

Jesus Christ the Divine Eternal *Asvattha*

Cheriyen Menacherry

A tree mysteriously leads its roots deep into the earth and magnificently spreads its branches high out into the sky as if it is an intermediary of the underworld, the earth and the sky. The fascination of the tree is in its endurance, its longevity and its constant upward movement. A great tree might have witnessed the rise and fall of different generations of human beings. The tremendous wonder at the mysterious magnificence of a tree always fascinated the symbol making human psyche of all generations¹ resulting in: 'Cosmic Tree', 'Tree of Knowledge', 'Tree of Life'.² The human being wanted that the 'Tree of Knowledge/ Life' to mediate him/her to know the mystery of the underworld of death, to help him/her to reach out the heights of the sky and above all to attain immortality.

In the ancient Egypt the tree of life is pictured as a tall sycamore upon which the gods sit and obtain immortality from eating.³ The *kalpavriksha* (*kalpataru*) of the Hindu mythology is one of the five trees of Svarga or Indira's paradise.⁴ From this tree of life Yama and the other gods partook of the life-giving drink, "soma."⁵ The *gishkin* tree, the mythical tree of life, in the temple at Eridu in Sumerian mythology is like a shining stone with roots reaching to the subterranean ocean.⁶

In the Garden of Eden the important tree is the tree of life/ knowledge. "Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9. Cf. also Gen. 3:22, 24; Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4.). The tree of life is also the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:1-21).⁷

For all above mentioned trees of life have their roots in the earth and the branches in the sky. In the Upanishads there is a particular tree, a divine tree, the divine eternal *Asvattha*.

An ordinary *asvattha* is a pipal tree or the holy fig tree (species *Ficus Religiosa*). The tree may have derived its Sanskrit name *asvattha* from *asva* (horse) *-ttha* (*-stha*) 'under which horses stand'.⁸ The tree *asvattha* is very sacred to the Hindus. The antiquity of tree worship in India is indicated by third millennium B.C. clay tablet from Mohenjo-daro depicting an *asvattha* and its worshippers.⁹ *Asvattha* is also especially sacred to Buddhists as the *bodhi* tree under which the Buddha gained Enlightenment.¹⁰

Upanishads mentions about a very particular divine eternal *Asvattha*: 'Arddhyam Ala avakṣakha aśvattha' '*asvattha* with its roots in heaven and branches in the world'.¹¹ Katha Upanishad states:

"Its root is above, its branches below--

This eternal fig-tree!

That (root) indeed is the Pure. That is Brahma.

That indeed is called the Immortal.

On it all the worlds do rest,

And no one soever goes beyond it.

This, verily, is That!" (Kath U VI, 1).¹²

Maitri Upanishad tries to connect Brahman the Asvattha with the syllable, the word, Om, and admonishes to worship this Asvattha through the word OM.:

"The three-quartered Brahma has its root above. Its branches are space, wind, fire, water, earth, and the like. This Brahma has the name of 'the Lone Fig-tree. Belonging to it is the splendor which is yon sun, and the splendor too of the syllable *Om*. Therefore one should worship it with *Om* continually. He is the only enlightener of man." (Mait U VI, 4).¹³

A Christian does neither believe that the world is an extended part of the God nor believes that human beings are immortal because they are part of God. Their belief is that the world and the human beings were created by God (Gen. 1:1 ff). If the surrounding ancient cultures were stressing on the eating the fruit from the magical 'tree of life' to have eternal life, the Bible had an entirely different vision. The message of the Book of Genesis is that it is not by eating or not eating the fruit of the magical 'tree of life' one will be getting or loosing the immortality. It is by obeying or disobeying God one will get or loose immortality.¹⁴ In the *Letter to Diognetus* (AD 125-200) it is written: "But it is not the tree of knowledge that destroys; it is disobedience that brings destruction."¹⁵ The first human beings Adam and Eve were created in the image of God and were called to share in the divinity of God by obeying God their creator's word, the commandment. The LORD God commanded: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (Gen. 2:16). Contrary to God's command Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of life. (cf. Gen. 3:1-7). They disobeyed God, sinned against God and were driven out of the paradise, lost the company with God, lost the immortality (cf. Gen. 3:8-24). "The story of Gen. 2-3 is a theological etiology explaining man's separation from God and the loss of the full life."¹⁶ Ever since, humankind was expecting somebody from heaven: a Mediator between them and God and saving them from their predicament and restoring their lost immortality. And so the mankind was expecting somebody as a life-giving Mediator whose roots are in heaven.

Can a Christian reflect the mystery of the coming down of the Logos, the Son of God to the world in the incarnation of Jesus Christ in the figurative terms of the Upanishadic divine *Asvattha* with roots in heaven and branches in the world and which should be worshiped through the word OM? Only basing on the central mystery of Jesus Christ a Christian can think Jesus Christ in figurative terms of the divine *Asvattha*. The Christians should aware of the great challenge. Presenting Jesus Christ as incarnated Word of God, the Son of the Father in the context of another belief that Brahman is the only reality and the world is only an extension or manifestation of Brahman symbolized in the Upanishadic Divine *Asvattha* is a great challenge for Christian.

In the face of the challenge one has to get inspiration from the early Christians. The early Christians were also faced challenges as they confronted with the surrounding ancient philosophies, religions and cultures. In the face of all the challenges holding fast to the central mystery of Jesus Christ they were able to explain to others the salvation mystery of Jesus Christ. Often St Justin the Martyr is taken as a model to be accepted in encountering other religions, for: "He is the first ecclesiastical writer who attempts to build a bridge between Christianity and pagan philosophy."¹⁷ Justin recognizes the universal working of the *Logos*.¹⁸ The *Logos* is the only Mediator between God and men, between God the Father and the world.¹⁹ In the

patristic period the contrast is clearly drawn.²⁰ To Justin the fullness of the manifested *Logos* is Jesus Christ.²¹ Not only did Socrates condemn the false gods among the Greeks 'by true and careful reasoning [*lógos*]', "but even among the barbarians they were condemned by the Word [*Lógos*] Himself, who assumed a form and became man, and was called Jesus Christ."²² This *Logos*, the Son, "came forth from Him [the Father] and taught us these things."²³ All these things are taught "by our Teacher, Jesus Christ, who is the Son and Apostle of God."²⁴ Justin the acute philosopher knows very well the consequences of identifying the *Logos*, the Son, with Jesus Christ in the Greek religious and philosophical world: a great occasion of misunderstanding, making an individual into God. Yet he still proclaimed this identification saying:

“Our Teacher of these things, born for this end, is Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, the procurator in Judea in the time of Tiberius Caesar. We will prove that we worship Him reasonably; for we have learned that He is the Son of the True God Himself, that He holds a second place, and the Spirit of Prophecy a third. For this they accuse us of madness, saying that we *attribute to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all things*: but they are ignorant of *the mystery which lies therein*.” [my emphasis].²⁵

The method must be the same for the Christian today: Worshipping the undivided mystery of Jesus Christ, they must try to explain this mystery to the followers of different religions. A Christian holds fast to the mystery of incarnation of Jesus Christ and explains it in the categories of the people.²⁶

Believing in the incarnation of the Jesus Christ, the Son of God, a Christian can say that the divine Asvattha: ‘*Arddhvam Ala av kśkha asvattha*’ ‘asvattha with its roots in heaven and branches in the world’ symbolizes Jesus Christ. (Picture in the front page depicting Jesus Christ as divine eternal Asvattha is by Dr. Sebastian Elavathingal CMI). Jesus Christ is often viewed as the Tree of Life of the Book of Revelation: “On either side of the river is the tree of life. . . .” (Rev. 22:2; cf. also Rev. 2:7). St. Jerome considers the tree of life as Jesus Christ. Pope Benedict XV writes (1920):

“Every single page of either Testament seems to center around Christ; hence Jerome, commenting on the words of the Apocalypse about the River and the Tree of Life, says: ‘One stream flows out from the throne of God, and that is the Grace of the Holy Spirit, and that grace of the Holy Spirit is in the Holy Scriptures, that is in the stream of the Scriptures. Yet has that stream twin banks, the Old Testament and the New, and the Tree planted on either side is Christ.’ [Jerome, Tract. De Ps. 1.]”²⁷

The divine Son, Jesus Christ has his root in the divinity of His Father. For, He shares the divine nature with His Father; He is one in being with the Father.²⁸ Rooted in the divine the Word of God, the Son, descended downwards to the world, took the human nature, which can be symbolized as the downward extended branches of a tree. “Rooted in the divinity, Christ embraced the whole of history, human and cosmic, in his humanity (Cf. Phil 2:5-11),²⁹ figuratively He is the real *Arddhvam Ala av kśkha asvattha*.”³⁰

There is a practice of worshipping the Asvattha tree even from the ancient cultures such as Mohencho-daro.³¹ In the Maitri Upanishad the worship of the divine Asvattha is through the word OM. (Cf. Mitri. Up. 6, 4). Christian will not worship a tree. It is said that seeing error that the people³² of Hesse venerating the Oak tree St. Boniface chopped down the tree with his own hands.³³ Christian worship the Crucified Jesus Christ on the glorious tree of the cross³⁴ (which has no root in the earth!), for Jesus Christ is the real Asvattha, who is rooted in heaven came

down into the world for the salvation of the humankind. The significance of the tree of knowledge of the Book of Genesis was in connection with the disobedience and fall of the humankind. The significance of the glorious tree of cross is in connection with the obedience of Jesus Christ and the restoration humankind's relation with God. Book of Revelation writes about sharing in the eternal life: "I will grant him to eat the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (Rev. 2:7). Eating the tree of life (Rev. 2:7) "symbolizes the sharing in eternal life The enjoying of all those blessings that the time to come has reserved for redeemed humanity The decree that excluded man from the tree of life (Gn 3:22f.) is now abrogated by Christ, . . ." ³⁵ St. Justin the Martyr interprets Psalmists singing of the reigning of the Lord as the prophecy of Jesus Christ's reigning from the tree of cross. ³⁶ St. Irenaeus writes:

"So the Lord now manifestly came to his own, and, born by his own created order which he himself bears, he by his obedience on the tree renewed [and reversed] what was done by disobedience in [connection with] a tree; . . ." ³⁷

Christian worship is not directed to a tree or to a human body. St Athanasius beautifully explains:

"We do not worship a creature. Inconceivable! For such an error belongs to heathens and Arians. Rather, we worship the Lord of creation, the Incarnate Word of God. For if the flesh, too, is in itself a part of the created world, still, it had become God's body. Nor, indeed, the body being such, do we divide it from the Word and adore it by itself; neither, when we wish to worship the Word, do we separate Him from the flesh. Rather...knowing that the Word was made flesh (John 1: 14), we recognize Him as God even after He has come in the flesh. Who, then, is so lacking in sense that he would say to the Lord: 'Leave the body, so that I may worship You?'" ³⁸

With the Athanasian model, while continuing to seek an adequate formulation in the context of the Upanishadic philosophy, let the Christian worship Jesus Christ and proclaim ³⁹ to those who are seeking to understand ⁴⁰ and worship ⁴¹ that Jesus Christ is true God and true man without division. And basing on the Book of Revelation: "On either side of the river is the tree of life. . . ." (Rev. 22:2) ". . . I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7), Christian can say figuratively Jesus Christ is the divine Asvattha.

It is mainly to get to know deeper the mystery of Jesus Christ, the divine Asvattha, from the different perspectives of cultures, philosophies and theologies that the EJournal *Asvattha: an International Journal of Culture, Philosophy and Theology* starts today on 8th December 2005, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In founding (1831) the religious congregation Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), first Religious Congregation of India, one of the visions of Blessed Chavara Kuriakos Elias, ⁴² one of the founding Fathers, was to proclaim the Word of God through the then up-to-date medium. He established the first printing press at Mannanam in 1844. The jubilee of the Bi-centenary year of his birth started on 3rd January 2004. The members of the congregation following the charism of the Blessed Chavara Kuriakos, began numerous publications including the first Catholic Daily of India 'Deepika' (1887), and also the international *Journal of Dharma*. As a member of the religious congregation, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) the Editor / Publisher, ordained on 11th May 1981, with the gratitude at the fast approaching Sacerdotal Silver Jubilee is aware of the duty of continuing the vision of the Blessed Chavara through the medium of the cyberspace, the EJournal *Asvattha*.

Fr. Cheriyān Menacherry CMI

Pater Cheriyān Meacherry CMI

On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception,

8th December 2005.

¹ Chetwynd, Tom. "Tree," in *Dictionary of Symbols: Language of the Unconscious*, Volume 2, London: The Aquarian Press, 1993, pp. 404-406.

² Cf. „World Tree,“ Britannica 2003 Ultimate Reference Suite CD-ROM.

³ Childs, B.S. "Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol.4, edited by George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville (USA): Abingdon Press, (1962) 1982, p. 695 cl. 2.

⁴ Monier Monier – Williams, Sir. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford: At The Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 262 cl. 3.

⁵ Childs, B.S. "Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol.4, edited by George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville (USA): Abingdon Press, (1962) 1982, p. 695 cl. 2.

⁶ Childs, B.S. "Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol.4, edited by George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville (USA): Abingdon Press, (1962) 1982, p. 695 cl. 2.

⁷ Cf. Childs, B.S. "Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol.4, edited by George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville (USA): Abingdon Press, (1962) 1982, p. 695 cl. 1.

⁸ "Asvattha," Monier Monier – Williams, Sir. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford: At The Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 115 cl. 3.

⁹ Margaret and James Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism: Its Mythology, Folklore and Development 1500 B.C.-A.D. 1500*, (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1977), p. 27.

¹⁰ Margaret and James Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism: Its Mythology, Folklore and Development 1500 B.C.-A.D. 1500*, (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1977), p. 27.

¹¹ S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy* Vol. I. (Cambridge, 1922; reprint, Delhi: Montilal Banarsidass, 1975), p. 234.

¹² As in R. E. Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*. (Translated from the Sanskrit), (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 358.

¹³ As in R.E. Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*. (Translated from the Sanskrit), (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 425-426. Cf. also *The Bhagavad Gita* 15:1-3, commented by Swami Chidbhavananda, (Tamil Nadu: Sri Ramakrishna Tapovanam, 1979) pp. 749-752.

¹⁴ Cf. Childs, B.S. "Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol.4, edited by George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville (USA): Abingdon Press, (1962) 1982, p. 697 cl. 1.

¹⁵ *Letter to Diognetus*, § 12, In Defense of the Faith, The Text: (II) A Homily Concerning the Mystery of Faith, Early Christian Fathers, In Welcome to Catholic Church, Version 2.0, CD ROM.

¹⁶ Childs, B.S. "Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol.4, edited by George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville (USA): Abingdon Press, (1962) 1982, p. 697 cl. 1.

¹⁷ J. Quasten, *Patrology* Vo. I: *The beginnings of Patristic Literature. From the Apostles Creed to Irenaeus*, (Westminster: Christian Classics, Inc., 1984), p. 198.

¹⁸ "We have been taught that Christ is the firstborn of God, and we have declared that he is the Logos, of whom every race of man were partakers, and those who lived according to the Logos are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists, as among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them." St Justin, *Apology* I, 46, as quoted by J. Quasten, *Patrology* Vo. I..., (1984), p. 209.

¹⁹ J. Quasten, *Patrology* Vo. I..., (1984), p. 208.

²⁰ "Christian theology has always tried, especially in more recent centuries (*in the Patristic period things were different*) [underline mine], to accentuate the differences between Christianity and the 'non-Christian' religions and to emphasize the newness of the Christian fact, both as revelation and as an ontological 'new creation'." Panikkar, *The Unknown....*, (1981), p. 164.

²¹ "For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Logos. But since they did not know the entire Logos, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves. And those who by human birth were more ancient than Christ, when they tried to consider and prove things by reason, were brought before the tribunals, as impious persons and busybodies." St Justin, *Apologia* 2, 10, as quoted by J. Quasten, *Patrology* Vo. I..., (1984), p. 210; cf. also p. 209.

²² St Justin the Martyr, *First apology* 5, in W.A. Jurgens, ...*Early Fathers* vol.I., (1970), ? 112 a.

²³ St Justin the Martyr, *First apology* 6, in Jurgens, ...*Early Fathers* vol.I., (1970), ? 113.

²⁴St Justin the Martyr, *First apology* 12, in Jurgens, ...*Early Fathers* vol.I., (1970), ? 116.

²⁵St Justin the Martyr, *First apology* 13, in Jurgens, ...*Early Fathers* vol.I., (1970), ? 117.

²⁶If the relationship of the individual "to Jesus were from the outset clearly understood as a *dying with Jesus (in absolute hope) in a surrender to the incomprehensibility of the eternal God*, Christology would no longer appear to the other world religions and the other forms of human desire for God as compatible only with a particular religion, which cannot be that of all human beings." K. Rahner, "Christology Today," in *Concilium: Religion in the Eighties: Jesus, Son of God?* Edts Edward Schillebeeckx and Johannes-Baptist Metz, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark LTD; New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), p. 77.

²⁷Pope Benedict XV, Encyclical Letter, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, September 15, 1920, § 12. In Welcome to Catholic Church, Version 2.0, CD ROM.

²⁸The Council of Nicaea (AD. 325) confessed that "our one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, the only begotten born of the Father, that is of the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, born, not made, of one substance with the Father (which they call in Greek "homousion"). . . ." *The Nicene Creed*, Council of Nicaea I 325, In Welcome to Catholic Church, Version 2.0, CD ROM.

²⁹Incarnation is "God's Revelation, not in mythical time...but in historic time among a historic people...." The death and Resurrection of Jesus, a unique event, is a sign of God's salvation for the whole creation and the whole of humanity. But it is a sign which is rooted in history." Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, (Bangalore: ATC, reprint, 1985), p. 125.

³⁰Menacherry, Cheriyān. *Christ: the Mystery in Hlstory: A Critical Study on the Christology of Raymond Panikkar*, Frankfurt am Main, 1996, p. 251.

³¹Cf. Margaret and James Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism: Its Mythology, Folklore and Development 1500 B.C.-A.D. 1500*, (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1977), p. 27.

³²
³³"In 722 St. Boniface returned directly to Hesse where he found his work hindered at the outset by Hessian veneration for the "Thunder Oak," an ancient tree sacred to Thor and reputedly guarded by thunderbolts. Since the Hessians-no brighter than at Trenton-were fully convinced of all this, St. Boniface felt that he must remove this obstacle before obtaining a hearing. In a scene reminiscent of Elias and the priests of Baal, he demonstrated Hessian error by chopping down the Thunder Oak with his own hands." *Catholic Church History*, Feudal Dyarchy: 565-843, VIII. Conversion of the west (590-754), 60. Carolingian Frankland (687-754), In Welcome to Catholic Church, Version 2.0, CD ROM.

³⁴"Looking at "the spectacle" of the Cross (cf. Lk 23.48) we shall discover in this glorious tree the fulfillment and the complete revelation of the whole Gospel of life." Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, § 50, March 25, 1995, In Welcome to Catholic Church, Version 2.0, CD ROM.

³⁵D' Aragon, Jean-Louis "The Apocalypse," in Brown, R. E., J. A. Fitzmyer And R. E. Murphy (edts) *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, (1969) 1984. p. 473 cl. 2.

³⁶"And again in another prophecy the prophetic Spirit, testifying through the same David that after being crucified Christ would reign, said: 'O sing to the Lord, all the earth, and proclaim his salvation from day to day; for great is the Lord and highly to be praised, terrible beyond all the gods. For all the gods of the nations are images of demons, but God made the heavens. Glory and praise are before him, and strength and pride in the place of his sanctification. Give glory to the Lord, the Father of the ages. Receive favor and go in before his face and worship in his holy courts. Let all the earth fear before him, and be set upright and not shaken. Let them exult among the nations; the Lord has reigned from the tree.' 25 (Ps 96 (95)) 1-10." Justin the Martyr, *In Defense of the Faith* § 41 First Apology of Justin, Early Christian Fathers, In Welcome to Catholic Church, Version 2.0, CD ROM.

³⁷Irenaeus, *Doctrine Of Redemption In Reply To The Gnostics*, § 19, An Exposition of the Faith - Irenaeus' Against Heresies, The Text (Book V) Redemption and the World to Come, Early Christian Fathers, In Welcome to Catholic Church, Version 2.0, CD ROM.

³⁸St. Athanasius, *Sermon to the Newly Baptized*, 3. , in Jurgens, ...*Early Fathers* Vol. I, (1970), ? 795. Pope St. Leo the Great also hints at the cosmic dimension of Jesus Christ. He took upon Himself all that pertains to ours which He had created: "...one and the same Mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus (I Tim. 2:5.), was able to die in one nature and not in the other. In the whole and perfect nature of true man, therefore, the true God was born, complete in what pertains to his own nature and complete in what pertains to ours. But by what pertains to ours we mean that which the creator formed in us at the beginning and that which He took upon Himself in order to redeem it." Pope St. Leo the Great, *The Tome of Leo: Letter of Pope Leo I To Flavian, Bishop of Constantinople*. June 13, 449 A.D. 28.3., in Jurgens, ...*Early Fathers* Vol. III, (1979), pp. 2182a.

³⁹Cf. Acts 17:22-31.

⁴⁰"That from which truly all beings are born, by which when born they live and into which they all return: that seek to understand." TU III, 1, as quoted by Panikkar, *The Unknown....*, (1981), p. 97.

⁴¹"What God shall we adore with our oblation?" RV.x, 121, as quoted by Panikkar, *The Unknown....*, (1981), p. 168.

⁴²For more about Blessed Chavara Kuriakos Elias, and also about the religious congregation CMI, cf. Mathew Kaniampampil, "Blessed Chavara: A Luminous Star Of India," *Asvattha: an International Journal of Culture*,

Philosophy and Theology (Panorama section), 8th Dec. 2005.