



# Hermeneutical Reading on the Understanding of God: a Dialogue between the Bhagavad Gita and the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius

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## 1. Introduction

One of the distinctive contributions of the Bhagavad Gita derives from its peculiar doctrine of God. The conception of God colours the interpretation to be put on the terms already familiar in the earlier Vedic religion: Brahman, Karma, Prakriti, Maya and so on. The most common names used in the Bhagavad Gita are Vishnu, Bhagavat, Krishna, and Vasudeva. The prominence of Vishnu in the Rig Veda is much less than his later importance would lead one to suppose. He is god of the sun's course, compassing earth in 'three strides' and is a leading figure of the Hindu Triad<sup>1</sup>. Ethical propensities seem present in him from the first, inasmuch as "Vishnu is identified with the Adityas (a group of celestial deities), along with Varuna (God of cosmic order, rain) and Indra (King of the gods). Vishnu is the Supreme God of the Bhagavad Gita of whom Krishna is the *avatar*"<sup>2</sup>. He is a god of grace, protecting and sustaining the world, and is worshi-

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<sup>1</sup> The three major Gods of Hinduism are the result of later evolution of theological thought; though perhaps we may say that Agni, Indra and Prajapati correspond respectively to Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma is the architect of the Universe; his work consists in making organisms, on the vast as well as the small scale, out of pre-existing matter. Vishnu is nothing else than the Vedic Sun-God. His work is that of a preserver, a sustainer of the world. In popular belief, he manifests himself, in solid physical shapes, whenever the world is going wrong. He must be always near at hand to save it from destruction before due time. The Vedic counterparts of Shiva are the eleven Rutras, with whom the later mythology has tried to identify him. His work is that of a destroyer, a regenerator of the world. On the understanding of Trimurthy, please refer GOVINDA DAS, *Hinduism*, G.A. Natesan & Co., Publishers, Madras, 1924, 162-183.

<sup>2</sup> R.C. ZAEHNER, *The Bhagavad Gita – With a Commentary Based on the Original Sources*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1973, p. 297; The name of Vishnu occurs three times in the Bhagavad Gita.

ped as the supreme God by his Vaishnava followers<sup>3</sup>. “Vishnu is traced to the root ‘vis’, ‘vish’ or ‘vevis’, all the three meaning permeation. Vishnu therefore would be ‘one who extends himself through everything’, and in this sense a permeator or pervader, a *vyapin*”<sup>4</sup>. Ignatius’s interest in theology was not a concern about theological knowledge for its own sake, but to help souls. Both for himself and for others, he looked for the kind of knowledge of God that gives rise to love and to a closer union with Jesus Christ; the knowledge of God, therefore, that answers human beings’ deepest desires, moves their affections, and influences their convictions, choices and commitments. Jerónimo Nadal, one of the men who knew Ignatius most intimately, thinks that the special grace of Ignatius was “to see and contemplate in all things, actions, and conversations the presence of God and the love of spiritual things, to remain a contemplative in the midst of action (*simul in actione contemplativus*)”<sup>5</sup>. For Ignatius, in a very real sense Jesus was the way to God. The attributes of God in the Bhagavad Gita and in the *Spiritual Exercises* are divisible into different categories, namely, the transcendent and the immanent, and the *avatar* and the incarnation, and in this paper let us have a dialogue between the Bhagavad Gita and the *Spiritual Exercises* on the understanding of God.

## 2. Different Attributes of God

### 2.1. The Transcendence of God in the Bhagavad Gita

According to the Upanishads, the knowledge of the Absolute is not the fruit of the activities of the senses and the intellect but of the higher faculty of intuition. This intuitive vision of God is possible only when the inner man is purified by the light of knowledge, austerity and celibacy: “The Brahman or Atman is obtained by truth, austerity and *brahmacharya* or chastity of life”<sup>6</sup>. Brahman is the Ultimate Reality, also known as Atman. The former name indicates his Cosmic Transcendence, the latter his Psychic

Once at BG 10:21, Krishna claims to be “Vishnu among the Adityas”, but only as the chief of a certain class, as, soon afterwards at BG 10:23, he calls himself “Samkara among the Rudras”; and twice in the chapter of Ecstasy (BG 11:24, 30) he is called Vishnu by Arjuna in contexts where Arjuna may well have been reminded of the sun. It is noticeable, then, that while the identification of Krishna Vasudeva with Vishnu had doubtless begun, he himself at no point in the Bhagavad Gita makes any definite claim to be Vishnu. See W.D.P. HILL, *The Bhagavad Gita*, Oxford University Press, Madras, 1953, 33.

<sup>3</sup> The Sanskrit word “Vishnu” means “he who acts or pervades”. In Vaishnavism, the Supreme Person is Vishnu who transforms himself into Brahma to emanate the universe, Vishnu to protect it from within, and Shiva to destroy it. Vishnu is met in the soul through meditation, in the fire through rites, in sacred utterances through initiation, and in the sun as time. For a detailed study on Vishnu, see J.Z. SMITH, *The Harpercollins Dictionary of Religion*, Harper San Francisco, New York, 1995, 1124.

<sup>4</sup> R. OTTO, *The Original Gita*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1939, 250.

<sup>5</sup> *MonNad*, IV, 651; The English translation is taken from J. GUIBERT, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice – A Historical Study*, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1986, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Mundaka Upanishad 111, 1-5. It is taken from F. MAX MÜLLER, *The Sacred Books of the East*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1898.

Immanence. Ontologically God is *Sat-Cit-Ananda*<sup>7</sup>: Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. These dimensions are coexistential and equilateral, and all three together constitute the one unity of Being, having three ontic dimensions yet only one ontological identity. The Bhagavad Gita, too, insists on this kind of cognition of God, a cognition that is intuitive, that is the fruit of a pure life and which is the real cause of man's true joy: "The holy men whose sins are destroyed, whose doubts are cut asunder, whose minds are disciplined, and who rejoice in doing good to all creatures, attain to the beatitude of God" (BG 5:25). This intuitive knowledge is the source of salvation; it is the consummation of all wisdom (BG 18:50). But the Bhagavad Gita offers this knowledge; it is important to note considering the popular character of the work, possible also (BG 12:11; 18:55), in order not to leave the vast majority of the population outside of the possibility of saving themselves due to their inability to reach this high grade of austerity and contemplation. Knowledge of God, therefore, has a very practical value, since true salvation and joy spring from it. Although the knowledge of God is thus considered essential for man's ultimate happiness, the Bhagavad Gita, like most of the Hindu philosophic tradition, is insistent in stating that one cannot have but a negative concept of God: "*neti, neti*" or "it is not this, it is not this"<sup>8</sup>. The Supreme is said to be "unmanifest, unthinkable and unchanging" (BG 2:25). The Supreme is unknowable and ineffable: "One looks upon him as a marvel, another likewise speaks of him as a marvel, another hears of him as a marvel; and even after hearing, no one whosoever has known him" (BG 2:29). These considerations should not lead us to think that the Bhagavad Gita is agnostic. Brahman is actually beyond definitions and words. "*Neti, neti*", the slogan of Advaitins' via negative, preserves the ultimate unspeakable-ness of God<sup>9</sup>. The *yogin* knows that his know-

<sup>7</sup> *Sat* is Being, the imperishable. It is also truth, the unchangeable. It could be called 'Being itself', if this term does not imply that modifications are possible which would have an effect on Brahman. *Cit* is Consciousness or total awareness. It is the self-reflection of *Sat* in itself. Thus, *cit* is not a qualification on *sat*, but it is the self-expression of the One. *Ananda* is Bliss. It is the ecstasy of Being, which again cannot be understood as a qualification of *sat*, but the very nature of the One is bliss in self-awareness. See E. DEUTSCH, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, East-West Center Press, Honolulu, 1968, 9; M. BRUCK, "Advaita and Trinity: Reflections on the Vedantic and Christian Experience of God" in *Indian Theological Studies*, St Peter's Pontifical Institute of Theology, Bangalore, 1983, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Brahman is unconditioned, non-determinate, not a genus, without attributes, relations, activity, form or internal variation. It is not comprehended by the intellect or described by words, because all finite categories of understanding fail to grasp it. It is indescribable, since knowledge is based on making comparison with what has already been experienced. The knower can never be known as an object since it is the foundation of all logical proofs. Brahman can be realized by the discriminative practice of "*neti neti*" in order to negate the apparent phenomenal existence that is superimposed on it. For a detailed study, please refer to S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992, 534-535; F. ZACHARIAS, *A Study on Hinduism*, The Industrial School Press, Ernakulam, 1931, 180.

<sup>9</sup> Designations that normally have a positive limiting character when applied to God or Brahman have instead a pragmatic aim – to point the mind beyond finitude. On "*neti, neti*" please see E. DEUTSCH, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, East-West Center Press, Honolulu, 1968, 11; The negation of predicates has its own positive implication. Negation is only a preliminary to affirmation. See M. HIRIYANNA, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London, 1970, 373.

ledge of God is based on analogy and that the ineffability of God indicates only the limited character of his intellect. The Bhagavad Gita approaches the problem of the existence of the Ultimate reality in two ways: by analysis of the objective reality, namely, of that which exists outside the subject (BG 15:16-17); and by analysis of a subjective reality (BG 3:42; 13:2, 31). Perhaps the greatest merit of the Bhagavad Gita consists in its efforts to separate the Creator from creation, God from the world, at the same time not losing sight of the relation that exists between the Creator and creation. In other words, the *yogin* can clearly perceive an attempt to save the transcendency of God without having to sacrifice the reality of His immanence in the world – two fundamental truths of the relationship between God and the world. In an unequivocal way, Brahman, in the person of Krishna, declares that he is the source of all. He sustains all beings, thus continuing his creative activity. But at the same time, the Bhagavad Gita is emphatic in asserting the distinction of the Creator from the created. He is superior to all that he has made, and this superiority excludes all identity: “Know thou that they are all from me alone. I am not in them, they are in me” (BG 7:12). In his comment on this verse, Radhakrishnan says, “This whole universe owes its being to the Transcendent Godhead and yet the forms of the universe do not contain or express him adequately. His absolute reality is far above the appearance of things in space and time”<sup>10</sup>. It is very important to note that the existence of the creation in God does not imply an identity; for the Bhagavad Gita clearly excludes this interpretation when it says, “And yet the beings do not dwell in me, behold my divine mystery. My spirit which is the source of all beings sustains the beings, but does not abide in them” (BG 9:5).

Arjuna’s confession of faith discloses some of the transcendent attributes of Krishna: “Lord, the divine seer Narada, and all the seers, along with Asita, Devala and Vyasa, call you highest Brahman, highest home, supreme purifier, eternal divine person, the original God, unborn and all-pervading. You know yourself through yourself alone, Supreme Person, Creator of creatures, Lord of beings, God of gods and Lord of the universe” (BG 10:12-13, 15)<sup>11</sup>. Accordingly, Krishna is the All-Highest Brahman, the All-Highest Person<sup>12</sup>, Eternal, Divine, Primeval, Unborn and All-Pervading God. Krishna is the Lord

<sup>10</sup> S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *The Bhagavad Gita – With an Introductory Essay, Sanskrit Text, English Translation and Notes*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London, 1948, 239.

<sup>11</sup> Zaehner analyses the transcendental attribute of Krishna as follows: Krishna is God, the Supreme Being, the Highest Brahman (BG 10:12), the Highest Self (BG 13:22; 15:17), the Person All-Sublime (BG 13:22; 15:17). He is the base supporting Brahman (BG 14:27) and in him Nirvana subsists (BG 6:15). He is, then, as much the source of the eternal world, Brahman, as He is of the phenomenal world. In the great theophany of Chapter 11, however, He reveals Himself not as the eternally at rest but as the eternally active – creator, preserver and destroyer. R.C. ZAEHNER, *The Bhagavad Gita with a Commentary Based on the Original Sources*, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, 38.

<sup>12</sup> In BG 7:24 we come across a word *param bhavam* i.e., “higher state or mode of being”: the state already mentioned in BG 4:10, which is reached by Krishna’s devotees. This is never defined, but presumably means God’s eternal Being, the source of Nirvana itself (BG 6:15), the “one mode of being, changeless, undivided in all contingent beings, divided as they are” (BG 18:20). For a detailed study, see R.C. ZAEHNER, *The Bhagavad Gita with a Commentary Based on the Original Sources*, 253.

of all beings and the Lord of the entire world. Krishna is the Lord of glory shining on all sides: “I see you – so hard to behold – crowned, armed with a club, discus-bearing, a mass of radiant energy, blazing in all directions, unlimited, an all-consuming, fiery, solar brilliance” (BG 11:17). Krishna is unfathomable and boundless. He is infinite and does not have any beginning, middle or end: “I see you everywhere, many-armed, many-stomached, many-mouthed, many-eyed, infinite in form; I cannot find out your end, your middle or your beginning – Lord of the universe, form of everything” (BG 11:16). Krishna speaks of his transcendent nature to Arjuna as follows: “There is another, higher person, called the Supreme Self, the eternal Lord who, penetrating the three worlds, sustains them. As I go beyond the perishable and am even higher than the imperishable, so I am celebrated in the world and the Veda as the Supreme Person” (BG 15:17-18) and “For I am the foundation of Brahman, of the immortal and imperishable, of the eternal law and of absolute bliss” (BG 14:27).

Thus the transcendent attributes in the Bhagavad Gita describe Krishna as the Supreme Brahman (*parambrahma*: BG 10:12); Brahman (BG 7:29; 8:3-4; 10:12); Great Soul (*paramatman*: BG 10:5); Atman (BG 10:20; 4:6); Highest Person (*purushottama*: BG 8:1; 10:15; 11:3; 15:18)<sup>13</sup>; Great Lord (*maheshvara*: BG 9:11); Imperishable Being (BG 11:18, 37); Non-being and Supreme Being (BG 11:37); Omniscient (BG 7:26); Omnipotent (BG 7:7; 10:40); Great Self (*mahatman*: BG 11:12, 20, 37, 50). As “Supreme Being, He is incomprehensible” (BG 11:17, 42), “infinite of form, having no end, middle or beginning” (BG 10:3; 11:16, 18, 37), boundless (BG 10:9), everlasting (BG 11:18), primal (BG 11:31, 38), unborn (BG 4:6; 7:25; 10:3, 12), changeless (BG 11:18) and immutable (BG 9:13). He is all marvellous (BG 11:11), terrible (BG 11:20), facing every way (BG 11:11), possessed of boundless strength and infinite might (BG 11:40), and resplendent and filled with glory (BG 11:17, 30). To put all aspects together, BG 7:26 says with authority, “there is no one at all that knows Me”<sup>14</sup>.

## 2.2. The Transcendence of God in the Spiritual Exercises

Ignatius’s vision of God in the *Spiritual Exercises* is “Trinitarian” (*Trinitario*), and in this sense it is very much transcendental. “The Trinity” (*La Trinidad*) is an absolute mystery, which is not perspicuous to reason even after being revealed<sup>15</sup>. Among the

<sup>13</sup> The concept of God reaches greater specificity in the name *Purushottama*. The word means highest or supreme person and parallels in meaning the like term *Paramatma*. Both expressions imply that God is the inner person of his body, the cosmos. *Purushottama* appears in the Bhagavad Gita to describe a personal divinity who both uses and possesses matter and finite spirits, but who transcends both. See J. CARMAN, *The Theology of Ramanuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1974, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Please refer to J.N. FARQUHAR, *The Crown of Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1915, 371-372; P. FALLON, *Religious Hinduism*, St. Paul’s Publication, Allahabad, 1964, 73-81; R.V. D’SOUZA, *The Bhagavad Gita and St. John of the Cross*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1997, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Christian reflection has long been led to distinguish what we have chosen to call the economical Trinity and immanent Trinity. The economical Trinity corresponds to the unfolding of the mystery of

absolute mysteries in the Christian faith, that of the Trinity is undoubtedly the most fundamental. In the *Spiritual Diary*, Ignatius recounts his “Trinitarian” experience in the following way:

«Feeling spiritual intelligences, so much so that I seemed to understand that there was practically nothing more to know in this matter of the Holy Trinity...I knew or felt, *Dominus scit*, that in speaking to the Father, in seeing that he was a Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, I was moved to love the entire Trinity, especially since the other Persons were in him essentially. I had the same experience in the prayer to the Son. The same too in that to the Holy Spirit, rejoicing in one after the other as I felt consolations, attributing this to – and rejoicing that it came from – all three»<sup>16</sup>.

The absolute nature of this Trinitarian mystery brings out its transcendence, too. This Trinitarian vision of God is communicated to the exercitant through such expressions as God (*Dios*)<sup>17</sup>, God our Lord (*Dios nuestro Señor*)<sup>18</sup>, God and Lord (*Dios y Señor*)<sup>19</sup>, Creator (*Criador*)<sup>20</sup>, Creator and Lord (*Criador y Señor*)<sup>21</sup>, Lord and Creator (*Señor y Criador*)<sup>22</sup>, Creator and Redeemer (*Criador y Redentor*)<sup>23</sup>, Divine Majesty (*Divi-*

God, Father, Son and Spirit, in the plan of its manifestation in salvation history. The immanent Trinity means the intimate mystery of God – Father, Son and Spirit – in himself. In the first case, we are referring to the Persons, translating what they are in their act of giving themselves to us; in the second case, we mean the Persons in their inner relationship, making abstraction. It is certain that we know the immanent Trinity only from the angle of the economical Trinity. Karl Rahner says that the economical Trinity and the immanent Trinity are not two realities, one behind the other. The economical Trinity is a revelation and gift of God for man’s salvation only if it is the Trinity that is God. It is precisely what was at the heart of the illumination of the Cardoner. See G. PELLAND, “Ignatius and the Trinity: Theological Insights” in *CIS*, *Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis*, Rome, 1982, 122-123.

<sup>16</sup> February 21, 1544 of the *Spiritual Diary* is taken from P. ARRUIPE, “The Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism” in *CIS*, *Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis*, Rome, 1982, 39.

<sup>17</sup> *Dios* is used twenty five times in the *Spiritual Exercises* and they are as follows: SE 58, 59, 150, 154 (twice), 169a (twice), 169b (thrice), 184, 235, 236, 262, 264, 274, 295, 297, 301, 305, 312, 329, 336, 338 (twice). See J. RICKABY, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola – Spanish and English*, Burns & Oates Limited, London, 1915, 146; C. DALMASES, *Ejercicios Espirituales*, Sal Terrae, Santander, 1987, 193-194.

<sup>18</sup> *Dios nuestro Señor* is used fifty eight times: SE 3, 9, 16 (twice), 20b, 23, 25, 39c (twice), 43 (twice), 46, 48, 61, 75, 77, 89, 92, 135, 150, 151, 153, 155 (thrice), 165, 166, 169a (twice), 169b, 174, 175, 177, 179 (twice), 180, 181, 183, 185, 188, 189ab, 232, 234, 240, 243, 315, 322, 330, 336 (twice), 338, 339, 343, 351, 363, 370 (twice). No word is more frequently used than “*Señor*”; by itself it occurs about forty times, in combination with “*Dios*” over sixty times, while Christ is called “*el Señor*” more than fifty times. See W.A.M. PETERS, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius – Exposition and Interpretation*, *Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis*, Rome, 1980, 189; J. RICKABY, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola – Spanish and English*, 146.

<sup>19</sup> *Dios y Señor* is used only once (SE 343).

<sup>20</sup> SE: 15, 20, 38, 39, 53, 316, 330. See J. RICKABY, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola – Spanish and English*, 141.

<sup>21</sup> SE: 5, 15, 16, 20, 38, 39, 50, 184, 316, 317, 324, 351. See J. RICKABY, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola – Spanish and English*, 141.

<sup>22</sup> Lord and Creator is occurred only once (SE 39b).

<sup>23</sup> SE 229: There are sound reasons to believe that “*Criador y Redentor*” does not refer to Christ. If it did, the exercitant would be asked to rejoice with Christ (“*gozo con Cristo gozozo*”, SE 48), to rejoice on

na Majestad)<sup>24</sup> and Divine and Infinite Goodness (*Divina y suma bontad*). Of all these expressions, Divine Majesty (*Divina Majestad*) brings out very emphatically Ignatius's understanding of Divine Transcendence. Divine Majesty is used 24 times in the *Spiritual Exercises* (5, 16 (twice), 20b, 46, 106, 108, 135, 146, 147 (twice), 152, 155, 167, 168, 183, 233, 234, 235, 240, 248, 330, 369, 370)<sup>25</sup>. In the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, Ignatius uses Divine Majesty in a very important rule, regarding the consolation without preceding cause: "Only God our Lord (*Dios nuestro Señor*) can give the soul consolation without a preceding cause. For it is the prerogative of the 'Creator' (*Criador*) alone to enter the soul, to depart from it and to cause a motion in it which draws the whole person into love of His 'Divine Majesty' (*Divina Majestad*). By 'without a preceding cause' I mean without any previous perception or understanding of some object by means of which the consolation just mentioned might have been stimulated, through the intermediate activity of the person's act of understanding and willing" (SE 330). Through this rule one comes across the transcendental aspect of God in the discernment of spirits of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

When Ignatius attributes to God the title "Creator and Lord" (*Criador y Señor*), he does not mean that God who was the Creator in the distant past, but the One who is now creating, moment by moment. God is always making the human person and everything around him, visible and invisible (SE 23)<sup>26</sup>. Since the Lord has been merciful to him during his convalescence at Loyola and his penance at Manresa, Ignatius contemplates the *Bondad Infinita* (Infinite Goodness) and feels greatly humbled before it (SE 52, 53)<sup>27</sup>.

account of Christ ("gozar de Cristo", SE 221), and to rejoice in him: there is a certain redundancy about this. Besides, outside the first colloquy of the retreat, Christ is never referred to as the Creator, and a careful reading of this colloquy shows that even here Christ is given the function, more than the title, of "Creator". Neither is he called "Saviour" or "Redeemer" anywhere in the Four Weeks. The conclusion is that "*Criador y Redentor*" stands for the Blessed Trinity. See W.A.M. PETERS, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius – Exposition and Interpretation*, 150.

<sup>24</sup> The trinitarian horizon in the *Spiritual Exercises* appears in a less explicit, but nevertheless very real way when Ignatius refers to God as "His Divine Majesty". From the context in the *Spiritual Exercises* and its use in Spiritual Journal, Ignatius is referring to the Trinity when he uses the expression "Divine Majesty". The context and use of such expressions as "Infinite Goodness" (SE 52), "God" (SE 58-59), "Divine Justice" (SE 60), the "Divinity" (SE 124), "His Divine Goodness" (SE 151, 157) and the "Divine Power" (SE 363) seem to refer to the Most Holy Trinity. See H.D. EGAN, *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian Mystical Horizon*, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1976, 127.

<sup>25</sup> J. RICKABY, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola – Spanish and English*, Burns & Oates Limited, London, 1915, 146.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. J.A. TETLOW, *Making Choices in Christ – The Foundations of Ignatian Spirituality*, Loyola Press, Chicago, 2008, 14.

<sup>27</sup> About divine attributes, Ignatius often writes about Infinite Goodness when corresponding with persons advanced in the spiritual ways. To his sons, at the beginning of the Constitutions, he solemnly declares: "Although it must be the Supreme Wisdom and Goodness of God our Creator and Lord which will preserve, direct and carry forward His divine service". *La suma Sapiencia y Bondad* is found twenty times in the Constitutions. The famous letter to the scholastics at Coimbra, "On Perfection" (May 7, 1547), was already putting them in the presence of the Infinite source: "I do not doubt the Infinite Goodness of God our Redeemer and Lord, who is most generous in communicating His gifts". For a

In the Kingdom of Christ he asks the exercitant to offer himself to the Infinite Goodness in the following words: “Eternal Lord of all things, in the presence of Thy Infinite Goodness,...this is the offering of myself which I make with Thy favour and help” (SE 98). It is likewise in the presence of the Infinite Goodness of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that the Contemplation to Attain Love is developed: “See how all the blessings and all gifts descend from above...my limited goodness coming from the Infinite Goodness” (SE 237). Ignatius looks to find the initial and final point of his searching and finding the will of God in the Trinity, with an attitude of respect and reverence like that of a servant before his king (SE 91-98), aware that he has a mission to carry out. Ignatius comes to the Trinity, after searching for and finding the will of God, “not at all for a further confirmation, but so that before the Most Holy Trinity a decision may be made regarding me concerning his greater service” (SD 83). The entire theology of mission, for Ignatius, depends on his understanding of Trinity: “Christ gives the mission, the Holy Spirit confirms it with his gifts, for the greater glory of God. It is the extension *ad extra* of the ‘expiration’ by which the Father and the Son eternally ‘send’ the Holy Spirit”<sup>28</sup>. Also, Ignatius’s use of words such as “glory of God” (*gloria de Dios*: SE 152, 182, 264, 339, 351), “praise and glory” (*alabanza y gloria*: SE 167, 179, 180, 189, 240) and “honour and glory” (*honora y gloria*: SE 16) indicate the transcendental part of the Divine Majesty.

### 2.3. The Immanence of God in the Bhagavad Gita

The attribute of God as immanent is also found in the Bhagavad Gita, as Krishna is present everywhere and everything is said to be in Him: “For the man who sees me in everything and everything in me, I am not lost for him and he is not lost for me” (BG 6:30). Krishna is the Way, the Sustainer, the Witness and the Friend of human beings (BG 5:29; 9:18; 10: 37-38; 11:41; 18:73). He is the father, mother, teacher and ordainer of this world: “You are the father of the world, of moving and unmoving things; you are its venerable teacher and object of worship” (BG 11:43)<sup>29</sup>. Krishna is the Self established in the heart of all contingent beings (BG 10:20). He is the light of lights (BG 13:17), the

detailed study on the Infinite Goodness of God our Lord, please see G. BOTTEREAU, “The *Discreta Carita* of Ignatius of Loyola” in *CIS*, Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis, Rome, 1978, 56.

<sup>28</sup> P. ARRUPE, “The Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism” in *CIS*, Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis, Rome, 1982, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Aurobindo achieves a synthesis of many of the ideas about God and the Absolute which are to be found in the Bhagavad Gita. Aurobindo genuinely attempted to hold together a variety of different concepts of the divine and to give them all real value. His teaching combines in a remarkable way views which stress the identity of the divine and the universe with those which assert the reality of the “supracosmic Reality”, attitudes which conceive of the divine as an Ineffable. Absolute with those which regard God as personal being with whom one may enter into a relationship: “The Divine Being, *Sat-Cit-Ananda*, is at once impersonal and personal; it is an Existence and the origin and foundation of all truths, forces, powers, existences, but it is also the one transcendent Conscious Being and the All-Person of whom all conscious beings are the selves and personalities; for he is their highest Self and the universal indwelling Presence”. See SRI AUROBINDO, *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, Pondicherry, 1970, 662.

discernment of the discerning, the brilliance of the brilliant (BG 7:10), the source of memory and knowledge (BG 15:15), the maker of Vedanta (BG 15:15), omniscient and unrivalled in knowledge (BG 7:26; 9:29; 11:38), the source of the seven Great Seers, the four Ancients and the Manus (BG 10:6)<sup>30</sup>, identifiable only with the prime and most significant of every species of existence (BG 10:20-38)<sup>31</sup>. The words *Isvara* as in BG 4:6 and *Paramesvara* as in BG 13:27-28 indicate the immanence of Krishna. BG 7:8-11 explains well the immanent character of Krishna in the following way:

«I am taste in the waters, light in the moon and sun, the sacred syllable in all the Vedas, sound in the air, manhood in men. Also I am the pleasant fragrance in the earth, the radiance in fire, the life in all beings, and in ascetics I am austerity. Know that I am the eternal seed of all creatures, I am the intelligence of the intelligent, I am the brilliance of the brilliant. And I am the strength of the mighty, freed from passion and desire».

There are two words in the Bhagavad Gita to express the concept of personal god: “*Purusha*” and “*Purushottama*”. The former means “person”<sup>32</sup>, while the latter signifies “the Best of Persons”. In the Bhagavad Gita, “*Purusha*” is used to express the “personality of Krishna”. “*Purushottama*” is used for “*avatar* Krishna”. Arjuna calls Krishna: “the source of beings, the Lord of creatures, the God of gods, the Lord of the world” (BG 10:15). He surpasses the perishable and is higher than even the imperishable (BG 15:15). Radhakrishnan says, “The Supreme spiritual Being with energy is *Purushottama*, the same in a state of eternal rest in Brahman”<sup>33</sup>.

Ramanuja’s idea of God of the Bhagavad Gita is expressed in the following way: “God of the Bhagavad Gita is the redeemer of souls, who descends to the earth for the purpose of redemption... The faith in the redemptive character of the redeemer is considered to be an important element in the context of surrender of the self to God (*paramabhakti*). This kind of relationship between God and the individual souls is known as *rakshya-rakshaka sambandha*. The Lord is the *rakshaka* and the individual soul is *rakshya*. According to this concept, God is the guardian or the redeemer or savior of souls. Soul-making or moulding of souls is thus looked upon as the very purpose of the world process”<sup>34</sup>. Influenced by Chapters 10 and 11 of the Bhagavad Gita, Gandhi explains the attributes of God as follows: “That indefinable something which we all feel but which we do not know... To

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. R.C. ZAEHNER, *The Bhagavad Gita with a Commentary Based on the Original Sources*, 293.

<sup>31</sup> Krishna is Father of the universe, Mother, Ordainer, Grandsire, the Way, the Supporter, the Lord, the Witness, the Dwelling place, the Refuge, the Friend. For further information on this see J.N. FARQUHAR, *The Crown of Hinduism*, 371-372.; R.V. D’SOUZA, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> The Purusha, the He of creation, the Principle, the Prototype, while visiting the soul abides there so intensely and with so much longing for intimacy that he stays on and abides in it for good, - and out of this longing he begets his own purusha in the soul, like unto his. The soul’s purusha remains ever mindful of the blissfulness of his example and is ever longing to take it over as his own ideal. He is the one and only first person singular. For a detailed study on Purusha, please see T. DE GREEFF, “The Mysticism of Isha Upanishad” in *Indian Theological Studies*, St Peter’s Pontifical Institute of Theology, Bangalore, 1998, 273-274.

<sup>33</sup> S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol I, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1923, 543.

<sup>34</sup> M. YAMUNACHARYA, *Ramanuja’s Teachings in His Own Words*, Bhavan’s Book University, Bombay, 1963, 89-90.

me God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness, God is the source of Light and Life, and yet He is above all and beyond these. God is conscience. He transcends speech and reason. He is personal to those who need his personal presence. He is simply present to those who have faith”<sup>35</sup>.

Thus the Bhagavad Gita affirms both the transcendent and the immanent dimensions of Krishna. The tenth chapter gives a vivid picture of Krishna as both eternal and personal Lord. Although “unborn”, the Supreme is seen as the source of all forms. Krishna tells Arjuna that he is the beginning and end of the entire universe and that the world is strung on him like pearls on a string (BG 7:7). He is the nucleus of all things, both animate and inanimate. Things of beauty, strength and spiritual power have sprung from a fragment of his splendour (BG 10:40-41)<sup>36</sup>. The eleventh chapter also presents a glorious and terrifying cosmic form of Krishna. Radhakrishnan asserts the transcendent and immanent dimensions of God categorically in the following way: “The difference between the Supreme as spirit and as person is one of stand point and not of essence, between God as he is and as he seems to us. When we consider the abstract and impersonal aspect of the Supreme, we call it the Absolute; when we consider the Supreme as self-aware and self-blissful being, we get God. The real is beyond all conceptions of personality and impersonality”<sup>37</sup>. The transcendence of Brahman and the immanence of *Ishvara* in the Bhagavad Gita can be summarized as follows:

«Brahman’s transcendence is so utterly safeguarded that it is pure silence, pure nothingness in the sense that it is prior to being; it is unrelated also to itself, and in consequence it would be inexistent and unconscious even to itself. *Ishvara* is that existence and that consciousness. He is properly speaking the revelation of Brahman, the first out-coming, as it were, of the unfathomable womb of Brahman.

Brahman cannot be a person, because it would have to have relations and these relations would endanger its absoluteness. *Ishvara* is the personal aspect of Brahman, whatever the consistency and peculiarity of this aspect might be.

Brahman cannot be made responsible either for the calling back of the world to its origin or for its reality. In other words, the grace of the Lord, the destruction of *maya*, the realization of Brahman, is precisely the role and function of *Ishvara*. He is, properly speaking, the Lord. Brahman is, again, so immovable, beyond all possibility of acting, that the *avatars* of godhead are, in fact, manifestations of *Ishvara*. It is *Ishvara* that manifests, appears, and descends in the form of *avatar* of the most different kinds.

*Ishvara* keeps zealously the transcendence or immanence – it comes to the same – of Brahman. *Ishvara* does all that he does for and as Brahman and, in consequence, is distinct from Brahman. *Ishvara* is, in one way or another, identical with Brahman, otherwise all his functions would be meaningless»<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Gandhi’s Young India 5.3.25 is taken from M.C. D’SOUZA, “Religious Traditions and Truth in the Gandhian Way” in *Journal of Dharma*, Dharmaram College, Bangalore, 1981, 370.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. P. BOWEN, *Themes and Issues in Hinduism*, Cassell Wellington House, London, 1998, 177.

<sup>37</sup> S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *An Idealist View of Life*, Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1988, 84.

<sup>38</sup> For a detailed study on the Brahman and *Ishvara*, please refer to R. PANIKKAR, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1964, 122-124.

Thus in the Bhagavad Gita both the immanence and transcendence of Krishna are revealed to Arjuna, who seeks to know the truth.

#### **2.4. The Immanence of God in the Spiritual Exercises**

The immanence of God in this created world is expressed powerfully in the *Spiritual Exercises*, from the “Principle and Foundation” (*Principio y Fundamento*) (SE 23) to the “Contemplation to Attain Love” (*Contemplación para alcanzar amor*) (SE 230-237). The *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius offers nothing other than the opportunity to relive the birth, life (the Second Week), death (the Third Week) and resurrection (the Fourth Week) of Jesus Christ who is Word made flesh, and by doing so to become the disciple of Jesus Christ, a disciple ready to do the will of God at any cost (SE 169-189; 313-336). The petition of the Second Week, “to ask for an intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has become man for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely” (SE 104) clearly indicates the immanence of God in Christ. The Christ of Ignatius is not a Christ who is culturally determined, a product of the environment or of passing interests<sup>39</sup>. He is the Jesus of the Gospels, poor, humble and humiliated (SE 146, 167), in whom Ignatius recognizes one of the Trinity with us to work for the redemption of the human race. He is the universal King who calls the exercitant to unite himself with him and to conquer the world for his Father (SE 95-98). He is the eternal Captain who calls the exercitant against the power of evil. It is Jesus who suffers death on the cross and, once resurrected, exercises with every person the “office of consoler”. This immanent God in Christ, who fascinated Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*, inspires the exercitant to ask: “What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?” (SE 53). Ignatius also points out the fact that the discernment of spirits is accomplished by meditating and contemplating the immanence of Son of God<sup>40</sup>. In the Directory of Father Miró the theological significance of the contemplation of the life of Christ in the *Spiritual Exercises*, especially from the perspective of the immanence of God, is summarized as follows: “It should be noted that the contemplation of the earthly King at the beginning of the Second Week is, as it were, the foundation of all the contemplations of the life of Christ to follow; for all this is concerned with nothing other than the imitation of Christ, which constitutes the perfection of human life”<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> The same holds for the petition of Ignatius to the Virgin, “that she would deign to place him with her Son”. And this petition is being affirmed by the Father at La Storta. After La Storta whatever happens is fine: Ignatius will live from then on from his new condition of being admitted into the Trinitarian sphere of the love and the mission of Jesus Christ ‘carrying the Cross’. See JESUIT WORKING GROUP, “Ignatius, Faber, Xavier: Welcoming the Gift, Urging the Mission” in *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, CIS, Rome, 2006, 20.

<sup>40</sup> The person of Jesus Christ dominates the entire perspective of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The contemplation of this person is far more important than any event, incident or doctrine presented in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius would have the exercitant flee from self-love, self-will and self-interest (SE 189) so that he may be filled with Jesus Christ. See H.D. EGAN, *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian Mystical Horizon*, 95.

<sup>41</sup> H. RAHNER, *Ignatius the Theologian*, Geoffrey Chapman Ltd, London, 1990, 97.

Ignatius's principal concern could best be summed up as bringing to mind the immanence of Christ, with particular reference to the cross. SE 53 invites attention to "Christ present on the cross" (*Cristo puesto en la cruz*); SE 109 to "the eternal Word incarnate" (*el Verbo eterno encarnado*); SE 114 to serving the newly-born child "just as if I were present" (*como si presente me hallase*); SE 116 to the intimate connection of the incarnation with the cross; and SE 206 to the constant recapitulation of each stage of the meditation in terms of the cross: "I will try to foster an attitude of sorrow, suffering and heartbreak, by calling often to memory the labours, fatigue and sufferings which Christ our Lord suffered, from his birth to whatever mystery of his Passion I am contemplating at the time" (*induciendo a mí mismo a dolor y a pena y quebranto, trayendo en memoria frecuente los trabajos, fatigas y dolores de Cristo nuestro Señor, que pasó desde el punto que nació hasta el misterio de la pasión en que al presente me hallo*). It is an essential trait of the Ignatian charism that the following of Christ is to be done in humiliation and on the cross (SE 136-147). But the cross that Christ bore on his shoulders means not only external persecutions but also following him in humility, poverty and self-abnegation (SE 98, 136-147, 165-168). The cross means stripping oneself of everything, including honour and a good name. Thus the *Spiritual Exercises* reveals the rich treasure of the immanence of God by focussing on the humanity of Christ and of the transcendence of God by focusing on the Divine Majesty<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> Ignatius attributes the title "Divine Majesty" to God, but equally to the Son and to the Spirit. He writes of Christ also as "our Creator, Redeemer and Lord". In his practice of attribution in the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius makes precise use of a divine name only when he applies it explicitly to one or another divine Person because of reasons made clear by the context. On the contrary, when he can abstain from precision, he is inclined to designate God by making reference to in its transcendental aspect, to the Divine Majesty, and to the titles of Creator and Lord, which in his mind bring in the unity of the Persons and the harmony of their action toward the creature. The proof of this: When Ignatius is treating matters pertaining to the end and to the procedures leading toward it, as he does about the requirements of the *Spiritual Exercises* (Annotations 1-20) and about the necessity of examining oneself in the light of divine Truth (SE 25-43) and about the graces to be asked for throughout the *Spiritual Exercises*, he does everything he can to put the retreatant in the presence of the God of Majesty, who for him is necessarily Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Creator and Lord. In the *Spiritual Exercises* he makes precise use of the term "Father" only some fifteen times, especially on the occasions of the final colloquy or during reflections on the relationship of the Father to the Son. The same holds true for the Holy Spirit, whom he mentions only seven times. On the contrary, Christ, whose place is emphasised often in those meditations where his earthly life and his redeeming mission are concerned, is in each case as the context requires. The designation itself (under varying names, such as Christ, Jesus Christ, Christ our Lord, Jesus, the Son and the Word Incarnate) is found more than 150 times. Despite that, the other divine names common to the three Persons (God, the Lord, the Creator and Lord, and the Divine Majesty) appear around 175 times in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Thus one finds equal importance is given to the immanence and transcendence of God in the *Spiritual Exercises*. See G. CUSSON, *Biblical Theology and the Spiritual Exercises – A Method toward a Personal Experience of God as Accomplishing within Us His Plan of Salvation*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1988, 57.

### 3. The Transcendence and Immanence of God: dialogue between the Bhagavad Gita and the Spiritual Exercises

In this way, the Lord of the Bhagavad Gita and of the *Spiritual Exercises* is both transcendent and immanent: “This entire universe is displayed on me in my unmanifest form; all creatures exist in me, but I do not exist in them. And yet creatures do not exist in me – behold my superhuman yogic power! My self causes creatures to exist, and maintains them, but it does not exist in them” (BG 9:4-5). In the Third Week of the Exercises Ignatius says “Consider how his divinity hides itself; that is, how he could destroy his enemies but does not, and how he allows his most holy humanity to suffer so cruelly” and in the Fourth Week he says “Consider how the divinity, which seemed hidden during the Passion, now appears and manifests itself so miraculously in the most holy Resurrection in its true and most sacred effects” (SE 196, 223).

Now, let us analyse the similarities and differences between the Bhagavad Gita and the *Spiritual Exercises* in the area of transcendent and immanent characteristics of God. We cannot find similarities and differences on the terminological or literal basis because of the hermeneutical and linguistic difficulty and because of the two different worldviews. However, as we have seen above, the transcendence of God is acceptable to both the traditions on the basis of the various elements that render Him incomprehensible and mysterious. The expressions of the Bhagavad Gita such as Highest Person (*puruṣottama*), Great Lord (*maheshvara*) and Great Self (*mahatman*) find a parallel in the expressions of Ignatius such as Divine Majesty (*Divina Majestad*), God and Lord (*Dios y Señor*) and Creator and Lord (*Criador y Señor*). Both the traditions have a great truth in common, i.e., the immanent presence of God. This point draws one closer to accepting the similarity of the dynamism of spiritual growth that initiates its activity in the very core of the human being. It is not outside of human being that God works; it is in him and in human history. And so the transcendent and immanent aspects of God are, for the exercitant and for the *yogin*, the highest truth, the highest good, the highest righteousness<sup>43</sup>. This is common to all mystics and is found in both the *Spiritual Exercises* and the Bhagavad Gita (SE 5; 23; 104; 150-157; 167; 230-237 = BG 7:5, 45; 8:13; 9:32; 13:28; 16:22; 18:64-65). With his transcendent and immanent characteristics, God is actively present in the human history. This truth unites both the traditions though there are differences between emanation and creation, between pantheism and monotheism<sup>44</sup>. Also,

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. M. DHAVAMONY, “Christian Approaches to Hinduism: Points of Contact and Difficulties” in *Gregorianum*, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma, 1972, 95.

<sup>44</sup> At the level of thematic expression of Christian and Hindu theology, the transcendental relationship between God and man are different; the differences between creation and emanation, between monotheism and pantheism, between theism and monism, etc. But the two views meet at the level of unthematic experience of the depth-dimension of human experience and life. The nucleus of all human experience is mystery as the horizon of awareness; a religious self-awareness in and through fulfilling the will of God in the historical situation. Please refer to M. DHAVAMONY, “Christian Approaches to Hinduism: Points of Contact and Difficulties” in *Gregorianum*, 102.

both for Christianity and Hinduism, the way to God as “transcendent Fullness” is faith tending towards heavenly realization (*sentir y conocer* and *jñana yoga*); the way to God as “supreme Agent” is service in conformity with his will of salvation for all (*contemplativus in actione* and *karma yoga*); the way to God as “Love” is loving devotion towards him proved by helpful love of one’s neighbour (*agape* and *bhakti yoga*)<sup>45</sup>.

At this point, it is important to note the difference between the Trinity of the Christian tradition and the Trimurthy of the Hindu tradition. In the Hindu tradition, since Vedic Brahmanical times, Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Sustainer or Preserver, and Siva the Destroyer have gradually absorbed, among them, the functions and attributes of myriads of local and lesser deities in Indian theogony. Thus the Grand Triad of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva embodies three separate divinities that represent the three awesome, mysterious divine realities of creation, preservation and destruction<sup>46</sup>. This Triad, however, is closer to Trinity in the Christian sense since the three divinities are manifestations of one Universal Soul, Brahman, in whom all divine realities exist simultaneously. The concept of Trimurthy<sup>47</sup> (Brahma, Vishnu and Siva) may be traced back to Vedic mythology where three gods, Agni, Vayu and Surya, were so very closely associated with one another as to form almost one, single divine personality. The Hindu Trimurthy, then represents an attempt to bring about a religious synthesis between Vaishnavism and Saivism on the one hand, and between these two popular Hindu religious movements and Vedic Brahmanism on the other.

Trimurthy and Trinity have their separate realities. The triadic theme of heaven-earth-underworld was as natural to man as that of three dimensions in space and that of a father in heaven, a son or mother on earth, and a mysterious spirit under the ocean. These need have no connection whatever with Three Persons in one God. The father-mother-child notion is simply the projection of the human family in space. The three members are in no sense equal, much less consubstantial, and they reveal their earth-begotten nature by nothing so forcibly as by their alliance with cosmic, and, in later ages, vital, forces. The Trinity, on the other hand, is not derived from any Triad-philosophies. No Triad has ever developed into Trinity. The invocation of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit represents trinitarianism at a supernatural level, a divine mystery, not a philosophy. The Trinity is the revelation of God himself to human beings.

<sup>45</sup> Cfr. R. DESMET, “Christian Integration of the Three Margas” in *Ignis*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1989, 19.

<sup>46</sup> The Puranas assert that three gods are to be comprehended within one Supreme Being and entreat the pious not to distinguish between them. The Hindu Trimurthy, then, seeks to unite the gods of the orthodox theologians into a trinity of aspects in essence. In the form of Brahma the one God creates; in the form of Vishnu the one God preserves; and in the form of Siva the one God lulls the universe into eternal sleep. See, S. BHATTACHARJI, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology*, Anima Ltd, Chambersburg, 1988, 18.

<sup>47</sup> The concept of Trimurthy was originally developed in the enormous great epic Mahabharata, “The Great Bharata Race”, and further elaborated upon in numerous Puranas, “Ancient Stories” and the Tantras, “Basic Teachings”.

Thus, at the very threshold of Christianity, the invocation of the divine name, under the triune designation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is something entirely new in the religious experience of mankind. In none of the pre-Christian or non-Christian religions is there the remotest hint of the triune nature of God<sup>48</sup>. The Trimurthy are basically artificial contrivances, while the Trinity represents three consubstantial Persons, a sublime mystery which separates the Trinitarian invocations of God from all preceding triads.

#### 4. Incarnation and Avatar: dialogue between the Bhagavad Gita and the Spiritual Exercises

Every religion invariably points to certain factors which are beyond human comprehension and expression; or rather, in religious life human being necessarily comes to a point beyond which his reason and language cannot go. Human experience becomes religious in the strict sense only when it touches on realities beyond that point. Consequently revelation and faith, however differently they may be defined, are basic elements in all religions, and this compels the use of symbols in religious rituals and discourses: objects of revelation and faith being incomprehensible in human concepts and inexpressible in human terms, one is forced to employ symbols to explain and express them<sup>49</sup>. Thus, symbols are necessary tools for human beings to understand and to communicate truths that are *per se* religious. Avatar and incarnation are such symbolic expressions in Hindu and Christian theology. They are symbolic not in the sense that they are less real; they are actually more real than they appear to be.

The word *avatar* in Sanskrit signifies descent, especially of gods to earth. The Bhagavad Gita does not employ the term *avatar* to indicate incarnation of Vishnu in Krishna. However, the *avatar* of Krishna designates the participation of God in the world of men to bring righteousness (*dharma*) and salvation. In Hinduism the scope of God's descent among men is directed towards the restoration of justice and righteousness. It is in Chapter 4 of the Bhagavad Gita that we have the first mention of *avatar* of Krishna:

«I have passed through many births, and so have you, Arjuna. I know them all, you do not, Incinerator of the Foe. Although I am unborn and have a self that is eternal, although I am lord of beings, by controlling my own material nature I come into being by means of my own incomprehensible power. Whenever there is a falling away from the true law and an upsurge of unlawfulness, then, Bharata, I emit myself. I come into being age after age, to protect the virtuous and to destroy the evil-doers, to establish a firm basis for the true law.

<sup>48</sup> Cfr. G.J. HOYNACKI, "Triadic Complexes and Trinities in Religious Traditions" in *The Asia Journal of Theology*, BTES of Serampore College, Bangalore, 1990, 261.

<sup>49</sup> Symbols, according to Carl Jung, are transforming images, converting energy within the unconscious. Certainly, as religion has always known, the power of symbolism is intended to transform the recipient. The active symbol can deeply affect an individual and can cause a transformation of understanding, of relationship, of life. Please see R.F.C. HULL, *Symbols of Transformation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1956, 231.

Whoever knows my divine birth and action as they really are is not born again on leaving the body. He comes to me, Arjuna (BG 4:5-9)».

In BG 4:5 Krishna refers to His and Arjuna's past births. Arjuna is ignorant about them. Krishna's self is changeless and his birth refers to his *avatar*<sup>50</sup>. Here the Lord Krishna makes reference to His knowledge of the past births of every one, because he is the Lord of all individual selves. His rebirth implies more than that of the average human being. Krishna affirms that "I generate myself" (BG 4:7) for setting up the law of righteousness (*dharmā*) for guarding the eternal law. He incarnates "age after age" (BG 4:8) to protect the good, who adhere strictly to *dharmā*, and works for the destruction of evil-doers. Thus the *avatar* of Krishna is to save human beings<sup>51</sup>. This life and saving

<sup>50</sup> A passage of the Mahabharata mentions ten *avatars*, namely, Boar, Dwarf, Man-Lion, Man (Vasudeva Krishna), deified hero Rama Bhargava, Rama Dasharathi, Hamsa, Kurma, Matsya and Kalki. The Matsya Purana, that gives another list of ten incarnations, states that there were three divine *avatars*, namely Narayana, Narasimha, and Vamana, besides seven human *avatars*, namely, Dattatreya, Mandhatir, Rama Jamadhagnya, Rama Dasarathi, Veda Vyasa, Buddha and Kalki. See also R.V. D'SOUZA, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 60; The *avatars* of Vishnu are numerous, but ten are considered to be the most prominent. They are Matsya or fish; Kurma or tortoise; Varaha or boar; Narasimha or man-lion; Vamana or dwarf; Parasurama; Ramachandra; Krishna; Buddha; and Kalki. Of these, the first five are said to have taken place in worlds other than ours; of the next four, Vishnu lived on earth as man; and the last is yet to come at the end of the world. For a detailed study on *avatars*, please see P. THOMAS, *Epics, Myths and Legends of India – A Comprehensive Survey of the Sacred Lore of the Hindus and Buddhists*, D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., Bombay, 1945, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Should the universe be threatened with destruction before the appointed hour, especially as a result of the activity of demons, it is the duty of Vishnu to rescue it, a duty he typically performs by intervening as *avatar*. Such *avatars* are said to be numerous but ten of them are considered particularly memorable:

1. The Fish (*Matsya*): When the earth was overwhelmed by a universal flood Vishnu took the form of a fish and warned Manu (the first man) of the impending danger and then carried him to safety along with his family.
2. The Tortoise (*Kurma*): The ambrosia of the gods was lost in the flood and had to be recovered. Vishnu then assumed the form of a tortoise to provide a firm footing for the mountain Mandara which served as the rod, with the serpent Vasuki serving as the rope.
3. The Boar (*Varaha*): Vishnu recovered the earth from the abysmal depths into which it had been cast in anger by the demon Hiranyaksha.
4. The Man-Lion (*Narashimha*): Hiranyaksha was succeeded by his brother Hiranyakasipu, whose son Prahlada, to the chagrin of his father, became a great devotee of Vishnu. When Prahlada called for Vishnu's help while being persecuted by his father, Vishnu emerged from a pillar in the form of a man-lion and ripped Hiranyakasipu apart after placing him on his thigh.
5. The Dwarf (*Vamana*): The pious demon-king Bali, noted for his liberality, posed a threat to the gods by his austerities. Vishnu neutralised him by appearing as a dwarf and was granted his request for a piece of land covered by his three strides.
6. Parasurama (Rama with the Axe): Vishnu incarnated himself as the son of Jamadagni, who was oppressed by King Kartavirya. There upon Jamadagni's son, Parasurama, killed the king and the sons of the king twenty one times.
7. Ramachandra (Rama with the Bow): Vishnu incarnated himself as Rama, the son of the King Dasaratha, to save the world from the depredations of the demon Ravana, who abducted Rama's wife Sita. Ravana was killed by Rama, and Sita was rescued.
8. Krishna: Vishnu's incarnation as Krishna in the Mahabharata.

activity of Krishna is a direct example of spiritual life because through the yogic consciousness of truth (Krishna's divine birth and action), man's sins are destroyed, and he is drawn towards God-realization.

The doctrine of *avatar* teaches us that Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, "is not an impersonal God, but deeply and intimately a personal God. The manifestation of *avatar* deeply calls for a human response to climb out of the ignorance and limitations of ordinary humanity"<sup>52</sup>. The *avatar* doctrine in Ramanuja's theology serves the following divine aims:

- God becomes incarnate for the purpose of salvation, which consists of eternal communion with him.
- God in his kindness and grace takes human form to rescue his devotees and to destroy their enemies whenever *dharma* (righteousness) is declining. God incarnates himself to save eminent *yogin* by allowing him to behold His essential nature, His deeds, and to listen to His teachings.
- God becomes incarnate to grant the request of his worshippers for worldly items as well as for the supreme goodness of fulfilling the will of God<sup>53</sup>.

Thus the *avatar* steps down from his throne to reach the human soul struggling in *samsara* to find and to fulfil the will of God, and becomes one like the *yogin*, suffers with him, endures pain with him and leads him by the hand like a friend or comrade or guide.

Ignatius's vision of God in the *Spiritual Exercises* is Trinitarian and manifestly Christocentric. Christ is the way and the end of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius prefers to use Christ (*Cristo*) and Christ our Lord (*Cristo nuestro Señor*) for the Second Person of Trinity, along with the "Son of God" (*Hijo de Dios*) (SE 274), "Son of David" (*Hijo de David*) (SE 287), "Son of Man" (*Hijo del hombre*) (SE 284), "Son of Mary" (*Hijo de María*) (SE 208, 248, 264, 276), "Saviour of the World" (*Salvador del mundo*) (SE 265), "Creator and Redeemer" (*Criador y Redentor*) (SE 229), "Bridegroom of the Church" (*Esposo de la Iglesia*) (SE 365) and "Universal Lord" (*Señor universal*) (SE 97)<sup>54</sup>. In the Christian tradition, the word 'Incarnation' means 'enfleshment' as expressed in the Gospel according to John 1:14, namely: the Word (Greek: *logos*) became flesh (Latin: *caro*; Greek: *sarx*). Incarnation refers to God's act of becoming a human being as well as to the result of this act, namely, the permanent union of the divine and human natures in the one Person of the Word. The New Testament does not use static, metaphysical concepts to explain the mystery of the Incarnation; rather, it understands the Incarna-

9. Buddha: Vishnu took this *avatar* out of compassion, to bring the bloody sacrifices of animals to an end.
10. Kalkin: This is the name of the *avatar* yet to come, when Vishnu will incarnate himself to bring the dark age to a catastrophic end and inaugurate a new era of peace.

For detailed study on *avatar*, see A. SHARMA, *Classical Hindu Thought – An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, 82-86.

<sup>52</sup> S. AUROBINDO, *Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press Ltd, Pondicherry, 1972, 141.

<sup>53</sup> M.R. SAMPATKUMARAN, *Gita-bhasya of Ramanuja*, CLS, Madras, 1969, 79.

<sup>54</sup> Christ (*Cristo*) is used forty times and Christ our Lord (*Cristo nuestro Señor*) is used seventy one times. See also, V. MALPAN, *A Comparative Study of the Bhagavad Gita and the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola on the Process of Spiritual Liberation*, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma, 1992, 220.

tion in terms of a dynamic movement. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians (2:6-11), speaks first of the pre-existence of the Word, then of his emptying (*kenosis*) of himself in becoming a human being, and finally of his exaltation in the resurrection. Here we have a Christology that starts from above, descends to the level of human being, and ascends again to the divine plane. On the other hand, in the Acts of the Apostles, we have a Christology from below, starting with the human life of Jesus Christ and ascending to his glorification (Acts 2:22-36; 5:30-32; 10:36-43)<sup>55</sup>.

Ignatius's understanding of Incarnation grounds its scriptural foundation giving equal importance to the Christologies of the School of Alexandria (Logos-Sarx = Word-Flesh) and the School of Antioch (Logos-Anthropos = Word-Human Being)<sup>56</sup>. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius brings out all the dimensions of incarnation in a beautiful way:

- The divine Sonship of the human Jesus is accepted; the human Jesus is the true Son of God, and not merely an adoptive Son.
- Jesus is worshipped in his human form since he is hypostatically<sup>57</sup> united with the Word.
- To Christ the human being can be attributed those predicates that are proper to the divine, and to Christ the divine those predicates that are proper to the human nature.
- Jesus' human nature is essentially and not just simply existentially holy and sinless because of its intimate union with the Word, in whom it subsists.

Thus Ignatius, through the *Spiritual Exercises*, helps the exercitant to have the right understanding of Incarnation, i.e., even though Christ the eternal Word becomes flesh, a human being, he does not lose his divinity; he is one person who is both human and divine.

The mystery of Incarnation is well brought out in a number of meditations of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The first contemplation of the first day of the Second Week, for instance, is devoted to "the Incarnation" (*la Encarnación*) where the three Divine Persons decide, in their eternity, that the Second Person should become a human being in order to save the human race (SE 101-102). In the contemplation on "the Nativity" (*el Nacimiento*), Ignatius brings the mystery of Incarnation to its historical and concrete realism (SE 110-117). The main point of Ignatius is to make the exercitant aware of the painful implications of the mystery of Incarnation, in order that the end of Christ's life on earth in utter poverty, weakness and death should be imitated by the exercitant. For Ignatius, the Incarnation of Christ has to be always seen from the point of view of the death and resurrection of Christ (SE 116, 190-209, 218-237) who is actively dwelling, existing and working in the history (SE 234-237).

<sup>55</sup> Cfr. N. SHETH, "Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation" in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Academy Press, Noida, 2003, 187.

<sup>56</sup> In the School of Alexandria, the emphasis is generally on the Divine Word while the humanity of Christ is a passive instrument. The School of Antioch highlights the full humanity of Christ, both body and soul, and thus preserves the duality of Christ's two natures, but does not maintain sufficiently the unity of Christ.

<sup>57</sup> It is derived from Greek word *hypo* means 'under', and *stasis* means 'standing'. Thus hypostasis means 'sub-stance'.

When we try to have a dialogue between the *avatar* of the Bhagavad Gita and the Incarnation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, it is theologically important that the terms should not be interpreted as interchangeable. Dupuis argues “as all Hindu commentators agree, the Hindu *avatar* teaching, while implying an earthly manifestation of the Absolute in human form, is never conceived as a personal insertion of God into human history, as Christian faith understands the Incarnation of the Son of God”<sup>58</sup>. Krishna is the manifestation of the Absolute Brahman and not a communication of the Trinitarian Mystery, as the Christians understand the Second Person of the Trinity. Krishna is not the Son of God who becomes incarnate but God himself in the form of Vishnu. Also it is important to note that the Incarnation of Christ in the world, for Ignatius, is to save all (SE 102, 107) by laying down his life on the cross (SE 190-207). The Incarnation of Christ in the *Spiritual Exercises* is not one of the many divine manifestations or descents, as is understood of the *avatar* of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita.

However, the *avatar* of Krishna entering at the right moment into the world to restore righteousness and justice can find its parallel in the Incarnation of Christ in the *Spiritual Exercises* because “in order to save the human race, when the fullness of time had come, the Divine Persons sent the angel St. Gabriel to our Lady” (SE 102 = BG 4:6). Even in this point we cannot speak of an absolute convergence of the Incarnation of Christ and the *avatar* of Krishna, because the Incarnation of Christ is concerned not so much with the fact that God came, but with God’s having become man and having died on the cross so that we might receive life in its fullness.

Apart from this, there are certain point of convergence between “the Incarnation” (*la Encarnación*) of the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *avatar* of the Bhagavad Gita. First, there is an element of freedom and of the initiative of God, in both the Incarnation of Christ and the *avatar* of Krishna with the aim of rescuing human beings (SE 102-109 = BG 4:7). Secondly, both these traditions stress the absolute transcendence of God even during the earthly manifestations of the divinity, and thus the immanence of God does not deprive the transcendental aspect of God (SE 5, 16, 20, 46, 106, 108, 135, 146, 147, 152, 155, 167, 168, 183, 233, 234, 235, 240, 330, 369, 370 = BG 7:26; 10:5, 9, 12; 11:3, 11, 12, 16-18, 20, 30, 31, 40, 42, 50). Thirdly, the initiative of God is to save human beings from their sinful condition (SE 45-61 = BG 4:8, 9). Fourthly, the *Spiritual Exercises* affirms of Christ and the Bhagavad Gita affirms of Krishna that he is the Way, each in his respective tradition (Two Standards 136-138; Election 175-189; Rules for the Discernment of Spirits 313-336 = BG 9:18). In this way, the *avatar* and the Incarnation are immanent, yet transcendent and totally free. They are not bound by the laws of nature, as human beings are. Their entry into the world is generally miraculous, accompanied by extraordinary signs. The *avatar* and the Incarnation reveal God’s personal love and concern for humanity and the whole cosmos. The *avatar* and the Incarnation emphasize loving devotion (*bhakti*). In both *avatar* and Incarnation, the descent of God enables human beings to ascend to God. Human beings are raised to a higher divinity: they are divinized in Hin-

<sup>58</sup> J. DUPUIS, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1991, 202.

duism and made adopted children of God in Christianity. The *avatar* and the Incarnation give importance to the world and justify selfless involvement in the world, searching for, finding and fulfilling the will of God rather than renouncing the world<sup>59</sup>. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna exhorts the *yogin* not only to be detached from the fruits of work but to be involved in the world and to work for the welfare of people (BG 3:19-25). Krishna has been interpreted not only as one who grants other-worldly salvation (*moksha*) but also as one who teaches how to discern and to find the will of the Almighty through the help of threefold *yoga*. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius portrays Jesus as concerned not only about the next world but also about establishing a kingdom of justice, peace and love (SE 95-98; 143-147) in this world. Ignatius makes the exercitant, through the key meditations (SE 23; 91-98; 136-147; 149-156; 165-167; 230-237), seek to remove poverty, inequality, oppression and injustice, and to promote the kingdom of God here on earth.

Thus the similarities between the *avatar* of Krishna and the Incarnation of Christ are as follows:

- As in the incarnation, so also in the *avatar* the freedom and initiative of God in regard to his entrance into the world is expressly maintained. God comes, not compelled by nature or constrained by *karma* or carried by the run of the *yugas*, but of his own free will, mastering nature, which is his own, with full knowledge and awareness and a clear purpose. His miraculous entrance, e.g., virginal conception, emphasizes the fact of God's freedom from nature's laws and from the chain of creaturely causality.
- In both the traditions, the absolute transcendence of God, even in his earthly sojourn, is safeguarded. God remains God and is not mixed up with nature, world or *prakriti*.
- There is a twofold purpose both for the Incarnation of Christ and for the *avatar* of Krishna, namely, God's self-revelation and, through it, man's salvation<sup>60</sup>.

It is heartening for both the traditions to realize that the other religious tradition also speaks of God's special presence in the world, thus emphasizing involvement in the world rather than running away from it.

However, it is difficult to reach a common understanding regarding salvation. For Ignatius, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, Christ came to save all and saved all by laying down his life on the cross ("To save the human race" in SE 102; "Let us work the redemption of the human race" in SE 107; "Christ will die on the cross and this will be for me" in SE 116; "The Lord is going to his Passion for my sins" in SE 193; "The whole Passion narrative" in SE 200-209). But in the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna as *avatar* came to save the good and to destroy the evil (BG 4:8; 9:22, 25).

<sup>59</sup> For a detailed study on the similarities between avatar and incarnation, please see F.X. D'SA, "Christian Incarnation and Hindu Avatara" in *Concilium*, SCM Press Ltd, London, 1993, 78-80; N. SHETH, "Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation" in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Academy Press, Noida, 2003, 192-193.

<sup>60</sup> Neuner's treatment on the similarities between the incarnation and avatar is taken from S. RAYAN, "Interpreting Christ to India: The Contribution of Roman Catholic Seminaries" in *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Bishop's College, Calcutta, 1973, 224-225.

Christ, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, is the final and absolute bringer of salvation, and it is in his person (SE 91-134; 136-148), death (SE 190-209) and resurrection (SE 218-229) that Christ brings victory to the redemptive plan of God. He is not an “appearance” but “real human” in his human form. The *avatar* of Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, enters human life but does not share it (BG 4:14). He is an “appearance” and has assumed human nature to save the good (BG 9:11). Thus there are many *avatars*, and sometimes repeated *avatars*, while the Incarnation of Christ comes only once. This is in keeping with the respective worldviews of the Hindu and Christian tradition, cyclic and linear. It makes sense to have many and repeated *avatars* in a cyclic worldview, and similarly one sees the point in the Incarnation taking place once and for all in a linear worldview. Also, Christianity does not believe in rebirth and one has but one earthly life, while Hinduism believes in reincarnation. Secondly, the Vaishnava *avatars* and the Christian Incarnation are both real, while the former are perfect, the latter is imperfect. That is to say, the *avatars* are real and absolutely perfect: they are not subject to such imperfections as time, hunger, thirst and so forth, while Christ is also real, but imperfect: he has the human imperfections except sin<sup>61</sup>. Christ saves by assuming a finite human nature, which is limited and conditioned by time, history and suffering. The *avatars*, on the contrary, do not in any way subject themselves to finite nature, to its pains and limitations. Unlike the *avatars*, Christ saves precisely through the Cross; the suffering Saviour belongs to the uniqueness of Christianity. This fundamental difference arises, of course, from the contrasting worldviews of the two traditions. For a Hindu it is impossible for God to become imperfect<sup>62</sup>. Thirdly, an *avatar* manifests the Absolute, generally Vishnu, who is a personal Creator-God and not the Trimurthi of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, while the incarnation of Christ reveals the Trinity. Partial *avatars* are possible in the Hindu tradition<sup>63</sup>, while Christ has never been thought of as a partial Incarnation. *Avatars* have different purposes, and not every *avatar* grants ultimate salvation, while the primary purpose of Incarnation is ultimate salvation<sup>64</sup>.

Neuner suggests that the differences between the Incarnation of Christ and the *avatar* of Krishna are as follows:

- Krishna is God and not Son of God, as Jesus is, and therefore there is no question of sonship either for the *avatar* or for those who receive him.
- The *avatar* is a manifestation of the Absolute and not a communication of the Trinitarian Mystery to human beings.

<sup>61</sup> Cfr. G. PARRINDER, *Avatar and Incarnation*, Faber and Faber, London, 1970, 122-130.

<sup>62</sup> Cfr. F. ZACHARIAS, *Christianity and Indian Mentality*, St. Joseph's Apostolic Seminary, Alwaye, 1952, 65.

<sup>63</sup> Even a partial *avatar* is perfect. In Vaishnavism, we have not only partial *avatars* but also descents of parts of God or even of the weapons of God. Please see N. SHETH, “Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation” in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Academy Press, Noida, 2003, 294.

<sup>64</sup> Some *avatars* come only to save a devotee from a particular difficulty; for example, Narasimha (Man-Lion) saves his devotee Prahlada from persecution, and once this task is done, Vishnu abandons his Man-Lion form. For a detailed study see N. SHETH, “Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation”, 295.

- The coming of Krishna is a presence rather than the fulfilment of the prophetic call and of the history of a people.
- By the advent of *avatar*, the world-process is not radically changed and history is not definitively oriented towards a transcendent destiny, while Christ has done both.
- In the absence of such a decisive intervention of Vishnu's part as *avatar*, he has to come into the world over and over again, *yuge yuge*, unlike his once-for-all action in the Incarnation of Christ for the redemption of the world.
- The *avatars* save human beings out of the world and not the world itself, there being no redemption for *prakriti* and no resurrection for the body.
- The *avatar* himself is not truly human and there is no real becoming-man, since God, in coming into the world, has nothing to do with *prakriti*, his humanity being a docetist appearance and illusion and play-acting, *lila*<sup>65</sup>.

Therefore there is in the Hindu tradition no God who takes on himself our *karma*, who shares in the human situation of *kenosis*, who labours, suffers and dies.

In this sense there are certain areas of convergence and divergence between the Incarnation of Christ in the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *avatar* of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita with their own important theological particularity<sup>66</sup> that cannot be ignored. At

<sup>65</sup> Neuner's treatment of the differences between the incarnation and avatar is taken from S. RAYAN, "Interpreting Christ to India: The Contribution of Roman Catholic Seminaries" in *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Bishop's College, Calcutta, 1973, 225. However, the argument made by Noel Sheth is different. He argues (quoting verses of the Bhagavad Gita 4:5-9) that, even though Krishna is unborn and changeless, he freely and by his own power comes into being in different ages. He does so in order to protect the good, to destroy the wicked, to re-establish righteousness and to free his devotees from rebirth. Krishna also comes to teach the devotee how to search for and to find the will of the Supreme Being, leading Arjuna through most of the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. From the text of the Bhagavad Gita we can conclude, first, that the form of the *avatar* is real, and not merely an appearance. Even though Krishna is himself unborn and changeless, he nonetheless comes into being (BG 4:6, 8), emanates himself (BG 4:7), has many births (BG 4:5), and resorts to or assumes a human form or body (BG 9:11). In other words, even though Krishna is eternal and changeless as a divine being, he evolves his *avatar* body in the form of a human being. From this it is quite natural to conclude that Krishna's human form is a real body and not an illusory one. Second, we deduce that the human body of Krishna is imperfect, since he comes into being by resorting to *prakriti* or material nature (BG 4:6). This *prakriti* is made up of the three imperfect *gunas* (we dealt on this theme in a detailed way in Part II), and hence his form has to be defective. It should be noted that, although the three *gunas* may be said to be 'perfect' insofar as they follow their own nature, they are 'imperfect' in comparison with higher types of being, just as matter, by its very nature, is imperfect compared to spirit, which is more perfect, or just as creatures are imperfect in contrast to God, who is most perfect. Since Krishna's body is made of this imperfect *prakriti*, which is called his lower (*apara*) nature (BG 7:4-5). Thus, Krishna is both really divine and really human, as well as imperfect as a human being. Please see N. SHETH, "Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation" in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Academy Press, Noida, 2003, 183.

<sup>66</sup> Aloysius Pieris says, "The text "The Birth of the Child-Saviour" (*Kumarasambhava*) gives the most exquisitely aesthetic account of *avatar* that one could ever read in an ancient Indic literature. It describes a typical instance of a god descending to succour humans in time of crisis. In that literature we often read about gods intervening in the lives of suffering people and winning battles against demons. The Bhagavad Gita does refer to God appearing in various epochs (*yuge yuge*) to help people in trouble. The value

any rate, this academic dialogue between the *Spiritual Exercises* and the Bhagavad Gita regarding the understanding of God intends to help adherents of the Christian and Hindu traditions to bridge better the gulf between God and humanity, heaven and earth, and the sacred and the secular.

## 5. Conclusion

The distinctive traits of the understanding of God in the Bhagavad Gita and the *Spiritual Exercises* can be summarized in the following way: An experience of God as being present under a form of knowledge which is simultaneously general and obscure yet rich and satisfying; God being present as love (*avatar* and Incarnation) and active at all levels of created reality; God being present as an experience of love penetrating and dominating the soul in its innermost depths, in a manner connected with passivity and activity; experiencing the passivity while he is under the all-powerful control of God; experiencing the activity in his habitual awareness of God and his continual prayer in the midst of goings and comings; a harmonious union between the transcendence and immanence of God; a harmonious union between his driving love for God and his strong power of reasoning and this combination is devoted to the service of God and others; his life is dominated and oriented by the thought of serving God, of procuring His glory; an experience completely focused on the thought of greater service to God by being in the world. Both the Bhagavad Gita and the *Spiritual Exercises* understand God as very much present in this world and invite the human person to collaborate in a project which takes place in the world, together with an other-worldly dimension. We believe that dialogue is an interaction between persons in which one of them seeks to give oneself as one is to the other and seeks also to know the other as the other is. The principle of dialogue used in this paper is conceived as openness to the Bhagavad Gita

of such literature is never to be underestimated, just as the *genre littéraire* known as “Myth” is indispensable as a medium of communication of the Ultimate Truth. The rituals that enact these myths disclose the liberative thrust of the religiosity of the poor. And in almost all cosmic religions, we have a god of justice to whom the poor have recourse. However, is there, in the Indic literature, any concept of God covenanted with the poor, God enfleshed among them and opting to die, say, a *chandala*’s death or a dalit’s death at the hands of Caste Hierarchs, thus vindicating God’s covenant with the oppressed as a soteriological process? Or anything that even remotely resembles it? Given also the fact that *itihāsapurānas* are invested with the authority of a fifth veda, as can be gathered from both the Hindu Scriptures and the Buddhist Scriptures, can it be affirmed that even the lesser priests who edited and re-edited them from time to time ever allowed the belief of a “God covenanted with the Oppressed” to emerge in any page of that vast literature? The now contemporary theological reflection of the Dalit community on their own experience is presumably based on a resounding “No” to these questions. By making this observation, I am not saying that the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures are soteriologically wrong, meaningless or inferior, but simply that they have their own uniqueness which Christians have to welcome and learn from”. See also, A. PIERIS, *God’s Reign for God’s Poor – A Return to the Jesus Formula*, Logos Printing Ltd, Sri Lanka, 1999, 83-89.

with a willingness not only to speak but also to respond to what the text says. This principle is clearly indicated by John Paul II as follows: “Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit” (*Redemptoris Missio* 56). The spirit of love enables the partners to see the others for what they are and to speak to them honestly, and thus respect them as persons and invite them to respond to us in such a way that we can meet them as persons. The spirit of hope expects the other to respond in honesty and sincerity and inspires mutual trust. Dialogue is more than communication; it is communion in which we are mutually informed, purified, illumined and reunited with one another and with God. The dialogue at the level of specialties has its importance because it can contribute to the accurate knowledge of religious heritage. Specialists in the historical-comparative phenomenology of religions can throw light on the fundamental religious experience and expression in order both to bring out the common elements as well as the divergences between religions, especially to avoid religious syncretism. The writer through this paper on “Hermeneutical Reading on the Understanding of God: a Dialogue between the Bhagavad Gita and the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius” believes that though the mystery of Christ and of his message is complete and definitive, the understanding and living of mystery can grow through dialogue by sharing the insights and riches of religious traditions of humankind.