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Experiencia de Dios en el encuentro interreligioso

Michael Amaladoss*

Resumen

India ha sido y es un país multirreligioso. Conserva una tradición de tolerancia religiosa que se remonta al emperador budista Ashoka, a la tradición hindú representada por el *Bhagavad Gita* y otros textos, y al emperador musulmán Akbar. Dicha tradición fue continuada en la época moderna por Ramakrishna y Mahatma Gandhi. Hacia finales del siglo XIX, mientras algunos hindúes consideraban a Jesús como su gurú, algunos cristianos pensaban que el cristianismo completaba o daba cumplimiento al hinduismo. Teólogos cristianos indios consideran que las escrituras de otras religiones están inspiradas analógicamente y se muestran abiertos a compartir el culto. Figuras como Abhishik-tananda y Panikkar se consideran a sí mismos hindú-cristianos. El encuentro hindú-cristiano nos ayuda a experimentar la relatividad de las religiones en relación con el Único Dios Absoluto: el Padre, inmanente y trascendente, Jesucristo, el misterio cósmico y el Espíritu universal.

Palabras clave: tolerancia religiosa, doble identidad religiosa, el Dios Absoluto y la relatividad de religiones, encuentro interreligioso

M I C H A E L A M A L A D O S S

* Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions, Loyola College, Nungambakkam, Chennai - 600 034, India. Tel: 91-44-2817 8271; Cell: 91-94444 60119. Correo electrónico: mamaladoss@hotmail.com

Experiencing God in Inter-religious Encounter

Summary

India has been and is a multi-religious country. It has a tradition of religious tolerance that goes back to the Buddhist emperor Ashoka, to the Hindu tradition as represented by the *Bhagavad Gita* and other texts, and to the Muslim emperor Akbar. This tradition was continued in modern times by Ramakrishna and Mahatma Gandhi. At the end of the 19th century, while some Hindus considered Jesus as their Guru, some Christians thought that Christianity fulfilled Hinduism. Indian Christian theologians consider other religious scriptures as inspired analogically and are open to sharing worship. Figures like Abhishiktananda and Panikkar consider themselves Hindu-Christians. The Hindu-Christian encounter helps us to experience the relativity of the religions in relation to the One Absolute God: the Father, immanent and transcendent, Jesus Christ, the cosmic mystery and the universal Spirit.

Key words: religious tolerance, double religious identity, the Absolute God and the relativity of religions, inter-religious encounter

Introduction

India is a land of many religions. It has given birth to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. It has been host to Christianity from its beginnings, since we claim the tomb of St. Thomas in Chennai. Islam also has been present there from the 8th century onwards. The co-existence of religions has not always been without tensions. Some of these tensions still continue, though more for political than for religious reasons, partly due to situations outside the country. However, on the whole these religions have lived together and interacted in a peaceful way. This has affected their God-experience too in important ways. I think the best way of showing this is to take a historical approach. This is true of Christianity's own experience in India. After that, a synthetic look at Christianity may be possible and significant. Without history, or without the experience, any synthesis can only be rootless.

1. A Tolerant Tradition

More than 3000 years ago the sages of the *Rig Veda* said famously: "Reality or Truth is one: the sages call it by various names".¹ This may have been a key moment in the transition from polytheism to monotheism, though without abandoning the pluralism at the level of experience and expression. About 300 years before Christ the Buddhist emperor Ashoka, a convert from Hinduism, after witnessing the violence of war, appointed a special minister to look after the welfare of all monks of whatever religious tradition, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, or other. In one of his rock-cut edicts he said:

King Priyadarsi honours men of all faiths, members of religious orders, and laymen alike, with gifts and various marks of esteem [...] The faith of others all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others [...] Concord alone is commendable, for through concord men may learn and respect the conception of Dharma accepted by others.²

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most important Hindu Scriptures, probably from around the time of Christ, Lord Krishna, a divine avatar, tells Arjuna: "In whatever way men approach me, in the same way they receive their reward".³ Kabir (1440-1518), born a Muslim but guided by a Hindu guru, sought to promote fellowship between religions. He sings: "O servant, where does thou seek Me? Lo! I am beside thee. I am neither in temple nor in mosque. I am neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash. Neither am I in rites and ceremonies, nor in Yoga and renunciation".⁴ The Muslim emperor Akbar (1543-1605) invited to his court experts from all religions and promoted the dialogue between them. Three Jesuits represented Christianity at various times.⁵ He sought to establish a new religion –*Din-i-llahi*– combining all that he considered good in the various religions. Islam is said to have spread in

¹ *Rig Veda* 1.161.46.

² Rock Edict XII in N. A. NIKAM / R. MCKEON (eds.), *The Edicts of Ashoka*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1959, 49-50.

³ *Bhagavad Gita* 4.11.

⁴ R. TAGORE (trad.), *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, Macmillan, London 1915, n.1.

⁵ Rudolf Acquaviva, Francis Henriques, and Antony Monserrate.

India mostly thanks to Sufism. The tombs of Sufi saints are still honoured across India and draw also Hindu pilgrims. The Sufis were known to have had a positive view of other religions. Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-73) said: "Though the ways are various, the goal is one. Do you not see that there are many roads to the Kaaba?"⁶

Guru Nanak's Sikhism was an attempt at an integration of Islam and Hinduism. It has no idols. Its scripture is a collection of devotional poems drawn from Hindu and Muslim saints.

Ramakrishna, the Hindu saint of the 19th century, said:

God himself has provided different forms of worship. He who is the Lord of the universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of knowledge [...] God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope.⁷

Mahatma Gandhi made the collaboration of members of all religions a keystone of his political programme. In his ashrams, where he trained his political volunteers, inter-religious prayer services were routine. He used them also to promote peace during the Hindu-Muslim violence after independence. In fact, he was killed on his way to one such service. His popular *bhajan* ("devotional song") goes: "Praise to you, O Ram! (Hindu) Ishwar (Christian) and Allah (Muslim) are your names!"

2. Early Hindu-Christian Encounter

When the Hindu believers and the Christian missionaries encountered each other during British colonialism, there was a movement of Hindus in Bengal (east of India) who were very much attracted to Christ, but not to the church represented by and identified with the missionaries.⁸ Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-84) considered Christ as his guru. His group said that Christ was really

⁶ Quoted in S. HOSSAIN NASR, *Sufi Essays*, Shocken, New York 1977, 149.

⁷ S. NIKHILANANDA (ed.), *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Ramakrishna Math, Chennai 1942, 5, 39.

⁸ See S. VALLAVARAJ PILLAI, *Christ Lives among Non-Christians. I Met Him*, Carmel Publications, Tiruchirapalli 1996.

an oriental. P. C. Mazumdar wrote a book: *The Oriental Christ*.⁹ Brahma-bandab Upadhyaya (1867-1901), one of the prominent converts to Christianity, proclaimed that he was Christian by religion, but Hindu by social culture. He tried to show how the philosophy of St. Thomas completes the Hindu philosophical quest for the Absolute.¹⁰

In this same spirit a protestant missionary, J. N. Farquahar, wrote the book *The Crown of Hinduism*.¹¹ The reference, of course, was to Christianity. A Belgian Jesuit, Pierre Johanns, wrote a series of booklets: *To Christ through the Vedanta*.¹² The *Vedanta* represents an important school of Hindu philosophers from the 8th to the 14th centuries. He tried to show how their quest for the Absolute, if continued, would lead them to Christ. An Indian Anglican Bishop, A. J. Appasamy, made a collection of Hindu texts for reflection and prayer: *Temple Bells*.¹³

In 1950 Abbe Monchanin and Dom Henri Le Saux, later known as Swami Abhishiktananda, founded an ashram, an Indian Benedictine monastery. Their aim was to introduce India to the contemplative and mystical tradition of Christianity hoping that the Indians, with their own rich mystical tradition, will be attracted by it and find fulfilment in it. In the 1960s, a Swiss Ambassador to India, Jacques Albert Cuttat, brought together a group of Hindu and Christian intellectuals to read together Hindu and Christian scriptural texts in a dialogical perspective. Abhishiktananda's *The Hindu-Christian Meeting Point* (1969) reports some of the discussions at these meetings. The Hindu *advaita* or non-duality – the Absolute and the world are “not-two” – seemed to be in tune with some of the “I am” sayings in St. John's gospel. Finally, the Second Vatican Council has contributed to these attempts at inter-religious dialogue by encouraging the wider Christian community to engage in dialogue with the other religions.

⁹ G. H. Ellis, Boston 1883.

¹⁰ S. PAINADATH / J. PARAPPALLY (eds.), *A Hindu-Catholic. Brahmabandab Upadhyaya's Significance for Indian Christian Theology*, ATC, Bangalore 2008.

¹¹ Oxford University Press, London 1913.

¹² P. JOHANNIS, *To Christ through the Vedanta*, 2 vols., UTC, Bangalore 1996.

¹³ YMCA, Calcutta 1930.

2.1. Swami Abhishiktananda

But before I go on exploring the impact of the Council upon the inter-religious encounter in India, I should briefly narrate the story of Swami Abhishiktananda, who not only straddled the Council and post-Council period, but also took the Hindu-Christian encounter in directions and to an extent in which the wider Christian community in India has not yet followed.¹⁴ Swami Abhishiktananda came to India to lead it to Christ, if not to Christianity. That is why he started the ashram. Trying to understand ashram life in India he visited various Hindu ashrams. One such visit brought him face to face with Ramana Maharishi, an advaitic mystic at Thiruvannamalai. He was literally blown over by this encounter and started searching for a similar experience. He started an intensive reading of and reflection on the *Upanishads*, which are reflective discourses on the Hindu experience that date from 6th to 3rd centuries before Christ. He began a serious search for this experience through Hindu meditation under the direction of Hindu gurus. The Indian meditation consists basically in emptying the mind and the spirit of every idea and attachment so that the light of the Absolute can shine. This may happen suddenly as in the life of Ramana or take a lifetime as in the case of Abhishiktananda. He lost all interest in the Indian Benedictine ashram, to which moreover there were no Indian vocations as he had expected, and gave it over to Bede Griffiths. Starting with an effort to read the Hindu texts and interpret them in the light of the Bible which was supposed to fulfil them, he proceeded to read the Bible in the light of the Hindu *advaita*. His focus was not devotional, but philosophical and mystical Hinduism. Because of this he was not very welcome within Christian circles. Some of his writings from this period were rejected by his censors both in France and India. Abhishiktananda lived this tension speaking two languages, one in public and one in private, this latter to a few interested friends. Here is an example:

The Self is then seen in the self. In the light of pure consciousness, Being shines with its own light [...] God is no longer a HE about whom men dare to speak among themselves, nor even only a THOU whose presence man realizes as facing him. Rather, necessarily starting from oneself,

¹⁴ S. ABHISHIKTANANDA, *Ascent to the Depths of the Heart*, ISPCK, Delhi 1998.

God is here discovered and experienced as I, the *aham asmi* of the *Upanishads*, the *ehieh asher ehieh* of the Burning Bush.¹⁵

The Second Vatican Council seemed to bring a promise of change. Therefore, he maintained a dialogue with the Christian community. However, he had gone far ahead. He felt that the Absolute was beyond both Hinduism and Christianity as religions. Hence both of them had to be transcended. The Absolute resides beyond "name and form" (*nama-rupa*), beyond all phenomena. But when one has to speak about it one has to fall back upon one or other religious tradition. Thus, one lives at two levels, not at the same time, but in succession. As a renouncer (*sannyasi*), Abhishiktananda felt that he had transcended the Hindu and the Christian *nama-rupa*. He claimed to have had the *advaitic* experience of the Absolute in 1972. Despite of this, he remained faithful to his Upanishadic readings, as well as to the celebration of the Eucharist till the last day of his life. Finally, all his concerns seem to disappear after a heart attack, lived as a spiritual experience in July 1973. He dies in December of that year. He wrote in his diary:

Once you have recognized the fundamental truth of the religious myth and of the multiple forms it has taken, you accept the symbolic truth of every formulation, every rite, etc., but you obstinately refuse to give them an absolute value.¹⁶

He had one disciple by name Marc. He was initiated as a *sannyasi* jointly by him and Swami Chidananda, representing the Hindu tradition. Marc simply disappears from history after some years, probably to escape any ties to any *nama-rupa* whatsoever. (This happened also to another disciple of his, Sr. Therese.) A Hindu-Christian encounter has led Abhishiktananda to transcend, while including, both Hinduism and Christianity. This could allow a meaningful discussion about God-experience and God-talk. I shall come back briefly on this later. Much of the inner tension that Swamiji lived with will not be known, except to a few close friends, till his spiritual diary was published. Swamiji will be seen as a pioneer of what happens in the Chris-

¹⁵ S. ABHISHIKTANANDA, *The Further Shore*, ISPCK, Delhi 1975, 116.

¹⁶ *Ascent to the Depths of the Heart*, 369.

tian community after his death, though he was no longer actively involved in it –and he is still ahead of us.

2.2. Mutual Enrichment

The Second Vatican Council does not go beyond finding “good” and “holy” elements, as well as the “seeds of the Word” in other religions. The Indian theologians begin with a step further. Asking the question whether Non-Biblical Scriptures can be considered inspired at a national seminar in 1973 their answer was “Yes”.¹⁷ They speak of God’s covenant with humanity already at creation: the *Cosmic* covenant that precedes the Mosaic covenant. The Scriptures of other religions all belong to the cosmic covenant. They can be considered inspired in an analogical way. Just as we read and interpret the First Testament in the light of the Second, the scriptures of the other religions can be read and interpreted in the light of the Bible. Many collections of texts from the Hindu scriptures were made to be read along with Biblical readings for the liturgical year. Other collections were thematic. Though they are forbidden to be read during the official liturgy, they are used in private meditation and in prayer groups, more and more widely. This may happen in inter-religious dialogue between Hindus and Christians. But it happens more often in a Hindu-Christian encounter within a Christian individual or community. A practice like this slowly leads to a greater appreciation of the Hindu text. It leads further to a consideration of the Christian text in the light of the Hindu one. This can lead to mutual enrichment, and even integration. For instance, one does not speak any longer about how the Hindu *advaita* or non-duality finds fulfilment in the mystery of the Trinity where the three Persons are one God. Rather, one speaks of a Christian *advaita* where the union between the Father and Jesus is seen as *advaitic* or non-dual, and how we share in this *advaitic* unity in and through Jesus. Thus, a text like: “As You Father are in me and I in You may they also be one in us” (Jn 17,22) will be seen as an *advaitic* text. In the process, the distance between the Creator and the creature characteristic of ordinary Christianity disappears. There is also a new respect for Hinduism, which is not seen simply in relation to the preparation-fulfilment paradigm, but as a religion with its own special

¹⁷ Cf. D. S. AMALORPAVADASS (ed.), *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures*, NBCLC, Bangalore 1974.

identity, a religion that can make a positive contribution to our God-experience. One even sees Hinduism as more mystical than normal Christianity, since one has to look for mystics like Meister Eckhart for such *advaitic* insights. Hinduism is then seen as a legitimate means of salvific divine-human encounter. The dialogue with the Hindus acquires a new seriousness and depth. One then recalls the kind of respect that Abhishiktananda had for Swami Chidananda of the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh.

Such an experience of Hinduism is confirmed by certain acts of John Paul II. In the first place we have his invitation to the leaders of other religions to come together in Assisi to pray for peace in the world. The invitation implied that the members of other religions can pray and enter into a divine-human encounter, and that their prayers can be effective, that is, "heard". Secondly, in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*, 28, John Paul II states that the Spirit of God is present and active in other cultures and religions. The Pope himself and the Roman theologians will try to see these events within the context of the preparation-fulfilment process. However, the Indian theologians will affirm the freedom of the Spirit, who can not only "blow where it wills" but also bestow its gifts to any person beyond the constraints to which we would like to confine it.

2.3. Sharing Worship

Certain equality between all religions was affirmed in another seminar on *Sharing Worship. Communicatio in Sacris*, celebrated in 1988.¹⁸ In this seminar theologians affirmed that God is one, and that all religions worship the same and only God, even though they may use different symbols to depict God. In this sense, there is no major difficulty in joining the others in their worship or to invite them to share one's own worship. I do not think that such a shared worship is practiced widely. As a matter of fact, anytime the Eucharist is celebrated in a public place or during a festival in which other believers may be present a warning is always made before the distribution of the Eucharist making clear that it is only meant for Catholics –though some members of other religions may come up for communion. But what is important is the attitude to other religions underlying this. We know from his spiritual diary

¹⁸ Cf. P. PUTHANANGADY (ed.), *Sharing Worship. Communicatio in Sacris*, NBCLC, Bangalore 1988.

that Abhishiktananda spent days and nights meditating in Hindu temples. He also put his disciple Marc through a joint initiation with a Hindu guru. Christians are not interested in ritualistic Hinduism. What interest them is philosophical and spiritual Hinduism. Today they see a greater openness towards a dialogue with Hinduism at that level. Thus, we need not wonder when we hear that there are Christian spiritual masters who preach retreats based on Hindu texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*.

2.4. Hindu-Christians

The Hindu-Christian encounter in such situations is not between a Hindu and a Christian believer. Rather, it is an encounter between Hinduism and Christianity in one's own spiritual practice. This is not a question of scandal, since it is a personal matter. It is in such a context that we hear people speaking of being Hindu-Christians.¹⁹ Abhishiktananda certainly felt that he was a Hindu-Christian. He was a Frenchman. He may have studied Hinduism while he was in France. He encountered living Hinduism only when he came to India. Struck by people like Ramana Maharishi and Swami Gnanananda, his guru, he practiced Hindu meditation. These gurus led him to the texts and to meditation.

But for people born in India the experience is different. For a person whose ancestors may have been converted to Christianity before four, five, or six generations Hinduism is the religion of his/her ancestors. It is not an "other" religion. It is a part of his/her roots. In encountering Hinduism that person is coming to terms with a dimension of his/her own deepest identity. Sociologically and institutionally s/he need not and cannot belong to two religious systems or communities. There is no need of following rituals of both religions. But at the level of spiritual inspiration and practice there is no reason why s/he cannot integrate the two traditions, especially when s/he sees them as mutually enriching. Abhishiktananda does not speak of visiting Hindu temples in his later life in the north of India. The sacred mountain Arunachala and the temples in Thiruvannamalai in the south of India seem to have represented an attraction for him.²⁰ Hinduism for him was the *Upa-*

¹⁹ See M. AMALADOSS, "Double Religious Identity: Is it Possible? Is it Necessary?", in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 73 (2009) 519-532.

²⁰ People say that Arunachala radiates cosmic energy in a special way, experienced by people who are sensitive to it.

nishads and the method of concentration on the self in order to discover the *Self* within.

Obviously, not everyone is called to be a Hindu-Christian. Not everyone needs to be one either. But taking into account the specific circumstances of their spiritual life and growth, some may feel called to explore the two religious roots of their personality. Such persons may be liminal persons, situated on the borders or even fringes of religious institutions. Ideally, they may be suited to be facilitators of the dialogue between Hindus and Christians in a fruitful and spiritual way.

Raimon Panikkar says: "I 'left' as a Christian, I 'found' myself a Hindu, and I 'return' a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian".²¹ There are nearly 60 Christian ashrams in India today.²² The people who live in them are trying to live their Christian identity in a Hindu (Indian) spiritual context. Some of them will identify themselves as Hindu-Christians in the sense I have outlined above.²³ Their spiritual experience is inclusive and holistic. The cosmos and the humans are one with the absolute *Self* in a non-dual manner. Christ is the model and the enabler in and through whom they achieve and live this *advaitic* communion. The people become open and free. They nourish themselves from God's gifts wherever they are found. They do not have to renounce to anything except to their egoism and inordinate desire. Life becomes like a play. They live in harmony with the universe. A sense of peace and fullness leads them to experience joy. As expressions of this new experience, the Church and the sacraments acquire new meanings. At the same time they are no longer compulsory, structural prisons. The "law" has given place to the Spirit who takes them to the Source. It is this experience the one which they seek to spell out in a new theological vision. Let us take a brief look at the major points of this new vision.

²¹ R. PANIKKAR, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, Paulist Press, New York 1972, 2.

²² See S. PAINADATH, *Solitude and Solidarity. Ashrams of Catholic Initiative*, ISPCK, Delhi 2003.

²³ The phenomenon of mixed marriages between Hindus and Christians is becoming frequent and requires exploration, especially with regard to the identity of the children.

3. Theological Implications: The Other Religions

Primarily, religions are not institutions, structures, or rituals. They are spiritual paths. They are made of certain God-experiences shared by sages and prophets. They do not so much speak about their discovery of God, but rather about how God has spoken and manifested His divinity to them. Religion is the sharing of an experience of a divine-human encounter. It offers the hope that others too may attain such an experience as long as they prepare themselves, for ultimately it is God's gift. Believers build up structures around such manifestations. Buddha shared his experience in the form of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. His disciples built up temples filled with images of various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, good and evil spirits. When we speak of a divine-human encounter this involves two freedoms: the freedom of God and the freedom of the person who responds to God's self manifestation. These two freedoms are sacred and inviolable. They need to be respected. In so far as religions facilitate such encounters they also need to be respected. Religious institutions surround this encounter with all sorts of rituals and doctrines. They share the limitations and even sinfulness of the humans, and are conditioned by history and culture. That is why the experience in each religion has to be carefully discerned.

We do not say that all religions are true or that all are the same. True religious experiences are their own authentication. From the fruits we will know the tree. God alone is Absolute. No religion can be absolute. Religions are always relative to a particular situation, person and community, with all their limitations. But the Absolute is not available to us in Itself. We can approach It only through Its relative manifestations. By our experience we know that the Absolute has manifested itself in various ways at various times. The Absolute's self-manifestation to me is adequate for me to experience it. However, it is possible to learn also from its self-manifestation to others –in dialogue with them. Ramana Maharishi, Swami Gnanananda, Dr. Mehta and others were instrumental for encouraging and facilitating Abhishiktananda's spiritual quest. God may call some to cross religious borders. In any case, even if I am happy to be where I am, I should never absolutize my experience of the divine. I should not quickly judge the experience of others from my own point of view. St. Ignatius of Loyola, for instance, tells the director of the *Spiritual Exercises* to respect God's action in each individual. The director's task is to contemplate and guide, not to inter-

fere. We could widen this insight to include people belonging to other religions, if we believe, as we do, that the Spirit of God is present and active in them. Currently, the tendency is to absolutize Christianity, its rituals and doctrines, and relativize the others'. Questioning this does lead to tensions. The call or mission to witness my own experience of God needs not prevent me from recognizing the God-experience of others. It imposes upon me the difficult task of coming to terms with both experiences and becoming aware of the specific contribution that my own experience has to make in such a situation. In any case, a Christian can be sure that s/he has been sent, like Christ, to serve others, not to dominate them; to gather all things leading them to fullness (in the Absolute), not to scatter them; to integrate rather than to destroy.

3.1. An Immanent and Transcendent God

In the Christian tradition, further supported by Greek philosophy, God is the great Other, the Creator over against the creatures, the Master, the Lord, and so on. But the Hindu tradition sees God as the Indweller, the deepest Self. God and the world, God and the ego, the Self and the self are not two beings opposed to each other. The self is in the Self. The *Isha Upanishad* says:

Behold the universe in the glory of God: and all that lives and moves on earth. Leaving the transient, find joy in the Eternal [...] Who sees all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings, loses all fear.²⁴

Does it sound very much like the Ignatian "Finding God in all things and all things in God"? God creates us in God's image by breathing God's spirit into us. My egoism may be a source of differentiation. It may ignore the Self by being attached to its own little self and the material world outside it. But the real and the ideal truths are that my self loses itself in the Self, so that eventually God may be "all in all" (1 Cor 15,28). Just as Jesus says "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10, 30), I too can say with St. Paul: "It is no longer I, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2,20). Jesus shares his oneness with the Father with all of us (cf. Jn 17,21-22). God is in us even when we do not attend to God. What we need to do is to become aware of our deeper rootedness in God.

²⁴ *Isha Upanishad* 6-7.

God is also immanent in another sense. By becoming human in Jesus, God enters history. "The Word became flesh and lived among us [...] From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (Jn 1, 14.16). We encounter God bodily, through our bodies, our imagination, and our emotions. Hindu spirituality has also a rich *bhakti* ("devotion", "love") tradition, without moving away from the *advaitic* perspective. We can not only love God in a human way but become God's co-workers.

But this God who is with us and within us is also beyond everything that we can think, say, or imagine. The transcendence of God does not mean that God is far away. It means that we cannot circumscribe God within our thoughts and images, our rituals and structures, our doctrines and systems. We can experience God only if we free ourselves of all these limitations that bind us, blind us, and disable us. God transcends the walls that we have built round ourselves. God is not the distant Other. God is the inner depth that we cannot fathom. So, transcendence is immanence in depths beyond our limited reach. The *Mundaka Upanishad* says:

In the supreme golden chamber is *Brahman*, indivisible and pure. He is the radiant light of all lights [...] There the sun shines not, nor the moon, nor the stars; the lightning shines not there and much less the earthly fire. From his light all these give light; and his radiance illumines all creation.²⁵

3.2. The Cosmic Christ

Jesus is divine and human. Some people affirm his divinity in such a way that his humanity is compromised. Others insist on his humanity to the extent that his divinity is denied. Still others divinize his humanity in such a way that the limitedness and historicity of his humanity is forgotten. That is why it is helpful to focus on the mediation of John in his prologue to his gospel. The Word is there from the beginning creating everything and enlightening every human being. This Word becomes flesh in Jesus. Whatever Jesus does, the Word of God also does in him. But the Word's own actions as God cannot be limited to the human nature that he has assumed, nor can his human nature be divinized. The Word relates to everyone who responds to It in encountering It in Jesus. But the Word also relates to others who, for his-

²⁵ *Mundaka Upanishad* 2.2.9-10.

torical reasons, encounter It, but not Jesus. Some theologians speak about Christ rather than the Word. For instance, Panikkar has said pithily: "Jesus is the Christ; but Christ is more than Jesus".²⁶ Other theologians speak of the cosmic Christ in the same sense. This is an attempt to understand how Jesus Christ reaches out to people who do not know him as Jesus. Some theologians, in the name of the unity of the person in Jesus Christ, suggest that the humanity is involved somehow even where it is not recognized and related to. Others, in terms of the differentiation of natures, think that the natures are different principles of operation and the actions of the divine nature may transcend the human nature. Within the person of Jesus Christ the two natures relate each other as divine invitation and human response. When John Paul II says that the Spirit of God is present in other cultures and religions it is a way of suggesting that Jesus Christ is not directly present and active there, though the Spirit is identified as the Spirit of Christ. But can we say that where the Spirit is, the Word also is, though the human Jesus need not be? Of course, all this is mystery. But the art of theology consists precisely in putting the mystery where it belongs, and not making everything equally clear or equally mysterious. Anyhow, this seems a matter of dispute among the theologians. Yet it helps the Indian theologians to experience not only the Spirit but also the Word (and the Father) active in other religions and in their believers. Most Hindu-Christians would like to contemplate the cosmic Christ active everywhere in the world and in all religions.

3.3. The Spirit of God

The Spirit of God is important to the Hindu-Christian in two ways. First of all, it is the Spirit's presence and activity that is recognized in other cultures and religions. Of course, there is an effort to subordinate the Spirit to Christ by calling it the Spirit of Christ. It is often suggested that Christocentrism, even a certain Christomonism, is characteristic of Western theology. The addition of the *filioque* to the Nicene creed in the West was probably intended to highlight the dignity of Christ as the source of the Spirit while asserting the power of the Church (as the body of Christ). The insistence on the presence of the Spirit in other religions may help us to emphasize her role in the divine economy of salvation, more in line with the Greek churches. It will

²⁶ See his book *Christophany. The Fullness of Man*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1970.

loosen the structures of the Church a little and make space for other facilitators of the divine-human encounter in the Spirit.

Secondly, the focus on the indwelling God may highlight the role of the Spirit in relation to us and to the world. It is true that in the Western Church the role of the Spirit remains underdeveloped. Even in the East, the understanding of the Trinity affirms the monarchy of the Father. It is said that the action of the Trinity outside itself is common to all the three Persons, though we attribute one or other function to one or other person. If this is so, can we rearrange the attributions in such a way that the role of the Indweller as the Source becomes central to the Trinity, the Creator, and the Redeemer emerging out of the transcendent-immanent Source, which is the non-dual Absolute beyond all the relations that set apart the Creator and the Redeemer from the world? I am aware that this is a new idea. But I think that it is worth exploring it. In the story of creation it is the Spirit that hovers over the universe and gives form to everything. The Sophia of whom the Wisdom books speak is more indicative of the Spirit rather than the Word-in-Jesus. The Spirit is also at the source of the Church at Pentecost and it is at the root of God's action in the world today. It is the Spirit that will recreate all things.

Conclusión

These theological reflections are not born from abstract speculation. They seek to understand and deepen the experience of God in an inter-religious context.²⁷ The spiritual experience leads to questioning, reflection, and back to experience. So we have an experiential-theological circle. But the focus is always the experience. If some traditional certainties are questioned, this happens only from an experiential point of view. The experience of the Absolute leads one to question the absolutization of the relative.

I would like to emphasize that the inter-religious experience is limited to a few. They are rooted in their Christian identity. They make use of the Hindu scriptures and Hindu methods of meditation based on yogic techniques.²⁸ This enables them not only to have a new "vision" of the Absolute, but also to integrate the divine, the human and the cosmos in new and original ways

²⁷ See, for instance, S. GRANT, *Towards and Alternative Theology. Confessions of a Non-dualist Christian*, ATC, Bangalore 1991.

²⁸ There are similar experiences of Christians who practice Zen, the Buddhist meditation. See B. SENECA, *Jésus le Christ à la rencontre de Gautama le Bouddha*, Cerf, Paris 1998.

around the "Self" leading to an experience of "cosmotheandric" communion.²⁹ They remain rooted in Christianity but are not confined by its borders. The "cosmic Christ" enables such a crossing of borders, having done so himself as he became aware of his divine nature.

The most important factor of God's inter-religious experience is the realization of the absoluteness of God who is immanent in and yet transcends everything, and the freedom of the Absolute and of the humans in the divine-human encounter. Such a realization frees us from structures of every kind, helping us to focus on the Absolute beyond "name and form", but without neglecting them at their own level. People in charge of institutions do not appreciate such freedom. Religions are like the Buddha's raft, which is used to cross the river, but afterwards it is left behind on the shore. All God-language and ritual become relative. Only authentic God-experience can assure this. But then one is *silent!*

²⁹ See S. PAINADATH, *The Power of Silence. 50 Meditations to Discover the Divine Space within You*, ISPCK, Delhi 2009. The *sadhana* or spiritual practice of Anthony de Mello also led in a similar direction. I have made a couple of efforts: *Towards Fullness* (1994) and *The Dancing Cosmos* (2003). Many other books can be cited.