CHAPTER III

DOCTRINE OF INCARNATION IN VAISHNAVISM

3.1 Introduction.

The Vaishnava movement has had a long history even from the Epic period. Vaishnavites are the worshippers of Vishnu, the Solar deity who is mentioned in the Rg-Veda. Gradually 'Vishnu' was accepted as the supreme God who pervades everywhere. Vaishnavism is the development of Bhagavata religion or Bhagavatism which identifies Vishnu with Bhagavan, the possessor of all auspicious blessings. Again Vaishnavism might have had developed from the pancarātra religion mentioned in the Mahabharata. Later on the Bhagavata cult emphasised the worship of Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu. This religion became a bhakti cult having an emotional character. Vaishnavism found its way to South India some time before the Christian era. In South India this religion was further developed by the Alvars followed by the Ācārya (Theologians) especially Ramanuja.

It was Ramanuja who made the Vaishnava religion more philosophical, unlike the hymns of Alvars which were in agreement with the Vedic scriptures, giving emphasis on devotion or Bhakti to Vishnu and his incarnations especially Krishna. But Ācāryas had to establish a philosophical basis for the worship of a personal God and his saving grace. Ramanuja could not agree with Śankara's Advaitism.
He therefore established his Visistadvita (qualified monism) giving emphasis on theistic view of the Vedas.

3.2. The Concept of God, Man, and World and their Relations in Vaishnavism.

3.2.1. The Idea of God in Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism is a theistic religion. In order to understand the concept of God in Vaishnavism, we shall look into the philosophy of Ramanuja who systematised the Vaishnava doctrine and made it philosophical. The nature of Ultimate Reality is described in different systems of philosophy in different ways. To the Upanishadic thinkers it is the Ultimate Reality which is both objective and subjective. This is approached through the philosophical analysis of the self called Atman. The true self transcends the empirical self. It is the absolute self. Radhakrishnan observes:

"The self which is free from sin, free from old age, from death and grief, from hunger and thirst, which desires nothing but what it ought to desire and imagines nothing but what it ought to imagine, that it is which we must try to understand."1

But the Ultimate Reality which is viewed as Brahman is neither objective nor subjective but the only Reality. The nature of Brahman is also discussed by different thinkers in different ways. To Sankara, Brahman is viewed as the total 'Absolute Reality'.

"That from which these beings are born, that in which when born they live, and that into which they enter at their death, that is Brahman."2
For the monists, neither the material world nor mind is ultimately real. Reality is beyond thought, beyond object-subject relations. At the same time Ultimate Reality is all inclusive, all pervading, infinite Absolute. All relatives are ultimately based on Absolute.

The Bhagavata doctrine looks upon the ultimate as Brahman, Paramatman and Bhagavan. The supreme Brahman is the immutable, self-existent being. Absolute is called Brahman because of its infinite nature. It is again called Bhagavan because of its immanent and transcendent nature. Paramatman is the highest self, the inexhaustible Lord pervading the three worlds who supports them. In Bhagavata, Krishna is known as Bhagavan who is Ultimate Reality itself.

The Ultimate Reality or Brahman is again known by another name, Ananda or delight. Ananda is considered as the highest reality in which the knower, the known and the knowledge become one. It is the most inclusive of all. From it all things flow. By it all things are sustained and into it all things are dissolved. 3

Ultimate Reality to Sankara is indefinable, indescribable nirguna Brahman. Therefore he used the expression ānanda-maya which indicates that it is not Brahman, whereas Ramanuja accepted 'Ananda' as 'Brahman'. To him 'Ananda' is Brahman who is revealed in the existences of the world where there are
different degrees of reality. According to Radhakrishnan we cannot give any account of the highest reality of Ananda. Even the question whether it is abstract or concrete is illogical. However, intellectual necessities require us to give some description. Ramanuja, therefore, believed in the concrete Ananda or revealed Brahman. Radhakrishnan states:

"The supreme Brahman or Ananda at the level of vijnāna or self-consciousness becomes the personal Isvara with a voluntary limitation. God or Self is the ground of unity, and matter or not-self becomes the principle of plurality."4

Thus the concept of Ultimate Reality or Brahman is theistic in nature in the philosophy of Ramanuja. Bhagavad-gīta, the Scripture of the Bhagavata Cult is in support of theistic religion giving room for love, faith, prayer, and devotion. The impersonality of the Absolute is not significant to man. Therefore Gīta adapted the Upanisadic idealism to the daily life of mankind. Infinite immutable Absolute is not meaningful or useful for religious purposes. Only the personal Isvara can satisfy the whole being of man. In that sense Isvara is higher than the impersonal Brahman to a religious soul. He is thirsting for a Saviour, a god who is interested in the welfare of mankind to save them from the evil influences of the Samsara (world).

Vaishnavites, thus, believe in a personal God, Isvara. The concept of God in Vaishnavism is discussed in Gīta, God of the Gīta is not the God of any particular religion, but
rather it discusses the God of all religions and there are many paths to reach Him, He is personal and also impersonal and yet transcends both categories. In a word He is all inclusive, Absolute Reality and cannot be compressed into our little finite notions.

Ramanuja’s Viṣṇuṣṭadvīta (qualified monism) is opposed to the notion of the undifferentiated or indeterminate, unity or Absolute, the notion supported by Sankara. To him, the Absolute Reality is a concept rich with meaning and attributes. Absolute is a self-conscious personality to Ramanuja. The recognition of the personality of the Absolute entails the equation of God and the Absolute. The Absolute is God who is in communion with individual selves. This communion is possible because of the moral attributes like love, justice, goodness possessed by God.

Vaishnavism or Bhāgavata Cult recognises God as Absolute from the Vedantic point of view, yet accepts the theistic concept of personal God who reveals Himself and His will through incarnation to redeem and sustain the world. The importance of the doctrine of incarnation in the Bhāgavata Cult cannot be over estimated. Bhāgavata starts with several questions, all of which revolve round the Doctrine of Incarnation such as the purpose of an incarnation like Krishna, the noble deeds an incarnation performs, the religion which an incarnation leaves
to humanity through his teachings and performances or as a sure guide, and so on. Hence the Doctrine of Incarnation may be regarded as the central pivot round which revolve the other theories of the Bhāgavata Cult.  

Ramanuja's system of Viṣistadvaita gives room for incarnation. To the Vaishnavites, Vishnu is God who incarnates. According to them Vishnu is supreme Brahman, supreme Spirit, and Narayana. In the words of Brain Brown:

"But as He is a great ocean of boundless grace, kindness, love and generosity, He assumed various similar forms without putting away His own essential God-like nature, and time after time incarnated Himself in the several worlds, granting to His worshippers rewards according to their desires, namely religion, riches, earthly love, and salvation, and descending not only with the purpose of relieving the burden of earth, but also to be accessible to men even such as we are, so revealing Himself in the world as to be visible to the sight of all, and doing such other marvellous deeds as to ravish the hearts and eyes of all beings high and low."  

3.2.2. Vaishnava Concept of Man and World in Relation to God. In the Ultimate reality or Brahman or God we have determination, limitation, difference, other-being which are at the same time contained in the One Reality. Brahman has internal differences. The finitude and infinity both are there in the same Brahman who possesses the qualities of being (Sat), Consciousness (Cit), and bliss (Ananda). According to Vaishnavism, Brahman is perfect supreme personality, while the individuals are imperfect personalities. Because of the personal nature of Brahman, He is known as Isvara
and also as Purusottama who is the support of His own essential qualities as well as everything else that are depending on him for their existence. The Vaishnava doctrine insists that God is both transcendent and immanent ground of the world. God is a person and not mere totality of individual persons.

Gita identifies the two principles of the Atman and Brahman. According to Upanished Atman and Brahman are identical, differ only in subjective and objective approaches. But for the Vaishnavites individual souls are distinct from God though they are depending on God. Brahman is eternally free from all imperfections. Individual souls are subject to ignorance and suffering. Yet matter and souls have existence only as the body of Brahman, which is their soul and controlling power. The individual souls and inanimate nature are essentially different from God, though they have no existence or purpose to serve apart from God. Hence Ramanuja's advaita is a special form of non-dualism (i.e., qualified monism). In this sense Vaishnavites do not accept the formula "I am Brahman" nor the concept of 'maya'. To them God is personal and individual souls are different from God. Though the four Vaishnava Schools have doctrinal differences, they all agree in regarding:

"God as personal and the soul as possessed of inalienable individuality, finding its true being not in an absorption in the supreme but in fellowship with Him."

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Ramanuja believes that the individual souls are not illusion. He insists on the continued existence of individual souls and yet they are not essentially the same as Brahman. He argues that God is indeed real and independent, but the world is also real though its reality is utterly dependent on that of God. The world is thus organically related to the Purusottama while the conscious and unconscious objects of the universe co-exist with God, they yet derive their existence from Him. The pluralistic universe is real as God is real. Yet, God is the immanent and transcendent ground of the world according to Ramanuja. That means the world is eternally distinct from God.

The Vaishnava theology is based on the Vedas and the Agamas and also Puranas according to which there is the theory of manifestation of Absolute Brahman. The Absolute, the Supreme Spirit is identified with Vishnu.

3.3. The Concept of Incarnation in Relation to God in Vaishnavism.

3.3.1. Vaishnava Doctrine of Salvation.

The doctrine of Incarnation or Agatara presupposes the doctrine of salvation or liberation. Therefore, we shall discuss the Vaishnava doctrine of liberation before dealing with the theories of avatara. It is true that the Upanisads lay stress on knowledge as the means to salvation or self-
realization. The individual soul fighting with the lower nature is the infinite which is to be realized through knowledge. To Ramanuja it is dhyana or meditation or worship by which one realizes the Ultimate Self in him.

The different religions adopt different methods of salvation. It may be this worldly or other worldly, it may be individual or social, it may be attained instantaneously or gradually. By salvation they mean an escape from something, sin, fear or danger. Salvation may be attained by self-effort or by the help of a Saviour. Many religions believe that salvation could be attained through works like asceticism, through ceremonies, through leading a good life, or it can be through self-surrender to the will of God or by faith in a Saviour. In Buddhism and Jainism the method of attaining salvation is by self-effort, while in Christianity and Vaishnavism salvation is through grace. In Hinduism salvation means the liberation of the soul from the cycle of birth and re-birth, whereas in Christianity and Vaishnavism salvation is a matter of surrender to the will of the Saviour, the incarnation of God through faith on the part of man and through grace on the part of God. Yet it is not by works, but by grace and faith.

The Vaishnava concept of salvation is other worldly in character, because it is the attainment of heaven or eternal existence in the presence of God. One may have to pass
through a variety of heavenly experiences before attaining the highest heaven. The goal has to be attained mainly through bhakti marga, i.e., faith or devotion, love or service to the incarnation of Vishnu.

Ramanuja's religion is more philosophical. To emphasise this aspect of religious experience he did not hesitate to undermine the importance of rituals and mythology of Puranas. He made an attempt to proclaim the doctrine of salvation through bhakti.

All the different schools of Vaishnavism accepted the doctrine of salvation through faith and grace. But they differ in the interpretation of the efficacy of faith in attaining salvation. The Tengalais (Southern School) adopted the dangerous doctrine of dosabhogya, according to which God enjoys sin, since it gives a larger scope for the display of his grace. This school believes that the consort of Vishnu (Laksmi) is uncreated and is to be equally worshipped as the bestower of grace. If salvation is by grace then the righteousness of man is only filthy rags before God. God reveals his grace where there is sin in man. Tengalais School believes that the more the sin in man greater will be the revelation of grace. Their theory of redemption is Cat Theory, that means, just as the kitten is carried by the mother cat, sinner will be received and redeemed by God of His own will without regarding the works of the devotee.
The Vadagalais (Northern School), on the other hand, adopted a different theory of salvation. Their theory of salvation is known as monkey theory. This means, even though the mother monkey is responsible for carrying the young ones, yet they have to cling to the body of the mother. Like that, though salvation is a matter of grace the devotee has to put his trust in God and cling to the will of God and aspire for the presence of God.

The Vaishnava concept of salvation is different, in a sense, from the Upanisadic concept. According to the Upanisad's view, "Whatever be the method we pursue - wisdom, love, or service - the end reached is the same, union of the soul with the highest. When the mind is purified and egoism is destroyed, the individual becomes one with the Supreme." Radhakrishnan observes that according to the Chandogya, immortality is lifting oneself up to the region of the deity. Mandaka holds it to be companionship with God. Absolute likeness with God is also suggested.

To some schools it is the immersion of the individual soul in the Supreme. But others hold the view that salvation is not an annihilation of the soul. Radhakrishnan mentions about one devotee who expressed that; "I want to eat sugar, and do not want to become sugar." This is the view of Vaishnava philosophers. Salvation is the communion with God, the fellowship with God.
This position of the Vaishnava doctrine of salvation brings religion and morality closer. In religion we have the will of man set over against the will of God. If man and God are not distinct, if the will of man and the will of God are one and the same, then there is no morality, for there is no independent will on the part on man to exercise in agreement with or against the will of God. Again if man's action is independent, then God's will is limited. To avoid this problem the Upanisads hold the view that salvation is the state of oneness with God. But in fact we cannot describe this perfection adequately. It is a state of ānanda, eternal joy. Sin is broken fellowship with God. It is disobedience or acting against the will of God. According to Vaishnava doctrine man cannot save himself as it is by grace only. If it is so the initiative on the part of God is necessary. The doctrine of incarnation (Avatara) expresses the manner or the way which the grace of God is revealed in special occasions to redeem man. We have already discussed earlier the different avatars of Vishnu.

3.3.2. The Identity of Avararas with God (Vishnu). Now the question arises how to show the identity of Various avatars like Krishna and Rama with Vishnu and Vishnu with Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. We have already mentioned earlier that Vishnu and Brahman are identical from the point of view of Advaita Philosophy, yet Vishnu is a
To answer the question of identity of avatars with Vishnu, we need to state the meaning of 'identity' According to Hansmol 'identity' in its liberal derivative sense is "absolute sameness" (Identity and Sacred. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976, P.57). If we accept the word 'identity' as the 'absolute sameness', how can we identify an historical person with the Supreme God in the case of avatars. According to Radhakrishnan, the representation of an individual as identical with the Universal Self is familiar to Hindu thought. In the Upanisad the absolute sameness of the individual self and Universal Self or Absolute is emphasised. In this sense we can accept the theory that the avatara is essentially identical with Vishnu or Absolute.

Again Radhakrishnan states that God is never born in the ordinary sense, because the process of birth as well as incarnation imply limitation which is not applicable to God. When we say that God incarnates, it simply means that it takes place with reference to a finite being. Though the whole world is the manifestation of the Supreme, yet He manifests at a greater degree in certain cases.

"When any finite individual develops spiritual qualities and shows large insight and charity, he sits in judgment on the world and starts a spiritual and social upheaval and we say that
God is born for the protection of the good, the destruction of the evil and establishment of the kingdom of righteousness. As an individual Krishna is one of the millions of forms through which the Universal Spirit manifests itself.

But at the same time we should remember that avatars and Vishnu are not two, but one and the same Absolute representing its higher and lower natures. Krishna is the human embodiment of Vishnu. Incarnation is same as creation in principle. In either case Absolute or God remains the same without change. Both creation and avataras are manifestations of God though they differ in quality. The former is general manifestation and the latter is special manifestation.

3.3.3. The Possibility of Avatara.

We have already mentioned in the first chapter the need and possibility of avataras. The avataras stands as the gate and makes himself the way men shall follow. Here we may refer to the words of Jesus: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6) Each incarnation in this sense holds before men his own example and declares the oneness of his humanity with the divine being. The different avataras are only different revelations of the same divine Purushottama.

According to Aurobindo, Gita is able to meet the objections raised by the rationalists against the possibility
of avatarhood because it starts from the Vedantic view. Gita shows that the divine birth is that of the conscious God-head in our humanity. It is essentially opposite of the ordinary birth even though the same means are used, because it is not the birth into the ignorance, but the birth of the omniscient being not a physical phenomenon, but a soul-birth. Aurobindo states:

"It is the soul's coming into birth as the self-existent Being controlling consciously its becoming and not lost the self-knowledge in the cloud of the ignorance."

Aurobindo, when he says that the birth of the avatara is not a physical phenomenon, but a soul-birth, it sounds that it is only a spiritual birth not a physical birth. This agrees with Radhakrishnan's view when he says that God is never born in the ordinary sense. But where does this soul-birth take place? It must be within the individual human being. If it is so, how will it be able to distinguish avatara from saints who are also having the experience of new birth or spiritual birth. Saints also exhibit the divine qualities. Not only that, according to the Vedantic view the eternal and universal self - that is God - is in every human being as partakers of God-head, not a fraction but a partial consciousness of the one consciousness. The Vedantians may justify their stand by stating that the difference in the case of the ordinary finite individual being is that he is limited by ignorance by which he forgets not
only the God-head from which he came forth, but the God-head which is always within him. He is ignorant because of the presence of Prakriti. Saints though exhibit the divine qualities as in the case of incarnations, yet they are also limited by Prakriti. But in the case of incarnation there is the special manifestation of the eternal Universal God-head, who descends into a human form having the inner consciousness of the Lord. Outwardly incarnation is human as any other human being, but inwardly he is God himself.

Thus avatara is always a dual phenomenon of divinity and humanity. The divine takes upon himself the human nature with all its outward limitations and makes them the means or instruments of the divine consciousness and the divine power. Human nature is the vessel used for divine birth and the divine works. Avatara thus opens a door for the individual human beings to be converted into avatar-like persons.

Here we face with a very serious difficulty. If avatara is essentially a spiritual phenomenon, a soul-birth, and described as a physical birth, how do we explain the union of divinity and humanity in avatara? How does the avatara receive body and mind? If at all there is a human body what kind of body would it be? Aurobindo used the illustration of heredity to explain the way God takes upon himself the human form. In the case of ordinary men, individual souls
prepare their physical and mental body through heredity. Similarly, a physical and mental body is prepared fit for the divine incarnation by a pure and great heredity. But this illustration does not explain how God takes upon himself human body. In this case of human heredity, the new body is formed according to the nature of parents. But this is not applicable in the case of incarnation which is essentially a spiritual phenomenon. It is then better to state that a divine birth takes place in a normal human body.

The process of avatar-hood is further explained on the basis of the Doctrine of Re-incarnation. Swami Abhedananda has discussed the theory of Re-incarnation according to Vedanta. The visible phenomenal world is nothing but the manifestation of invisible subtle forms of matter and forces. If the subtle state changes, the gross manifestation will also change. Everything gross is the outcome of a subtle cause. Subtle body is nothing but the invisible particles of matter which are held together by invisible forces including mind and thought force in a potential state. Prana is the life sustaining power. According to Swami Abhedananda:

"Every action of body or mind which we do, every thought which we think, becomes fine, and is stored up in the form of a Samskara or impression in our minds. It remains latent for sometime, and then it rises up in the form of a mental wave and pro-
duces new desires. These desires are called in Vedanta, Vāsanās. Vāsanās or strong desires are the manufacturers of new bodies. If Vāsanā or longing for worldly pleasures and objects remains in any body, even after hundreds of births, that person will be born again. Nothing can prevent the course of strong desires. Desires must be fulfilled sooner or later.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus the actions of the body and mind must correspond to the dormant impressions stored up in the subtle body. The body structure is determined by the desires and will of the individual. When an individual dies, his subtle body continues to exist, of course invisibly, and expresses itself again in gross forms according to the desires and tendencies that are ready to manifest. Advocates of Re-incarnation hold the view that after death the soul wakes up and puts on a new body. Thus the soul continues to manifest itself over and over again. Ordinary people cannot remember their past lives, but a Raja yogi through powerful concentration upon the dormant impressions of the sub-conscious mind can remember all the events of his past lives. Those who believe in the theory of heredity do not believe in the truth of transmigration or Re-incarnation of souls. Heredity, in fact, explains only the continuation of body and mind from parents. But Re-incarnation explains the continuation of the existence of soul. It is believed that the soul of man is eternal. Only Buddhists and materialists believe in the temporary existence of
soul. From the point of view of some schools of Vedanta, soul of man is part of Brahman. They are eternally existing. In that sense the doctrine of rebirth can be accepted. At the phenomenal level, even Advaita Vedanta is not opposed to the concept of rebirth. But the Semitic religions do not believe in the rebirth theory because immortality of soul can be explained without rebirth theory.

The doctrine of incarnation can be explained in the light of the above description of reincarnation theory. Just like the subtle body has the urge to become manifested in gross forms, the love of God expressed in creation of the Universe expresses itself again in a special way. That is incarnation. John's gospel chapter 3, verse 16 states that the cause of incarnation is love of God. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." In other words, the love of God becomes flesh. Whatever may be the explanation regarding the process of incarnation, one thing we have to accept that it is the birth of God in human form. It is a miraculous birth as it is believed by the Christians (the virgin birth theory). It is by the direct action of the Spirit of God.

Again, if the birth of God is not taken in its literal
meaning, if it is only mythological, then the problem of relating infinite and finite is solved i.e., God is not becoming actual flesh, God is only being manifested in a special way in flesh for a specific purpose. Such a manifestation becomes actual in the life of a man through means of myths. Now let us examine the nature or characteristics of avatars in Vaishnavism to study this problem further.

3.4. Characteristics of Avatara.

3.4.1. Importance of Myth in Religion. Avataras is expressed in Vaishnavism in mythological language rather than literal. Mythological language is different from the language of theory or hypothesis. When we face with some puzzling phenomenon, we offer a hypothetical description of the problem. Once it is verified the phenomenon is no longer puzzling.

Myths are also responses to problematic phenomena, but they are different kinds of responses. Myths are useful especially in religion to enable us to relate ourselves to the problematic situations (metaphysical problems). Bultman has defined mythology as,

"The use of imagery to express the other world in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side." 14
Myth can be defined in another form. It is a story which is told but not literally true or it is an image or idea which is applied to something else which inspires the hearers.

There are different kinds of myths. They are classified in many different ways. John Hick has classified myths into narrative myth and mythic concepts. Narrative myth evokes a particular attitude to a present situation by telling a story which is not literally true. The story of the fall of man in the Bible, the creation of the earth through the story of the Kurma avatara are examples of narrative myths. Some moral and religious teachings are attached to these stories. Mythic image is used to evoke a distinctive attitude towards a situation or person, for example, the mythic Son of God.15

According to John Hick, incarnation is not a theological theory, but a religious myth. It is rather a mystery. It is not an hypothesis still waiting to be adequately defined, rather, it is not an hypothesis at all. It is a mythological idea. As such it cannot literally apply to any particular avatara. But it is a powerful poetic image which is evocative even though it conveys no literal meaning. It expresses the religious significance of avatara rather than historical. Its function is to evoke an appropriate response of faith in a person who is accepted
When we say that an avatara is only a myth, most of the religious people will get disappointed. We have to clarify John Hick's standpoint. He does not mean that a religious myth is meaningless. It is not a fable, but a means of grace. A religious myth may or may not have historical basis. But what is more important in religion is faith in God who is not historical.

In this connection it is appropriate to refer to Y. Masih's views regarding the importance and role of myths in religion. To him myth is the language of the unconscious, so it is more primitive than scientific language. On the other hand, facts and science are typical products of the conscious. He states that man lives in an interplay of the conscious and the unconscious. When this interplay is weakened then man becomes abnormal. Religion uses non-literal mythological language and myth cannot be easily removed. "The function of myth is to integrate the cosmos with the sacred." The division of natural and supernatural is not sharp in a primitive world view. The primitive man considered the material objects with supernatural powers. Y. Masih tries to explain the origin of totemism and polytheism on the basis of such belief of the primitive man. In this way we can
say that myth is sacred story giving account to the origin and end of the world. Myth is a living story by which a religious man can participate in the acts of gods and goddesses. Here Y. Masih's view that myth is a living reality to the religious man is right from the practical point of view. Myth can elevate ordinary and profane things of this world to the level of sacred elements.

The importance of myth can be explained in another way by giving it a sacramental value. A sacrament is a means of grace. It is the physical and outward expression of the inward spiritual grace. The myth of the Eucharist (Lord's Supper of Christians) becomes a living reality to the participants of this sacrament. Here myth can elevate ordinary people to the spiritual experience through listening and participating to their religious myth. In this way myth becomes a living experience for the man who accepts it as means of grace. Moreover, religious myths are necessary for mental health. On account of the scientific advancement most of the religious myths have been discarded. But for the modern man it is necessary to formulate new myths to keep him mentally healthy and spiritually alert.

God is a myth not a fact—according to Y. Masih. God becomes a living reality or living experience through myth, which gives an individual the power to make adjustment to his earthly demands. He states:
"God is not a man and yet He is to be pictured as a man so that He may be a tower of strength and a rock of ages for the moderner." 18

Again we get confused when we accept the view of Y. Masih that God is a myth. Unless we explain what we mean by myth, belief in God to many people becomes only imagination, a castle in the air. God is Spirit as it is mentioned in the gospel of John 4:24 and we worship him in truth and spirit. God is spiritual reality rather Supreme Reality. But he reveals to us in our religious experience through rituals, myths, and through the service of God.

The idea of God varies in different religions. That means each religion has got a particular myth to understand God and experience him in the lives of each sect.

3.4.2. The Myths that are connected to the ten incarnations of Vishnu and their historical basis. After having discussed the importance of myths in religion, let us examine the myths that are associated with the ten incarnations of Vishnu with a view to show its relevance to the lives of modern man. Of course we have discussed this already in connection with the history of the concept of incarnation in Vaishnavism. However, in this chapter we have to re-examine those myths to see whether they are philosophically sound and meaningful in the modern religious context.

To Annie Besant, though we human beings find so much dif-
ference between man and lower animals, for infinite Supreme Ishvara such distinctions are but ant hills in comparison with himself. Annie Besant has made an attempt to explain the first four incarnations in terms of evolutionary theory of the Biologists, according to which the main evolution of the animal world begins with fish, then amphibians like tortoise, then the mamals like boar, then the semi-human forms like man-lion. These incarnations are myths formulated by the primitive men to explain the phenomena of creation of the earth and the growth of different forms of animal life on the earth. In course of time, earlier myths have undergone certain modifications. We have mentioned in the second chapter that the four incarnations perhaps are connected to the flood story narrated in Genesis chapter 6 of the Bible. These incarnations also represent the practice of nature worship.

It is believed that during the Treta-yuga (second age) there were constant war between the invaders and the aboriginals in India. The avataras like Vaman, Parashuram, Ramachandra are having references to the tension between gods or righteous people and asuras or the giant like aboriginals, perhaps and the clash between Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Those incarnations might have developed during this period. Another possibility is that the earlier deities might have undergone modifications in the light of the new
Those incarnations, Vamana, Parashurama and Ramachandra are mythological containing moral teachings though based on certain events of heroworship except the Vamana avatara which is based on Rg-Veda story of the three strides of Vishnu. The Dwarf incarnation (Vamana) story represents the work of God in man, as the inner man, to over rule the powers of darkness and evil in man. The myth of Parashurama also represents the work of God against the powers of darkness. At the same time it relates to the supremacy of the Brahmans over the Kshatriyas. Ramachandra is only an Epic hero mentioned in Ramayana. Here the destruction of Ravana represents the spiritual warfare between God's people and the evil powers.

Unlike the Western writers the Indian writers in the past used to conceal their identity. The writers of Puranas and Epics, like the Old Testament Hebrew prophets, were religious teachers and prophets. They might have had formulated myths during this second age to convey to the people the importance of leading a moral, religious life against the growing powers of darkness.

The myth of Krishna avatara might have developed at a very late period, though it originated during the Dwapara yuga (third age). Probably Krishna became the perfect
manifestation of Vishnu during first or second century A.D. The moral and religious teachings of Krishna are much advanced than the teachings of the earlier writers. He was also probably a hero, later on deified and became the saviour of the world.

As mentioned by Dr. Radhakrishnan, Krishna belonged to the ancient Vṛśni or Satrāṭa branch of the family of Yadu. They, perhaps, lived in Mathura. He taught the Satrāṭas the worship of the Sun and the Satrāṭas, perhaps, later on identified their teacher with the Sun, he taught them to worship.

The ninth incarnation, Buddha, took place during the Kali-yuga (fourth age) as the embodiment of illusion and delusion. In fact Buddha was not a descent, but an ascent of man to the level of divinity through meditation. He lived around 300 years before Christ. Vaishnavites accepted him as one of the avataras of Vishnu. He was born to save people from materialism through morality. Buddhism is an ethical religion. We have to note here that the Buddha who is worshipped by the Buddhists today is a mythological Buddha, different from the historical one. It could be possible to believe that the Buddha avatar mentioned in Vaishnavism is another mythological Buddha.

Now the last avatar, the Kalki avatar, represents
the dawning of a brighter age. With his coming the Kali-yuga will pass away and the new Satya-yuga will come with a new and more spiritual race. He will come to judge the world, to punish the evil doers, and comfort the virtuous and then the end of the world will come. Later from the ruins of the earth, he will re-establish a golden age. We have a parallel of this incarnation in the Bible which relates to the second coming of Christ and the re-establishment of a new earth and new heaven and the new Jerusalem, the city of God, (Rev. 21:1-3). This myth is the hope of the Vaishnavites as in the case of Christians whose hope is the glorious second coming of Jesus Christ.

3.4.3. Krishna and the Cult of Krishna. Vaishnavism is predominantly Krishnaism and therefore let us discuss the process in which the Epic hero, Krishna became the supreme God of the Vaishnavism and Krishna Cult. The Krishna Cult is the most important of all the major cults such as Siva, Krishna, and mother goddess, over the whole of India, though in Bengal the cult of mother goddess, Durga is also important. The festival directly connected with the life and works of Krishna are observed joyously all over India. The worship of Krishna is not directly related to the Vedic religion of the Aryans, but he is worshipped as the incarnation of one of the Vedic gods, i.e., Vishnu. Unlike the
other incarnations of Vishnu, Krishna is considered as God himself, full God and full man as in the case of Jesus Christ who is full man and full God.

Krishna cult originated and developed in India. It presented a new sentiment to the Hindu religion. This sentiment has come to be known as bhakti which implies the self surrender of human beings to a personal God of love. This bhakti cult has been transformed into strong emotionalism, especially as it is practised in Bengal. The present forms of bhakti in the Krishna cult are originated from Gita according to Nirad C. Chaudhuri. We can notice in the history of the Krishna cult a transition from the Epic Krishna to Krishna the God. The Krishna, as he is depicted in the Mahabharata, is the earliest Krishna. But a new Krishna appears in the Bhagavadgita. In the Mahabharata, Krishna is depicted as an Epic hero and not as God. In the present form of Mahabharata indirectly he is mentioned as God, because of the additions and modifications. Krishna of Mahabharata underwent a revolutionary transformation just before and after the beginning of Christian era. During this period Krishna, the Epic hero, became the personal supreme deity of a monotheistic cult. He is identified with Vishnu, the second person of the Hindu Triad. Nirad C. Chaudhuri believes that this Vishnu was not the Vedic Vishnu though
it had grown out of the Vedic religion. The Vishnu-Krishna is generally known as Vasudeva. Because of the compound personality of the Krishna of Mahabharata, he is considered as a second Krishna.

Krishna of Gita must be a third Krishna as he is entirely a new Krishna. With the appearance of the Bhagavadgita, the early Vishnu-Krishna cult received a new impetus and a new Krishna appeared as the Supreme God. When it appeared, its teaching appealed to the minds of the Hindus by the new religious sentiment and experience it offered.

The name Krishna occurs at many places such as Vedic, Epic, and Puranic literature as also in Buddhistic and Jain literature. This covers a very long period beginning from B.C. 3000 to 5th century A.D. In Rg-Veda (RV. VIII), Krishna is mentioned as a non-Aryan chief according to Pusalker. In Chandogya Upanisad (III. 7.6) there is a reference to Krishna Devakiputra as a Vedic seer and pupil of Ghora Angirasa. Krishna is represented in the earliest parts of the Mahabharata as an Epic hero, a religious teacher, and a counsellor of the Pândavas; but gradually he is raised to the level of partial incarnation of Vishnu. In the later parts of the Epic, he is treated as the Supreme God, full incarnation of Vishnu,
even he is identified with Brahman.

As it was mentioned earlier, the Puranas speak of Krishna as a Yadava hero, who spent his earlier days in Gokula, but migrated to Dvarāka later on. He was treated as the incarnation of Vishnu-Narayana. A.D. Pusalkar has noted here that with exception of the Rg-Veda passage, Krishna is mentioned as Devkiputra in the Chandogya Upanishad, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas. Krishna is also known as Vāsudeva.

The question of historicity of Krishna deals with the problem of identification of Krishna mentioned in Upanishad with the Krishna of Mahabharata or the Vedic Krishna with the Krishna of Gita. As a matter of fact we do not find any evidence to the identity of the Vedic Krishna with Epic Krishna. Some scholars, on the other hand, believe that the Krishna of the Mahabharata, the Krishna of Puranas, and the Krishna of the Bhagavadgita are different persons.

R.G. Bhandarkar argues that Krishna and Vāsudeva were originally different personages who were later on merged into a single personality. According to him the cow-herd Krishna of the Puranas is distinct from the Vṛṣṇi Prince Vāsudeva of the Mahabharata.

It is however believed that the great battle of...
Kuruksetra is a historical fact although there are conflicting traditions regarding the date of the battle. Pusalkar holds the view that Krishna was connected with the Pandavas and lived during the period of the Bharata war which took place some time around B.C. 3000.24

In the light of the above discussion, one can easily understand the complexity of the historical elements contained in the account of Krishna avatara. It is evident that Krishna of Gita is different from the Epic hero of Mahabharata and also different from the Krishna of the Puranas and Upanisads. Here history is mixed with mythology. It is possible to believe that the cow-herd Krishna of Puranas and Vṛṣṇi prince of the Mahabharata both are historical, but not the same. And also Krishna, the son of Devaki and the pupil of Ghora Angirasa also might be a historical person though different.

One way to explain the complexity of historical elements in the Krishna avatara is to treat it as a saga. That means, we can possibly believe that the traditions of different historical persons mixed with myths in due course combined into one story.

We have noted that the Vaishnava incarnations are not purely mythological. They are based on certain historical facts. The problem of understanding the nature of incar-
nation led to the formulation of various theories of incarnation or avatara vada.

3.5. Different Theories of Avatara.

3.5.1. Introduction.

There are different theories of incarnation formulated by the Vaishnava theologians like Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Vallabha, Caitanya. These theologians were primarily concerned with salvation. But in order to establish their doctrine of salvation, they had to refute other doctrines. They had to fight against materialism, Buddhists, the Sankhyas and other such Schools. Their chief opponent was Sankara, the advocate of the Advaitism. Sankara advocated illusion theory and monism, according to which the Absolute is unqualified pure being, Saccidananda. This Brahman is not perceived through reasoning, but apprehended through inner perception (anubhava). The world is not real though it exists. Liberation is attained only when man perceives identity with Brahman. According to Sankara, the avatara is unreal, because Isvara does not really come down into this world of ours, but only it appears so.

The Vaishnava Schools opposed the doctrine of Sankara and as a result there arose four Schools or Sects, viz., (1) The Shri Sampradaya of Ramanuja, (2) The Brahma Sampradaya of Madhva, (3) The Rudra Sampradaya of Vishnu
Swami, (4) The Sankaädi Sampradaya of Nimbarka. The later sects of Vallabha and Caitanya are also against Sankara's Avatara Vada. The reason is that the maya vada of Sankara does not have room for real devotion or surrender to God which is fundamental in Vaishnavism.

3.5.2. Ramanuja's Theory of Avatara.

Ramanuja opposed the doctrine of Sankara. He says as it is quoted by Otto R.:

"This entire teaching of the so called Kevala-Advaitin Monism presented by our opponent, is nothing but a web of false reasoning scoffing at every logical distinction... His understanding must have been disturbed by illusory imagination, arising from the sins he has committed from his previous births."25

This is the clearest expression of his rebellion against Sankara's doctrine. He wages the battle of realism against idealism. To him the world and multiplicity are real. Ramanuja holds the view that Brahman is certainly the highest and is one. But that does not mean that there is nothing besides him. It simply means that there is no second being equal to him as the co-founder of the world. He is the real creator of the real world and real souls. This creator is not attributeless. Thus Brahman is personal Isvara. The world is called the body of God because he does not create it from something outside him, but in fact he creates this world out of himself. The world depends on God just as the body depends on soul.
When Ramanuja is refuting Sankara's doctrine to establish his own theistic system, he is struggling to establish the place of God in his advaita system. He, therefore, makes a distinction between God of Religion and God of philosophical speculation. He is emphasising God of Religion, the one who inspires personal trust, love, and loyalty, self-surrender. Then we may say that Ramanuja's theistic system falls short of philosophical consistency unless he establishes the fact that God of Religion and Absolute are not two but one and the same. Bradley claims that God of Religion can never be Absolute because once it becomes Absolute, God ceases to be God. In that sense inconsistency in religion is inevitable.

Ramanuja's religion is sectarian, since he considers the supreme to be identical with Vishnu. This supreme God, Vishnu has a human body made of spiritual matter, and the same Vishnu appears in many forms or avatars and each avatar assumes a new body suited to his purpose. Vishnu resides even in the idol. Unlike Sankara, Ramanuja believes that the appearance of God as avatar is real. God's body, according to Ramanuja, is not really human and it does not belong to the realm of Prakriti. It is a mode of spiritual matter and as such it is not limited to the time and space. It is free from the laws of human nature.

Ramanuja, here, supports the Bhagavata doctrine which states
that pure matter constitutes the body of a descent. Pure matter being supra-cosmic substance, it is but natural for a descent to depart with his body made of pure matter.

According to Bhagavata the descent must have two bodies, one is of pure matter (spiritual body) and the other gross matter (physical body). The former is brought about by cit-sakti and the latter by Prakriti. Therefore, it seems that Ramanuja is talking about the spiritual body of avatara only ignoring the physical body. Avatara being God in miniature form, he should posses these two powers, cit-sakti and Prakriti. Both the bodies—spiritual and physical—ultimately belong to God only, because physical bodies are the gross forms behind which shines the glorious spiritual forms according to Siddhesvare Bhattacarya.

This view agrees with the Bible narrative about the body of Jesus Christ. The New Testament speaks that Jesus was having a physical body which got glorified after his resurrection from the dead and he appeared before many (John 21, Acts 1) in his glorified body. St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:40 that there are physical bodies and spiritual bodies. The glorified body of Jesus Christ is not limited to time and space.

Ramanuja's theory of incarnation includes five-fold manifestation of Brahman—Para, Vyuha, Vibhava, Antaryamin,
and Arcā. These are the five forms of God or Brahman accepted on the basis of Pancharatra Agama which is a system of theology.

(1) **Para.** Para is Parabrahman. God assumes five kinds of divine forms. According to V.R. Sri Saila Chakrāvarti:

"The Para form or body is that extra-ordinary aprakṛta body of the Lord assumed in that self-luminous eternal and divine world of bliss and beauty of unsurpassed splendour of lightning and grandeur called paramavyoma, for beyond this material world, uninfluenced and unaffected by time, where time has no power or control, where the first eternal and oldest seers called the nityas enjoy the Supreme Being incessantly along with the muktas liberated from the bonds of Samsāra or worldly existence, shining forth in their own true colours surpassing, in lustre, millions of suns and moons. The Para or Supreme body of Isvara—dearer to the Lord than His own being or Svarūpa— the root cause of all avatars and incarnations, the protector and suporter of all ... called Para Vāsudeva..."

We have a parallel to this form of God in heaven, in the Bible (Isaiah Ch.6: 1-13 and also in the Book of Revelation).

The Brahman in Ramanuja's philosophy is Visista Brahman who is conceived as completely personal. He is the God of love, Narayana, the final resting place of souls. As Para or the Supreme, he manifests in Vaikuntha, which is his eternal manifestation without any limitation. From there he manifests himself in various ways to redeem the devotees.

(2) **Vyuha.** Vyuha form or body of God is the first step in
the materialisation of the spiritual principle from which the whole universe has emanated like a web from a spider's body. V.R. Sri Sāila Chakrāvarti mentions four kinds of Vyuhas—Vasudeva, Pradyumma, Sankarsana and Aniruddha.

(3) Vibhava The Vibhava form is another way in which the Supreme person manifests himself. It is the manifestation of God in the cosmos. It is the incarnation (descent) from the Lord, prompted by overflowing grace.

"The avatāras are limitless as the grace of the Lord, the desires of the devotees and the occasions calling for the descent of the divinity are equally limitless."3

The purpose and occasion of incarnation is mentioned in the Bhagavadgītā. The Vibhavas may be of two kinds namely, primary and secondary. In the case of primary or mukhya avatāras, Isvara himself is operating directly, not through a soul's medium. Such incarnations are the descent of God in his rupa (form) with a divine or aprakṛta body taking the shape of man or animal. The secondary avatāras are jivas possessed of divine powers of accomplishing specific superhuman purpose.

An avatāra is thus God in human form, a meeting ground of the divine and human, according to Ramanuja. All people may not realize the divinity of avatāra. The vicious see only the human form while virtuous people can see the divinity in avatāra. The only difference between the birth of
avatara and birth of ordinary human being is that the former remembers them while the latter does not. Rama and Krishna are examples of Vibhava.

(4) Antaryamin. This is the manifestation of God or Isvara as the indweller, the inner self of all souls and even the life principle within non-living things. If it is so, we can consider this form of manifestation as the manifestation of divine spirit in general while Vibhava or avatara is the special manifestation. V.R. Sri Saila Chakravarti states:

"Besides being the life principle within matter and souls, He manifests Himself, to those who seek to see Him in this form within their hearts."31

This is the special form in which Isvara manifests himself to the yogis and enlightened souls.

(5) Arca. Lastly the Arca or Image form is also an avatara according to Ramanuja. To him it is the symbol of the Deity. Avatara like those of Rama and Krishna had their earthly ministry in the past. But they can be real today to the modern man through their statues or icons or symbols or idols. Thus the Vaishnavites practise the idol worship because,

"Paradoxically enough the lifeless idols become the living witness of the living God pulsating through them. Worship of the icon and communion with it looked upon as communion with God Himself who has given it life."32

Arca avatara is considered as the concretisation of the
Supreme Being in material medium like wood, stone, or metal. Ramanuja's School attach great importance to Arcā or idol worship as an immediately available aid to achieve spiritual discipline. The philosophy behind idol worship in Vaishnavism is found in scriptural texts such as Gita verse IV. 11.

For the Vaishnavites Arcā is an act of grace (anugraha) on the part of the deity towards his devotee. It seems to me that Arcā may be treated as a means of grace, as in the case of sacraments in Christian Churches. For the Christians, Sacraments like the Lord's Supper, and Baptism are means of grace and not an end in themselves. In rituals what is important is meaning attached to the symbols. Most of the people are just satisfied with the outward observances of the rituals without having communion with the Reality i.e., deity behind these symbols or rituals. In many cases ritualism has degenerated into commercialism and social gathering or entertainments. If the images or symbols used in ritualistic forms of worship could serve the purpose of getting grace of God, then they are avatāras, in the sense Ramanuja has interpreted.

Thus Ramanuja's theory of incarnation interprets the concept of incarnation in a much wider sense, so much so all the various forms of God's manifestation are included. In fact the concept of incarnation is used generally in a
very restricted sense i.e., special revelation or God's descent with a specific purpose only. Para being the manifestation of God in the spiritual realm only, it is not at all considered as incarnation. Vyuha is also not incarnation as it is only general revelation. Antaryamin is only manifestation of divinity in saints and Arca is only symbolical and means not end and therefore they are also not incarnation. So we shall accept only Vibhava as incarnation in the strict sense of the term.

3.5.3. Nimbarka's Theory of Avatara.

Nimbarka, a Telegu Brahmin, was a staunch propagator of the Sankadi Sampradaya or sect. His conception of Bhakti deeply influenced both Vallabha and Caitanya who founded new sects at the opening of the 16th century. His philosophical system is called dualistic monism (Beda-bheda). According to him the soul is both identical with and different from God. God is a self-differentiating and self-integrating Being. Both difference and non-difference are real. The universe being the manifestation of God, cannot be dismissed as an illusory world. Krishna is identical with Brahman. From his spiritual body emanates his shakti called Radha, the eternal consort of Krishna. The gopis are further differentiations of Radha. Krishna and Radha take the place of Narayana and Laksmi. Prapatti or submission is the way of deliverance. Bhakti is love and
devotion and not meditation. The worship of other Gods is forbidden. Nimbarka preached exclusive devotion to Krishna. According to him:

"Avatara means that the heaven of Krishna becomes manifest on earth, and the bhaktas are capable of witnessing the inner life of God, which is the premalila (love sport) of Krishna and the gopis."33

This eroticism is in contrast with the intellectual and serene Bhakti of Ramanuja. They worship Sri Krishna as represented in his boyhood. Sometimes they worship Sri Krishna and Radha, the pair and devote their wholehearted energy to worship, by offering flowers, scents, fruits, food, and aratrik (waving of light before image) to him and also by the chanting of hymns in his praise.

3.5.4. Vallabha's Theory of Avatara.

Vallabha strengthened the Rudra Sampradaya or sect which was originated from Rudra. His philosophical system was also theistic which is pure non-dualism or monism different from Sankara's monism which is impure monism, because it contains the concept of maya. According to him the world is real. He holds the view that:

"The supreme is Krishna whose eternal consort is Radha; his inner life consists in amorous sport with Radha and the gopis, a continuous hide and seek consolation alternating with disolation (God manifesting and hiding Himself)."

To him, the souls, inanimate objects and the world are in
essence one with Brahman. The relation between them is one of pure identity. Jiva, Kala (time), and Prakriti (maya) are eternal in existence and have no separate existence apart from Brahman who can create without any connection with maya. God is personified as Krishna who is Kartā (doer), Bhokta (enjoyer), and endowed with Jnana (knowledge) and Kriya (action). He appears in various forms to please his devotees. Ananda (bliss) is suppressed in human beings, animals, and matter. By his will Brahman can have evolution and involution. Avatar is Krishna himself. He has no earthly body and soul.

Salvation is attained through devotion to Krishna. It is by grace of God. The highest goal is not liberation, but the eternal service of Krishna. It consists in being admitted into the inner life of God in celestial Brindavan, the participation in his sport.

Vallabha's Vedantic principle is Visudha Advaitavada or Sudha Advaitavada. According to this School Saguna and Sudha (pure) Brahman is the cause of the universe. Jivas (beings) originate from him like sparks from a flame. Hence it is different from Sankara's Advaita. The means to attain bliss is love and devotion.

3.5.5. Madhva's Theory of Avatar. Madhva was the greatest
exponent of Brahma Sampradaya. He accepted two kinds of Reality, (1) Swatantra (independent) and (2) Paratantra (dependent). Only the supreme person is independent. The dependent may be of positive (Bhava) or negative (Abhava). Positive may be either conscious like souls or unconscious like matter and time. World and souls are real and eternal like God.

Brahman is identified with Vishnu as creating, maintaining and destroying the world again and again. He is endowed with a super-natural body and is the inner ruler (Antaryamin) of all souls. He is both transcendent and immanent. He manifests himself in the Vyuhas (of various forms) appears now and then as avatars and is mystically present in sacred images. Laksmi, the divine consort is co-eternal with him and all-pervading without a material body. She is Nityamukta and witnesses the glory of Vishnu through eternity.

Isvara is different from Jiva. Absolute is thoroughly independent having unsurpassing qualities, where as Jiva is endowed with limited powers and is dependent. Jiva becomes liberated by his grace only. This School does not admit Nirvana or final liberation from matter and re-union with the Supreme. Liberation can be in different forms such as Sarupya which means sameness, Sauuja which means intimate union with the desired deity, Sannidya which
means to be in the presence of God and Sashti which means possessing the same rank with the deity. They prefer pure devotion to attain the realisation of the goal.

3.5.6. **Caitanya's Theory of Avatara.**

Caitanya's theory is also same as Nimbarka's. The Bengal Vaishnavism of Caitanya School also gives emphasis on erotic bhakti to Krishna. He believes that the spiritual world with Radha and gopis as his companions is one and the same Krishna in another form. The lila of Krishna is the basis of worship and devotion. The ordinary souls are, on the other hand, only sparks of the divine essence in an infinitesimal degree. Avatara means that the cities of heaven become visible on earth (earthly Vrindaban is identified with heavenly one) and Krishna's inner life is made manifest so that the hearts of men may be filled with bhakti and be associated to his inner life.

Unlike Ramanuja's theory of incarnation which includes all the various forms of God's manifestation, the other Vaishnavava Schools are giving more importance to the manifestation of Krishna's heaven (Vrindaban) only. The essence of Vrindaban experience is love sport which the devotees can participate through bhakti. To these schools, it seems, avatara means the descent of Vrindaban and not simply Krishna. Probably, they mean that Krishna in his
fullness includes the whole of Vrindaban. If we substitute the word 'Kingdom of God' in its place, then it agrees with the Christian concept of incarnation. Jesus Christ brought down the Kingdom of God into the earth. That means the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was the descent of the Kingdom of God (John 1:3). The erotic element is included in the Christian concept of bhakti or devotion to Christ who is pictured as the bridegroom and the believers or the Church as the bride. The heavenly experience is pictured as the celestial marriage relation between Christ and his Church.

3.5.7. The Views of Radhakrishnan.

Radhakrishnan's views regarding the incarnation is expressed in his Commentary on Gita. He asks, how we can identify an historical individual with the Supreme God. He justifies the possibility of such a belief by saying that it is possible to identify the individual self with the Universal Self. According to the Upaniṣads a fully awakened soul apprehends that he is one with the Absolute. Gita makes a distinction between the birth of incarnation and ordinary birth. As an individual, Krishna is one of the millions of forms through which the Universal Spirit manifests itself. When an individual manifests divinity he is considered as an avatara.
Radhakrishnan here uses the word 'avatara' in a general sense. To him, the avatara is the demonstration of man's spiritual resources and latent divinity. It is not so much the contraction of Divine majesty into the limits of the human frame as the exaltation of human nature to the level of God-head by its union with the Divine.

But he uses the word 'avatarana' in the case of God's manifestation in Krishna. Krishna is an incarnation or descent of the Divine into the human frame. Lord has many times been born, though he is unborn. Krishna is the human embodiment of Vishnu. Avatara is God's assuming human nature as in the case of creation. In either case such a manifestation does not take away anything from or add anything to the Divine Reality. Creation and avatara, both belong to the world of manifestation and not to the Absolute Spirit. Creation is the general manifestation or revelation of God, while incarnation is his special manifestation.

Radhakrishnan believes that avatara is different from the general manifestation of God in the sense avatara is the revelation of the spiritual in man. According to him, there is no difference whether we say God limits himself to become man or man rises to God by the working of God in human nature, though avatara is generally accepted as
a descent. To him the divine consciousness present in human nature is the eternal avatara, while Krishna avatara is an illustration of the revelation of the spiritual in us.

Radhakrishnan here agrees with Aurobindo who holds the view that the purpose of descent of God is to help man to ascent to the level of God-head or to have full communion with God. To Aurobindo, descent or incarnation is incomplete without the ascent of man. When Radhakrishnan states that avatara is an illustration or demonstration of the presence of spiritual resources in us, he means the same thing that it is for the purpose of spiritual upliftment of man or to save mankind.

Thus we have discussed the concept of incarnation in Vaishnavism in relation to the concept of salvation. It is the message of Gita as well as the message of the gospels, that the purpose of incarnation is to save mankind from sin and to give eternal life. John 3:16 is the heart of the Christian doctrine. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life." Though the concept of sin as the fallen nature of man is emphasised in Christianity, it is not so clear in Vaishnavism. Let us now examine in the next chapter the concept of incarnation in Christianity.
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