PROLOGUE

> Much that is true of God has also been revealed in the long history of religion, and this can be demonstrated for the Christian by reference to the true standard of Christ. In the great religions which have given shape to human aspirations, God plays on an orchestra which is far out of tune, yet there has often been a marvellous, rich music made.
>
> Alexander Schmemann[1]

When Hindus greet others they say *Namaste* or *Namaskāram*: this expression is a tacit acknowledgement of the divine in the 'other'. Similarly, when Orthodox Christians meet, they give what St Paul calls a 'holy kiss', twice or three times on the cheek: such an action signals that they greet the 'other' in the name of Christ, the God-Man, or of God the Holy Trinity. Thus a symbolic recognition of the divine potential within the human person is shared by Hindus and Orthodox Christians, despite the many crucial doctrinal differences that separate them. One might say that Hindus are well-placed to empathise with the Orthodox Christian approach to the human person as being an icon of the divine.

This present book sets out to explore the spiritual terrain of both faiths in the hope of enhancing mutual understanding and appreciation, and with the intention of debating issues that may arise from what I envisage as 'respectful conversations'.

It would be fair to confess from the outset that I am a convert to Christ from an ancient and highly distinguished Brahmin Hindu family. Though I do not tell explicitly in this book the story of my journey from being Hindu to becoming Christian, the factors that propelled me towards Christianity underpin my dialogic venture. Suffice it to say, paradoxically, that it was my earnest pursuit of Hindu spiritual ideals

1. Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), p. 19.

that led me to Christ. Whilst I was researching for my PhD from the University of Cambridge, I was baptised in St John's College Chapel by an Anglican priest, Father Geoffrey Keable, who had served in India and taught as Vice-Principal at Bishop's College, Calcutta.

I am deeply grateful to the Anglican Church for nurturing me as a new Christian. I value the love, generosity and gentleness, and also the quiet grace that often informs Anglican worship at its best. My study of Augustine and of the leading lights of Reformation theology (Luther, Calvin, Richard Hooker) and of modern Protestant writers such as C.S. Lewis, Lesslie Newbigin, Stephen Neill, E.L. Mascall, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Father Michael Harper (as well as the articles in his *Renewal* magazine) gave me a good grounding in the basics of the Christian faith. They taught me a great deal about what it means to take up one's cross daily and to keep Christ's commandment to love God and love one's neighbour. I owe a great debt to the Anglican Church, just as I do to my Hindu upbringing.

It was when the Anglican Church took a direction that began to politicise worship that I began to feel uneasy. I could not but feel the faith of the Fathers was being compromised in the interests of political correctness. I became deeply troubled and felt 'undernourished', until I met with certain Orthodox theologians (writers such as Christos Yannaras, John Zizioulas, Sergei Bulgakov and Metropolitan Anthony Bloom) and, above all, until I experienced the Liturgies of St John Chrysostom and of St Basil. While I was discovering the riches of the Orthodox Tradition in worship, I also learned to appreciate the distinctly Orthodox approach to Christian witness and pastoral care, through the friendship of an Antiochian Archibishop, Gibran of Australasia, who eventually chrismated me Orthodox, along with my husband, Professor David Frost.

Over the years, I have experienced an ongoing internal dialogue between the faith I was born into and brought up in and the faith into which I am reborn. I am prompted by my experience to say that in worship and doctrine, Orthodox Christianity offers a fullness of truth and beauty in its quest for holiness which, I believe, can be shown to resonate with the hunger for holiness that is pervasive in Hindu traditions.

To some Orthodox Christians, it may seem a rash venture even to consider the possibility that there might be 'truth' and 'holiness' beyond the visible (one might almost say, walled) boundaries of the Orthodox Church. Such exclusivists (found particularly in those traditional heartlands of Orthodox Christianity, Greece, Russia, Romania and other Eastern European countries), whether priests, monastics or laity, tend to think that, since the Orthodox Church has the 'fullness of truth', there

is no need to engage with people of other faiths – which they readily dismiss as 'demonic'. A fortress mentality too easily develops that claims to 'safeguard Orthodox Christianity' from threatening 'outsiders' (a term that may even include other Christians). But such a hardline approach, motivated by a fervent desire to 'preserve' Orthodox Christianity, runs the risk of simply 'pickling' it. If one denies that the questionings of the modern world have any validity, the danger is that, when confronted by complex issues, one may resort to formulaic answers that are pastorally unsatisfying. At worst, the exclusivist attitude, founded on dogmatic rigidity, and compounded by ignorance, complacency, and even arrogance, breeds not just disregard and disrespect for one's global neighbour but nurtures that 'inner Pharisee' to whom Jesus Christ directs his most severe reproofs.

However, there are other, saner, more enlightened voices within the Orthodox Christian world: priests, bishops and theologians who deplore bigotry and exclusivism and are acutely aware of the need in the modern world to engage with people of other faiths.[1] They join Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars such as Stephen Neill, Lesslie Newbigin, Stanley Samartha, M.M. Thomas, Raimon Panikkar, Karl Rahner, Abhishikatānanda, Bede Griffiths, and many more who have long been engaged in an interfaith dialogue with Hinduism that for the Orthodox has remained a relatively unexplored field, even though Orthodox missions continue to expand into the Indian sub-continent and south-east Asia.

Yet Orthodox Christianity from earliest times has had a keen awareness of what one might call the 'cosmic' mission of Christ. That derives, among other roots, from God's 'universal' covenant in the Old Testament with Noah (in addition to his historical covenant with Abraham). More importantly, it is proclaimed in the opening verses of the Gospel according to St John: 'The true light that gives light to *every man* was coming into the world' (John 1:9, italics added).[2] Orthodox theology stresses that all human beings are created in the 'image of God' and that even after the Fall that image is still present, however badly marred and weakened it may be by human sin. One consequence of being such an 'image' of God is that each individual person is endowed with freedom. Thus choice, the decision about whether or not one seeks

1. To cite a few key figures: Dumitru Stăniloae, Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), John Zizioulas, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew IV.
2. Biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version,* © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society.

holiness, perfection and truth through baptism into the Christian faith, remains crucial. The consistency (that some might call obstinacy) with which the Orthodox Church maintains that it contains the 'fullness of truth' is testimony to this universalist stance. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, who is often questioned about what appears to be an arrogant claim, likes to respond: 'We know where the Church is: but we cannot be sure where it is not.' Another Orthodox writer makes the point even more forcefully:

> Christ is not limited by space and time; his Spirit lives, speaks, and acts in human history everywhere, often through mysterious and humanly unintelligible ways. What human being or organization can limit the Spirit's involvement in history?[1]

One branch of the Orthodox Christian 'family' that has been engaging in a 'dialogue of life' with Hindus is the Syrian Orthodox Church of India.[2] Known also as the Malankara Church, this Oriental Orthodox Church in India (despite its internecine problems) can authentically trace its origins back to the Apostle Thomas. Both its ecclesiastic hierarchy as well as the laity of this Church boast a long history of encountering Hindu religious beliefs at the grassroots level. And yet, until recently, the voice of this indigenous Indian (Malankara) Orthodox Church and its contribution to dialogue has been muted: partly because of its own internal turmoil, but largely thanks to the charge of 'heresy' levelled against it by the Chalcedonian branches of the Orthodox Church. Sadly, such charges (of Monophysitism and Nestorianism) continue to haunt it, even if progress has been made toward dispelling what has largely been misunderstanding and misrepresentation. One of the objects of this book is to restore the role of the indigenous Indian Orthodox tradition

1. Demetrios J. Constantelos, 'Models of Christian Discipleship', *Christ's Lordship & Religious Pluralism*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson & Thomas F. Stransky, C.S.P. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 187.
2. The history of the 'Thomas Christians' in India – a title to which many different branches of the indigenous Orthodox Church lay claim – is so fraught with ecclesial and legal controversies that it is hard to pick one's way through the tangle. See Susan Viswanathan, *The Christians in Kerala* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1993). My research for this book was conducted largely at the 'Old Seminary' in Kottayam, Kerala, which belongs to the Indian (Syrian) Orthodox Church. Officially, this Church – which is labelled non-Chalcedonian – is *not yet* in full communion with the Orthodox Church in the West (commonly called 'Byzantine'), though much progress has been made in dispelling unjust charges of heresy. I found the staff, students and the hierarchs I met there and the worship I attended with them in their churches recognisably Orthodox in doctrine and practice.

in setting the parameters for dialogue between Christians and Hindus.

Grassroots issues have triggered the writing of this book. Some years ago, I was asked by Abbot Symeon of the Monastery of St John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights, Essex, to help him counsel a couple who wanted to marry, one of them being a Hindu and the other an Orthodox Christian. On another occasion, I was 'commanded' by Bishop Theodoritos (then at the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Sancta Sophia, London) to write an article to clarify those problems that had arisen among members of his congregation who were practising *yoga*. I have also been approached by Hindus who are interested in Orthodox Christianity (one being my young Hindu nephew), and by other Hindus who have converted to Christ and are concerned about how to deal with their Hindu religious heritage; and also by a number of Westerners, young and old, Christian and non-Christian, who are keen to understand Hindu religious beliefs so as to exercise discernment between what remains acceptable and what must be rejected.

This book is a response to such concerns. It is aimed both at the general reader and at scholars; at bishops, monastics, priests, teachers of religious education and anyone who has to deal with the pastoral issues that arise from Hindu-Christian encounters, from Hindus interrogating Christianity and Christians questioning Hindus.

I hope to address also the needs of those who are attempting to find within their faith-commitments, Christian and Hindu, ways and means to tackle the existential challenges of the modern world. Traditional faiths are no longer contained within geographical boundaries. The Internet has become a readily available marketplace for choosing a religious faith or a spiritual path or method. Hindu religious beliefs and practices are no longer just a phenomenon to be studied in their traditional home-base in India, for they now percolate and influence modern life globally in a variety of ways: so much so that Christians, whether they like it or not, have no choice but to prepare to meet and understand what these beliefs and practices signify in order to respond to their impact, especially in pastoral circumstances.

Aside from some incidental reflections from Orthodox writers like Father Alexander Men, Father Sophrony, Archbishop Anastasios, and Gavin Flood, there is, as yet, no book that engages fully in dialogue with Hinduism. There is much to learn, 'inwardly digest', and explicate. Both religions boast a strong, unbroken and still vital continuity of spiritual tradition and growth. In both religious traditions, there is a pervasive, sacramental, holistic perspective on life and a concern for beauty and rigour in worship and in the practice of rituals. Key motifs of

Orthodox Christian theology offer challenging comparisons with Hindu metaphysical concepts, noted for their imaginative boldness. More often than not, it is not just what one finds in common but what one perceives as a challenge from one faith to the other that yields valuable insights in dialogue.

However, I would reiterate that Christians, especially Orthodox Christians, set great store by the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the one and only Incarnation of God; and this God they worship as the One Undivided Trinity in Unity. Moreover, Christianity is a historical religion, in that Christians (in common with adherents of the other Abrahamic faiths) insist that God works his purposes in and through history. In contrast, Hindu traditions operate within the environment of a cyclical view of creation, and most, if not all of them, accept the concepts of *Karma* and rebirth unquestioningly. As we shall see in the following chapters, these basic differences cannot be simply brushed aside, because they affect everything else that happens within these traditions. To acknowledge that such articles of faith are non-negotiable need not hinder dialogue: on the contrary, a candid appreciation of difference can provide the freedom that is vital for any exploration in depth, if it is to yield fresh insights. Part of the argument of this study is that it is better, rather than seeking some watered-down common denominator between faiths, to be faithful to the distinctiveness of each, so as to arrive at a nuanced appreciation of both. Such an opportunity can be provided by the apparently paradoxical combination of an uncompromising Orthodox Christian claim to the 'fullness of truth' with an acknowledgement of the necessity (in theory at least) to identify the work of the Holy Spirit beyond its humanly conceived horizons.

To conduct 'conversations' with Hindus from an Orthodox Christian perspective is further complicated by the ambivalence that prevails in the attitudes of many in the Orthodox world towards non-Orthodox Christians. Despite manifold discussions with Christians of other denominations, even the concept of ecumenism continues to be a thorny topic in the Orthodox world.[1] Though one can grieve over a sad lack of unity among Christians, it would be unrealistic and dishonest to glide over the causes of disunity. Not merely historical events, but important, subtle differences in approaches to theology, tradition, worship, prayer and ecclesiology contribute to barriers (and sometimes barricades) that preclude integration. As a consequence, an Orthodox Christian engaging

1. See Razvan Porumb, *Orthodoxy and Ecumenism: Towards Active Metanoia* (PhD thesis, Anglia Ruskin University, 2015).

with Hindu religious beliefs will frequently find that he or she has to conduct a three-way dialogue, with an eye to other Christians. No doubt this is a daunting task, yet it may provide exciting fresh perspectives to invigorate a Hindu-Christian dialogue that may seem to have reached an impasse.

Dialogue, if conducted with empathy and clarity, gives an opportunity to reduce the cacophonous contention born of ignorance and prejudice: a chance to attune oneself to the tunes of 'the other' that may be sometimes harmonious and at other times jarring. Such an enterprise is more than a matter of sympathetic listening. It is demanding, in the sense that it needs humility and love: one has to set aside preconceived notions, prejudice, and, above all, fear of the 'other'. It is risky, in that one might, even unwittingly, give offence. However, such difficulties can be overcome if the partners to dialogue can be persuaded to re-view their own beliefs from a fresh, and hopefully enriched, perspective. No doubt, truth-claims will need to be candidly confronted; but there is, nonetheless, a great deal of groundwork to be done before you can even prepare to enter that arena.

Whatever may be the insights I have gained in the course of my personal struggle with a Hindu religious ethos and practice and from my ongoing experience of Christian life as a member of the Orthodox Christian Church, these have inevitably shaped the exploration I have documented in the following chapters. While mine is not a work of apologetics, it is confessional in the sense that my exercises in comparative theology are conducted from an Orthodox Christian perspective, to which I am committed. That does not mean I have negated my past, but rather that I have revisited it for a fresher, deeper, and more appreciative appraisal.

What follows is an exploratory effort in comparative theology that is conducted thematically. I have attempted to combine both the theoretical and the practical dimensions of a selected theme in a unified discussion. Wherever possible, my theological discussions are complemented by examples drawn from the lives of actual practitioners from each tradition. I have attempted a format that discusses theological issues by weaving in and out of personal experience, and by so doing, aims to establish a mode of comparative theology that can enlighten and enliven our understanding of the faiths of Hindus and of Orthodox Christians as they are lived.