

PART 1. THE COSMIC VISION OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

As the Bible has been translated into an increasing number of languages, over the last five hundred years, it is now easily available to a widening circle of those interested in a variety of sacred scriptures. This means that the Bible takes its place in a world of spiritual literature, accessible to many people of different cultures and Faiths.

The Bible is the basis for an Abrahamic vision of the One God. The New Testament provides the foundation for a Christian Faith. But the Gospels do not "belong" only to Christian believers. The Gospels speak to a world beyond the institutional Churches. This is particularly true of John's Gospel, which was composed among those believers in Christ, looking beyond the confines of a Jewish tradition. Hence in the very prologue of this Gospel we come on the term "Logos", a concept taken from Greek philosophy. Throughout the Gospel narrative, Jesus reaches beyond orthodox Jewish tradition, to a world of Faith in the Presence of the Divine, intrinsic to the human search for the Spirit of Truth.

My own Father, coming from a reformed monotheistic branch of Hinduism, had a deep appreciation for the Bible, and the Christian Faith of my Mother. I remember the quiet times we had as a family, when the Gospels were read and reflected on. My Indian Grandfather was a follower of a Hindu sect, particularly oriented to the Word of God, or "*Shabda*".

LAY OUT OF THE PRESENTATION.

In the presentation of some of my images I have related these to my reflections on the Gospel of John. This Gospel has been for me a source of many important images that relate to Indian approaches to spirituality, and the role of the imagination in meditating on symbolic reality.

I have divided my presentation into two parts. **The first part** is in a way closer to a mythic world view which is important for many of the primal sources of Indian cosmic art, to be found not

only in the highly developed philosophical strands of Indian culture, but also in the folk tradition where stories about Creation play a vital role.

The second part of my presentation is more about the “I Am” statements of Jesus especially in the Gospel of John. Here the “I Am” self revelation of Jesus’s role as a Wisdom Teacher, offers a typology that is both rooted in His ministry presented as a series of “signs”, and in his ultimate purpose of showing the way to a Resurrection and Life in the glorious purpose of the Father to redeem the whole of Creation.

First title slide: THE WORD and CREATION

2. THE MANDALA OF CREATION

Many Hindus respond to the deep insight of the Gospel text, “The Kingdom of God is within you”. (Luke 17. 21) This sense that there is a Divine Presence in the heart of every person, is to be found in the poetic utterances of mystics like the 15th century Kabir, who also said that he had been wounded (struck) by the Word (*Shabda*).

This belief that God speaks within the heart is also a way of understanding the statement of St. Paul: “I live, but not I, Christ lives in me”. (Gal. 2.20) This sense of an inner “I”, which is not the individual ego, is to be found in the devotional thought of Hinduism as the “Antaryami”, or inner witness—the “One who controls from within”.

3. THE SPIRIT HOVERED OVER THE WATERS

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John we find a cosmic view of the Christ in relation to history, and the advent of Christ as the ‘Son of man’ in history. Indian Christology has tended to stress the Cosmic dimension of Christian Faith, by outlining what Raimondo Panikkar called the “cosmo theandric” dimension of Christian Faith. This is a response to the Cosmic significance of Indian spiritual experience. Hindu writers about Indian iconography have talked about the nature of a “Cosmic art”. The Mandala form that underlies Indian icons is a door into the Cosmic reality. The human being is a microcosm of a cosmic world. In the first chapter of the Gospel of John we find a

cosmic view of the Christ in relation to history, and the advent of Christ as the 'Son of man' in history.

The contemplative tradition of 'Lectio Divina' approached the Word of God in a meditative way. The Mandala form that underlies Indian icons is a door into the Cosmic reality. Jesus, when instructing his disciples about prayer, said: "Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret". (Matt. 6. 6) This "inner room" can be understood as the heart, and the Mandala is the door to the mystery that lies hidden in the heart.

4. THE SPIRIT AS A BIRD –THE WORD MADE FLESH

The prologue hymn of John's Gospel says that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the Beginning with God; all things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made". (John 1.1-3)

5. THE HANDS HOLDING THE LIGHT OF CREATION

Dom Bede Griffiths, who I first met in 1963, when he was giving some talks about a "Christian Ashram" dedicated to the spirit of dialogue with people of all Faiths, was particularly concerned with the "Cosmic Covenant" which was with all creatures, after the flood from which Noah was rescued. This covenant was the affirmation of a revelation given to all human beings

6. THE DESCENT OF THE SPIRIT

Here we find the poetic basis for the symbolic world that undergirds the Gospel of John. The prologue uses a pattern of Signs, that we find in the Genesis account of Creation. The primal flood or '*Tehom*', over which the Spirit hovered like a bird, describes the undifferentiated chaos as "Tohu wa-bohu" which is a cosmic vibration, from which the order of Creation emerged. In Indian thought from this vibration ('*dhvani*') comes the rhythm of differentiated forms, like the natural elements, darkness as distinct from light, and finally life that transcends death.

A fundamental prayer in the Upanishads which is chanted before meditating on the sacred scriptures is:

“Lead me from untruth to Truth, from darkness to Light, and from death to Immortality. Peace, Peace, Peace.”

7. LIVING WATER

Water is a basic symbol related to life, in all religious traditions. In India, the overflowing vessel is one of the most basic symbols of fullness and the gift of life. Indian pilgrims travel to visit sacred sites associated with holy rivers. The river Ganges in the North of India draws pilgrims from all over India who want to bathe there, to wash away the dust and grime of the world.

8. THE BURNING BUSH

The Indian mystic, Ramana Maharishi said that the Divine Name “I AM” shows where the “I thought” originates in the human heart. The great sayings of the Upanishads reveal the mystery of this Divine Presence as “I am That” “*Tat tvam asi*”.

The Burning Bush tradition in the Bible provides the central spiritual experience informing a sense of the sacred in Creation, and hence the sacramental in life experience.

9. THE WORD ENLIGHTENS THE HEART

In the early centuries of Christianity, it was contemplative monks who were responsible for spreading the message of the Gospel. India has been the home of various contemplative movements. The Vedic *Rishis* were teachers of wisdom, around whom disciples gathered. The Guru was supposed to be one who had experienced the spiritual path.

The Guru is not just the external religious authority, but is rather the inner “Sat Guru”, who is in the heart of the worshipper, and is the ‘inner voice’ that guides every seeker after Truth (Sat). The word ‘Sat’ in Indian thought means both Truth, and Being.

10. GIVING LIGHT TO THE BLIND

The word “Guru” implies one who shows the light in the darkness. Later the Buddha was a wisdom teacher, whose path led to enlightenment.

The Gospel of John is very much about seeing. Jesus says to the first disciples, “Come and See”. (John 1:39) An important aspect of Indian devotional practices is known as “*Aarathi*” or the offering of a tray in which a light burns. This tray is waved by the devotee in a circular gesture, in front of the door that leads to the inner sanctum of the Holy Shrine. The light illumines the interior of the shrine whose doors are thrown open so that the worshipper might see the Holy images within the shrine. This act of worship is known as “*Darshan*” which means “To See”.

Hagar was to say, after the Divine revelation in the desert: “Thou art a God of seeing”. (Gen. 16:13) Meister Eckhart was to phrase this primal revelation: “The eye through which I see God, is the same eye with which God sees me”.

11. I AM THE DOOR

Jesus said on different occasions: “I am the Way” (John 14:6); “I am the Light” (John 8:12) and “I am the door of the sheep”. (John 10:7) This chapter 10 of John’s Gospel presents the figure of the Good Shepherd, who enters by the door of the sheepfold.

The figure of Jesus standing at the door and knocking is found in Revelations (3:20). Jesus is both the door, and the one who stands at the door. Like the window, the door allows the light to enter the home. It is identified with the threshold. It is the passage from the outer to an inner world.

PART 2 :

THE EARTHLY MINISTRY OF JESUS.

For me as an artist, drawing from the rich world of Indian myth, and Biblical poetry, the language of signs has provided a source for creative imagination.

The main purpose, as I see it, for a spiritual art in a world often divided by conflicting cultures and religious beliefs, is to provide a locus for dialogue, a common place where different Faiths can meet and share an experience of the Sacred, and a spiritual journey towards an experience of the Divine presence in the world in which we live.

Fr. Amalorpavadas suggested that I might work as an artist in relation to the N.B.C.L.C. which he had set up in 1968 about ways that the Gospel might be “inculturated” in the Indian context.

Karl Rahner, in a lecture he gave in 1977 on the spirituality of the Church of the future, said, “Spirituality would always be a relationship with the living God, who has revealed Himself in the history of humanity, who has placed Himself within the innermost heart of His world, created by Him and within humanity”.

First title slide: I AM THE RESURRECTION and LIFE :
SYMBOLS OF HEALING, EUCHARIST and the TREE OF LIFE.

2. JESUS MEETS NICODEMUS

In the Book of Revelations Jesus says, “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to eat with him”. (Rev. 3.20)

As discussed in the first part of this presentation, Christ is both the Cosmic Word that brings into existence the universe, but is also the teacher or Guru, present in the heart of every worshipper.

Some contemplative thinkers from the Indian spiritual tradition, have responded to this inner voice of what has been called ‘the Lord in the cave of the heart’.

“Sadhu Sundar Singh turned to (John’s Gospel) more than to any other book in the Bible, saying ‘I am drawn to St. John’s Gospel because it is so simple and yet so deep’.”

(Introduction to *“India’s Search for Reality and the Relevance of the Gospel of John”*,1975.)

3. JESUS THE TEACHER

Some thinkers in the Indian Church have suggested that art can help in a process of dialogue with people of other Faiths.

In an Indian Christology Jesus has been imagined as a Guru. However, the Guru that Jesus presents has a distinctive relationship between Teacher and disciple. Jesus is the ‘suffering servant’ who, like a servant, washed the feet of those who had been rejected by society. His was not the way of holding on to power in a worldly sense, but of emptying himself in order to draw all creatures back to the Creator.

Ramana Maharishi had said that the external Guru was only a sign pointing the disciple to an inner Guru. In Buddhist Mandalas the Guru as the Buddha is represented in the centre of the Mandala.

4. “I AM THE WAY”

Christian art is both an expression of the teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God, but is also an expression of an inner spiritual journey to which all are called, through a Faith committed to the Presence of the Divine in an imperfect world, which we see around us. The image of the Way is found in Hindu as well as Buddhist and far Eastern thought, as the *“Marga”* or *“Tao”*.

Such an image relates to the human journey from birth to death, and can be understood as one of the primordial images relating to the spiritual path.

I have often used the yin-yang symbol which is important in the Buddhist tradition to represent the path that leads between light and darkness or life and death.

4. I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD”

The Shepherd, or herder and keeper of domestic animals, is a theme that we find in many cultures. In India, Krishna is called “*Gopala*”, he who looks after cattle. Shiva is known as “*Pasupati*”, that is the Lord of animals. The Shepherd figure, so well known in Christian art draws from pre-Christian figures such as Orpheus, who drew animals through the music that he played.

There have also been images of the Good Shepherd resembling Krishna the cowherd playing his flute.

The Lamb was a very important symbol in the Old Testament, and was symbolically seen as the soul. The Good Shepherd goes in search of the lost sheep. (Luke 15: 3-7)

5. JOHN’S GOSPEL AS A BASIS FOR INDIAN CHRISTIAN ART

The first major commission that I was given in 1967 was to furnish a newly rebuilt Church in Srinagar, Kashmir, which had been destroyed by a fire. I proposed to decorate the walls of the Church with murals where I represented the Gospel story in a Kashmiri landscape. There is a legend in Kashmir that Jesus visited this valley in the company of Mary Magdalene. So I represented Jesus and his disciples as Kashmiris.

I based the arrangement of scenes from John’s Gospel in a symbolic way, so as to convey the idea that the incarnation takes place everywhere. There is in Kashmir, a very ancient cultural tradition, going back to a time before the population became predominantly Muslim, and was a centre for Buddhist and Hindu thought. At that time a visual art developed around the concept of the Mandala, as a cosmic order that could be imagined as underlying all sacred space. I related the landscape, and the figurative elements of the Gospel story with Mandala patterns. Later Dom Bede Griffiths had suggested that I might work on a series of Christian Mandalas, which might provide the basis for an Indian Christian iconography. Such Mandalas are used in Hindu and Buddhist art as a way of meditating on the sacred Presence in the world.

6. "I AM THE RESURRECTION and the LIFE"

In the Gospel of John we find a number of "I AM" statements of Jesus. Around these affirmations of Jesus concerning his Mission, a Christology developed in the Early Church. This Christology relied on a typology. In the "I AM" statements we find various "types" or narrative figures that link the person of Jesus Christ to a whole poetic and symbolic world that runs through the Bible. This symbolic imagination of Faith reveals images of the Divine Word, that are archetypal. In other words these types evocative in the Biblical stories, reach back beyond the Bible as a narrative. Jesus said: "...before Abraham was, I am". (John 8.58) Here we find a very conscious reference to the primal experience of Moses, who was addressed by the Divine as "I AM WHO I AM".

7. "I AM THE BREAD "

The spiritual importance of food, as nourishing the body is another archetypal theme that can be found in many Faiths. Mahatma Gandhi once said that if God were to appear in India among the poor and hungry, he would come in the form of bread.

The Japanese theologian Masao Takenaka, whose inspiration was behind the setting up of the Asian Christian Art Association, wrote a small book or meditation entitled "*God is Rice*".

8. MANDALA AS EUCHARIST: THE REAL PRESENCE

Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life". (John 6:3) The importance of food in sustaining life, has been recognized in the Upanishads. In the Taittreya Upanishad, Brahma is identified as "the food of all beings" In the Prasna Upanishad, we find "food is the Lord of Creation" (I:14); and in the Maitri Upanishad, sacrifice is understood as an offering of food.

We find a Mandala structure underlying the composition of narrative images in Indian art. In the same way Christian icons are constructed using a formal abstract structure. In the image of the Trinity as three angels, the monk artist St. Andrew

Rublev represents the hospitality of Abraham in the form of a Mandala that gives the image a unity. At the centre of the altar like table at which the angels are seated, we find the chalice.

This chalice is like the bowl in which the Buddha received the gift of food. This bowl is linked to the concept of “*Sunya*” or emptiness. At the centre of the Mandala we find the symbol of emptiness, which is represented as a white circle, that also can be the heavenly bread that is both fullness and emptiness.

9. “I AM THE VINE, AND YOU ARE THE BRANCHES” (John 15.5)
Jesus described himself as a living vine tree whose branches and fruits were to be found in his disciples. He was the peace and unity that brought all the diversity of Creation together into the One reality of the Creator.

This was essentially the significance of the Mandala, at whose centre is the seed of life. By meditating on this symbol of Unity in diversity, the Cross could be re-imagined as a symbol not of death but of a new Creation.

The Mandala is a way of re-thinking the structure of the Cross as leading to the Tree of Life.

11. MANDALA as SYMBOL OF WHOLENESS

Some of the Christian Mandalas that I designed during the time I was in Kurisumala Ashram which Dom Bede helped to found, I showed to people at Missio when I first visited Germany in 1974. These were published by Missio as a Calendar, and also led to my designing the first Hunger Veil for Misereor.

The word Mandala in Sanskrit simply means ‘a circle’. It is generally based on either overlapping squares or triangles, and is the basis of a folk tradition of making designs on the threshold of the home as a sign of blessing and welcoming. Similar patterns can be found in the great rose windows in Gothic Cathedrals, which were used as a “Bible for the Poor” who could not have direct access to the written Word of the Gospels. They presented the Christian message in the form of an abstract design that could be meditated on and remembered.

John's Gospel has a carefully worked out symbolic structure that relates the life of Jesus to the whole of Creation.

CONCLUSION

I have understood my work as searching for ways by which the visible image can act as a form of dialogue between Faith traditions that we find in India, and the Gospel. The image is not meant to be a dogmatic statement. Rather it is a pointer, a path leading to an inner experience. For me, the relation of Gospel to culture can take place in a shared encounter between individuals who are searching for a spiritual truth. In this encounter the Christian believer is enriched in a Faith that is found not in a tradition coming simply from the past, but a way of seeing that looks to the future, The way that people of other Faith traditions might look at the Gospel message from their perspective, helps in understanding the significance of the Gospel at another level. The Gospel is like a Mandala that has many layers. The encounter with other Faiths, and other ways of understanding the meaning of the Gospel, is like a door that opens us to unexpected depths in the Gospel that as yet we have not found.

Jyoti Sahi
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