5.1. Importance of Comparative Religion.

We have already discussed the concept of incarnation in Christianity and Vaishnavism from historical and philosophical stand points. Now let us compare their views to find out the areas where these two religions meet and the areas where they differ. Before doing this it may be relevant to show the importance of comparative religion and its limitations.

A few centuries ago the attitude of people all over the world was to assume the unquestionable and unquestioned superiority and validity of one's own religion. But this attitude has been changed because of the increasing contact which the different civilizations and religions have with each other and also the development of scientific study and comparison of religions. We have to-day a more accurate and extensive knowledge of different religions than ever before, as a result of pains-taking research in this field. The scholars could notice amazing similarities as well as dissimilarities in them. This made them search out what is common and essential in all religions. As a result of such comparative study
of religions, it is realized that the claim for truth is the core of all real religious life. For example, we have prophetic religions, like Christianity and Judaism, different from mystical religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. Yet we notice certain fundamental points of similarities between these religions.

But it is important to be cautious enough when we indulge in such comparative studies. In this connection let me refer to the views of Hendrik Kraemer, the author of the 'Christian Message in a Non-Christian World'. Here he took up a position as different as possible from that of all the supporters of the comparative method. According to him, the use of the expression 'religions' implies at once, that there is some general concept, under which all the particular forms of religion may be subsumed. But it is difficult to arrive at a satisfactory and agreed definition of religion. To him comparison can only be of ideas. We can work out more or less accurately the Christian idea of God and compare this with the idea of God as it is found in Vaishnavism. But we must never forget that, when we do this we are dealing with abstractions. In order to make comparison possible we have detached certain ideas or theories or doctrines from the living experience which has given rise to them. In doing so, we rob them of their life. Such study has the same value as
the dissection of a specimen in the laboratory. We have to note here, faith is to be experienced as a whole and cannot be experienced in any other way. Stephen Neil states:

"It has to be recognized that those things which are experienced as wholes are in fact not com-
mensurable with another, anymore than one scent is really comparable with any other ... "2

According to him just as we cannot really compare music of one person with another, each has to be felt and appreciated in terms of itself and nothing else, so also each religion should be understood in terms of itself.

H. Kraemer states:

"Every religion is a living indivisible unity. Every part of it - a dogma, a rite, a myth, an institution, a cult- is so vitally related to the whole that it can never be understood in its real function, significance and tendency, as these occur in the reality of life, without keeping constantly in mind the vast and living unity of existential apprehension in which this part moves and has its being. It is only for the sake of scientific analysis that we are al-
lowed to break up a religion into conceptions about God, man, sin, redemption, soul, etc. This scientific method properly speaking, is a great distortion and disregard of living and actual reality," 3

Therefore scientific method is no use to apprehend reli-
gion which is a living reality. Thus a real insight is possible only if one applies a 'totalitarian approach' to a religion and its constituent parts. Therefore we should remember that comparison of religions can only be of ideas and not of religion as such and religious faith is experience
as a whole. Each religion, as we study it, will be found to be one expression of man's reaction to the total human situation within which he has to live.

An important requirement of comparative studies is to make the investigation in a spirit which is truly objective and broadly impartial and at the same time keep in mind the limitations of such study. Remembering these things, let us proceed to make a comparative estimate of the doctrine of incarnation in Christianity and Vaishnavism.

5.2. Common Characteristics of Incarnation in Christianity and Vaishnavism.

5.2.1. Twelve Characteristics of Avatara Doctrine.

The following are the twelve characteristics of avatara doctrine mentioned in Geoffrey Parrinder's book 'Incarnation and Avatara': (1) Avatara is real, (2) it takes worldly birth, (3) it is both divine and human, (4) each avatara finally dies, (5) it is both historical and mythological, (6) avatara is repeated, (7) avatara lives exemplary life, (8) each avatara comes with a mission, (9) avatara is not illusion, (10) it is a guarantee of divine revelation, (11) it reveals a personal God and (12) it reveals a God of grace.

5.2.2. Common Characteristics of Incarnation and Avatara.
When we closely examine the above mentioned characteristics, it becomes obvious that they are not simply the characteristics of avatara doctrine of Vaishnavism only, but they are common characteristics of incarnation in both Vaishnavism and Christianity, though they differ in certain details. Even though some scholars have tried to make a distinction between avatara and incarnation, basically both doctrines believe in the process of God's descent into the world to save mankind and destroy evil. To some critics, the successive avatars are not incarnations, but theophanies only. Christian tradition also includes theophanies for there are many manifestations of God through angelic messengers and divine visions mentioned in the Old Testament and New Testament. Vaishnavites claim that Krishna is the full revelation of God, while other avatars are just partial incarnations. In this respect it agrees with the Christian concept of incarnation.

We shall mention some of the important characteristics of incarnation that are common in Christianity and Vaishnavism.

(a) **Incarnation is real and not appearance.** According to Sankara incarnation is appearance or illusion. This is not special to avatara only because in Sankara's system of philosophy every thing except Brahman is appearance.
Ramanuja on the other hand believes that incarnation is real. Even the purely mythological avataras also must be treated as real though they are not historical persons. They are used as imageries or myths to represent God's revelation in nature in the form of creation for restoring righteousness. At least some of the Vaishnava avataras like Krishna and Rama are thought to be heroes deified and became incarnations of the epic period. Except Buddha, we do not have any authentic historical record to prove the historicity of Vaishnava avataras. Even Buddha avatar also, we are not sure, whether Buddha mentioned among the ten avataras is the same Buddha who lived during 563 to 483 B.C. However, these avataras of Vaishnavism are real in the sense they are the manifestations of God though in different forms.

In the case of Jesus Christ there is no doubt about his historicity, though the Christological problem is not yet settled. The efficacy of incarnation lies in this belief that incarnation is real.

(b) **Incarnation is both divine and human.** Saints are not conscious of God in them, though they possess both divinity and humanity. Christians believe that man was created in the image of God, but he lost that image because of sin. But God, in Jesus, made it possible for all men to restore the original status. Unlike the saints, incarnation is
conscious that he is God himself.
(c) *Incarnation finally dies a vicarious death.* This aspect is emphasised in Christianity. Jesus Christ's very mission was to die for the redemption of mankind. This vicarious aspect is not clear in Vaishnavism though the death of certain incarnations before they left their earthly existence is mentioned. Some think that Rama's suffering was having vicarious aspect.
(d) *Incarnation is both historical and mythological.* This aspect of incarnation is discussed elsewhere in detail. Jesus of Nazareth is historical while Christ of the New Testament is mythological. Similarly, Krishna, the Yadava prince, might be a historical hero while Krishna of Gita is mythological. Some of the avataras like fish, tortoise, man-lion, boar, Vamana are purely mythological though they might be based on some pre-historical facts like the creation of earth.
(e) *Incarnation is special revelation of God.* God reveals himself in diverse ways and manners. But he reveals his personality, love and grace through incarnation. The personal aspect of God is revealed in the avataras like Krishna and Rama. Jesus Christ reveals the Father aspect of God. Krishna, Rama, and Christ reveal the love of God in their earthly lives. Christianity claims that the manifestation of God's love and grace reaches its climax on the cross of Calvary where Jesus died a vicarious death,
for the salvation of the whole world. Gita also insists that God is the highest person, who reveals not only love but grace too. Both Vaishnavism and Christianity emphasise that salvation is by grace and grace only and not by merit. Christianity insists that revelation in Jesus Christ is once and for all. It is final and perfect and as such it need not be repeated. Vaishnavites also claim that Krishna is the perfect manifestation of God himself and as such it is final. It is distinct from amsavatara. Lord Krishna in Gita promises that he takes birth whenever there is a need to save man from the powers of darkness. The same promise is given in the New Testament that Jesus Christ sends his spirit to abide with the believers alsways and he will appear again to judge the world. It is the second advent of Christ which is the hope of Christians. The Vaishnavites also do hope that Krishna will incarnate again as 'Kalgi' to judge the world. This is parallel with the coming of Christ to judge the world. This is the final judgment to receive the righteous people to himself and wicked to eternal destruction. Vaishnava concept of judgment by the tenth avataras is similar to Christian concept of judgment at the second advent of Christ.


5.3.1. Let us begin with the account of Man Jesus and
Man Krishna and their lives and works. The four gospels in the New Testament explicitly state that Jesus is a man who lived on earth like other human beings with all the limitations of human life. Gospels are records of the life and works of Jesus Christ, including his teachings. Gita, on the other hand, does not give the life and works of Krishna. It is predominantly a book of ethics and eschatology, dealing with the teachings of Krishna. In that sense it is the gospel (good news) of Krishna. In fact we can trace the account of his life and works in the Mahabharata and Bhagavadgita is simply a part of it. Just like the New Testament is interpreted in the light of the Old Testament, Gita is interpreted in the light of the Mahabharata. The New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament and Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. In the case of Gita, it is only an extract from the Mahabharata. To enlighten the background of the Mahabharata we need to go through some other scriptures like the Chandogya Upanished. The Chandogya Upanished mentions that Krishna was the pupil of Ghora Angirasa, a priest of the Sun-god. According to Mahabharata Krishna was the friend of Arjuna. He belonged to the ancient Vrsni family of Mathura, where he established a new religion different from Vedic religion.

It is interesting, as well as profitable, to note the parallels in the New Testament and Gita regarding the lives and works of Jesus Christ and Krishna. New Testament scho-
lars locate the story of Jesus in the history from B.C. 4 - A.D. 28. Gospel writers mention the early life of Jesus which he spent in a village called Nazareth in the Northern District of Palestine. But the period between his childhood and his public ministry at the age of thirty is obscure. So also is the case of Krishna who appears in the Mahabharata as a warrior after a period of long silence, between the stories of his early life and his appearance as a warrior. In the case of Krishna, it is doubtful whether the Krishna mentioned as Devakiputra and the warrior Krishna of Mathura or Krishna of Gita are identical or not. Garbe states:

"It has long been known that we do not possess the Bhagavad Gita in its original text but in a form that has resulted from substantial alterations. The teachings put into the mouth of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita offer a remarkable mixture of pantheistic and monotheistic ideas of philosophical thought and pure deeply religious faith in God."°

However, W. Douglas P. Hill in his book 'The Bhagavad-gita' mentions about the manhood of Krishna. According to him, about one thousand years before the birth of Christ, the Aryans leaving their unknown home some centuries before and crossing the northern ranges had settled down in the sacred land of Kuruksetra. It is the central plain near the place where Jammu and Ganges meet. The famous battle between the neighbouring tribes of Kurs and Pancalas took
place in this holy plain. According to Douglas, the mighty works and deeds of Pancalas were handed down in song and story and form the kernel of Mahabharata. According to Radhakrishnan the original event seems to be a non-\textsuperscript{aryan} one; but it was soon converted into an Aryan story.

Of course it is difficult to separate history from the legendary in that great \textsuperscript{Epic}. But the names of those who are said to have fought in the battle are found in the early literature. Therefore it is \textit{reasonable} to suppose that Krishna who plays so important a part in the story, was in \textit{very} truth a ksatriya warrior who fought at Kuruksetra. If that be so, it was in this land and in these times that Krishna was born. His father's name was Vasudeva and his mother's \textsuperscript{devaki}. His elder brother was Sankarsana (Balarama). He belonged to the ancient Vrisni family of Yadu of Mathura, a city by history and tradition alike connected to Krishna's name. According to tradition Krishna learned those lessons of the meaning of sacrifice, the merit of virtue etc. from a priest of the Sun-god. These lessons are preserved in the \textit{Bhagavadgita} by the \textit{Bhagavata} sect. Since this new sect advocates the religion of the heart and insists on the importance of devotion to a personal God, it is possible that many Brahmins might have opposed this religion as it is against the Vedic
This account regarding the life of Krishna must be treated as purely hypothetical and not yet proved. However, in the absence of authentic historic records, uncontradicted tradition may be accepted as true. Therefore, there is room for further study regarding the Krishna tradition. But in this discourse we are more concerned of the teachings of Gita and the teachings of New Testament to make a comparative study of the incarnations in these scriptures. S. Radhakrishnan writes:

"So far as the teaching of the Bhagavadgita is concerned, it is immaterial whether Krishna, the teacher is a historical individual or not. The material point is the eternal incarnation of the Divine, the everlasting bring forth of the perfect and divine life in the universe and the soul of man." 9

However, he supports the view that Krishna is a historical individual, who was the student of Ghora Angirasa as mentioned before. Krishna learned from his teacher the religion of the heart or faith and then he preached the same. Of course, religion of Krishna is not a new religion, but a reformed Vedic religion, rather, the fulfillment of the Vedic ritualistic religion.

Jesus Christ also taught the religion of the heart. It was already initiated by the Hebrew prophets. In fact Jesus himself said that he had come not to destroy the laws
that is, old Hebrew religion, but to fulfil it. He is the meaning of the Hebrew ritualistic religion. The Old Testament sacrifices are only shadows directing to the vicarious death of Jesus on the cross. He reinterpreted the Old Testament commandments and preached the Kingdom of God.

Similarly, Krishna is a unique teacher, being the omniscient, Supreme Reality revealed to man. He taught three ways of salvation—Karma marga, Bhakti marga, and Jnana marga. These three ways are not separate ways of salvation, only the three aspects of the same way of salvation. New Testament also states that faith and works (Bhakti and Karma) are only two sides of Christian life. Faith without works or works without faith is meaningless (James 2:26).

5.3.2. Divinity of Christ and Krishna.

S. Radhakrishnan mentions in his 'Indian Philosophy' about the process by which Krishna is made into a Supreme deity. The Mahabharata contained several accounts combined into one, in the course of ages, representing Krishna in all the grades from a historical character to an avatar of Vishnu. Krishna, in the opinion of the writer of Gita, is the Purusothama, the supreme God who limits himself to become man without losing the fullness of knowledge. Here Krishna is Vishnu himself, the second person of the Hindu triad. So also, according to Christian
tradition, Christ is God himself, the second person of the God-head.

Krishna avatara is mentioned in the Bhagavadgita as revelation of God (Gita ch. 4) and New Testament claims that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God—the eternal word of logos became flesh (John ch. 1). Since Krishna transcends the perishable and is more exalted than the imperishable, he is extolled as the Supreme person in the Veda. But the knowledge of Krishna's true form cannot be known from the Veda, for he says that he has shown grace to Arjuna by revealing to him by his own power, his supreme form which is glorious, all embracing, infinite, and primeval. The worship of the Vedic gods is really directed to Krishna himself, though the worshippers may not realize it.

In the case of Christ, the Old Testament religion is directed to himself, though the Hebrews did not realize it. The unknown Krishna of Veda will be known only by his lovers with the aid of his own grace. The revelation of God in Christ was predicted by the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament writers have interpreted it as the fulfilment of the Old Testament.

Krishna declares that though in reality he is God who knows no birth or change, he has been born many times. The
climax of the Bhagavadgita is the theophany, in which Krishna, the incarnate God, reveals himself to Arjuna in his 'Supreme Form' as the Lord (Gita XI: 45).

"The message of the theophany is that while the still, static eternal state of Brahman can be gained by any one who can completely detach himself from this world; the fullness of the God head as it is tirelessly active in time can only be seen and experienced by God-lovers (Gita XI. 54)."

A parallel of this record is found in the New Testament where it is mentioned about the transfiguration of Christ (Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-36). Peter, James, and John had the privilege to have this wonderful experience of the glory of Jesus. They heard the declaration that Jesus Christ is God's own dear Son (Matthew 17:5).

However, we notice a difference in the case of the revelation of Krishna. The crowning purpose of Krishna's avatara is to reveal his true nature as God and to manifest his love for man and to demand love in return from man in order that man may attain salvation which is a state of union with God in perpetual and blissful love. This is similar in the case of Christ's revelation also. But Krishna's revelation in the form of incarnation has no finality and definiteness for his incarnations are said to be innumerable, though the important ones are
There is no unique incarnate God, no unique saviour, no unique salvation unless we take for granted that Krishna is the unique saviour who reveals himself in diverse manners in different occasions and his revelation mentioned in Gita is in its fullness. Again Krishna of Gita is not a revelation in history. It is not an account of God's dealings with man in history. It does not matter whether Krishna was a historical person or not; the idea that he is an avatara is sufficient for a believer to have communion with God because all avataras are different manifestations of the Supreme God. Hence Krishna's revelation is essentially mystical. It is not easy to distinguish between mysticism and revelation. In Gita, of course, theistic mysticism which implies direct attainment of knowledge of God is emphasised.

Though, the synoptic gospels emphasise the historical Christ, the fourth gospel gives more emphasis on the mystical aspect of Christ's revelation. The writer of the fourth gospel, through his association with Jesus, attained a mystical experience which is reflected in his gospel and more in his book of Revelation. In the same way we can treat Gita as the reflection of the mystical experience of the writer who might have had the vision or mystical experience of Krishna like Saint John had the direct experience of Christ before and after his resurrection.
5.3.3. The Pre-existence of Christ and Krishna.

The following parallels have been collected from Gita and New Testament to show the divinity and pre-existence of Christ and Krishna.

Gita IV. 4-9. Arjuna asked Krishna, "You rather confusing, Gi you exist now while Vivasvat ruled in the dim-past, how is one to believe that you taught him this yoga?" (IV. 4) Krishna answered: "Oh Arjuna, both you and I have passed through numerous lives. I know all of them, but you know none. Oh slayer of foes!" (IV. 5)

"True I am birthless, of imperishable essence, the Lord of the created. Even so, I do make myself appear in this world in material forms, as effects of my creative force, with it as a support and condition. This is the function of my māyā." (IV. 6)

"Oh Bhārata! whenever virtue suffers and vice prosper, I appear in a body, I create myself!" (IV.7)

New Testament—Gospel of John, Then said the Jews to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"

Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was I AM." (John 8:57,58)

Jesus said to them, "You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world: I am not of this world" (John 8:23).

He said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven" (John 6:41).
5.3.4. The Claims of Christ and Krishna, as God.

John 10:30-35- Jesus said, "The Father and I are one". They replied, "...you are trying to make yourself God!" Jesus answered, "It is written in your own law that God said, "you are gods"... and God called those people gods, the people to whom his message was given!"

Here it can be interpreted in the language of Vedantists that Christ is the Word or God and all those who are having Christ (the word of God) in their lives are gods, though they are ignorant of it. In John 10: 36-38 Jesus claims himself to be Son of God.

"How then can you say that I blaspheme because I said that I am the Son of God? ... you should at least believe my deeds, in order that you may know once and for all that the Father is in me and that I am in the Father."

In John 11:4, Jesus speaks about the death of Lazarus, "This happened in order to bring glory to God and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory." Unlike the children of God in general, Jesus Christ is one with the Father or identical with the Father. He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). "I am with you always " (Matthew 28:20). This statement indicates the omnipresence of Christ. People asked him, "How long are you going to keep us in suspense? Tell us the plain truth: are you the Messiah?" (John 10:24).

(The word messiah means the anointed of God. The word
'Christ' is the Greek form of the same Hebrew word 'Messiah'.

The title 'Messiah' is applied principally and by way of eminence, to the sovereign deliverer who was expected by the Jews and whom they expect even to-day though he is already come at the appointed time. When Jesus was asked by the Jews whether he is messiah, he told them that he is the Son of God (John 10:36), who is identical with the Father. (John 10:30,38). When he declared, "I am the resurrection and life", Mary answered, "Yes, Lord, I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:25-27). Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father (Christ and Father are one, John 14:9).

Unlike Jesus Christ of the New Testament, Krishna of Gita claims directly that he is God himself. The following passages give clear evidence to this view. Krishna says:

"Though unborn and immortal, I manifest myself through my own yogamaya (divine Potency), keeping My Nature (prakrti) under control. My birth and activities are divine, He who knows this in reality does not take birth again on leaving his body but attains Me."

Gita IV. 6-9

"Having known Me in reality as the enjoyer of sacrifices and austerities, the Supreme Lord of all the worlds, and the disinterested friend of all beings, My devotee attains peace."

Gita V. 24.

Krishna said to Arjuna:
"I shall unfold to you in its entirety this wisdom along with the real knowledge of manifest Divinity, having known which nothing else remains still to be known in this world."

Gita VII. 2

"Arjuna, know that all beings have evolved from this two fold prakrti and that I am the source of the entire creation, and in Me again it dissolves."

Gita VII. 6

"There is nothing else besides Me, Arjuna ..."

Gita VII. 7

"Veiled by My Yogamāya (divine potency), I am not manifest to all, hence these ignorant folks do not recognize Me as the unborn and imperishable supreme Spirit (i.e., take Me to be subject to birth and death)."

Gita VII. 25

"Arjuna, I know all beings, past as well as present, nay, even those that are yet to come, but none (devoid of faith and reverence) knows Me."

Gita VII. 26

"I am the sustainer and ruler of this universe."

Gita IX. 17

Jesus makes a similar claim in John's gospel. John 18:37, 38, "Whoever belongs to the Truth listens to me." He claims that he is the ultimate Truth which is God himself (John 14:6).

5.3.5. Christ and Krishna as Unique Redeemer.

The following references from the New Testament show that Jesus is the unique redeemer. "At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in
you" (John 14:20). Jesus said, "... he who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Acts 4:12 claims that Jesus is the only saviour, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." In John 17:3 it is said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

We find in the Gita similar references to show that Krishna is the unique redeemer. Krishna says in Gita IX. 29, "I am the same to all creatures, no one is hateful to me and no one dear. Both those who are devoted to me in love are in me and I am also in them." Again in Gita IX. 32 we read, "Even those, O Son of Pritha, who are of lowly birth, women, vaishyias, and sudras will attain the highest aim, if they take their refuge in me." In Gita VII. 6,7 Krishna the Supreme God as unique saviour is mentioned as parallel to the claims of the New Testament—Acts 4:12. "Arjuna know that all beings have evolved from this two-fold prakṛti, and that I am the source of the entire creation and in Me again it dissolves. There is nothing else besides Me, Arjuna." Again another unique claim is found in Gita XVIII. 66—"Surrender all duties to me, seek refuge in me all-one. I shall absolve you of all sins,"
grieve not".

Both Krishna and Christ state that salvation is a mystical union with the saviour. John's gospel chapter 15 gives a clear picture of such higher religious experience. Salvation is for all irrespective of individual differences. The mystical union of believer and the Lord is much more than the organic relation (John ch. 15).

5.3.6. Salvation is by Grace only.

We find parallels in both Gita and New Testament showing that salvation is a free gift from God for all and not by merit. "Neither by study of Vedas nor by penance, nor by charity, nor by ritual can I be seen in this form (with four arms) as you have seen Me." GitaXI.53). "Though single minded devotion, however, I can be seen in this Form (with four arms) and know in essence and even entered into, O valiant Arjuna." (Gita XI. 54). Again Krishna speaks, "Arjuna that supreme purusa, in whom all beings reside, and by whom all this is pervaded is attainable only by exclusive devotion." (Gita VIII. 22) "Arjuna, people having no faith in this Dharma, failing to reach Me, revolve in the paths of the world of death." (Gita IX.3). "On those ever united through meditation with Me and worshipping Me with love, I confer that yoga of wisdom through which they attain Me." (Gita X. 10).
Gita X.11 says, "In order to shower My grace on them, I, dwelling in their heart, dispel the darkness born of ignorance by the shining light of wisdom."

In Gita XVIII. 50-65 we see,

"Through devotion he comes to know Me in reality, what I am, and who I am; and thereby knowing Me in essence, he forthwith enters into Me ... And the Karma yogi who has taken refuge in Me, though even performing all actions, attains through My grace the eternal, imperishable abode ... With your mind thus fixed on Me, you shall get all difficulties by My grace. And if out of pride you will not listen to Me, you will be utterly destroyed ... Fix your mind on Me, be devoted to Me, worship Me, and bow to Me; so shall you without doubt reach Me. This I truly promise to you; for you are dear to me."

Salvation is thus promised to the devotees only. Religion of Gita is a religion of grace. Now let us turn to New Testament to find similar references to show that Christianity is also a religion of grace. New Testament also emphatically states that salvation is by grace and faith only. Romans 3:10 says, "There is none righteous no, not one." It means that no one can be saved by his own merit, or righteousness. In Romans 3:23,24 we read thus: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus freely." Therefore we conclude that according to New Testament, a man is justified by faith (grace) without the deeds of the law (rituals or outward religion). Salvation is promised to every one who believes. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only
begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Jesus invites all sinners, "Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Gita insists that though salvation is free and by grace and faith only, it is to be worked out through practice of renunciation which consists of seven fold practices. - (1) renunciation of prohibited acts, (2) worldly desires, (3) worldly thirsts, (4) selfish motives, (5) indolence and desire for fruit in performances of all duties, (6) attachment to worldly objects and activities, (7) ego­tism with regard to the world, the body and all actions.

New Testament also speaks emphatically of the practical aspects of religion. Salvation is by grace and faith, yet it should be worked out. Philippians 2:12 says, "Wherefore, my beloved ... workout your own salvation with fear and trembling." This should be interpreted in the light of the book of James. "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead"(James 2:17). (According to the Good News Bible, work is necessary to complete salvation). It is said in James 2:24 that by works a man is justified. Here good works should not be treated as merit for salvation. 1 Corinthians 10:31 and James 2:18 clearly state the Christian attitude to work. "Whether
you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

When James says, "By works a man is justified," he does not mean that our justification in the sight of God, but of the justification of our faith in sight of man (James 2:18). The writer clearly states that one has to show his faith by his works.

5.4. Theories to Explain the Similarities between Incarnation and Avatara.

5.4.1. Alleged Indebtedness of Vaishnavism to Christianity.

We have already noticed that there are a number of points of resemblances between Vaishnavism and Christianity. We know that these two religions have developed from two different backgrounds, i.e., Vaishnavism from India while Christianity from the Middle East. In order to explain the parallel accounts of Krishna of Gita and Christ of the New Testament, some of the Western theologians have suggested the possibility of indebtedness of Vaishnavism to Christianity. But many of the Indian scholars including the Indian Christian theologians do not agree with this view. To them, there is no clear evidence to support this view. If we accept the indebtedness of Vaishnavism to Christianity, we have to accept the views of some other critics who have suggested that Christianity was influenced by
Hinduism and Buddhism. Let us discuss first the view of indebtedness of Vaishnavism to Christianity before we discuss other possibilities to give account for the resemblances of Christ and Krishna and their teachings.

Nicol Macnicol in his "Indian Theism" mentions that the resemblances may be described as the resemblance in idea and in rituals or in the stories or legends that are associated with the divine figures in these religions. He has pointed out some of the parallels in the lives of Krishna and Jesus Christ that support the view that Vaishnavism is greatly influenced by Christianity. There are a number of points of resemblances between the story of the child Christ and the child Krishna, though these are resemblances merely in outward detail and not at all in the spirit and atmosphere of the stories. Macnicol writes:

"The elements, that are supposed to show Christian influence in the legend of Krishna, are such as the honour paid to his mother Devaki, the birth in a stable, the massacre of children by Kamsa, the representation in Indian pictures of the mother suckling the child like a Madonna Loctans." But just on the basis of these resemblances, it is not easy to prove the indebtedness of Vaishnavism to Christianity. Nicol Macnicol tries to bring out some of the possible evidences for the Christian influence in the story of the child Krishna. He admits that the story of the child Krishna is originally Indian. But some of the elements
might have been added or incorporated into that story from the Christ story.

It is believed that south India was having communication with the Middle East, i.e., Egypt, Persian Gulf, etc. Pantaenus journeyed to India during the second century and found, probably, in Malabar coast some Christians and Aramaic (Syriac) version of the gospel of St. Matthew. There is a strong tradition in Kerala regarding the coming of St. Thomas in A.D. 52 and establishing the Church there. This is a possible evidence for the Christian influence in the Krishna story. According to the history of the Syrian church in Kerala, the first Christian converts were from among the Brahmans. Probably, these Christians might have accepted the new faith incorporated into their old faith in Vasudeva Krishna. The Syrian Christians even to-day are practising some of the earlier Brahmanical Hindu customs. Their form of worship is also indigenous. The name of Christ is also Indianised into Kristo. Therefore, it is not difficult to believe that the earlier Christians accepted Christianity into the Hindu mould or crucible or they have christianised their religion giving deeper meaning and importance, though we do not have any documents to support this view. According to the tradition of the Kerala Church, the Portuguese people, who imposed Catholicism upon the Syrian Church, destroyed all the earlier documents from the Syrian Churches.
In this connection, I shall mention a reference in Sri R.G. Bhandarkar’s Indian Antiquary, January 1912, to give another possibility for the Christian influence.

"About the first century of the Christian era, the boy-god of a wandering tribe of cow-herds of the name of Abhiras came to be identified with Vāsudeva. In this course of their wanderings eastward from Syria or Asiaminor they brought with them, probably, traditions of the birth of Christ in a stable, the massacre of the innocents, and the name of Christ itself. The name became recognized as Krishna, as this word is often pronounced by some Indians as Kristo or Kusto, and thus the traditional legends brought by the Abhiras became engrafted on the story of Vāsudeva Krishna of India."  

These events are only suggestive and not clear proof for the Christian influence. Of course, the association of Krishna with his mother Devaki is as old as the Chāndogya Upanishad. But this story of child Krishna was, probably, enriched and popularised as a result of the influence of Nestorian Christians who entered India during the seventh century, because they might have brought stories of the child Christ as well as pictures and ritual observances. Macnicol thinks that the influence of the Nestorian Christians might have affected the puranic story of Krishna, resulting to the celebration of his birth festival and also the details regarding his birth in a cow house among cattle, the massacre of the innocents, the story that his foster father Nanda was travelling at that time to Mathura to pay tax or tribute to Kamsa."
As a matter of fact, to establish the Christian influence over Vaishnavism we need not wait for the coming of Nestorian Christians in 7th century, because we have, in the Indian Church history, earlier accounts of the coming of 336 Christian families under the leadership of Thomas Canaanite, who migrated to Kerala from Syria during the 4th century.\textsuperscript{16} Not only that, we have mentioned that the disciple of Jesus Christ, St. Thomas preached the gospel on the Malabar coast and also Pantaenus found out the gospel of Matthew belonging to 2nd century there on the Malabar coast. Therefore, it is possible to believe that, if at all the Krishna story was influenced by the gospel story of Christ, it must have been done through the early Christians of Kerala.\textsuperscript{17}

Many parallels have been traced from Gita and the New Testament (specially the gospel of John) to show the possible Christian influence. But a careful examination of these, however, shows that these resemblances are only superficial in many cases, while some are paralleled from the Upanisads. It seems that Gita IX. 29, "Those who are devoted to me in love are in me and I in them" is an indication of the direct influence of John's gospel on Gita. (John ch. 15).

Such influence, which was considerable and increasing from about the 8th century onwards, seems highly probable, but it is not easy to determine where it is present in particular. However, Macnicol points out that it seems highly
probable, when we consider the revival of bhakti in the time of Ramanuja, who might have had some acquaintance with the Nestorian Christians of South India. Even it is possible to believe that Ramanuja's philosophy is the result of the direct influence of Christianity.  

Vaishnava doctrine of salvation is similar to the Christian doctrine of redemption and also Mahaprasada (sacramental meal) agrees with the Christian Eucharist. All these points of resemblances give enough support to the view that Vaishnavism is indebted to Christianity to a large extent, yet it is only a hypothesis without proof. 

Dr. Motilal Das in his book 'Vaishnava Lyrics' has traced the origin of Vaishnava form of theistic love and prayer, which is the essence of Vaishnavism, to Vedic religion especially the hymns addressed to Varuna, craving for mercy and favour. But Vishnu worship had hardly anything in it of that characteristic Vaishnava attitude of worship and prayer. Bhaktimarga, the path of devotion and faith, is a later development. From the sacrifices of the Vedas, we come to the pantheistic monism of the Upanishads, which is incompatible with faith which requires a personal God. Hence, Krishna Vasudeva section of the Vrisni family of Mathura founded this monotheistic Bhagavata religion or Bhagavatism or Vaishnavism.
Some writers are of the opinion that Krishna myth regarding Krishna's birth is only another version of the gospel story of Christ. But some other writers argued that the cult of Krishna could never have been derived from Christianity, rather the Indian myths were much older than Christianity. Not only that, the legendary war with which was connected the story of Vishnu's incarnation in Krishna, was to be dated a thousand and more years before the birth of Christ. But in fact, the oldest Indian inscriptions, yet found, are not three centuries earlier than the Christian era. However, some critics agree that though the Krishna story is older than the birth of Jesus, yet there is the possibility of having originated some details from Christianity.

Rudolf Otto denies the possibility of the Christian influence on Vaishnavism through the Nestorian Christians or the Syrian Christians of South India. It is true that Syrian Christians developed as a closed caste while revival of the Bhakti movement took place in Tamil Nadu by the initiation of the Alvars. Therefore, Otto concludes that Vaishnavism has not been influenced by Christianity; at least there is not convincing proof to this effect.  

There is another account given by Richard Garbe regarding the Christian influence through Nestorian Christians.
According to him 'Shvetadvipa' mentioned in the Mahabharata is probably the lake Balchash in the Indian Milky sea having the Nestorian Christian settlement, from where the wise Narada brought the Pancharatra doctrine made known to him by the God Narayana.  

Some writers like R.G. Bhandarkar do not agree with Garbe for the simple reason that Bhakti religion has existed in India much earlier than the beginning of Christianity. We have mentioned earlier that the Krishna story is not originated from Christmas story, but there is the possibility for the Christian influence on Krishna story because in the words of Garbe,

"There exists between Christianity and Krishnaisn an inherent relationship that explains the susceptibility of the latter to Christian influence."  

In the light of the above discussion it is possible to believe that Christianity directly or indirectly has exerted influence on Vaishnavism to some extent at a later stage and as a result the old Krishna story has undergone modifications and additions. Hinduism by nature is receptive to new ideas and new teachings and therefore, when the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached by the early Christians of Malabar coast, there might have taken place a counter reformation in the Vaishnava religion. Similarly, the approach of Robert De Nobli, a notable Christian missionary, who worked among the Tamilians of Tamil Nadu, attracted
many high cast Brahmins. This also might have caused a counter reformation in the Vaishnava religion of South India. It is not impossible therefore, to believe that there was some Christian influence before the 19th century on Vaishnavism, though it cannot be proved.

5.4.2, Progressive Revelation.

To explain the resemblances between Vaishnavism and Christianity (Krishna story and gospel story particularly), Vivian Phelips has suggested another possibility. He states:

"I cannot understand what the Christian cause can gain by ascribing the parallels in Hindoo mythology to Christian sources when there is all this mass of evidences, for parallels that are quite as extraordinary (though less numerous) in those ancient religions where their priority to Christianity can not reasonably be denied." 23

These resemblances are no longer attributed to a device of the evil one, according to Phelips, and yet an explanation is urgently required. He finds the explanation for these resemblances in these two religions—Hinduism and Christianity in the theory of a progressive revelation.

In the case of Krishna legend, it is contended by some Christian writers that the stories must have been borrowed from Christian sources, both canonical and apocryphal. But in fact as I have mentioned earlier that there is no getting away from the fact that the belief in Krishna existed long before the advent of Christ. Not only that, in
ancient religions other than Hinduism and Buddhism, there are among many others, distinct parallels - the virgin birth, the Heavenly choir, the Epiphany, the slaughter of the innocents, the temptation, and forty days' fast, the miracles, the crucifixion, darkness, and descent into hell, the second coming, and day of judgment.

Vivian Phélips has mentioned the following examples of parallels between other religions and Christianity.

The Virgin birth. In the Chinese legends the sages Fohi and Laokium (600 B.C.) were born of virgins.

The Heavenly choir. Even Confucius the celebrated philosopher (551 B.C.) was ushered into the world with dragons and angels hovering about the couch and with the sound of heavenly music in air.

The Epiphany. Krishna was visited by sages who brought perfumes.

The slaughter of the innocents. The story of the 'dangerous child' is almost universal. Horus, Zoraster, and Bacclurs, for example, were dangerous children.

The Atonement. In China the Holy one (Tien) dies to save the world. Mithras, the Sun-god of the Persians, was the 'mediator' between God and men - the saviour who by his laborious conflicts, worked their salvation. He was also called the 'Word'. Allys, called the 'Only Begotten Son' and the saviour, was worshipped by the Phrygians, and represented by them as a man tied or nailed to a tree.
The modern assessments of the avatara doctrine do not usually claim a Christian origin for it, but often try to differentiate it as much as possible from Christian belief. India possessed doctrine of incarnation long before Christianity. If it is so, how do the Christians give account for the traditional belief regarding the uniqueness of Christ's incarnation. We have mentioned earlier that, what do you think of Christ?, means to many people, what do you think of Krishna or Buddha? as well. A denial of any religious value to these figures might lead to a denial of Christian faith as well. To establish belief in the uniqueness of Christ we have to accept the theory of progressive revelation as it is mentioned in the New Testament, Hebrews 1:1-2:

"God who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds."

The writer of the Hebrews means here that Jesus Christ is the perfect and final revelation of God; and all other manifestations in the past were only God's revelations leading to this perfect revelation. Does this mean that God in Christ is the last and perfect revelation and no more to come. The theologians may interpret it in such a way that Christ is treated as the source of all revelations, and it is He who revealed in different ways and at various times and will possibly manifests in future too.
Geoffrey believes, in this sense, that Christ is in all religions. J.N. Farquhar, the author of 'The Crown of Hinduism' and Panikkar, the author of 'Unknown Christ of Hinduism' hold the view that Christ is in Hinduism. For the Vaishnavites Krishna is the perfect revelation of Vishnu himself, the second person of God-head. When Panikkar says about the unknown Christ of Hinduism, he means Krishna, the unique avatara, is Christ himself. This view leads to another theory.

5.4.3. The Theory of Identity of Christ and Krishna.

Now let us discuss this question of identity of Christ and Krishna. We know for certain that Christ of the New Testament and Krishna of Gita are from two different backgrounds, objects of worship of different religions—Christianity and Vaishnavism. Do we find any justification in believing that Christ and Krishna are identical? Christ is the incarnation of the Son of God, the second person of God-head of the Christian Trinity. Krishna is the incarnation of Vishnu, the second person of Hindu Triad. If it is so, how can we say that Christ and Krishna are identical? When we say that they are identical it is true that we do not mean the identity of the incarnations. It may mean that these two incarnations may be the same reality. Does it mean then, that the Son of God and Vishnu are identical? This question has to be discussed from different angles.
We can argue that Christ and Krishna are identical on the basis of: (a) the uniqueness and universality of incarnation, (b) acknowledged Christ of Vaishnavism or Hinduism, (c) similarities between Christian experience and Krishna bhakti.

(a) The uniqueness and universality of incarnation. The equal claims of the universality and uniqueness of Christ and Krishna alike lead us to admit the fact that Christ of the New Testament and Krishna of Gita are one and the same reality, because there cannot have two unique incarnations. Krishna of Mahabharata as the Yadava prince of Mathura is distinct from the Krishna of Gita, because the latter transcends the perishable and is more exalted than the imperishable, he is extolled as the supreme person in the Veda and the world. The true Krishna, the universal Krishna can be known only by his lovers with the aid of his own grace. In the same way Jesus of Nazareth is distinct from Christ of the new Testament, especially the fourth gospel because the latter transcends the perishable and is the incarnate word of God. He himself proclaimed that he is the fulfillment of the scriptures (Mark 15:28). Christ of the fourth gospel is not confined to a particular locality, but he is the universal Christ, the saviour of the world, who sits on the right hand of God, and at the same time he is one with the Father, the infinite Absolute God.
Girindra Narayan Mallik has written about 'The Concept of Krishna as the Absolute' in his book 'The Philosophy of Vaishnava Religion'. According to him, Krishna is treated in Bhagavata Purana, as the ultimate Reality or Bhagavan. He is the ultimate substratum of the endless incarnations. He manifests eternally to the phenomenal world in order to save the world. Hence, he is the eternal saviour of the world. Christianity also claims that Christ is the unique saviour of the world. He is one with the Father, the ultimate Reality.

Then it is contradictory to state that the Absolute Krishna and Absolute Christ are two different entities. Ultimate Reality must be one, though there are diverse manifestations. The Absolute God revealed through Krishna of Mathura and Jesus of Nazareth must be thought of as one Reality, ultimately the same saviour, though the worshippers realise him differently. Krishna claims that he is the saviour of the whole world rather the whole world exists in him. So also the Bible speaks about Christ as God in whom we live, move, and have our being (Acts 17:28, 1 Corinthians 8:6, Colossians 2:9). Salvation is attained in the universal Christ and the universal Krishna and not in historical Jesus or historical Krishna. Christian doctrine of atonement emphasises that there is salvation in the blood of Jesus. The death of Jesus on the cross
of Calvary must be treated as the manifestation of God's eternal sacrificial love for mankind. The death of historical Jesus does not give salvation to man, but by faith in Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. This must be true in the case of Krishna of Mathura, the Yadava prince. It is doubtful whether any one has attained salvation by having acquaintance with the supposed historical Krishna. But only later on the Vaishnava doctrine of atonement developed giving emphasis on Bhaktimarga, devotion to mythological Krishna. Y. Masih has made a distinction between historical Jesus and the mythological Christ.  

Can we say then, the mythological Krishna and the eschatological Christ are identical? Of course, the Ultimate Reality behind both must be the same; though the Vaishnava concept of avatara and Christian concept of incarnation appear to be different. The identity of Christ and Krishna can be explained only in the ultimate sense.

Panikkar claims that Christ is there in Hinduism even though he is unknown to the worshippers. Here he speaks in the language of St. Paul who claimed that the Athenians worshipped the God of Christians unknowingly (Acts 17:16-34). But M.M. Thomas and Stanley Jones tell that Christ is acknowledged by the modern Hindus and he is already on the Indian Road. Many Indians came to Christ through the teachings and the life of Christ. M.M. Thomas writes:

"Indeed many Indians have come to accept Jesus Christ as Saviour precisely through the Sermon on the Mount, which has awakened them not only in a new moral law but also to the prophetic awareness of the tragedy inherent to the law and the need of man for divine redemption and God's answer in the Gospel of Jesus Christ." 28

Keshub Chander Sen speaks emphatically about Christ's presence hidden in the Indians. He writes:

"The time is coming and now is when India shall worship the Father in Spirit and in truth ... I say emphatically ... that Christ is already present in you. He is in you even when you are unconscious of his presence." 29

Keshub here speaks from the Vedantic point of view. He is not speaking of historical Christ, but the universal, all pervading Christ. It is his belief that India will reach Christ through the Vedantic Hindu creed of absorption and immersion in the Deity which prevails in the country.

Similarly, Brahmobandhav Upadhyaya accepted Christ as cit. He made the current use of the name Satchitananda for the Christian idea of Trinity within the Christian Church.
Vivekananda acknowledged Christ as Jivanmukta and Radha-krishnan accepted mystic Christ as one among many saviours. For Mahatma Gandhi Jesus is the supreme Satyagrahi. He was not interested in the historical Jesus but the Sermon on the Mount.

The Hindu response to Christ is sufficient evidence of his presence in Hinduism. Swami Abhedananda's book 'Why a Hindu Accepts Christ and Rejects Churchianity' shows that Christ is present in Hinduism.

(c) Krishna Bhakti and Christian experience. Now let us examine the Krishna bhakti of Vaishnava devotees and the Christian experience of Christians to see whether the similarities between the Vaishnava incarnation and Christian incarnation is only superficial or whether there is any fundamental unity underlying these two religions. We have noted that both religions are religions of grace, and both religions are bhakti margas. The doctrine of incarnation in Vaishnavism agrees with Christian doctrine of incarnation in many respects. Religion in essence being religious experience, our study would be incomplete if we omit the study of Krishna bhakti and Christian experience, while we are attempting to explain the similarities between the doctrine of incarnation and avatara.

Bhakti experience of the Vaishnava saints. According to bhakti teaching, religion is primarily communion with God.
different from sacrifice and penance. It is not a means of obtaining worldly projects. It is first and foremost the experience of a personal relationship with God. The devotee loves his God with deep and absorbing love and seeks continually to live in his presence. In Bhakti religion there is emphasis upon the inward character of religion as against the outward religion or formalism. Bhakti saints believe that religion ought to be shared with others. Hence, there is greater emphasis on religious fellowship and missionary zeal irrespective of caste.

Though religious experience is the basis of our belief in God, it is not final by itself. It would have to be submitted to various tests. In order to make sure of the validity of bhakti experience we should examine carefully the nature and quality of the testimony which is given by the devotee himself. All the devotees may not have the same degree of experience; all may not have the same concept of the highest ideal in life. Therefore, we cannot judge the validity of bhakti experience just on the basis of the words of the devotee because some of the highly religious devotees or saints may claim that they have not achieved their highest ideal, while ordinary devotees may claim that they have achieved the realization of God because they differ in their concept of highest ideal in life.

Therefore, the bhakti experience should be further
tested by examining their practical lives. The religious experience of the devotees must be consistent with their lives. According to the Book of James, faith without works is meaningless. The saints not only merely sang beautiful hymns giving fervent expression to their desire for God, but also they actually led godly lives, fully dedicated to God. They also helped other people to come to such experience. Since God is a God of love, every devotee must share his bhakti experience with others.

Bishop A.J. Appasamy has included in his book 'The Theology of Hindu Bhakti', the description of the bhakti experiences of some of the Vaishnava poets, especially the Alvars who are great lovers of God. A supreme passion for fellowship with God controls them. Though the current accounts of our saints in India, as of the saints of other countries are mixed with legends, we cannot treat them as valueless. The accounts of Tirumangai Alvar, the poetess Andal, Nammalvar, etc. mentioned in the 'Theology of Hindu Bhakti' show the nature of bhakti experience of Vaishnavites. Speaking of the hymns of Alvars, Appasamy quotes Hooper as follows:

"A yearning after the divine fellowship stands out as the chief characteristics. In comparison with this, the best that the world can offer is valueless: wealth, sensual indugence, the exercise of kindy authority, the bliss of svaraga itself, are all treated with contempt. It is not a vague absorption into the divine essence that is
here desired; it is a personal relationship, illustrated largely by relation between a man and the woman he loves. The object of man's love is not a neutral abstraction but Vishnu, Narayana above all."32

Christian experience of the devoted Christians. All the philosophical theories of Christianity ultimately rests on Christian experience. A Christian becomes a new creature in Christ. The old life with all its wickedness has to die (Colossians 3:8-9). The greatest glory for a Christian is that he belongs to God (2 Thessalonians 1:12). This experience is achieved by faith (Hebrews 11:1) which is neither scientific knowledge nor cognitive assent, but the affirmation by the whole personality of the things hoped for. Y. Masih states:

"It is a matter of existential commitment for a certain kind of values and self-involvement in relation to values which the whole man within us says amen."33

A Christian belongs to God and this belonging to God means that the world hates him (2 Corinthians 6:9-10). He has to run the race subduing his life of the flesh to achieve his goal (2 Timothy 2:5). To a Christian, suffering is a part of God's plan for him. He has to realise that, "Not I but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Does it mean that every Christian must have mystical union with Christ? When Paul says, "Not I but Christ lives in me", he means that his life is totally dedicated for the master's service. He is an instrument used by God.
Christian approaches God in Jesus in prayers. Trust in the master gives him unbounded joy and peace. Though this experience is subjective, he can share his experience with others, and influence others and have Christian fellowship. In that sense Christian experience is both subjective and objective.

Christian experience is of different degrees. Ordinary Christian devotees enjoy the fellowship of Christ in prayer, in doing the will of God and leading a life of faith. But some Christians are having deeper religious experience, rather the mystical union with Christ.

According to Bishop Appasamy, Christianity at its very source is mystical. Jesus showed a perfect balance between its inner and outer aspects. He loved to be with his Father. Prayer was one of the strongest passions of his life. Again St. Paul was definitely a mystic. His Christian experience was having Christ in the centre of his life and him in Christ. He had the vision of Christ and he practised meditation after that (Acts ch. 9). He was raised to the heavenly experience while he was in trance (2 Corinthians 12:1-6). St. John also was a mystic. John ch. 15 speaks about the mysticism. There were many Christian saints like St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assissi, St. Teresa, who were having mystical experience. Like the
Vaishnava saints St. Paul considered worldly possessions and achievements as worthless as rags (Philippians 3:7).

After having discussed the nature of Vaishnava bhakti and Christian experience, we shall try to see whether there is any relation between these two types of religious experiences. According to Rg Veda "The real is one, the learned call it be various names" (Rg Veda 1:164-166). That means the supreme is one, though he is described differently. Ordinary teachers who have grasped the truth partially quarrel with one another, while only a Buddha knows the whole. Ramakrishna lived like a Christian. To him, Christ, Buddha, and Krishna were different forms of the Supreme. He who has seen the reality is lifted above all narrowness. People give more value to the shadow rather than the real. But in fact, the name by which we call God and the rite by which we approach him do not matter much. Radhadrishnan quotes the view of Karl Heim who declares that for the mystic, "At the peak of ecstatic experience, all thoughts of the person of Jesus are lost and the soul sinks into the ocean of the divine unutterable. The sense of the present reality of God and the joy of His indwelling make the mystic indifferent to all questions of history."36 This means that there is a fundamental unity underlying all religions at the level of mystical experience. But we have noted that the mystics are few and most of the bhaktas are not mystics.
There are many devotees who claim that they have had the vision of Christ—St. Paul, Ramakrishna, Sadhu Sunder-singh, etc. Ordinary believers claim that they enjoy the presence of Christ through meditation and prayers. Since religious experience is subjective, we cannot make a convincing proof for the unity of Christian experience and Vaishnava bhakti. But the outward expression of their experiences, the faith in action, may be taken into consideration. No doubt, the spirit of love and service and their commitment to God in Jesus or Krishna expressed in the lives of the devotees of both religions is a clear evidence for the unity of Christian experience and Vaishnava bhakti. Faith is a living response of the soul to God. It is ceaseless action, perpetual renewal. In the words of Paul, "For the love of Christ constrains us" (2 Corinthians 5:14).

This love of God is the essence of Christian and Krishna experience that flows through the lives and examples of the devotees. If God is one, the love of God that constrains both Vaishnava saints and Christian believers must be the same. In this sense, not only Christianity but Vaishnavism also is agapeistic. Devotees of both religions are dedicated to God to serve humanity. They are not satisfied with helping the needy but they feel that they are used by God to win the hearts of people and bring them
closer to God. They are lighted to lighten others. This is the way the kingdom of God grows.

This unity of religion experienced is not anything special in Vaishnavism and Christianity, but many scholars have already made an attempt to establish the unity of all religions. To them religion is one, though religions are different. Religions differ because of the geographical differences, differences in the interpretation of religious experience, differences in the form of worship, individual differences, differences of fellowships etc. Therefore unity of all religions is not yet established, though we claim from the philosophical standpoint that religion must be one. There is no established unity within the Christian Church nor among the Vaishnava sects. As a matter of fact, we are not expecting to exclude all forms of differences, but only unity in diversity. Such a unity of all religions is possible through education, dialogue, through love and service, mutual understanding. It is the union of hearts, not doctrines, by the bond of divine love, agape.

Thus we can point out that the concept of incarnation in Vaishnavism and Christianity are alike in many respects, because of the Christian influence or mutual influence on one side and progressive revelation of God on the other side. Not only that, in both these religions, the devotees
have been constrained by the love of God, which is the essence of Christian experience and Krishna bhakti. Hence there is greater probability to state that at bottom Christian incarnation and Vaishnava incarnation are same at eschatological and metaphysical level though they differ in historical or mythological level. When we look at other faiths with sectarian spirit and prejudices we cannot tolerate other religions. Even the Evangelical Christians cannot tolerate ritualistic orthodox or catholic forms of worship. Many Christians cannot tolerate idol worship nor the romantic emotionalism in Vaishnavism. But when we view Vaishnavism in its true form, its doctrine of salvation by faith in the incarnation and grace, it is same as the true form of Christianity.

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