

Some Reflections on Two-Way Traffic

OR

Incarnation/*Avatāra* and Apotheosis

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Motto 1: *et homo factus est.*

Motto 2: *Vae, deus fior.*

The first part of this short note rather than article will offer a few general and comparative considerations. The second part will focus on a particular area which students of religion may find instructive on more than one score.

However, before dealing with our subject proper — *incarnatio* and *avatāra* — a preliminary observation is made necessary by the juxtaposition of our two key terms, one derived from the Christian, the other from the Indian tradition. Comparative Religion, at least as it is practised today in Academia, has been forged, like most sciences and scholarly pursuits, on the anvil of Western intellectual history and in the “workshop” of Western universities. In an age of almost pathological supersensitivity to alleged Western intellectual imperialism, scholarly neocolonialism, and academic superiority-complexes, let me hasten to assuage the suspicions as well as the sensitive noses of those who everywhere see and smell neo-imperialist rats, by making it quite clear that I did not assert here that scientific endeavour and scholarship are, or always have been, Western monopolies. I am merely trying to say that most scientific and scholarly pursuits, as they are conducted today in universities and institutions of higher learning in most places, are, for better or for worse influenced by, if not completely rooted in, the modern, Western academic tradition. For Comparative Religion this means that there is an inevitable Christian (or, if you prefer, biblical viz. Judeo-Christian) slant to our vocabulary, our conceptual apparatus, and our very often unexamined pre-

suppositions. For example, the notion of a totally and essentially transcendent God and of a numinously “wholly other” *may* well be a premature generalization on the basis of biblical presuppositions rather than a legitimate scientific induction on the basis of empirical evidence.

Before taking a closer look at the phenomenon of *avatāras*, let us stay for another moment with the Christian tradition. Believing Jews and Muslims can hardly be expected to evince a genuine understanding of, let alone sympathy for, the doctrine of the incarnation. The proof of the pudding is in the eating: whilst Jews simply “reject” Jesus (to use a favorite and hoary Christian cliché) or at least his divinity and messianic role, Muslims, who revere him as one of Allah’s prophets to such an extent that they even give a docetist interpretation to his passion, would nevertheless shudder at the mere idea of his divinity. They are, if I may say so, monophysites with a vengeance but holding the monophysite stick at the other end. And no matter how extreme their devotion to Allah’s Apostle, and how deep and manifold the forms of piety which this devotion has generated (Prof. Annemarie Schimmel has given us some very moving accounts and descriptions of this), his uncompromised and uncompromising humanity is beyond question. (I am, at this stage, deliberately ignoring certain mystical and Sufi notions, as well as certain Shi’ite semi-gnostic ideas that come close to doctrines of incarnation and divinisation.) But it cannot be emphasized strongly enough that the very power of the Christian dogma resides precisely in the unheard-of and almost outrageous, unprecedented, unrepeated and unrepeatable uniqueness of the event. Many of us are aged enough to remember the old liturgical style, and the sense of mystery that overcame us when during Mass the Creed was recited standing, except for four words. The rhythm of the recitation changed, the congregation knelt, and with numinous awe reverberating in their voices uttered the words *et homo factus est* (“and he was made man”). So much to explain the first of the two mottos placed at the head of this paper.

The late G. Scholem, professor of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, once suggested a threefold, almost Hegelian, rhythm while writing about the emergence of mysticism as almost inevitably occurring in later stages of originally nonmystical or even antimystical “prophetic” religions (I am using here the terminology of a phenomenological dichotomy popularized by Friedrich Heiler). At the primordial (“mythological”) stage the human and the divine are not sharply separated but intermingle freely. Subsequently, prophetic viz. biblical-type religion creates a qualitative and ontological gulf between the two. At a later stage, mysticism again tries to bridge this gulf, albeit on a higher and more internalized level (*theosis, deificatio, unio mystica*). The history of Jewish and Christian mysticism as well as of Muslim Sufism provide eloquent illustrations not only of these developments but also of the suspicion with which

mysticism was regarded by the “orthodox” authorities, and often suppressed or “censored,” precisely because it appeared to close this ontological gap between the human and the divine in a manner that could not but seem “heretical” in the eyes of “prophetic” theology.

In other cultures and religious traditions, however, matters can be very different. Incarnations are less unique, though they are not necessarily “promiscuous” and unregulated. At times they are defined with great precision, e.g., at what moments and for what purposes the Egyptian god Amun incarnates himself in the Pharaoh. I shall return in a minute to the subject of divine kings. At the present stage suffice it to say that where the distinction between human and divine is more fluid, a completely different religious structure results. Much as monotheism versus polytheism is not simply a quantitative matter of arithmetic (one god *versus* many) but a qualitative and ontological difference (the one god is also *unique*), so on the other hand the belief in multiple incarnations and avatāras is apt to render the concrete, real, and material presence of living gods an almost routine affair. In other words, some religious cultures teach their followers to take the divinity of certain contemporaries in their stride, as it were. As Professor Basham once put it in connection with sacred kingship: “Divinity was cheap in India. Every Brahmin was in a sense a god, as were ascetics with a reputation for sanctity . . . If the King was a god on earth, he was only one among many, and so his divinity might not always weigh heavily upon his subjects.” Unless, of course, your theological system teaches that there is only one avatāra per generation or possibly only one in every kalpa.

Within the limitations of our present discussion we shall ignore the mythological stories of gods temporarily assuming a human or other physical shape (many of the canonical Indian avatāras are anything but human!), e.g., Zeus as a swan to seduce Leda; Vishnu as a charioteer to communicate the exalted teaching of the Bhagavad Gita. Instead, I wish to draw attention to a very simple, essential, and basic point, too often overlooked perhaps because it seems so obvious. The idea that in some religions “the distinction between human and divine is more fluid” (to repeat the formulation used earlier) implies that we have to look at the relationship in terms of two-way traffic. Genuine divine beings (gods, devas — and not merely spirits, angels, or demons) assume human or other material and earthly shape for the sake of accomplishing some divine salvific purpose. But similarly and concurrently human beings can rise (or be raised) to the rank of divinity. Kings are a standard example, and I need not summarize here the scholarly discussions on the subject of divine, sacral kingship. The wide spectrum of possibilities within one culture-area alone has been highlighted by H. Frankfort’s now classic comparison of Egyptian and Babylonian ideas. The anthropological type of analysis was well illustrated by E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s discussion of Shilluk

kingship. Hellenistic and Roman emperors, partly as a symptom of their megalomania (C. G. Jung would have called it “inflation”), partly as a matter of institutionalized political theory, regarded themselves as *divus* or *epiphanes* (if they could have read Eliade they might have preferred the term *hierophanes*) even during their lifetime, let alone after death when a Roman emperor automatically became deified. One Roman emperor at least was cynical enough to exclaim, as the moment of death approached, not “alas, I am about to die” but “woe unto me, I am about to become a god!” This imperial deathbed exclamation also accounts for the second motto at the head of this paper.

The Japanese emperor is divine not by the grace of god, or by a Mandate of Heaven, or by dint of a special charisma (even a hereditary or institutionalized one), but in a strictly biological sense: he is the direct descendant of the ancient great gods. This, incidentally, distinguishes him in a significant manner from the Chinese emperor who ruled by the Mandate of Heaven — a Mandate that could be claimed by a rebel or by the founder of a new dynasty to have been revoked. On the other hand the vulgar version of euhemerism considers every god to be a deified human being, hero-worship as it were transforming itself into the worship of divine beings. On the professional advice of the court-shamans that had been consulted, the angry spirit of Kankō (Sugawara Michizane, an illustrious 9th century Japanese statesman and scholar who had been greatly wronged) was appeased by being posthumously promoted, by imperial decree, to full divine status. The procedure of deification (as distinct from canonization) of the founder of the Tokugawa dynasty, the Shogun Ieyasu, can be read in any textbook on the history of the period, even though tourists visiting and admiring the shrine at Nikko may be blithely unaware of all this. Heaven could be as bureaucratic as the Chinese administrative system, and illustrious statesmen, generals, and scholars would be successively elevated to ever higher ranks and degrees of divinity, as happened to the famous warrior Kuen Ti (also known as Kuan Yü or Wu Ti) who, after his death in the 3rd century A.D., successively advanced — throughout the T'ang, Sung, Ming and Ch'ing dynasties — to ever higher degrees of divinity until in 1594 he received the title “Faithful and Loyal Great Ti, God of War.” (He is said to have had 16,000 State Temples plus thousands of local shrines in pre-Communist China.)

By now you may rightly complain that so far little has been said about *avatāras*. But my point was precisely to argue that in order to talk sensibly on this subject at all, we must see the two-way traffic between human and divine in the respective religious cultures. For reasons of my incompetence in theological exegesis, I must refrain from illustrating this two-way traffic with an almost obvious quotation from St. Gregory of Nyssa to the effect that in Christ God became man so that man might become God. My hesitations are

due to the fact that I am not quite sure how far deliberate paradoxes of this kind are meant to be literally pressed. Sometimes you say “god” when you mean “godlike.” The West is currently inundated with oriental gurus and others, sporting the title “His Divine Holiness” and—believe it or not—being taken seriously by their devout followers and probably also by themselves. What is edifying religious truth to the one is blasphemy or ludicrous nonsense to the other. At any rate you don’t have to go to Poona or Pondicherry to encounter twentieth century versions of this phenomenon. And surely you can never hope to understand Sri Ramakrishna as long as you insist on regarding him as a great teacher, ascetic, and saint instead of a divine incarnation.

An interesting question, to be mentioned here in passing but not to be elaborated upon, arises when this urge for immediate, direct contact with the incarnate divine manifests itself in a highly developed or systematized religion. In that case it is not enough to encounter the “divine” generally in some human incarnation. Just as a human incarnation is always individual and specific, and never “general” or “diffuse,” so also the incarnate deity must be individual. Precisely because the believer has no vague intercourse with a generalized divine, he wants to know which specific deity it is that has assumed physical form. Hence both mythological and/or historical incarnations, as well as their contemporary counterparts, usually contain a reference to a specific god or name of god. This holds true not only of the ten canonical avatāras of Vishnu but also of other Hindu incarnations as well as of Jaina and Buddhist traditions. It is not enough to speak of the succession of Trithankaras and Buddhas, but you must give each and every one a local habitation (if possible) and a name. The “living Buddhas” of the Mahāyāna tradition provide ample illustrations.

Let me now turn to the religious history of one particular country during the last 100–150 years. Japan always knew the concept of *ikigami*, i.e., living gods, gods existing as humans on this earth. In keeping with traditional Japanese syncretism, these could be *ikigami* (Shinto-type) or *ikibotoke* (Buddhist-type). Of course the *ikigami par excellence* was the Emperor and hence claimants to divine status often laid themselves open (not without reason) to the charge of *lèse majesté*. Japan, as is well known, has experienced a mushrooming of so-called “new religions” or sects in the last generations. They can be counted by the hundreds. The more successful ones number millions of followers, but in keeping with Japan’s population figures even sects that are dismal failures can count 50,000 followers or more. In this paper I am not interested so much in the phenomenon of the Japanese “new religions” as such, as in their founders. The latter are usually divided into two main types: *ningen*, human beings who are great and perhaps even inspired teachers and leaders, and *ikigami* (“living *kami*”)—and the meaning of *kami*

is pretty close to that of “god.” It is important to realize the full implications of this. No doubt the legacy of shamanism is very much alive and present in all this, but the shaman is a human being who, occasionally or more or less permanently, is possessed by a deity that speaks through him/her or otherwise uses him/her as a vehicle and instrument. I do not, in the present context, wish to elaborate on the sometimes important and helpful, sometimes irrelevant distinction between possession by a divine being or spirit (literally “enthusiasm”, *en-theos*) on the one hand, and ecstasy (literally “standing outside”), when you leave your body and the soul journeys or battles its way through the spirit world on the other. In fact, it is the latter phenomenon which is shamanism proper. But unlike the traditional shaman, the *ikigami* is a permanent living divine presence. I insist on the word “presence,” because he/she is not the mere mouthpiece or representative (priestly, prophetic, oracular, or otherwise) of a particular *kami*. He is the *kami* himself. The *kami-hotoke*, whether identifying himself or being identified as Tenri-ō-nomikoto, or Kannon-sama, or Miroku-ō-mi-kami, or Tenshō-Kōtai-Jin (which happens to be another pronunciation of the ideograms with which the name of Amaterasu-ō-mi-kami is spelled), or Tenchi-kane-no-kami, Konkō Daijin, or Su-no-kami, or Ushitora-no-konjin, etc., etc., enters into and completely possesses a human being which thereupon becomes his abode and incarnation, and as such a living god. Some of the founders actually had themselves buried after their death in burial mounds modelled after those of the imperial graves, thereby lending even more justification to the accusation of *lèse majesté*. Deguchi Onisaburō (co-founder of Ōmoto) actually rode about on a white horse, thereby infringing on another imperial prerogative.

Of course, as time passes and the successors of the first believers, who usually were simple, unlettered, poverty-stricken, peasant-farmers, become less illiterate (compulsory education!), more technologically modern and perhaps even more middleclass, the divine and incarnational character of the founder increasingly becomes a subject for theological reflection. Thus the student of the writings of the recent generation of Tenri theologians cannot suppress the eerie feeling that he is actually rereading, albeit transposed into a slightly different key, a repetition of the documents of the early Ecumenical Councils up to Chalcedon. What, for instance, is the relation of the peasant woman Nakayama Miki to the *kami* called Tenri-ō-no-mikoto (Tsuki-Hi or Oyagami), considering the fact that this peasant-woman is both fully human and fully divine (*oyasama*)? *Mutatis mutandis* the same questions must be asked about the *ikigami*-founders and foundresses of the other “new religions” including, of course, Mrs. Kitamura Sayo whose name, in the sect, is *ogami-sama*. Clearly the catch phrase “Japanese shamanism” is totally inadequate as an explanation of the phenomenon. It is true that the *ikigami*-faith is deeply embedded in the Japanese religious tradition. Some Shinto

scholars even regarded it as the “essence” of Shintoism. In a bibliography of the English publications alone of the late Professor Katō Genji I found over half a dozen studies devoted to this particular subject. But enough has been said to illustrate — if any illustrations were needed — that the problems of incarnational theology are not merely of antiquarian interest or of relevance to believers whose religion was founded two thousand years ago. The living god is a permanent possibility, reasserting itself — as if deliberately to disturb the lethargy of students of religion — in the technologically most advanced society of our age.

Needless to say that these (poly)theistic reflections would have to be complemented by an analysis of the apparently very different, but in reality strictly analogous traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The paradoxical concept of the omnipresent Buddha-nature or Buddha-reality, the possibility of being or becoming a living Buddha, the fact that these ideas can be formulated only against the background of specific philosophical doctrines (*śūnyatā* or others) — I am deliberately leaving aside here Lamaism and Tibetan tulkus — all these present further variations on our theme, and may serve to attest the breadth and width of a problem which still requires much further study.

REFERENCES

- * This article dispenses with a bibliography on the subject. The bibliography is immense and should be known to scholars. I shall mention only two titles. The comparative study *Avatar and Incarnation* (London: Faber, 1970) by Geoffrey Parrinder, written from an evidently Christian perspective, and the more indologically-oriented study by Rainer Seeman, “Versuch zu einer Theorie des Avatāra. Mensch gewordener Gott oder Gott gewordener Mensch?” in *NUMEN* XXXIII/1 (1986), pp. 90–140.