Interreligious Perspectives on Incarnation

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Abstract: Incarnation in Christian understanding is associated with God becoming human in Jesus Christ. However, the notion of incarnation is also to be linked to God’s divine self-revelation in history in multiple-forms. This incarnational thrust is most evident in Judaism. Even if Islam outwardly rejects the language of incarnation, it also insists on divine manifestations of God in every era. Beyond the Abrahamic traditions, we can also recognise incarnational-type ideas in Hindu Avatara and Buddhist Bodhisattva beliefs. There is ample room for incarnational dialogue among these key religious traditions.
(It is an) almost self-evident fact that the Western Christian tradition seems to be exhausted, I might almost say effete, when it tries to express the Christian message in a meaningful way for our times. Only by cross-fertilization and mutual fecundation may the present state of affairs be overcome; only by stepping over present cultural and philosophical boundaries can Christian life again become creative and dynamic. Obviously this applies to the other religions as well: It is a two-way traffic... The meeting point is neither my house nor the mansion of my neighbour, but the crossroads outside the walls, where we may eventually decide to put up a tent--for the time being.¹

Today it is widely accepted that Christianity needs to define its identity not in isolation from, but in dialogue with, the world’s great religious traditions. Since Vatican II, the Catholic Church has actively promoted the need to study and understand other religions especially Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and, increasingly, the spiritualities of Indigenous peoples. This challenge has been taken up by Christian theologians and teachers with the result that religious education programmes normally include topics or entire courses dealing with the world religions.

It is one thing to study world religions from a phenomenological perspective and quite another to enter into dialogue with them for the sake of ‘cross-fertilization and mutual fecundation’. This second step requires a depth of knowledge and conviction with respect to one’s own tradition that cannot be simply assumed, perhaps especially in an increasingly pluralist and secular culture. Nor, in a real sense, can one dialogue with

another religion. Religious dialogue, if it happens at all, is a living encounter between two or more religious persons who, in their own distinctive ways, *incarnate* their own traditions. Incarnation means embodiment; it is always more than a mere idea or clash of ideas. Genuine religious dialogue is a flesh-and-blood affair as well as ‘a religious, hence sacred, act’.²

This leads to the thorny question that is the major focus of this investigation: incarnation from an interreligious perspective. There is already a certain kind of bias embedded in the very word *incarnation* with its Latin roots (*incarnare* ‘to make flesh’) and Christian crowning (‘the assuming of a human body by the Son of God’).³ Certainly, Christianity is unique in the manner in which it makes divine incarnation the centre-piece of its entire theology of revelation. Every aspect of Christian theology from creation and salvation to the trinitarian understanding of God is profoundly influenced by ‘the mystery of the Incarnation’. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume that other religious traditions are without incarnational beliefs, even if they differ from the Christian notion of incarnation.

This discussion reviews some of the major ideas on incarnational thought as they emerge in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Inevitably, the treatment of each religion is brief and focuses on the level of intellectual articulation as distinct from symbolic and ritual expressions or religious experience as such. However, even at this level of ideas, some possibilities for religious dialogue on incarnation can be shown even if, as here, those possibilities derive solely from the Christian perspective and should be further tested as ‘the crossroads outside the walls’.

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² Ibid., 37
**Incarnation in Christianity**

Christian belief in the incarnation—‘God became man in Christ Jesus’—is founded on resurrection faith and the post-Easter experiences of the disciples. This is formulated in an opaque manner by the synoptic writers who focus on the divine messiahship of Jesus, the coming Son of Man prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. Matthew and Luke add to these various supernatural occurrences surrounding the birth of Jesus, notably the story of the virgin birth. It is John who takes these teachings to a new level, not only proclaiming Jesus as ‘the Son of God’, but insisting on his identification with the divine *Logos*: in Christ Jesus, the *Logos* or Word of God is enfleshed. In the *Logos* doctrine, Christ is not only the Messiah and Son of God through whom salvation occurs; he is literally ‘from God’ and ‘one-with-God’ in eternity. Christ’s pre-existence enables him, as the *Logos*, to be associated with the very creation of the universe. However, it is only in Jesus of Nazareth that the incarnation of this divine *Logos*, at a particular place and time in human history, reaches its zenith.

Other New Testament writings assume that the fullness of the divine mystery is somehow contained in the person of Jesus Christ. Increasingly, God the Father is distinguished from God the Son. 4 This presented the early Church with two essential difficulties: how to understand the distinction between Father and Son within a monotheistic framework; and how to understand the unity of humanity and divinity within the person of the Son. History shows that it took some four hundred years to resolve these difficulties on a formal level. At the heart of the Patristic debates were diverse understandings of the *Logos*: the Jewish notion of *Logos* as a non-created and fully divine power active in creation and history (Johannine theology); and the more abstract, Greek Platonic notion of the *Logos* as the

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principle of unity and rationality sustaining the universe, at most a created, semi-divine power (Arian theology).

The Christological councils of the fourth and fifth centuries seemed to resolve the debate once and for all in favour of the strong, Johannine incarnational teaching.\(^5\) Christ, the *Logos*, is not a demi-god intervening between God and the world, but the fullness of the divine mystery present in the human Jesus. Henceforth, in Christian teaching, Jesus Christ is understood to be both *perfectly human* and *perfectly divine*: ‘one in being with the Father as to divinity, and one in being with us as to humanity’ (Council of Chalcedon). Moreover, the dual natures of Christ do not compromise his essential unity or identity. This Christian doctrine of the ‘hypostatic union’ represents a victory over the Platonic notion of a totally changeless God who is somehow immune from real contact with the created world. In so doing, it preserves continuity with the God of Israel whose divine love and pathos are the driving force of human history and cosmic destiny.

Nonetheless, these classical Christological expressions do not easily translate into today’s language. Karl Rahner has shown how the Chalcedonian two-natures (*phuses*) and one-person (*prosopon*) model for understanding Christ is, in fact, a misunderstanding *if* we are thinking in terms of contemporary notions of ‘nature’ and ‘person’.\(^6\) Another critique is that the Councils are so focused on the issue of Christ’s identity, that they lose touch with other aspects of the Christ-event. It is almost as if faith in the incarnation is enough without having to be too concerned with Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection.\(^7\) Linked to this are socio-political critiques of

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\(^7\) This is sometimes expressed in terms of the unfortunate split between ‘Christology’—*who* Christ is in his identity—and ‘soteriology’—*what* Christ does for us.
the *high-descending* Christologies of the Nicene Creed insofar as they can too easily translate into *power* Christologies: Jesus becomes the triumphant imperial Lord justifying dehumanizing power relationships rather than the one who sides with the oppressed, upsets the powerful and dies a humiliated death.\(^8\)

In all of this, the question being asked is what happens to Christian belief in incarnation once we leave the world of classical consciousness to inhabit the evolutionary world of post-Enlightenment thought?\(^9\) One unsatisfactory and quite evidently heterodox response is to dismiss incarnational belief as pure mythology.\(^10\) Another is to side with the need for so-called *low-ascending* Christologies that centre on the human Jesus of the Gospels and then, in light of these reflections, work towards an understanding of Jesus' divine status.\(^11\) After all, it is fairly reasoned, this is the process that the disciples themselves must have followed. As well, Biblical scholars are showing how the *Word/Logos* Christology of John’s Gospel had its origins in the experience and understanding of Jesus as the incarnation of divine *Wisdom/Sophia*.\(^12\)

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\(^11\) In general terms, this is the approach of most contemporary Christologies. It is, of course, an approach that can become one-sided in relating to the human Jesus without being led to the Christological affirmation of Christ’s divinity. This kind of critique of one-sided, *low* Christologies is evident in Sebastian Moore, *The Fire and the Rose are One* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

\(^12\) See Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 131-162; and Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God* (Homebush: St Paul’s, 1995), 19-68
interreligious possibilities of this largely repressed tradition are only beginning to unfold.

The fundamental insight of Christian teaching on incarnation can be expressed as follows: in the humanity of Jesus the self-emptying divine love is made manifest to the world in a totally new and transforming way. It represents a double disclosure: divinity is revealed as pure pathos and compassionate love; humanity is shown to be the locus of the divine. In this context, the assumed separation of God and the world breaks down. Jesus’ relationship with the divine mystery as the Son of God does not annul his genuine humanness, but crowns it. If the Patristic period emphasised the divinity of Jesus, it also understood the human project in terms of the divinization of humanity. If today there is more focus on the humanity of Jesus, this accords with contemporary emphasis on human experience. The story of Jesus and his proclamation of God’s reign show that divinization and humanization are not opposed projects, but different dimensions of the single cosmic process that is divine in its origins and goal: Christ is both *Alpha* and *Omega*. Christian incarnational belief affirms that such a process has been lived most fully and completely in Jesus Christ. However, as the classical tradition also understood, this requires a fundamental re-thinking of the divine mystery in trinitarian terms.

**Judaism’s Incarnational Thrust**

Christianity was originally a Jewish sect. Not only did the original proclaimers of the Christian Gospel understand Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures, they considered themselves to be faithful adherents of Israel’s religion. The point of division between Judaism and Christianity was not the incarnation as such, but the identification of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. We have already seen that Christian incarnational thinking is heavily reliant on Hebrew categories,
especially Word and Wisdom theologies. Nonetheless, Jewish (and Islamic) theology is uncompromising in its rejection of the Christian incarnational claim on grounds of its incompatibility with Israel’s strict monotheism. What is most at stake here is the Jewish understanding and experience of God.

There is then, for the Christian, a kind of double-bind in the relationship with Judaism: Christian understanding of the incarnate Christ is dependent on a certain incarnational thrust in the Hebrew Scriptures; and yet, Judaism rejects all notions of Christian incarnation out-of-hand. We need, therefore, to understand Jewish negative reaction to the acclamation of Jesus’ divinity and, then, explore the kinds of incarnational motifs that are acceptable to Jewish religious thought.¹³

The first and most significant commandment God gave to Moses was the prohibition with regard to worshipping false gods. In a word, idolatry. This too is the most frequent charge of Israel’s prophets, a charge which they link to covenantal transgressions against the demands of social justice. In the context of polytheism, only Yahweh, the God of Israel, is to be worshipped. As well, Israel must refrain from attributing divine powers to created objects (one thinks of the Golden Calf). In developing Jewish consciousness, and under the influence of Greek philosophy, Israel’s God is understood to be non-corporeal, non-material, pure spirit without body. Moreover, as transcendent Spirit, God is One and indivisible.¹⁴ In post-biblical times, Jewish theologians also developed negative theologies with the view to protecting God’s transcendent holiness and arguing against all anthropomorphic understandings of the divine mystery.

¹⁴ Ibid., 201-203. The Greek philosophical influence is mainly attributed to the medieval Jewish theologian, Maimonides (1135-1204).
On the other hand, we have to reckon with the reality that the Hebrew Scriptures are rich in attributing to God all kinds of material and human attributes. These should, of course, be interpreted metaphorically. More poignantly, it is impossible to deny that Israel’s God is present in a creative, redeeming and dynamic way in her life and history. This is not incompatible with a negative theology in the sense that anything we say of God is more unlike than like. However, it is also to suggest that Israel’s monotheistic understanding of God and her doctrine of divine transcendence exist side by side her appreciation of God’s revelation in creation and history. The words of the prophets are God’s words; the wisdom sayings communicate God’s wisdom; the historical unfolding of Israel’s life is resplendent with God’s interventions. In some fashion, the divine *Logos* and divine *Sophia* mediate God’s very presence to the world and especially to the people of Israel.

None of this should be interpreted as suggesting an implicit acceptance of divine incarnation, let alone a trinitarian understanding of God. Neither the divine *Logos* nor *Sophia* are fully incarnated in any human creature, prophet or king. However, it is to affirm that within the confines of Israel’s strict monotheism there is a powerful sense of divine immanence. Yahweh is not only present everywhere but especially so in certain historical times (Exodus), particular people (Abraham) and specific places (Mt. Sinai). There is also a sense that *shekhinah* or divine presence occurs wherever Jewish people gather, especially in exile.\(^{15}\) All this is to suggest that there is a strong incarnational thrust in Judaism that, however, does not manifest itself as divine incarnation in a particular human being.

Jewish rejection of Christian incarnation is magnified in the light of 2000 years’ Christian anti-Semitism culminating in the

\(^{15}\) *Ibid.*, 208
horrors of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{16} Also, on this account, many Orthodox Jews do not believe there is any future in Jewish-Christian dialogue except perhaps in the area of social ethics. Even so, Christian theology has taken significant steps in recent decades to come to a new awakening of its own Jewish roots and heritage.\textsuperscript{17} What becomes clear in this theological reformulation is that incarnational belief in Christ must take into account God’s prior covenant with Israel. Some writers even see Christianity as the Judaism of the Gentiles.\textsuperscript{18} In this view, the incarnation is the means by which God’s original covenant to Israel is now extended to all peoples. Less radical positions still insist that God’s choice of Israel as the Chosen People is not overturned because of the Jewish rejection of divine incarnation in Christ. Clearly, this type of interreligious dialogue is not only important for Jewish-Christian relations; it is also most important for a transformed vision of Christianity in terms of its Judaic foundations. To put the matter blandly: without Israel, there would be no Jesus Christ!

**Islamic Rejection of Incarnation**

Islam arose some six centuries after the birth of Christianity. As an Abrahamic religion, Muslims respect the great Jewish prophets including Jesus of Nazareth whose virginal birth they accept. In fact, the Qu’ran refers to Jesus as ‘a word from God’ and ‘God’s Word committed to Mary’. However, orthodox Islamic theology has no place for divine incarnation (\textit{hulul}) in the Christian sense of the \textit{Logos} doctrine. Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), considered the greatest Muslim theologian, stated that God ‘is


\textsuperscript{18} Wyschogrod (205) takes this position. It would also appear to be the post of the Single Covenant proposal of Paul van Buren, \textit{A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality} (New York: Seabury, 1983).
not *halul* in anything and nothing is *halul* in him*. The ‘I am’ sayings of the Gospels need to be understood in purely metaphorical terms. Likewise, the Word/Logos of the Fourth Gospel reveals the essence of the Creator in various ways but does not impute to Christ any divine, pre-existent status. Nor in orthodox Islamic theology does any human figure incarnate divinity in this way.

Islamic rejection of Incarnation is based on its powerful sense of the utter transcendence of Allah who is One and without attributes. Nonetheless, as with Judaism, this does not preclude God’s involvement in human history. Revelation occurs. It needs to be noted that, for Islam, the greatest revelation and true Word of God is not the Great Prophet Muhammad, but the Holy Qu’ran. Any other divine mediation or representation must take second place to the Qu’ran. Christians, with their faith in the incarnation of Christ, have often failed to appreciate that the Muslim equivalent to Christ is not Muhammad but the Holy Book, the Qu’ran.

This having been said, we can now indicate various Islamic traditions that speak of human representations of the divine. Shi’ite Muslims developed the understanding of Imams (great spiritual leaders) as divine manifestations bringing salvation to the world. Muhammad’s son-in-law, Ali, is considered to be the first Imam. Others follow in continuous succession, each possessing an essence of divine Light and representing Allah’s eternal will. Still, though the divine light shone upon the Imam who may in fact have certain cosmic

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20 Ibid., 194-196.
powers, there was in orthodox Shi’ite theology no notion of divine indwelling or *hulul*. At most, we could speak of the Imams in these theologies as quasi-incarnations.

However, heterodox versions of this theology did appear. The Nusairis, for example, taught that spiritual beings emanate from the ineffable God-head and that seven successive manifestations of God appeared ‘to dwell among men’. Of these, the first was the divine Creator, the second Ali who was increasingly divinized and, then, the Imam leaders of the ‘men of God’. These teachings explicitly state that God becomes incarnate by indwelling (*hulul*). The Druize went further in claiming that ‘Our Lord’ Imam Hakim represented God in his unity and held a position comparable to the cosmic intellect. He was considered the last incarnation of God and will appear again at the end of time. These Nusairis and Druize versions of Shi’ite Islam were considered extreme and condemned accordingly as *hululiya*, that is, as those who believe in God’s indwelling (*hulul*) or incarnation.

Finally, Sufi mysticism provides another interesting account of an Islamic theology of divine manifestation that steers away from any talk of *hulul*, indwelling or incarnation. The medieval Persian mystic Rumi (d. 1273) believed that there was a new manifestation of God in every era. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad are all emanations of the divine unity. There is no real incarnation, not in the Christian sense. These are docetic figures. Jesus, for example, ‘though in the form of a man, was really homogenous with the angels’. Rumi’s Spanish contemporary, Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), may seem closer to Christian incarnation through his identification of the Logos (*kalima*) with the Spirit of Muhammad. However, the Spirit of Muhammad is the divine Spirit, not the earthly prophet. Muhammad and every other prophet and every created reality

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is a Logos (kalima), not the Logos. In Sufism, as in other forms of orthodox Islamic theology, the doctrine of divine transcendence holds sway. Even though Sufism softens the sense of the distance between God and the world, it does this through the language of divine emanations or mystical union with God.

Like Christianity, Islam understands its theology of revelation in context of the religion of Israel. The divine is present in history and acts in the world through human agents. However, in many respects, orthodox Islam shows closer affinity with Indian belief in reincarnation: the divine Light or divine Spirit shows itself in a succession of manifestations. No doubt, Islam’s rejection of the language of divine indwelling, hallul or incarnation is related to its not always happy relationship with Christianity. Still, Islamic theology does use Greek categories, especially notions of divine emanations. This shows both similarity and difference to Christian theology. The Reality of Muhammad is described by Ibn ‘Arabi as three-fold: ‘my beloved is three, although he is One’.24 It also seems that Muhammad is raised to a position resembling Christ in Christian trinitarian theology. However, Muhammad is not the second Person of the God-head. The Trinity is a trinity of aspects, not of persons. Consequently, while rejecting incarnational language as incompatible with Islam, there is between Christianity and Islam a commonality of roots and spiritual experience that needs to be further explored in religious dialogue.25

**Hindu Avatara Belief**

Although Hindu belief in the manifestations or appearances (pradurbhava) of the gods does not appear in the earliest Indian Scriptures, it precedes both Christianity and Buddhism. The

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24 Ibid., 204.

stronger term *avatara*, now frequently translated as ‘incarnation’, is the favoured expression of the Great Indian Epic, the *Mahabharata*. The *avatara* is a descent or down-coming of the deity to earth from heaven. It is mostly applied to descents of Lord God Vishnu who comes in numerous forms ‘to protect the good, destroy the wicked and establish righteousness’ (*Bhagavad Gita* IV, 8). As developed in Hindu Vaishnavite theology, Vishnu is at once transcendent and immanent, the all-pervading divinity, all-knowing, all-powerful, guide and protector of the universe. The most important *avatars* of Vishnu are Krishna and Rama in whom ‘the Lord takes a body’ (*Bhagavata Purana* 8, 24). Although there are some stories of Vishnu appearing in animal form, we will restrict our discussion to the major *avatars* who are human manifestations of the divine.

The most common features of Hindu *avatara* belief can be summarized as follows. Each *avatar* is born of human parents, exhibits human and divine characteristics, lives an exemplary life and, on completion of the mission of restoring right order and harmony (*dharma*) on earth, dies a natural death. The example and character of the *avatar* are important. Krishna, for example, despite moral lapses in his youth, is considered noble and compassionate. Rama is depicted as especially noble, virtuous and long-suffering. The mission of the *avatar* includes social, political and cosmic dimensions (*dharma*) as well as the specific task of revealing a personal God of tenderness and mercy to all people regardless of class, gender or caste.

While some of the *avatars* are clearly mythical figures, Krishna and Rama lay some claim to historicity. The inclusion of Gautama Buddha among the *avatars*, as well as documented modern saint-figures like Sri Ramakrishna and Mahatma Gandhi,

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26 See Parrinder, 19-31, for the role of *avatars* in this classic Indian epic
27 Ibid., 120-127.
suggest a concern with history not shared in primal Hindu consciousness. Quite evidently, avatars are repeated even if there is little agreement about the precise number. In the present creation (mahayuga) the number of ‘full incarnations’ is often set at ten. Of these, the greatest is Krishna who as the divine incarnation of Isvara, Creator and personal aspect of the divinity, reveals to his warrior-disciple Arjuna the union of all things in the One God (Brahman). It is in the revelation of Krishna as Lord God that the path to salvation is most clearly outlined, a path that emphasises the importance of listening to God in contemplation and responding at the level of human action in the world. This dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna (Bhagavad Gita, 11) is one of the earliest and clearest expressions of the powerful reality of the divine-human encounter throughout history.

The context of avatar belief is the more general Hindu belief in reincarnation or transmigration of souls (samsara). However, despite some evident similarities, these are actually quite distinct doctrines. In the words of the Lord Krishna himself: ‘Many births have passed for Me, and for you also Arjuna: I know all of these, but you know none of them’ (Bhagavad Gita 4,5). In the following verse Krishna states that he is ‘unborn’ and ‘eternal’ while coming into being through his own mysterious power. Unlike the human Arjuna who lives under the spell of karma, the divine Krishna is under no such power as to be bound by his earthly actions. In short, Krishna is a divine being; his actions are freely chosen; his work is the salvation of the world. Although he chooses many ‘births’, he does so without being held by the wheel of reincarnation.

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28 Hoynacki, 22.
29 Ibid., 24.
30 See Parrinder’s discussion, 224-226.
Hindu *avatara* belief points to a highly developed theology of revelation. The divine and the human, God and the world, are not so separate as to prevent communication and even communion. Nonetheless, the divine-human encounter, symbolized in the dialogue of Krishna and Arjuna, does not depend on divine-human unity in the person of Rama, Krishna or any other *avatar*. *Avatars* are, in the end, divine characters who take on human forms without being, or pretending to be, truly human. The *avatara* doctrine may well be described as incarnational, but it is so without the emphasis on historicity or humanity that is integral to the Christian notion of incarnation.

**Buddhist Bodhisattva Belief**

As might be expected, there are similarities between Hindu *avatara* beliefs and Buddhist teachings. After all, many Hindus understand the Buddha as the last historical *avatar* of the present age; it is said that he replaces Krishna; and Kali, the final *avatar* of the age is yet to appear. However, Buddhists do not understand Gautama Buddha in the Hindu manner. The Buddha cannot be regarded as an *avatar* or incarnation of God or any supreme divine reality. With the Buddha, the theistic basis upon which Hindus understand ultimate reality breaks down. It is not that Buddhism rejects a theistic cosmology as such, but it does not focus its thinking and practice on notions of divine transcendence or *Brahman*.

The major similarity with Hinduism is the Buddhist notion of a succession of Buddhas.\(^{31}\) This requires an understanding of the Sanskrit term *Bodhisattva* meaning Wisdom-Being or Enlightenment-Being who appears from time to time according to circumstance and need. Already in the original Pali Theravadan texts, Gautama Buddha is referred to as *Bodhisattva*. Later texts apply the term to Gautama at the

\(^{31}\)Ibid., 149-163.
moment of his conception and in his many previous births. Mahayana teachings expand the application of Bodhisattva to numerous other supernatural beings, learned teachers and holy people. Yet, the Buddha begins his journey towards enlightenment (nirvana) in the manner of other mortals and, like them, passes through hundreds of re-births. In this respect, he is more like Arjuna (bound to the karmic law) than Krishna (an avatar of the deity).

Although more reserved in the Theravadan tradition, the glorification of the Buddha was universalized. Gautama was not the only Buddha: he had between seven and twenty-four predecessors. He is even acclaimed as a divine being, omniscient and sinless. Through countless incarnations he merited this divinity and his place in Tushita heaven from where he miraculously descended to earth to be born a man. His divinity showed itself in his achievement of enlightenment (nirvana) as well as in his life and teachings. Despite this divinization of the Buddha to the point that, in some traditions, he becomes a kind of super-god (atideva) or the god beyond the gods (devatidiva), he is not the incarnation of any god, but of himself.

This doctrine of Buddhist ‘incarnations’, not fully developed until the fifth century C.E., is called the Trikaya or the theory of the three bodies of the Buddha. Dharmakaya is the non-material or essential Buddha body; Sambhogakaya is the heavenly manifestation body of preaching; and Nirmanakaya is the transformation-body visible in individual Buddhas on earth.32 Pointedly, the Nirmanakaya is not a personal being but the all-pervading emptiness and traceless ground of the soul. This entire doctrine underscores the reality of radical immanence: everything must disappear in order that nothingness (sunyata) may emerge. Only with such realization, achieved in the lives of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, will

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liberation from human desire and suffering occur. The Buddhist doctrine of multiple ‘incarnations’ is finally a doctrine of human salvation. It is the task of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas to ‘incarnate’ the love and compassion of the Dharmakaya, the essential Buddha body, without which we remain in the endless cycle of deaths and re-births.

Consequently, the Buddhist doctrine of incarnation needs to be situated within the more primordial Eastern consciousness of ‘reincarnation’. However, unlike the Hindu avatara, the Buddha is not regarded as the incarnation or avatar of the supreme deity. And unlike Christ, who is missioned by the Father, the Buddha incarnates himself by himself. Despite these significant--indeed, incommensurable--differences, there is fruitful ground for religious dialogue between Christians and Buddhists focussing on incarnation as the kenosis of God, or the divine self-emptying (Phil 2:6-11), and the centrality of sunyata (nothingness or emptiness) for the Buddhist understanding and experience of ultimate reality.33

**Conclusion**

These different approaches to incarnation represent more than subtle differences in theological ideas. Underlying the ideas, theories and explanations are unique experiences of Ultimate Reality (God, Christ, Yahweh, Allah, Vishnu, Isvara, Sunyata) mediated via unique historical traditions. From the Christian perspective, belief in the incarnation of God in Christ must always be directly related to the experience of Christ mediated via the Christian tradition. Such experience, as we know, led to the trinitarian understanding of God without which the Christian understanding of incarnation is unthinkable. Other religious

traditions have their own stories and histories which, from our perspective, may seem to make little sense. It is only when we listen to those who enflesh--incarnate--those stories and beliefs, that true understanding and real dialogue become possible. Such dialogue seems today, at the beginning of the third millennium, both a moral and a genuinely religious responsibility.

Source: The original version of this article was published in *The Australasian Catholic Record* lxxvi: 4 (October 1999), 430-440.