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IV. Avatara-Divine Incarnation: Their Mission and Legacy

1. Life Events: Jesus and Sri Ramakrishna

Jesus was born in Judea because the Hebrew religion provided the best foundation upon which to build Christianity. It far exceeded the religions of Europe and Egypt at that time. Similarly, Sri Ramakrishna took birth in India because the Hindu religion was best equipped for him to carry out his spiritual mission.

There are a number of interesting similarities in the life experiences of Jesus and Sri Ramakrishna, many of which are discussed in this and in Chapter III.

As Divine Incarnations (Avataras (literally descent)) they come down from a higher plane of existence to fulfill their Divine mission. This is the direct self-revealing intervention of Brahman-God in the world. Their purpose is to reestablish religion that has fallen into a state of decline and to create a new path (marga) to the Divine world. They come to liberate-save people and to establish righteousness making it a more pious world.¹ The result is a tidal wave of spirituality in the world that infuses new vitality into the inner spirit of religion.² Many people are blessed. They bring their teachings (Principles) and life history (Personality) that become the basis of religious scripture. In addition, they infuse spiritual Power into their religion that creates a potent life force that attracts a large number of followers.

Their descent to earth occurs at an auspicious time in world history, when they are most needed. The Avatara (or Avatar) is the central figure in sacred history, intervening in human events while having a major impact on its religious and cultural development. Sacred history is different from history in general in that the events that compose it are of a religious nature. They come during a crisis period, when the ancient religious structure of a society has become sterile and has lost its vitality and meaning. Swami Saradananda explained that the Indian people, "Relinquishing their previous life goals, which had been based on renunciation and

self-control, they became eager for more material pleasures. Their ancient system of education and training disappeared, and they became atheistic ... Indians came to believe that the long-cherished beliefs they had held and practiced were completely wrong.”³ Correspondingly, at the time of Jesus the discipline life of the earlier Roman Empire was being replaced by a growing desire for sensual pleasures.

Both were preceded by a highly developed religion (in a state of decline) that provided a spiritual foundation upon which they could develop their own ideas. At times with great respect they would quote the scriptures of the religion they were born into. Jesus criticized the Pharisees and Sadducees but never the religious scriptures. He selected Judea as his place of his birth because Judaism at that time was superior to the religions of Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Rome, and the Teutonic, Nordic, and Anglo-Saxon people. These religions worshipped polytheistic nature deities (sun, moon, fire, rivers, etc.) each with limited spheres of influence. Conversely, the monotheistic Jehovah transcended nature and controlled the entire universe. The Hebrew *Bible* provided the foundation upon which Jesus built his own religious system. For this reason the Judaic scriptures of the *Old Testament* formed part of the *Bible*, but not those of the Roman religion, etc. Since that time Judaism has remained a living religion, while the others died out. Likewise, Ramakrishna selected Hinduism, as the most suitable religion to accomplish his task. In both cases the country of their birth was not a dominant country in the economic, political, or secular intellectual realms.

By a free choice they were born into a specific religious cultural at a particular time in history. This way they learned how to convey their message in a way that would be understood by the people of their day and afterwards. Their message embodies the eternal spiritual truths, adapted to the prevailing religious ideology of their society and to the needs of their time.

The countries they lived in were under the European rule of the Roman Empire and British Empire, who allowed them to maintain their national religion. Though they had little to do with these foreign people, they had some idea of the their values and the way they thought in contrast to the indigenous people. Christianity provided a powerful spiritual force to counter the materialism and violence of the Roman Empire and Ramakrishna-Vedanta of the modern world. Christianity was preceded by 500 years of the Roman Republic and Empire and Ramakrishna-Vedanta by 400 years of the secularization of the earth that followed the discoveries of Christopher Columbus.

Their mothers and fathers had a spiritual dream or visitation of an angel or Deity telling them that they would have a Divine child. Joseph dreamt of an angel of the Lord, and the angel Gabriel told Mary of her future son.⁴ In Chapter III, Section III, it mentions that a light came out of the image of Shiva and entered Ramakrishna's mother's body soon before he was conceived, and how his father had a dream of Lord Vishnu who said he would incarnate as his son. Their parents were poor and pious religiously oriented people. At the Council of Nicaea (in present day Turkey, 325) based on Mt. 1:20 and Lk. 1:35 the Bishops concluded, "by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man."⁵ Shiva is the third member of the Hindu Trinity and the Holy Spirit of the Christian Trinity.

Following the doctrine of kenosis they emptied themselves of "the form of Brahman-God," taking the form of a human "being born in the likeness of men."⁶ Too many they appeared to be ordinary people brought in humble surroundings, the son of a carpenter and a village farmer respectively with limited formal education. Throughout their life they never held a high or lucrative position in society, since the accumulation of money and earthly power were distasteful to them.

As youths they manifested deep religious understanding. When Jesus was twelve years old his parents, "found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answer." Similarly, when Sri Ramakrishna was nine or ten years old, he understood everything that a group of religious scholars (pandits) were conversing about. He was able to resolve a debatable theological issue concerning a passage in the scriptures, which they could not solve. "This pandit was amazed when he realized that this wonderful boy had patiently listened to the various arguments, had understood everything, and had now reached a sensible conclusion. Then he told his friends what Gadadhar (the young Sri Ramakrishna) had said, and they all agreed it was the only solution to the dispute. They inquired whose keen intellect had first discovered such a wonderful solution. When they learned that it was the boy Gadadhar, some looked at him in awe and considered him to be endowed with Divine powers; others joyously took him on their laps and blessed him."⁷

As aids in their spiritual quest they accepted teachers whom they quickly surpassed. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. As he rose from the water he had an intense spiritual experience; "The heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him" and he

heard a voice from heaven. Sri Ramakrishna had a number of spiritual guides including a wondering nun named Bhairavi Brahmani who initiated him into the Tantric path during 1861-63, and Tota Puri who taught him nondualistic Vedanta in 1864-65.⁸ Incarnations receive a new spiritual name that differs from the one they were born with. Gautama became the Buddha, Jesus was later called Christ, and Gadadhar became Sri Ramakrishna. These names elicit reverence and devotion.

While Jesus was in the wilderness the devil “showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’” Jesus replied, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” Like Jesus, when he was meditating Ramakrishna was tempted by a demon who offered him wealth, honor, sex pleasure, occult powers, etc. Of course he refused and began praying to the Divine Mother.⁹

Jesus considered himself to be the Son of God the Father, and Ramakrishna the Son of God the Mother. Consequently, due to this filial relationship they totally surrendered their will to Brahman-God. Jesus told his followers, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work.” “The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise.” “I can do nothing of my own authority ... I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.” “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.” “For the Father is greater than I.” Similarly, Sri Ramakrishna mentioned he could not bring about anything on his own, since everything is determined by the will of the Divine Mother. He made known, “I say to the Divine Mother: 'O Mother, I am the machine and Thou art the Operator. I am the house and Thou art the Indweller. I am the chariot and Thou art the Charioteer. I do as Thou makest me do; I speak as Thou makest me speak; I move as Thou makest me move. It is not I! It is not I! It is all Thou! It is all Thou! Hers is the glory; we are only Her instruments.’”¹⁰ Consequently he was free of the maya of “universal egoism,” realizing the Divine Mother was working through him. They are the spiritual vehicles of the Father in Heaven and Mother Kali respectively, whose message they conveyed to the world.

As an adult, Ramakrishna always had the major part of his mind in the higher blissful spiritual realm. While his physical body dwelt on earth, often his entire mind remained in the spiritual realm. Both possessed a theocentric consciousness. So also, it is likely that a large portion of the mind of Jesus unceasingly resided in the Kingdom of Heaven. They had many spiritual visions and visitations, with their

consciousness focused on the Divine realm. The *Bible* mentions that, “After six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.” An Indian journalist described Sri Ramakrishna’s samadhi in 1881, “A most wonderful change had come over the face. The lips were slightly parted as if in a smile, with the gleam of the white teeth in between. The eyes were half closed with the balls and pupils partly visible, and over the whole countenance was an ineffable expression of the holiest and most ecstatic beatitude.”¹¹ Swami Saradananda (1865-1927) explained Sri Ramakrishna’s appearance at a large religious festival in 1885. “We do not remember ever having seen the Master display such a luminous beauty in samadhi as he did that day. It is beyond human power to properly describe the extraordinary beauty of his Divine form. We never could have imagined a human body changing in a moment of ecstasy. We saw the Master’s figure every day, but on that day it appeared to grow even taller and become weightless, like a body seen in a dream. His slightly dark complexion became bright and turned golden; the Divine mood shone on his face and illumined everything around him. When people saw his incomparable smile—a combination of grace, compassion, peace, and joy—they forgot everything and followed him, spellbound. The beautiful colour of his skin blended with the bright ochre colour of his silk wearing-cloth so that it seemed as if he were enveloped in flames.”¹² These spiritual experiences demonstrated before humanity the reality of Brahman (God) leading to a new era of spiritual unfoldment.

Jesus was accompanied by Mother Mary and Sri Ramakrishna by Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother. Ramakrishna mentioned, “One day I was in an ecstatic mood. My wife asked me, ‘How do you regard me?’ ‘As the Blissful Mother,’ I said.”¹³

According to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception on “8 December, 1854, Pius IX pronounced and defined that the Blessed Virgin Mary ‘in the first instance of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace granted by God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved exempt from all stain of original sin.’” The Council of Trent (1545-63) had previously affirmed that she never committed a personal sin. Original sin is a noun, something that is inherited; while sinning is a verb, something people do. St. Bernadette (1844-79) a poor French peasant, at age fourteen (1858) experienced “a small young lady,” Mother Mary who referred to Herself as the Immaculate Conception.¹⁴ Consequently, like Holy Mother she was sinless throughout her life.

Mother Mary receives special worship by the Catholics, as does Ramakrishna's wife the Holy Mother.

Though it was not evident to most people at that time, Divine Incarnations are endowed with exceptional charismatic powers and qualities of Divine origin. They command great respect and intense attraction among their disciples. They were able to demonstrate the special nature of their mission, and to inspire their followers along these lines. Their authority that is sacred, unique, and spontaneous results in the creative establishment of new norms and forms of thought along with a new religious organization. Consequently, they both followed a unique and original lifestyle.

Sri Ramakrishna could read a person's unconscious mind and knew about their past, present, and even their future. Like Jesus he was able to recognize his future disciples, though they appeared to others to be young ordinary looking people. Our mind exists at the conscious level of vibration, but Ramakrishna could enter into the unconscious level of vibration and gain this understanding. "Passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he [Jesus] saw Simon [Peter] and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.' And immediately they left their net and followed him. And going a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending their nets. And immediately he called them and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him."¹⁵ While they dwelt on earth, they were able to transform the lives of people, though they concentrated more on their disciples who had a tremendous potential for benefiting their ministry. In addition they attracted an outer group of admirers of a limited size.

While in the Temple they were angered when people were involved in worldly actions or thoughts. Jesus entered the Temple of God and then drove out those people who sold and bought in the Temple, overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of the pigeon sellers. "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you made it a den of robbers."¹⁶ While in the Kali Temple, Rani Rasmani asked Ramakrishna to sing a few songs to the Divine Mother. After a time, he stopped singing and with anger slapped her stating, "Shame on you--to think some thoughts even here." Rather than mediating on the Divine Mother, she had been thinking about a pending lawsuit. She later defended him against the irate Temple officials and gatekeepers.¹⁶

Living a moral life of renunciation they never cared for earthly possessions. In

their teachings, they emphasize spiritual treasures and not the enjoyments of this world. A moral life is required as preparation for the spiritual, which is a life of prayer and meditation. They stressed devotion to Brahman-God, receiving His grace, and purification of the heart.¹⁷ All of their energy was devoted to concentrating on fulfilling the mission for which they came to the world. They are the greatest exemplars of their own teachings.

It was religion that interested them and not social reform, political advancement, industrial development, or nationalism. Consequently, they were basically indifferent to the political and national movements of their time. Yet, through their life and teachings they were able to bring about a great reformation in a large section of humanity. Ramakrishna was interested only in sacred history (e.g., Life events of Holy personages like Rama and Krishna, etc.) and not in secular history composed of political, economic, military, and social events.

They made their teachings known orally through the spoken word using simple language rendered sometimes in parables. A parable is a type of analogy, which is a succinct instructive story that illustrates one or more lessons or principles. It can be used to illustrate a moral lesson or a religious principle. Parables suggest how a person should behave by providing guidance for proper conduct in one's life. They might express an abstract idea using a concrete narrative that is easy to understand.¹⁸ Neither Jesus nor Ramakrishna (nor Krishna) wrote their teachings down. Some people believe that spoken language is the primary and most fundamental method of communication and that the written word is a derived representation of the spoken word (Phonocentrism).¹⁹ According to some Hindu and Christian writers the universe is created from Divine speech, the spoken word and this is followed by the written word. Possibly the written word is less subtle and farther away from the original Divine source than the spoken word. In Hinduism, the most authentic religious scripture is known as Shruti, "that which is heard." Sri Ramakrishna's teachings are Shruti because he heard them from Mother Kali. Since their teachings are based on their religious experience and not on abstract reasoning, often they do not offer detailed intellectual justifications for the ideas they present. It is the religious philosophers and theologians who come later who render intellectual support for their ideas.

Jesus and Sri Ramakrishna were subject to misunderstanding and persecution, for the reason that they came to teach to some extent a new religious path to the Divine world, and sometimes did not conform to the ways of the people around him. Only a few people could recognize their greatness partly because of Kenosis

their veiling of their eternal deity by humanness. When Jesus asked John to baptize him, “John would have prevented him saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’”²⁰ Sri Ramakrishna was also greatly admired by his spiritual teachers.

As a form of vicarious atonement, they had to undergo severe hardships and an unpleasant death of the physical body to take on the sins-bad karma of people. John the Baptist said to Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God [Jesus], who takes away the sin of the world.”²¹ Ramakrishna stated, “The people whose karma I have taken think they are attaining salvation through their own strength. They do not understand it is because I have taken their karma on me.”²²

They left a religious scripture that offered future devotees the inspiration of their life events and personality, the practical and theoretical knowledge of their teachings, and the practices necessary to live a genuine religious life. For example Jesus said, “Knock and it shall be opened unto you” and Ramakrishna taught “God will surely listen to you if you call on Him earnestly.” In a sense Ramakrishna and Mother Kali are one and Jesus revealed, “I and my Father are one.”

After their passing they appeared to some of their disciples. After the crucifixion Jesus’ body was placed in a tomb, and he appeared first before Mary Magdalene, then two others, and then eleven disciples whom he gave instructions to. After his cremation Ramakrishna appeared to Holy Mother and took her by the hand and asked, “Am I dead, that you behave like a widow? I have only passed from one room into another.” Swami Brahmananda revealed, “I see Sri Ramakrishna everyday and speak to him.” Swamis Vivekananda and Premananda also mentioned Ramakrishna appeared to them.²³

Another important characteristic is that they produced a number of disciples who became illumined souls. Outstanding gurus such as Jesus or Ramakrishna plant the seeds of potentiality in their disciples who eventually attain the highest spiritual realization. They awaken the inherent spirituality in their disciples, who generally continue to retain their basic personality and temperamental characteristics. Nevertheless, it is only after they departed from the earth that their disciples reach their fullest spiritual maturity. Being part of the Roman Empire or British Empire allowed some of their disciples to learn their foreign language and ways of thinking, which made it possible for them to spread their teachings to the Roman and to the English speaking world. A small group of totally dedicated disciples preached the life and teachings of their Master over a wide geographical area in order to lay the groundwork of a world mission. Yet, during their lifetime only a relatively small

number of foreign devotees accepted their teachings.

Vivekananda wrote, “While I am on earth, Shri Ramakrishna is working through me. So long as you (Swami Ramakrishnananda) believe in this there is no danger of any evil for you.” “Oh, I have work to do! I am a slave of Ramakrishna, who left his work to be done by me and will not give me rest till I have finished it.” Paul mentioned, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”²⁴

Ramakrishnananda (1863-1911) revealed, “Because the ordinary man can never make out God, He always comes with someone who will be able to understand His life and make it known to the world.”²⁵ Only the people whom they selected have that ability.

The revelation and new religion that the Divine Incarnation establishes has two major aspects. One is the book, the body of teachings and biography that compose the religious scriptures left by the charismatic leader and his followers. The second is the Religious Order, the organization his followers create. Jesus and Ramakrishna did not set up a religious organization, which was left for their disciples to do. In time an international religious organization was founded based on the principles they had laid down, and consequently they had an immense influence on people of future generations. There is a term in Sanskrit called *adrsta* or *apurva* meaning, “The unseen potency of one’s actions.” During their lifetime on earth Jesus and Sri Ramakrishna and their apostles, with their powerful personalities created very potent spiritual vibrations at the very subtle causal level of existence. They are like seeds that can take centuries to manifest on the gross physical plane of existence. A person living in the first or second century A.D. might have thought Christianity would remain a small religion because they could see only the gross effects, and not the imperceptible causal seeds that would by necessity manifest in the upcoming centuries. These ways of thinking had to eventually manifest on the gross plane, guaranteeing their inevitable future success.

Their legacy represents a turning point in world history. Yet each Avatara-Divine Incarnation is unique in that they reveal new truths based on their own spiritual experiences, which were not previously known. They are exceedingly creative and present unexpected teachings, which could not be forecasted in advance, and bring about major changes in society. This spiritual knowledge is of great practical importance for attaining liberation and salvation. At the same time, they respect and keep intact the religious wisdom of the past. By keeping their minds in the Divine realm, the Incarnations and their inner circle of disciples bring heavenly consciousness down to earth. In future centuries they inspire many saints

and devotees through spiritual life-changing visitations, visions, and dreams. Not only their original teachings, but the concreteness and uniqueness of their life events won over many followers.

They both said they would return in the future. "For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done." "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will the coming of the Son of man." Ramakrishna revealed, "Those belonging to the inner circle [of disciples] will not attain liberation. I shall have to assume a human body again, in a northwesterly direction."²⁶ Estimates range that he will return in one to four hundred years, with two hundred years being the most common. This is highly unusual and unprecedented for an Avatara to return in such a short time. We expect that the people of the world will be far more receptive to his ideas and those of his disciples, than they were before the period ending in 1939 with the passing of Swami Abhedananda the last living monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Possibly when they return Vedanta will become one of the universal religions of the world. Sri Chaitanya preached Krishna and not himself. So when he returns he will likely preach Ramakrishna and not himself. Vivekananda mentioned Belur Math as the spiritual center of the earth for over a thousand years, so it is not likely he will initiate a new religious order. It is difficult to predict what he will be like because there are so many possibilities. Avatars can be Brahmans (Ramakrishna), warriors (Rama) or a laborer (Christ); be unmarried (Christ) or married (Rama, Ramakrishna); and an Indian or non-Indian (Christ).

Sri Ramakrishna's had a spiritual experience of, "Lord Jesus Christ, the Master-Yogi, eternally one with Brahman-God, who shed his heart's blood for the deliverance of man! It is He!" The figure embraced the Master and disappeared into his body, leaving the latter in bhava samadhi (a devotional ecstasy). As a result the Ramakrishna Order has demonstrated more reverence for Jesus than other Hindu organizations.

Ramakrishna regarded Jesus as the highest yogi, a master of Brahman-God-realization. He reached the conclusion that Christ emphasized sadhana, religious practice, in order to reach anubhava, this realization. The relationship with Brahman-God is gained by love and obedience to His/Her command. Yoga assists in the spiritualization of man so that something Brahman-God-like may be uncovered in the deepest reaches of the soul that connects humans with the Divine. For him, Jesus is a bhakti yogi, an Incarnation of love, but also a karma, jnana, and raja yogi,

stressing service, experienced in controlling himself and natural laws, and expressing his unity with Brahman-God.

An Avatara-Incarnation in its human nature (not in its Divine nature) can abandon its Divine omni- traits out of love for humanity, which is a kenotic power of self-limitation. Consequently, the human Jesus and Ramakrishna possessed the capacity to endure suffering and being tempted. This was motivated out of Divine love to aid humans in manifesting their innate perfection. On the kenotic account there is a big difference between the power and knowledge of their pre-incarnate state and their condition of Jesus and Ramakrishna at birth. The psychological continuity of personal identity is preserved though due to the birth process the manifested soul has undergone involution. This is a process we all go through from a developed adult and reborn as a baby with very few of the prior traits manifested. The prior developed traits remain in the unconscious mind, but those traits that manifest in the new lifetime take years to enter into the conscious mind. The special function of the Avatara-Incarnation is to set guidelines of practical wisdom of how people should act in order to get liberated-saved and to maintain the moral order in the future. We can assume that the Avatara-Incarnation has some memory of its pre-Incarnational spiritual states that motivate him/her to live an impeccable life.

Jesus Christ and Sri Ramakrishna are Avatars-Divine Incarnations since both temporarily renounced the blissful BrahmaloKa-Kingdom of Heaven to enter in a personal union with a human nature. This is a supreme act of compassion. They came, “To deliver the holy, to destroy the sins of the sinners, to establish righteousness” (BG 4:8). Their future parents receive a revelation of their birth to them. They are real historical people selflessly involved in the world and are a mixture of Divine and human. To some extent they offer new Divine revelation, and reveal a personal Brahman-God full of grace. They identified with humanity, and both were a sinless from birth.

They differed in that Ramakrishna was a brahmin and that Jesus engaged in physical healing, was more critical of the establishment, and spoke before the multitudes.

2. Sri Ramakrishna and Justification (To Be Made Just) and Regeneration

Ramakrishna stated, “The Lord says in the *Gita*, 'O Arjuna, take refuge in Me. I shall deliver you from all sins.' Take shelter at His feet. He will give you right

understanding. He will take entire responsibility for you.” “One need not have any fear if one takes refuge in God. God protects His devotee.” “God’s devotees have nothing to fear. They are His own. He always stands by them.” “God takes upon Himself complete responsibility for one who totally depends upon Him. It is like a guardian taking charge of a minor.”²⁷

The first and primary step in Justification is that the Chosen Ideal (Ishta Devata, that aspect of the Deity that you worship) and guru have taken on the responsibility for the liberation (Chr. Salvation) of their devotees. By a special act of grace, they have taken possession of the devotee’s life and accepted them into their favor. Jesus told his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn. 15:16). This means liberation from the domination of the external and internal laws of nature. Prior to Justification, most devotees were to some extent under the delusory control of avidyamaya (Chr. Original Sin). Irregardless of the devotee’s original state, the Chosen Ideal gradually purifies them through a process of regeneration, sanctification, and eventual glorification in a higher realm the Brahmaloaka (Chr. Kingdom of Heaven). We receive, imbibe, and participate in the righteousness, purity, and virtues of the Chosen Ideal that is imputed and infused within us. Reception is made possible not only through the Lord’s grace but because of the inborn divinity within us (Atman, Chr. made in the Image of God).

The law of karma deals with external events, and the law of samskara (mental impressions) covers internal events that are both intellectual (rational) and emotional-desires (psychological). The two laws combined determine our outer and inner life experiences. The Avatara sets us free from the bondage of karmas and samskaras (Chr. the remission of the penalty and guilt of sins).

Vedantists emphasize the descriptive-applied law of karma while the apostle Paul stressed the prescriptive moral Laws of Moses. Devotees are not free from the workings of the law of karma but from its curse. They are acquitted, vindicated, and declared innocent of bad karma. Nevertheless, the devotee’s residual karma remains to be worked off in this lifetime.

For a Vedantist, justification is an act of grace, whereby the person has been accepted by the Chosen Ideal who takes on the responsibility for the devotee’s regeneration and eventual liberation. It is important to realize that the initial justification begins at birth before the person joins a religion. Since it is originally of a limited extent the future devotee is apt to make some mistakes. This grace leads the devotee along a path to a religious life that includes a spiritual teacher and initiation through which the regeneration process is accelerated. This process

involves predestination meaning the omnipotent merciful Brahman-God has graciously decided to place this person on a path of liberation from their birth and after their passing they will not return to earthly existence. Most important, the Chosen ideal knows the propensities of the devotee, and places them in the proper circumstances where they will spiritually develop. Through prevenient (from the Latin "to come before") grace the Lord gradually turns the will of the devotee away from the secular world toward Brahman-God. The greater the spiritual potential of the devotee, the more likely they will receive these special graces. Devotees with little substance receive less grace.

In taking responsibility for the devotee's spiritual progress, the Lord to a large extent acquits them of their prior sins, but still they must work out some of their bad karma. They certainly must follow the moral law, and this is accompanied by faith and devotion in an aspect of the Brahman-God called the Chosen Ideal (Ishta Devata). The devotee should realize they are guided by the invisible hand of Brahman-God and all that happens to them is the Lord's will. "We know that in everything, God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

It is important that we thank and praise Brahman-God for the goodness, mercy, and justice He/She has bestowed on us. The prayer of Thanksgiving that originates in a heart full of love is expressing appreciation and gratitude for the good things Brahman-God has done for us.

Negatively the justification and regeneration process mean repentance and forgiveness of bad karmas and samskaras (Chr. sinful acts and thoughts); positively the devotees become righteous and are restored through practice of the four yogas (Chr. faith and devotion to the Lord, belief in the ideas and ideals, prayer, and good works) into Divine eternal life. A distinction should be drawn between spiritual-religious good works such as meditation (Chr. prayer) and social good works. The Chosen ideal reconciles their devotees to Brahman-God and they experience a second birth (Chr. reborn), a new being, and a new creation. The devotee's desires are directed to spiritual things, and gradually their will is turned toward them, resulting in a change in character. Devotees are justified and liberated first through the Chosen Ideal's grace and secondarily by acts of religious merit. To accomplish this task Ramakrishna and his followers as an act of compassion willingly departed from the blissful Brahmaloaka (Chr. Kingdom of Heaven) to undergo some suffering on earth. As an act of Vicarious Atonement, Ramakrishna has taken on the karma (Christian sins) of his devotees.

The Vedantic interpretation of Justification differs from the Christian in that: Justification is a result of the devotees prior life activities, the pre-existence of the Soul (Self); according to the Karmic Theory of Atonement Christ's reparations are made to the laws of nature and not to Satan or to God (See: Section 4. Sin and the Doctrine of Atonement); those who fall short of the mark are eventually reborn not damned; and some of the Lord's liberating functions are assigned to the guru.

3. They Save Those Who Follow Their Teachings and Believe in Them

Indian: "If a man keeps following my [Sri Krishna's] teaching with faith in his heart, and does not make mental reservations, he will be released from the bondage of his karma" (BG* 3:31, p. 56; cf. 4:9; 18:71). "Because they love me these are my bondsmen and I shall save them" (BG* 12:7, p. 129; cf. 4:10; 7:14, 29; 8:15-16; 9:30-31; 11:54-55; 14:26; 18:55).

New Testament: "He who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life" (Jn. 5:24; cf. Jn. 3:15, 17; 6:47; 8:51; Acts 16:31). "He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn. 11:25-26; cf. Mt. 19:17; Jn. 1:12; 14:21; 1 Tim. 1:15; Heb. 5:9).

The way to God. Indian: "I [Sri Krishna] am the goal of the wise man, and I am the way. I am his prosperity. I am his heaven" (Bhagavatam 11:12). New Testament: "I [Jesus] am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved" (Jn. 10:9). "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6).

Take refuge in him. Indian: "Give me your whole heart, love and adore me [Sri Krishna], worship me always, bow to me only, and you shall find me: this is my promise who loves you dearly. Lay down all duties in me, your refuge. Fear no longer, for I will save you from sin and from bondage" (BG* 18:65-66, p. 172). New Testament: "Come to me [Jesus], all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me ... And you will find rest for your soul" (Mt. 11:28-29).

Source of happiness. Indian: "You find yourself in this transient, joyless world. Turn from it, and take your delight in me [Sri Krishna]" (BG* 9:34, p. 109). New Testament: "In me [Jesus] you have peace. In the world you have tribulations" (Jn. 17:33).

According to a parable of Sri Ramakrishna a Divine Incarnation-Avatara is like a

huge steamship, which can transport a large number of people across the ocean of maya and mortality. “A worthless stick floating on the water sinks under the weight of a bird; but a heavy and substantial log floating on the water can support a cow, a man, or even an elephant. A steamboat not only crosses the water itself but carries many human beings with it.”²⁸ “When a mighty log of wood floats down a stream, it carries on it hundreds of birds and does not sink. A reed floating down may sink with the weight of even a single crow. So when a Saviour appears, innumerable men find salvation by taking refuge in Him.”²⁹ Unlike a saint who can save an advanced spiritual aspirant, an Avatara has the strength to liberate ordinary people. When an Avatara descends, it is much easier for a sincere devotee to attain liberation. They transmit spiritual energy to others like electricity. Brahman-God incarnates Himself to convey devotion and love to those people who accept them and follow their teachings. Meditating on an Incarnation is the same as meditating on Brahman-God Himself. Avataras appear at the last moment before a person’s passing, for the purpose of liberating them.³⁰ Through faith one can attain the Lord. “Once a person has faith he has achieved everything. There is nothing greater than faith.” “To love an Incarnation of God--that is enough.” “Faith is the one essential thing. God exists. He is very near us. Through faith alone one sees Him.”³¹

Swami Saradananda stressed that Avataras have the capacity to impart profound experiences of spiritual awakening to their followers. They can effortlessly transmit spiritual energy by a wish, touch or a look and immediately remove the obstacles to experiencing samadhi, resulting in a God vision of heavenly bliss. In a single moment with a touch, they can radically alter the course of a person’s life for the better.³² Concerning Sri Ramakrishna relationship with some of his devotees Saradananda wrote, “While in ecstasy, he then touched their chest or tongue. This powerful touch forced their minds inward, withdrawing them partially or completely from sense objects, awakening their accumulated spiritual tendencies, and engaging them in the effort to realized God. At the touch, some devotees had visions of Divine light or the luminous forms of gods and goddesses; some plunged into deep meditation and experienced indescribable bliss; some felt an immediate release of the knots in their hearts and felt an intense longing for God; some became ecstatic and experienced savikalpa samadhi; and some rare souls had a foretaste of nirvikalpa samadhi.”³³

Swami Prabhavananda (1893-1976) mentioned that an Avatara possesses a “unique power to transmit spirituality and transform men’s lives by touch, look, or

wish. Jesus manifested this power when he breathed on his disciples and said to them, ‘Receive ye the Holy Ghost’ [Jn. 20:22]. Sri Krishna manifested this power when he gave Arjuna Divine sight, so that the disciple might see the universal form of God” (BG 11:9, 47).³⁴

In the words of Swami Akhilananda (1894-1962), “The Divine Incarnations intensely love their disciples and followers; love is the connecting link between them. It is this love that attracts the disciples to the Incarnations, as the magnet attracts base metal. We have seen time and again in history as well as in our personal experiences that illumined souls have intense love for human beings. They can inspire and transform the people because of their love for them.” “Swami Brahmananda told us one day that ‘Even if you do all the good things you can for a person all your life and do one thing that is not wished or liked by him, all your good deeds are in vain. You are no good to him. God is just the opposite. You do everything wrong all your life and then one day you think of Him with love and devotion and you do the right thing. At once He forgives your entire past and lifts you to a higher plane.’ The parable of the prodigal son as told by Jesus [Lk. 15:11-32] is well known, in this connection.”³⁵

According to John Calvin (1509-64) justification (i.e. making just or righteous) is the “acceptance by which God receives us into his favour, and esteems us as righteous persons; and we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.”³⁶ Calvin developed the concept of double justification. First, is justification by faith, which is “the beginning, foundation, cause, proof and substance of works righteousness.” By faith, “we grasp Christ’s righteousness, by which alone we are reconciled to God.” Faith is a matter of both the heart and the mind. In the sacred act of justification by faith, God in his mercy and free love receives the sinner into His favor and declares them to be just, though in actuality they remain a sinner until their death. Second is “justification by works.” “Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify.” “You cannot possess Christ without being made partaker of his sanctification.” “An empty show of faith [without good works] does not justify.”³⁷ Therefore, what follows is justification by works, which is an effect of the desire to perform righteous deeds. Good works are the manifestation and not the cause of justification by faith. Through the performance of good works, the restored seeker affirms their own righteousness and true faith by attempting to satisfy God’s demands.³⁸

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) the German-American Lutheran formulated the thesis that the New Being in Christ is communicated to others, as part of his saving work that unites humans with God. “Man as he exists is not what he essentially is and ought to be. He is estranged from his true being.... Everyone who participates in the New Being actualized in him receives the power of becoming a child of God himself.” The soul who attains the New Being is no longer estranged from their essential nature. “This reality is the New Being, who conquers existential estrangement and thereby makes faith possible. This alone faith is able to guarantee—and that because its own existence is identical with the presence of the New Being. Faith itself is the immediate (not mediated by conclusions) evidence of the New Being within and under the conditions of existence.... The term ‘New Being,’ as used here, points directly to the cleavage between essential and existential being—and is the restorative principle of the whole of this theological system. The New Being is new in so far as it is the undistorted manifestation of essential being within and under the conditions of [human] existence.... Jesus as the Christ represents the essential unity between God and man appearing under the conditions of existential estrangement, every human being is, by this very fact, asked to take on the ‘form of the Christ.’... Only by taking suffering and death upon himself could Jesus be the Christ, because only in this way could he participate completely in existence and conquer every force of estrangement which tried to dissolve his unity with God.... In all its concrete details the biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ confirms his character as the bearer of the New Being or as the one in whom the conflict between the essential unity of God and man and man’s existential estrangement is overcome.... There are no traces of unbelief, namely, the removal of his personal center from the Divine center which is the subject of his infinite concern.... In the same way the biblical picture shows no traces of hubris or self-evaluation in spite of his awareness of his messianic vocation.”³⁹

For Tillich, the Divine Incarnation is a breakthrough of New Being the existence of Him whose being is the truth. “We are grasped by something ultimate, which keeps us in its grasp and from which we strive in vain to escape.” New Being is not impersonal, since it comes about as a relationship between a Personal God and us. The relationship of the Unconditional to the conditional is determined is expressed as the “ground of being.” This conquest of existence and of the estrangement that is a part of it does not “remove finitude and anxiety, ambiguity and tragedy.” Becoming totally translucent in relation to the coming Kingdom of the Father is the

self-emptying (kenotic) way of Jesus the Christ. “Jesus has to negate himself, in order to be true to God's” plan. Emphasis is on “the movement between interiority, the inner experience of the encounter, and exteriority, the New Being in history.”⁴⁰

Christians believe that the purpose of the Gospel is the salvation of humanity, through reconciliation to God. Jesus came to redeem and save humanity, from the domination of the power of the sin and death. His life and death redeemed humanity, and restored the broken fellowship which evil has brought on to separate God and man. “The living Christ can work in the world in this manner only through those who accept his sovereignty over their lives beyond the sovereignty of the law. The law, meaning some accepted order of life, must always stand. But in Christ it is servant, not master. When the living Christ rules our lives, the standards which we obey and the goods which we seek and cherish are held subject to the unbounded creativity of God.” “The giving of oneself to be controlled and remade by a reality most surely known is an act of faith just as genuine as the giving of oneself to something not so surely known.... Faith may be the surest knowledge. Such knowledge by itself alone is not faith but it becomes faith when one acts upon it in the manner of self-giving described above.” “In liberal Christianity generally, the work of Christ is that of reconciling man to God, and salvation is achieved through the faithful embodiment in life and character of the spirit and ideals of Jesus.” Good works include moral action, ceremonials, self-surrender, productive labor, and asceticism.⁴¹

4. Sin and the Doctrine of Atonement

Indian: “In every age I [Sri Krishna] come back to deliver the holy, to destroy the sin of the sinner” (BG* 4:8, p. 60). “I will save you from sin and from bondage” (BG* 18:66, p. 172; cf. RV 2:28.9).

New Testament: “The Son of man also came ... to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45; cf. Mt. 20:28; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; 1 Pet. 1:18-19). “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29; cf. Mt. 9:2, 6; Mk. 2:5, 10; Lk. 5:24; 7:48; 19:10; Acts 13:38; Rom. 6:6; 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Jn. 2:2). “Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:24-25; cf. Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18).

The *Vajradhvaja Sutra* quotes an eighth century Indian Buddhist writing that gives the vow or resolve of a Bodhisattva (a potential Buddha), “I take upon myself

... the deed of all beings, even of those in the hells, in other worlds, in the realms of punishment.... I take their suffering upon me ... I must bear the burden of all beings, for I have vowed to save all things living, to bring them safe through the forest of birth, age, disease, death and rebirth. I think not of my own salvation, but strive to bestow on all beings the royalty of supreme wisdom. So I take upon myself all the sorrows of all beings.... I redeem the universe from the forest of purgatory, from the womb of flesh, from the realm of death. I agree to suffer as a ransom for all beings, for the sake of all beings.”⁴²

Swami Saradananda articulated, “When spirituality declines in human hearts, God incarnates out of compassion, suffers on behalf of the people, and redeems them from the whirlpool of maya. Although He does that, He does not completely absolve humanity. He makes individuals put forth some self-effort so that they may learn. As the Master [Sri Ramakrishna] used to say: ‘By the grace of the Avatars, a person finishes the sufferings of ten lives in one.’”⁴³ “One day in Shympukur the Master had an incredible vision. He saw his subtle body come out of his gross body and move around the room. He noticed some wounds on the back of its throat and was wondering how those wounds came to be, when the Divine Mother explained to him: People who had committed various sins had become pure by touching him, thereby transferring their sins to his body and causing those wounds.”⁴⁴ Sri Ramakrishna told his disciples, “People are so sinful in the Kaliyuga; if I awaken their spiritual consciousness I shall have to accept the burden of their sin.” As stated in the first section, “The people whose karma I have taken think that they are attaining salvation through their own strength. They do not understand that it is because I have taken their karma on me.”⁴⁵

We might refer to the Kaliyuga as the Tamasayuga since during the Iron Age the tamasic guna is predominant compared to other yugas.

Eventually these subtle body (mind body, thought body) wounds manifested in his gross body as a fatal cancer of the throat. Vicarious atonement is practiced not only by an Avatara, but also on a smaller scale by a competent guru. Since they take on the karmas of many people, as an act of supererogation they have to undergo many hardships that are far beyond those of other people.

Some early Christian Fathers believed the atonement is a ransom paid to the devil. This idea was

later replaced by the Satisfaction Theory of the Atonement that originated with Anselm (1033-1109) of Canterbury. He came to the conclusion that humans were released from guilt and punishment for their sins and were reconciled to

God, by the atoning substitutional suffering of Christ.⁴⁶ A. Daniel Frankforter informs us, Anselm “argued that human sin was an offence to God which placed man indefinitely in God’s debt. God was able freely to forgive the guilt of the act, but since he was a God of justice as well as mercy, reparation was needed to restore the moral balance of the universe. Because the offence was mans, only man could make restitution. But, since man was God’s creature, everything he had was God’s already, and he had no surplus of merit adequate to repair the effects of his rebellion. Consequently, although man owed the debt to God, only God had the resources to repay it.”⁴⁷ In Anselm’s words, “Without satisfaction, that is, without a spontaneous settlement of the debt, it is impossible for God to forgive a sin that has remained unpunished.” Since “the sinner has nothing ... with which to make satisfaction,” it was necessary that “the goodness of God come to its rescue, and the Son of God assume it into his own person.”⁴⁸

As an alternative, according to the Karmic-Samskara Theory of Atonement, the phenomenon of the atonement is primarily objective. Both karmas and samskaras are forms of the substance of subtle matter and energy that can be destroyed. Restitution is made to the impersonal unalterable laws of nature, in the sense that the natural world cannot continue to exist unless the equilibrium of the karmic balance is maintained (the Law of Balance). It is sustained through the process of cosmic order and justice. Due to the interrelationship of all entities, it is absolutely necessary that the law of causation be maintained (i.e., that the effect equals the cause) both in the physical and moral realm, otherwise the universe would become chaotic and disintegrate. The law of karma refers to the descriptive law, the positive or negative effects of following or not following the prescriptive moral laws.

Conciliation between Brahman (God) and humans by the process of vicarious atonement has two aspects. First, the bad karma that is the effect of wrongful deeds is removed. It is not enough to abolish the effects of misdeeds, without also removing their causes. Second, it is necessary to remove the negative mental impressions (samskaras) and habits (vasanas) in the mind of the individual that caused the wrongful deeds to occur in the first place, in order to prevent the sinful act from being repeated. The individual is a prisoner of his or her own karmas and samskaras. Through the act of atonement, the karmic debt is paid off, the samskaras are purified, and the person is freed of the bondage of misdeeds.

There is merit in medieval French scholastic philosopher and theologian Peter Abelard’s (1079-1142) Moral Exemplar Theory. It holds that "Jesus died as the

demonstration of God's love." The life of Jesus Christ was aimed at bringing about moral and spiritual reform in the devotee. His sinless life was as much a part of his soteriology as was his suffering and death on the cross. God's love for people manifested through the life of Jesus Christ who has the power to transform humans. Realization of this love leads to repentance. It provides an ideal for us to try to imitate and an example that plays an important role in changing the hearts and minds of people leading to their transformation. Abelard rejected Anselm's satisfaction theory of atonement, the idea that Jesus' death was a "debt paid to God's honor" and that God changed His mind after the sinner accepted Jesus' sacrificial death.⁴⁹

By satisfying the demands of the law, the Avatara-Divine Incarnation freely accepts a portion of the sins (karmic debts) of his followers. Since humanity came into existence, people have been constantly working off their own karma. Only in a small percentage of cases did they live an immaculate enough life to bring about their own liberation-salvation. Thus, the Avatara-Divine Incarnations are absolutely necessary because they possess the spiritual power to make atonement for a large number of people. The entire life of the Avatara-Divine Incarnation involves redemption and the act of vicarious atonement, not just their suffering at death. Throughout their life they graciously undergo innumerable hardships, bearing many but not all of the effects of sins (karmas) of their followers. Jesus atoned for the sins of others throughout his life, though it was most pronounced during his crucifixion. In addition, Jesus' twelve apostles aided him by participating in the vicarious atonement, by suffering for sins they did not commit. They also underwent the hardships of martyrdom. According to the Council of Trent (1545-63) Jesus Christ the savior of the world died for all, but not all people receive the benefit of his death. Transfer of merit by a spiritual sage (bodhisattva) is an ancient conception in Indian Mahayana Buddhism. It is possible that the people Jesus cured of various physical ailments received some atoning benefits. When Jesus healed the woman who bled for twelve years, some of his power left him, indicating that he suffered some loss. They do not come to destroy the sinners, but the sins of the sinners. In this world the quantity of iniquities always involves a finite number of sins, from a limited number of people. Both the magnitude of the sins (and karmas), and the atonement, are limited and not infinite. If the effects of the Avatars-Divine Incarnation's atonement were infinite, all sin would be destroyed and all people would have become virtuous without effort, yet evil remains in the world. Aquinas in agreement with the Greek philosopher Aristotle

(384-322 B.C.) held that “a finite magnitude [such as a human body] cannot have infinite power” and “infinite power in a finite magnitude cannot move in time.”⁵⁰

A difficult question to answer is why does an Avatara-Divine Incarnation have to suffer? Why is not his immaculate life not enough to cancel the bad karmas (sins) of his present and future followers?⁵¹

What is the extent of vicarious atonement? The Avatara-Divine Incarnation comes for a large portion of humanity who become members of the new faith, but not for everyone in the world. Even for the devout believer some imperfections remain, and they must atone for some of their sins and work hard to maintain their piousness. Those people who lived before the Avatara-Divine Incarnation benefit from the atonement, only by being reborn in a new human body at a later period of time.

It is obvious that the Avatara-Divine Incarnation bears the effects of sins of many people whom they associate with. But how does he/she also take on the sins (the negative karmas) of humanity or a large section of humanity as a whole? According to Platonic Universalism all human bodies, minds and souls, are fragments of a universal body, mind and soul. Is the Avatara-Divine Incarnation somehow able to tap into this source? If this were so, it would have been possible for Jesus to accomplish the atonement by making contact with the universal body and mind of humanity or a large section of it.

Influenced by Platonic Universalism (aka Realism), early church theologians like Marius Victorinus (c. 290-365) a Christian Neoplatonist, Bishop Gregory of Nyssa (modern-day Turkey, c. 330-95), and Cyril the Bishop of Alexandria (c. 376-444) conceived of the whole of human nature constituting a single living being. Christ conjoined himself with this universal body that is the totality of humanity, in order to sanctify it. Humanity is a generic whole and consequently all people are in Christ and were purified by his suffering on the cross and his resurrection. Christ body is universal not particular thus, all human bodies were crucified in it, and His sufferings have a universal property.⁵² Along this line Victorinus wrote, “When He took flesh, He took the universal idea of flesh; for as a result the whole power of flesh triumphed in His flesh.... For human nature as a whole was in Him, flesh as a whole and souls as a whole, and they were lifted to the cross and purged through God the Word, the universal of all universals.”⁵³ Cyril of Alexandria concluded, “The Only-begotten made Himself like us, that is, complete man, so as to deliver our earthly body from the corruption which had invaded it? This is why He condescended to become identical with us by the mystery of the union and took a

human soul, thereby making it able to prevail against sin and, as it were, colouring it with the tincture of His own immortality.... So we say the Word in His entirety united Himself with man in his entirety.” “By virtue of the flesh united to Him, He has us all in Himself,” and “We were all in Christ; the common person of humanity comes again to life in Him.”⁵⁴ Erigena (815-77) later wrote, “Although He preserved wholly in Himself and in the whole human genus the whole of human nature which He wholly took upon Him ... yet nowhere but in Himself alone is humanity united to the Deity in a single substance, so that transmuted into Deity itself it transcends all things.”⁵⁵

5. Giver of Knowledge

Indian: “Whatever a great man does, ordinary people will imitate; they follow his example” (BG* 3:21, p. 55). “The same ancient yoga I [Sri Krishna] have told you today; for you are My devotee and friend” (BG 4:3). “I shall teach you in full both knowledge and experience, which being known, nothing more remains here for you to know” (BG 7:2).

New Testament: “If you continue in my word ... you will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (Jn. 8:31-32; cf. 18:37; Eph. 1:17; 1 Jn. 5:20). “I [Jesus] have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn. 15:15; cf. Mt. 11:27).

Light that dispels darkness. Indian: “I dwelling in their hearts, dispel with the shining lamp of wisdom the darkness born of ignorance” (BG 10:11). “This is my Infinite Being; shall the sun lend it any light-or the moon, or fire? For it shines self-luminous always” (BG* 15:6, p. 147). New Testament: “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness” (Jn. 8:12; 1:5, 9). “I have come as light into the world, that whosoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (Jn. 12:46).

To quote Sri Ramakrishna, “Nothing is problematical to the Incarnation. He solves the most difficult and intricate problems of life as the simplest of things in the world, and his expositions are such as even a child can follow. He is the sun of Divine knowledge, whose light dispels the accumulated ignorance of ages.... The Jnana [spiritual knowledge] of the Avatara is still more powerful, and may be likened to the sun. He is the sun of Divine knowledge whose light dispels the

accumulated ignorance of ages.” “In every age God incarnates Himself as the guru, to teach humanity.” The Divine Incarnation is the true guru of humanity, the spiritual teacher of the world.⁵⁶

In describing Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Saradananda write, we were “overwhelmed by the wonderful coexistence of Divine and human characteristics in him.... His Divine qualities and powers were fully manifested through the veil of a human body and human nature.... He truly took on a human nature in order to do good to humanity; he showed us the path leading from the human plane to the Divine. Because we observed him closely, we understood that Avatars of past ages had also displayed such wonderful manifestations of Divine and human aspects.... sometimes they travel on the highest spiritual plane and bring to us news of a realm of ideas and power that is unknown to us.”⁵⁷

Swami Abhedananda (1866-1939) explains the necessity of these Divine teachers, “Who could have understood and realized the highest aim and purpose of human existence, who could have solved the most bewildering questions and problems concerning the true nature and destiny of human souls, if God himself had not revealed these things to mankind from time immemorial? Could ordinary human beings with their short-sighted intellect and imperfect understanding, living constantly on the animal plane of the senses, deluded by the phantoms of phenomenal appearances and always mistaking the unreal for the real, have ever discovered the ultimate purpose of life and the true nature and destiny of human souls? Think of the innumerable opinions of atheists and agnostics, materialists and thinkers of different capacities which have bewildered the intellect and understanding of the vast majority of people!”⁵⁸

On this subject Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) discerned, “Man’s perfect beatitude, furthermore, consists in the sort of knowledge of God which exceeds the capacity of every created intellect.... what is set forth for us to hold about God by faith cannot be known of itself to man, since it exceeds the capacity of the human intellect. Therefore, this had to be made known to man by Him to whom it is known of itself.... To Him [God] this truth is naturally known of itself, and from Him it becomes known to all.... Therefore man, to achieve perfect certitude about the truth of faith, had to be instructed by God Himself made man, that man might in the human fashion grasp the Divine instruction.”⁵⁹ “By the mystery of the Incarnation are made known at once the goodness, the wisdom, the justice, and the power or might of God.”⁶⁰ He made the invisible things of God known by visible

things. Jesus established faith, increased hope, showed his love for humanity, set an example of righteousness and bestowed full participation of divinity on humanity.

The Avatara does not give out all of his knowledge in one incarnation. Else he would have nothing to add in a future incarnation. Ramakrishna said, "I am at peace now. I shall have to be born once more. Therefore I am not giving all knowledge to my companions. Suppose I give you all knowledge; will you then come to me again so willingly?"⁶¹

Divine Incarnations generally place more emphasis on practical spiritual knowledge that relates to our wellbeing, on what we must do to reach the higher states. Less emphasis is placed on theoretical knowledge that concerns religious philosophy. For example, Buddha encouraged his followers to focus on their spiritual progress and the development of virtue rather than on metaphysical questions such as whether or not the world is eternal, or whether the world is finite or infinite.

When it comes to theoretical knowledge the scriptures are often written tersely and can be interpreted in more than one way. This allows for future generations to provide commentary by working on these problems and too make a productive contribution to the religion. Similarly, in other fields of knowledge intellectuals are motivated by theoretical problems that have not yet been solved.

For more on this subject see: SVRP: Ch. X. Avatara-Divine Incarnation, Section 3. Their Mission, B. Giver of Knowledge. Web: <http://www.vedantawritings.com/SVPR10.pdf>

6. The Second Coming and Multiple Incarnations

Indian: "I am born in every age" (BG 4:8). "There is no end of My Divine manifestations" (BG 10:40; cf. 11:5).

New Testament: "At the [future] coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thes. 3:13; cf. Mt. 24:30; 25:3; 26:64; Acts 1:11; 1 Thes. 4:16). "Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ... then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him" (2 Thes. 2:1, 8). "Christ ... will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (Heb. 9:28).

Concerning those Divine beings who incarnate for the well-being of the world Shankara (c. 688/788-720/820) the Advaita Vedantic the seer-philosopher discerned, “For the fulfillment of their missions they move on from one body to another with perfect liberty, as though from one house to another... while retaining an unobliterated memory (of their identity etc.), they do this by creating new bodies and owning them either simultaneously or successively, for they are the masters of the materials that produce the bodies and senses.”⁶² “Even for a single god there is the possibility of assuming many bodies simultaneously.... By showing here the identity of all the gods with Hiranyagarbha, the *Upanishads* reveal that Hiranyagarbha Himself has multiple forms simultaneously.”⁶³

To quote Sri Ramakrishna, “An Avatara will never get liberation. As an executive officer of an estate rushes to a place where there is chaos or disturbances, so the Avatara comes to relieve the sufferings of people whenever there is any unusual condition in the Divine Mother’s vast empire—that is, in the world.”⁶⁴ “In every age he descends to earth in human form, as an Incarnation, to teach people love and devotion.”⁶⁵ “The Avatara is always one and the same. Having plunged into the ocean of life, the one God rises up at one point and is known as Krishna, and when after another plunge, He rises up at another point, He is known as Christ.”⁶⁶ Because of his future rebirth, Ramakrishna revealed he gave out only part of his knowledge, reserving some for his spiritual truths for his next Incarnation.⁶⁷

Swami Abhedananda made it clear, “The Hindus maintain that since the beginning of the world God has incarnated many times, and will come again and again. They have recognized many Incarnations in the past, and believe that there will be many in the future.... God can manifest in any place at any time, because His powers are unlimited. If we limit Him by saying that there has been only one Incarnation, then we make Him finite; but as He is Infinite in His powers, in His glory, and in His manifestations, He ought not to be limited by time, space, or nationality. His love for all nations is equal, and whenever His manifestation is necessary, there He naturally descends. These Incarnations are called in Sanskrit Avataras, which means the descent of the Supreme Being for the good of humanity.”⁶⁸

Elkesai (fl. 100) was the founder of the Jewish Christian Ebionite sect that resided east of the Dead Sea and flourished between 100 and 400 A.D. His followers taught that Christ repeatedly reincarnated on earth before he was born as

Jesus. Pseudo-Clementine (c. 150-200) probably a Jewish Christian believed that the primal man Adam reincarnated as Enoch, then Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and finally Christ who was the greatest of the prophets. He wrote, “Christ the only prophet has appeared in different ages.... he alone has it, who has changed his form and his names from the beginning of the world, and so reappeared again and again in the world, until coming upon his own times, and being anointed with the mercy for works of God, he shall enjoy rest for ever. His honour it is to bear rule and lordship over all things.”⁶⁹ Bactrian Gnostics (c. 250 or earlier) held that Jesus had reincarnated before and will do so again in the future.⁷⁰ We have no Biblical record of Jesus saying he had or had not been born on earth in a prior life. Many Christians believe in the second coming of Christ. This idea differs from the Indian Avatara in that they believe Christ will come to earth as an adult and will not be reborn in a womb. If there were no Saviors before Jesus Christ, we might ask how were the people who lived in Palestine and Europe before that time saved?

Thomas Aquinas realized that the Second Person of the Trinity could incarnate again if He wished to, or could incarnate in two different people at the same time. “In nothing is the power of the Father or the Son lessened by the Incarnation of the Son. Therefore, it seems that after the Incarnation the Son can assume another human nature distinct from the one He has now assumed. I answer that, what has power for one thing, and no more, has a power limited to one. Now the power of a Divine Person is infinite, nor can it be limited by any created thing. Hence it may not be said that a Divine Person so assumed one human nature as to be unable to assume another.... for the Uncreated cannot be contained by any creature.... A man who has on two garments is not said to be two persons clothed, but one clothed with two garments.... the human nature is related to the Divine Person, from the fact that it is assumed by the Divine Person in time, not indeed that the nature is the Person, but that the Person subsists in the nature. For the Son of God is His Godhead, but is not His manhood.”⁷¹

After reading Thomas Aquinas’ “Treatise on the Incarnation” Quentin Quesnell of the Smith College Department of Religion concluded, “In summary, we have seen Thomas a bulwark of Catholic theology, arguing that God, the Word, could become incarnate in several more human instances besides Jesus. The Father, too, could become incarnate, once or several times, or in various individuals at the same time. So could the Spirit. Moreover, all three could become incarnate in one human nature.... Or any one of them could become incarnate in several individuals, each

with a different name and temperament.”⁷²

Lutheran and Calvinistic Reform theologians profess the doctrine of “*adventus Christi in gratia*” meaning, “the continuing presence of Christ to his church on earth between the first and second visible coming, according to his own promise of abiding presence (Mt. 18:20; 28:30). It is an advent *in gratia* since Christ and his grace are present and made available to faith in Word and sacrament. This advent is, of course, invisible.”⁷³ This is an important idea, meaning that after 1886 Sri Ramakrishna through his grace maintained some contact with the Ramakrishna Order.

The reincarnation of the Avatara implies that when the omnipotent Brahman-God assumes a new form as a Divine Incarnation, the former Incarnation continues to exist. For example, Sri Rama continued to exist in the Divine realm, after the birth of Sri Krishna a later Avatara. Since the Incarnations continue to exist concurrently in the Divine realm, it is doubtful that one Incarnation such as Rama transformed into Krishna. Shankara stated above, “they do this by creating new bodies and owning them either simultaneously or successively, for they are the masters of the materials that produce the bodies and senses.” It is more likely that the Personal God (Ishvara, Logos) incarnates first as Rama and at a later time as Krishna and both continue to exist. Possibly each Incarnation is analogous to a separate ray of the sun that exist concurrently. Another factor to consider is that, “Only a small portion of God (or a heavenly being) descends and incarnates, thus enabling Him/Her to continue performing Divine and cosmic functions.”⁷⁴ The idea of many Avataras is related to the idea of reincarnation and promotes religious pluralism.

One difference between the Vedantic and the Christian view is that when Sri Ramakrishna returns to earth he is expected to be reborn as a baby with a new physical body. On the other hand, most Christians believe in the Second Coming, Christ will return as an adult. Ramakrishna and his disciples will have to come a second time, since most of the people were not ready to receive their message. Today many people practice yoga and are being spiritually trained so that they will be better prepared to accept the religious teachings of the future Avatara and His disciples.

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- ³ Saradananda, section 1.1.9, p. 79.
- ⁴ Saradananda, I:3.21, pp. 100-01; I:4.1, 7-8, 10, pp. 102, 105, 107; IV:3.25, pp. 615-16; Mt. 1:20-21; Lk. 1:30-35.
- ⁵ *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chad Meister And Paul Copan (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 557.
- ⁶ Phil. 2: 5-7; cf. 2 Cor. 8:9.
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- ⁹ GSR, p. 746; Mt. 4:8-10.
- ¹⁰ GSR, pp. 891b, 98g, 209b; Lk. 18:19; Jn. 4:34; 5:19-20, 30; 6:38; 14:28.
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