

HINDUS AND CHRISTIANS FOR 2000 YEARS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Christians and Hindus have interacted for 2000 years in the Indian sub-continent. Two major assumptions underlie that bold assertion.

First, it assumes one accepts the Thomas tradition as to the origins of Christianity in South Asia. It is widely accepted in India that the Apostle Thomas came to India in 52 AD, preached and established churches during the first century (Mundadan 1989). The Thomas tradition cannot be proven, but neither can it be disproven, and the evidence indicates that the gospel came and that Christianity has existed in India since the earliest times. If true, it seems surprising that there is no early record of a Hindu speaking about Christ (Amaladass 2006, 61). Nevertheless a robust Indian Christian community adhering to the message of Christ, which they claimed had been handed down by St Thomas, was discovered in the fourth century by Syrian Christians fleeing from Persian persecution. The existence of this venerable community, living in peaceful co-existence with the majority community with whom it shared common roots, customs and values, is itself a remarkable historical instance of cordial relationships during the early centuries. The Thomas Christians no doubt came to terms with many of the practices of the larger community, as is reflected in customs continuing in the Syrian Christian community today. The opposite may also be observed: Hindu practices modified by Christian influence.

The second assumption concerns the antiquity of Hinduism. Contrary to popular opinion, what is known today as “Hinduism” is not the most ancient of religions. The terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism” are of recent origins, “categories invented by outsiders in an attempt to interpret and explain the complexities they found in Indian religious and social life” (Oddie, 156). Hinduism accordingly is reckoned the creation of colonialists, Orientalists, missionaries, or a combination thereof. More to the point, Hinduism as a single entity does not exist. Rather the term is a convenient catch-all for a vast variety of religious cults and sects, regional and local deities and devotees, differing philosophies, spiritual disciplines, religious practices, guru cults and more. “Hinduism is an acceptable abbreviation for a *family* of culturally similar traditions” (Lipner, 6). Hinduism as we know it is a recent creation but with complex cultural traditions of 3000 years or more.

II. Christianity and Vedic religions in South Asia.

Christianity thus has a long history of relating to Vedic religions in South Asia. It is only in the modern period that explicit Hindu-Christian interactions can be documented. It will be of interest to note a number of *Hindu* responses to Christianity as well as specific *Christian*

responses to Hinduism, then finally to consider the possibility of *Hindu-Christian* approaches to theology and witness, beginning with the earliest Christian response.

2.1 Christian Response to Hinduism

Historically Christians have interacted with Hindus from the earliest advent of Christianity in India. According to local mythology original converts of St Thomas included some from the Brahmin community in Kerala. Claiming descent from Namboodiri Brahmin converts has conferred high caste status upon the Thomas Christians. This respectable social status “enabled them to be in harmony with their predominantly Hindu neighbors” (Amaladass 1993, 16). Tensions between the Hindu caste system and the Christian value of equality became evident in the modern period, but must be understood in light of the historic context (Amaladass 1993, 19). Caste-related practices, customs regarding food and occupation, modes of dress, faith in horoscopes, ceremonial bathing, rituals and festivals developed in largely Hindu categories. Church architecture borrows simultaneously from Jewish synagogue and Hindu temples—“the cultural elements of Hinduism, Christianity and the Syrian tradition are clearly in juxtaposition” (Visvanathan, 9). Christian rites of passage likewise reveal use of ritual substances such as coconuts, oil lamps and rice (commonly used by Hindus) but with a distinct Christian imprint (Visvanathan, 102). Death rituals for instance point to Christian belief in the afterlife and the second coming of Christ.

Moving to the modern period, and a context quite dissimilar to Kerala, a remarkable example of cultural interaction is to be seen in Andhra Pradesh. There under the indigenous leadership of Bishop V. S. Azariah (1874-1945), the Dornakal Diocese became the fastest growing diocese in South Asia, demonstrating that “the Church has succeeded best when fully inculturated” (Harper, 184). Through its schools the Church influenced Brahmin and other upper-caste students, but its greatest role was for social uplift among the so-called lower castes accomplished through various means including not least the empowerment of village women. Conversion movements were an aspect of socio-economic and cultural change extending beyond the Church. “The arrival of Christianity may have set a process of catalytic cultural change into motion, but, once begun, even the church could not control the outcome” (Harper, 191).

Caste practices were condemned by Azariah as incompatible with Christianity. Some progress was made, but many caste-based practices continued. Nevertheless something new had begun. “In attempting to build a new community with a new identity that replaced and transcended old caste identities, the church almost inadvertently created new social organizations, rituals, and customs that bore remarkable similarities to the old ones they replaced” (Harper, 193). Azariah devised new indigenous Christian liturgies, festivals and art forms borrowed from Hindu and other sources. An example of the new synthesis was in the construction of the Dornakal Cathedral which incorporated aspects of Hindu temple and Muslim mosque architecture. “This cathedral, entirely hand-carved and hand-built by local people, was the bishop’s most dramatic statement of Christianity’s potential as the fulfillment of Indian faith and culture” (Harper, 196).

Through conversion oppressed and backward peoples sought relief from the discrimination and stigma of untouchability as well as to improve their status in society. “Evidence from the Dornakal diocese therefore supports the view that the conversion movements to Christianity were less a means of rejecting Hinduism and the prevailing caste system than a

means by which subordinate groups tried to elevate their rank in the social hierarchy by accommodating and, sometimes, transforming the values of dominant non-Christian groups” (Harper, 210). Dornakal is but one example of Christian response which took various shapes in other settings.

The missionary approach to Hinduism not infrequently has been in terms of criticism and confrontation. To William Ward (1769-1823) of the Serampore Mission, Hinduism was seen as an enemy to be opposed and exposed. That at least appears to have been one of the objectives in his publication of *History, Literature and Mythology of the Hindoos*. Largely descriptive, the four volumes also contain translations and extracts from philosophers and religious writings.

Quite a different response is found in Orientalists such as F. Max Müller (1823-1900), William Jones (1746-1794), and Monier-Williams (1819-1899) who promoted Sanskrit studies and the dissemination of India’s sacred texts. These early Indologists held that Hinduism has much to teach the West. This proposition was in fact taken up by a re-invigorated Neo-Hinduism in its Vedantic mission to the West (Tathagatananda, xv-xvi). In the assumptions of the Orientalists we come closer to a Hindu response to Christianity.

Rather than confrontation, encounter today is more likely in terms of dialogue. Inter-religious dialogue is for mutual enlightenment and to dispel misunderstanding. Through dialogue Christians and Hindus can get to know each other better. The Round Table conferences conducted at Sat Tal Ashram in North India by Methodist evangelist E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973) were a forerunner of today’s dialogue events. Jones sought an interpretation of Christ and the Christian *dharma* in keeping with the Indian ethos. At the Round Table, Hindus and Christians and others were able to share their views in a non-threatening environment. As a result Hindus and others came face to face with Christ.

Reflecting on the impact on Christian participants, Jones wrote, “The East now knows what it means to be a Christian and is demanding that we be Christian” (Jones, 267). Jones found the Indian ashram a suitable indigenous forum for reflection, and utilized Hindu philosophy and culture for presenting the gospel. For years Jones’ disciple and successor, Acharya Daya Prakash (D.P. Titus), has continued to present Christ and the Christian message in the form of a modified Vedanta fulfillment theology through *satsangs* in various religious settings.

Dialogue with Hinduism challenges the Church to examine the role of Christianity in a pluralistic society. In India this motivates the search for an authentic Indian Christianity and a contextual Indian theology (Robinson 2004).

Dialogue raises questions as to how far the Indian Church can go in Hinduizing its theological identity. Is there danger that Church and theology may lose their way? Issues of language must be considered such as the implications of terms such as *avatara* and the use of Brahmanical versus Dalit categories for an Indian Christology. Hindu-Christian dialogue where Hindu populations have settled in Europe has proven fruitful in fostering good relationships and understanding (Bakker, 35).

Since Vatican Council II, dialogue has emerged as a major component of the mission theology and practice of the Catholic Church. Ashrams and other centers for inter-religious dialogue have been established in India and Sri Lanka where Catholics, more than Protestants, are officially engaged in dialogue with Hindus. In this connection the work of Raimundo

Panikkar might be mentioned, particularly his 900-page anthology, *The Vedic Experience Mantramanjari: An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration*.

2.2 Hindu Responses to Christianity

As a result of India's encounter with the West, various Hindu revitalization movements emerged to help identify Indians with Hinduism (Hiebert, 331). Some such as the Hindu Mahasabha, the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) became overtly political. Others associated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, the World Council of Hindus) have remained distinctly religious in nature and include gurus with large followings, popular festival, shrine and pilgrimage movements as well as Neo-Hindu organizations.

Other Hindu reform movements tried to accommodate and adapt Christian concepts, particularly to oppose idolatry and caste practices. Hindu response to Christianity is exemplified in the Hindu Renaissance of the nineteenth century. The Brahma Samaj was the most influential new movement, founded in 1828 at Calcutta by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), pioneer Hindu social reformer, as a theistic society intended to precipitate a renewal movement in Bengal. Inspired by Christianity, yet derived from the Upanishads and the Gita, theistic and hostile to the Vedanta of Sankaracharya, the Brahma Samaj may be considered a Hindu revival movement. *The Precepts of Jesus*, compiled by Roy, reveal a theistic, rational interpretation of the New Testament. Roy had considerable interaction with the Serampore missionaries with whom he initially collaborated, then entered into controversy over the issue of Christology. At this early stage of encounter, Roy was not prepared to embrace the full-orbed Christological and Trinitarian creed defended by Joshua Marshman (1768-1837) whose rigidity did not permit latitude for an Indian approach to the mystery of Christ. The Church was deprived of a potentially innovative theologian and a distinctly Indian theological perception. Roy rejected the Hindu concept of *avatar* (multiple incarnations) which he regarded as idolatry and with it the Christian doctrine of Incarnation which he thought violated the Oneness of God (Thomas, 9).

In contrast to Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen (1836-1910) had no difficulty accepting belief in Incarnation. Sen is a key figure in the Hindu dialogue with Christianity and is a pioneer in the development of Indian Christian theology, although he never became a Christian. Dissatisfied with Hinduism, he began to study the Bible and Christian theology. In 1857 Keshub joined the Brahma Samaj, and soon became its leader. Keshub was devoted to Christ, and called himself the slave of Jesus. Many Hindus regarded him a Christian. Christ became the center of his life. There is no denying the reality of his experience of Christ and the genuineness of his effort to express his experience and understanding of Christ in terms of his own familiar Indian tradition. Keshub's lectures bear witness of his love for Jesus (Scott, 106).

The "Brahmo" movements were strongly theistic, cordial to Christianity, and stand in contrast to movements marked by hostility such as the Arya Samaj founded by Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) as a missionary movement for the propagation of the Aryan religion and the reconversion of converts to Islam and Christianity back to the Vedic faith. The stance of the Arya Samaj is decidedly anti-Christian. Christians are considered deluded, all non-Vedic religions false. The Vedas alone are inspired, the Vedic religion true. Despite its apologetic and polemical tone, the Arya Samaj expressed belief in a personal God and concern for justice and

compassion, ideas possibly derived from the Bible and the teachings of the missionaries (Neufeldt, 39).

Less vitriolic than the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission founded by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) established Neo-Hinduism as a modern missionary religion. Vivekananda rejected the Christian concept of sin and a fallen humanity in need of saving grace, and opted instead for a mystical Christ and the mystic's experience of the Ultimate. The vast system of educational and social institutions of the Ramakrishna Mission resemble the institutional expressions of the Christian mission prominent in Bengal at that time. In many respects the Mission founded by Vivekananda appeared a Hindu replica of the Society of Jesus. Vivekananda's participation in the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 launched a missionary career dedicated to the advance of Vedantic Hinduism. Critical of Christianity, Vivekananda nevertheless recognized Christianity as a legitimate religion, and he had a great admiration for Christ. But his was a Vedantic Christ, interpreted according to Vedanta (Mathew, 127).

Other new religious movements also arose, sometimes in reaction to the Christian message, more often due to inappropriate methods and approaches of insensitive messengers. A case is documented in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, wherein one Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879) appropriated Methodist circuit preaching methodology to propagate Saiva Siddhanta as a monotheistic religion. An interesting feature is Navalar's use of the Bible to demonstrate similarity between the temple worship of Siva and the worship of Yahweh in the Old Testament in order to prove that Siva linga worship was "Biblical" and thus to counter the missionary attack. From the Saiva viewpoint not the Saivites but the Christians are the heathen "because they do not know the true God, Siva" (Hudson, 29).

Religious movements aside, a number of key individuals interacted significantly with Christianity. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), *mahatma* and nationalist, during the 1920s and '30s carried on an active dialogue with Christians in India. Initially repelled by missionary denunciations of Hinduism as superstition, Gandhi later came to an appreciation of the New Testament and especially the Sermon on the Mount. He interacted with several Christian friends. Among them were C.F. Andrews, whom he regarded as a model Christian, and E. Stanley Jones with whom Gandhi exchanged views concerning conversion and other vital issues. Gandhi objected to the Europeanizing of Indian converts to Christianity. Untouchability however was an issue over which they disagreed. Although Gandhi remained a Hindu, eventually there emerged a "Gandhian Christianity" in which Gandhi was interpreted as putting Christian ideals into practice (Webster, 94-95).

Quite a different approach is that of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), late President of India and brilliant philosopher and Hindu apologist, whose disagreement with his Christian teachers led him to a radical re-interpretation of Christianity according to a Vedantic hermeneutic. Radhakrishnan rejects the uniqueness of Christ, and affirms the superiority of Vedanta. To Radhakrishnan, "Hinduism is not just another religion but the very essence of all religious thinking" leading to monism and Advaita Vedanta (Kalapati, 27). Radhakrishnan presupposes a Christianity indebted to Eastern sources, a thesis not supported by historical evidences, and draws a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith—the latter resembling his Vedantic Christ. The resurrection, in this interpretation, is not historical and physical but symbolic and metaphysical, and true religion is measured not by doctrine but by

religious experience. Despite deviations, Radhakrishnan borrows values from Christianity (Kalapati, 169).

From these explicitly Hindu responses we turn to examples of distinctly Hindu-*Christian* approaches to theology and witness.

III. HINDU CHRISTIAN APPROACHES TO THEOLOGY AND WITNESS

One of the most interesting contextual experiments in mission history took place in the early seventeenth century in India. Early missionaries in India included scholars who made important contributions to the understanding of Indian cultures. The brilliant but controversial Jesuit scholar, Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), is one example, whose radical cultural adaptations were viewed as a threat by the Portuguese ecclesiastical authorities, but who stands as a model of adaptation. His purpose was “to show that the Christian faith could be thought and lived in a truly Indian way” (Clooney, 73). Nobili demonstrated that one could be Indian without being Hindu, and Christian without being European. A remarkable scholar and critical thinker, Nobili wrote theological treatises in Tamil and insisted that religion and culture can be separated.

De Nobili's approach was through the traditions of Hinduism. While strictly Hindu religious practices were removed, other traditional practices were Christianized. Roberto de Nobili is a rare example of inculturation far in advance of his time. His adaptation was not superficial, i.e. it was not confined to dress and symbols, but represented a profound appreciation and appropriation of Tamil culture as a vehicle for Christian faith. In S.M. Michael's opinion, de Nobili so Tamilized Christianity that he touched the heart of Tamil culture. His adaptations enabled the Christians to retain their Tamil cultural identity. “As a result, the converted Christians were not culturally alienated from the other non-Christian Tamilians” (Michael, 63).

Nobili's career at Madurai was marked by controversy. Still today the persistence of caste in the Tamil Church has been blamed on Nobili's accommodation policy. But according to historian Saulière, “it is not correct to say that Nobili brought the caste system into the Church; rather he brought the Church into caste-ridden society, and Christianised it” (Sauliere, 497). De Nobili is castigated by modern critics for methods designed to appeal exclusively to the Brahmins and other “twice-born” castes. It should be noted however that most converts were from the lower castes who were not excluded by his ingenious approach.

De Nobili's greatest contribution was through his scholarship. The author of more than twenty books in the Tamil language, he is regarded the father of Tamil prose and has been honoured for his contribution to Tamil culture. His accurate knowledge of the people, fluency in speech and writing, opened an approach to the Tamil people the fruits of which still continue. De Nobili gave a terminology for Christian theology, a vehicle for conveying Christian ideas. Still today the Tamil Church--Protestant, Pentecostal and Independent as well as Catholic--builds upon the foundation laid by de Nobili and other missionary scholars.

India has produced a number of thinkers and leaders representing an “Indian” perception of the Christian church and theology, e.g. Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya (1861-1907), Nehemiah Goreh (1825-1885), Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929), P. Chenchiah (1886-1959), V. Chakkarai (1880-1958), M.M. Thomas (1916-1996) and others.

None is greater than the diminutive Pandita Ramabai Dongre Medhavi Saraswati (1858-1922), social activist and advocate of women's rights, a Marathi Chitpavan Brahmin convert to Christianity. Her own passage into Christian faith was in stages beginning with conversion to the reformist Brahmo Samaj whose monotheism she later came to perceive as Christian in origin. Although she no longer accepted or practiced Hindu religious beliefs, she never reviled the Hindu heritage received from her devout parents. Ramabai regarded herself as both Hindu and Christian (Ramabai 2003, 21,36). An initial intellectual conversion to the truth of Christianity was followed years later by an intense spiritual awakening. From this further conversion stems Ramabai's evangelical identity combining intense spirituality with a vigorous social engagement. Her interest in Keswick Holiness brought openness to the 1905 revival at Mukti Mission with accompanying Pentecostal manifestations, Pentecostal religious experience showing affinity to the *bhakti* expressions of the devotional Hinduism in which Ramabai was nurtured, the mystical tradition common to both.

Convert to Christ that she was, she declined to engage in negative polemics and endeavoured to maintain a policy of religious neutrality in her Home for widows. Without apology she exposed the deplorable condition of Hindu women, and, in the spirit of a true reformer, did everything in her power to bring about change. To accomplish this objective she spoke in Hindu temples on behalf of women, and in 1889 became the first woman to address the Indian National Congress. Pointing out that Christ came to fulfil, not to destroy; Ramabai urged upon Christian missionaries the importance of studying the sacred writings of India in order to appreciate something of the religious values which have sustained the Hindus through the ages. She wrote, "I, who have adopted the Christian faith, and entered sympathetically into the elevated spiritual teachings of that faith, am anxious that my Christian friends should know, too, what is good and true and beautiful in the teachings of our books" (Ramabai 2000, 23). In her conversion Ramabai neither rejected her own cultural background nor identified with Western observances.

At Kedgoan Ramabai channeled the enthusiasm of the revived community into famine relief work as well as social rehabilitation. In this way the spiritual awakening had an enduring influence in Maharashtrian society. Mukti Church continues today, a unique indigenous legacy of one of India's greatest women, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, one of the makers of modern India.

Not only Ramabai but others from a *bhakti* tradition were drawn to Christ, e.g. the famous Marathi poet, Narayan Vaman Tilak (1862-1919). Dissatisfied with orthodox Hinduism, through reading the New Testament Tilak became convinced of the truth of Christianity following a protracted period of mental conflict. Conversion brought alienation and persecution from his family and the Chitpavan Brahmin community. Eventually his wife Lakshmibai returned, believed, was baptized and became Tilak's greatest supporter and encourager. An acknowledged Marathi literary figure, Tilak brought his poetic gifts to the service of Christ and the Church. He utilized forms of Marathi spiritual literature to communicate the teachings of Christ. Some 250 of his hymns are found in the Marathi hymnal. In place of translated Western hymns, Tilak introduced the singing of *bhajans* and brought the use of *kirtan* into the Marathi Church, thus enriching its devotional life through familiar art forms. Tilak never gave up his Indian cultural birthright, but brought the riches of his Hindu heritage into the Church.

Of all Indian Christians, the best known is said to have been Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929). Born in Punjab of devout Sikh parents who also read the Gita and followed Hindu

teaching, Sundar Singh was nourished on the Hindu scriptures. His mother, he claimed, instilled in him the love and fear of God which prepared him to work for the Lord as a Sadhu (Appasamy, 18). Prejudiced against Christianity, distraught and in despair, he prayed for God to reveal Himself, failing which he determined to take his own life. In his own words, “I remained till about half past four praying and waiting and expecting to see Krishna or Buddha, or some other *avatar* of the Hindu religion; they appeared not, but a light was shining in the room....and in this light there appeared, not the form I expected, but the living Christ whom I had counted as dead....” (Singh, 55). This encounter was Sundar Singh’s conversion. From that point in time he became an ardent disciple of Christ. In Sundar Singh we meet an evangelical Indian mystic. In Singh’s thought, meditation along with dreams and visions were possible vehicles for receiving Divine messages. Sundar Singh’s mystical theology is Christocentric. He affirms the uniqueness of the Incarnation. Salvation is a work of the Holy Spirit for those who repent and believe in Christ.

A more recent Punjabi Sikh follower of Christ, Bakht Singh (1902-2000), converted in 1923 while an engineering student in Canada, returned for a ministry of faith and preaching all over India. The sermons of Bro. Bakht Singh were simple Bible expositions. His theology as revealed in the sermons is Biblicist, Christocentric in content, devotional in character. Bible teaching is a hallmark of the Assemblies (Movement) with which he was associated. Weaknesses notwithstanding, the ministry of Bro. Bakht Singh and the Assemblies is a remarkable indigenous Christian witness (Koshy 2003). What is not often recognized is the Punjabi nature of the Movement with worship patterns borrowed from the Gurdwara. Cultural practices have been Biblicised, and North Indian cultural forms adapted and followed throughout a Movement which is largely South Indian in composition.

A distinctly Hindu-Christian theological response is exemplified in the *logos* theology of Brahmabandhav Upadhyay (1861-1907). Committed to the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ, Upadhyay was equally convinced that God’s revelation in Christ should be expressed in Indian categories. For example, the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity should be re-stated in Sanskritic terms as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*. This gave rise to Upadhyay’s Cantic to the Trinity, *Saccidananda*, a Christian hymn indigenous to the soil of India expressing the doctrine in a contextual lyrical format appropriate to the culture (Tennent, 255). More recent Christian-Hindu theological dialogue focusing on the doctrines of God and creation have had the objective of understanding each others beliefs, clearing misunderstandings and answering objections (Tennent 2002).

Hindu-Christian followers of Christ are many and extend far beyond the borders of the Church. Expressions are found in art forms adapted and utilized in architecture, poetry, music, dance, painting and more which are beyond the scope of this paper. The impact of Hindu-Christian interaction upon theology and Christian history is considerable.

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