

The Church in Upadhyay's Vision

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Abstract: While paying tribute to an exceptional man who had two passions: intense patriotic zeal to liberate India from colonial power and an ardent desire to win India to the Catholic faith, our author affirms that Brahmabandhab Upadhyay symbolizes a threefold commitment: to the Church emphasizing the need for incarnating the Gospel in the cultural ethos of India; to the nation with the message that Indians must be responsible for one another and must love and live an authentic Indian life.

Though Upadhyay cannot be copied today, the author asserts that he is a theologian of importance who can teach us something significant. We know that the circumstances in which he lived and struggled are not the same as what shapes the context in which we today live and search. In our changing and challenging context of the 21st century, Upadhyay inspires us to listen anew to what the Spirit is telling the Church and nation and for deeper Christian commitment to the integral development of the people of India.

Keywords: Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, Indian Church, Indian Christianity, Hindu-Christian theology, contextual theology.

Introduction

The year 2007 celebrated the centenary of the death of a great patriot and a remarkable Christian who in his time had a profound influence on the country and on the Church. Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) lived fast and died young, 46 years old. But

the intensity of his love and commitment to his country and to Christian discipleship inspired many. Among them was his contemporary, Rabindranath Tagore, who described Upadhyay as “a Roman Catholic ascetic yet a Vedantin - spirited, fearless, self-denying, learned and uncommonly influential.”¹

The country and the Christian community recall the memory of Upadhyay, an unrecognized martyr of the freedom struggle who died a prisoner of the British Raj. An outstanding example of Christian value, he is remembered today as a thinker of high standing, and for his numerous writings that contain authentic seeds for an Indian theology. Upadhyay gave an impetus to the process of inculturation of the Christian faith not only at the level of theology but also in spirituality and Christian practice.

We pay tribute to an exceptional man who had two passions: intense patriotic zeal to liberate India from colonial power and an ardent desire to win India to the Catholic faith. He wanted to liberate his motherland from European political hegemony, and the Church from western ecclesial monopoly, which he perceived as a cultural domination. His loyalty to his motherland was intimately interwoven with his loyalty to the Catholic faith and Church. In Upadhyay, we find a courageous pioneer of the difficult synthesis of supernatural faith and national culture. In this paper I shall underline the many and varied efforts of this farsighted thinker to sow the seeds of a great revolution in Indian theology and ecclesiology.

I. Upadhyay's Indian-Christian Identity

Upadhyay was a child of his times to be understood in his context. He was born in the Kulin Brahmin family of Bengal – Kulin being the ritually purest and socially most elevated stratum of the caste. He was an Indian of the 19th century nationalism with its claim of swaraj and in his sacramental rebirth he was a Christian of the 19th century Catholic Church.

In its broadest sense, nationalism is an ideological movement that draws upon national identity in order to achieve certain political goals. However, political self-determination is only one part of the demands inherent in nationalism. An equally important characteristic

feature of nationalism, according to Prof. Hans Kohn, is cultural self-determination.²

For many Bengali nationalists of the late 19th century, 'nation' was an ambiguous concept. It often coincided both with Bengal and with the territorial boundaries of British India. This 'nation' was sometimes called Bengali, sometimes Hindu, sometimes Aryan, sometimes Indo-Aryan, and sometimes Indian. Upadhyay and other early nationalists were more concerned about the contours of cultural identity than the territorial-geographical dimensions of the national space. "Carving out a national space out of colonial space meant investing it with a cultural identity and meaning," says V. Sebastian.³ The roots of cultural nationalism can be found in the political thought of Upadhyay who tried to define Indian culture in terms of Hinduness based on Aryan racial superiority, consolidation of caste system and Brahmanical hegemony.

The notions of Aryan-Hindu-caste that form a unity in Upadhyay's thinking are essentially linked with his concept of Indian nation and nationalism. This Aryan-Hindu-caste triad determines his understanding of Indian national identity and also forms an essential part of his conception of Hindu Catholicism.⁴ The images, symbols, metaphors and idioms expressed in Upadhyay's writings convey complex interpretations, not only of the emergent Indian national identity but also of Hindu-Christian identity.

Upadhyay's Christian identity was influenced by the 19th century Catholic Church to which he belonged. The Catholic Church of this period bore an extremely institutional character, which was carved by the Tridentine ecclesiology of the 16th century. Its institutional self-understanding was further accentuated in the 18th century with the rise of National Churches, *ecclesia gallicana* in France and its variations in Germany and Austria known as Febronianism and Josephism. It was a contest between papal absolutism and royal absolutism. A Church dominated by an exaggerated extension and exaltation of papal authority at Vatican I in 1869-70 obviated the full realization and individuality of local churches. Between 1850 and 1950 the Catholic Church was characterized by a dominant European culture and a centralized form of governance with its hierarchical structures that enforced uniformity, orthodoxy and submission at all levels.

Upadhyay's vision for an indigenous Church in India will have to be assessed against the backdrop of his political stance, caste allegiance and his Catholic religious experience and outlook which influenced and determined his Indian Christian identity. Just as many from various circles – historical, cultural, religious and political - would agree that Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861 – 1907) has made a significant contribution to shaping the new India, today in the ecclesiastical circle, many would acknowledge Upadhyay's daring passion to change the colonial face of the Church in India.

2. Upadhyay's Vision for an Indian Church

2.1. The Context

From the 16th century the mission of proclaiming the Good News entered a new phase. Coincident with political expansion the Gospel encountered the major cultures of the world. However, the association of the Catholic faith with European culture, transplantation of feudal ecclesial structures into the 'new world', and the fear of pagan beliefs and practices affecting the purity of Christian faith proved great stumbling blocks for inculturating the Christian message. Until the late 19th century the tendency was to address one culture and one civilization, since multiplicity was feared to be the disastrous result of human arrogance, as symbolized by the Tower of Babel.

Planting of the European Church in mission lands without any appropriate adaptation hindered the Christian faith in its encountering and dialoguing with cultures and other cosmic and meta-cosmic religious traditions. Dialogue could not take place because the institutional Church had come to give and to teach and not to receive and to learn. Consequently, the Church became a ghetto, excluding all creativity of indigenous cultures.

Attempts by Robert de Nobili and Constantine Beschi in India, Matteo Ricci and others in China and elsewhere to incarnate the Gospel in various contexts presupposed an interaction between faith and culture. Such efforts were scant and were to pass almost unnoticed in comparison with formidable efforts made to propagate a Western form of Christianity globally. However, some of those apparently negligible efforts became a motivating force for recognizing the urgency of inculturating the Gospel in modern times.

Inspired by Robert de Nobili's innovative efforts among the caste Hindus, some Indian Christians of the late 19th century, like J.N. Farquhar, Krishna Mohan Banerjee, Keshub Chunder Sen and Brahamabandhab Upadhyay felt that the Church in India should assume a uniquely Indian character, and that Hindus should become Christians without having to desert their cultural heritage. They attempted to portray Hinduism as an avenue towards Christianity and as being fulfilled in it. From among these pioneering figures, Upadhyay's farsighted vision for an Indian Church contributed much to the contemporary search for a relevant Indian theology and ecclesiology. I shall underscore some of his novel and pertinent insights.

2.2. Upadhyay's Obsession: Defrock European Christianity in India

Upadhyay⁵ feared that Christianity would remain a foreign cult, an alien system, an anti-national force and a religion repulsive to the people, if it did not insert itself into the Indian mainstream. His passion was to win India for Christ and the Church. He was obsessed with the ideal that the Catholic Church, to gain acceptance in India, should strip itself of all that is European because according to him, "it is the foreign clothes of Catholic faith that have chiefly prevented our countrymen from perceiving its universal nature. Catholicism has donned the European garb in India. Our Hindu brethren cannot see the sublimity and sanctity of our divine religion because of its hard coating of Europeanism."⁶ Christianity in European clothing is extremely repulsive to India. He therefore appealed to all Christians in India to sever the undesirable alliance of Christianity with Europeanism.

On being received into the Catholic Church in 1891, Upadhyay goes through a phase of intellectual confusion. He wants to remain faithful to his Brahmo faith into which his love for India was integrated, and to the new understanding of Jesus Christ. Besides, he is also confused about the meaning of the Church, the Church of foreigners, of "trousers and beef and drinks ...," the Church which seemed to have donned the religious attire of the colonial rule. This Church he found it difficult to accept. Like his uncle Kali Charan Banerji, Upadhyay often said that the Indian followers of Christ

*should form "a national, indigenous Church of their own and maintain good relations with all."*⁷

2.3. Upadhyay's Identity-claim: "We are Hindu-Catholics"

Sensitive to affirming the Indian identity of Christians, with remarkable cultural insight, Upadhyay made a decisive pronouncement, which expressed a comprehensive notion of being Hindu-Catholic in India, when he wrote:

By birth we are Hindus and shall remain Hindus till death. But as dvija (twice-born) by virtue of our sacramental rebirth, we are Catholics; we are members of an indefectible communion embracing all ages and climes. In customs and manners, in observing caste and social distinctions, in eating and drinking, in our life and living, we are genuine Hindus; but in our faith we are neither Hindus nor Europeans, nor Americans, nor Chinese, but all inclusive. Our faith fills the whole world and is not confined to any country or race; our faith is universal and consequently includes all truths. Our thought is emphatically Hindu. We are more speculative than practical, more given to synthesis than to analysis, more contemplative than active. It is extremely difficult for us to learn how to think like the Greeks of old or the scholastics of the Middle Ages. Our brains are moulded in the philosophic cast of our ancient country ... In short, we are Hindus as far as our physical and mental constitution is concerned, but in regard to our immortal souls we are Catholic. We are Hindu-Catholics.⁸

This astonishing declaration reveals a basic principle, which as it were articulates the nature of the Catholic Church that he had envisaged for India. The Church is indigenous and catholic, local and universal. Therefore, Christian faith bids us retain both our native Hindu-Indian identity and our Catholic identity of being in communion with the whole community of Christians. It invites us to respond to and to live the Christian message within one's socio-cultural context, for 'in our life and living we are genuine Hindus,' and within the context of world culture, 'in our faith we are all inclusive.'

In his search for a Hindu-Catholic identity, he adopts a firm theological stance on issues of Christian truths and Hindu beliefs, such as avatara and incarnation, of patriotism and Catholic allegiance to the

nation, etc., which are as relevant for the Church in India today as it was in his time.

Calling himself a Hindu-Catholic, he indicates the direction he desires for Christian presence in India. It expresses his deep concern for a dialogue between the Hindu heritage and the Catholic faith. Making a distinction between faith and culture, he has stated that a fruitful dialogue should evolve between Vedanta and Catholic faith, which will transform both Hindu religiosity and Catholic culture. Upadhyay gives an insightful expression to describe his new found Hindu-Catholic identity. According to samaj dharma, which is the order of society and the cultural world he had inherited, he is Hindu; according to sadhana dharma, that allows an individual the inner freedom to choose any authentic path to spiritual pursuits, he is Christian.

2.4. Upadhyay's Dream: A Church with an Indian Face

Upadhyay's open stand in favour of inculturation in several areas of Catholic life will give us insights into what he hoped the Catholic Church would be.

2.4.1. Incarnate Christ and his message in Hindu garb

Upadhyay envisaged certain elements in the realization of his creative vision of establishing a Church with an Indian face. These were: the integration of the Indian social order into the Christian way of life, the use of Vedantic categories to express Christian theology, the recognition of the Vedas as 'the Indian Old Testament' in preparation for the Gospel and the establishment of an Indian Christian monastic order.

The landmarks of his ever-unfolding desire of realizing this vision for the Church in India were the deeply Hindu religious system of India and the Indian social order of the caste system. On the occasion of the Eucharistic Congress in Goa in 1900 he wrote:

If the universal character of the religion of Christ is to be demonstrated to our fellow brethren, it is necessary to show that in matters of faith we are above time and space neither Indian nor

European, but in matters other than those of faith we are essentially Hindu in the strictest sense of the word.⁹

As an Indian-Hindu, he assumed a nationalist stance and a rigid defence of the caste system, which he justified on grounds that it “was framed on the basis of the human constitution.” He further affirmed: “Hinduism is generally taken to be a religion with a definite code of doctrines, while it is fundamentally a social organization with a well defined hierarchy of class division.”¹⁰

Upadhyay believed that in matters other than those of faith, Indians are essentially Hindu in the strictest sense of the word. To be a Hindu one need only be born a Hindu and observe caste distinctions. The rules of caste are the bonds that keep the Hindu society unified. He summed up his views on this social structure thus:

The regulating principle of the Aryan or Hindu society is the love of vocation for its own sake and not for its fruits. The central social law that governs the four classes of communities was the loyalty to hereditary vocations, which should create a sense of self-respect and check unseemly desire for reward in the discharge of social functions.¹¹

Upadhyay felt it was rash to militate against the Hindu social system of hereditary vocation on the ground that it was incompatible with the spirit of civilization and Christianity. Here we witness his natural-supernatural principle at work: Caste is a natural distinction, and therefore the Church has no right to interfere with the cultural modes of ordering human living, even though it may rightly insist that our supernatural destiny will properly consist in equality of all humanity.

2.4.2. Construct an Hindu-Christian Theology

Having a comprehensive knowledge of the Hindu culture and religion, his first priority was to construct a Hindu-Christian theology, through a symbiosis of Hinduism and Christianity, respecting the authenticity of each. Upadhyay was convinced that to construct an Hindu-Christian theology, one would first and foremost have to eradicate from the minds of Indian people the erroneous doctrines of pantheism implicit in traditional *Advaita* and its modern expressions,

and the debilitating social and moral consequences of belief in karma and re-birth, and of Hindu idolatry and its polytheistic mythology.¹²

He believed in introducing Theism through the Vedas, for he was of the view that the natural culmination of Vedantism was faith in Christ, the Son of God. He used the Vedas and Vedanta for interpreting Christ against the Indian cultural background and Hindu terminology for expression of Christian truth. He argued that if the Thomist system could make use of Aristotelian philosophy to interpret Christian faith, the same could be done with an Indian system of Vedantic thought to render Christianity intelligible in India. In spite of his strong Christian convictions, he never abandoned Hinduism.

In the Hindu Scriptures of the Vedas he sought to discover the 'natural' foundation for the 'supernatural' religion of Christ. He held the view that the Vedas represented an Indian monotheism, similar to that of the Old Testament. He wrote, "Whatever may be the theology of the Vedas, they are, from cover to cover, surcharged with the idea of a Supreme Being, who knows all things, who is a personal God, who is father, friend, nay even brother to His worshippers."¹³ However, he also cautions us not to be led away by chauvinistic pride, since truth is universal and not local, "there is no such thing as Asian truth and European truth just as there is no such thing as American geometry and Indian geometry."¹⁴

2.4.3. Inculturate the Christian faith in the Hindu context

Upadhyay felt that Christian theology tends to get stagnated in abstract concepts and definitions because it refuses to pass on through stages of evolution to the goal of consummation. Immersed in his 'Hindu-Catholic' dual belonging and well equipped with the tradition and language of the religion of his birth, Upadhyay sought to incarnate Christian faith in Indian religious thought.

He was of the view that theology should open its gates to the East and continue the process of indigenising the Church as initiated by the early Fathers. Though deeply rooted in the Catholic heritage, Upadhyay refused to admit the culture of the Eurocentric Christianity as normative for the whole Church. "No mistake could be more fatal to progress than to make the Indian Christian community conform

*to European social ideals because Europeans happen to be prominent in the Christian World," he said.*¹⁵

Upadhyay believed that Christianity alone was supernatural in its origin and offered comprehensive salvation to humankind. However, Catholic doctrines appear unintelligible when preached in expressions alien to the Hindu mind. "We must fall back upon the Vedantic method in formulating the Catholic religion to our countrymen," he affirmed.¹⁶ For instance, the doctrine of creation that the infinite alone is eternal; and finite beings exist only in time have been defended by European missionaries against the vedantic doctrine of Maya.¹⁷ Upadhyay attempted to reconcile Maya and the Christian doctrine of creation to render it intelligible to the Hindu mind.

In an article in *Sophia* entitled "Our Attitude Towards Hinduism" in 1895, Upadhyay wrote that Christian faith must fulfil and not destroy what is true and good in Hinduism, and that with the exception of ancient Greece it is in Hindu thought that human philosophy or insight into the invisible things of God reached its zenith. The unique, spiritual, all-pervasive, omniscient, omnipotent and the imperishable nature of the Supreme Being are some natural Hindu truths, whereas the doctrines of Christ, the Trinity, the atonement and resurrection are supernatural truths beyond the domain of reason.¹⁸

Upadhyay was convinced that an open dialogue between Hindu Vedanta and Catholic doctrine could purify Vedanta from its "degeneration into factions of warring gods and goddesses" and liberate Catholic theology from its stagnation by giving "a new impetus from the east." He also believed that an ongoing dialogue between the Hindu culture of dharma and the Christian faith and spirituality would have significant consequences for Christian life and theology in India, and for the universal Church as well. "The more we meditate on the cogitations of Hindu philosophy concerning the Supreme Being, on its marvellous but fruitless effort to penetrate into His inner nature, on its heroic struggle to harmonize unity with diversity the more light is thrown upon the ever-mysterious Christian doctrine of God, one yet multiple, absolute yet related within Himself."¹⁹

Upadhyay felt strongly urged to share with all his compatriots the treasure which he had discovered, namely, Christ and his Church. His method was a novel one for the times, which raised many an eyebrow: Let the Hindu remain one in his culture, in his language, his lore, his ethos, his customs, his philosophy, and let the new-found faith be grafted hereto, purifying whatever is required and in the process sublimating everything. Only when the doctrine of Christ is couched and explained in the categories of Vedanta Philosophy and the Church is fully indigenised in its outlook and functioning, then Christianity will make sense to the Indian mind and find a foothold in our motherland. He geared all his energies towards this end – his publications and writings, the research he conducted, his life of a sanyasi and the monastic order he began.

In fact, his ideal for incarnating the religion of Christ in Hindu garb was concretely manifested in the Catholic monastery that he founded on the banks of the Narmada, and of which he wrote, “Here in the midst of solitude and silence will be reared up true Yogis to whom the contemplation of the Triune *Saccidanandam* will be food and drink. Here will be trained the future apostles of India. In this hermitage will the words of the Eternal Word be strung in the hymns of Eastern melody; in this Holy place will the transcendent Catholic devotions be clothed in Hindu garb.”²⁰

2.4.4. Catholicity of the Church

Though Upadhyay dreamed of an Indian Church, he considered his admission into the Catholic Church as universal, not bound to any nation or culture.

He strongly upheld the Catholicity of the Church, believing that it is not confined to any one race or country. *Kasthalika*²¹ or Catholic faith is a faith that extends to all ages and lands. Commenting on this viewpoint, M. M. Snell, the American editor of *The Church Progress* in 1898 said, “The Catholic religion is not the property of any race or group of races, and is not associated with any special type of civilization or culture, but, on the contrary, it is the only means by which any race or nation can realize perfectly its own proper type of culture in its most ideal form.”²²

Upadhyay was convinced that if a synthesis between the Vedic systems and the eternal truths were taught in the Catholic Church, it would not only aid the conversion of the whole Hindu nation to truth and unity but it would also make a valuable contribution to the mentality of the whole world. The Catholic Church with its profound learning and charismatic gifts could erase the racial, local and personal prejudices. Though Upadhyay dreamed of a Church with an Indian face, he fully recognized its catholicity and cosmopolitan character by which it adapts to the changing environments of time and space and “is one in essence but various in manifestations; she is one body but has many clothes. In Asia she puts on the oriental costume; in Europe, the Latin garb.”²³

2.4.5. An incarnated Church: Spirituality of Involvement

True discipleship is mission oriented

Upadhyay was a prophet well ahead of his times. A true Indian and Christian, he committed his life to the freedom struggle, denouncing the continued foreign presence in India as well as to Christian discipleship announcing the Good News of his new found faith in Christ. His vision of being genuinely Indian and deeply Christian made him embrace the sannyasa way of life and commit himself to the teachings of Jesus in authentic praxis.

In place of the militant strategy and material allurements employed by the *Padroado* Church to Christianize India, Upadhyay’s missionary strategy was the might of the pen for winning over Hindu-India to Christ. In the course of his short span of life he edited several journals: the *Harmony* (1890), the *Sophia* (1894), the *Twentieth Century* (1901) - and later the *Sandhya*, which became a leading nationalist vernacular daily. Through his writings he fearlessly pursued a synthesis of philosophy and theology, and a meeting of East and West by crystallizing Christ’s message in Vedantic thought and harmonizing Hindu culture and Indian patriotism with Christian life. He trusted that the pen would “supply a new garb to the religion of Christ without affecting in the least the essential Christian tenets.”²⁴ By his life and writings Upadhyay sought to demonstrate that being a Christian and a patriot are not in any way contradictory.

In spite of his resolute step to adopt the lifestyle of a sannyasi, he does not accept a world-denying spirituality. He advocates a

spirituality of involvement in the struggles of the people and of commitment to the welfare of all beings. His ascetic life style, his care for the sick in the plague stricken city of Karachi (1896) where he looked for abandoned men and women in the hidden lanes and by-lanes, his participation in the freedom-movements and his appraisal of the oppressive systems of the British flowed from his Vendantic-Christian theology.

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay's nationalism, which harbored vital concern for an indigenous Christianity was manifested in the varied roles he played - as religious reformer, religious revivalist, political activist and social commentator, and as teacher he gave special attention to the poor and talented. His commitment to India was itself deeply religious. It was not merely political independence or a Hindu society that he dreamed of, but the revival and appreciation of the spiritual values and religious traditions of the Indian people. He denounced poverty, slavery and westernisation, for he believed that they stifled the soul of India. Among the many burning social issues that he expressed concern for was the perennial problem of the status of women.

He dared to fight for the cause of women even at the young age of 15. He came to the rescue of some Hindu women who were being harassed by the Armenians. He administered them a severe beating and even hauled them before the court. On another occasion he showed attentive concern towards an abandoned exquisitely beautiful lady who was gasping for breath. He addressed her as mother and attended to her needs with utmost care. He was greatly distressed and deeply wounded to find the Sindhi boy in whose care he had entrusted the lady to, shamefully misbehaving with her. He sent the boy away remarking: "I lost my mother at a very early age. I have heard it said that she was famous for her beauty. When I see a fair girl I think that perhaps my mother was like her."²⁵

Conscious of the subjugated and servile status of women in Indian patriarchal society, he maintained that, "woman is not an attendant of man. She is not born merely to serve him. She is not his shadow."²⁶ He championed the cause of restoring the esteem and position of

woman that is due to her and affirmed that she is a pillar of human society and “has a noble function to discharge in the social economy.”²⁷

2.4.6 Allegiance of the Indian Church to Rome

Upadhyay’s two great loves: love of his country and love of Jesus Christ coalesced and took a new avatar in his love for the Church, especially evident after his conversion. His dream to establish a Catholic Church in Indian garb was evident in his passionate efforts to construct an Indian Catholic theology, to inculturate Christian faith and embellish Catholic doctrines in Hindu philosophical expressions. Though proud of his Indian nationality and of his new found Hindu-Catholic identity, he never wanted an Indian Church cut off from its Roman roots.

Though he often criticized the colonial aspects of the institutional Church, he was basically an apologist for her. During his visit to Rome in the winter of 1902, he expressed his feelings to his intimate friend Animananda:

As soon as I got down from the train I kissed the soil of Rome. In the morning I went to see St Peter’s. If one wants to see Christianity expressed in concrete form, it will be found here. I prayed at the tomb of Peter – the Rock, the Holder of the Keys – for India, for you all. While kneeling down at the tomb of St Peter, I thought of the Holy Father – the living St Peter. Oh! How I longed to kneel at his foot and plead for India.”²⁸

Upadhyay’s zeal to establish an Indian Church and his efforts to inculturate Christian faith in India did not have the support of the ecclesiastical establishment that it deserved, though it did not go unnoticed by a few perceptive European members of the hierarchy in India.²⁹

The closed mindset of the Church authorities of the time is evident in the statement of Mgr. L. Zaleski, the then Papal Delegate to India, who consistently opposed the indigenisation efforts of Upadhyay:

Christianity alone can bring civilization. Heathenism, whatever form it assumes, may sometimes take an exterior appearance of civilization, but it always leaves the soul of the people plunged in barbarity and superstition. There is no civilization outside

Christianity. Christianity made Europe the leading continent of the world, and Christianity alone has in itself the power to civilize other countries.³⁰

Mgr. Zaleski opposed his dream project of an Indian Catholic Monastery and forbade the Catholic public from reading the *Sophia* for its theological and political approach, which was unacceptable to him. Another journal for socio-political affairs, *The Twentieth Century*, met with the same fate. Even Upadhyay's appeal to appoint a censor to scrutinize every journal before printing was not complied with.³¹ The real issue of course was not theological but political: Zaleski was afraid that Upadhyay's writings would give rise to an indigenized theology and a national Church that would sever its ties with the Roman Catholic Church. It was also a time when the Catholic Church was haunted by the phobia of modernism and frightful of the loss of control secured in the hands of Christian colonial powers. Even Upadhyay's efforts in 1902 to obtain the support and approval from higher authorities for his projects proved futile.

However, in spite of the injustice Zaleski meted out to Upadhyay, the latter showed exemplary sincerity and humility when he stated in the *Examiner*, August 7, 1901: "I have never shown any disinclination to submit my writings to ecclesiastical judgment and I never write on theological or philosophical matters without the approval of good theologians with whom I have personal correspondence." In July 1904, he reassures his Sindhi convert friend, Premchand, that the rumours that he had abandoned the faith were unfounded:

Rest assured that for me it is impossible to go against the Holy Church. Never, for a moment, since my baptism have I been tempted (I am not boasting) to doubt the divine authority of the Pope of Rome over my faith and morals. Moreover, I have never failed to submit to lawful ecclesiastical authorities.³²

It is only fair to admit that Upadhyay's predicament vis-à-vis ecclesiastical authority was distressing. Even though the Roman Hierarchy shattered his life's work and missionary zeal, Upadhyay never gave up his faith in Christ the Saviour.

3. Appraisal of Upadhyay's Vision for an Indian Church

Upadhyay was a pioneer of an indigenous expression of Christian faith and he worked relentlessly to establish a Hindu basis for the reception of the Gospel in India. His dream for a Catholic India was perhaps too ambitious and idealistic to become a reality in a milieu with such deeply ingrained Hindu tradition. Although his primary desire, to free India from political colonialism, was strong and genuine he never actively championed an India free from the caste system. However, his vision for an Indian Church and the means he proposed for realizing it still survives as a great contribution to inculturation today.

His life as a 'Hindu-Catholic monk' and 'Roman Catholic advaitin' was the living synthesis of Hinduism and Christianity, of which he spoke and wrote so much. He had hoped that it would serve as a basis for a Hindu-Christian theology and an Indian ecclesiology. He remains one of the great pioneers of Indian Christianity in spite of the ambiguous justification he made at times for being a 'Hindu-Catholic'.³³

This was consistent with the natural-supernatural distinction he made, between Hinduism and Christianity - representing Hinduism as a culture rather than as a religion. But such statements seem inconsistent with his other claim, that the Vedas are an 'evangelical preparation,' a divine revelation. Hinduism interpreted essentially as culture renders impossible the reception of divine grace through the Hindu tradition.³⁴ However, a discerning study of Upadhyay's prophetic vision will certainly enrich contemporary efforts at inculturation.

Furthermore, the validity of his theological base on his interpretation of Vedanta in terms of unity in multiplicity and his stance on caste could be questioned. One may sense a sort of theological elitism in his methodology, particularly in the Vedantic theology that he advocated and in his persistent defence of the caste system. One wonders what they could really mean for the millions of poor and marginalized in India. If Vedanta were to be understood as advocating an elitist way of thought, it may not have much relevance for Indian

theology. But if Vedanta could be interpreted as a call to perceive the divine presence in the poor and to respond to the unjust structures as Jesus did, then a theological assimilation of Vedantic insights into Christian theology could contribute towards making the Gospel truly incarnate and meaningful in India and towards shaping an Indian ecclesiology.

However, Upadhyay's stance on the caste system and his full support of the continuity of its practice is not only questionable but also unacceptable. His understanding of the caste system seems to be quite naïve and one wonders if Upadhyay saw the contradiction of affirming caste distinction without questioning its shocking and inhuman discrimination.

But one must not examine Upadhyay's social, political and religious stance from standpoints of today since he was formed in and belonged to another era. Facing many odds, he showed how a loyal Indian could be an authentic follower of Jesus.

Conclusion

In this year of the centenary of his death, we remember with pride this great son of the soil and fellow believer in the Catholic communion. His contribution to the country's history and the Church is perhaps greater than he is credited for.

In spite of the discouraging and sad experiences that Upadhyay encountered, his bold initiatives have given an orientation for the emergence of an Indian ecclesiology. Setting aside his penchant for a high caste Sanskritized Church, his approach remains an inspiration and a challenge because of his contribution towards incarnating an Indian Church within the universal character of the Catholic Church.

He symbolizes a threefold commitment: to the Church emphasizing the need for incarnating the Gospel in the cultural ethos of India; to the nation with the message that Indians must be responsible for one another and must love and live an authentic Indian life; and to the world

at large declaring that a secular culture without God cannot build a truly human civilization.

Upadhyay cannot be copied today. But he is a theologian of importance who can teach us something significant. We know that the circumstances in which he lived and struggled are not the same as what shapes the context in which we today live and search. In our changing and challenging context of the 21st century, Upadhyay inspires us to listen anew to what the Spirit is telling the Church and nation and for deeper Christian commitment to the integral development of the people of India.

Notes

- 1 Julius J. Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*, India: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. xv.
- 2 V. Sebastian, S.J., "Implications of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay's Cultural Nationalism and Constructions of Identity," ITA 30th Annual Seminar, 2007 (Unpublished), p. 5.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 V. Sebastian, p. 8
- 5 It is important to pay attention to Upadhyay's mindset when he made any statements for they were influenced by the time and place of their composition.
- 6 Julius J. Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*, India: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 211.
- 7 Animananda, *The Blade*, Calcutta: The Alliance Press, p. 43.
- 8 This is a development of an earlier idea when in 1895 in an open letter to Annie Besant, he claimed to be "a Brahmin by birth and a Christian and Catholic by faith," J. Lipner & G. Gispert-Sauch, *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, Vol. I, Bangalore: UTC, 1991, p. 24.
- 9 B. Animananda, *The Blade*, p. 97.
- 10 *The Blade*, p. 202.
- 11 *The Blade*, pp. 209-210.
- 12 Lipner & Gispert-Sauch, *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, p. xxxiv.

- 13 M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, pp. 102-103. He was totally opposed to the doctrines of the cycle of emanation or evolution of God and of rebirth of the human.
- 14 Animananda, *The Blade*, p. 64.
- 15 Sophia, 27, 10, 1900 in Lipner & Gispert, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, 256.
- 16 Animananda, *The Blade*, p. 74,
- 17 Lipner & Gispert-Sauch, *The Writings*, Vol. II, p. 226.
- 18 Lipner & Gispert, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, 126.
- 19 Sophia 07 / 1897, Animananda, *The Blade*, p. 68.
- 20 Animananda, *The Blade*, pp. 78-79,81.
- 21 The Sanskrit words *ka* and *sthala* mean 'time' and 'land' respectively. The two words together form the compound *kasthalika* implying 'pertaining to all times and lands.' *Ibid.* pp. 73-74.
- 22 Animananda, *The Blade*, p. 76.
- 23 Lipner & Gispert-Sauch, *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, vol. II, p. 206.
- 24 Animananda, *The Blade*, p. 88. Lack of knowledge of the spiritual and intellectual culture of the Hindus led Mgr. Zaleski the Delegate Apostolic to forbid Christians from reading the writings of Upadhyaya.
- 25 Animananda, *The Blade*, p. 7.
- 26 Lipner & Gispert, *The Writings*, vol. II, p. 65
- 27 *Ibid.* 65.
- 28 Animananda, *The Blade*, p. 109.
- 29 The bishop of Nagpur, Charles Pelvat supported his monastic initiative at Jabalpur and several bishops and archbishops had favoured his journal *Sophia* both as its aims and financially.
- 30 Lipner & Gispert, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, p. 213.
- 31 Animananda, *The Blade*, p. 103.

32 Lipner & Gispert, *The Writings*, vol. II, p. 349.

33 Evelyn Monteiro, *Church and Culture, Communion in Pluralism*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2004, p. 137.

34 J. Dupuis, *Jesus Christ à la Rencontre des Religions*, Paris: Desclée, 1989, pp. 58- 60.

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