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FROM GODS TO GAMERS

The Manifestation of the Avatar in Religious History and Postmodern Culture

By Naamleela Free Jones

When James Cameron's epic film, *Avatar*, was released in 2009 it was the highest-grossing film of all time. Yet how many people who watched it were aware of the multifaceted Hindu doctrine underlying the concept of the *avatara*? This paper traces the avatar from the Vedic age to the present day, examining how it has persisted and adapted for over three thousand years. First the complex history of the Hindu *avatara* is examined through Hindu religious literature, mythology, and hagiography. This is followed by a deeper exploration of the theology of the avatar as a "hierophany", or divine manifestation, through three progressively deepening dimensions of the Hindu worldview—*dharma*, *bhakti*, and *moksha*. The final chapter concludes with a glimpse of the avatar concept in the postmodern world, now stripped of its religious context and emerging as a simulacrum of selfhood in the digital age. The question is asked whether the secularization of the avatar is a simple case of cultural appropriation, or what possibilities for authenticity remain as we explore the recoding of religious idioms in popular culture.

I. Introduction

In January of 2010, I excitedly crowded into a local movie theater to see James Cameron's groundbreaking film, *Avatar*.¹ It was the first time a theater attendant handed me a strange pair of black plastic 3D glasses, and there were the usual visual experiments of looking around the theater with the newfound dislocation of 3D vision. I had heard about *Avatar* for months, and the experience itself did not disappoint—a vivid extravaganza of pulse-pounding adventure, breathtaking beauty, and special effects that reached out of the screen and grabbed me in my seat.

As I watched James Cameron's film, I knew that the idea of an "avatar" came from the

¹ James Cameron, *Avatar* (2009; Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2012), DVD.

tradition of Hinduism. The blue Na'vi people resembled the blue skin of Krishna as depicted in East Indian art, and the notion of a savior incarnating to redeem the native people echoed Indic epic myths. However, watching *Avatar* had a special personal significance for me as well, because it was the first movie I watched in a theater after my father passed away. My father was an American-born spiritual teacher named Adi Da Samraj, who founded a new religious movement after studying within a spiritual lineage of some of the great Hindu yogis of the twentieth century. He had been teaching students from around the world since the early 1970's, when philosopher Alan Watts first read his work and spontaneously exclaimed, "It looks like we have an Avatar here."² In the years that followed, my father formally adopted the title "Avatar," and his students related to him both as a spiritual authority and a divine incarnation.

I grew up hearing stories about traditional avatars—from Krishna, to Kalki, to Sri Ramakrishna—and I observed how seriously my father related to the avatar function. As a result of this personal background, I left the theater with mixed emotions. Here was a profound theological and spiritual idea presented on a 3D screen with blue, alien-like people, crazy flying dragons, and war craft, and I couldn't help but question: Was that right? Was it the ultimate disrespect to this sacred Eastern tradition? Or was it a positive opportunity to bring an esoteric concept into the consciousness of millions of people?

Three years later my love of popular movies, my personal upbringing, and my undergraduate work in Religious Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, all brought me back to research the tradition of the avatar. As a student of religion with a unique family history, I wanted to understand the origins of this tradition, to examine its theology in greater detail, and to trace the historical developments through which it came to appear in a movie theater near me.

The word "avatar" comes from the traditional Sanskrit term *avatara*, generally translated as "descent," or "incarnation." It is derived from the root verb *tar*, meaning "to pass/cross over," and the prefix *ava*, meaning, "away, down."³ A variant Sanskrit word *avatarana* implies "the entry of an actor upon the stage making his appearance from behind a curtain."⁴ Therefore the idea of crossing over, or coming down, is symbolic of the descent of the divine into the world, as well as the passage of the unconditional stepping into the conditional, as if from behind a metaphysical curtain.

The first chapter of this paper will examine the history of the *avatara* in Hinduism, looking at how this ancient doctrine originated and developed throughout Hindu literature, mythology, and hagiography. Early germs of the concept can be found in the *Rig Veda Samhita*, from approximately 1400 BCE, although the term itself does not appear in writing until 400 BCE. Over the next six centuries, the idea was elaborated in the Brahmanas, the Sanskrit epics, and the Puranas, eventually becoming classified into a well-known list of ten recurring figures, or *dashavatara*. By the time of the late Puranas the *avatara* had also become almost exclusively associated with the deity Vishnu, whose name means "the All-Pervading One." Vishnu is now one of the three supreme deities of the Hindu trimurti—Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva—as well as the central figure of Vaishnavism, the branch of Hinduism in which the *avatara* is most commonly venerated. Finally, while the literary references to the avatar were primarily mythological, the term was eventually adopted as a way of referring to unique spiritual individuals—often founders

2 Bubba Free John, *The Way That I Teach: Talks on the Intuition of Eternal Life*, 1st edition (Middletown, California: Dawn Horse Press, 1978). Back Cover.

3 "Avatar, N.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed January 31, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13624>.

4 E. G. Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World's Religions* (Oxford, England ; Rockford, MA: Oneworld Publications, 1997). 3.

of Indian religious movements—living from the eighteenth century to the present day.

The avatar is one of the clearest examples of what religious historian and scholar, Mircea Eliade, called “hierophany.” According to Eliade, hierophanies are the building blocks of religion, and they are described through myth as “breakthroughs of the sacred (or the ‘supernatural’) into the World.”⁵ The second chapter will examine the avatar as such a divine manifestation, or breakthrough, of the sacred. Using its mythological stories, I will explore the function of the avatar through three progressively deepening dimensions of the Hindu worldview—*dharma*, *bhakti*, and *moksha*. Seen through the lens of the first term, the avatar can be understood to incarnate for the sake of upholding *dharma*, or order, on both a cosmic level, and in the domain of human ethics. Next, the avatar provides a focus for *bhakti*, or the devotional love relationship to the divine. Finally, the avatar, as a manifestation of absolute reality, becomes the means for human beings to realize *moksha*, or liberation from conditional reality itself.

While the avatar remains a sacred tradition both within and without Hinduism, the last century has seen the concept extended into popular global imagination. The third chapter will conclude this historical journey with a glimpse of the avatar in the postmodern world. Examining how the avatar has been appropriated by global culture and stripped of its religious context in the process, I will trace the secularizing shifts whereby human beings have now replaced the higher gods, incarnating as avatars into virtual worlds of their own creation. I will ask whether this is a simple question of cultural appropriation, or what possibilities for authenticity remain as we explore this powerful archetype in new forms of secular mythology.

II. Chapter One: The History of the *Avatara* in Hinduism

The idea that the divine can appear in human form is a deeply resonating belief and hope for billions of people around the world, held in varying degrees by many of the world’s religions. In *The Perennial Philosophy*, Aldous Huxley famously stated, “The doctrine that God can be incarnated in human form is found in most of the principal historic expositions of the Perennial Philosophy—in Hinduism, in Mahayana Buddhism, in Christianity and in the Mohammadanism of the Sufis.”⁶ In Hindu tradition, the germ of the idea stretches back three millennia to the Vedas, the oldest extant religious texts in any Indo-European language, and eventually becomes elaborated as the doctrine of the *avatara*, or recurring agent of divine incarnation. According to Robert Elwood, Professor Emeritus at the University of Southern California, “Once fixed, the idea of avatar and incarnation has shown a remarkable persistence and adaptability.”⁷ Therefore, this chapter will trace the key developments in the concept of the *avatara* through the Vedas, Brahmanas, Sanskrit epics, Puranas, and Indian hagiography, looking at how this ancient doctrine has persisted and adapted throughout the emerging history of Hinduism.

In the religious universe of ancient India, God was immanent everywhere, manifesting via multiple forms of metamorphosis and incarnation. Ancient religious man saw the cosmos as a perpetual struggle for balance between the forces of *dharma* and *adharma*, or order and chaos—a struggle that was relieved by the intervention of divine manifestation. In early Vedic

5 Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (Manhattan, Kan.: Waveland Pr Inc, 1998). 6.

6 Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy: An Interpretation of the Great Mystics, East and West* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009). 60-2.

7 Daniel E. Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity: The Myth of the God-Man* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987). x.

myths, the deity Indra—intimately connected with fertility and natural phenomena—wandered about when needed in the form of a bull, a ram, or even the guise of chosen sages. Likewise, the god Varuna, whose thousand eyes made him omniscient in the affairs of men, was said to have manifested out of the sharp point of an arrow. These forms of manifestation were known by Sanskrit terms such as *rupa*, *vapus*, *tanu*, and *pradurbhava*—linguistic predecessors to the word *avatara*, and early descriptive terms for the divine as active within the sphere of creation.⁸

Composed between 1600 and 1000 BCE, the *Rig Veda Samhita* describes, “They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni...To what is One, sages give many a title.”⁹ The image of that One, seen as a great being that manifests in and as the world, was expressed in hymn 10.90, the *Purusha Sukta*:

*A thousand heads hath Purusa, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet.
On every side pervading earth he fills a space ten fingers wide.
This Purusa is all that yet hath been and all that is to be;
The Lord of Immortality which waxes greater still by food.
So mighty is his greatness; yea, greater than this is Purusa.
All creatures are one-fourth of him, three-fourths eternal life in heaven.
With three-fourths Purusa went up: one-fourth of him again was here.
Thence he strode out to every side over what eats not and what eats.*¹⁰

The *Purusha Sukta* goes on to describe the unity of the universe as the body of the Purusha, or cosmic being, out of which the moon, the sun, the air, the earth, human beings, animals, and all living forms emerge. Although the Purusha is not himself an *avatara*, some scholars see the germ of the doctrine of the *avatara* in the fact that three quarters of the Purusha is in heaven, and one quarter remains manifest on earth. In Dasgupta’s *A History of Indian Philosophy*, he sees the *Purusha Sukta* as the starting point of the doctrine of incarnation because it conveys the earliest notion of God as both transcendent and immanent. In other words, the Purusha alludes to the fact that while the divine is all pervading, a portion of the divine can also be represented, or made manifest, on earth.¹¹

The all-pervading cosmic being would eventually become represented as Vishnu, the Purushottama, or Supreme Being, whose name comes from the Sanskrit root “vish,” meaning to pervade.¹² Although Vishnu later becomes a divinity of the highest rank, and takes prominence in the *avatara* doctrine, he occupies only a subordinate position in the *Rig Veda*. His principal appearance occurs in hymn 1.154, the *Vishnu Sukta*, in which he is worshipped as striding over the universe in three steps—an act further taken up by one of his *avatara* in a later narrative.

Let me now sing the heroic deeds of Visnu, who has measured apart the realms of earth, who propped up the upper dwelling-place, striding far as he stepped forth three times...

His three footprints, inexhaustibly full of honey, rejoice in the sacrificial drink.

8 Ibid. 3.

9 “Rig Veda: Rig-Veda Book 1: Hymn CLXIV. Viśvedevas.” accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv01164.html>.

10 “Rig Veda: Rig-Veda, Book 10: Hymn XC. Puru a.” accessed October 20, 2014, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv10090.html>.

11 Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*. 17.

12 Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*. 19.

*Alone, he supports threefold the earth and the sky – all creatures.*¹³

Many cosmological myths exist in the Vedas and the Brahmanas, invoking a variety of images and symbols for the act of creation. However, throughout the Brahmanas, in roughly the 9th to 6th centuries BCE, Vishnu gradually emerged in prominence. As this occurred, he became an increasingly syncretistic character, intertwining the all-pervading immanence of the Purusha, with the solar and fertility functions of Indra and other early gods. The plurality of Vishnu's actions began to exemplify the idea of a benevolent God who takes a helpful and loving interest in the world for the sake of human beings.¹⁴

In the *Satapatha Brahmana*, Vishnu manifests as a horned fish in order to save Manu, the progenitor of humanity, from a great flood. With striking similarity to the Biblical tale of Noah, the fish instructs Manu to build a ship, and then drags it with his great horns safely through the flood, such that only Manu and his passengers survive. In the *Satapatha Brahmana* and the *Taittiriya Samhita*, Vishnu incarnates as a boar, a metaphysical act of creation out of which the earth itself and the gods are born. Finally, the myth of Vishnu's three strides also reappears in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, this time in the story of a dwarf who tricks the *asuras*, or demons, in order to gain control of the world for the *devas*, or gods.¹⁵

The word *avatara* does not appear in any of these passages. However, a pattern of mythology can be identified that would soon take on a central position in Hindu theology. From about the fifth century BCE, the idea of devotional worship was also gradually expanding on the Vedic ideologies of *dharma* and ritual. The concept of *bhakti*, or devotional love in relationship with a personal God, was becoming a central religious practice.¹⁶ Historical testimony shows devotional worship of Vasudeva (Krishna) already established by the fourth century BCE.¹⁷ Against the background of oral tradition and the emergence of new forms of worship, the term *avatara* appeared in writing for the first time in the *Ashtadhyayi*, the foundational text of Sanskrit grammar, by Panini.

Within a hundred years, this growth of devotionalism, along with the rise of Vishnu and Krishna, was reflected in the great Sanskrit narrative epics. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, compiled between approximately 300 BCE to 300 CE, and 200 BCE to 200 CE respectively, tell the tales of the highly revered heroes of Krishna and Rama. In Indian tradition, the *Mahabharata* is generally referred to as *itihasa*, or “chronicle,” and the *Ramayana* as *adikavya*, or “the first poetic work.”¹⁸ While it is possible that the stories originated from historical folk heroes and tribal conflicts in northern India, the narratives took on the significance of allegory rather than historical account. Through a long tradition of oral poetry, the *avatara* became identified with human heroes, and increasingly worshipped as the descent of the divine in human form.

The *Mahabharata*, traditionally attributed to the sage Vyasa, is the longest known epic poem in the world, at ten times the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. It tells a bloody and heroic tale of the Kurukshetra War—an archetypal battle between the *devas* (gods)

13 Wendy Doniger, *The Rig Veda*. Reprinted Edition (Penguin, 2005). 226.

14 J. Gonda, *Aspects of Early Visnuism*, 2d ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969). 22-23.

15 Wendy Doniger, *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit*, New edition (Penguin, 2004). 180, 185, 177.

16 Gavin D. Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996). 103.

17 Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism: Third Edition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007). 112.

18 Robert P. Goldman, “Gods in Hiding: The Mahābhārata’s Virāta Parvan And The Divinity of The Indian Epic Hero,” in *Modern Evaluation of the Mahābhārata*, 1995. 76.

and the *asuras* (demons), played out as a human conflict between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and Pandavas. The protagonist of the *Mahabharata* is Krishna, a divine hero and *avatara* of Vishnu, worshipped across many Hindu sects as the *purnavatara*, or complete *avatara*. Barbara Powell asserts that “Krishna’s significance in Hinduism cannot be underestimated... He is believed by some to be among the several incarnations of Vishnu, by others to be a divine incarnation of unique and singular importance (as Jesus is to Christians), by others the highest and most perfect manifestation of Brahman, and by still others simply God, the Original and Supreme.”¹⁹ In fact, Krishna is viewed in such high regard that his position in relation to Vishnu is sometimes reversed, with Krishna himself worshipped as the supreme god and source of all other incarnations.²⁰

In the midst of a highly complex narrative, the *Mahabharata* standardized and also elaborated the formula of the human *avatara*. A portion of the first book of the *Mahabharata*, called the *Amsavatarana*, elaborates on the purpose and nature of the *avatara*—by distinguishing between a *purnavatara* (full *avatara*), and an *amsavatara* (partial *avatara*). While Krishna exemplifies the *purnavatara*, most of the other characters in the *Mahabharata* can also be interpreted as partial *avataras* of gods or demons. Their incarnation often takes place through the mechanism of divine-human parentage, and is seen as a kind of demotion from a heavenly plane to the earthly plane, sometimes as the result of a curse. For example, Bhishma is the incarnation of the Vedic god Dyaus, cursed by a sage to be born as a human. King Yudhisthira was said to be an incarnate portion of the god Dharma; Arjuna of Indra; Draupadi of the goddess Sri; and Krishna’s brother Balarama, of the great serpent Shesa.²¹ Degrees of avatarology are thus introduced, with later Hindu schools developing complicated theological debates, and creating further classifications such as the *avesavatara* (an individual possessed by God), *arcavataras* (image-forms of God), *purushavataras* (spirit incarnations), and *lilavataras* (playful incarnations).²²

The *Bhishma Parva*, or Book 6 of the *Mahabharata*, contains the *Bhagavad Gita*, a beloved text seen by many as the definitive scripture of Hinduism, and sometimes referred to as the “Hindu New Testament.” The *Gita*, as it is often called, belonged to a period of Hindu synthesis, in which Hinduism was defining itself in relationship to the growing influences of Samkhya, Buddhism, and Jainism.²³ In the narrative framework of a dialogue on the eve of battle, Krishna expounds to his devotee Arjuna on the nature of the *avatara* as a recurrent agent of the divine—one who is born age after age for the sake of restoring righteousness in the world, and liberating the devotee.

Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Bhārata (Arjuna), then I send forth (create incarnate) Myself.

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age.

*He who knows thus in its true nature My divine birth and works, is not born again, when he leaves his body but comes to Me, O Arjuna.*²⁴

19 Barbara Powell, *Windows Into the Infinite: A Guide to the Hindu Scriptures - Paper*, First Printed edition (Fremont, Calif.: Jain Pub Co, 1996). 35.

20 Kristin J. Largen, *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2011). 33.

21 Anonymous, *The Mahabharata*, ed. John D. Smith, Abridged edition (Penguin Classics, 2009). 20-1.

22 Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*. 6.

23 Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*. 124-5.

24 S. Radhakrishnan, trans., *The Bhagavadgita*, 1st edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). 154-6.

The philosophical and devotional themes of the *avatara* are also reflected in the other great Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*, a poetic work of 50,000 lines traditionally ascribed to the sage Valmiki. According to Robert P. Goldman, “Few works of literature produced in any place at any time have been as popular, influential, imitated, and successful as the great and ancient Sanskrit epic poem, the *Vālmiki Rāmāyana*.”²⁵ This time the narrative revolves around the protagonist Rama, also an *avatara* of Vishnu, and the divine king of Ayodhya. The story encompasses Rama’s birth at court and his exile in the forest, as well as his marriage to Sita, and her abduction by the demon Ravana, culminating in a great battle. Again, many characters in the epic are viewed as *avataras* of Vedic deities -- such as Rama’s three brothers, Lakshmana, Satrugna, and Bharata -- with whom he co-incarnates and disincarnates. Hanuman, Rama’s exemplary monkey servant, is considered an incarnation or reflection of Shiva, and Rama’s wife Sita comes to be seen as an incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi.²⁶

In contrast to Krishna, Rama is described as an *amsavatara* or partial *avatara*, because he is both divine but also fully human. His human nature renders Rama unaware of his divine identity, thus suffering fully as a human being, and able to provide an example for other human beings of how to live every moment of life according to the rules of *dharma*, or the law of right conduct. This provides a trope reminiscent of Judeo-Christian and ancient Mediterranean cults, one that Robert P. Goldman describes as “The idea that the omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, and non-contingent Godhead or absolute takes on—even if ambiguously—birth as a vulnerable mortal with limited self-knowledge and a specific, contingent life-history so as to both reveal and conceal his or her true nature while acting out the divine plan.”²⁷

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* reflect an oral tradition that grew around the figures of Rama and Krishna, and continued with additional texts, revisions, and commentaries. Multiple versions of the *Ramayana* have survived throughout North India, South India, and Southeast Asia, including the tenth-to-fourteenth century text of the *Yoga Vasistha*, the sixteenth century *Adhyatma Ramayana*, and the *Ramcaritmanas*, or “Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama,” by Tulsidas. These later versions of Rama’s story added to a deepening interpretation of his divine nature and soteriological function as an *avatara*.²⁸ In the Krishna tradition, additional stories were created, beyond what is in the *Mahabharata*, expanding on Krishna’s youth and devotional significance through scriptures such as the *Harivamsha*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, and the *Vishnu Purana*. In addition, philosophers such as Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, and Mahatma Gandhi have provided deepening commentaries and interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita* continuously over the last two millennia.²⁹

Both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* play a vital role in linking the Vedas with the realms of sacred literature, art, theater, and religion to the current day. The elaborate stories and characters created in the epics are so integral to Hindu consciousness that, as John D. Smith writes, “It would be hard to find a Hindu who did not know at least the broad outline of the story and the personalities of the chief heroes.”³⁰ Krishna and Rama dominate Hindu ritual

25 Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland, eds., *The Rāmāyana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India, Vol. 1: Balakanda* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985). 3.

26 Swami Parmeshwaranand, *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Puranas* (Sarup & Sons, 2001). 628-9, 387.

27 Goldman, “Gods in Hiding: The Mahābhārata’s Virāta Parvan And The Divinity of The Indian Epic Hero.” 80.

28 Frank Whaling, *Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama* (Motilal Banarsidass Pub, 1980). Introduction.

29 Ibid. 2-3.

30 Anonymous, *The Mahabharata*. xiv.

and iconography, throughout the Indian subcontinent, as well as in South and Southeast Asia. According to Phillip Lutgendorf, the annual reenactment of the *Ramayana* is “among the world’s most popular dramatic traditions: a form of live theater that reckons its audience not in hundreds or thousands, but in millions.”³¹

The first of the *dashavatara* is Matsya the great-horned fish, reminiscent of the Brahmanical hero that saved Manu from the flood. The second, Kurma the tortoise, supports the earth during the legendary churning of the ocean by the gods and demons. Varaha, the boar *avatara*, returns next to defeat the demon Hiranyaksha and raise the earth out of the cosmic sea with his great tusks. The fourth *avatara*, the half man-half lion Narasimha, viciously defeats the demon Hiranyakashipu at the request of his devotee Prahlada. The fifth *avatara* is Vamana the dwarf, who extended his authority over the three worlds in three strides, echoing the Vedic myth of Vishnu. The sixth, Parasurama, is a form of the Rama *avatara* with an axe, who incarnates to rid the earth of Kshatriyas, or warriors, on behalf of the priestly Brahmins.

Rama, the ideal hero of the *Ramayana*, is the seventh of the *dashavatara*, who incarnates in order to kill the demon Ravana of Lanka. Krishna is the eighth *avatara*, the perfect incarnation of the *Mahabharata*, born in order to defeat his wicked uncle Kamsa. The Buddha is incorporated as the ninth *avatara*: from the Hindu perspective, a complex figure often viewed as either a test to lead mankind away from the Vedic path, or as a benign *avatara* who is the teacher of *dharma* and compassion. Finally, the tenth *avatara*, Kalki, is the future incarnation yet to come, depicted riding a white horse, and destined to bring an end to the Kali Yuga with his mighty sword of discrimination.³²

The ten *dashavatara* remain the most popular listing to this day, but the classification was by no means as clear in the Puranas as it appears now. Other *avatars* included Dattatreya, the yogic sage; Hayagriva, the horse-headed solar deity; Hamsa, the celestial swan; and sometimes Sita and Radha (Rama and Krishna’s consorts) as incarnations of the goddess Lakshmi. The *Garuda Purana* and the *Agni Purana* list the *dashavatara*, while the *Pancaratra* lists thirty-nine, and the *Bhagavata Purana* lists twenty-two, mentions up to forty, and finally adds that the number is innumerable.³³ Entirely other systems arose alongside the *avatars* of Vishnu, such as the *vyuhas* of Pancaratra theology that indicated a fourfold range of attributes that Vishnu can contain.³⁴ In fact, while modern scholars have attempted to identify definitive characteristics for avatarhood, such criteria did not exist in traditional Hindu literature.

In the past several hundred years, use of the term *avatara* has extended further. While the idea of divine descent was previously recorded through the language of myth, the *avatara* has evolved into a way of understanding and portraying uniquely spiritual individuals who have appeared out of the Hindu tradition, and are often founders of Indian religious movements. Many movements have regarded their founder as an incarnation of the divine in the world, an object of *bhakti*, and thus an agent of salvation—adopting the reference “Avatar” as a concept that is readily understandable in the history of Hindu theology for a unique and living appearance of the divine. As the twentieth-century saint, Meher Baba, proclaimed, “When God manifests on earth in the form of man and reveals his Divinity to mankind he is recognized as the *Avatār*—thus God becomes Man.”³⁵

31 Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*, 1991. 248.

32 Ganga Somany, *Vishnu and His Avatars* (Bookwise (India) Pvt. Ltd., 2004).

33 T. S. Rukmani, *A Critical Study of the Bhagavata Purana* (Chaukhamba Amarabharati Prakashan, 1970). 4.

34 Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism* (Praeger, 1968). 397.

35 C. B. Purdom, *The God Man: The Life, Journeys and Work of Meher Baba with an Interpretation of His Silence and Spiritual Teaching*, 1st with corrections edition (Sheriar Foundation, 1964). 210.

The first historical example in India was the sixteenth-century Hindu monk, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534 CE)—an ecstatic worshipper of Krishna, who came to be regarded by his devotees as an *avatara* of both Krishna and Radha combined. Chaitanya did more than any figure to promote *bhakti* in relation to Krishna, and generated the tradition that remains to this day, the Hare Krishna movement, still extant in India and in the West.³⁶ Four centuries later, the Bengali saint Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886) became one of the most outstanding modern figures to be looked upon as an *avatara*. When he was in his twenties, a convocation of the most highly regarded religious scholars of the day gathered and unanimously declared Sri Ramakrishna an *avatara*.³⁷ He went on to advocate a universal acknowledgement of the manifestation of God as all extraordinary spiritual figures, not solely confined to Hinduism, stating,

*[Avatāras] are human beings with extraordinary original powers and entrusted with a Divine commission. Being heirs of Divine powers and glories, they form a class of their own. To this class belong the Incarnation of God like Christ, Krishna, Buddha, and Chaitanya and their devotees of the highest order.*³⁸

Sri Ramakrishna attracted thousands of followers, including Swami Vivekananda, who furthered Ramakrishna's inclusive vision, and was also revered as a divine incarnation. Swami Vivekananda was instrumental in bringing Hinduism to the West, beginning when he spoke as a formal delegate at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago. Shortly after Vivekananda's historic voyage, another Indian teacher held to be an *avatara* would travel to and work in the West. Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) was cultivated by the Theosophical Society, a group that held that "...high on the ladder [of the spiritual hierarchy] stood the World Teacher who is a founder of a great religion, an Avatar, and a transmitter of divine wisdom." Krishnamurti eventually stepped outside of the Society that fostered him, becoming a renowned writer and teacher on philosophy and spirituality.³⁹

The twentieth century continued the introduction of the *avatara* to the Western world with a growing tradition of spiritual teachers who were pivotal in bringing Hindu ideas to the West. Among these was Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), who was involved with the Indian independence movement, and later founded a system called "Integral Yoga," integrating elements of Vedanta, Yoga, and Tantra. Meher Baba (1894-1969) was born to Zoroastrian parents in India, and promulgated a complex model of Perfect Masters and *avatars*, eventually becoming revered by millions around the world as the "Avatar of the age."⁴⁰

Another well-known figure, Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952), also born in India, spread Eastern yoga to millions of Westerners through the work of the Self-Realization Fellowship. In his best-selling book *Autobiography of a Yogi*, he spoke of several *avatara* figures that he felt guided his work from the astral plane.⁴¹ A lesser-known figure also considered an *avatara* was the Tamil saint, Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), acknowledged as one of the great spiritual teachers of the twentieth century. Ramana Maharshi lived in the style of an ascetic in the mountains of

36 Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*. 139.

37 Lex Hixon, *Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna* (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1997). 9.

38 Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*. 230.

39 Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*. 109.

40 Ibid. 84.

41 Ibid. 133.

India, but was regarded as a teacher to many Western disciples, such as Paul Brunton, Arthur Osborne, and J.D. Salinger.⁴²

A special example with which I had a personal relationship was my father, spiritual teacher, Adi Da Samraj (1939-2008). While all of the individuals mentioned above were born in the East, and served to form a bridge between East and West, Adi Da was born in America. He studied in both Western academia and a Hindu lineage in India, eventually going on to found the Way of Adidam as a new tradition outside of Hinduism.⁴³ Adi Da used the description “Avataric Incarnation of Conscious Light” to communicate that he was not the incarnation of a Hindu deity, but of what he called “Conscious Light,” or the nature of absolute reality itself, transcending all dualities and structures of belief.

The spiritual teachers of the last several centuries have renewed and expanded our understanding of the *avatara* function. They have not only personified the role of the *avatara* in relationship to their devotees, but have also provided valuable insights and commentary into the nature and function of divine incarnation. Their teachings and examples advocate for the effectiveness of relating to the divine through a spiritually awakened human agent, thus providing a living interpretation and link to the larger and ancient tradition of the *avatara*.

The final chapter of this paper will discuss the most recent development of the term avatar—its incorporation into postmodern, globalized culture. Before progressing into contemporary absorption, I will discuss and explore in the following chapter the sacred role of the *avatara* in greater detail, by examining its mythological stories through the lens and vocabulary of Hindu theology.

III. Chapter Two: Exploring Three Dimensions of Divine Manifestation

The *avatara* is an example of what Mircea Eliade called “hierophany,” or the breakthrough of the sacred into the world.⁴⁴ According to Eliade, all religion is based on the felt need to overcome the primal separation between the sacred (from Latin roots meaning “dedicated, set apart”)⁴⁵ and the profane, or everyday world. From this point of view, religion, on the most fundamental level, is based upon the manifestation of the divine reality, or that which brings the sacred to life in the ordinary human domain. Eliade argues that hierophany is the essential object of all religion, whether the divine manifestation takes the form of an object, a symbol, a natural phenomenon, a book, or a consecrated human being.⁴⁶

There are many examples, in various religious traditions, of an individual person who appears in order to serve that “breakthrough” process, but how that appearance is interpreted depends on the theology and mythology of the tradition in which it occurs. Therefore, to understand the concept of the *avatara*, I will argue that it can be understood as the primal religious idea of divine manifestation, articulated in the context of the Hindu theologies of

42 Daniel E. Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity: The Myth of the God-Man* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987).

43 Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*. 272.

44 Eliade, *Myth and Reality*. 6.

45 “Sacred, Adj. and N. : Oxford English Dictionary,” accessed April 6, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/169556?redirectedFrom=sacred#eid>.

46 Mircea Eliade and John Clifford Holt, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed, Reprint edition (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1996). 1-2.

dharma, *bhakti*, and *moksha*.

My analysis was inspired in part by Frank Whaling's detailed study of the figure of Rama in *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama*. Whaling proposes a new kind of analysis in which Rama is understood to function as a symbol—a symbol that develops through different levels of meaning. He examines this symbolic development through historical revisions of the *Ramayana*, growing from an example of *dharma*, to a devotional lord, to identical with *Brahman* (the absolute divine). While Whaling gives a historical survey of these three levels of understanding in relationship with Rama, I will examine them as a conceptual framework present in the mythology of the *avatara* altogether. I use the Hindu concepts of *dharma*, *bhakti*, and *moksha*, as three simultaneously existing dimensions through which to understand the function of the *avatara* as a divine manifestation.

Dharma, *bhakti*, and *moksha* are complex concepts in the tradition of Hinduism, each with its own history of development, and differing schools of thought. In the case of the first concept, divine manifestation is understood to function as *dharma*—from the Sanskrit roots literally meaning to “support” or “uphold” and signifying righteousness, virtue, and moral order, as contrasted with *adharma*, or lawlessness. As it relates to the second concept, the manifest form of the divine is the focus of *bhakti*—from the Sanskrit root meaning “to participate in” or “worship,” and denoting a relationship of devotion and love-attachment to the divine. Finally, in relation to the third concept, the manifestation of the *avatara* is a means to *moksha*, or “liberation”—dissolution from bondage, and a way out of this world of mortal suffering into identification with the sacred, or transcendent divine itself.⁴⁷

Dharma is a fundamental concept in Hinduism, referring both to the macrocosm of the order of the universe itself, and to the microcosm of rules that govern human society and ethics.⁴⁸ As mentioned in the first chapter, traditional Hindu thought understands that the cosmos is characterized by a constant agonistic struggle between chaos and order. A now obsolete Vedic term *rita* was a precursor to the idea of *dharma*. As Betty Heimann describes, “*Rita* is the functional balance of already existent single phenomena of which each in its proper place functions in its own law of activity and all of them collectively balance each other...”⁴⁹

The *avatara* is generally understood in Vaishnavite theology to incarnate precisely to maintain this delicate balance. According to Sri Ramakrishna, one of the traits of *avatars* is that they are born free of *karma*, or personal destiny.⁵⁰ Therefore, Hindu mythology always ties the birth of the *avatara* to a specific salvific purpose, rather than any personal desires of the *avatars* themselves. As Krishna says to Arjuna, he comes into being “*For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness...*”⁵¹

Matsya, Kurma, and Varaha—the first three of the *dashavatara*, or widely accepted list of ten incarnations of Vishnu—incarnate to save the earth from elemental chaos, and thus to uphold *rita*. As a fish, a tortoise, and a boar, respectively, they each appear to guarantee the preservation of the earth in response to the elemental threat of water. The connection between water and the world of creation was an important relationship that appeared in the Vedas, and continued through the Brahmanas. The ocean was seen positively, as the original state of generation that is

47 Georg Feuerstein, *The Encyclopedia of Yoga and Tantra*, Rev Exp edition (Boston: Shambhala, 2011). 107, 63, 229.

48 Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*. 57-8.

49 Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*. 467.

50 Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*. 65.

51 Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*. 154.

necessary for life, but also viewed warily, as a threat necessary to keep in proper balance.⁵² Matsya uses his horns to pull Manu's boat through the great flood; Varaha lifts up the earth from the sinking waves; Kurma holds up the earth in the form of a mountain to help the gods and demons during the great churning of the ocean. As soon as their task is complete, they disappear again into the primordial reality from which they emerged.

Many of the successive *dashavatara* that follow similarly incarnate in order to save the world from powerful demons and threats. Vamana, the dwarf, defeats the demon Bali by echoing Vishnu's three strides around the altar. Narasimha, Rama, and Krishna incarnate in order to kill the demons Hiranyakashipu, Ravana, and Kamsa respectively, who, on the basis of curses, cannot be killed by any other figure than a particular *avatara*.⁵³ Similarly, Kalki is prophesied to appear in the final moments of the Kali Yuga, to restore righteousness when *dharma* has been utterly confused and reversed.⁵⁴

However, in the human mythological *avataras*, particularly Rama and Krishna, we see the evolution of *dharma* from the Vedic conception of *rita* to an understanding of right and moral conduct—a concept that is sometimes even considered synonymous with Hindu religion itself. In Hinduism, this involves righteousness within the framework of the system of four castes (*Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, and *Shudras*), and four life-stages (student, householder, hermit, and wandering ascetic). Thus, in addition to morality, *dharma* encompasses the entire external side of religion, as well as civil law and social customs.⁵⁵

Rama is especially important as an example of *dharma* in Hindu thought. The opening lines of the *Ramayana* describe him as “self-controlled,” “calm,” “illustrious,” “handsome,” “devout,” and “full of the highest qualities.”⁵⁶ Because of his status as a fully human *avatara*, he is considered an embodied example of how to live every moment rightly according to *dharma*. As Whaling states, “Rama...must do what is ‘right’ at every stage of his life whatever the cost may be. Dharma must be observed. It is a transcendental norm, and Rama was willing to undergo successive experiences of suffering in order to fulfill what he conceived to be his highest dharma. Dharma for him was all in all.”⁵⁷ The first such crisis occurred when Rama was to be inaugurated to the throne of Ayodhya, and yet he instead agreed to a time of exile in order to respect his father's promise to one of his wives. In other instances, he chose physical injury over injury to others, and finally repudiated his beloved wife Sita, because of rumors of her defilement by the demon Ravana. After he was finally inaugurated, Rama was an ideal ruler, always fully interested in the affairs of his subjects. He ruled over the *Ramarajya* as a heavenly kingdom on earth, bestowing all of his subjects with virtue through his right moral and divine kingship.⁵⁸

Even as *dharma* is the guiding law of Rama's actions, Whaling demonstrates how further revisions of the Rama literature, such as the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, exemplify a second dimension of the *avatara*—the *avatara* as the object of *bhakti*, the devotional Lord who both loves and is loved by his devotees. *Bhakti* is defined as acts of worship or devotion, or “the passionate longing for the Lord from one's whole heart”. As Klaus Klostermaier describes in his *Survey of Hinduism*,

52 González-Reimann, Luis, “Cosmic Cycles, Cosmology, and Cosmography,” *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, n.d. 412.

53 Dimmitt and Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology*. 63.

54 Doniger, *Hindu Myths*. 236.

55 Paul Hacker and Donald R. Davis Jr., “Dharma in Hinduism,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 34, no. 5 (October 1, 2006): 479–82.

56 Whaling, *Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama*. 46.

57 Ibid. 39.

58 Ibid. 40-46, 64-65.

“Visnu *bhakti* knows all shades of love, from the respectful devotion of the servant to his masters, through the affectionate relationship between parent and child, to the passionate eroticism of Krsna and Radha.”⁵⁹

Bhakti also provides a new lens with which to understand the mechanism of the incarnation of the *avatara*, as can be seen in the fourth *dashavatara*—the half-man half-lion Narasimha. Known as the protector of his devotees, Narasimha’s appearance is precipitated by the steadfast devotion of Prahlada, the son of the demon Hiranyakashipu. Hiranyakashipu is given a boon that, among other specifications, neither a man nor an animal can kill him, and because of this he rules his kingdom with great cruelty. His son Prahlada is an ardent devotee of Vishnu, and finally, Hiranyakashipu becomes so enraged by Prahlada’s steadfast prayers that he asks him, “If thy Visnu is God omnipresent, why doth he not reside in that pillar yonder?”⁶⁰ At that, the pillar cracks open with violent force, and Vishnu springs out in the fierce form of Narasimha, slaying Hiranyakashipu with his mighty claws.

As the figure of Rama developed, the principle of *bhakti* appears in the *Adhyatma Ramayana* through themes such as devotion to his lotus feet, and the importance of spending time in his company, and in the company of his devotees. Some of the principal set practices of devotion are described as the remembrance and repetition of Rama’s name, and the telling of his stories through recitation, enactment, and song. It is said that hearing or singing the story of Rama allows one to “cross the ocean of life.”⁶¹ The attitude of *dasya*, or service, is emphasized, along with the importance of surrender, and taking shelter in Rama’s protection. Rama comes to be described as “infinite in mercy,” the “remover of His devotees’ sorrows,” and “the refuge of his devotees.”⁶²

While the concept of *bhakti* developed throughout the stories of Rama, it is of central importance to the mythology of Krishna. The many faces of love are exemplified in Krishna’s varying roles: as a playful infant in the *Harivamsha Purana*, as a young man enacting divine love sport in the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Gita Govinda*, and as an adult giving instruction on the battlefield of the *Bhagavad Gita*. In Krishna’s childhood exploits, recounted in the *Harivamsha Purana*, he engages in mischievous play with both his brother Balarama and his mother Yashoda, sometimes appearing as an ordinary child, and sometimes revealing his divine nature, all the while both frustrating and delighting his family. In her book *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ* Kristin Johnston Largen describes how the many stories of Krishna’s childhood can be understood as *lila*, or play, a unique form of religious literature that transcends the distance between God and his devotee, leading into an intimate relationship of pure love and devotion.⁶³

That intimate relationship develops into the iconic images of Krishna as a young man, romancing the *gopis*, or cowherd girls, of Vrindavan. Distracted by the sound of Krishna’s divine flute, the *gopis* abruptly abandon their homes and husbands, and run to Krishna in the forest. In the *Rasa lila*, or circular Rasa dance of divine love, described in the *Bhagavata Purana*, Krishna extends one night into billions of years. Multiplying himself magically, he dances ecstatically in such a way that each *gopi* believes she is the only one dancing with him through the night. This eternal dance of love epitomizes the heart of *bhakti* as distraction, love, and even painful longing for the union with the Divine. The *Bhagavata Purana* describes,

59 Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*. 112.

60 Swami Prabhavananda (translator), *Srimad Bhagavatam: The Wisdom of God* (Madras: Vedanta Press & Bookshop, 2007). 7.1

61 Whaling, *Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama*. 159-70.

62 Ibid. 180.

63 Largen, *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ*. 49.

*The beauty of their faces was enhanced/ by droplets of perspiration/decorating their cheeks, and/ By lotus flowers in their hair/ and behind their ears./ With music resounding from their bracelets and ankle bells,/ and garlands falling from their hair,/ The Gopīs danced/ together with their Beloved Lord;/ bees became a chorus of singers/ in that assembly of the Rāsa dance.*⁶⁴

In the many playful and erotic stories of Krishna and the *gopis*, Parrinder points out that “The Avatar no longer occurs simply to restore righteousness and destroy demons. Passionate love (*prema*) is here the chief relationship of God and man. As the union of love is the highest point of human life, so it is of human-divine relationships. Krishna shows that romantic love is the highest symbol, and that impassioned adoration of God is the best road to salvation.”⁶⁵ As Krishna states to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, “Fix thy mind on Me; be devoted to Me; sacrifice to Me; prostrate thyself before Me; so shalt thou come to Me. I promise thee truly, for thou art dear to Me.”⁶⁶

There is a plurality of paths in Hinduism, but ultimately they are all understood to lead to *moksha*, or liberation from the world, what Klostermaier describes as “the focal concern around which the whole of Indian philosophy is woven.” In contrast to the Vedic goal of *svarga*, or a heavenly plane of existence, the Upanishads articulated the understanding of *moksha* as liberation from bondage to existence itself. Existence is characterized as *samsara*, or the domain of birth and rebirth in a constant cycle of suffering. *Moksha* is thus freedom from all dualities, a state of immortality and bliss, or the ultimate realization of identity with *Brahman*.⁶⁷

Some evidence suggests that the concept of *moksha* may in fact have originated far away from the modes of orthodox Hindu literature, arising “among practitioners of trance and ecstasy...sorcerers, medicine men, and yogis.”⁶⁸ On the one hand, this points to *moksha* as an esoteric idea of transcendence, standing in contrast to *dharma*, or the fulfillment of duty in the world. However, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, *moksha* is in fact explicitly linked to both *dharma* and *bhakti*. On the eve of battle, Arjuna is faced with a great moral dilemma. Should he fight in combat, even when it means the killing of members of his own family? In response, Krishna speaks to him as his divine charioteer, instructing him to fight, and teaching him the secret that *dharma* and duty are in fact compatible with liberation when action is undertaken without attachment to its results.⁶⁹ In addition, *bhakti*, or devotion to Krishna, as exemplified in both the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, is unquestionably soteriological—rewarding devotees not with an impersonal goal, but with the joy of union with Krishna.⁷⁰

According to Whaling, it is notable that there are virtually no substantial references to *moksha* in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*.⁷¹ However, a later text, the *Yoga-Vasishtha*, traditionally also attributed to Valmiki, contains an esoteric dialogue between Rama and his teacher Vasishtha. The scripture expounds on the nature of liberation, and the character of the liberated man, or

64 Graham M. Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love: India’s Classic Sacred Love Story: The Rasa Lila of Krishna* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005). 69.

65 Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*. 77-78.

66 Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*. 377.

67 Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*. 178.

68 Daniel H. H. Ingalls, “Dharma and Moksa,” *Philosophy East and West* 7, no. 1/2 (April 1, 1957): 41–48, doi:10.2307/1396833. 46.

69 Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*. 126.

70 Largen, *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ*. 202-3.

71 Whaling, *Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama*. 48.

jivan mukta. Dasgupta summarized that description as, “The *jivan mukta* state is that in which the saint has ceased to have any desires, as if he were in a state of deep sleep...He does not wait for the future, nor remain in the present, nor remember the past. Though sleeping, he is awake and, though awake, he is asleep...He is full of bliss and happiness, and therefore appears to ordinary eyes to be an ordinary man; but in reality...he has not the delusion of being himself an active agent...”⁷²

Some scholars warn that to limit the interpretation of the *avatara* to the idea of *dharma* would actually be to miss the ultimate point of such a manifestation. It is only in the relationship of *dharma*, *bhakti*, and *moksha* that the greatest significance of the *avatara* can be understood. R.K. Pandey states “If the divine birth is interpreted only in the former sense of upholding of *Dharma*, it will become wholly devoid of its true meaning. It will mean nothing but a superstition which will have a limited significance...The *avatar* assumes human form so that mankind by imitating his ways and following the path shown by him may realize the absolute state of being, may become one with God.”⁷³

Sri Aurobindo further argued,

*If there were not the rising of men in to the Godhead to be helped by the descent of God into humanity, Avatarhood for the sake of the dharma would be an otiose phenomenon. Since mere right, mere justice or standards of virtue can always be upheld by the divine omnipotence through its ordinary means by great men or great movements, by the life and work of the sages and kings and religious leaders, without any actual incarnation, the avatar comes as the manifestation of the divine nature in the human nature, the apocalypse of its Christhood, Krishnahood, Buddhahood, in order that human may lay moulding its principle, thought, feeling, action, being on the lives of that Christhood, Krishnahood, Buddhahood transfigure itself into the divine.*⁷⁴

To put it another way, the *avatara* functions as a critical aid in the path to salvation. It is because of his or her nature as one with the transcendental *Brahman*, that the *avatara* is able to reveal the Absolute Divine to devotees, and ultimately lead them to oneness with that reality. The key to this process is that the *avatara* appears in the concrete form of a human being, thus providing a focal point for the devotional and ultimately transcendent relationship. It is understood that human eyes cannot take in the sight of the boundless divine, and thus a human form is required.

In the climactic scene of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna grants Arjuna the divine vision of his multi-armed cosmic form, a sight reminiscent of the Purusha, or cosmic being of the *Rig Veda*:

Having thus spoken, O King, Hari, the great lord of yoga, then revealed to Pārtha (Arjuna), His Supreme and Divine Form.

72 Swami Venkatesananda, *The Concise Yoga Vasistha* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1985). xiv.

73 R. K. Pandey, *The Concept of Avatars* (B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1979). 82.

74 Ibid. 48.

Of many mouths and eyes, of many visions of marvel, of many divine ornaments, of many divine uplifted weapons.

Wearing divine garlands and raiments, with divine perfumes and ointments, made up of all wonders, resplendent, boundless, with face turned everywhere.

If the light of a thousand suns were to blaze forth all at once in the sky, that might resemble the splendor of that exalted Being.⁷⁵

Shaking with fear, Arjuna begs Krishna to once more resume his familiar form: “I have seen what was never seen before and I rejoice but my heart is shaken with fear. Show me that other (previous) form of Thine, O God and be gracious, O Lord of the gods and Refuge of the Universe!”⁷⁶

The necessity for the embodied form of God is reiterated in the *Avadhuta Gita*, a 9th to 10th century CE text associated with the less well-known *avatara*, Dattatreya. In the *Avadhuta Gita*, Dattatreya asks “How can I bow to Him who is formless, undifferentiated, blissful and indestructible, who has through Himself and by Himself and in Himself filled up everything?” He is told that the path is more arduous, and that in fact the same goal can be more easily reached through the path of devotion to the personal God. He replies, “As for myself, my only yearning is that there may appear before my gladdened eyes that bluish someone who keeps romping on the shores of the Yamunā [Krishna].”⁷⁷

As Adi Da Samraj stated:

[S]omething in the Super-Physics of the universe makes it possible for the Divine Conscious Light to Avatarically Incarnate as an apparent human individual, for the Purpose of Bringing others into the Sphere of Divinely Enlightened Existence...

No abstract Divine Principle can serve you in that manner—because the physics of this Process must be directly Present, and the bodily (human) Demonstration of the Process must be Present in a Form that can Do Its Work in your case.⁷⁸

Thus, while the *avatara* can first be understood in relationship to the crucial balance and welfare of the cosmic universe, this final understanding points to the pivotal role of the *avatara* in liberating human beings from bondage to that very conditional world. Rather than seeing this disparity as a contradiction, such multiple dimensions can be viewed as a simultaneous and deepening understanding. The *avatara* appears to restore righteousness in successive ages, to balance the forces of cosmic order, and to take on human form in order to demonstrate the equilibrium that comes from following the laws of *dharma*. The human form of the *avatara* also provides a unique opportunity for human beings to enter into a deeply felt, transformative relationship with God through the many forms of devotional love, or *bhakti*. Finally, the ultimate soteriological function of the *avatara* is revealed as the means by which human beings can themselves realize oneness with the divine—following the lead of the *avatara* to *moksha*, or liberation from both birth and death.

75 Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*. 272-3.

76 Ibid. 286.

77 Ibid. 293.

78 Adi Da Samraj, *The Aletheon*, First edition (Middletown, Calif: The Dawn Horse Press, 2009). 175, 8.

IV. Chapter Three: The Avatar in the Postmodern World

As noted in the first chapter, Swami Vivekananda was instrumental in introducing the *avatara* to the Western world, and in his wake, that sacred tradition has continued both inside and outside Hinduism. However, the journey the *avatara* has made is not only that of an Eastern idea migrating into Western culture, but also that of a sacred doctrine making its way through an increasingly secularized world. While the *avatara* in Hinduism builds on the Sanskrit roots for “descent” to indicate the incarnation of the divine on earth, the popularization of the term into English usage as “avatar” has now reduced its meaning to the most basic sense of ontological demotion. Along with its widespread use in the world of digital gaming and online forums, the avatar is now used to indicate the embodiment of a particularly strong example of an idea or a trait, or no more than any solid representation of a concept. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “avatar” now has a range of meanings in the English language, from “incarnation,” to “manifestation or presentation to the world,” to simply “manifestation, display, or phase.”⁷⁹

This appropriation of the avatar in the postmodern world demonstrates how new forms of secular mythology emerge—not through a disappearance of religion, but through its recoding in nonreligious idioms. This recoding of the avatar has occurred progressively over the last two hundred years through representations in literature, in virtual gaming worlds, and finally in blockbuster films. Through these appearances, the avatar reflects the great shifts of focus in Western culture, both from the dogmas of religious theology to the natural laws of science, and from a God-centered culture to one that is centered on the human individual. The avatar has been progressively stripped of its meaning in theological constructs, and has been reassigned to secular roles in science fiction, including fictitious online worlds. Finally, it has been reduced to the most basic notion of ontological demotion, embodying a kind of simulacrum of selfhood in which human beings have replaced the higher gods, incarnating into virtual worlds of their own creation.

While it cannot be denied that such secular transformation represents a cultural appropriation in the grossest terms, the persistence of the avatar proves its importance in our collective imagination, while also providing new possibilities for authenticity. In 1940, William Slater Brown commented on Superman, stating that “besides affording entertainment to the romantic young, [he] seems also to fill some symptomatic desire for a primitive religion.”⁸⁰ When popular and scholarly discourse acknowledges the influence of religious mythology in secular culture, it opens the door for a more authentic exploration of religious idioms, as well as a conscious acceptance of sacred mythemes in popular media.

A century before Swami Vivekananda arrived in America, the concept of the avatar was reaching the West through a movement that Raymond Schwab calls the second “Oriental Renaissance.”⁸¹ The European Renaissance of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries had seen the spirit of Western secularism flourish, with the rise of reason over faith and scientific over religious reality.⁸² The eighteenth century saw the systematic work of Orientalist scholars in Great Britain, Germany, and the United States, in which Eastern ideas were brought into that

79 “Avatar, N.”

80 Layne Little, “A Genealogy of the Mystic Superhero: American Pop-Cultural Encounters with Yogis, Lamas & Secret Masters in the High Himalayas” (Unpublished, 2015). 22.

81 Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Discovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, First edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

82 Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*, Reprint edition (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993). 302.

continuing Western tradition. Indologists such as Sir William Jones, Friedrich Schlegel, and Friedrich Max Müller pioneered the study of Sanskrit language, as well as the comparative study of religion itself.⁸³ While such study was the result of colonialism, and involved institutions of cultural hegemony, Schwab saw this as the true beginning of “world history,” with the conscious integration of Eastern doctrine and Western scholarship.⁸⁴

In 1784, Sir William Jones’ reference to the avatar as “descents of the deity as preserver” was the first use of the term in the English language, and the word subsequently appeared in the works of Lord Byron, Browning, and Balzac.⁸⁵ By the late nineteenth century, New England transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman all possessed copies of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Whitman incorporated the avatar in his *Leaves of Grass*, and Thoreau stated that next to the *Gita*, “even our Shakespeare seems sometimes youthfully green and practical merely.”⁸⁶

Despite these initial attitudes of respect, in *Mutants and Mystics*, religious scholar Jeffrey Kripal describes a desecralizing process through which sacred ideas enter the popular Western imagination. He suggests that the divine is oriented to the idea of “Somewhere Else,” and that there have been innumerable Somewhere Elses in the popular imagination, moving progressively from “worlds above” to “geographically distant civilizations,” to “outer space,” and finally to “future worlds, or parallel dimensions or universes.”⁸⁷ Along the way, the divine as “other” undergoes an “Alienation,” in which it is ultimately aligned with themes of modern science fiction and futuristic fantasy literature.

In the century following the Oriental Renaissance, the first glimpses of this alienation of the avatar can be found in French literary works. According to Daniel Bassuk, a number of French works experimented with the avatar theme, beginning with an 1856 story titled “Avatar,” in which Théophile Gautier listed all ten of the *dashavatara* of Vishnu. By 1906, *Les Avataries* (“the Avatarized Ones”), by Charles Marion, provided a comedy of errors involving the transference of souls, in which people get “avatarized” into the wrong bodies. The novel *L’Avatar d’Yvan Orel*, written by Omar Chevalier in 1919, saw the avatar as transcending time and space, and thus inhabiting superterrestrial planets.⁸⁸ By these transforming notions of time and space, the framework of the avatar began to shift from heavenly worlds above to paranormal possessions—divine descent to extraterrestrial visitation.

Further developments of the avatar in twentieth-century literature have extended the fantastical worlds of science fiction, with tropes of descent and ascent, mythical supergods, and visions of apocalypse. William Butler Yeats’ famous poem *The Second Coming*, composed in 1921, described the reincarnation of a messiah, using allegorical imagery that has been compared to the Hindu avatar Narasimha.⁸⁹ *The Avatar*, a 1978 novel by science fiction writer Poul Anderson presents avatars as existing on the planet of “the Others”—a highly evolved civilization whose inhabitants, superior to humans, are able to consciously summon such God-like avatars at will.

83 Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*. 268.

84 Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*. 17.

85 Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: The Anglo-Indian Dictionary*, New edition (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1999).

86 Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*. 107.

87 Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, First edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Location 731.

88 Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*. 107.

89 Shweta Saxena, “A Mythical Interpretation of Yeats’ The Second Coming,” *International Journal of English and Literature* 4, no. 1 (January 2013): 17–18, doi:10. 5897/IJEL12.171.

Lord of Light, a 1967 science fiction novel by Roger Zelazny, is set on a distant planet, and depicts Mahasamatman as a combination of the avatar Kalki and the Buddha—an apocalyptic figure who calls himself Sam and fights the forces of evil.⁹⁰

This popularization of the avatar re-emerged in the late twentieth to early twenty-first century, in conjunction with the explosion of digital technology and newly emerging possibilities for virtual embodiment and identity. A decisive change in perspective occurred, one in which we recognize the ongoing effects of the secularizing shift established in the European Renaissance—from a God-centric to a human-centric society. Rather than representing the incarnation of gods or aliens into our world, the avatar now became associated with our own incarnation from the human world downward into virtually created worlds.

In 1985, computer game designer Richard Garriott reframed the term avatar, using it to mean the on-screen representation of the user in the game *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*. In 1992, Neal Stephenson used the word avatar in his cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* to mean the virtual simulation of a human form in a virtual-reality world. He writes, “He is not seeing real people, of course. This is all a part of the moving illustration drawn by his computer according to specifications coming down the fiber-optic cable. The people are pieces of software called avatars. They are the audiovisual bodies that people use to communicate with each other in the Metaverse.”⁹¹

Digital gameplay has provided a new framework for intensely embodied experience, which scholars suggest has the capacity both to invoke traditional performance genres and to create entirely new traditions.⁹² The idea of incarnation with purpose and the ability to step into the body of a hero and control their actions go back to the question of why the avatar incarnates to begin with. Newly created issues of identity and interaction reframe primal questions of ontology, as well as the ethics of interaction. The most sophisticated avatars run the gamut from the stereotyped young African-American men of *Grand Theft Auto*, to the detailed creation of identity in games such as *EVE Online* and *City of Heroes*.⁹³

At the same time, on the other side of the virtual spectrum, anyone who logs into their computer with a user name and a personal icon of a flower is now using an avatar. America Online introduced instant messaging in 1996, translating the avatar concept from gaming into the idea of “buddy icons,” or small customizable representations used for chatting.⁹⁴ GIF’s, AIM icons, and Emojis are used pervasively by the billions of current Internet users, to personalize their online presence, or simply to represent parts of their identity in forums and texts.

There is no doubt that such interpretations diminish the sacred communication of the traditional Hindu *avatara*, thus co-opting a concept central to Hindu culture. A similar Western appropriation of sacred Sanskrit terms has occurred through the popularization of words such as “guru,” “mantra,” “yoga,” and “nirvana,” and their incorporation into everyday English usage. Through such popularization, Westernized secular culture strips layers of Eastern cultural understanding from such words, replacing them with a new mindset of highly reduced, even profane, meaning. As Edward Said described in his thought-provoking book *Orientalism*, “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the

90 Roger Zelazny, *Lord of Light*, Reprint edition (New York: Harper Voyager, 2010).

91 Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (New York: Spectra, 2000). Ch 4.

92 Kiri Miller, “Grove Street Grimm: ‘Grand Theft Auto’ and Digital Folklore,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 121, no. 481 (July 1, 2008): 255–85, doi:10.2307/20487609. 255.

93 “Avatar (computing),” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, December 4, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Avatar_\(computing\)&oldid=636675142](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Avatar_(computing)&oldid=636675142).

94 Ibid.

Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it; by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”⁹⁵

However, as Michael Richardson further commented in “Enough Said,” to paint a solely negative picture of cultural appropriation is to ignore the dynamics of reciprocity that are possible in such a relationship. He writes, “The problem that arises here is that if such representations are false then there has at least to be the possibility of a representation that is ‘true.’”⁹⁶ Creators of popular media, such as Richard Garriott and James Cameron, have in fact been knowledgeable about the Hindu tradition upon which they have drawn, and have sought to restore elements of authenticity. Along those lines, Garriott used the term avatar because he sought to put something of the original Hindu ethos back in to *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*, instilling a greater sense of moral and salvific responsibility to the player’s actions in the virtual-game world.⁹⁷

James Cameron’s blockbuster film, *Avatar*, was perhaps the fullest articulation to date of the idea of virtual embodiment, as well as one of the top box office movies of all time.⁹⁸ In Cameron’s *Avatar*, the avatar refers to a genetically engineered process in which humans are melded into the 10-foot tall, blue bodies of the indigenous Na’vi tribe. Cameron further embedded the avatar within popular tropes of science and science fiction, imperialism, and the white man’s burden. At the same time, he also pointed us to deeper questions of identity and human nature, along with a nod to the blue-skinned gods of India. In a curious reversal, the body of the other now looks like the traditional blue-skinned Hindu deity, only inhabited by a paraplegic American Marine.

In an interview with *Time* magazine, Cameron openly confessed to basing his movie on the Hindu doctrine, as well as bringing to life the idea of an avatar in a virtual world. He described,

*[An avatar] is an incarnation of one of the Hindu gods taking a flesh form. In this film what that means is that the human technology in the future is capable of injecting a human’s intelligence into a remotely located body, a biological body. It’s not an avatar in the sense of just existing as ones and zeroes in cyberspace. It’s actually a physical body. The lead character...has his human existence and his avatar existence.*⁹⁹

Through Cameron’s *Avatar*, along with millions of online forums and digital game platforms, the contemporary world now has access to the term avatar as a secular myth of plastic identity and embodiment. The idea that an identity can be assumed with conscious intent, continuity of awareness, and a specific purpose owes its mythology to the ancient religious doctrines of Hinduism. However, along the way the context has shifted from God-human, to alien-human, and to human-alien/virtual world. As postmodern human beings, we have become masters of our own identity, but we have lost the multilayered understandings and possibilities for salvation that reside within the original concept of the *avatara*.

When Aldous Huxley argued for the perennial doctrine of divine incarnation in religions around the world, he also added that “every human being can thus become an Avatar by adoption” — an idea alluded to in the fact that virtually every character in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*

95 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage, 1979). 3.

96 Alexander Lyon Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2001). 210.

97 “Avatar (computing).”

98 “Avatar (2009) - IMDb,” accessed April 17, 2015, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/?ref_=nv_sr_1.

99 Rebecca Winters Keegan, “Q&A with James Cameron,” *Time*, January 11, 2007, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1576622,00.html>.

is a manifestation of one or another deity.¹⁰⁰ Hindu religion, in fact, delineates between special and general incarnation. The *avatara* is a special example of divine manifestations—fulfilling cosmic order, and offering the possibility for salvation. At the same time, every human being is also the embodiment of the divine, an *atman* (personal soul), which is in fact identical with *Brahman* (absolute reality).¹⁰¹ In other words, as described by philosopher Eliot Deutsch, there are really two paradoxical modes of consciousness—the “bound” or personal consciousness, and the “boundless” or universal consciousness.¹⁰²

In this sense, the most generalized statement that can be made about the avatar is that every being is an incarnation of the divine, understood as absolute reality or the universal consciousness in which we all inhere. Just as previously religious terms like “messiah,” “martyr,” and “angel” have become popular in everyday usage, we cannot help but grasp for words that embody the margins of what it is to be human, and attempt to answer some of our eternal questions about life and death. When we use the word “avatar,” we are questioning the mystery of identity itself: where any of us come from to begin with, where we go at death, and how we continue to be at all. It is perhaps in this final understanding that the avatar, as a secular construct of identity, remains the most authentic and widely accessible in the postmodern world.

V. Conclusion

I now return to my seat, watching James Cameron’s *Avatar*¹⁰³ in vibrant 3D and reflecting on this symbol of incarnation that has persisted throughout three thousand years of human history. The *avatara* can be traced through ancient stories in the oldest extant texts of Indo-European culture, and can be seen to develop through the complex history of Hindu myth, literature, and hagiography. As a religious myth, it contains the highest teachings of Hinduism—rules for how to live our lives, principles of the natural order of existence, and the means for a personal relationship to God along with the possibility of salvation in ultimate terms. In postmodern culture, the avatar reflects a new secular mythology, in which science rather than theology is the ruling viewpoint of life. Casting aside the constructs of religion, in this new interpretation, we are compelled to make ourselves the center of the universe, claim the place of the gods, and control our own identity and incarnation.

At the end of this long history—spanning East and West, historical and contemporary societies, sacred and secular cultures—what are we left with? The ancient *avatara* is a mythic symbol, a hierophany, a revelation, a theological construct, a theory of evolution, and an archetype of divine descent. Today’s avatar is a virtual game figure, an archetype of ontological demotion, and an expression of human identity extending itself into fictional worlds. Whether coded in the religious language of Hindu thought, or the alien worlds of science fiction and Internet gaming, the concept of the avatar communicates the special role of incarnation in the world, along with questions of our own identity. It points to ideas of descent and ascent, incarnation and transcendence, expanding the possibilities of what we can experience and realize as human beings.

Religion contains many such myths, profound symbols of consciousness, and the human

100 Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*. 13.

101 Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*. 7.

102 Eliot Deutsch, *Personhood, Creativity, and Freedom* (Honolulu: Univ of Hawaii Pr, 1982). 35-6.

103 Cameron, *Avatar*.

psyche. However, according to the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, the symbols that we have historically used to convey our understanding of god and truth now need to be re-interpreted, and freed from the illusions of dogmatic faith and theology.¹⁰⁴ In the words of my father, Adi Da Samraj,

This “One” (God, or Truth) cannot be “proven” to exist, since This “One” merely Is, prior to conditional knowledge.

This “One” cannot be Ulitimately approached or Realized via “religious” myths, since This “One” merely Is, prior to belief...

*Therefore, when “religious” myths fail, the Way is not to try to “prove” What cannot be believed. Rather, the way is to ask the right questions.*¹⁰⁵

Only by inspecting the mythologies of both religion and science, by opening our minds and hearts to ask the real questions that lead us beyond the limitations of our inherited belief structures, can the ancient symbols be reintegrated into a meaningful, and truly postmodern, understanding. As the epilogue to Richard Tarnas’ influential book, *Passion of the Western Mind*, states:

*We may be seeing the beginnings of the reintegration of our culture, a new possibility of the unity of consciousness. If so, it will not be on the basis of any new orthodoxy, either religious or scientific. Such a new integration will be based on the rejection of all univocal understandings of reality, of all identifications of one conception of reality with reality itself...It will recognize that in both scientific and religious culture all we have finally are symbols [.]*¹⁰⁶

In the end, how we understand and integrate the symbol of the avatar in our lives now is up to every one of us. It would be valuable, however, for more people to be aware of the concept’s rich history—to appreciate what has come before, so that this depth can inform how we live now. For some, the avatar is likely to persist simply as a symbol of selfhood, an embodied gaming experience, and perhaps a catalyst for questions about ontology and identity. For others, the world of popular imagination may also open the door to an exploration of the profound religious idea of the *avatara*, and a reintegration of the possibility of divine manifestation that it represents. Regardless, as the idea continues to persist and adapt through human culture, it is likely that the avatar will be a part of our future in new and unknowable ways.

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105 Ruchira Avatar Adi Da Samraj, *Real God Is The Indivisible Oneness Of Unbroken Light*, 2nd edition (Middletown, Calif: Dawn Horse Press, 2001). 97.

106 Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*.

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