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### **K.M. BANERJEA (1813-1881)**

K.M. Banerjea (also spelt Banerjee or Banerji) was a recognized leader of the Indian Christian community in Bengal, and was made the first president of the Bengal Christian Association in 1870. The main purpose of this association was to establish a national church of India, ministered by Indians and supported by Indian money.

He was one of Alexander Duff's early converts and also a member of the Free Church of Scotland. Right after his baptism in the Anglican Church he became a priest, in 1852, and taught for 15 years in Bishop's College, Calcutta, as a Professor. Till 1870 his approach to Hinduism was negative, but after his retirement from Bishop's college he became sympathetic to Hinduism. His books include *Dialogues* and *The Arian Witness*.

In this book he starts off by saying that there are striking similarities between the Old Testament and the Vedas. Thereby his desire was to show that Christianity, if not identical with, is in any case the logical conclusion of original Hinduism: He also finds parallels between Vedic and Assyrian texts and even the Hebrew and Sanskrit languages. For Banerjea the Hebrews and the Aryans have a common background. Even etymologically Banerjea finds Manu and Noah to have the same root. All this implies that Christianity is not foreign religion but the fulfillment of Vedic religion. Though the Christian message would frighten many Indians, he exhorts that this is also what happened to Apostle Peter. He did not want to mix with the uncircumcised and had to be mildly rebuked by the Lord in order to be led to the full truth.

The corner stone of the commonness is in the institution of sacrifice and priesthood. He is specially quick to find

parallels for the biblical Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world in Vedic literature. Even the parallel between the Creation, Fall and Deluge cannot be accidental. But what happened was that in the course of time the Hindus have forgotten the implications of sacrifice, through which men became gods and attained *moksha*. But to throw away the whole Vedic sacrifice system is to throw away the baby with the bath water. The Vedas still remind us of the high value in which sacrifices were held in earlier times.

Coming to Christ, he finds an excellent parallel between the self-sacrifice of Prajapati, the lord of the universe, for the sake of the creatures, and the self-sacrifice of Christ for the remission of the sins of the world. These two truths he puts in his own words as follows:

Firstly, the fundamental principles of Christian doctrine in relation to the salvation of the world, find a remarkable counterpart in the vedic principles of primitive Hinduism in relation to the destruction of sin and redemption of the sinner, by the efficacy of sacrifice itself a figure of Prajapati, the lord and saviour of the creation, who had given himself up as an offering for that purpose.

Secondly, the meaning of Prajapati, an appellation variously described as a *purusha*, begotten in the beginning as *Vishwakarma*, the creator all, singularly coincides with the meaning as *Vishwakarma*, the maker of all, singularly coincides with the meaning of the name and offices of the historical reality Jesus Christ, and that no other person than Jesus of Nazareth has ever appeared in the world claiming the character and position of the self-sacrificing Prajapati, at the same time both mortal and immortal.

This means that Christian speakers, when they speak of those things mentioned above, do not “utter which things be called strange to Indian ears”. The idea of salvation from sin by the death of a saviour who was a god and man himself was a conception which had administered consolation to our ancient *rishis*, says Banerjea. And to a greater degree it does so now to us Indians.

Beyond this, Banerjea asserts also that, “not a single charter in Hindu pantheon or in the pantheon of any other nation has claimed the position of the one who offered

himself as a sacrifice for the benefit of humanity”. Only one historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, has claimed this Vedic idea. Thus we may conclude, says Banerjea, that Jesus is the true prajapati, the true saviour of the world, the only name given among men whereby we must be saved. He calls the prayer to Varuna, which is mentioned in Rig Veda, a truly Christian prayer :

O illustrious Varuna, do thou quicken our understanding, we that are celebrating this sacrifice, that we may embark on the good navigating vessel [Banerjea thinks this means sacrifice] by which we may escape all sins.

So Banerjea shows that these doctrines, namely, Christ as the true prajapati, the true *purusha* begotten in the beginning before all the worlds, the doctrine of saving sacrifice, the primary religious rites, the double character of priest and victim, the ark by which we escape the waves of the sinful world, all these doctrines are found, amid rubbish, in our Vedas and are the fragments of real truth of Christ. Boyd calls the theology of Banerjea ‘Vedic theology’. What he means by this is that since the beginning of time there was a universal cosmic religion in existence, whose basic principle was that there is no salvation without the shedding of blood. Already sacrifice is practised by Abel. Some corrupted forms of this sacrifice have been forwarded to different religious traditions, whereas among the Jews, by God’s special care, it was kept intact, and so he finds a commonalty between the Jewish and the Hindu systems.

### **Evaluation**

I think we must hold fast to the principle that only through the eye of faith in Christ we can discern all other thoughts and systems and religions. It is when tested against the touchstone of Christ that we know whether a particular aspect is true or false, good or bad, right or wrong. He is the norm. By the same token, only in comparison with Christ can we discover whether a particular element is a foreshadowing of him or not. No doubt there is truth in every religion, but for us who are disciples of Christ, Christ is the final touchstone.

It is one thing to say that there is truth revealed in the Vedas and another to say that it can be discerned. Banerjea, by discerning the truth, I think raises the vedas to the level of revelation. This is unacceptable.

### **SWAMI ABHISHIKTANANDA (1910-1973)**

Swami Abhishiktananda was a French Catholic Priest whose real name is Dom Henri Le Saux. He came to India expressly with the purpose of finding a meeting point between Christianity and the great Eastern religions and thus have the way for the dialogue of all religions. He came also as a colleague to Jules Monchanin who is the founder of the Saccidananda Ashram on the banks of the river Kaveri. After the death of Monchanin he became the main guru and lived there until his death in 1973.

You would have by now noticed that India is really the place where dialogue is at its best. In fact not just the term dialogue, but the very theology of dialogue, is created as well as maintained by Indian thinkers. And so Swami Abhishiktananda set out boldly to explore the heart of Hindu spirituality, first as a lonely pioneer and later with a growing number of friends whose Christian commitment led to them to Gangotri with other Hindus, and some of his experiences on the way are quite revealing.

He wrote several books in French and English. The English books are *A Benedictine Ashram*, *The Mount of the Lord*, *Pilgrimage to Gangotri*, *Prayer*, *The Church in India*, *An Essay in Christian Self Criticism*, *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church*, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*, and *The Further Shore*. Many of them were published posthumously.

As we have already seen, it is precisely because of their belief in the validity of natural theology that there are more Roman Catholic theologians who affirm the validity of other religions than the Protestant theologians. This also is the reason why the dialogue is a constant theme among them, including Swami Abhishiktananda. Following the tradition of Robert De Nobili (whom we shall study shortly) there is a line

of courageous spirits who have taken the step of entering into the heart of Hinduism to know it better. Happily Swami Abhishiktananda is more readable than Panikkar!

### ***Hindu Christian Meeting point***

The book *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, with the subtitle "Within the Cave of the Heart", is a translation from the French by Sarah Grant. As she writes in her introduction, the book was written a few months before his death, but after his experience of "the reality of Upanishads and gospels". He wrote and edited the book meticulously so that it also might be awakened to its purpose, "the awakening of others to awareness of the truth of their own being".

The book starts with an analysis of momentous changes in the Roman Catholic Church in 1964. The appointment of Conciliar Commission by the Pope to relate the church with other Christians around the world, and of the Roman Secretariat to relate with the world religions, are seen by Swami Abhishiktananda as the Church's admission that Christ is already at work outside the Church's boundaries. These appointments also show the Church's admission of such a truth. He writes in his own words:

The church thus realizes that her mission is not to lead to Christ the Saviour isolated and poverty stricken individuals, sunk in deepest error and sin. With reverent wonder she finds that, in the hearts of those to whom the name of the Lord is still unknown, his Spirit is already at work bringing them to fulfillment and resurrection. She sees that it is not in spite of but precisely through, the instrumentality of their various religious traditions, their rituals and scriptures and the spiritual vigour and thirst for renunciation which these have transmitted from generation to generation.

This idea of fulfillment, the *pleroma* of Christ, is then the main theme of Swami Abhishiktananda's theology. This means that the Church is no more satisfied with the contacts which individual members have made with the individual members of other religions, but she must now start "official contact" with the accredited representatives of other religions. All this is of course in line with Swami Abhishiktananda's advaitic experience before his death.

### ***Entering into the heart of Hinduism***

Further, if the church is really serious to enter into dialogue with Hinduism, it is, according to Swami Abhishiktananda, absolutely essential that it prepares itself adequately. But this preparation is not at the level of concepts and thoughts, which is theological, but at the deeper level: “the ‘knowledge’ of those ultimate depths of the self, the ‘cave of the heart’ where the mystery revealed itself to the awareness of *rishis*.” It is only here, in the secret place of the heart, that real dialogue can take place.

This means two things. One, it means that Christians must be ready to exercise *epoche* which he defines as “a temporary suspension of one’s faith”. Not only that, the Christians must also be ready to enter into the deep mystical experience of the Hindus.

Such an experiment was conducted in Almora in ‘61, in which Swami Abhishiktananda was playing a major role. Here several of the participants shared their experience. One striking example was from a person who lived in Bengal. Swami Abhishiktananda says,

He helped us to understand the truth that is hidden in the worship of idols, which in India at least does not merit the denunciation launched by Israel’s prophets at the cults of Canaan and Babylon. He explained to us the religious and even contemplative meaning of the worship of ‘signs’, and told us how idol worship had helped him to enter more deeply into the mystery of the signs used by the church as means of grace in order to ‘concretize’ the worship of God’s people especially that essential sign which constitutes the church, the Eucharist.<sup>1</sup>

Two conclusions followed this: “first that Christ was already in India”,<sup>2</sup> and second “that India has received from her Creator a very special gift of interiority and a unique inward orientation of the spirit”.<sup>3</sup>

In these experiments, of course only by Christians, even the Upanishads were read “in the presence of Christ”. The conclusion that Swami Abhishiktananda and his followers came to is this: there is a great similarity between St. John’s

and the Upanishad’s messages. The use of light and life by John, the use of the word *Dabar* or *Logos* can be paralleled also in Upanishad by *Vac* or the word *Om*. So they call St. John’s gospel the supreme Christian Upanishad. They also find a parallel between Yahweh’s revelation ‘I Am’ and the vedantic ‘*aham Brahmasmi*’ (I am Brahman). Thus Swami Abhishiktananda advocates that advaita is no danger to Christian faith, because to the pure all things are pure.

### ***Fulfillment in Christ***

The study of these details of the advaitic experience with *epoche* makes Swami Abhishiktananda come to his concept of fulfillment. He believes that God has planted the seeds of true faith in Hindu hearts. So it is the task of the Christian Mission to help the holy seed germinate, since “in the designs of God Hinduism tends of its very nature towards Christianity as its eschatological fulfillment”.<sup>4</sup> This means that even the Hindu Upanishads will find their fulfillment in the Bible. That is, for Swami Abhishiktananda fulfillment is a matter of a deep spiritual experience rather than a theological exercise. Following Upadhyaya he also accepts that the meaning of Brahman is really understood only as Saccidananda and only when Saccidananda is experienced as the Christian Trinity. When, in the cave of the heart, Christians and Hindus meet, first they experience the ultimate non-duality of the Christians and secondly “the experience of divine sonship in the unity of the Spirit”.<sup>5</sup> The first will inevitably pass on into the second. And that is how the first is fulfilled in the second.

He dwells on what he calls “the cosmic covenant and the pleroma”.<sup>6</sup> He calls attention to Melchizedek whom he calls “a priest of the cosmic covenant”. His sacrifices foreshadowed the sacrificial death of Christ and are seen therefore as an example of a cosmic liturgy, to be found also in the non-Christian faiths, including Hinduism. Yet he is careful enough to say, that to enter this pleroma the passage must necessarily go through the Cross of Christ. Nothing can come to God unless through the Cross of Christ.

## **Presuppositions**

Boyd analyses the presuppositions behind Swami Abhishiktananda's thought. First, he sees that behind Swami Abhishiktananda's thinking there is an assumption that the intellectual formulations of western Christianity are inadequate to express the spiritual reality of the Christian faith and that the Upanishads are more capable of doing it. So "aided by Indian spirituality, Christian theology must now recover the experiential wholeness which now it has lost", says Boyd.<sup>7</sup> A second presupposition he finds in Swami Abhishiktananda's thought is that "spiritual life is the most important issue for Christians, at least in India".<sup>8</sup> Of course, many Indians like M.M. Thomas have vigorously rejected such a spiritual approach. Boyd's own criticism is that whether such a religion of Swami Abhishiktananda can ever be, in Bishop Newbigin's words, "an honest religion for secular man"?

## **Evaluation**

Since we have already been alerted to the Roman Catholic approach to theology in general we need not repeat here our criticisms of the Swami which are due to his Catholic faith (there is more of this later in Panikkar's theology). However, we must point out that all do not follow the same approach, there are exceptions to every rule. We can mention at least three things which are rather predominant.

One is the question of *epoche*. Having once been filled by the Spirit and adopted as the child of God, it is hard for me to imagine that I can suspend my faith for the time being and say that I do not belong to Christ and act as if I am neutral. I personally am opposed to the whole philosophy of *epoche*. It does not take the existential situation of faith seriously.

The other is the question of justifying idolatry. No doubt Boyd, in summarizing Swami Abhishiktananda's theology, avoids such extremes, but I have purposely mentioned it to show where dialogue patterned after Swami Abhishiktananda's guidelines can lead to. So the Swami's approach to idols stands rather weakly supported.

Then finally, again following the Roman Catholic two-tier scheme of discipleship – the higher clergy and the lower laity – Swami Abhishiktananda's approach seems to cater to the monks and nuns rather than to the mass of lay people. As such it is more a method for the elite and not for the common disciple of Christ. This also explains why it is exclusively spiritual, in a monastic way.

## **KLAUS KLOSTERMAIER**

Klaus Klostermaier is a young German theologian who, as a member of the Order of Divine Word, lived for two years near Mathura in Vrindaban, the famous pilgrimage centre of the Hindus, the birth place of Krishna. In these two years he emphatically entered into the very spiritual experience of his Hindu friends. Out of this experience he wrote two books: *Kristvidya: A Sketch of an Indian Christology*, and *Hindu and Christian Vrindaban*. The first one was a paper in one of the Catholic ashrams for discussion, while the later is an account of his experiences and their analysis.

As the title *Kristvidya* (knowledge of Christ) adequately shows, his main attempt is to develop a Christology for India. So his one burning concern is to give a meaningful answer to the question which Christ himself asked, "what do men say about the Son of Man? Whom do they think he is?" (Mt. 16:13). Like the disciples of old, many Hindus even now understand him as one of the *avatars*, like Rama or Krishna or Chaitanya, etc. Some others may take him as a great moral teacher, a saint, a miracle worker like the old yogis or even like the modern Sai Baba. This is the reason why many Hindu homes also have a picture of Christ.

But the question Christ asks his disciples is more revealing, "Whom do you say that I am?" (Mt. 16:15). Peter's answer "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (Mt. 16:16), according to Klaus Klostermaier, is totally inadequate, because in many Indian translations 'the Son of God' does not make any impression upon the Hindu mind, since to them all are sons of God. The concept of 'the living God' makes still less sense for them, since for them God

cannot but be a living God. And to say that he is 'Christ' makes absolutely no sense since the word Christ is such a strange name that they cannot make head or tail of it.

So Klostermaier affirms that since it is useless to introduce any new foreign terms or idioms, we Indian Christians must "find the 'theological place' of Christ within the Hindu system as the Greek Fathers of the church did." Only so "does Christ become meaningful for a Hindu". So he is sure that for the Hindus we have to express Christ as the living relationship of everybody with the Ultimate. Hence he calls his study *Kristvidya*, according to him a literal translation of the Greek *Christ-logia*, Christology.

This *Kristvidya* is presented in a most systematic manner in three parts.

### **The Prerequisites: Attitudes**

(i) First, since the New Testament authors inevitably go back to the Old Testament in order to explain Christ, so also "to make clear to a Hindu what it means to 'search for the kingdom of God' we have to make use of his Hindu scriptures".<sup>9</sup>

(ii) The second attitude is a recognition of the necessary Hindu pluralism: many schools and sects in Hinduism "differ not only in inessentials but in the very basic idea of the absolute and the way to it".<sup>10</sup> Klostermaier then masterfully describes the basic attitude of this variety of schools.

The basic attitude of Sankara's school is pure and exclusive desire for the absolute. That of Ramanuja is *prapatti*, "complete surrender to the Lord" as the only condition for receiving his grace. Bhakti schools have several attitudes, all of which Klostermaier calls the basic attitude required for Hindu 'seekers'. Madhava emphasizes resignation to the Lord Vishnu, Nimbarka emphasizes *sakshatkara*, a bodily vision of God, and absolute faith in the guru, others emphasize passionate love and devotion. The basic attitude of *karma yoga* is that of absolute obedience or faith even when one does not understand it. This is why *yajna* is a basic element in *karma yoga*.

(iii) Thirdly, since according to Klostermaier, the aim of all these several schools are "to enable man to be 'in' or 'with' God or the Absolute",<sup>11</sup> *Kristvidya* must also approach not intellectually but existentially experience of being with Christ as in Brahman.

### **Basic Categories**

(i) It does not do any good to call Christ holy or great or good and so on. Klostermaier observes that in the Bible wherever Christ is mentioned there is "a movement towards God".<sup>12</sup> That is, Christ always makes the distinction between 'my Father' and all other things, and he definitely includes himself on the side of the Father. There is always a basic distinction between two radically different and mutually exclusive realms of realities in Christ's mind. Our categories of Hinduism must maintain this thought.

(ii) The logical categories of Hinduism are very different from those of Christians. They use the term *viveka* for the higher level of discernment. While the lower level of discernment gives pairs of opposites like hot and cold, dark and light, sweet and sour, good and bad, the higher level of discernment or *viveka* gives higher pairs of opposites between the relative and the absolute, between the eternal and the temporal, between *prakriti* and *purusha*, between *Jeevatman* and *paramatman* and the like. We Christians must always be careful not to mix these two levels and use those higher categories.

(iii) Following from the above, since the Christian Father-world relationship is not the same as Brahman-world, to translate one with the other is a gross mistake. The logic of the higher level, as is the case with Brahman-world, is not that of *pratyaksha* or *upamana* but of *shabda* alone, that of *logos*.

### **Constructive Elements**

Here he starts off by accepting paradox as the method of explaining *Kristvidya*, exactly as was the method also for *Brahmavidya*. Only this way can we enter into certain transcendent levels of understanding, which otherwise we

may never reach. Then he examines the three *margas* of Hinduism in detail. Since Christ also calls himself the Way, Klostermaier is sure that he is a *marga* – though he does not teach it, he lived it.

(i) *Karma marga*: Here Klostermaier believes that to use the word *deva* to describe Christ can only lead into misunderstanding, at least one reason being that *devas* are only those who are called as such in the Vedas. Even otherwise, the function of the Hindu *deva* is essentially different from that of Christ. As such the term does not apply to Christ. But he finds another term *shabda* in *karma marga*, which he understands as *mantra*. This word is “the connection of the world with *akriti*, the uncreated idea which as such is incomprehensible and is never exhausted by the individual word.”<sup>13</sup> Coming back to John’s prologue, Klostermaier says that according to John Christ also is in the sphere of *shabda*-Brahman and *akriti*. “It should be possible to communicate something of the mystery of the divine sonship of Christ in the terms of the *shabda* philosophy”.<sup>14</sup> This rather than other translation like *ishwar ka putra*, Son of the living God, is far more fruitful. Another term, *yajna*, is also used for sacrifice but only with limited earthly promises. It cannot be directly used for the sacrifice of Christ, but he believes that *shabda yajna* can be better used than other terms in *karma marga*.

(ii) *Bhakti marga*: Since *bhakti* is interpreted severally by different Hindu commentators, it is best to accept the general characteristics. He mentions, some of these. First, since *bhakti marga* concentrates on *avatars*, the manifestations of God is visible form, it insists rather on the historicity of salvation. If you want to say *Kristbhakti* it is definitely much more than the historical part of salvation. Also, since *bhakti* is not speculative but rather an analysis of human emotions and techniques, eros plays a significant role in *bhakti*. So to translate the gospel as the gospel of love is again a misnomer. We must be careful, if at all we use the word *bhakti*, to bring the content of *agape*, in it.

Klostermaier says that the real theological problem of *bhakti* is in its concept of *avatars*. For the *bhakti* system the lord, Ishwara, is Brahman. He is the controller and the principle of all, the one worshipped in every religious act, the bestower of every fruit, the sustainer of all, the cause of all effects. As such, though it is appropriate to be used for a high view of Christ, says Klostermaier, we must remember the five-fold existential modes of Hindu divinity, namely, as *para*, *vyuha*, *vibhava*, *antaryamin* and *arkavatara*. As *para* he is Narayana, as *vyuha* he is the highest brahman himself, as *vibhava* he is the ten avatars, as *antaryamin* he is the dweller in the hearts of the individual selves, and *arkavatara* is the form where he accepts those from which the devotee chooses. Now, which of these five form can we attribute to Christ properly? Since Christ cannot be identified ontologically with any one of them it is best to use all the forms. As *para* is the procession from the Father, as *vyuha* he is the procession as the Spirit, as *vibhava* the divine mission of the world, as *arkavatara* in the eucharistic presence.

Another element of *bhakti marga* he would like to include in Christian practice is that of *japa*. Both the Old Testament as well as the Hindu *bhakti* groups make God and his name equal. The repetition of the name of God, that is *nama japa*, is an essential part of their worship. There is also a parallel for this, Klostermaier says, in the Jesus prayer of *philokalia* in the ancient church. As such *nama japa* and *kirtan* can be accepted.

(iii) *Jnana marga*: In this school, of course, the essential content is the basic distinction between brahman and non-brahman. One of the expression used to distinguish these two spheres – and unfortunately not enough attention is given to it – is the pair of *karma* and *adhyatma*. *Karma* is the sphere of constant stage and repetition, nothing eternal and lasting can take place in it; whereas *adhyatma* is the realm of the self, the spirit, the reality proper. When Valmiki describes Rama as a great king and hero, bound by the laws of this world, it is a *karmic* description. But when the

*adhyatmic* Ramana interprets the same adventures, then Rama becomes the absolute being, ultimate reality, and all the episodes are mere allegories for spiritual realities. In the same way the parts of the gospels which only tell the birth, death and events of Christian life belong to the *karmic* type of scriptures. They cannot possibly satisfy the Hindu mind who looks for the *adhyatmic* Christianity or esoteric Christianity. For example, Christ understood the miracles and parables as signs and even before his death he only spoke in parables. This is the *adhyatma Kristvidya*, says Klostermaier. He strongly believes that all the gospels have both poles, the *karmic* as well as *adhyatmic* aspects of Christ. St. John's Gospel appeals to Hindus most, perhaps exactly because it gives more of the *adhyatmic* Christ, the *Logos* of Christ.

This means that *Kristvidya* does not belong to the sphere of *karma* but it is equivalent to *brahmavidya*.

In the conclusion of the book, Klostermaier says that the principle upon which *kristvidya* is based

Demands a full and real 'incarnation' of Christ in the culture and categories of India. We have to find the place of Christ within the Hindu religious systems. That it is not possible to carry him into them from without should be proved by now from history. Christianity is not an additional theological system – perhaps 'the only true logical' infallible one – but communication of the Word of God: it should be possible to express the meaning of Christ in any language and philosophy, to point him out as the soul and depth of all philosophies and theologies that deserve the name.<sup>15</sup>

Just as the Greek *Christologia* does not exhaust the mystery of Christ, *kristvidya* also cannot exhaust the mystery of Christ. An Indian *Kristvidya* differs from the Greek *Christologia* in its method. It will not

culminate in a *summa* of doctrines and definitions but will be largely *marga* – a systematic liberating of man from all wrong attitudes and concepts to 'free' him for the **one**, the ultimate experience. What is unique is not the way but the goal.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Klostermaier says, in *Kristvidya* we preserve all the elements of *karma marga*, *bhakti marga* and *jnana*

*marga*. His other book, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban*, is an exposition of his experience of this *Kristvidya*.

### **Evaluation**

Klaus Klostermaier is not the only one to accept a combination of all the *margas*, though, as Boyd points out, he seems to have a preference for *jnana marga*.

It is highly unlikely therefore that a theology which mixes up terminology from the various 'strands' will carry conviction to a Hindu; and the Christian theologian is left with a great difficulty: how is he to substantiate his claim that Christ is God at the same time demonstrate the reality and the goodness of the created world, including the human personality, the human body and human history?<sup>17</sup>

Beside this, I would also apply the tree-fruit test.

### **S.K. GEORGE (1900-1960)**

Srampikkal Kuruvilla George was born in 1900 in a Syrian Christian family in Kottayam, to a rich cloth merchant. He grew up in the pious and closed atmosphere of the Anglican communion under the C.M.S. Church. After his college education he went to study in Bishop's college, Calcutta, earned a B.D.degree. But since he developed serious doubts about the orthodox theological position of his church he could not go back to minister there, but worked in the College as tutor for some years. During these years he plunged into the Independence movement and was converted to nationalism. He wrote his manifesto called "India in travail". Because of this he had to resign from the College, and several years he wandered in the wilderness without finding any group to attach with or support his family. In fact, his small daughter died due to starvation. He came to Gandhi's ashram and developed a very close loyalty to him and wrote his first book *Gandhi's Challenge to Christianity*. Later his wife Mary George, stayed back in Kerala, on Gandhi's insistence that she take up the work of Kasturba Trust there while her husband went to Shantiniketan to work there with Tagore. Later he came to Wardha and taught there as a lecturer for about six years

and edited the quarterly *The Fellowship of Friends Truth Quarterly*. That he was against conversion seems to be evident as the Niyogi Commission accepted him as a good Christian against the rest who proselytized. After retiring from the Wardha College they returned home and George died in 1960.

Besides the writings mentioned above he also contributed articles in journals and magazines like *The Guardian*, and *Young Men of India*, and several other books: *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*, *The World Teachers*, *The Story of the Bible* and *The Life of Jesus*.

One can summarize his thinking about Christ as follows: though Christianity has unwarrantedly raised Jesus to the level of deity, what is important is Jesus after the flesh, the man of Nazareth. He is the central figure. His charge was that when he was seeking to deify Jesus the churches have failed to follow him. Thus his purpose to reveal the reality and relevance of Jesus the Christ. As such, he selectively takes up those parts of the gospel narrative where the humanity comes through. Thus his conclusion is:

What is indispensable in accounting for the rise of the Christian movement and what really matters for modern living in the power of Christ is the belief that the spirit of Jesus has triumphed over physical death, and that though dead he still speaketh. That faith is independent of the legend of the empty tomb.

This means that the old form of Christianity presented as a creed, a system of beliefs and rituals, is no more relevant. Rather we must preach it as a way of life in the world and the struggles of today.

As far as the scriptures are concerned he gives credit that his spiritual life has been nurtured on them, though he thinks that God has also spoken in literature other than the Bible. He had the dream of contributing to the "larger Bible of mankind". As such, the Bible is not the unique, the only authentic word of God to man. He further says:

Every sacred book, every religion, is in a sense unique. It is the result of a double process, of human search and divine

self-giving. The later is rightly regarded by every religious soul as the more primal activity. The initiative is God's though the human response there to indispensable.

But what is unique about the Bible is the vision of the good it shows. This vision of the good is gradually developed and is consummated in "Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Man and Son of God" who is "the unique treasure the Bible mediates to man". This means that though the Bible gives narrations about Christ, it does not necessarily give scientific answers to the questions of how and when of creation. Neither does the book of Revelation give an authentic record of what happens but rather a figurative way of God's challenge to Christianity.

George postulates that (1) "a true Christian in India must necessarily be a Gandhiite", and (2) "a true Gandhiite is essentially a Christian". Such a conviction of George is based on the truth that the Cross of Jesus Christ is the way for every man, and his belief that Gandhi has demonstrated its applicability and proved its efficacy more than everyone else.

As we have seen, George does accept Jesus Christ as a historical person, but he accepts him only as that and no more. According to him the deification of Christ is something parallel to the deification of other gods in India and hence does not belong to the essence of Christianity. Therefore he also does not deal with the crucial issues such as atonement and the Cross and Resurrection. His approach to the Bible is liberal in the sense that he does not see that God's full and final revelation is to be found in Christ and that he finds that God speaks in other religious scriptures also.

## NOTES

1. Swami Abhishiktananda, *Hindu Christian Meeting Point*, The Institute of Indian Culture, Bombay, 1969, p. 27.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
6. Boyd, *ICT*, 1989, p. 294.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
9. Klaus Klostermaier, *Kristvidya*, CISRS, Bangalore, 1967, p. 13.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
17. Boyd, *ICT*, 1989, p. 308.