Book Reviews


Human encounter with the ultimate is a core issue in most of the world religions. However, the religious experience within mystical, formal ritualistic, mythical domains as well as in historical experience often remains shrouded in mystery because of the inherent inadequacy of the religious language. The ineffacability of mystical experience, due to its complexity, fascination and intimacy, despite all possible command of a person over language, is not easy to be communicated. This finitude of human speech and knowledge and the unfathomable depth of religious experience in one way or another, contribute to this paradox. The issue becomes more complex when the Divine interacts with the human through revelation. For some this must assume a personal form of incarnation, for others it expresses itself in a historical encounter as parting of the water in the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt. Aldous Huxley considers this as a common phenomenon in most of the world religions “in Vendanta and Mahayana Buddhism, as also among the Sufis, spirit and Spirit, are held to be the same substance; Atman is Brahman; That art Thou.” ¹

Indeed, incarnation and revelation are common and recurring themes in most of the world religions. However, their nature and understanding vary substantially from one tradition to the other. For example, the Islamic concept of revelation is substantially different from the Christian or Hindu concept of revelation.

Islam subscribes to the pristine Abrahamic *tawḥīd* paradigm in which the Creator and the Ultimate, being Infinite and Absolute, does not reveal Himself in any material object, whether animate or inanimate. He communicates His Commands through the spoken word conveyed to the

human through Arch Angel Jībra’il, in the form of speech. In the case of Allah’s Prophet Mūsā (Moses) (peace be on him) the commands were sent down in written form on tablets. In classical Hinduism, however, God is perceived to have revealed Himself in animate or inanimate beings.

Geoffrey Parrinder’s *Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World’s Religions* is a remarkable research on this subject. The concept of *avatar* is a major theme in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Judaism and Islam, in principle, reject the idea of incarnation though, according to the Qur’an, some Israelites believed that Ezra (‘Uzayr) (peace be on him) imbibed the divine attributes of Yahweh.\(^2\) In pristine Judaism this concept is considered a contradiction in terms for Yahweh is perceived as unique and totally other. Similarly, the Qur’anic principle of *tawḥīd* does not permit a believer to accept any sharing in the person or attributes of Allah, the Creator and Sustainer. He cannot be compared with any of His creations in the universe. He is totally unique and other.\(^3\) The Creator, nevertheless, interacts and communicates with human beings through the spoken word, *kalām Allāh*.

Judaism in its classical understanding also holds the doctrine of Yahweh’s revelation in history. For Christianity, “The incarnation is not a mere appearance of God, a theophany, but it is part of the redemptive work of Christ, as a man, but in whom God operates. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself” (2 Cor. 5.19).\(^4\)

Both Buddhism and Hinduism doctrinally believe in incarnation. A major section of Buddhists believes in periodic appearance of the Buddha as divine incarnation of the Bodhisatva or Tathagata. As for the Hindus, they are invariably of the view that the Infinite reveals Himself in the finite in order to communicate with and transform the finite.

Textural analysis of *Vedanta-Sutra*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagwad Gita*, *Puranas* and classical writings on Hinduism indicate the presence of belief in *avatars* in Hinduism.\(^5\) Parrinder’s in-depth analysis and comparison of the Hindu Scriptures with the Christian sources shows a remarkable similarity in the concept of incarnation between the two religious traditions (pp. 87–97). Parrinder shows the presence of *Avatara* doctrines such as in the teachings of Arya Samaj and even in modern Hindu literature such as the poetry of Rabendranath Tagore (1861–1941) or in the ideas of M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948). Parrinder suggests that the oldest traces of the *Avatara* doctrine are fully

\(^2\) “And the Jews said: ‘Uzayr is son of Allah.” Qur’an 9: 30.

\(^3\) “And there is none comparable to Him.” Qur’an 112: 4.

\(^4\) Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, 216.

Indian (p. 117). He refers to Rudolf Otto’s view that “the doctrine of ‘incarnation’ is not special to Christianity. India possessed it long before Christianity, but that Christ was a propitiator in the profound meaning of his coming.” Christian theologians such as H. H. Farmer feel uncomfortable with use of the word incarnation for Jesus (peace be on him). He talks about “inhistorization” of God, in a fully historic individual i.e. Jesus.7

Parrinder talks in detail about twelve characteristics of the Avatar doctrine. He mentions that it is a shared belief that Avatar take a worldly birth, which allows the human to mingle with the divine. The Avatar represent a recurring historical phenomenon and as personal God, constitute the core of belief in several religions. On this count Hinduism and Christianity appear to have a great deal in common.

With reference to Islam, there exists a general misconception that the so-called ṭarīqah stream (tasawwuf or mystic way) incorporates some kind of union (witrāḥ) with the Ultimate. Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj’s (d. 309/922) famous assertion anā ʾl-Haqq, “I am the Truth,” is often quoted in support of this assertion. Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1357/1938) in his famous lectures interprets Ḥallāj’s statement as I am from al-Haqq and not I am al-Haqq. Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Ghazālī (450–505/1058–1111) in his al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl, questions such assertions and regards them as heretical.8 The Qur’ān and the Sunnah severely criticise the Christians for attributing divinity to Jesus (peace be on him), considering him God incarnate. Both these sources insist on the total otherness of Allah in His person (dhāt) and in His attributes (ṣifāt and asmā’). Nevertheless, the presence of deviant views in popular sufism cannot be denied.

It is often difficult to liberate oneself from one’s own cultural baggage. Nevertheless, Parrinder compares the concept of incarnation in five different religious traditions. Among these, Islam and Judaism have no scriptural justification for incarnation. This is due to the foundational principle of the ultimate otherness of the Creator. While referring to popular ṣūfi belief Parrinder recollects the New Testament assertions such as “I and my Father are one,” (John 10: 30) and “...There is one God, the Father...and one Lord, Jesus Christ...” (1 Cor. 8, 6). Dilating on the views of al-Ghazālī, who knew, the Christian Scripture well, though its Coptic version, he holds that al-

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Ghazâlî was lenient in commenting on the Scripture that “the word was made flesh” was a metaphorical statement and ought not to be taken literally (p. 195).

However, al-Ghazâlî makes no compromise on transcendence (tanzîh) of Allah and regards comparing anything with God as wrong and unacceptable. Therefore statements such as “God was in Christ” or the Hindu doctrine of “thou art That” are rejected by him. He also does not agree with the idea of God becoming one with any person or object. God, for him, is unique, transcendent and not tangible physically (p. 196).

Parrinder is of the view that the Shi‘ah concept of Imâm, excluding the Zaydis, who attribute right guidance only to the Imâm, carry traces of neo-Gnosticism, though, he adds that the notion of transmigration (tanâsûkh) is rejected by the Shi‘ah scholars. They hold the view that at all times an Imâm must be present to guide the people (p. 196).

Parrinder also refers to deviant groups, generally not considered Shi‘î by the mainstream Shi‘ah. These include Nusairîs, Durûz and Ismâ‘îlis. While dealing with the concept of ālul, the Ghulât claim that the divine light dwells fully in the body of the Imâm. The fact of the matter is that authentic Shi‘ah scholars do not consider these groups to be part of the mainstream Shi‘ism nor count them as part of the Muslim Ummah. Similarly, some of the philosophical positions such as the doctrine of logos (kalīmah) of Muḥyî ‘l-Dîn Muḥammad b. ‘Alî Ibn al-Arâbî (d. 638/1240), as the creative principle, which implies that each Prophet had this logos, but that the logos of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) was special to him (pp. 202–205) deserve reconsideration. He concludes that “In Christian belief God is spirit, is love. But Ibn Arabî’s One is transcendent and attributeless. Being who is known only through what is called the spirit of Muḥammad. In Christian faith God has many attributes, and yet comes in a real incarnation. Ibn ‘Arabî’s God is pure essence and unapproachable, acting only through an agent that is not human at all” (p. 205). With reference to Sufis Parrinder holds that “they do not illustrate a universal tendency toward belief in incarnation but they rather show a binding hold of monism” (p. 205).

In Christianity the event of crucifixion leads to a variety of views about the real nature of Jesus (peace be on him): was his body human or divine (diactinism), did he pass out or not and so on. A reference is made to Luke who says that “the risen Christ was not a spirit” and that “the disciples were invited to touch his hands and feet, though it is not stated that they did so” (p. 213). Parrinder also refers to the second century development in the Gospel of Peter that Jesus was silent on the cross since he felt no pain. “And the most dreadful of all cries of dereliction, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken
me?’ was perverted into a lament ‘My power, why have you left me?’ And when he had so spoken he was taken up.” Parrinder concludes: “This suggests that he went up to heaven without really dying” (p. 214). This, on the one hand, reinforces Paul’s belief in the divinity of Jesus (peace be on him). Paul, it is said “spoke of the ‘scandal’ of Christ crucified to the Jews, for how could the Messiah of God be killed? Paul also felt that it was foolishness to the Greeks for the gods could not die” (See, 1 Cor. 1,23). Parrindar also refers to Acts of John which confirms the divinity of Jesus. “Nothing therefore of the things which they will say of me have I suffered... I was pierced yet I was not smitten, hanged, and I was not hanged, that blood flowed from me, and it flowed not” (p. 214).9

Modern Christian scholars, specially John Hick is of the view that “to call Jesus God incarnation, or son of God, or even God, is to use the language of commitment or love, and that such language should not be taken as a set of propositions, for formulating a creed from them is to misunderstand their purpose and meaning. To talk about Jesus as Lord and Saviour is like saying that one’s beloved is the most beautiful person in the world, wonderful, divine” (p. 264).

This interpretation provides an important basis for inter-religious harmony and dialogue. The recognized Islamic position of Allah’s transcendence and the uniqueness of His attributes does not permit anyone to consider His immanence or incarnation in a person or in an object. However, it is perhaps only allegorically, and not literally, that some Sufis, Hindus or Christians talk about the reflection of God’s wisdom or power in some person or object. Perhaps, thanks to the finitude of human language and an overflowing of love and devotion, words are used which only symbolically talk about the divine character of a person. They need not be taken literally.

The view expressed by John Hick provides a workable basis for a meaningful inter-faith dialogue, particularly within the faith which falls in the Abrahamic tradition, namely the Jewish, Christian and Islamic. This in-depth study confirms that religious motifs travel from one tradition to another in response to the perennial questions encountered by man in pursuit of truth. The book fulfils a much needed objective — critical comparative study of a central concept in Hinduism and Christianity.

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