

"WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?" SPEAKING OF JESUS IN INDIA TODAY

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The Gospel of Matthew narrates the following dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus asks them: "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples report what they have heard: "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Then Jesus repeats the question: "Who do *you* say that I am?" Peter's reply is reported: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:13-16). Whether this dialogue is a verbatim report or not, it certainly reflects the faith of the early Church. But it is also a paradigm of similar stories that repeat themselves through history. Christians as well as others who hear the story of Jesus are called to respond to the same question. The answers today may be as varied as those reported by the disciples, though using different terms. The answers both of the people and of Peter suppose the context of Israel, its history and its messianic expectations. The names of the prophets and the title 'Messiah' will not have been understood outside that circle. Today the answers will have to come out of our own different contexts: "Who do we think Jesus is?"

Let us note again, before we leave this story, that the answers of the disciples did not refer to the personal history of Jesus. They did not refer to the place of his birth or his ancestry. They rather called for an interpretation of the meaning of his life and work. They pointed to the significance of Jesus in the wider historical context of Israel. There is a comparison and a contrast. "Jesus is like the Prophets. He is one of them!", say some. "He is the expected Messiah, the Prophet we have been waiting for!", says Peter. But all of them place him in the prophetic tradition

of Israel. It will be helpful to keep this in mind.

THE EARLY ANSWERS

The quest for the significance of Jesus did not stop with the first disciples. It continues. The various books of the New Testament show us that the early Church continued along the same lines as the first disciples. They discovered many titles for Jesus. Oscar Cullmann has listed them: the Prophet, the Suffering Servant of God, the High Priest, the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Lord, the Saviour, the Word, the Son of God.¹ The Evangelists wrote their story of Jesus, each one from a particular perspective. Mark saw him as proclaiming and realizing the Reign of God and calling for conversion. Matthew writing to a Jewish audience spoke of him as fulfilling the promises of the Prophets and pointing to the final fulfilment in his own second coming. Luke writing for Gentile groups underlines not only his going out to the Gentiles, but also describes the opening out of the early Christian community to the Gentile world in the Acts. Paul and John share with us their own reflections on the story of Jesus. Paul sees in Jesus a cosmic figure, the second Adam, who reconciles all things in himself in the power of the Spirit. John contemplates in him the Word in whom all things were created and who enlightens every one coming into the world and who becomes flesh to lead all to communion with the Father.

When the Gentiles become disciples of Jesus they continue the same practice. Their context however is not the story of Israel. We see this already in John who sees Jesus as the *Logos* or Word. But some of the others follow the myths and stories of their own previous religious tradition. Some probably thought of him as a great hero, like Apollo or Hercules, a superman, who is divinized. Others thought of him as a god — one among the many gods who had made up their pantheon. He was not really a man, but a god in disguise, so to speak. The early Church and the Fathers thought that these speculations were quite inadequate to explain the significance of Jesus. They simply

1. Cf. Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1959).

assimilated him to existing figures, historical or mythical, with whom they were familiar. They lacked the intuition of Peter who saw something new. The early Church therefore asserted, in its faith and in its worship, that Jesus was God and Man. The Fathers, reflecting on this faith experience of the people, seek to project a true image of Jesus. Being very negative to the religious and mythological tradition of the Graeco-Roman world, they rather look towards philosophy. So they speak of the two natures, divine and human, and one person in Jesus. They affirm his divinity and explain his origin in terms of generation, rather than creation. They speak of the unity of 'substance' between Jesus and God. All of us know the formula of the Creed which we repeat every Sunday: "God of God, Light of Light, True God of True God, begotten not made, one in substance with the Father."

When the Indians heard the story of Jesus, they also searched their religious traditions for appropriate names for Jesus. They called him *Guru*: the great master and teacher; the *Avatar*: God descended in human form among the humans to save them from unrighteous oppression; *Ishvara*: the Lord who mediates and presides over creation; a great *Yogi*: a self-realized person who can show the way of self-realization to the others; a *Saint*: who not only preached, but also practised a non-violent morality; etc. These and other names do bring out various elements of the significance of Jesus seen in the context of Indian religious tradition. But Christians in India feel that these titles do not really bring out the full significance of Jesus for us and for history. But at the same time the clear definition of Chalcedon is not quite intelligible in India. Some of those terms cannot even be translated in Indian languages.

SEARCHING FOR A NEW/OLD LANGUAGE: THE STORY

Looking around the world one suspects that such a philosophical answer is not more intelligible elsewhere either. People do not look at themselves and their world through such philosophical spectacles any more. A contemporary answer therefore cannot be satisfied with repeating or translating the traditional answer, but has to rediscover it, so to speak, in the context of contem-

porary experience and language.

Another problem is that the Fathers of the Church in formulating an answer also shifted registers. The disciples and the New Testament tried to spell out the significance of Jesus in the context of their history, which was a history of God's saving interventions. The Fathers of the Church, rejecting the religious experience of their tradition, looked rather to philosophy. But in the process they rose to a level of conceptual abstraction. They spoke more about what Jesus *was* than what he *did*. They were interested in describing his ontological composition rather than his historical action. It is true that this ontological expression responded to what they thought Jesus was doing in his life. They spoke of it as *divinization* of human beings. They affirmed Jesus' divinity because otherwise Jesus could not have communicated God's life to the people in the process of divinizing them. They affirmed his humanity because he could not divinize human nature without assuming it himself. The incarnation itself is seen as divinizing so that the paschal mystery only confirms what has happened already in the incarnation. The divinization takes place first of all in himself and then others participate in it. In this manner, the divinity and the humanity of Jesus are affirmed precisely in relation to his 'work' of the divinization of the humans. But the weak point of this approach is that while the divinization of the humans is affirmed and taken for granted, it is not explained how this is taking place in history, in the lives of human beings. Besides it is not presented to people in any form that they would recognize in their ordinary day to day lives. As a second order reflection all this may be interesting. But this is not the language in which one can talk to people. We can remark in passing that we see the same move when theology and doctrine move from the 'economic' to the 'immanent' Trinity.

The consequence of this is that it loses any explanatory power with regard to history and to contemporary human life. It is necessary to relate the story of Jesus with the stories of people and of the world. This cannot be done in terms of abstract formulations. I think that we have to rediscover the mystery of Jesus as a story, which tells us what he does, and through that, gives us a glimpse of what he is. We may never be able to grasp fully what he is in himself. We may say no more than *neti, neti*

— not this, not this. But we can know what he did as a human being. This knowledge is of course primary. The narrative form also seems the best suited to communicate the truth about Jesus to the others.

THE 'WHY?' OF THE STORY

History is always narrated from a perspective. There is no story which is simply a list of bare facts. Such bare facts are not even available. Everything happens in a particular situation and is narrated by some one from his or her particular point of view. The way that we narrate the story of Jesus will depend upon what we think is the significance of what he did. This significance will be disclosed if we can answer the questions 'Why?' and 'How?'

The purpose of Jesus' life is expressed by Christians in many ways. Jesus came to proclaim the coming of the Reign of God, to share God's love and life with us, to make us children of God, to save us from our sins, to bring all things together into a unity, to restore and reconcile wounded humanity as well as the wounded cosmos, etc. These are the kind of perspectives that we have in the New Testament. But unfortunately we have truncated this vision in many ways. In the past the whole project of salvation was reduced to the saving of souls. Today we speak more holistically of persons with body and soul. But still we tend to focus on the individual rather than on the community, or on the whole human race, or on the universe. The way we tell the story of Jesus will certainly be different according to whether we think its significance is only for individuals or a particular community like the Church or to the whole of humanity or to the cosmos itself. Without elaborate justification let us take for granted for our reflection here that the salvation proclaimed and realized by Jesus reaches out to the whole cosmos. We could keep in our minds the picture of Paul in his letter to the Romans (Rom 8) of the whole cosmos, including the humans, yearning for freedom and fullness in the process of becoming the Reign of God.

ANSWERS TO THE 'HOW?'

The second question that we have to be clear about before we can tell a meaningful and convincing story about Jesus is 'How?' How does Jesus contribute to the realization of the Reign of God? This question has been answered in a variety of ways in the course of Christian history. While the early Church and the Fathers spent a lot of energy and time in trying to spell out who Jesus is in himself (divine and human) and what he did (save or divinize), they did not reflect much on the 'how?'. There are many theories regarding this. The very words used to indicate what Jesus did betray a particular theoretical orientation: redemption, salvation, atonement, etc. All of these take for granted the need for reconciliation between God and the humans because of sin and the event of Jesus' death and resurrection as achieving this reconciliation in some way for all peoples.

The various theories of atonement have been grouped into four classes: transaction, conflict, enlightenment and solidarity.² I think that for our purpose here, it is enough to look at these four models, rather than survey the different theories. Theories of atonement as transaction looks at sin as offence against God's honour. Jesus, by his death, makes proper satisfaction for the offence. By focusing on God's honour, one excludes such ideas as 'avenging injustice', 'appeasing anger', 'paying a ransom', etc. These theories reflect a feudal background. According to theories of conflict, the world is seen as a battlefield between the forces of good and evil. The forces of evil are often personified. On the cross and through his resurrection Jesus conquers the forces of evil. Jesus appears as the royal hero. The theories of enlightenment suggest that Jesus' life and death have an exemplary value. He shows the way each person has to follow in order to achieve salvation. According to theories of solidarity, all of us share in the reconciliation achieved by Christ, because he does so in solidarity with us. One could however have different opinions on the roots of this solidarity.

Another aspect of the theories of atonement is how what

2. Cf. Michael Winter, *The Atonement* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995) 63 ff.

happened to Jesus at a particular place and time becomes significant to every one at every time, even to the cosmos. Here we are not talking about the availability of salvation to other believers. We are taking for granted that God is making it possible for all humans to participate in the paschal mystery of Christ, in ways unknown to us.³ We are raising a more fundamental question: how an event that happened once for all becomes salvifically significant for every one and at all times. I think that, at the moment, there are basically two ways of answering this. The more popular way speaks the language of merit. Jesus by his salvific death has gained an infinite quantity of merits. These are now distributed to every one who behaves according to his/her conscience with implicit or explicit faith in Christ. God can also communicate salvation even before the birth of Jesus in view of these merits — as happened in the case of Mary. This theory, of course dressed up in various symbolic forms, still remains the official/popular view: indulgences and jubilees depend on this. The second way of answering the question is more 'transcendental'. In becoming human Jesus is 'somehow' uniting himself to the whole of humanity. So what happens in him affects every one. In Christ all of us are reconciled. The people — the world — are radically redeemed.⁴ Of course people are free to pull out of this scheme, though it is difficult to see how. Another problem with this theory, as with the theory of divinization of the Fathers of the Church, is that such divine-human reconciliation is already a reality in the incarnation. So one does not see clearly what the paschal mystery adds to it, except to confirm it dramatically.

The problem with both these groups of theories is that if salvation is achieved once for all in this manner either historically or transcendently, then there is no real place for any other religions and history has no real significance. The transcendentalists are consistent in saying that every human person has

3. *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

4. The transcendental theory is usually attributed to Karl Rahner among others. Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978) 212-28, and many relevant articles in his *Theological Investigations*. But John Paul II also often uses this language. See, for instance, his very first encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, no. 22.

to be Christian, either aware of it or anonymously. With regard to history: in the ongoing struggle between good and evil, the decisive victory has been won by Jesus in his death and resurrection. Some mopping up operations are going on just now — to continue the military metaphor. The final battle will not be the decisive one. We are just waiting for the victory procession. No wonder that the early Christians were expecting the victory procession to start soon. Such a view devalues history and the freedom of the people engaged in it. It seems particularly offensive to other believers who are all, in this way, turned into anonymous Christians.

THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF A NEW THEORY

I think that we need to look for a new theory. We should develop a theory to suit our facts rather than try to adjust or interpret our facts to suit our theories. The New Testament can still provide us inspiration for this. Asking themselves the same question that Jesus had asked them, "Who do you say that I am?", they gave different answers, each according to the audience and to the historical circumstances in which he was writing. They are an example for us to follow, not to repeat their answers, but to fashion our own arising out of our historical situation. Our situation differs from theirs in two ways. The early Christians seem to have been expecting an imminent second coming of Christ. So they did not try to give a meaning to present and future history. We on the contrary are very much aware of history, even if it is set in the horizon of hope. Secondly, too close to the experience of Jesus and too expectant of the end to come, they did not pay much attention to the other religions. They broke off even from Judaism, in spite of the agonizing questions of Paul (Rom 9-11). The Fathers of the Church were very negative to the other religions, seeing some value only in their philosophies. Today we are open to other religions and have a positive view of the experience of other believers. We are therefore looking at Jesus in a new historical context and are looking for adequate ways of talking about him to people whose religious experience we regard positively with appreciation and respect. Let us look at these two contexts: religious pluralism

and history.

In evaluating the context of religious pluralism, I think that we should avoid three sorts of approaches. One approach looks at religions as unrelated. God is one and has one plan for the universe. While we accept the possibility of God's self manifestations in various ways and at various times, we do think that they must be all related in some way, though I think that the manner of this relationship is not to be affirmed *a priori* but discovered in dialogue. Secondly, while we make space for other believers in the way we look at the world and at God's plan for it from our own point of view, we should not aim at making a common scheme that would be acceptable to every one. Dialogue supposes different points of view in tension and one can expect a convergent movement. This should not be preempted ideologically by a premature totalizing project. This leads to my third observation. We do not pretend to know the end of history and what shape this would take. We do not seek to preempt the freedom of the Spirit, the freedom of the actors in history and the role of other religions in it.

With regard to the historical context, when we narrate the story of Jesus and seek to realize its universal significance, we can look at it in three ways: historically, typologically and eschatologically. We can look at the Jesus event as one limited to a particular place and a particular time. We strongly affirm its historicity. Any attempt to give it universal significance then becomes the universalization of the particular. This is done in two ways as I have pointed out above, namely either in terms of a cause whose effects continue in time or by making it transcendent, thus freeing it from historical conditioning. Odo Casel even suggested a third way through which the historical event of the paschal mystery had a mysteric kernel that, shorn of its historical particularity, could be made present cultically in the Eucharist at various places at various times. But such universalizing of a particular historical event takes away the value of the rest of history.

Another way of looking at the Jesus event is to consider it as a type. As such it is a model or example of many similar events in history. Divine interventions in human history are something ongoing and repetitive though in different circum-

stances. What happened in Jesus is typical of what normally happens in similar divine interventions. The Jesus event may have some special characteristics, but it belongs in a series. There is some truth in this perspective. If we do believe that God keeps intervening in history — and the Scriptures are stories of such interventions — then there is bound to be a certain similarity between these, even if each event is further specified and localized by the concrete circumstances in which it is taking place.

AN ESCHATOLOGICAL VISION

I have termed the third way of looking at the Jesus event eschatological. History is not simply a haphazard jumble of events. We believe that there is only one God and history is governed by God's plan. History therefore has a meaning and a goal. But, it is not a deterministic process, but a creative one that includes the free interventions of God as well as of human beings. We spell out the goal of history as the Reign of God, though it could be described in other similar symbolic terms. In this history every event has an impact with regard to the totality. Nothing is haphazard or accidental, even if its place in the totality is not always obvious to us. Some events are of particular importance to this history. They determine in some definitive way its course. The Jesus event is one such. But however exceptional such an event is in our opinion, its impact on history cannot be explained purely in terms of itself. It can be fully understood only in the context of other events in the ongoing dynamic of history. Just as the New Testament looks at the Jesus event in the light of the history of Israel, it can also be looked at in the light of the wider history of the world.

The Jesus event is not an isolated happening in history. It has given rise to a movement of people, the Church, which has played and is playing a role in history. In playing this role it is in constant dialogue, willingly or unwillingly, with other historical forces. Its meaning and impact can be fully understood only on the last day, when history itself reaches its fulfilment. The early Church saw this fulfilment in the past or in the immediate future. It expected an imminent end to history with

the second coming of Jesus. So it did not think about other historical forces. But we see the fulfilment in the future and for us the historical significance of Jesus is not yet complete.

We do not see this future completion as an unfolding of what happened two thousand years ago in a logical, deterministic way. It is a creative movement that involves the freedom of God as well as the freedom of the people who are making history. We still believe that this history is not chaotic. The Spirit of God is animating the whole process. We believe also that God's self-manifestations to other peoples through other events which have also given rise to other religions as movements of people have their own role and significance in history.

If we believe that the Jesus event is of particular importance, then it is not enough to affirm it. It is neither enough to claim it, simply because Jesus is divine. We have to make it operative in history, because Jesus also chose to be human and to enter into the process of history.

The Jesus event is not simply a type of many such events in history. It has a special, particular place and impact in history. But it is not enough to discern it in the past. As disciples of Jesus we are making it relevant in the present and actualizing it creatively by our own freedom. By concentrating our attention only on the past event we may be failing in our present duty. By closing our eyes to other movements in history we may be hindering the impact our own movement should have on them and on history in collaboration with them.

I think that this is the perspective in which we should tell the story of Jesus today in India. The story must be told more by our lives than by mere words, so that it is seen to be actual rather than merely in the past.

RETELLING THE STORY OF JESUS

When we read the life of Jesus we see three blocks, so to speak, or inter-related activities: proclaiming the Reign of God in word and deed, healing and teaching. People who encountered him felt the presence of God in him. Reflecting on this experience they conclude that in Jesus God himself is present to them. But he did not preach an abstract doctrine about God. In his life and

action people get to glimpse special characteristics of God. Let us take a brief look at the life of Jesus. We shall not be elaborate, but indicative.

Jesus starts his preaching by proclaiming the coming of the Reign of God and by calling for conversion (Mk 1:14-15). In the synagogue at Nazareth he spells out the implication of this proclamation (Lk 4:16-21). Just as in the prophets, option for the poor and justice become the criteria for the presence of the Reign of God.⁵ The world is seen as divided into two camps: the people who are powerful and rich and others who are poor, oppressed and marginalized. This division is not seen as natural, but as imposed by the rich on the poor. There is then a situation of social conflict. In this conflict Jesus takes the side of the poor.⁶ He not only denounces the rich, but he actively searches out the company of the poor. He eats with them. Publicans and sinners find a place at his table. In doing so he defies the social and ritual taboos of the time. His miracles are worked in their favour. The hungry are fed, the sick are healed, the marginalized like the lepers are reintegrated in society, the lame walk, the blind see.⁷ The poor that he opts for are not only the materially poor, but all the oppressed and marginalized in the name of social mores and religious principle. He is therefore seen as a threat to social and religious order. While not leading a violent agitation, he is engaged in a quiet revolution that challenges the social and religious principles on which the social order is based and undermines the authority of those who are dominant and powerful. The religious and political leaders of the time conspire together to put him out of the way. But his resurrection and his mission to the disciples to go and proclaim the Reign of God throughout the world show that it is God's own revolution and it is here to stay. It has not disappeared with the death of Jesus

5. Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Mission as Prophecy," in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, Vol. 2 (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994) 64-72 and the references there.

6. Cf. Aloysius Pieris, "An Asian Paradigm: Inter-religious Dialogue and Theology of Religions," *The Month* (April 1993) 129-34. Pieris speaks of Jesus himself as being the defence pact of God with the poor and the oppressed.

7. I take for granted in these paragraphs that the Gospels are known sufficiently so that detailed references for every non-controversial assertion need not be given.

as the rich and powerful had hoped. Instead it has become the leaven that keeps challenging and transforming peoples and communities.

Jesus' deeds and words only illustrate this basic option that he has made. His works are focused on healing, giving life to those who in any way are deprived of it by sickness or other needs. This is not merely a physical process but a way of reconciliation and integration. That is why often his healings involve or are presented as forgiveness of sin, seen as alienation from God and from others. Mary of Magdala and the adulterous woman, the lepers and the possessed who wander through the grave yards illustrate this reconciliation.

His teaching explains the meaning of his deeds. He preaches love and forgiveness. He gives a new commandment of love. He questions ritualism and the mere formalism of the Law. His teachings gathered together by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount project a vision of a new society based on self-gift and sharing, option to be poor and justice, forgiveness and love, moral and social rather than ritual practice (Mt 5:25).

His miracles as well as his authoritative teaching not only project the new vision of the Reign of God that he proclaimed, but indicate that God's own self is here offering a new blueprint for history. He launches a new movement of people who continue to witness to, proclaim and help to actualize the Reign of God in the world. His resurrection and the sending of the Spirit continue his animating and strengthening presence in the world.

His life and death not only project a new social vision, but also a new way of achieving it. He does not come with power, neither political, nor economic, nor military which people normally think are necessary for a revolution. He chooses rather the way of poverty and humility, love and forgiveness, suffering and death. He is aiming not at an imposed change, but an interior transformation. By entering history and by continuing his presence in the community of his disciples he has opted for a way of change that respects people's freedom and the process of history. It does not subvert history and human agency in a display of power that imposes cataclysmic change, so dear to the heart of apocalyptic writers. It is neither a mysterious, unknown, transcendental transformation. It is a historical process with its struggles

and draw-backs and partial successes. Self-emptying, washing of the feet, voluntary suffering, love and non-violence are the weapons of a new kind of struggle. Its very strangeness shows that there is someone more than human here.

In Jesus we experience God's presence and action in the world in a new and unique way. But this presence is not dominating and powerful, destructive of other presences of God through the Spirit in the movements of committed people who seek God and God's liberation and fullness for themselves and for the world. He is not simply a model for us to imitate. He continues his involvement, partially visibilized by the Church. His liberative action is not 'once-for-all' in a limited historical way. It is eschatological, continuing in history and oriented to a goal. He has not preempted history, but has entered into it. Having become human he has not abolished history, but has rather become part of it, with all its pluralism and uncertainty.

God's humanity in history certainly asks us to take history seriously. The Reign of God may not be a historical manifestation: it is God's gift. But it is also a human task and realizes itself in and through human history. That is why God became human in Jesus. Christian life and devotion often seem to turn to the mysteries of the past re-presented in liturgy and proposed to contemplation. I think that Jesus challenges us to turn back to history. God is authentically encountered today, not in 'sacred mysteries', but in the poor and the marginalized to whom the Reign of God is proclaimed and in whom it is slowly taking shape. The criterion of the truth of God's humanity in Jesus is not abstract dogmas but a community that opts for the poor and does justice, respecting the divine and human freedoms operative in history leading it to a fulfilment that we can only affirm in faith and hope. This is also the best language in which we can talk about Jesus today.