20 A Hinduism without walls? Exploring the concept of the avatar interreligiously

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Introduction: the universal and the concrete

Jerry L. Martin has defined a Theology Without Walls as “a theology that takes all sources of revelation, enlightenment, and insight into account, without (to the extent possible) privileging our own.” He has further characterized this approach as “a cooperative, constructive, trans-religious theological project,” based on the observation that “[p]eople who engage in serious study beyond their own tradition frequently find revelation, enlightenment, or insight into ultimate reality in multiple traditions. In light of this experience, restricting theology to the articulation of truths within one’s own tradition seems unduly restricted” (Martin 2018).

The Vedanta tradition of Ramakrishna is a Hindu tradition that one might expect not only to embrace the idea of a Theology Without Walls but also to suggest that this mode of theologizing describes precisely what its adherents have been doing all along; for from the inception of this tradition in the multireligious spiritual practices of its founding figure, it has been rooted in the idea that ultimate reality and the truths leading to it cannot be confined to a single tradition. To its adherents, Vedanta is, in short, already an example of a Theology Without Walls. In the words of Pravrajika Vrajaprana, “Vedanta is the philosophical foundation of Hinduism; but while Hinduism includes aspects of Indian culture, Vedanta is universal in its application and is equally relevant to all countries, all cultures, and all religious backgrounds” (Vrajaprana 1999, 1).

Even as it aspires to universality, though, Vedanta is also, in practice, one tradition among others. The organizations founded by Swami Vivekananda and charged with promulgating this tradition – the Ramakrishna Order and Mission and the Vedanta Societies – have their own specific practices, observances, beliefs, and so on. There is a distinctive Vedantic worldview that, even as it seeks to integrate the insights of many traditions into its universal vision, is nevertheless different from these other traditions in many respects.

As a scholar-practitioner in this tradition, I can say that it is precisely its breadth of vision, its aspiration toward universality, that was one of the main factors that drew me to it.¹ A religious tradition, though, must also

make the universal concrete if it is to mediate universal concepts and transcendental realities to living practitioners. In the words of Alfred North Whitehead:

Religion should connect the rational generality of philosophy with the emotions and purposes springing out of existence in a particular society, in a particular epoch, and conditioned by particular antecedents. Religion is the translation of general ideas into particular thoughts, particular emotions, and particular purposes; it is directed to the end of stretching individual interest beyond its self-defeating particularity. . . . Religion is an ultimate craving to infuse into the insistent particularity of emotion that non-temporal generality which primarily belongs to conceptual thought alone.

(Whitehead 1978, 15, 16)

To take Vedanta as an example of this principle, Vedanta as a spiritual practice tied to a tradition and an institution affirms universal ideas, like the idea of a divine reality that manifests Itself to human beings at various points in history but also renders this idea concrete in the form of the image of Ramakrishna as the avatar, or divine incarnation, of our current historical epoch, whose primary mission has been to teach the harmony and the ultimate unity of all religions. The idea of Sri Ramakrishna as an avatar is, of course, distinctive to the Ramakrishna tradition: an affirmation that differentiates this tradition not only from other religions but also from other forms of Hinduism, for not all Hindu traditions accept the avatar doctrine, and not all that do would affirm the idea of Ramakrishna as an avatar. But although this doctrine serves to differentiate the Ramakrishna tradition as one historical tradition among others, it also serves for its adherents to render concrete the far more abstract ideal of divine love: a love willing to manifest itself in time and history in order to draw humanity ever nearer to the realization of its divine potential.

The concept of the avatar

The necessity of the concrete manifestation of divinity in a human form is affirmed in many places by Swami Vivekananda, according to whom we, as human beings, can only relate to a highly abstract reality such as the Infinite if we can approach it through the medium of a human form. In one passage, using the metaphor of light, he says,

The vibration of light is everywhere in this room. Why cannot we see it everywhere? You have to see it only in that lamp. God is an Omnipresent Principle – everywhere; but we are so constituted at present that we can see Him, feel him, only in and through a human God. And when

these great lights come [that is, avatars, or divine incarnations], then man realizes God.

(Vivekananda 1979b, 122)

The ideal of the avatar is part of the Vaishnava tradition of Hinduism. It is first affirmed in a text that is foundational both for Vaishnavism and Vedanta: the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In the seventh verse of the fourth chapter of this text, the Supreme Being, or Bhagavān, Lord Krishna, tells his friend, the hero Arjuna: “Whenever *dharma* declines and when chaos and evil [*adharma*] arise, I manifest myself” (*Bhagavad Gītā* 4:7, translation mine). Interestingly, the word *avatāra* itself does not actually appear in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, though it is clear from the subsequent textual tradition that this is the idea being expressed. In the *Bhāgavata Pūrāṇa*, a central Vaishnava text, many avatars are listed and described (*Bhāgavata Pūrāṇa* 1.3). Although the avatars are sometimes said to be countless in number, there are several lists of these avatars in various Hindu texts. The best-known list includes 10 avatars, though there is also a list of 24 and another list of 108.²

Hindu sources describe the attributes of an avatar, thus making it possible to determine if a particular individual might be one. How has Sri Ramakrishna been proclaimed an avatar by his followers? According to the accounts of his life – the Bengali *Kathāmr̥ta* and *Līlaprasaṅga* – he was filled at a very early age with a deep longing to see God: to perceive divinity directly. This longing intensified after he became a priest at the temple of Kali, the Divine Mother, at Dakshineshwar, near Calcutta. After many days of intense prayer and profound emotional turmoil, Ramakrishna experienced the Goddess Kali as a living reality, who manifested to the young priest as “a limitless, infinite, effulgent Ocean of Consciousness” (Nikhilananda 1942, 14). In the months that followed, Ramakrishna conceived a desire to experience divinity in as many forms as possible, taking up the disciplines of various Vaishnava, Shaiva, and Shakta traditions of Hindu spiritual practice. It was in the course of these *sādhana*s, or spiritual disciplines, that a woman called the Bhairavi Brahmani became his guide:

Day after day she watched his ecstasy during the kirtan [singing of sacred hymns] and meditation, his samādhi [a profound state of meditative absorption which he was capable of entering spontaneously], his mad yearning; and she recognized in him a power to transmit spirituality to others. She came to the conclusion that such things were not possible for an ordinary devotee, not even for a highly developed soul. Only an incarnation of God was capable of such spiritual manifestations. She proclaimed openly that Sri Ramakrishna, like Sri Chaitanya [a medieval Vaishnava saint proclaimed an avatar in the Gauḍīya Vaishnava tradition], was an Incarnation of God.

(Nikhilananda 1942, 19)

The Bhairavi Brahmani's faith that Ramakrishna was an incarnation is widely held in the tradition based on his life and teachings. But this tradition has no dogma or creed. Individuals in the Vedanta tradition are thus free to express skepticism about this teaching. One such skeptic, in fact, was Swami Vivekananda himself, who, in his youth, frequently expressed doubts about the idea of his teacher's divinity (Nikhilananda 1942, 72). Although he would later come to believe in his teacher's divinity very deeply, he never insisted that adherents of Vedanta accept this idea, and he discouraged others from insisting "too much" on it (Vivekananda 1979c, 81). He did not want it to become a bar to people accepting the more fundamental teaching of Vedanta, of the inherent divinity within *all* beings. In contrast with mainstream Christianity, Vedanta is not primarily about belief in the divinity of a particular teacher, but about the realization and manifestation of the divinity within us all.

Indeed, one can observe that there is some tension between the idea of the avatar and the idea that all beings are divine. Again, the ultimate aim of Vedanta is the realization of the divine potential in every being. What, then, is an avatar, according to this worldview? One could suggest that an avatar is simply a person who has fully realized and manifested this divine potential. We will all someday be avatars from this point of view.

There is a distinction, though, in Hindu traditions between one who *ascends* to the level of enlightenment and becomes God-realized – literally *jīvanmukta*, or liberated in this lifetime – and a *descent*, or *avatāra*, of the Supreme Being. The idea of the avatar clearly points to a distinct form of divine manifestation in the world that is different from the more general inherent divinity of all beings that practitioners of Vedanta are seeking to make manifest.

The avatar is the assumption of a concrete form by the Paramātman, or Supreme Self – the Infinite Being, or Supreme Reality – for a specific purpose, or mission. The classical avatars of the Vaiṣṇava tradition all come to, as Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, destroy evil and restore the good. This typically takes the shape of their destroying demonic beings who embody *āsuric*, or negative, qualities that keep us from God-realization: qualities such as egotism, greed, hatred, and lust. Avatars such as the Varāha, or Boar Avatar; the Narasiṃha, or Man-Lion Avatar; Vāmana, the Dwarf Avatar; and Rāma, or Rām, destroy demonic beings called, respectively, Hiranyaksha, Hiranyakashipu, Mahābālī, and Rāvaṇa. Other avatars, such as Paraśurāma and Krishna, destroy human beings who exhibit demonic qualities.

In the interpretation of Sri Aurobindo, the Buddha avatar – the ninth in the standard list of ten avatars – is a divine incarnation who chooses to set aside his divinity in order to show human beings, by example, the path to the realization of their inherent divinity. By setting aside his divine power and living as a human seeking freedom from suffering, he shows us the way to this freedom.

Significantly, the Buddha avatar is himself a good example of Hindu traditions operating after the manner of a Theology Without Walls, with an openness to the sacred figures and teachings of other traditions; for the Buddha in question is, of course, the historical founder of Buddhism, a tradition with which Hindu traditions were often in a relationship of antagonism for much of the history of Buddhism in India. To be sure, the original concept of the Buddha avatar was not at all friendly to Buddhist traditions; for the Buddha is represented as deluding ignorant and demonic persons into not performing Vedic rituals. This negative assessment was not to prevail, however. In Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda*, for example, it is said that the Buddha avatar only taught his followers to avoid those Vedic rituals that caused harm to living beings: the animal sacrifices that have been enjoined in certain rituals and in certain regions during certain periods of history. He thus plays a positive role, from a Vaiṣṇava perspective, in establishing the central Vaiṣṇava value of *ahiṃsā*, or nonviolence in thought, word, and deed. This is seen as the primary mission of this avatar in the Vaiṣṇava tradition. In the modern period, Swami Vivekananda teaches that there is nothing in the Buddha's doctrine contrary to the teachings of Vedānta, as found in the Upanishads, even as he rejected some aspects of the more ritualistic practices of the Vedas. According to Swami Vivekananda, "Buddha brought the Vedānta to light, gave it to the people, and saved India" (1979a, 2.139).

What is Ramakrishna's mission as an avatar, according to his tradition? This mission is, importantly, closely connected with the idea of the Ramakrishna tradition as a Theology Without Walls; for Ramakrishna's mission as an avatar is widely believed to have been the establishment of the idea of the harmony and unity of religions on a practical, experiential basis. In his pursuit of God-realization through many traditions, Ramakrishna's multireligious disciplines can be seen as an embodied, practical version of a Theology Without Walls. Indeed, Ramakrishna sought not only "revelation, enlightenment, or insight into ultimate reality in multiple traditions" but also direct realization, a profound inward encounter with divinity, in multiple traditions.

Ramakrishna experienced divinity through varied Hindu systems of practice – Vaiṣṇavism, Tantra, Advaita Vedānta, and so on. But his quest was truly "without walls," for he engaged in Islamic and Christian practices as well. These practices similarly culminated, as his Hindu practices had, in a direct realization of God.

The Hindu avatar and the Christian incarnation

As a result of Ramakrishna's explorations of both Islam and Christianity, the Ramakrishna tradition sees not only the avatars listed in Vaiṣṇava texts and Ramakrishna himself as divine incarnations but also figures from outside the Hindu tradition, such as Jesus Christ.

Jesus, of course, as traditionally understood in Christianity, is a singular divine incarnation, “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6), faith in whom is necessary for salvation.

Ramakrishna never came to believe that Jesus *alone* was divine. Ramakrishna’s sensibility was far closer to that expressed in a *Bhagavad Gītā* verse cited by Swami Vivekananda in his famous welcome address at the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893: “In whatsoever way that living beings approach me, thus do I receive them. All paths lead to me” (*Bhagavad Gītā* 4:11).

Ramakrishna did not deny that Jesus was divine, and indeed accepted the possibility that he was, himself, a manifestation of the same divinity that had previously walked the Earth not only as Rama, Krishna, and Buddha but as Christ as well. Ramakrishna did not proclaim himself to be an incarnation of Christ; but there were Christians in Ramakrishna’s time, and subsequently in the Ramakrishna movement, who believed this to be the case, and he did not contradict them when they expressed this view (Saradananda 2003, 910).

A “test case” of a Theology Without Walls arises if one encounters claims made by religious traditions that at least appear to contradict one another. The Hindu idea of many avatars, in contrast with that of a singular divine incarnation found in Christianity, would appear to be such a case.

It is significant, too, that this is not a peripheral or trifling issue – at least for Christians. If one takes seriously the idea that Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life” and that no one comes to the Father but through him, then the conclusion one reaches on the issue of multiple incarnations or only one could be a matter on which one’s eternal salvation hinges.

From a Hindu perspective, this issue seems easily resolvable. The one divine being who is the way, the truth, and the life, without whom salvation is impossible, has incarnated many times. There is no contest between Jesus and Krishna, because both are incarnations of the same divine reality. If the “I” who says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me,” is the same “I” who says, “In whatever way living beings approach me, thus do I receive them; all paths lead to me,” then the contradiction is resolved. The divine being who has come as Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, and that same divine being has also come as Rama, as Krishna, as Buddha, as Chaitanya, as Ramakrishna, and as many more such beings.

One can imagine the verses from John’s gospel and from the *Bhagavad Gītā* that one might normally take to be contrary to one another as two halves of a new verse, or *navya śāstra*:

I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me. And in whatever way living beings approach me, thus do I receive them; all paths lead to me.

This is not the way Christians would typically address this issue, unless the idea were to become available to them that the same divine Word, the same cosmic Christ, who walked the Earth as Jesus of Nazareth, also walked the Earth as these other figures. One appeal of this idea for Christians might be that it helps resolve, in a very elegant way, the question of the salvation of non-Christians. The idea that most of humanity is damned for eternity for following teachers other than Jesus is difficult to reconcile with the idea of the loving God proclaimed in the gospel.

Conclusion

The idea of a singular divine being with multiple incarnations – with Christianity giving greater emphasis to the singularity side of the equation and Hindu traditions emphasizing the plurality side – is an example of how a Theology Without Walls can draw traditions to appreciate one another's insights, moving toward a more inclusive vision of truth.

Notes

- 1 I was raised in the Roman Catholic tradition of Christianity.
- 2 There are at least two versions of the standard list of ten avatars. In the older one, the ninth avatar, after Krishna, is listed as Krishna's brother, Balarama. A somewhat more recent and better-known version replaces Balarama with the Buddha.

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