The Holistic Effects of Mystical Union with Christ in the Soteriology of Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai

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Abstract

This article addresses the relationship between eschatological and present issues in Christian soteriological debates of the mid-twentieth century, particularly in post-colonial India. It focuses on the writings of Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai. As mystical views of Christian salvation can be criticized for their irrelevancy to secular society, Dhanjibhai presents a contrast to this in a type of mystical soteriology that breaks such critiques and complicates the usual categories of South Asian understandings. According to Dhanjibhai, “salvation” means to be in union with Jesus Christ, a spiritual faith-based relationship that extends into eternity but is also practically experienced in the world today. This article proceeds according to four key features of Dhanjibhai’s writings that demonstrate the holistic effects of union with Christ in his soteriology. I argue that Dhanjibhai alleviates the perceived problems of mystical approaches by presenting a soteriology that envelopes personal, social, and even ecological ramifications of salvation within a contextual evangelical framework.

Keywords

salvation – union with Christ – India – mystical – Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai – cosmic Christ – Bhakti
1 Introduction

The middle of the twentieth century was a time of significant societal change in many parts of the Global South as colonial rule was ending and indigenous leaders were assuming personal responsibility for addressing the needs of their new nations. Among Christians in these settings, some responded in polarizing ways and reflected divisions similar to those of the North American Fundamentalist-Modernist debate. Fundamentalists emphasized the need for spiritual conversion and a heavenly mindset while modernists pursued social progress and communal reconciliation. One group was preoccupied with eternal matters and the other with present matters. However, by the middle of the twentieth century, many Christians were seeking to transcend this dichotomy and maintain the significance of individual salvation from sin and death while also extending Christian redemption to encompass the social aspects of life in the present.

This raises an important question: how can an eschatological understanding of Christian salvation relate to the immediate needs of people in the present? Such a question came to a head in the 1960s and 1970s at a number of landmark Christian assemblies. At Vatican II (1962–1965), presentations by figures such as Karl Rahner evidenced a particular concern for connecting the sacred spirituality of the Catholic Church with the common, earthly situations of humans (Gugelot 2019:1042–1043). The developments at Vatican II were influential in the controversial growth of theologies of liberation among Latin American bishops (Stanley 2018:219–220). The assemblies of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1962 and Uppsala in 1967 demonstrate mainline Protestantism’s growing emphasis on the socio-political and ecological realms in discussions on salvation and Christian mission. Evangelicals later responded to these trends in 1974 at Lausanne, where Latin American presenters such as René Padilla challenged the evangelical tendency to present an “other-worldly” salvation, which fails to communicate “the Christian’s commitment to his neighbor” (Padilla 1975:116–133; Stanley 2013).

In India, this soteriological discourse was most famously addressed by theologian M. M. Thomas (1916–1996), who argued that the vertical dimension of salvation in Christ must be actualized horizontally through “humanisation,” or a moral transformation in secular society in light of the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ. Raised in an evangelical wing of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, Thomas became disillusioned with what he perceived as the Indian church’s isolationist attitude that avoided engaging in the nation-building efforts of their non-Christian society. The culmination of Thomas’s theology of humanisation is found in his book *Salvation and Humanisation*, which was part of the Indian
Christian Thought Series published by the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society. According to Thomas, salvation certainly involves cosmic redemption and an eschatological eternal life, but inherent in this gospel of salvation is “the promise of humanisation” in which the great eschatological hope of humanity is to receive a “full humanity” by being incorporated into the perfect humanity of Christ (Thomas 1971:14–19). This eschatological hope can be partially realized in the present through ethical engagement in society. Thus, faith in Jesus Christ brings reconciliation with God and a right orientation to what it means to be a true human in the world. Thomas is critical of certain approaches to soteriology made famous by previous generations of Indian theologians and which conceive of salvation as mystical union with God. For example, Thomas was critical of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861–1907) not only for his supposed dependence on Thomism but also because of his emphasis on the beatific vision. Thomas comments, “Indeed the emphasis on the vision of God as the end of man weakens the emphasis on the will of God and ethics” (Thomas 1969:109). According to Thomas, a soteriology of union with God suffers from an overly individualistic and “other-worldly” view of salvation and is insufficient to address the immediate concerns of human society. Recent studies have argued that Thomas’s theology paved the way for the emergence of Dalit theology in the 1980s–90s with its soteriological emphasis on Dalit liberation (Bird 2008; Pachuau 2019:72–76). Modern Dalit theologians maintain similar criticisms towards mystical emphases in theology (Clarke 1999).

Sebastian Kim provides a lucid summary of theological approaches to Christian conversion in South Asian contexts, organizing them into three groups: (1) secular approaches that seek communal cooperation for the betterment of society, with Thomas’s approach being the chief example; (2) inculturation approaches that seek to combine elements of Hindu and Christian spirituality; (3) liberation approaches that seek to uplift the marginalized (Kim 2003:190–197). Applied more broadly to soteriological claims, one can see in Kim’s model how Thomas distinguished his ethically-inclined views from other contemporary theologians. Thomas’s main dialogue partner among evangelicals was Lesslie Newbigin (Kim 2003:98–102). However, preceding Thomas’s Salvation and Humanisation is the third book in the Indian Christian Thought Series, entitled Khristopanishad, written by a theologian who presents a type of mystical soteriology that breaks Thomas’s critique and complicates Kim’s categories (Fakirbhai 1965). Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai (1895–1967) was a Gujarati lay theologian and professor of physics at Gujarat College, Ahmedabad. Raised in a devout Hindu home and later associating with evangelical Protestantism, Dhanjibhai’s theology is uniquely situated at the intersection of Hindu devotionalism, evangelical mission, and scientific scholarship. Dhanjibhai was
baptized by Methodist missionaries sometime in the early 1910s and later joined an Anglican church in Ahmedabad. Even as an active church member, Dhanjibhai continued to maintain close ties with Hindus in his community through personal relationships at Gujarat College and organizing inter-faith gatherings. He completed a Bachelor of Divinity at Serampore College while continuing to teach and write as an academic physicist. Robin Boyd states that two of Dhanjibhai’s chief concerns were “intimate and constant personal communion with God joining with effective witness and service in the world of men” (Boyd 1974:184–185). According to Dhanjibhai, “salvation” means to be in union with Jesus Christ, a spiritual faith-based relationship that extends into eternity but is also practically experienced in the world today.

Dhanjibhai’s theology provides significant insights for the field of mission studies as well as intercultural theology. Writing in both Gujarati and English for a predominantly Hindu audience, Dhanjibhai utilizes Hindu terms and concepts to present Christ as the central figure from which personal, social, and cosmic salvation proceeds. His theology of salvation conveys a biblical and evangelistic appeal using concepts that are not only contextual for his primary audience but seemingly natural, given the author’s own religious background and vocational training. Furthermore, his writings, which have hitherto been significantly understudied, make a unique contribution to the study of twentieth-century debates on the church’s witness amidst such issues as post-colonial public life, ecological concerns, and conversion.

This article will proceed according to four key features of Dhanjibhai’s writing that demonstrate the holistic effects of union with Christ in his soteriology: his definition of the union as a communion of love, his pneumatological distinction, his appropriation of the cosmic Christ, and his focus on the person of Christ as salvation’s telos. Based on these four features, I will argue that Dhanjibhai alleviates the problems Thomas perceives in mystical approaches by presenting a soteriology that envelopes personal, social, and even ecological ramifications of salvation within a contextual, evangelical framework that centers on a mystical theme – union with Christ.

1 Out of nearly two dozen titles, Dhanjibhai writes most directly on soteriological themes in four of his writings: his only originally English publication, Khristopanishad; two early Gujarati publications, Prem Tattva Darṣana (“The Philosophy of Love”) and Shri Hriday Gita (“Song of the Heart”); and an unpublished manuscript written shortly before his death, Ādhyātma Darśana (“A View of Spirituality”). In addition to Khristopanishad, this essay utilizes the English translation of Prem Tattva Darshana which was published during Dhanjibhai’s lifetime, and a translation of Ādhyātma Darśana, both of which are reprinted in Boyd 1974. The recent English translation, The Song of the Heart, is also referenced.
Eternal and Present Union in a Communion of Love

Union with Christ connects the eternal and the present in Dhanjibhai’s soteriology, first of all, because of the way he defines the nature of the union itself. There are two key terms in his definition: communion and love. Dhanjibhai defines the nature of the union itself as a communion of love encompassing both an eternal nearness to God and a dynamic transformation of one’s way of life. Doctrinal formulations of union with Christ are most often based on the Johannine theme of reciprocal “abiding” and the frequent occurrences of “in Christ” in Pauline literature, and defining the nature of the union has become a prominent subject of study across the Christian spectrum. Constantine Campbell’s recent study surveys the biblical evidence and reception history of union with Christ and concludes with a definition using four key terms: union, participation, identification, incorporation. Campbell argues that the static terms of union and identification maintain the eternal, positional nature of salvation in Christ and the present, existential aspects of the union are maintained by the more dynamic terms of participation and incorporation (Campbell 2012:413). Furthermore, a number of contemporary scholars argue that union with Christ is best understood as a dynamic communion, a *koinonia* between Christ and believers, which secures eternal salvation and also enlivens moral transformation (Vanhoozer 2018:3–33). Dhanjibhai makes similar conclusions by defining union with Christ as the essential core of salvation in which the love of God is applied to human persons in uniting them to Christ, producing a new identity and a new way of life.

The soteriological themes of communion and love are noticeable in Dhanjibhai’s religious background as a Hindu and in his transition to evangelicalism. From a young age, Dhanjibhai’s mother and grandmother immersed him in their family’s Hindu bhakti tradition (Boyd 1974:181). Bhakti, a term derived from a Sanskrit word meaning “to participate” or “to attach,” refers to a composite devotional tradition in South Asia that values affective desire for the divine, commonly expressed through poetry and song (Lipner 2010:346). Dhanjibhai was raised in a Vaishnavite form of bhakti, which focused on the worship of a personal God “with qualities” (*saguṇa*). However, there are also other forms of bhakti which worship a deity “without qualities” (*nirguṇa*) and even “non-dualist” forms related to the Advaita Vedanta tradition, which view devotion primarily as the pursuit of knowledge (*jñāna*) which brings liberation (Sharma 2002). Beyond being merely about private piety, bhakti spirituality also has a history of manifesting itself publicly through performances of worship and storytelling (Novetzke 2007:255). Evangelicalism’s affective emphasis on an intimate relationship with a personal God provided a fitting
ground for Dhanjibhai to retain and adapt bhakti themes in his theology. Two significant evangelicals that influenced Dhanjibhai were Sadhu Sundar Singh and E. Stanley Jones (Boyd 1974:182). Arun Jones observes similar connections between bhakti and evangelicalism in nineteenth-century North India (Jones 2017:63–88). Dhanjibhai reflects his bhakti background by arguing that salvation is ultimately about participation in Christ in a manner that manifests itself in tangible, public ways.

Dhanjibhai’s theology of sin clarifies the relational focus of his soteriology. The primary concern in salvation is not simply forgiveness of sin nor alleviation from some present suffering. Instead, Dhanjibhai argues that salvation is primarily about being “united once again with God in the bonds of Love” (Fakirbhai 1974b:228). Salvation is necessary because the bond of love between God and humanity has been broken by human sin, which is formally a “state devoid of God-life” (Fakirbhai 1965:3) manifested by “the perversion of man’s will through his evil habits and sinful actions” (Fakirbhai 1974b:228). Dhanjibhai explains that sin alienates one from God because sin is essentially “Egoism,” a turning unto oneself and turning away from God. He writes, “God is the only I AM, and Egoism is its negation. Egoism is Godless void” (Fakirbhai 1965:38).

The idea of individual autonomy is the root of humanity’s problem because it negates their innate dependence on God and the communion of love that God intended to share with humanity. Thus, the centrality of communion with Christ in Dhanjibhai’s soteriology produces an aversion towards preoccupation with the individual self and instead emphasizes dependence and relationship.

Furthermore, Dhanjibhai elaborates on how a communion of love with God can have relevance for the immediate problems of life. He acknowledges that notions of “love” are abstract and often used ambiguously in religious discourses. Thus, he writes as follows:

To say that ‘God is Love’ simply equates two abstractions; but when God so loves that He gives Himself to us as a Presence who comes and dwells with us, lives with us, and loves us, we realise that God is love. ‘It is by this that we know what love is: that Christ laid down His life for us’ (Jn 14:9; 1Jn 4:12; Jn 1:2; 1Jn 5:20). He identifies Himself with men, with the poorest and most needy. Then love is no longer an abstraction or mere quality but God is love in action towards the world and towards men.

Fakirbhai 1965:5–6

The communion of love that Christians enter into in salvation is a dynamic communion patterned after the active love of God in Christ. Frequently Dhanjibhai emphasizes that love is not simply a disposition but an action as
well. God’s self-identification as love is shown to be true through Christ’s atoning work and through his work of uniting believers to himself. Therefore, when Christians enter into a communion of love with Christ, this communion is a dynamic participation in the love of God, which manifests itself in good deeds towards the world. In Christ, humanity can know what love is.

However, Dhanjibhai does not see the revelation of God’s love as limited to the Passion event alone. Instead, God’s initiating love toward humanity is a theme that runs throughout the biblical narrative and is personally and existentially realized in union with Christ. First, love is the reason behind God’s act of creating (Fakirbhai 1974b:227). God did not create the world out of necessity but out of love; not for his own benefit but for that of creation. Dhanjibhai emphasizes to his readers that creation is real, not an illusion or maya as traditional advaita posits (Fakirbhai 1974b:227). Creation is the display of God’s initiating, self-giving love. Second, love is the reason for the Incarnation. Dhanjibhai describes the Incarnation as “the very embodiment of Love in the world of man” (Fakirbhai 1974b:231). Third, the love of God is revealed in the atoning work of Christ, which achieves salvation for humanity through the selfless, sacrificial, and substitutionary life of Jesus Christ. Without mentioning penal notions, Dhanjibhai appears to affirm some element of substitution in the Atonement: “He took their sins (papa) upon Himself and He made atonement (prayashcitta) for their sins as if they were his own sins.” Jesus made himself “fully one with us” (Fakirbhai 1974a:280). Finally, the love of God is revealed in the Indweller, the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within a person, that person then joins in God’s ever expanding “realm of love” (Fakirbhai 1974b:234). Thus, believers participate in God’s “cycle of love” which is the “mutual give-and-take of Love” between “God, myself and my neighbour” (Fakirbhai 1974b:229). Upon entering into union with Christ by the Holy Spirit, Christians are not only sealed for eternity, but they are also invited into God’s work of love in the world.

Dhanjibhai sums up the significance of love for union with Christ by relating it to a paradigm that is familiar to his Hindu audience. One traditional categorization of Hindu approaches to spirituality follows a three-fold paradigm: the way of knowledge (jñāna), the way of devotion (bhakti), the way of action (karma). Julius Lipner describes these as three common disciplines that Hindus follow for spiritual fulfillment, each with its own emphasis such as scripture, tradition, or experience (Lipner 2010:340). Dhanjibhai utilizes this common paradigm to show that these three ways converge in “the way of love” (Fakirbhai 1974b:235). The central principle for approaching God is love. Love fulfills knowledge by knowing God as one knows a loved one. Love fulfills devotion when one worships God and is satisfied in God. Love fulfills action
because “love always finds its outlet in true service” (Fakirbhai 1974b:235). He concludes, “To love God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our understanding, with all our powers, with all our soul – with our whole personality – that is the Way of Love. This way of union with God in Love is nothing other than Salvation” (Fakirbhai 1974b:235). The way of love brings together the head, the heart, and the hands through communion with Christ. Dhanjibhai’s soteriology avoids an “other-worldly” critique because salvation is about union with Christ, entering into the way of love that manifests itself vertically and horizontally.

3 Eternal and Present Union in a Pneumatological Realism

Dhanjibhai explains his understanding of union according to a distinctive pneumatological application. If one only studies Dhanjibhai’s soteriology according to his emphasis on love, it would appear to be similar to Thomas’s humanisation, since Thomas agrees that the love of God is essential and that love for one’s neighbor is part of following in the true personhood of Jesus Christ. However, Dhanjibhai’s appropriation of the indwelling Holy Spirit provides an even clearer distinction from Thomas. A central idea to Thomas’s humanisation is the notion that Jesus Christ serves as the Christian’s model of a perfect humanity, and once people are brought into a salvific relationship with Jesus Christ, their actions in the world should reflect the kind of humanity that Jesus modeled (Thomas 1971:4). However, for Dhanjibhai, a model-based formulation of Christian love ultimately keeps Christ outside of the believer in an abstraction. Instead, Dhanjibhai views the Christian life as inseparable from the mystical union with Christ. Dhanjibhai argues that a real bond occurs between believers and the living Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. His theology of union with Christ operates in a form of “pneumatological realism” (Evans 2015:21) that views salvation as occurring when Christ unites himself to the believer through the real indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Two ideas explain the pneumatological realism of Dhanjibhai’s soteriology. First, the Holy Spirit is the personal agent of spiritual and moral regeneration.

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2 Evans uses the title “Pneumatological Reality” for the second model in his list and associates it primarily with the writings of Reformed theologian Richard Gaffin, emeritus professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. The title is an apt description of Dhanjibhai’s position due to the significance that Dhanjibhai gives to the Holy Spirit in salvation and due to the agency that he gives to the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.
In describing the doctrine of regeneration, Dhanjibhai makes a distinction between a human being and a “spiritual being.” Everyone is born as a human being and though a person may be inclined towards spiritual desires and capable of acting morally, they are ultimately without true life – the life that resides in the person of Jesus Christ. A spiritual being is a new creation entirely, produced by the intervening grace of God, which changes a human being into a spiritual being by uniting them to Jesus Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Dhanjibhai agrees with Thomas that true humanity, true life, is found in “the figure of Jesus Himself,” and thus we are transformed in his likeness once we are born again into spiritual beings (Fakirbhai 1965:13). However, Dhanjibhai’s approach is based on a pneumatological realism that emphasizes the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit as the agent who enables ethical living as an overflow of the believer’s union with Christ. The Holy Spirit is the new “constituent” who fashions the person into Christ’s likeness:

Man has a body, mind or intellect, sensations, emotions, and will, also conscience, aesthetic, moral and religious sense. However, when the Divine Spirit takes possession of him, he becomes a spiritual being. Another controlling, transforming and recreative constituent takes hold of that man’s constitution, so that he becomes a new creation, a spirit-born one, a spiritual man. Then begins a transformation of his existing constituents and faculties; his mind changes into a new mind such as is in Jesus, his will coincides with God’s will, and his character is formed as Jesus shapes it through living and working in him; and he becomes a new being, a spiritual being.

Fakirbhai 1965:17

The Holy Spirit is the vital pneuma of the union between Christ and believers who “continuously breathes in and through the individual so that he lives a spiritual life and does spiritual works (Jn 3:8)” (Fakirbhai 1965:12). Here Dhanjibhai closely aligns with John Calvin’s view of unio cum Christo in which the Holy Spirit applies to believers the duplex gratia of justification and sanctification simultaneously, the assurance of eternal salvation, and the ability to live according to God’s will in the present (Calvin 1989:111.1.1). Salvation as union with Christ affects the whole of a person’s life and actions because of the real indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Second, Dhanjibhai’s distinctive pneumatological realism arises in what he terms “the continued Incarnation” (Fakirbhai 1965:31). Rather than being “confined to one body,” Jesus “wanted to multiply Himself” by “entering in many persons” (Fakirbhai 1965:31). Referencing the apostle Paul and the Johannine
Upper Room Discourse, Dhanjibhai claims that those who truly live do so only because it is Christ living in them (Gal. 2:20; John 14:19). Dhanjibhai attempts to avoid the ontological problems of his proposal as well as the risk of diminishing the uniqueness of the Incarnation by giving attention to the Holy Spirit in the believer's union with Christ. He writes, “Only God can condescend to the human level or form of man as Incarnation and having given spiritual life to man can dwell in him as the Indwelling Spirit. Thus, it is possible for God to dwell or live in the spiritual being and for the spiritual being to dwell or live in God” (Fakirbhai 1965:16). According to Dhanjibhai, the Holy Spirit is the continuing presence of Jesus Christ in the world through his followers. However, describing the Spirit's indwelling of believers as the “continued Incarnation” creates problems that Dhanjibhai leaves unresolved. The notion can potentially blur important trinitarian distinctions between the Son and the Spirit, and it presents ontological problems by suggesting multiple occurrences of Christ's Incarnation.

Some of these problems in Dhanjibhai’s pneumatology are resolved when he applies the notion of the “continued Incarnation” to ethics. He stresses how Christ's enduring presence in believers leads to righteous actions that can have a permeating influence on entire societies. According to Boyd, Dhanjibhai is not claiming that individual Christians or the church as a whole are reduplications of the Incarnation of the Son of God, but rather that the living Christ continues to work out his purposes in the world through those united to him (Boyd 1974:218). The intended meaning is not ontological but ethical. The “Indwelling Jesus works out His aim” by multiplying through “Christ-indwelt individuals” who follow Jesus in the acts that he himself inaugurated in his earthly ministry:

One sets out to uplift the fallen and depressed, the despised, the outcaste and the exploited and the suppressed. Another helps the needy and starving. A third sets out to free the slaves, or the enslaved races and nations. Another uplifts the women and gives free play to children. Still another opens the eyes of the blind, physically, intellectually and spiritually. Yet another purges degradation and immorality. Another serves the lepers, the diseased and the dying. One makes real His teaching of no sword, no violence, and no war. Yet another redeems the prisoners and gives them relief. Another opens up the neglected islands, the dark continents and the isolated places of the world.

Fakirbhai 1965:32–33

Such is the kind of service that Jesus began and indeed continues to do through the church, the ever-increasing number of Christ-indwelt persons. Not only does
union with Christ produce Christ-like living, Dhanjibhai shows that it leads to Christ-continued living as the “Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9) works through the church to transform whole societies. The indwelling Spirit of Christ is the agent who unites believers to Christ, producing the assurance of eternal peace with God and the ability to carry out the works of Christ in every arena of life. However, Dhanjibhai maintains that the ascended Christ continues to be active alongside the Holy Spirit. This leads to the third operating feature of Dhanjibhai’s soteriology: his appropriation of the cosmic Christ.

4 Eternal and Present Union in the Cosmic Christ

At the time of Dhanjibhai’s writing, cosmic Christology was gathering interest within his own South Asian context through the work of Paul D. Devanandan (1901–1962). While presenting to the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1962 at New Delhi, Devanandan spoke of the cosmic work of Christ in an address entitled, “Called to Witness.” According to Devanandan, the Christian message of salvation testifies to the eschatological hope that all of life “will be brought eventually under the direct sway of God” (Devanandan 1962:155–156) when he unites all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). This eschatological redemption, while based on the historic work of Christ, is a cosmic activity which is “being carried out – now and everywhere in our world” (Devanandan 1962:156). Devanandan’s main point is that the cosmic Christ is presently at work in the various activities of the world, particularly in the activities of non-Christian religions. While Devanandan emphasizes the cosmic Christ’s renewing activity in Hinduism as an exhortation for Christians to participate in mutually beneficial dialogue, Dhanjibhai appropriates the cosmic Christ using Hindu thought patterns to explain the cosmic scope of what it means to be in union with Christ. Rather than serving as a “call to witness” for Christians in dialogue with Hindus, the cosmic Christ speaks directly to Hindus in Dhanjibhai’s writing as a call to see the significance of Jesus Christ in both spiritual (eternal) and physical (present) matters.

The clearest display of cosmic Christology in Dhanjibhai’s writings appears in one of his final works, A Vision of Spirituality [Ādhyātma Darśana] (1967), where he coins a new term for his doctrine of union with Christ: Khristadvaita. A combination of the Sanskrit terms for “Christ” and “non-dualism,” Dhanjibhai is careful to distance his use of the term advaita from Shankara’s monistic view of metaphysical unity, or divine-human absorption, to refer instead to the life of faith-union with Christ, a “union of love, not absorption” (Boyd 2002:333). Additionally, in contrast to traditional advaita cosmology which considers the material world to be a cosmic illusion (maya), Dhanjibhai insists that the
material world is not only real, but is God’s “ornament,” a product of God’s love (Fakirbhai 1974a:274). The concept of Khristadvaita leans into the thought of the eleventh-century theologian Ramanuja by making a strong connection between union with God and union with God’s purposes in the world. When believers are united to God through Christ, they are God’s “body,” participating in the divine nature and carrying out God’s actions in the world. In Khristadvaita, salvation encompasses more than the individual soul. It ultimately involves a participation in the purposes of the living Christ in the world.

Dhanjibhai broadens the scope of the significance of union with Christ by listing six aspects of Khristadvaita in which Christ stands as a cosmic, unifying figure: (1) the unity between Christ and God the Father; (2) the unity between Christ and his creation; (3) the unity between Christ and believers; (4) the unity between members of Christ’s body, the Church; (5) the unity between the Christian and humanity who bears God’s image; (6) the unity between the Christian and nature (Fakirbhai 1974a:272). Dhanjibhai does not imply an ontological equivalence between these six aspects, as if the unity between Christ and the Father is ontologically equal to that between Christ and believers. Instead, Dhanjibhai intends to show the cosmic and personal significance of Christ as the “living personality and power in history, over history and ahead of history,” (Fakirbhai 1965:10) and the source of a lasting and purposeful life (Boyd 2014:201). He summarizes with a paraphrase of John 5:17, “Jesus said, ‘God continues to work, He has not ceased working. The Father works and so I work’” (Fakirbhai 1965:24). The cosmic Christ in Dhanjibhai’s Khristadvaita brings a cohesion to the eternal and present implications of salvation by engraving believers into the economy of Christ’s cosmic activity, including personal eschatological salvation and earthly Christ-like service. Yet again, however, Dhanjibhai creates potential problems with his choice of terms. He attempts to modify the term advaita to present a contextual theology of union with Christ. However, it is unclear whether Dhanjibhai intends to maintain a type of “qualified non-dualism” similar to Ramanuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita, in which the world, or the church in Khristadvaita, is an extension of God’s being. Although his writing seems to focus, again, on the ethical rather than ontological, the ambiguities in terminology remain unresolved.

The cosmic Christology of Khristadvaita relates union with Christ to two significant issues of earthly life: vocation and ecology. In relation to vocation, Dhanjibhai explains that human work takes on a new significance in Christ. When one is united to Christ, they are invited into God’s own creative work in the world, in part, through their vocation. If it is farming, construction, or art, “it is a part of God’s work of creating” (Fakirbhai 1965:28). If it is raising children, teaching, or developing others, it is part of God’s work of nurturing and growing.
If it is advancing technology, mathematics, or science, “we are co-operating with God and nature for the benefit of mankind” (Fakirbhai 1965:29). When one becomes united to Christ, they are able to align their vocation with God's activities in the world. Similar to Abraham Kuyper's belief in the lordship of Christ over the mundane, Dhanjibhai states that the work of the indwelling Spirit of Christ cannot be relegated to “religious” activities. Instead, the life of faith-union with Christ “consists of the whole of life and of practical living (vyāvhār)” and should not be juxtaposed from so-called “worldly affairs” which would be an act of “sheer hypocrisy” – dismissing the materials of God's creation as a “delusion or an evil” (Fakirbhai 1965:26). To explain salvation as a communion of love with the living Christ does not necessitate an escapist view of earthly life or degrade the worth of human activity. Instead, Dhanjibhai shows that experiencing union with Christ enables people to align their vocation with the purposes of God and participate in the creative and nurturing activity of the cosmic Christ in the world. Salvation as union with Christ leads not only to a life everlasting in Christ but even to a life of participatory vocation “in Christ.”

In relation to ecology, Christ is the cosmic figurehead around whom humanity and the natural world find redemption in the present and in the eschaton: in the present because in union with Christ, Christians come to know their proper relationship with the natural world as one of stewardship; in the eschaton because the Church and the natural world will together find their completed redemption in the eschatological New Creation when the dwelling place of God will be on earth (Rom. 8:18–22; Rev. 21:3). Dhanjibhai considers the natural world to be a “companion and fellow-pilgrim with man on his way to the goal which God wants him to reach” (Fakirbhai 1974a:274). When one finds personal salvation through union with Christ, they are invited into a friendship with Christ's creation. In finding unity with Christ, humans can have “unity” with the natural world as well.

Dhanjibhai's ecological perspective shows similarities to that of Joseph Sittler, another plenary speaker alongside Paul Devanandan at the New Delhi meeting of the WCC. In his address entitled “Called to Unity,” Sittler argues that the current ecological crisis hinders the Church from experiencing God's intended unity – a unity of reconciliation between God, humanity, and the natural world. Sittler concludes from Colossians 1:15–20 that the Church's ecological duty, rather than being a pragmatic issue in a secular scientific sense, is primarily a “Christological obedience” (Sittler 1962:186). Although Sittler is speaking primarily to North American issues such as its development of nuclear weaponry (Pope-Levison and Levison 1992:61), his move from Christology to ecology exhibits parallels with Dhanjibhai by tying together unity with God.
and unity with God’s creation. When the Church cares for the natural world, they give witness to their union with Christ, the cosmic sustainer of the natural world.

Dhanjibhai’s cosmic Christology sits in an interesting place in relation to the arguments of Sittler and Devanandan. In his exposition of the cosmic Christ in *Khristadvaita*, Dhanjibhai, similar to Sittler, connects union with Christ to its implications for creation care, but while doing so he utilizes Hindu patterns of thought and reveals the virtues of his pre-Christian heritage, a methodology that incorporates the dialogical concerns of Devanandan. Furthermore, while Dhanjibhai’s value for the day-to-day activities of human life finds parallels with Devanandan’s view of the cosmic Christ’s universal activity, Dhanjibhai appropriates the cosmic Christ in an evangelistic, faith-contingent way that continually emphasizes the center of salvation – union with Jesus Christ. This leads to the fourth distinctive feature of Dhanjibhai’s holistic soteriology: Christ as salvation’s *telos*.

5 Eternal and Present Union in Salvation’s Telos

A key belief that underlies Dhanjibhai’s theology of union with Christ is the hope of the final communion with Jesus Christ. Dhanjibhai states, “As creation starts with, and is maintained through and in Christ, so its consummation and perfection too will be in Him, who is the beginning, the middle and the final” (Fakirbhai 1965:41). Beyond the many personal gifts that accompany salvation and beyond the benefits that Christ-indwelt persons can bring towards humanity, the end, or *telos*, of salvation is final communion with God in Jesus Christ.

Moreover, not only is the end of salvation about being *with* Christ, it is also about being *conformed to* Christ. Referencing 1 John 3:2 he explains, “If God’s Spirit is present in an individual it can go on to full growth, that means, full development to type. ‘What we shall be has not yet been disclosed ... when it is disclosed we shall be like Him’ (i.e. like Jesus)” (Fakirbhai 1965:41). Conformity to Christ is an eschatological hope that is partially realized in the present through progressive sanctification. Dhanjibhai’s soteriology of union with Christ makes Christ himself the great *telos*, and this eschatological focus affects life in both the present creation and in the New Creation, particularly in his emphasis on conformity to Christ. Dhanjibhai focuses on three practices through which Christians grow in conformity to Christ: surrender, self-denial, and eternal perspective.
First, if communion with God in Christ is the greatest hope of humanity, this requires a person to surrender themselves to God. Dhanjibhai claims that surrender is the first step in conformity to Christ because to believe in human self-sufficiency is an utter contradiction of the fact that creation is fundamentally dependent on the creative and sustaining grace of God. This is similar to Ramanuja’s conception of the relationship between the “accessory” (Śeṣa) and the “principal” (Śeṣi): “Śeṣa is a thing which exists for another, and that for which it exists is the Śeṣi” (Carman 1974:148). The opposite of salvation is to be in a deluded state of “self-consciousness” wherein a person seeks ultimate joy in temporal pleasures (Fakirbhai 1974a:276). For those who have been united to Christ however, their ultimate joy comes from God as they surrender themselves to God’s work of conforming them to Christ. Dhanjibhai emphasizes the existential nature of surrender:

So long as we do not count ourselves and all our possessions as belonging to God we are separated from God and his rule. True knowledge and reunion consist in surrendering ourselves and our personal world to God. We have stolen ourselves and our possessions from God and used them for selfish purposes, contrary to God’s aim and purpose. These we should return to God and should use them, as well as our will, heart, intellect, energy and everything else as a means for God.

Fakirbhai 1974a:276–277

Surrender is not simply a cognitive action or only a one-time event of conversion. It is characteristic of the on-going life of a Christ-follower. Dhanjibhai wants to maintain a theocentric eschatology that keeps God as the goal of the Christian life. The more a Christian withholds from surrendering to God, the less they experience God’s gracious work of conforming them to Christ.

The second way that a person lives in light of salvation’s telos is through self-denial. The content of self-surrender, Dhanjibhai argues, is self-denial. In his most popular book, Song of the Heart, a devotional piece compiling various biblical passages in a contextual format, Dhanjibhai describes self-denial in his chapter on “the yoga of surrender” (samarpaṇyoga). Self-denial involves renouncing the human tendency to love material possessions or relationships more than God. Also, self-denial includes finding contentment in the basic necessities of life and the “stage of life” (āśram) that God has assigned, not merely for one’s own benefit but so that through meekness and humility “the gathering of people of faith” may live as one, meeting each other’s needs and
bearing each other’s burdens (Fakirbhai 2014:110–111). The goal of self-denial is not mere asceticism but love for God. This is a goal that “sets us free from the bondage of the world,” not in an attempt to escape the world but to be able to love the world “for God’s sake” (Fakirbhai 1974a:280). Finally, self-denial involves an embrace of suffering. Being conformed to Christ involves a participation in the sufferings of Christ, such as experiencing persecution, injustice, and pain. Participating in the sufferings of Christ is something to “rejoice” in as “our light and momentary adversity is creating for us an abundant, unique, eternal weight of glory” (Fakirbhai 2014:112–113). Teleological perspectives of self-denial like Dhanjibhai’s have received significant criticism since the end of the twentieth century by feminist scholars who argue that self-denial has been historically instrumentalized to foster patriarchal hegemony (McNay 2000). Although others have defended Christian asceticism through historical examples of female ascetics and even through comparable traditions among Hindus (Bueno-Gómez 2019; Flood 2004:248–252), Dhanjibhai gives little attention to the possible dangers of emphasizing self-denial. For Dhanjibhai, self-denial chiefly consists of renouncing idolatry in the heart, finding contentment in God, and joyfully embracing suffering. Through such a life, Christians can experience in the present that which they are being conformed to in the eschaton – communion with Christ, the telos of salvation.

Lastly, eternal perspective is the third characteristic of a life lived in light of salvation’s telos. More specifically, Dhanjibhai describes a Christocentric perspective in which Christian acts of service are performed through the lens of Christ. Returning to his emphasis on the practical effects of union with Christ, Dhanjibhai writes:

The true unity of men, of races and of mankind is accomplished (only) along the spiritual way (adhyatmika marga). With regard to our dealings with others, it is not enough merely to “do to others what you would like them to do to you” (Matt. 7:12). That might be called “mutual non-difference” or advaita between man and man. But the Lord Jesus does not stop there. What he goes on to say is: “Look upon little children, upon poor disciples and the weak, helpless, diseased, distressed, orphans, starving and naked as Myself. See Me in them, and help them as if they were I, and I were they. Strangers, foreigners, the destitute, those in prison, the poverty-stricken – what you do, or do not do for them, you do – or do not do – for Me.” This is not mere benevolence, humanitarian work or charity. This is a serious responsibility and determines our eternal destiny.

Fakirbhai 1974a:282
In union with Christ, a person’s whole perspective on life and eternity is transformed. The overflow of love for God and the world that resonates from this union, is performed in the world with an eye towards the Christian’s hope. The service that Christians render towards others is done in a “consciousness in which God is all-in-all” because the ultimate hope for humanity is found not in the gifts but in the Giver (Fakirbhai 1974a:281). The end of benevolence is not ultimately about humanity but about Christ. If Thomas’s humanisation seeks a full humanity in light of Christ, Dhanjibhai’s Khristadvaita seeks a fullness of Christ in humanity. Similarly, if humanisation hopes for unity within humanity based on Christ, Khristadvaita hopes for unity with Christ overflowing to humanity.

6 Conclusion

This article began with a survey of significant Christian conferences in the 1960s and 1970s in which prominent theologians discussed the relationship between eternal and present issues in salvation. Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai contributes to this history in ways that can appeal to studies of intercultural theology. As a largely unknown lay theologian, Dhanjibhai answers the central question of this article by pointing to the spiritual union that believers experience with Christ. Union with Christ is the central definition of Dhanjibhai’s soteriology, which brings together eternal and present-day elements of redemption in the form of a “spiritual-participative” soteriology. It is “spiritual” in that it emphasizes pneumatological agency and Christocentric teleology. It is “participative” because the eternal benefits of union with Christ are presently experienced through love for God and the world and through growing in unity with the continued work of Christ in the world. Dhanjibhai demonstrates a strong awareness of his own context by connecting theology with the natural sciences and by incorporating aspects of Hindu thought for both theological accessibility and evangelical proclamation.

Also, Dhanjibhai’s writings make a unique contribution to mission studies, particularly on the church’s witness in Hindu and post-colonial contexts. Dhanjibhai complicates the usual categories of soteriological views in South Asian Christianity. His Khristadvaita mediates between Kim’s categories, especially between “secular” and “inculturation.” Khristadvaita is a clear case of inculturation because of the way Dhanjibhai relates Ramanujan cosmology and bhakti themes of communion and participation to evangelical formulations of the new birth and personal regeneration. This reflects the evangelistic nature of his writings and his intention to present the gospel in a meaningful
However, his holistic perspective of union with Christ's effects on the world through Spirit-filled Christian service in alignment with the activity of the cosmic Christ demonstrates Dhanjibhai's ability to address the concerns of secular society for the betterment of human life today.

Beyond the South Asian context, there are parallels between Dhanjibhai and recent rediscoveries of the importance of mystical union with Christ in both the Lutheran (Braaten and Jenson 1998) and Reformed (Billings 2011; Canlis 2010) traditions. Also, Dhanjibhai's ideas resonate with recent studies that have observed a distinctive mystical element in Protestant thought, particularly on the concepts of communion and love similar to Dhanjibhai's usage (McGinn 2016; Rittgers and Evener 2019). Even beyond Protestantism, McGinn shows how this affective approach to mystical theology is characteristic of traditional Franciscan spirituality in contrast to the intellectual mysticism characteristic of the Thomistic tradition (McGinn 1998:70–112). These historic themes within Protestant and Franciscan thought find intriguing parallels in Dhanjibhai's Khristadvaita. Thus, Dhanjibhai makes a unique contribution to current discussions on the significance of union with Christ, affective mysticism, and the ethical implications of these issues for the church catholic. While many Christians of his day were divided between those championing evangelistic proclamation and those championing social service (Pachuau 2019:92), Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai argued that both can be achieved through understanding salvation and the Christian life as a union of love with the living Christ. The holistic soteriology embedded in Khristadvaita suggests a reconsideration of how mystical views of Christian salvation, even those “inculturation” approaches which use contextual theological concepts, can correspond to the welfare of humanity and the natural world.

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3 Fakirbhai was writing at a time when many Indian and Western theologians were engaging with Vedantic thought in Christian theology and seeking to either reconcile Hindu and Christian beliefs or communicate Christian doctrine using concepts familiar to Hindus. It was only in the 1980s when a significant critique of this approach arose among Dalit theologians who argued that the affinity for Hindu modes of thought among Christian scholars, what became termed “Indian Christian Theology,” is not an appropriate theological method for Dalit Christians because of their historic status as outsiders to philosophical Hinduism (Clarke 1999:1–16).
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**Resumen**

Este artículo examina la relación entre los temas escatológicas y los del presente en los debates cristianos soteriológicos de mediados del siglo XX, en la India poscolonial en particular. Se concentra en los escritos de Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai. Dado que las perspectivas místicas de la salvación cristiana pueden ser criticadas por su irrelevancia para la sociedad secular, Dhanjibhai contrapone un tipo de soteriología mística que rompe con tales críticas y complica las categorías habituales de percepción del sur de Asia. Según Dhanjibhai, la “salvación” significa estar en unión con Jesucristo, una relación espiritual basada en la fe que se prolonga hasta la eternidad pero que también es vivida en el mundo de hoy. Este artículo se desarrolla en torno a cuatro ejes de los escritos de Dhanjibhai que demuestran los efectos holísticos de la unión con Cristo en su soteriología. El autor argumenta que Dhanjibhai alivia los problemas percibidos de los enfoques místicos al presentar una soteriología que abarca aspectos personales, sociales e incluso ecológicos de la salvación dentro de un marco evangélico contextual.
摘要

这篇文章探讨了二十世纪中期，特别是在后殖民印度，基督教救赎论中末世论和当前面对的问题之间的关系。重点关注达吉巴伊·法基尔巴伊的著作。鉴于基督教救赎的神秘观点可能因其与世俗社会的不相关性而受到批评，达吉巴伊提出了与之对比的观点，以打破这种对神秘救赎论的批评和对南亚通常范畴理解的复杂化。根据达吉巴伊的观点，“救赎”意味着与耶稣基督合一，这是一种在今天的世界中实际体验到的并延伸至永恒的属灵信仰关系。本文按照达吉巴伊著作的四个关键特征，展示了与基督合一在他的救赎论中的整体果效。我认为，达吉巴伊通过提出一种将个人、社会甚至生态在背后的救赎论，缓解了神秘方法带来的问题，将其置于处境化福音框架中。