

The Biblical Approach to Other Religions

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INTRODUCTION

It is quite impossible in one brief paper to do justice to this vast subject. Nor is it possible to adequately employ the wealth of relevant recent biblical scholarship. It is necessary therefore to be partial, introductory and to assume much with reference to contemporary New Testament and Old Testament studies. Moreover the assigned topic, *The Biblical Approach to Other Religions*, contradicts the FOIM Conference requirement that it be presented "from an Indian perspective!" The two are not necessarily the same in that an Indian viewpoint may not be that of the Bible at a number of points. Not infrequently the two approaches may represent opposing worldviews, attitudes and assumptions.¹ The method which follows therefore is to seek for the Biblical approach and to find applications in the Indian context.

OLD TESTAMENT

A starting point is the biblical account of creation. Humanity is made in God's image: a starting point for understanding human culture and religion. The early Genesis chapters are universal having in view the entire human race. God's call of Abraham and of Israel introduces a particularity, i.e. through Abraham God forms a people of his own. The call -- and the constitution of Israel -- is universal in scope, embracing the world. All families of earth will be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:3). There is no negative exclusion in God's choice of the one to be his servant people. Exclusiveness is tempered by universality. In the Table of the Nations Israel is seen as one of the nations. As StuhlmueLLer observes, Israel has no special status in origin, birth, or early history (Senior and StuhlmueLLer 1984:11). Abraham was called out of an idolatrous house and family.

Israel's religion developed out of historical experiences. Events otherwise insignificant were remembered and celebrated liturgically. During the patriarchal age elements of Canaanite culture were selectively absorbed, yet specifically religious elements such as Baal-worship were rejected. This selectivity became more evident from the time of Moses. Styles of worship were borrowed and adapted. While driving roots deep in Canaan, Israel at the same time developed a distinct religion linked to the charisma and values of the Mosaic ethos and legislation (Senior and StuhlmueLLer 1984:23).

A characteristic Old Testament outlook toward the religions² developed during the formative period of Israel's wilderness wanderings. An account of the journey toward Canaan in Numbers 33, for example, declares that the Lord brought judgment on the gods of Egypt (Num.33:4). This text suggests that the plagues associated with Israel's deliverance from bondage were directed against the Egyptian deities. The Old Testament is equally harsh in its rejection of Canaanite idolatry, polytheism and associated evils of sorcery, spiritism, divination, necromancy, human sacrifice, and various fertility cult practices. A continuing

prophetic opposition to idolatry confirms a fairly universal rejection of pagan religion throughout the Old Testament period.

The Old Testament contrasts Yahweh and the gods. The gods of the nations had limited functions, e.g. fertility, and were limited territorially. The Old Testament denies their deity: they are non-gods (Hedlund 1992:107). An example is Psalm 82: the gods fail to demonstrate their deity, they fail to do justice, to uphold the weak and fatherless, to aid the needy and oppressed. Therefore they are not gods! Again in Psalm 115: the gods are represented by idols but they cannot speak, see, hear, smell, feel or walk. In contrast, Yahweh is a God who acts. Old Testament history is a recital of his acting. Not so the gods of the nations: they are powerless, says Isaiah, whereas the Lord God made the heavens and the earth and has acted on behalf of His People (Isaiah 45). These so-called gods require craftsmen to create images which must be carried about (Isaiah 46). The prophet's conclusion is that the Lord Yahweh alone is God, there is no other, there is salvation in no one else.

The prophets kept the Mosaic spirit alive. Stuhlmueller contrasts the preaching of Ezekiel with the outlook of Second Isaiah. Ezekiel focuses upon the restoration of Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple, and the rejection of the nations. Second Isaiah deemphasizes Jerusalem, the Temple and liturgical Israel, and anticipates the salvation of the Gentiles (1984:27). Later, Jesus reflects the Isaiah outlook.

What does all of this mean as to the religions? The Old Testament preserves several viewpoints. Officially, as Hess points out, the prophets condemned other religions, especially the Canaanite fertility cult, and demanded an exclusive worship of Yahweh. The rulers of ancient Israel, on the other hand, accepted the state deities of other nations. For many of the ordinary citizens, while Yahweh was regarded as the official state deity, in everyday life they turned to local (Canaanite) family deities. At certain brief points in history a foreign deity was imported and established as the national cult in notorious violation of the prophetic norm (Hess 1991:5-8).

A parallel may be observed in the present situation of the Indian Church. An official Christian orthodoxy may be denied or contradicted by theologians but is generally adhered to by many of the Faithful. The latter, not infrequently, may incorporate popular practices from other religions, e.g. use of the horoscope, dowry, and caste observance. We are not speaking here of cultural adaptations but a syncretism of incompatible elements involving practices prohibited in the Bible. This spiritual schizophrenia includes occult practices and the recognition and service of other gods, a contradiction to Biblical norms.

In the Old Testament, whereas aspects of culture were absorbed and some elements of pagan religion tolerated or adapted, the religions themselves -- deities, sacrifices, temples, idolatry, paraphernalia and practices -- were rejected. While it is true that the Bible itself presents a mixed picture of religion in the Old Testament, the attitude in ancient Israel was to condemn and forbid the worship and recognition of other gods.

Religious plurality, always characteristic of India, was also part of the Old Testament setting: Egypt, Canaan, Babylon. In that context Israel was called to confess "One Lord." Incorporation of cultural elements--perhaps also of cultic ideas--was permitted so long as there was no compromise of Israel's Confession of Faith in Yahweh. But the Golden Calf (Ex.32) must be eliminated! Religious syncretism--defined as religious inter-penetration involving the combining of incompatible elements--was not tolerated.³

It will be helpful to take a closer look at the Old Testament understanding of *one God* in a context of religious plurality. The Wisdom literature of the Bible in particular incorporates aspects of the religious and ethical perceptions of humanity. These insights are given a new context, however, within the religion of Yahweh, as Goldingay and Wright point out (1991:35). Similarities do not constitute identity. Canaanite and Israelite religion are not equally valid alternatives. Insights from Canaan are refined in Yahwism. Incompatible aspects are rejected.

The purpose of God's particular action in the history of Israel is ultimately that God, as the saving and covenant God Yahweh, should be known fully and worshipped exclusively by those who as yet imperfectly know him as El. The end result of what God began to do through Abram was of significance for the Canaanites precisely because it critiqued and rejected Canaanite religion (Goldingay & Wright 1991:39).

Salvation, as understood in the Old Testament, is through Yahweh. Other religions do not save. The gods are powerless. In Old Testament terms the question whether there is salvation in other religions is, according to Goldingay and Wright, a non-question: "There is salvation in *no* religion because religions don't save" (1991:43). Israel was saved by Yahweh, not by religion. Religions may offer many good starting points, but they are not adequate as finishing points. "There is no salvation in them, not because they are somehow inferior as religions to the religion of Christianity, but because they are not witnesses to the deeds of the God who saves" (1991:45). Insights alone are not enough. "We need redemption, not merely revelation" (1991:44).

The prophets are amply clear that even Yahwism does not save. No religion--including the cultic practice of Old Testament Hebrew religion--is able to save. It is Yahweh who saves. Moreover, as Isaiah, Amos and Micah clearly argue, adherence to religious cult (the sacraments of Hebrew religion?) does not save. Salvation is seen in doing the will of Yahweh, it is expressed in practices which reflect the character of Yahweh (Micah 6:8; Amos 5:21ff; Isaiah 1:10ff).

In the time of Abraham, Melchizedek's worship of El was accepted on a par with Yahweh worship. Likewise there was an identification of Joseph's God and the God of Pharaoh. But that was not true of the Pharaoh of Moses' day. "Thus while Moses can accept the identification of Yahweh and El, he must represent the opposition of Yahweh to the Egyptian gods as served by the Pharaoh" (Goldingay and Wright 1991:46). There is a difference in character and nature which had implications for the related issues of justice. The destruction of Pharaoh is a declaration of Yahweh's opposition to a religion that sanctions inhumanity and an oppressive social structure (1991:48).

The contrast is more clearly evident in Israel's long struggle with Baal worship. The Canaanite and Baal fertility cult was a debasing influence involving ritual prostitution, child sacrifice, and occult practices. Probably one of the reasons for the severe prohibition against use of images was the association of idols with decadent forms of religion. (Women were not employed as priests for similar reasons). Openness to another religion can lead to perversion as well as bring enrichment (1991:49).

The biblical writers describe Israel's deportation and exile as the judgment of God which took place because Israel had abandoned her own religious heritage and because of Israel's corruption.

All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them, as well as the practices which the kings of Israel had introduced. The Israelites secretly did things against the Lord their God that were not right.... They built themselves high places in all their towns. They set up sacred stones and Asherah poles.... At every high place they burned incense, as the nations whom the Lord had driven out before them had done. They did wicked things that provoked the Lord to anger.... They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them....

They forsook all the commands of the Lord their God.... They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger (2 Kings 17:7-17).

Increasingly in the Old Testament period Israel tends toward exclusiveness. Yet this is not a denial of the possibility of truth in other religious traditions. Melchizedek, Balaam and other non-Abrahamic cases must be noted. Beyond the Abrahamic Covenant there was LIGHT! In some instances, e.g. Balaam, that light was dim. In other cases, e.g. Job, the light shone clearly. Job provides a magnificent example of piety, faith, and knowledge of the One True God.

It is important to note that the Old Testament is much more than a history of Israel. A universal scope embracing all of humanity is seen in the opening chapters of Genesis as well as in Job and other sections. From these brilliant episodes perhaps we can find a point of significance for the religious genius of India?

Consider the Wisdom literature of the Bible and in particular the Book of Job. Job, a representative of the nations, has the knowledge of the true God. Job comprehends God as Creator and Sustainer, Revealer and Redeemer (Job 14:14, 16, 17; 19:25, 26). In Job we see a personal awareness of God's grace and mercy in the forgiveness of sins and catch a glimpse of belief in the resurrection that is rare in the Old Testament. Job is recipient not only of a general revelation of God in nature, but of redemption (Hedlund1985:143). Yet Job is from outside the Abrahamic tradition.

Job's associates share in this revelation. Their great speeches contain profound insights, considerable truth, and magnificent language (e.g. Job 5:9-18). Yet the whole is marred by a defective theology which did not respond to the problem of suffering nor offer comfort to the sufferer. Eliphaz's sources were from God, no doubt, but also from the occult--dreams and spirits (Job 4:12.15). What must not be overlooked is the possibility that religious faith -- any religion -- can become demonic⁴ (Lorenzen 1992:58).

The presence of the demonic in the religions is not recognized in much contemporary theological discussion. The problem, as Biblical scholar Walter Wink points out, is that there is no place for Satan and other spiritual entities in the dominant materialistic worldview (1986:1) borrowed from the West. According to the Bible, humanity is a fallen creature. The effects of the fall are observable in all aspects of human life including the religious. The demonic is a demonstrable fact of the present century, states Wink, manifest in an idolatry of Adolf Hitler and other sadistic leaders (1986:41, 51). What happened in Nazi Germany can only be explained in terms of demonic powers, the spirituality of Nazism. "The demonic was the interiority of the German state made into an idol" (Wink 1986:54). The reality of the fall is expressed in ecological and societal disharmony. Human culture is distorted. Human values are tainted by cruelty, depravity, inhumanity. The disruption has entered every area of life including religion. The Bible's explanation is that a universal malady is the result of a fall from innocence by the first human creatures who were incited to rebellion against the Creator by a personified source of evil.

The Book of Job gives a mixed picture. Religion contains error and falsehood (Job's friends) as well as elements of revelation (e.g. Elihu). Ultimately the highest expression of human religion is defective, marred, ineffective. The greatest and best is there to be welcomed, respected, retained. There is no suggestion of a "destruction" of Job's friends or their flawed religious philosophies (contrary to the apprehension of some dialogical theologians toward evangelization). The ultimate judgment is from God who pronounces all human religiosity inadequate. Religion does not save. Revelation alone is not enough. Humanity requires redemption. Each human person--including the righteous Job--stands in need of Divine redemption. The reality of the Fall is reflected in God's dealings with the entire human race and with each individual.

Thus the classic non-Abrahamic cases, Melchizedek and Job, underline the failure of religion as well as the fact of universal revelation. Implications for the Indian context seem clear. There can be no denial of the religious insights of many, past and present. One thinks, for example, of Tukaram, the poet-saint of Maharashtra, or the sacred *Kural* of the poet Valluvar in Tamil Nadu. The late Bp. Stephen Neill was of the opinion that the latter, representing the best of the ancient Wisdom of the Tamils, while worthy of respect, was of a different quality than that of the Wisdom of the Bible. In fact the underlying presuppositions of the *Kural* reflect a Hindu rather than a Biblical world view. Consider the following: reincarnation/re-birth (35:348-9; 36:358), *maya* (36:351), *moksha* as extinguishing of desire (37:362,364-5,370), *karma* -fate (ch.38). Yet the sections on royalty and the State contain wise sayings not unlike the Biblical Book of Proverbs, and the section on love is reminiscent of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

Tukaram was essentially a devotee who found meaning in life in God. From frustration and a long desire for union with God, he came to an encounter in which he declared that God accepted him. This finding of God, his conversion, brought deep joy and liberty (Dabre 1987:9). The deep seeker was rewarded with the experience of God's presence. Tukaram meditated and adored God in many forms familiar in Hinduism. A favorite form of prayer was a recital of Divine names. Salvation, for Tukaram, is through *bhakti*, devotion. He continued the practice of image-worship, but "is conscious that the divine presence is not limited to it" (1987:26). Thus Tukaram avoids idolatry, states Dabre (1987:25). This appears less than the Biblical norm which in the First and Second Mosaic commands enjoins the worship of only One God and prohibits the use of images (Exodus 20). It may also be

pointed out that Tukaram manifests a religious person's search for God which however is the reverse of the Biblical Gospel in which God (from Eden) takes the initiative in the search. Dabre is of the opinion, however, that Tukaram's search for God is founded upon a conviction that "God seeks his devotees" (1987:239).

There is no evidence that Tukaram was ever in contact with Christianity. Dabre is satisfied with distinctive but parallel religious insights (242), and posits supernatural revelation and the availability of salvation in the non-Christian religions. "Saving faith is a response to God who reveals Himself" (240). Possibly so. For religion does not save, salvation is the action of God.

The case of Tukaram is of considerable interest because of another poet of Maharashtra. Some three centuries later Narayan Vaman Tilak, converted to Christ, says that he came to Christ "over the bridge of Tukaram!" The difference is that Tilak came into contact with Christianity (which he found terribly Western) and the Bible. Tilak became the devotee of Christ. Tilak retained his "Indianness" bringing the richness of Marathi cultural expressions into the Christian Church.

And how do we evaluate? By fruit! "An authentic religious faith must contribute to *making and keeping human life human*" (Lorenzen 1992:62). Moses and the prophets spoke to that issue throughout the Old Testament period.

With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to have mercy
and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:6-8)

THE NEW TESTAMENT

An overview of the Bible's approach to the religions begins in the Old Testament, but it goes on to the New. For Christians *Jesus Christ* is the final touchstone. A biblical approach to the religions must come to terms with the reality of Jesus Christ. Christology deals with Jesus as the basis of Christian faith. As Pannenberg states, "The Jesus proclaimed today is none other than the one who lived at that time in Palestine and was crucified..." (1968:21). Diversity of New Testament witnesses ought not be overlooked, but there is no cleavage between Jesus and the Christ preached by the apostles. Not antithesis but continuity is understandable between the historic Jesus and the primitive kerygma. The task of Christology is to identify this reality. The early Christians' confession of Christ as Lord is grounded in the activity and fate of Jesus in the past (1968:29). The task of Christology is to establish the true understanding of Jesus from his history. "In this man God is revealed" (1968:30).

This brings us to the resurrection which is core of the issue of Jesus' relationship to the religions. The disciples understood that Jesus' resurrection was the beginning of a universal resurrection of the dead (1968:66). The end of the world has begun in Jesus' resurrection, and God is ultimately revealed in Jesus (1968:69). This motivated the mission to the Gentiles who are included in the eschatological salvation (1968:70). Paul justified the mission to the Gentiles on the basis of the Christ event (1968:72).

CHRISTOLOGY

It is appropriate therefore to consider briefly the bearing of the Johannine Gospel on the question of mission in a pluralistic world. More theological than the Synoptics, the Fourth Gospel focuses especially on the person of Jesus and has been used extensively to construct a Christology (Erickson 1991:385). It is important therefore to note that *Logos* Christology identifies Father and Son as a single God while differentiating them within the Godhead. As Pannenberg points out, the Logos is *not* a pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth concept as is sometimes suggested. Only in Jesus Christ has the whole Logos appeared (1968:163). Nevertheless, as Erickson suggests, historical Christology expressed in categories of Greek philosophy is not adequate for contemporary understanding. There is a need to more adequately respond to the problems posed by theologians such as Hick and Knitter. Actually several diverse cultural traditions found their way into New Testament Christology (Rossano 1982:105,120). This inculturation enriched the faith of the early Church without diluting the high Christology of the Johannine and Pauline writings. This suggests encouraging possibilities for a Biblical Indian Christian theology.

But to return to the relevance of John's Gospel to the religions. In a recent article Matthew Vellanickal suggests that John follows a process of evangelization different from the rest of the New Testament. Separating the Christ of experience from the Jesus of history, Vellanickal argues for the presence of Christ in other religions and cultures. He sees in John no question of a deposit of faith but rather an experience which is "inclusive of other religious experiences of mankind" (1992:34). Vellanickal assumes that "the principle of the hidden presence of Christ in the cosmic religions is now practically accepted" (1992:36). That, however, is too large an assumption. Most evangelical theologians will disagree, as do a number of Roman Catholic theologians. Hindus also object. Hindu participants at World Council of Churches conferences have rejected religious relativism stating that every religion makes a claim to final truth, therefore religions are "alternative absolutes" (Ariarajah 1991:193). Ariarajah states that Kraemer too held that each religion has its own integrity, and that the Asian theologians generally supported Kraemer's position (1991:105). The hidden Christ idea is not accepted by Hindus, nor by many Christians in Asia and elsewhere. At best the notion of a cosmic Christ is an assumption by theologians, but it bypasses the Faithful and goes beyond the traditions of historic Christianity.

Had the early Church believed in a cosmic Christ, large numbers of Christians might have escaped martyrdom by confessing Caesar as Lord rather than Christ as Lord.⁵ To the early Christians, John 14:6 ("The Way, the Truth and the Life") and Acts 4:12 ("No Other Name") were not mere expressions of infatuation but absolute affirmations for which they laid down their lives. According to Latourette, it was the dynamic effect of the uniqueness of Jesus more than anything else which accounts for the extraordinary advance of Christianity during the first three centuries. This vitality was combined with an inclusiveness which attracted all races and classes. Early Christianity was both flexible and intransigent. Adaptability made it

possible to adjust to many current beliefs and practices, but on its essential core doctrines the Church refused to compromise (Latourette 1937:168).

The appeal to the religious experiences of mankind while commendable is not adequate in face of reality. This approach fails to come to terms with the possibility of the demonic which is also part of the religious expressions of humanity. One thinks for instance of the caste system which has dehumanized whole sections of human society and which is founded upon a religious worldview which justifies structural inequities on the basis of *karma* and *samsara*. Even grosser practices of depravity, e.g. human sacrifice, infanticide, suttee, cannibalism, and head-hunting, were expressions of religion.

These religious expressions (with the exception of head-hunting which ceased with the coming of the Gospel) have all re-surfaced, sometimes sensationalized by the media. Society's crimes against women are well-known, documented by recent studies. Religious sanction? Perhaps illegitimately, religious justification is found. Female infanticide relates to severe economic problems, but nevertheless has a religious dimension. A recent study revealed the practice persisting in certain religious communities, nonexistent in others in the same locality and economic status. Not yet exploited by the media, human child sacrifice has continued into the present decade in at least one ethnic community in Maharashtra--as a religious rite. Done in secret, the people feared to change the custom but have welcomed a Christian Gospel which comes with an alternate world view and brings new values and liberation from the heinous practice.

I agree with Fr. Sebastian Karotemprel that "the permanent validity and motivation for Christian mission stands or falls with the meaning and significance of the revelatory salvific event in Jesus Christ" (1992:5). Jesus' attitude toward the religions is of paramount importance for a company of missiologists in any contemporary context. "The uniqueness of revelation-salvation in Jesus Christ is not an invention of the first disciples of Jesus Christ, nor of a later triumphalistic Church" (1992:6). The Fourth Gospel is important to the question of the religions in that "the Johannine Jesus takes words upon himself that were originally spoken in a context of many claims to divinity by foreign deities" (Ball 1991:53). "The core of John's Christology is the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the unique revealer of the living God" (Senior and Stuhlmuehler 1984:283). This statement has an exclusive sound to it, but, as Senior concludes, "no writing in the New Testament is 'universal' to the extent that absolute claims for Christ drop out of the picture" (1984:293). In the "I am" sayings in John's Gospel Jesus identifies himself with Yahweh, the only God and exclusive Saviour. Here, states Ball, "Jesus takes words that speak of the LORD's exclusive right to save Israel and applies them to himself" thus identifying himself with the forgiving action of Yahweh (1991:59,60). The essence of John's Christology is that Jesus is unique because he is divine, the incarnation is no myth (Ball 1991:64,65). As Vinay Samuel asserts, the particularity of the Incarnation is significant (1989:76). Jesus thereby identified with humanity, thus affirming the universality of the Gospel. This does not constitute an endorsement of the religions of mankind, but establishes rather the unique mission of Jesus Christ and authenticates the salvific purposes of God seen from creation. John's Gospel is addressed to a first century context of conflicting religious claims and has particular relevance in our own pluralistic setting today.

THE EARLY CHURCH

How did the New Testament Church interact with the religions? The best available example is found in the speeches, writings and performance of St. Paul. At Lystra (Acts 14) he called a superstitious audience to turn from a plurality of gods and idol worship. At Athens (Acts 17) the Apostle engaged a sophisticated audience -- Stoics and Epicureans -- in a discussion of the nature of God. Winter (1991) has shown that the Athenian address is filled with references and themes drawn from the "natural theology" of these two systems, e.g. the Stoic view of providence and the Epicurean affirmation of a living God who could be known. This common ground prepared the way for a call to conversion. St. Paul showed cultural sensitivity and engaged the worldviews of his audience in order to communicate at the point of need. He did not hesitate to identify what he considered erroneous views: "we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is no God but one" (I Corinthians 8:4). "Conversion involved a rejection of the pluralistic perception of divinity present in an epiphany or in any idol" (Winter 1991:129).

This intransigent stance had repercussions for the early Christians in relation to the State religion of Rome whose primary creed was "Caesar is Lord." Several generations of martyrs refused to compromise their confession of Christ. Political religion is a major factor with which Christians have to contend in present-day India where "Indianness" sometimes is (wrongly) measured in terms of adherence or non-adherence to the majority religion! Religious freedom and the right to conversion are critical contemporary issues.⁶

The Biblical approach to world religions must be seen in light of the New Testament Church and the issue of conversion. Jesus began his ministry by calling people to repent. The Apostles insisted upon the necessity of repentance, turning to God and turning from sin (Acts 3:19; 26:18-20; 1 Thess.1:9). Repentance and faith result in changed behaviour. Conversion was essentially spiritual resulting in new relationships including incorporation into the Church. Baptism was closely linked with the call to repent (Acts 2:38). Through baptism newly converted families, individuals and groups were initiated into the Body of Christ, united with other penitents. Conversion was personal, but not individualistic. The role of the believing community was essential.

Is it possible in the Indian context to posit *stages* of conversion? Conversion in the Bible is an act of turning to God. It has a starting point. It also entails turning from the sinful practices of the past. Identification with the believing community is an essential part of the conversion process (1 John 1:1-3), but not necessarily at the initial stage. For some people conversion is primarily a change from one religion to another. It is essential that such nominal conversions be followed by spiritual regeneration, the conversion known as the new birth (John 3:3).

Conversion in the New Testament is an essential starting point, and the Church has an indispensable nurture role in fostering Kingdom values. St. Paul did not deny the validity of insights from other religions and cultures (Acts 14:8-18; 17:16-23,30-31; 26:18-20; 3:19). Nevertheless he banded converts together into congregations of the redeemed.

Our challenge in the Indian context is to do likewise. Somehow we must strike a balance. Converts must have a clear identification with Jesus Christ and with fellow disciples. This identity and commonality is essential. It is the essence of the Biblical ideal of separation from the world. Our problem is that we have introduced foreign patterns of Church life

which are not essentially Biblical and which alienate Christ's followers from their own society. The Biblical pattern is the reverse: the converts continued in living relationship with their people who were themselves attracted to discipleship.

Staffner no doubt has something similar in mind when he advocates a synthesis in which converts remain socially Hindus but spiritually Christians. But is this approach valid? The intention is to preserve the best from Hindu culture while finding spiritual reality in Christ. Hindus may not agree: many have reacted angrily toward the proposition that Hinduism is only a culture and not a religion. Staffner's study (1988) does not indicate the form of the Church that should result from this synthesis, but his aim is to make it possible for all India to acknowledge Jesus Christ.

How far can we go? From the New Testament we can only speculate as to how far St. Paul was willing to go in religious, cultural adaptation. We are not discussing here the Christian distortions and accretions brought to India by the Syrians and the Europeans! St. Paul obviously opted for a *Gentile* Church as a legitimate alternative to Jewish Christianity. Yet he retained certain distinctives which provided a continuity. We must therefore probe the Biblical meaning and implications of Gentile baptism and incorporation into a Church outside the Jewish community from Antioch onward. Once we determine that, we can go on to look for Indian parallels, insights, adaptations in the search for a new Indian Christian discipleship model. We will not learn the essence of the Biblical meanings by beginning *from* the Indian context. But we must know and appreciate the Indian context in order to effectively adapt and apply essential Biblical meanings *in* the Indian context. Meanings and definitions change, as in any field of knowledge. Therefore we have to find out the original intent as used by the Biblical writers lest we impose our changed definitions and usages upon the past.

How far, then, can Indian Christians go? The problem with Creeds and formulations of the past is that all were contextual to their time and situation--Western, Syrian, African, whatever. Yet they are perceptions. We dismiss them to our danger: we may land up as Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter Day Saints (Mormons)! It is interesting therefore to consider certain Indian perceptions of Christ. Most fascinating is that of Keshub Chunder Sen. Never a baptized "Christian," Sen is generally dismissed as heretical. Yet he was an enthusiastic devotee who desired that all India should follow Christ! Sen rejected European accretions--Jesus, after all, was not an Englishman! In the process, Sen missed or dismissed a number of the finer points of the Christian understanding of theology. Not the niceties of Western Christian doctrine for Sen. Not the Western Christ, but the One in whom we recognize "Him whom for ages our ancestors have sought" (Scott 1979:177) Sen sought to follow Jesus in an Indian mode. "In vain do I go to the Vedas or to Judaism to learn sonship. That I learn at the feet of my sweet Christ, my Father's beloved Son" (1979:233). Sen was positive: "The real recognition of Christ has taken place in India. It is an accomplished fact. Only the nominal recognition remains" (1979:239). He warned: "India is sick of idolatry. Add not to the already overcrowded pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses a fresh divinity in the name of Jesus..... Christ is not an incarnation like the myriad deities worshipped in this land" (1979:241).

Sen is delightful to read. It is equally instructive to read the perceptions of a number of converts to Christianity, many of them Brahmans: Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, Mahadev Aiyer, Manilal Pareek, Narayan Vaman Tilak, Sadhu Sundar Singh. Ardent disciples of Christ, most found difficulties with the Europeanized Church found in India (much as Muslim converts to Christ are uncomfortable in the culturally "Hindu" Churches of India).

Converted Christians, they retained an "Indian" identity, grappled with difficult issues including baptism and various cultural forms. Their's was an effort to spread Christianity in a saffron robe.

The question is complicated, however, by the fact that religion has its dark side. This aspect is shown, for example, by Swami Dharma Theertha who writes from "within" regarding the evils perpetuated by religion. According to Theertha, Brahminism converted religion into a means of exploitation. In his view, the Hindu Scriptures themselves were manipulated to exalt the Aryan conquerors and degrade the subdued original inhabitants. Theertha charges that the priestly Sanskrit compilers were guilty of unscrupulous distortion and misrepresentation (1992:21). If so, the Scriptures themselves are the products of imperialism (1992:61) and instruments of caste discrimination and exploitation. India, he states, is in bondage to a medieval caste system, religious fanaticism, and priestly domination imposed by Manu (1992:204).

Thus the Hindu social order is a negation of the truth that all humans are born free and equal. This system was inflicted upon society by priests who mutilated the ancient sacred books and fabricated spurious Shastras for their own selfish ends (1992:226), establishing themselves at the head of an oppressive hierarchy and consigning others to hereditary untouchability (Theertha 1992:229). Theertha thus castigates what we may designate the prostitution of religion. If correct, then we must look elsewhere for the better aspects of religious aspirations. Theertha in fact implies that there was, more than 4,000-5,000 years ago, a higher level of religion. That period of idealism Theertha sees in the age of the Ramayana and the Mahabaratha with its religion of spiritual enlightenment embodied in the Upanishads and the original teachings of the Gita (1992:233). It is seen again in the time and teachings of the Buddha. Glimpses of the higher order appeared again in the reform movements during the Muslim period and during the time of the British. But Theertha notes a simultaneous Brahmanical revival accompanied by rigid caste observances, slavery, compulsory sati, child-marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, and other social evils (1992:234). This, then, is the dark side of religion.

Can we, however, take the direction of Fr. Staffner who brings out the best in a positive evaluation? Yet in his own way, Staffner seeks to bring all of India--all Hindus--to follow Jesus. He does this by proclaiming Christianity as a faith, Hinduism as a culture with room for many religions. Theertha no doubt would disagree, as do many Hindus. Staffner's approach appears attractive, seeming to avoid the arrogance of an older "Fulfillment" Theory which assumed an evolutionary progression of religions with Christianity at the top. Reducing Hinduism to a mere culture devoid of religion, however, may also be viewed as a veiled form of arrogance. Despite Staffner's good intentions, to imply that Christianity is a religion but that Hinduism is not is an insult to religious Hindus!

Christians will have other theological reservations. What of the Community of Faith? What marks the identity of Jesus' disciples? As we have seen, the New Testament Epistles and Acts posit the Church as a visible community of diverse strands of humanity united in Christ. True, we become confused by bricks and mortar and by denominational labels and structures. That is not the Church of the New Testament. The New Testament Church had identity (without buildings) *within* society of which it was part yet distinct. Hindu religion is not congregational: we derive that concept and reality from the New Testament which insists upon the indispensable role of the believing community, as Bishop Newbigin has pointed out (1989:54).

The practice of love and discipleship puts the community of disciples into the world in living contact with society. The greatest example in India is Mother Theresa. Hers is a community founded in love--derived from the Jesus of the New Testament.

Was the early Church too negative toward the pagan religions? St. Paul's indictment of Gentile ungodliness and wickedness was severe (Romans 1:18ff). At the same time he placed the Jews under judgment (Romans 2:9ff). Paul, states Tillich, "makes the assertion, unheard of for a Jew, that Jews and pagans are equally under the bondage of sin and equally in need of salvation -- a salvation which comes not from a new religion, Christianity, but from an event in history which judges all religions, including Christianity" (1963:33). Severe? Perhaps so. Paul's purpose is to show the moral predicament of the entire human race (Romans 3:19-20,23). He does so in order to offer the possibility of salvation to pagans and Jews alike. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

According to St. Paul, life outside of Christ is in bondage, dominated by powers which inflict humanity and inhibit the Gospel (Galatians 4:8-10; Ephesians 2:2). St. Paul in the Colossian Epistle grapples with religion as a manifestation of the powers. Religion itself is one of the powers than can enslave (Wink 1986:149,125). The Colossians believed that God ruled the world through intermediary emissaries -- angels or demons, authorities or principalities. Religion was preoccupied with the in-between realm and struggled to manipulate the unseen through asceticism and mystical practices (van der Heuvel 1966:28,29). St. Paul did not demythologize the powers. He accepted the Colossian world view as a frame of reference, then endeavoured to put Christ in place of the powers (Col.1:9, 11, 13).

The New Testament assumes the reality of evil spirits and demon possession. Jesus, in the Synoptics, frequently confronted evil spirits (e.g. Mark 1:23-26; 5:1-8; 9:25-27; Luke 4:33-35; 8:29,35; 9:42; etc.). St. Paul on more than one occasion exorcised demons (Acts 16:18;19:12). This too is part of the biblical approach to religions. We cannot overlook demonic expressions found in the religions, all religions. Religions in and of themselves do not save, they may in fact enslave. Religion, according to one viewpoint, is the divinization of the self. Is this not an ultimate idolatry? Is it not in fact bondage? St. Paul wrote to the Galatians:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God--or rather are known by God--how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you....

.... It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Gal.4:8-11; 5:1).

Religion is under the judgment of God. That includes *Christian* religion as it was true of the Hebrew religion of the Old Testament. The history of Christianity includes some sad examples. One of the most shameful is the record of the medieval Crusades. In the Crusades, Christians devised the greatest ever anti-Christian strategy against themselves. A negation of Christian witness and contradiction of the Gospel, the Crusades solidified the world of Islam in perpetual opposition to Christianity. There was nothing of salvation or liberation in any sense in the Crusades. In the Crusades Christianity brought judgment upon

itself for all succeeding generations. Religion does not save. That was true of Yahwism, it is true of Christianity. It is Jesus Christ who saves. The sole known exception during the barbaric Crusades was the mission of Francis of Assisi, a crusade of *love*, the first attempted mission to Islam and an attempt to end the Crusades. Ultimately however that too failed in its objective which was to convert the Muslims to Jesus.

What then of *values* in the religions? This too should not be neglected. Theologically it is unacceptable to posit the religions as alternate ways of salvation. Far better to avoid speculation, yet affirm with the Fourth Gospel that every human person has received some measure of life and light. "The true light that *gives light to every person* was coming into the world" (John 1:9).

CONCLUSION

The New Testament does not give us a theology of religions, but it assumes the validity of Old Testament attitudes toward polytheism and idolatry. Jesus' conflict with the demonic and St. Paul's engagement of the powers provide further implications for the biblical understanding of the religions.

The Old Testament is foundational. A variety of contexts are addressed in the Old Testament, not all of which may be equally appropriate to our contemporary situation. As Michael Nazir-Ali affirms, Elijah among the prophets of Baal is not the only -- or universally suitable -- paradigm! We should also consider Melchizedek's encounter, Balaam and Cyrus, Jonah's ship's crew, and New Testament evidence of non-Christians joining in Christian worship. While the New Testament (apart from Acts 17) rarely provides a positive assessment of the religious systems, texts such as Romans 1 and 2 and Acts 14:17 do allow "a vestigial knowledge of God among all people" (Nazir-Ali 1989:89). The entire Gentile mission of the Church is a record of women and men of all classes, cultures, families and religions finding acceptance by God through Christ without conversion to cultic Judaism (1989:89). Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12) and it is not surprising if we find other lights, and glimmers of light (John 1:8,9), that form analogies to him (Lorenzen 1992:64).

In a helpful study of Gospel and culture in Ephesus, P. Rosano (1982) has shown how diverse cultural traditions found their way into New Testament Christology not by placing all religious traditions on an equal level but as polemical parallels. The *Logos* and other concepts thus became bridges to Christ. Christianity was not absorbed by the prevalent philosophies and cults, but Christianity appropriated various forms and ideas for expressing the Christian faith. In the process Christianity was enhanced and enriched. From this starting-point the second century Church Fathers, Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, developed the idea of the *Logos Spermatikos*, which, however, is beyond the scope of this introductory paper.

Theology, states Yagi, deals with gospel answers to people's problems. Yagi speaks from an East Asian perspective. "Asian theology is commissioned to find biblical paths through ancestor respect, salvation from shame, and hope for the dead" (1991:375). That must also be our motive and goal as South Asian missiologists as together we explore the biblical sources.

As we pursue this subject, perhaps it is not out of place that we remind ourselves of the Bible's definition of true religion:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:27).

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ENDNOTES

1. Concepts of caste hierarchy, *karma*, *samsara*, reincarnation, fate, and *avatara*, are familiar Indian concepts which clash with Biblical ideas. But probably the greatest divergence concerns the Biblical conception of exclusive monotheism in contrast to the unity (common core) of all religions as propounded by Cantwell Smith, Sri Radhakrishnan, and others. See the valuable study by Harold A. Netland (1991). S. Smartha has pointed out that Hinduism and Buddhism do not believe in a scriptural hermeneutic which will yield truth (1992:80).
2. The author has endeavoured to grapple with the implications of the Biblical attitudes toward the religions and related issues in two or more tentative papers. See "Judgment on Their Gods?" (103-115) and "Conversion in the Indian Crucible" (83-100) in Hedlund 1992.
3. According to some scholars, all religions are syncretic to some degree. This implies a positive connotation. All missions lead to syncretism! More commonly, from a Christian and Biblical perspective, syncretism is given a negative connotation as an undesirable deviation, usually by accretion. See the helpful discussion by Andre´ Droogers in Gort, Vroom, Fernhout & Wessels (1989):7-25.
4. Christianity is not exempt. The moral and justice requirements of Old Testament religion were established through Moses and proclaimed by the later prophets. Christians are subject to a higher law, the law of love. The command to love one's neighbour as one's self summarizes the essence of the Mosaic Law. Jesus gave and practiced a still higher law, that we love our enemies, an ideal most notably attempted by the Anabaptists. Christians frequently fall short. When Christians practice greed and selfishness, discriminate and hate -- there is a denial of true religion as defined by the Bible. Christianity also is under the judgment of God.
5. The most famous martyrdom in the second century was that of Polycarp, the aged Bishop of Smyrna. Arrested, Polycarp refused to sacrifice and say "Lord Caesar." Advised to have regard to his grey hairs and commanded to deny Christ, Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Him and He did me no wrong, how shall I blaspheme my King who has saved me?" Polycarp died for confessing himself a Christian (Wand 1961:36).
6. See the author's discussion of this problem in "Christian Freedom and Third World Realities"(Hedlund 1992:117-130).

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