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Criteria for indigenisation

At this juncture it is unnecessary to repeat that we are dealing with Indian thinkers whose primary aim was to indigenise the Christian message. There are as many indigenised theologies as there are thinkers. The question is which of them is right? Are there any criteria by which we can judge one more valid than the others?

Once I read an interesting anecdote in a book: during World War I in South India, rice, which is the staple food, became a scarce commodity. In order to meet the crisis the British sent wheat to the South Indians but they dumped it into the sea all along the coast: Not only did they not know what to do with the wheat but they also took an offense at the British, because knowing that they eat rice they had sent some other grain. Apparently the British thinking went something like this: there is a big food shortage with you and wheat is better than rice, so we are sending that to you. I think the big mistake the British made was they did not adequately south-indianize the wheat and so it was rejected.

In indigenisation of theology also, more or less the same conditions hold good. In indigenisation we are not so much concerned with the sales technique or even the packaging but rather with the usefulness (in the case of wheat whether it gives protein to the body or not), digestibility and form (whether it comes as bread or bun or *chappati* or *nan* or whatever). As far as the Christian gospel is concerned, the universal claim of 'no other name' takes care of usefulness. But we must also be concerned with the form or the expression whether they were familiar with hearers or not. And we must consider the digestibility, that is whether the thoughts and concepts used are understandable or not.

There is one more criterion which perhaps becomes the final seal whether an indigenisation is valid or not. Since a tree is known by its fruit, I think the best way to judge whether an indigenisation is valid or not is whether the people who heard the indigenised gospel have meaningfully accepted Christ or not, by showing the fruit of the spirit in their daily living. That is the final test.

As far as the earlier are concerned I think Brahmabandhav must be counted among the top. But when we come to the last criterion – the tree-fruit test – it is not sure whether many people who heard him really responded to Christ. But there is one Indian thinker whose indigenised gospel has brought greater response than anybody else's: *Sadhu* Sunder Singh – 'The most famous Indian Christian who has yet lived'.

The contrast between Brahmabandhav and *Sadhu* Sunder Singh is a well known one in Indian Christian literature and you should some time later dig into it a bit deeper.

SADHU SUNDER SINGH (1889-1929)

Sunder Singh was born at Rampur in Punjab. His parents were rich Sikhs, religious yet broad minded. By the age of seven Sunder Singh knew the Bhagvadgita by heart (To make a comparison: we are told that entrance into Cairo University is given only to those who know the Koran by heart. Which of us know the whole New Testament by heart even at mature age!). At 16 he had read through the Granth, the Koran and several Upanishads. This religious inquiry was inspired by his mother who wanted him to become a holy *Sadhu* and not worldly like his brother. He had also acquainted himself with Christianity at the mission school in Ludhiana, but was strongly opposed to this foreign religion – perhaps influenced by the public opinion of the time. He threw stones at the missionaries and even burned a copy of the Bible. He was also well trained in *yoga* by the time of his adolescence.

All these different attempts show enough about the deep thirst Sunder had. He was a seeker and had a restless heart. None of these different religious exercises he underwent could bring him the peace, the *shanti* for which he was searching. In all his search Sunder sincerely believed that his own religion could bring him peace. Since there are several versions of his conversion I think the best way to hear the story is from his own lips:

Three days after burning the Bible, finding that Hinduism gave me no comfort, I decided to commit suicide because to live in such misery was impossible. Very early in the morning (at 3. a.m.) I arose and taking a cold bath I began to pray 'If there be any God let him show me the way of salvation; if not then I will commit suicide by placing myself on the railway'. Up to 4.30 no answer came. Presently there came a light in my room. In that light the beloved and glorious face of Christ appeared and showing his wounded hands, in which the nailprints clearly showed, he said, "why do you persecute? Behold I gave my life for you." Hearing this his words sank like lightening into my heart. I immediately became filled with joy and I was changed for all eternity.

Later Sunder Singh himself gives testimony to the authenticity of his conversion.

This was not imagination. If Buddha or Krishna has shown himself it would have been imagination, for I worshipped them. But for Christ to show Himself, he whom I hated, is a miracle and clear proof that he is a living Christ. Neither was it a dream, for no one can see a dream after taking a cold bath and a dream cannot completely change life. This is a *great reality*.

This conversion took place on 18th December 1904. Sunder Singh immediately gave his allegiance to Jesus Christ, to the dismay of his own people, who persecuted him very much. But ultimately he had to leave home and was baptized next year in September. Following the wishes of his mother he donned the ochre robe and so became a true *Sadhu*.

From an American, S.E. Stokes, Sunder Singh learned about the monastic life. In 1909 he even joined a seminary, the St. John's Divinity College in Lahore but had to leave it within months. He was given a preacher's license by the

Lahore Diocese but later surrendered it because he wanted to be a preacher-at-large to the universal Church. So just taking the Urdu New Testament with him he toured all over India, especially into Tibet. The many mysterious happenings as well as miraculous deliverances he experienced are well known and need not be repeated here. He visited Britain, America, Europe and Australia during 1902-22. In Germany, they held him almost equal to Christ, judged by the veneration they gave him. When he returned to India he again toured all over the land as well as to his favourite Tibet since no ordinary evangelist could go into this very difficult place. Specially in Tibet and in his evangelistic journeys he was persecuted, beaten, lashed and suffered heavily on account of Christ. Once when Chenchiah provokingly commented to the *Sadhu* that his hand were very soft and delicate like a lady's the *Sadhu* replied, "yes, but my body bears the marks of Christ". That was literally true.

The end of *Sadhu's* life is shrouded in mystery. On his last journey to Tibet he was seen off by his friends and nothing more is known of him. The Government of India sent search parties but nothing is known so far. It is rather idealistic to say, as some authors suggest, that he was taken without death into the presence of God, but that does not need to detain us here. This was in 1929. His own version was that he went to one great *maharshi* in the Himalayas, with whom he wanted always to be engaged in the ministry of prayer for the whole world.

Perhaps the great commitment the *Sadhu* had for Jesus Christ can be summarized in an anecdote. Once when he was visiting England, and knocked at a door the little girl (very recently I met this, girl, who is now 85 year old woman) who opened the door, ran back to the mother and said "Mummy, Jesus is standing at our door." His one passion was Jesus Christ, so much so that others saw Jesus in him.

Theological Writings

It is singular that most if not all of the *Sadhu's* theological pronouncements come as part of trances or visions, or

in contact with supernatural beings or spirits in heaven. He speaks often of having visited heaven and having asked questions to these angelic spirits concerning whatever doubt he had of life or questions on earth. So mostly his answer run like this "I was told . . .", or "Once the spirits told me . . ." etc.

His writings include, *At the Master's Feet, Religion – Meditations on God, Man and Nature, The Search After, With and Without Christ, Visions of the Spiritual World, Meditations on Various Aspects of the Spiritual Life, The Real Life, The Real Pearl* and many articles in several of the Indian and non-Indian periodicals.

Sunder Singh's Theology

It is very important to notice that besides the revelations in the Scriptures *Sadhu* Sunder Singh gives equal weight to the trances and ecstatic experiences of visions he has had. He himself explains them very picturesquely this way:

There are pearls in the sea but to get them you have to dive to the bottom. Ecstasy is a dive to the bottom of spiritual things; it is not a trance but it is like a dive because as a diver has to stop breathing so in ecstasy the outward senses must be stopped.

But it must be equally noted that all his ecstatic experiences were always in harmony with the Bible. In fact, the Bible was his primary form or standard. As such, one cannot carp on his resort to his ecstatic visions. At the same time we must also notice the *Sadhu* uses mostly the New Testament. There are hardly any references to the Old Testament. There is much written of what he thought about the relation between the Old and the New. But definitely he seems to have made no attempt to replace the Old Testament by the Indian scriptures, as some have done.

Obviously Christ was the central theme of the *Sadhu's* utterances. He holds Christ to be fully God, that in him alone God is fully revealed and that to know him is to know that he is divine. Christ was the *Sadhu's* living experiences. He says: "I do not believe in Jesus Christ because I have read

about him in the Bible. I saw him and experienced him and know him in my daily experience."

The *Sadhu* considers Christ as God become flesh. Unlike others he does not differentiate between incarnation and *avatara*. He uses these terms interchangeably.

The *Sadhu* did not give much details of his thought concerning the Cross. How on the Cross Christ brings redemption for the sins of man is never clearly told, but the nearest is this: "Christ knew that neither silver nor the gold nor diamonds nor any other jewels would suffice to procure life. That is why he gave his life for the redemption of the world."¹

There is a sense of legal transaction here equivalent to penal substitution. But in the *Sadhu's* teachings there is more of a 'moral influence' understanding of the Cross. His stories are full of how the sufferings of the parents for the betterment of their wayward children changed the hearts of the latter. That is why the *Sadhu* emphasized that Christians do not like to commit sin because they know that it grieves God.

Obviously the *Sadhu* speaks more of life in Christ rather than life given at the Cross, more of sanctification than of justification. For him forgiveness of sins is only one part of salvation. Full salvation includes freedom from sin. This is what he means by new life or new creature. For him, just as the salt which has been dissolved in water cannot be seen but only discerned, so also this new life can be discerned in our lives by others. Another important aspect of his understanding of sanctification is that of life as cross bearing. True to his *sanyasi* state he takes the cross as an essential part of Christian life. In fact he says, "The Cross is heaven". To quote him once more,

To follow him and bear his cross is so sweet and precious that if I find no cross to bear in heaven I shall plead before him to send me as his missionary to bear his cross. His presence will change even hell into heaven.²

Here as elsewhere the *Sadhu* speaks not so much of the cross of Christ but rather the cross of the disciple which each one of us must bear.

For the *Sadhu* seems to believe in rather a lack of goodness than an active principle of evil. "Sin has no independent existence. It is merely the absence or negation of good."³ This is of course less satisfactory than what Paul calls the principle of sin as a positive force in man. Yet the *Sadhu* holds to the fallenness of man: that man sins because he is sinful, than sin has power over him and he has no power over sin or to do what is good.

Karma is the result of sin, such as the hardening of one's character, or the degeneration of one's whole personality, or the very punishment of sin. Thus beautifully the *Sadhu* relates sin and *karma* very relevantly to the Indian hearers.

Yet, as Boyd brings out clearly the *Sadhu* believes that suffering for sin is not and cannot be penal. Suffering rather drives us into the lap of God and is not a punishment for sins. As such for him eternal punishment is untenable and he seems to tend towards universalism i.e. the salvation ultimately of all men.

Man has neither created his own soul nor can he destroy it. The creator has brought into being every creature for some special purpose . . . and even though many wonder and go astray, in the end they will return to him in whose image they have been created, for this is the final destination.

Thus emphasizing the love of God more than his holiness the *Sadhu* thinks that it is impossible to conceive that the God of the Bible will eternally punish his creatures.

So also his understanding of the last judgment differs. He does not think that the last judgment is when all people will stand together to be judged. No, rather the real judgment is that which goes on every day.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in the *Sadhu's* thinking was his understanding of the church. When asked to which church he belonged his answer was: "To none. I belong to Christ. That is enough for me."⁴ Once out of the church he

was a free man, going like a *Sadhu* among people. Giving greater importance to his ecstasies the *Sadhu* emphasized more the individual relationship with God and Christ (the Hindu ideal of alone with the Alone) and so the corporate worship had little value for him. He even refused to set up an ashram when he was offered all the means. Whenever possible he did partake of the communion in a church service and also preach. But otherwise he was neither under the authority of any church nor had any relations with them.

What does *Sadhu* Sunder Singh think of other religions? According to him "The living Christ reveals himself to every man according to his need." So he is revealed in every way because he is the only true light. Hence "Christianity is the fulfillment of Hinduism. Hinduism has been digging channels. Christ is the water to flow through these channels." For him religions mean love and commitment and not knowledge. So he rejects all kinds of *margas*, even *Bhakti marga*, which is perhaps the closest to his own method. He did use most of the terms from Hinduism (remembering that he came from an Urdu background it is significant that he uses the Sanskrit words).

Being a *Sadhu* i.e. living a life away from this world, he speaks more often of life in that next world. So his themes include heaven, hell, the last judgment, the resurrection of the body and the coming salvation of all men and the like. For him hell and heaven are not places but states.

Hell also is a training school, a place of preparation for home . . . men were not created for hell and therefore do not enjoy it and when they desire to escape to heaven they do so but they find heaven even more uncongenial than hell so they return. But this convinces them that there is something wrong in their lives and thus they are gradually led to repentance.

This of course smacks of universalism which we have already seen. Many of the things which he says concerning eschatological things are his own personal experiences, so we need not dwell much upon these themes.

Perhaps the most redeeming part of his theology was his method of communication. More than any one else he has used the method of parables as Jesus did, and with the greatest effect. His parables are very apt and coming out of his own experience they bring the message to the hearer in crystal-clear terms. Since he was interested neither in producing a logical consistency in his talks nor a systematic presentation, we need not hold it against him. But his illustrations are relevant not only to the hearers of his time but also have a universal appeal. That is the greatness of *Sadhu* Sunder Singh. The following is one of his good illustrations:

Hindus are very fond of saying that god is in everything. I once came to a river which I had to cross. There was no boat to carry me over and I stood wondering how it could be managed. Then a man called attention to a deflated water skin and said that that was the only way. So we inflated it with air and I crossed over in safety. Then the thought came to me that there was plenty of air all around me but it was incapable of helping me in any difficulty until it was confined in the narrow space of the water skin. So it is as unreasonable to deny the necessity of the incarnation of Christ as to declare that the air-filled leather boat was no use in helping cross that river.⁵

Perhaps this method has to do with his lack of theological training but judged from the 'tree-fruit' test his indigenised theology was indeed very successful.

Evaluation

It may appear presumptuous to evaluate such a man but we must do it as objectively as possible. But we are concerned more with his thoughts.

a) His Christo-centricity is unquestionable.

b) His basing all his theology on the Scriptures is again commendable, though we must take account of his giving sometimes a greater importance to his ecstatic experience, but as we have seen none of his experiences are contrary to those given in the Scripture.

c) Filled with a burning passion to reach people for Christ, his method was to get the message across and so he

developed whatever method was relevant to the hearers. His analogical method can be best explained this way: it would be good if other Indian preachers taken up this method.

Some of his weaknesses are:

a) Of course his rejection of the church cannot be reconciled with what the Bible teaches.

b) His lack of use of OT can be another weakness. This may tend to mean that his understanding of the gospel, the whole counsel of God was inadequate. But given his Christocentricity one need not carp on that.

c) His tendency toward universalism is again to be regretted.

d) As we have seen *Sadhu* Sunder Singh looked at Christ more as a living experience rather than the one who brings justification or the one who consummates history. Hence he speaks very little of both the comings of Christ, coming first to die on the cross and coming at the end of history. These two do not play any significant role in his thinking. Thus his theology can be said to be more existential and experiential.

A.J. APPASAMY

As we have seen, Brahmabandhav's interpretation of Christianity in the vedantic line is not the only type. *Sadhu* Sunder Singh's approach closely related to *bhakti* is another type. There are several Indians who have taken this line as the best way to interpret the Christian gospel. Among them A.J. Appasamy is undoubtedly the foremost. He wrote his doctoral dissertation and made an extensive research into the *bhakti* tradition from the Christian point of view.

The Bhakti tradition

The *bhakti* tradition has as its main tenet the existence of a personal god as well as human beings as personal beings. Salvation in the vedantic (i.e. advaitic) tradition means the absorption of *atman* into Brahman. But *bhakti*, or what has now come to be known as vishistadvaitic tradition never blurs the difference between God and man.

Keeping these distinctions it is the closest to the mysticism of the Fourth Gospel. To Indians, perhaps because they are interested more in mysticism than rational analysis, the Fourth Gospel has always been a great attraction. The advaitic vedantists always contended that the vishistadvaitic tradition is inferior, having a personal god Ishwara, who is part of *maya*, while advaita rises above that and believes in the higher impersonal god Brahman.

Yet even in Hindu literature there exist several strands of this personal god approach. The most important perhaps is Bhagavadgita. Though it has been differently translated to suit one's own school of thinking, the devotion of Arjuna to Krishna, the personal god, is definitely the dominant note. During the 10th century there came an emotional type of *bhakti* literature called Bhagavata Puranas. Here the personal devotion to god became so intensive that at times it spilled over even into sensual, rather erotic direction. In addition there is also a third form of literature by the best known Tamil poets called Alvars, who composed very personal *bhakti* songs. All this was in line with what Bhagavadgita itself said: "Those who worship me with *Bhakti* are in me and I also in them."

About the 11th century came Ramanuja of Kanchipuram, who courageously opposed Shankara's advaita and under the influence of both Vaishnavism and the Bhagavata Puranas, developed a theological basis which made the personal communion with god possible without either getting absorbed into an impersonal Brahman or ceasing to exist. This is what is now called Ramanuja's System or *vishishtadvaita* — modified non-dualism.

There are many competent scholars who suggest that the *bhakti* literature of authors such as Manikkavasagar, Ramanuja and Kabir were influenced by Christian thought. In any case all this goes to show that the kind of mysticism found in the fourth gospel is to be found also in other traditions, including the Indian Hindu tradition, albeit with a mixture of truth and falsehood as is the case with every revelation apart from Jesus Christ.

From this Hindu *Bhakti* tradition to the Christian *bhakti* tradition bridging is not difficult. There are several well known names such as H.A. Krishna Pillai (1827-1900) of Tamilnadu, Kahanji Madhavji of Gujarat and Narayan Vaman Tilak of Maharashtra (1862-1919). God's yearning to commune with man in spite of man's sinfulness, with his eventual death on the cross, the subsequent sanctification and resultant abounding joy are the themes of these authors. Tilak also added another element to this, emphasizing the love aspect of God. He called God mother, something for the feminist to chew on. Even now in most of the Marathi congregations Tilak's lyrics are sung with gusto.

Appasamy's life

Ayyadurai Jesudasan Appasamy (born 1891) was the son of Dewan Bahadur A.S. Appasamy Pillai, who converted from Shaivism to Christ at the age of 24, partly because of Krishna Pillai. After his studies in Tirunelveli, Appasamy left for America and later for Oxford, where he wrote his doctoral thesis: "The mysticism of the Fourth Gospel in its Relation to the Hindu *Bhakti* Literature". Many well-known celebrities, like Canon B.H. Streeter, J.N. Farquhar, Rudolf Otto, and Baron Friedrich Von Huegel, helped him in his research. When he was still at Oxford *Sadhu* Sunder Singh visited there and they developed a deep friendship leading to Appasamy's writing a very authentic book on the *Sadhu* called *The Sadhu*. Apparently the mysticism of the *Sadhu* had a great influence upon him — birds of the same feather flock together, do they not?

After returning to India, Appasamy continued his research into Sanskrit and Tamil literature, primarily to find a Hindu philosophical basis for the *Bhakti* tradition. Before long he found what he was searching for, *vishishtadvaita* of Ramanuja. After thoroughly mastering it he published several works which have become definitive concerning the *bhakti* tradition. Appasamy became a well known writer-teacher and Bishop of the Church of South India.

His theological writings include *Christianity as Bhakti Marga* (1928) which is a revised version of his doctoral thesis. His other writings include *An Indian Interpretation of Christianity, The Use of Yoga in Prayer, Divine Incarnation as Found in the Ramayana of Tulsidas, Temple Bells – Readings from Hindu Religious Literature, The Johannine Doctrine of Life – A Study of Christian and Hindu Thought, Christ in the Indian Church – A Primer of Christian Faith and Doctrine, Christ Answers Youth's Problems, The Gospel and India's Heritage, Christian Task in Independent India, Sermons and Letters, My Theological Quest*. Besides these he has written several articles in well known theological periodicals.

Appasamy's Thought

It is necessary to start with Appasamy's rejection of the Chalcedonian formula — namely that Christ is fully God and metaphysically one with the Father. Usually the two great sayings or *mahavakyas* from John's Gospel, "I and my Father are one" and "Abide in me", are used to prove that God and Christ and believers are one in the same manner and that it is a union rather than communion. Appasamy rejects this, not primarily because it is western but because it smacks of the Hindu advaitic tendency and he will have nothing to do with that. Basing his arguments on another passage in John which affirms the subordination of the Son to Father, Appasamy argues that the Son's unity with the Father as well as the disciples' unity Christ is a moral one, one of commitment and communion. Only on such a similarity between the Father-Son and the disciples can Appasamy build his *bhakti* system.

Going on from there Appasamy develops the thought that fellowship with God does not consist in the harmony of the individual soul with the divine soul in thought and imagination, in purpose and will, in humble deed and adoring devotion. This quality of life which the Bible, particularly John's Gospel, calls eternal life, is what Appasamy calls *moksha*. Of the three Hindu margas — *jnana marga*, *bhakti marga* and *karma marga* — it is *bhakti marga* which

maintains this kind of personal communion. Appasamy obviously chooses *bhakti marga* as the only way to attain *moksha*. In an interesting definition Appasamy says:

(*Moksha*) is a real harmony with the holy and righteous Father. It is a personal experience which, however, in its higher reaches transcends the personal. It is a corporate experience, man mingling with his fellow-men in order to attain the heights of God's love. It begins even in this life and does not wait for an indefinite future.⁶

Such an interpretation of *moksha* not only preserves the personalities of both God and man but also gives human beings a social dimension which probably is an addition to the original meaning of the term.

This call of Jesus, "abide in me", demands a response from the disciple which is "keep my commandments". Thus *Bhakti marga* necessarily involves a commitment to Christ in this life in an ethical character and conduct. Analyzing the concept of personality in Hindu *Bhakti* literature, Appasamy concludes that even there the response of the *bhakta* (worshipper) to God is a whole response involving thoughts, emotions and decisions, though they are a bit weaker on the will.

He further contends that in Hindu literature the 'I' is pictured as the root of all our troubles and so if we respond to God using our will, being and thought, the suspicion is such a development of egoism. We are commanded to obey, which takes care of that.

Building on this *bhakti* kind of communion between God and man, Appasamy develops also the relevance of family in this context, since family is the first social unit where such moral relationships are developed. Jesus' attachment to several families such as Lazarus, Martha, and Mary and others show that he himself had these family relationships. This is to safeguard against the *bhakti* tradition's rejection of family in Hinduism. Many of the *bhakti* poets rejected their wives and parents and children and other family members in their ecstatic and even sensual relationship with their *ishta devata*, their personal god. But Appasamy rightly suggests

that Jesus did nothing of the kind. In fact he encouraged family relationships. This is to safeguard against *agape* (love) to growing (or degenerating) into *Eros* (desire).

THE IMMANENT CHRIST

Another of his important thought is his exegesis of John 1:10, "he was in the world". While normally this presence of Christ in the world is understood to refer only to his incarnation, i.e. as Jesus of Nazareth, Appasamy however interprets it to mean the presence of the immanent Christ both before and after that. This is something similar to the *Logos Spermatikos* idea which we have already seen. So he says "Incarnation is a more effective means of showing God than mere immanence."⁷

This kind of presence makes Christ *antaryami*, the indweller or the inner controller. Here it must be pointed out that while many Indians use the term *antaryami* for the Holy Spirit, Appasamy uses it for the 'cosmic' Christ. In his thinking this *antaryami* is fully equivalent to the *Logos* of John's Prologue. He is quick to point out, of course, that this *Logos* shone at its brightest in Jesus, and so without coming to know Jesus one cannot know anything about this *antaryami* or *Logos*. In other words, what Appasamy is affirming here is that all religions have a revelation of Christ, though dim, but only in Jesus (the Church) this light is the brightest. This also means that the difference between Christianity and other religions is one of quantity and not of quality.

It is easy to see from the above argument that for Appasamy God is in the world, but is not identical with it, but he is active in the world as *Logos*. Using Ramanuja's analogy he says that God is the soul and the world is the body. Boyd rightly points out that this analogy of body and soul is an important part of Appasamy's theology, for he uses it also in other contexts such as in dealing with the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in the church.

CHRIST'S AVATARA

Rejecting the advaitic teaching Appasamy also rejects their interpretation of *avatara*. Yet he is very careful to make

the distinction between the Hindu view and the Christian view. He gives several distinctions.

(a) In Hinduism *avatara* is repeated while in Christ it is only once.

(b) In Hinduism *avataras* are incomplete, since only the *Krishnavatara* is called the full or *purna avatara* *avatara* is a complete one.

(c) In Hinduism after the *avatara* is over the deity usually returns to his original state while in Christ it is a permanent one.

(d) In Hinduism, as Bhagvadgita says, the *avataras* are for the destruction of the wicked and the reward of the righteous, whereas the *avatara* of Christ is to seek and to save the lost. In all this, Appasamy has adequately preserved the once-for-allness of Christ's incarnation.

(e) He also calls the Hindu *avataras* mere theophany rather than real incarnation.

(f) There is no more distinction which comes in Saiva Siddhanta, where the *avataras* do not have a real physical body but only an apparent one.

Appasamy contends that Christ's is a real physical body, that Christ's *avatara* is not appearance or illusion but it was real. He became flesh. Following the vishistadvaitic tradition Appasamy is careful to maintain the reality and the distinction of the world from God.

PERSONALITY, SIN, KARMA

Even with all this Appasamy is not quite clear whether God is truly personal or impersonal, truly absolute or relative. He finds some traces of personal description of God in John, such as in descriptions of personal aspects – a warm person and empathetic human being, full of love and grace. He concludes his exegesis of John by saying that John wants “to emphasize those aspects of Christ which transcend personality as against those aspects which are personal”.⁸ Thus Appasamy is really making a synthesis between Ramanuja and Shankara.

As far as his understanding of sin is concerned Appasamy gives a new insight: “The problem of getting rid of *Karma* is far more pressing than the problem of getting rid of sin.”⁹ His defense is that since a Hindu normally has a real passion for God he should be first helped to understand God's love and only later he will be shown the seriousness of sin. He also finds an adequate solution of *karma* in John 3:18: “He that believeth in him is not judged. He that believeth not is judged already . . .” Following this line of thinking Appasamy rejects also eternal punishment but rather advocates “a perpetual retributive judgment going on even now, men are judging themselves by their good or bad choices. In this sense there is a continual *karma* working itself out in human lives.”¹⁰ Here there is an unmistakable influence of *Sadhu Sunder Singh*.

What does Appasamy think of the work of Christ on the cross? As can be expected, that again is an original interpretation. Starting with two passages “Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die it abideth by itself alone, but if it die it bears much fruit” (Jn. 12:24) and “I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto myself” (Jn. 12:32), he infers that suffering is universally necessary and that suffering influences all the spectators. Clearly this is a moral influence theory of the atonement. He is reluctant to think of the cross in a negative way, that is as penal substitution, but in a positive way, as the illustration of the love of God which draws men to him. However there are indications that later Appasamy seems to have seen the inadequacy of this interpretation of the cross and has tended to accept the penal substitutionary theory, at least in certain aspects.

SOURCES OF AUTHORITY

As we have seen in the first Chapter, Hinduism accepts three authorities for their faith. The first is *shruti* (scripture), second *yukti* or *anumana* (reason) and thirdly *anubhava* (experience). Appasamy accepts these, but with great insight he also adds a fourth one, which actually in his thinking comes second, that of the Church, the *sabha*. He

is quite right when he says: It is of the essence of the Christian religion that God reveals himself not merely to individuals but to his church. The Hindu religion fails disastrously in this respect.¹¹

Perhaps as a result of the same syllogism Appasamy also accepts, unlike many other Indian Christian thinkers (such as Chenchiah), that the Old Testament is an essential part of Bible, the Scriptures, and not to be replaced by Hindu or other traditions. This positive attitude towards the church (remember he is a Bishop) resulted in making his Church the body and Christ the soul, as we have already seen. And especially in the case of the Eucharist.

Christ himself comes into our soul through the elements, and abiding in us endows us with his spiritual energy. Through faith we abide in him. We turn our thoughts to him in prayer, surrendering all we have into his sacred keeping, and he comes into us and directs us from our inner self.¹²

Here, of course, there is no hint of the physical presence of Christ as trans- or con-substantiation would have us believe.

Similarly Appasamy affirms that when Jesus says “This is my body” he is actually using the body-soul analogy. Jesus takes the created elements of bread and wine for fulfilling his purpose of revealing himself to men.

Evaluation

i) Appasamy’s choice of *marga* is perhaps the closest one can think of in making the gospel meaningful to the Indian mind, since other schools such as *advaita* or *dvaita* are much further in thought content from the gospel message.

ii) His high view of the Church is very commendable. Since there is no lonely Christian and since Christ gives all his gifts and responsibilities to the Christians as the Church this is perfectly biblical. One wonders if he had not been a bishop whether he would have emphasized the Church that much!

iii) His acceptance of Old Testament as equally normative as the New Testament is another commendable aspect of his theology.

iv) Perhaps the greatest weakness of Appasamy lies in his Christology. The complete or near complete rejection of the legal aspect of the cross is a sad lack. Remember, the Cross is the pivot for whole Christology.

v) Perhaps for the same reason the seriousness of sin is missing in his thinking. Though he properly emphasizes the influence of *karma* on Indian mind. Yet a sub-scriptural understanding of sin does not understand Christ in his essence.

vi) Finally, his use of Ramanuja’s body-soul analogy is another creative aspect of his theology. I hope in the near future someone can develop another more relevant Indian Christian theology taking that as a theological method.

NOTES

1. F. Heiler, *The Gospel of Sunder Singh*, LPH, Lucknow: 1970, p. 144.
2. A.J. Appasamy, *The Cross is Heaven*, London, 1956, pp. 39f.
3. F. Heiler, *op. cit.*, p. 164.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
5. B.H. Streeter and A.J. Appasamy, *The Sadhu: A Study in Mysticism and Practical Religion*, London, 1921, p. 57.
6. A.J. Appasamy, *What is Moksha?: A Study in the Johannine Doctrine of Life*, CLS, Madras, 1931, p. 6.
7. A.J. Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga*, p. 43.
8. Appasamy, *What is Moksha*, p. 103.
9. Appasamy, *The Gospel and India’s Heritage*, ISPCK, London, 1942, p. 97.
10. Appasamy, *What is Moksha?*, pp. 218-220.
11. Appasamy, *What Shall We believe?* CLS, Madras: 1971 p. 16.
12. Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga*, p. 147.