakti*

3.1. *Social Concern and the Liberational Critique of Hinduism*

The term, 'Dalit', refers either solely to the so-called 'untouchables' (or Scheduled Castes) or to these and tribal people (or the Scheduled

⁵⁶ Ganeri (2003), 150-219.

⁵⁷ Boyd comments that Abhishiktananda's account of creation in Vedantic terms seems to combine Ramanuja with Shankara, even though Abhishiktananda does not explicitly mention him. Boyd (1974), 291-2

⁵⁸ Grant 1999, 189-91. Panikkar is willing to recognise that Ramanuja's account may contain a parallel for the idea of created participation (1964), 129.

⁵⁹ J.J. Lipner, 'The Christian and Vedantic Theories of Originative Causality: A Study in Transcendence and Immanence' in *Philosophy East and West* Vol.28 No 1 (1978)

⁶⁰ J.J. Lipner, 'The World as God's Body: In pursuit of Dialogue with Ramanuja' in *Religious Studies* Vol 20:1 (1984). For Ramanuja the embodiment concept is not a metaphor within his particular dualist understanding of embodiment.

Tribes). Together they constitute about a quarter to a third of the population of India. The 'untouchables' are those traditionally considered polluting by higher caste Hindus and excluded from areas of religious and social life. They have an ambiguous relationship with Hinduism, either considered outside the hierarchy of the caste system or at its bottom. Post-Independence India has seen the increased conscientisation of the Dalits, especially since the 1970s, as well as attempts by the Indian government to push forward social reforms meant to improve the situation of these and other disadvantaged groups.

As a result of mass conversions of Dalits to Christianity at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, of the present Catholic community fifty percent belong to the Scheduled Castes and twenty-five percent to the Scheduled Tribes.⁶¹ The emergence of a Dalit voice within the Church has encouraged the view that it is on the level of the Dalits that Christians should develop their theological and practical attitudes towards Hinduism. The kind of concern shown by de Nobili and Upadhyay to be acceptable socially to the Brahmins is seen as typifying the wrong approach of earlier engagements. Dalit Christians protest, moreover, that oppressive caste structures continue in the Catholic community. They argue that they end up being doubly discriminated against, because as Christians they do not enjoy the same rights as Hindu Dalits under the Indian constitution, on the grounds that there is no caste in Christianity, whereas in reality they do suffer caste discrimination within the Christian community.⁶² A shift to an emphasis on social emancipation, focused on the socio-political struggle of the Dalits, challenges any inculturation into the intellectual and spiritual traditions of Brahmanical Hinduism, Advaita or otherwise, insofar as they provide support for the caste system and insofar as they promote a spirituality of withdrawal and transcendence instead of concern for social transformation.

It is in this context that a liberative hermeneutic of religions is favoured for determining what kind of inculturation there can be into the traditions of Hinduism. A prominent advocate of this, Soosai Arokiasamy,⁶³ stresses that a liberational perspective insists on the need to keep desire for spiritual salvation and concern for social transformation together in a dynamic tension, or within Christian terms, to keep love of God together with love of neighbour. The liberative

⁶¹ A. Kanjamel, 'Redemptoris Missio and Mission in India,' in W.R Burrows *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 195-205: 197.

⁶² For example, A. Raj, 'The Dalit Christian Reality in Tamilnadu,' *Jeevadhara* XXII No.128 (1992), 92-111

⁶³ S. Arokiasamy, 'Theology of Religions from Liberation Perspective' in Pathil (1991), 300- 323

hermeneutic aims to identify the prophetic, or liberative, core in Hinduism and also to identify how it has been domesticated to fit into oppressive structures, so that it may be freed to function once more as liberational. Arokiasamy identifies the *bhakti* movement as such a core, which he interprets as primarily a movement of members of the lower castes or outcastes, in which God is held to offer salvation equally to all whatever their status, thereby rendering irrelevant the spiritual hierarchy and exclusiveness of the caste system, where lower or higher place is justified as the consequences of *karma*. To illustrate this, Arokiasamy refers to passages in the very influential *bhakti* text, the *Bhagavata Purana*, as indicating the special concern that God shows for the poor within the *bhakti* tradition, and he mentions the Shaiva Basava (c.1106-67) and the Muslim Kabir (1440-1518) as both teaching that devotion to God has to be combined with concern for the welfare of others. Within this perspective *bhakti* is domesticated, when it is combined with affirmation of the values of the caste system or a world-transcending spirituality, thus undermining its power to motivate social transformation. Arokiasamy points to this taking place in the tendency in Brahmanical Hinduism for *bhakti* to be integrated into a scheme of three saving paths (*marga*), along with caste-specific action (*karma*) and liberating knowledge (*jnana*).⁶⁴

The emphasis on social emancipation can lead to a wholesale rejection of Brahmanical Hinduism as inextricably linked to the oppressive structures of caste and to argue for dichotomy and opposition between Brahmanical culture and Dalit culture, as two mutually exclusive choices for inculturation.⁶⁵ Arokiasamy's liberative critique of Hinduism itself, however, would seem to offer a less extreme alternative, for it leaves the way open for a creative adoption of Brahmanical Hindu traditions freed from oppressive elements. In keeping with this, many Indian Christian theologians continue to explore a positive interaction with Brahmanical Hinduism, often critical of elements which fail to address these issues of social emancipation, but also able to find within these traditions the basis for an authentic Indian Christian theology and spirituality.⁶⁶ Any rigid dichotomy between Brahmanical Hinduism and the religion and culture of Dalits might seem to ignore the history of and continuing potential for a creative interaction between them, the kind of interaction which is reflected in the complex and varied relationship between Brahmanical Hinduism and *bhakti* theism.⁶⁷ The Indian identity of the Catholic community

⁶⁴ Ibid. 311

⁶⁵ Barnes (2002), 170-2

⁶⁶ For instance, S. Painadath, 'Atmabodha -The Challenge of Indian Spiritual heritage to Christian Theological Reflection,' in Pathil (1991), 45.

⁶⁷ As G. Gispert-Sauch has argued in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue in India* (1992), 14

is, in any case, neither solely that of Dalit culture nor Brahmanical Hindu culture.⁶⁸

Arokiasamy's Asian liberational perspective, moreover, depicts concern for social transformation going along with the pursuit of spiritual advancement, rather than replacing it. In like manner, a number of those thinkers who have engaged in intellectual and spiritual encounter with Advaita have argued that a distinctive Indian liberative theology should be concerned with both social and spiritual liberation. Panikkar grounds intercultural dialogue and exchange in concern for the mutual liberation of both Christian and Hindu cultures and depicts this as both liberation from injustice and liberation for the attainment of the ultimate goals of human life.⁶⁹ Thus, the shift to social concerns is not in itself exclusive of intellectual and spiritual concerns.

3:2 Towards a Liberative Inculturation into Hindu *Bhakti*

Such a liberational perspective will be critical of a number of features of Advaita Vedanta. Advaita affirms the caste hierarchy, for traditionally only those who are high caste are eligible to study the Vedas and hence to follow the Vedantic path for liberation. Advaita would, moreover, seem to have only a limited scope for constructing a positive view of the world that might motivate emphasis on social concern. Even the Christian reading of Advaita, in which Advaita affirms the reality of a contingent world, still expresses a fairly negative evaluation of the world in itself. Advaita's concern is not the transformation of the world of practical existence, but withdrawal from it and its transcendence in the liberating experience of the unity of the soul with Brahman. In recent times those Christians emphasising social emancipation have, for their part, often been very critical of the contemplative spirituality of the ashramic engagement with Hinduism, as insufficiently unconcerned with the social and political reality of most Christians in India. Even within the neo-Hindu movement itself there was doubt over the suitability of Advaita for constructing a positive social ethic, which might serve to bring about social change and growth. Important neo-Hindus such as Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-1894) and Gandhi (1869-1948) turned instead to the Hindu theistic traditions for the resources they needed.

Although from the liberational perspective the developed *bhakti* traditions have themselves tended to allow caste structures to be reaffirmed, they have also been a force for social change and have re-

⁶⁸ As Barnes notes (2002), 172.

⁶⁹ Panikkar (1991), 282-86. Likewise, Painadath (1991), 46; also S. Grant, 'Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation,' *Jeevadhara* X No. 59 (1980), 389-403

tained an inherent dynamic to challenge the religious value of social hierarchy and exclusion. An ethic for social transformation seems to find an easier basis in the theist trend in Hinduism in general, which affirms the reality and value of the world and interpersonal relations and where there is found an emphasis on concern for others. *Bhakti* traditions tend to emphasise release from existence affected by ignorance and *karma*, rather than from materiality and embodiment as such. In Ramanuja's Visistadvaita, for instance, not only is embodiment viewed as a good thing in the state of release, but even the present life of *samsara* changes from being place of sorrow to one of delight for the devotee whose will is in harmony with that of God, the world in itself being the manifestation of the glory of God.

A liberational perspective suggesting a new engagement with the *bhakti* tradition co-incides with a much greater openness to Hindu theism on the part of Catholics in the second half of the twentieth century. Earlier generations of Christians, including many of those Catholics who favoured encounter with Advaita, tended to be quite negative towards the devotional traditions of Hinduism and to see them as the opposite of what they understood Christianity to be, taking the variety of Hindu theistic traditions to be polytheism and the ubiquitous worship of images to be idolatry. Hindu devotion itself seemed to lack a sufficiently ethical focus and to tend to the overly emotional and erotic. Hindu mythology was taken at face value and dismissed as anthropomorphic and as picturing the gods in an immoral light.⁷⁰

Upadhyay, for his part, initially characterised Hindu devotionalism as morally degrading, singling out the myth of the young Krishna with the naked *gopis* (cow-herd girls) as expressing only an offensive eroticism. He also characterised Hindu worship of images as idolatrous, in contrast to the veneration shown to Christian images in Catholic devotion. Later, however, he came later to argue that Krishna was a moral exemplar for Hindus to emulate, now reading this myth as symbolising and teaching the reconciliation in Krishna of renunciation and involvement in the world.⁷¹ The Jesuit scholars we have considered likewise often have had considerable reservations about Hindu theism. Nonetheless, they too have gradually come to show greater openness, especially since the Council. Johanns is unhappy with what he regards as anthropomorphic and irreverent elements in the mythology and theology of *bhakti*, even though he admires the fundamental attitudes of Hindu devotional religion, with the emphasis on surrender to God in love. A generation later, however, Fallon is willing to depict Hindu mythology as a symbolic communication

⁷⁰ For a brief outline and reflection on this see F.A. Thomson, 'Christian Views of Hindu Bhakti' in Coward *Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (1989), 176-190

⁷¹ Lipner (1999), 335-40

of truths and values. He also acknowledges the underlying and often very explicit monotheistic perspectives to be found in Hindu theism. Moreover, he recognises that the properly installed image in Hindu worship, as the locus of the sacramental presence or embodiment of God (*arcavata*), finds a better parallel in the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist rather than in the use of images.⁷² This type of shift has continued and Catholic theologians engaged in serious study of Hinduism would now want to distance themselves from the type of negative and contrastive language found in earlier Christian appraisal of Hindu theism.⁷³

A move towards a more sympathetic appraisal of the devotional traditions has gone with an openness to intellectual and spiritual inculturation into them. For instance, Gispert-Sauch, a Jesuit at Vidyajyoti College, in a discussion of how the *Bhaktisutra* of Narada, a treatise on the nature of *bhakti*, might help develop an Indian Christology, finds in the same episode with the *gopis* not a lack of reverence for God or the promotion of eroticism, but an example of the humble devotion of those who have nothing but their nakedness to offer. He finds in the depiction of devotion (*bhakti*) and the devotee (*bhakta*) a Indian Christological model whereby Christ can be seen as the true devotee, wholly oriented to God, as well as a model for Christian discipleship.⁷⁴ Likewise, Klaus Klostermaier's encounter with the Vaishnavas in Vrindavan leads him to explore a Christology within the Vaishnava Pancaratra scheme of five forms of divine manifestation.⁷⁵

Attempts at inculturation into Hindu theism, however, also have to recognise the danger of considerable misunderstanding by Hindus if some elements are adopted. The obvious example of this is the difficulty with any straightforward use of the Vaishnava concept of the *avatara* (divine descent) as a way of expressing the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.⁷⁶ While the concept of the *avatara* has often seemed a natural parallel for the Incarnation, there are serious objections against its suitability for expressing the nature and scope of the Incarnation in Christian thinking. For instance, the *avatars*

⁷² P. Fallon, P in various articles in *Religious Hinduism* (1996), 108-129, 220-230, 292-313

⁷³ For instance in J.J. Lipner *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1994); F.X. Clooney *Hindu God, Christian God* (Oxford: OUP, 2001).

G. Gispert-Sauch, 'Devotion to the Lord in the Light of the Bhakti Sutras' *Jeevadhara* XXXIII No 195 (2003), 208-215. By way of contrast, Johanns, writing seventy years before, shows much esteem for the work, but expresses misgivings about Krishna and the naked *gopis* as a good model for devotion since they seem to have forgotten any sense of the majesty of God. (1996), 377-383

⁷⁵ K. K. Klostermaier *Hindu and Christian in Vrindavan* (London: SCM, 1969), 115; *Kristvidya* (1967), 31-2

⁷⁶ For a detailed discussion of the Christological use of *avatara* see Robinson (2004), 273-284 and Boyd (1974), 239-41

are not incarnations into the bodies which human beings have in *samsara*, for within the Hindu account, the *avatara* cannot take on a *samsaric* body, nor can it suffer, because such bodies and suffering are the result of *karma*, which God does not have. The *avataras* are also many and often clearly limited in their scope. Thus, although Klostermaier favours the Pancaratra scheme in which the *avatara* is one form of divine manifestation, he refuses to align Christ with the *avatara*, in order to avoid Hindu misunderstanding. Moreover, from a liberational perspective, it has been argued that the *avatara* doctrine manifests the kind of world-transcending spirituality that contrasts with concern for the transformation of this world.⁷⁷

A number of Catholic theologians have sought a positive engagement with the rich devotional traditions of South India, both Tamil Shaivism and Vaishvaism. Just as Catholic scholars are becoming more open conceptually to Ramanuja's theistic Vedantic, so they are becoming more open to the spirituality of the Sri Vaishnava tradition to which he belonged.⁷⁸ Sri Vaishnavism is itself rooted in the spirituality of its great *bhakti* poet-mystics, the Alvars, and represents a reconciliation of Sanskritic Brahmanical culture and Tamil culture. For his part, Ramanuja is held to have made efforts to improve the status of members of the low castes and to secure their involvement in temple religious practice.⁷⁹ A liberational critique would, of course, find here much domestication of the *bhakti* tradition. Ramanuja's own conception of *bhakti*, developed within Vedantic terms, is itself accommodated to caste eligibility for access to Vedic knowledge, as well as reflecting the basic world-view of Vedanta. Within the Sri Vaishnava tradition caste restrictions have also come to be re-imposed concerning access to some temples. However, within this tradition the inherent dynamic of *bhakti* to transcend such restrictions is manifest in another form of devotion, *prapatti*, self-surrender to God, which is seen as open to all and even the superior path for all to follow. Moreover, the more radical Ramananda (14th century), one of the leading figures of the *sant* movement, and his followers are understood to be rooted in the teaching and spirituality of Ramanuja and the Sri Vaishnava tradition. These developments show the potential of *bhakti* for encouraging change and transformation in Hinduism, even though domestication is also taking place. There might, then, be a creative inculturation into Visistadvaita and Sri Vaishnava theology

⁷⁷ For instance, S. Anand, 'Avatara in the Bhagavata Purana,' *Jeevadhara* XXXIII No 195 (2003), 216-225.

⁷⁸ For instance, C. Veliath SJ *The Mysticism of Ramanuja* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1993); J. Manickath, 'Ramanuja's Devotional Approach to Spirituality' *Jeevadhara* (1984); F.X. Clooney *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology Among the Srivaisnavas of South India* (New York: SUNY, 1996)

⁷⁹ Veliath (1993), 111, 124; Brockington (1992) 128

and spirituality, which builds upon its own history of cross-cultural fusion and social emancipation.

Conclusion – from Advaita to *Bhakti*

The shift noted by Mundadan and others from an emphasis on intellectual and spiritual engagement with Hinduism to one on social concern also involves a shift from one intellectual and spiritual engagement to another, as it does from one type of social concern to another. It marks a shift from an emphasis on a social concern for Brahmins and high caste Hindus to one for Dalits. It also marks a shift from intellectual and spiritual engagement with Advaita to one with *bhakti* Hinduism.

Whether the dynamic of social emancipation in India can avoid a polarisation of Dalit culture and Brahmanical culture that would prohibit any inculturation into Brahmanical Hinduism, be it Advaitic or theistic, is something the Catholic community in India can only decide for itself. Speculation and exploration at a remove must be open to the challenge of that lived encounter. However, even a liberational critique seems to leave scope for a creative, if also critical, interaction with Brahmanical Hinduism. In the case of theistic Hinduism, the liberational critique recognises and promotes a prophetic voice already within it, which has an inherent dynamic to counter and transcend caste and so be the vehicle of social change.

Perhaps the most abiding argument for any privileged and even exclusive engagement with Advaita remains the perception that it is the high point of Hinduism and that to follow another inculturation is to risk Christianity being dismissed by Hindus as a lower religion.⁸⁰ However, such a position is in no small measure dependent on acceptance of the revisioning of Hinduism by neo-Hindus, something that has never been the consensus of Hinduism as a whole. Advaita remains only one tradition within Hinduism, one which has been challenged and rejected by theistic Hinduism, Vedantic and otherwise. The shift to a greater openness to theistic Hinduism should allow these other voices to be more fully recognised.

The engagement of Christianity and Hinduism is of course not restricted to India and those who have explored inculturation in India have also made their encounter more widely known. It is possible to talk of a wider inculturation in which the intellectual and spiritual traditions of Hinduism can enrich Christian theology and spirituality in other parts of the world. We have seen that the encounter with

⁸⁰ For instance, Boyd (1974), 253

Advaita has continued to have its adherents and such engagement enjoys a freedom from some of the concerns that face the Indian Church, such as that of avoiding misunderstanding by Hindus and that of challenging the ideology of caste. Here too, however, the encounter with theistic Hinduism is developing and providing an alternative to Advaita.

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