

# IJFEM

Volume 18, Number 1

Spring 2001

## Evangelical Neo-Marxism

in

# India?

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# From the Editor's Desk

**A**s the *International Journal of Frontier Missions* nears its two-decade mark, a bit of a crisis has loomed and IJFM now has a default editor. (How deeply we are indebted for all the years Hans Weerstra has served us.) Depending on how we react, things can go down or up, but they are not likely to stay the same.

In the first place, there is nothing out-of-date about frontiers in mission. Nor is it a case of old-age senility. Our nearly two decades of history certainly has less to do with the number of those years than with two facts:

*First*, we have just crossed an enormously prominent historical date, the boundary of the third millennium, and thus the steam is now gone for work toward that date. Indeed, in the founding purpose of the associated *International Society for Frontier Missiology*, the initial purpose included, quite understandably, the question "What can we do by the end of the year 2000?" But that kind of steam is now gone.

*Second*, not only are those frontier goals (hastily assembled in order to take advantage of the prominence of the goal date) now no longer borne aloft by the aspirations of reaching them by that very special date—an almost unrepeatable date—also, the idea of gaining a "missiological breakthrough" into every "unimax people" by the year 2000 can now be seen as never more than an intermediate goal for most of us. But it was a strikingly concrete goal. However, now the relevance of an intermediate goal that might be reachable by a terrifically prominent date has lost a lot of meaning, and must now finally be recognized as intermediate.

OK, so we quit?

Or, do we now find ourselves forced into a highly productive review of mission frontiers in general? And, now that we are released from an artificial goal date, can we now more soberly and realistically widen our vision to take a great deal more into account?

There certainly would be no good reason to continue with either the *International Society for Frontier Missiology*, or the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, if there were no more frontiers. Startlingly, now that we are released from a possibly reductionist pragmatism (which was intermixed in some people's thinking about "reaching peoples"), a whole host of both related and unrelated but genuine, crucial frontiers now cry out for our attention. This is not the place to list some of those (however, see the tentative description on page 32), or at least not the issue of IJFM in which to do so. This particular issue, however, breaks new ground in several ways.

# IJFM

January-March 2001

Volume 18:1

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## Subscriptions

One year (four issues) \$15.00

Two years (eight issues) \$28.00

Three years (twelve issues) \$40.00

Single copies \$5.00

Payment must be enclosed with orders.

Subscriptions are automatically renewed

and billed each year unless we receive

instructions to cancel. Please supply us with

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**IJFM** (ISSN #0743-2529) was established in 1984 by the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions. It is published quarterly.

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PRINTED in the USA

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*Startlingly, now that we are released from a possibly reductionist pragmatism (which may have been intermixed in some people's thinking about "reaching peoples"), a whole host of both related and unrelated but genuine, crucial frontiers now cry out for our attention.*

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We are not for the present going to continue with the four-color splendor which only a larger subscription list can justify. The same goes for meticulous prepress copy editing. When our number of subscribers grows sufficiently we can go back to that.

The contributions to this issue are the sole responsibility of the authors. World history has turned a corner now that all our writers have spelling checkers. We have in this issue, due to the time constraints of major events in India, been unable to impose our normal "style sheets" which require more thorough referencing than some contributions this time have.

Speaking of unusual time constraints, read carefully the editorial of the guest editor. His years of residence in India, and his appreciation for the massive and portentous events unfolding there in these very weeks are the catalytic force bringing into existence IJFM's first issue wholly on India.

He is not to blame for the slightly mischievous theme I have concocted: "Evangelical Neo-Marxism in India?" That is in part a teaser, but only in part as you will see as you peruse these significant articles.

What I mean by "neo-marxism," with tongue in cheek, is the simplistic idea that there is a good class of people and a bad class of people and that by

revolving the "good" oppressed class, so it will now be on top, thereby justice and peace will be automatically achieved. But in fact few of the articles deal directly with this eye-catching heading. In this issue are astoundingly different points of view, all helpful in certain crucial ways as we approach an equally astounding mountain of complexity.

The degree to which the world's largest democracy has been slighted by the mission movement in general is hard to understand and evaluate. *Now, however, major forces far beyond anyone's control are poised to transform India possibly beyond recognition.* This is potentially even far more significant than world terrorism. We can think of other nation-states destabilized almost without warning due to gradual awarenesses and sweeping convictions.

It is very late but not certainly too late for even a hastily assembled group of papers to focus our attention on the immensity that is India, and the forces there which are moving ever more swiftly, almost like flood waters in this amazingly advanced and yet surprisingly and dangerously troubled collective giant. I have to congratulate our guest editor for including such an arresting, scintillating and diverse set of earnest and informed perspectives.

But back to the future. As a default editor I can promise you that every article in every issue from now on, and perhaps for the past, will be available for downloading from the Internet ([www.wciu.edu/ijfm](http://www.wciu.edu/ijfm)). It is already clear that the Internet nicely complements the printed page. But it is apparently not likely to replace the durable and handy sort of thing you hold in your hands.

Indeed, we expect a web site will enlarge our hard copy subscription base, not reduce it nor compete with it. Ever try underlining on an Internet screen?

Hard copy you can take with you where computers cannot conveniently go. But once a hard copy article captures our attention, we may wish to download it for interleaved comments to be sent by email to the author and to friends. Furthermore, the Internet will shortly function as a breeding ground for future issues, attracting additional contributors to article-themes which will focus on a series of frontiers. We already have planned two-years of issues by guest editors focusing on specific arenas of thought. On our web site you will see posted these themes and you can ponder your own contribution to them.

Now, make sure in the next few weeks you find two friends who will join our growing subscription list!

*Ralph D. Winter*  
Editor

# Guest Editor's Page

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*The need for an edition devoted to the issue of the West's response to oppression in India has arisen from several current and potentially explosive developments in India.*

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In the history of the IJFM there have been a number of special editions. However, this particular edition is unique in several ways. First of all, the need for an edition devoted to the issue of the West's response to oppression in India has arisen from several current and potentially explosive developments in India. Thus, this is the first time that a special edition of the IJFM has been devoted to a real-time crisis. I might add that because of the urgency related to this edition, the authors were only given three weeks to submit (from the time of invitation). Secondly, this is the first special edition devoted to the Hindu world. Thirdly, this is an edition that comes directly from the field. All of the selected authors have worked or are currently working very closely with the problem of oppression in India at the grassroots level. And, as you will see, most have been wrestling very deeply with the missiological issues related to this topic.

As you will soon see also, there is no convergence of view on how to best deal with the oppressed and oppression in India. Yet, in light of several of the developments unveiled in this edition's articles, there is a greater need now than ever for convergence. The West must now quickly determine and adopt a united approach in this highly volatile matter. Mistakes by the Christian West in this matter may now carry with them a much higher penalty than they have in the past. For this reason, we are adding one additional novelty to this special edition: a request for feedback and input. During the next three months from the date of this issue, we invite 500 word maximum responses. These may be either reactions to any of the seven articles or the editorial contained herein or additional input related to our overall topic for this edition. We intend to include some of these responses in future issues of IJFM. These responses should be sent to our regular edition editor, Rory Clark. He can be reached via e-mail at [ijfm@wciu.edu](mailto:ijfm@wciu.edu) or via fax at 626-398-2101. Any who would be willing to expand their input into a full-blown journal article should so indicate along with their submission. Thank you.

*D. M. Burke*  
Guest Editor

# Why are Christians Persecuted in India? Roots, Reasons, Responses

by Herbert Hoefler

W e reap what we sow.” (Gal. 6:7)

“I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” (Mt. 10:34)

“If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also.” (Jn 15:20)

The fierce attacks on Christians in India have been reported nationally and internationally. Both Christians and Hindus have been taken by surprise by the breadth and ferocity of these recent developments. What are the roots, reasons, and responses?

## **Roots**

### **Pre-Colonial Mission Work**

If one surveys Christian mission history in India, it is remarkable how little violence missionaries faced. Fierce attacks were a fact of life in most mission work around the world, from Asia to Africa. However, Christian missionaries and converts were generally absorbed into the Indian society.

(In this article I will be referring to mission experience among the 82% of the Indian population that is Hindu. Mission experience among Muslims is entirely different. The Koran explicitly mandates the death of apostates from the faith.)

The Syrian Orthodox Church of Kerala has a strong tradition that Jesus' own disciple Thomas came to India and founded their church. His place of martyrdom and grave site are still publicly identified in Chennai City, Tamil Nadu. We know for certain that there was a Christian community in Kerala, as reported by Syrian traders in the 4th century. Some theorize that these traders founded the church.

For our purposes what is noteworthy is that this Christian community thrives till today. It has been accepted as one of the castes of that region. Generally, they do not do much evangelistic activity outside their ethnic group. A reform movement, the Mar Thomites, split off in the late 19th century under the influence of Protestant missions, and they are evangelistically active.

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For several centuries from the 8th century onwards, the Indian subcontinent was in upheaval because of the Muslim invasions. One of the cardinal principles of Islam is the removal of idols. They attacked and destroyed Hindu temples as they conquered the land. Of course, Hindu leaders fought back and eventually regained some hegemony in the land. When the British arrived and conquered in the 19th century, they dealt with both Muslim and Hindu kings.

Even during these tumultuous times, several Christian mission efforts went on peacefully. The great early missionary of the Jesuit Order, Francis Xavier, converted fishing communities all along the southwestern coast of India, and they remain as Christians to this day. Another famous Roman Catholic missionary was Roberto de Nobili, who presented himself as a Christian Brahmin in the 17th century and taught among the priestly castes around Madurai and its ancient temple. His work ran into much more opposition from rival Roman Catholic orders than from Hindu leaders.

Finally, the Protestant missions entered the India scene on the eastern coast of South India through the work of Ziegenbalg at the beginning of the 18th century. These Protestant missionaries learned the Tamil language and translated the Bible, gaining the respect of all levels of the society. William Carey's pioneering work around Calcutta in the north similarly was accepted and respected by social and political leaders. Carey's group also worked in Bible translation and education.

A common thread here absorption and accommodation. The Christian missions did not seek to change the Indian society but to add to it. Conversions were not a major issue, as the converts remained within the traditional social structures of the land. The missionaries worked

within the political and social structures, which accepted them as contributors to the general welfare of the society. Conversions did not spread across the society so as to become a threat to established structures and leaders.

### **Colonial Period**

Just as the Hindu community resisted the conversions associated with the Muslim invasions, so resistance developed during the British colonial period: 1800–1947. Local peoples around the world resented how white missionaries came in and gained the trust of the people. Then other white people came in and exploited their trust. The expression of colonized peoples around the world was “The Bible first, then the guns.”

Of course, there was high tension between the missionaries and the exploiters in all these countries. Nonetheless, missionaries also used the protection and advantages of the colonial governments to advance their activities, including their conversion activities. People converted because it was economically advantageous in the colonial empire.

Missionaries were no longer vulnerable and powerless. They were politically secure and economically powerful. Conversions increased, especially among the marginalized in the society, but so also did resentment and opposition.

Missionaries also carried an aura of cultural superiority during this era. Just because their governments were militarily superior to other nations, they viewed themselves as culturally superior. Easily, their teaching of Christianity spread into a moral critique of the local culture. In India, the major moral attack was on the caste system, particularly its hierarchical character and the practice of untouchability.

The latter issue of untouchability (outcasts) struck a nerve. The critique was

accepted by many Hindu religious and political leaders. Mahatma Gandhi is renowned for his attempt to elevate the outcasts in their own eyes and in the eyes of the society by naming them “Harijans” (“children of God”).

Harijan caste leaders sprang up around the society, demanding social and religious reforms. A famous leader was B. R. Ambedkar. He decided that the Harijan community would never gain respect within the Hindu community. He debated whether to lead his mass of followers in Maharashtra State into Buddhism or into Christianity, since neither accepted caste. He eventually chose Buddhism, primarily because of its roots in Indian soil.

However, especially across southern India, masses of Harijans converted to Christianity. It was a social protest movement of liberation, which also had economic benefits within colonial India. Converts would often get educational and employment benefits from the missionaries. The missionaries also provided most welcome social services to these neglected and oppressed parts of the population, through schools and hospitals and economic uplift efforts.

Hindu reaction was a mixture of guilt and resentment. On the one hand, they could hardly defend their millennia of mistreatment and disrespect toward these citizens of their land. On the other hand, they felt they were being lured into an unwitting partnership with their country's enemies. We'll find these same mixed feelings evident in contemporary India, as a historical root of current violence against Christians.

### **Hindu Revival**

The Christian critique of Hinduism provoked a good deal of honest soul-searching and rethinking among Hindu leaders. When India achieved Independence in 1947, the Hindu polit-

*During the Independence struggles against the British, very few Christians sided wholeheartedly with their fellow countrymen. Many dalits felt quiet glee that their long term oppressors were now getting oppressed themselves.*

ical leaders enacted many social reforms derived from Protestant social critiques. Entry to temples could no longer be restricted, except to non-Hindus. Untouchability was banned, as was any discrimination on the basis of caste. In keeping with traditional Hindu tolerance of religious differences, the new Constitution's approach to secularism was to encourage all religions equally. For example, even today the state governments pay the salaries of teachers in all schools, whether run by the state or by any religious group.

In addition, the government set about remedial work among the historically oppressed sections of the society. Roughly 16% of the society are outcastes. Therefore, the government reserves 16% of all seats for higher education for these applicants, as well as stipends during elementary school, free high school hostels, and scholarships. Similarly, 16% of all government jobs must be allocated to this section of society. It is a highly courageous and generous "affirmative action" program which elevates the oppressed economically—though it does little to change social attitudes, of course. Another 6% is allotted to people from tribal backgrounds, as they also are oppressed and neglected populations. Together, these populations have given themselves a new name: "dalit," a title for all the long-oppressed peoples in the country.

In 1980, this uplift program was expanded to include over 3000 low caste groups (called "backward castes"). In

total, over 50% of the population now qualifies for these government benefits to some degree or another. Of course, there has been some resentment among higher caste youths, but the program has basically remained in place.

As Hindu leaders set about cleaning house, they also rebutted the religious critiques. Hindu religious leaders like Ramakrishna and his disciples Vivekanda confronted Christianity's presumption of superiority and assertion of exclusivity. Instead, they argued the traditional Hindu concept of universal salvation: "All rivers lead to the same ocean."

These arguments found ready acceptance in the liberal philosophical climate of Europe at the beginning of this century. Max Mueller's translations and explanations of Hindu philosophy gained a large, influential following. The Western world's affirmation of basic Hindu tenets, also in the spread of Theosophy by Annie Besant and even in Christian Science by Mary Baker Eddy, strengthened Hindu leaders in their assertion of Hinduism back home as well.

The Hindu critique extended also to Christian conversion activities. If all religions are different approaches to the same Reality, then why are conversions necessary? Indeed, Hindu leaders would point out that the vast majority of conversions from Hinduism took place only among the culturally weak sections of the society. Missionary work hardly dented the castes. Caste Hindus would

attend Christian schools for the sake of the excellent education through dedicated teachers, but very few would ever convert. Instead, they would accuse missionaries of "getting their numbers" by preying on the less educated and enticing the poor with "inducements" to convert.

Furthermore, Hindu revival leaders accused Christian missionaries of converting their people to Western culture as well. Religion and culture had become so intertwined over the millennia in India that the simplest day-to-day activities could be viewed as "Hindu." The easiest solution was to instruct converts to reject all these "Hindu" activities. Women had to dress and decorate themselves differently. Converts had to give up their "Hindu" names (often the names of different gods) and take new names (usually Western or Biblical names). Hindu converts had to eat beef and Muslims pork before they would be accepted for baptism.

Especially in the North where isolated individuals converted, converts were brought to the missionary compounds for their physical and spiritual safety. There they adopted Western ways and became known disparagingly as "compound Christians." These converts were lumped together with the Anglo-Indians (converts from Indian-British marriages and relationships), as cultural victims and fools.

During the Independence struggles against the British, very few Christians sided wholeheartedly with their fellow

countrymen. Many dalits felt quiet glee that their long term oppressors were now getting oppressed themselves. How could they “bite the hand that fed them?” Many feared for their safety once the British left the country. Their allegiance was seen to be with their missionaries and his people, rather than with their own people. To this day, that stigma remains.

We see that distrust of the Christian population yet today in the central government’s profound uneasiness over the mass conversions of tribal populations in Northeast India. This remote, vulnerable area borders China and Bangla Desh, both countries with which India has had border disputes and wars. American Baptists have publicly urged their church members to fight hard to preserve their faith and culture. But some local tribal leaders, deeply resentful and suspicious of their longtime mainland oppressors, have moved beyond that and called for outright secession.

Would Western church leaders try to persuade the US government to support such a movement? In the event of border conflicts in their area, might these Christian tribal groups move to provide a sympathetic base of operations for an invading army in hopes of gaining independence? No wonder the government tries to curtail Christian conversion activities but allows nationalist Hindu groups freely to work for reconversions.

## **Reasons**

These historical roots shoot up stems, which bear fruit even today. Politically, socially, and religiously we still have these historical tensions. These are the reasons cited today for persecution of Christians in India.

## **Socio-political Movements among the Oppressed**

As noted above, most mission work—both evangelistic and social service—

was done among the poor of the society. They were the ones who were responsive and in direst need. Whether they converted or not, they gained a new self-image through the proclamation of the Gospel and the critique of Hinduism. The formerly untouchables now were “harijans,” children of God.

This new self-respect resulted in social and political movements against their historic oppressors. Part of the movement was religious, as noted above. With a democratic form of government in the newly independent country, came the possibility of new political power. No longer would the oppressed quietly accept that they deserved their plight because of bad karma in previous reincarnations. The mission work had sown seeds of social revolution. Those in economic power in the land had reasons to oppose the spread of this “dangerous” thinking.

With political elections conversions were no longer just a religious matter. Conversions changed constituencies. A convert from Hinduism would be far less likely to accept his previous Hindu political leaders. Politicians do not want changes in the constituency which elected them. They had political reasons—though couched in religious terms—for inhibiting conversions as much as possible.

People with new self-dignity and new urgency for social justice organized themselves politically. One can note that the areas of the country with the longest history of Christian presence (Bengal and Kerala) are the ones with the strongest Communist influence. The Christian Gospel gave the new sense of dignity and urgency, and the Communist Party enabled those aspirations to be realized politically.

Similarly, dalit movements, primarily in the South—where Christian influence once again is the greatest—have man-

aged to elect dalit-dominated state governments. In these states of strongest Christian influence, there is little expectation that the Hindu-dominated, traditional parties will gain hegemony in the foreseeable future. These socio-political effects of Christianity are not unnoticed by threatened political powers in the land.

One current counter-reaction by Hindu landlords, especially in the North, has been to forcibly put down dalit socio-political movements. They have organized their own armies like Middle Age feudal lords in Europe. If any dalit leader or group rises up to assert their rights, these armies attack some remote dalit village away from government scrutiny or police intervention. Dozens of men, women, and children are indiscriminately killed, simply as a means of intimidation. Of course, the dalits claim that the government does nothing to protect them because they are controlled by these same Hindu landlords.

As we will see, Christians are known to be peaceful and non-violent. However, the spread of Christian teachings and critiques does have revolutionary socio-political ramifications. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when He said, as noted at the start of the article: “I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” These broader effects are very difficult to control and direct. One can understand why those in power would want to stop Christianity’s spread.

## **Religious Movements among Caste Hindus**

Of more significance evangelistically, are the anti-church religious movements among two-thirds of India in the Hindu caste system. I have intentionally used the term “anti-church,” as these pious religious seekers make a clear distinction between Christ and the church. As described above, the church is seen to be a product of the colonial period with all



the despised vestiges of Western culture and influence.

One of my major research efforts while at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, was among what I termed “non-baptized believers in Christ” (published as “Churchless Christianity,” 1991). I interviewed 83 NBBCs around Tamil Nadu, and we did a random sample statistical survey of Chennai City. We found about 200,000 people (mostly caste Hindus) in the city whom we identified as NBBCs. I would refer you to the book for details of this research.

At this point, I want to highlight how these people intentionally desire to keep themselves separate from the organizational church. They want to identify with their families and their culture. As long as this cultural commitment is clear, there are accepted within their families and castes. If they would take baptism, however, they would most likely be excluded.

I was back in India for two months earlier this year, and I had the opportunity to meet with a group that is working now with such NBBCs. These people call themselves “Jesu bhaktas,” devotees of Jesus. Within Hinduism, one is free to choose the god one wishes to worship, so such Jesu bhaktas are simply accepted as such devotees. One will even find pictures of Jesus in Hindu ashrams and temples, especially those associated with the Ramakrishnan movement. Of course, from the Christian standpoint, we would have questions about such religious syncretism; however, we do need

to recognize a very significant “Hindu” pattern of turning to Christ.

This Hindu pattern also involves a very strong rejection of the church (therefore, the rejection of Baptism). I hope to publish my several experiences in this matter from this last visit to India, but let me share a couple of items from the one group discussion. An itinerant Jesu bhakta who shared the three principles he advocates as he meets his fellow

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*One will even find pictures of Jesus in Hindu ashrams and temples, especially those associated with the Ramakrishnan movement.*

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believers around the country:

- 1) If anybody asks, tell them you're a Hindu (understood culturally in this case).
- 2) Never go to a church (they will come after you right to your home, embarrassing you and your family).
- 3) Do not go into full-time religious work (stay within one's family and carry out one's social responsibilities as a witness there).

Furthermore, the group listed 20 specific reasons why caste Hindus feel uncomfortable with church life and want to stay away from it.

The point for our purposes here is that Christianity in India is popularly viewed as repugnant to Indian culture. Baptism is viewed as an allegiance to a group and an organization allied with the West. The vast majority of India lauds spiritual training and social work, but conversions are opposed. The roots of these

attitudes and the reasons for the present persecution of evangelists are clear.

## **Hindu Nationalist Movements**

Such deep feelings will also produce political expressions. Just as the historic grievances and religious tensions in Northern Ireland have spawned the IRA in Irish Roman Catholicism, so has the religious history of India.

For more than a millennium—ever

since the Muslim invasions—the vast Hindu population of India has been fighting to maintain their culture.

The Hindu atti-

tude is one of tolerance and non-violence, rooted firmly in their basic doctrines. However, they have had to fight fire with fire, against often overwhelming military powers. Therefore, the militant nationalist groups of today are directly linked historically with the guerilla heroes of India's past.

These groups were the ones who worked the streets on behalf of the Hindu nationalist political party, the BJP, which currently heads the coalition national government in Delhi. They have protectors in high places, also at the state government level. They are generally identified as the perpetrators of the church burnings, attacks on seminarians and nuns, murder of missionaries (until recently only Indian missionaries), harassing of evangelists, opposition to church constructions, etc.

These violent activities are justified by their leaders as necessary to stem the tide of conversions in the country. They publicly warn that soon most of India will be Christian and the great Indian civilization will be lost. Such warnings

strike a tender spot in Hindu thinking, as one can imagine from the history recounted above. As much as Hindus are repulsed by the violence, they also are sympathetic to the goals and fears these groups express.

In addition, this Hindu nationalist thinking has been expressed in official government policy ever since Independence. No new foreign missionaries were to be allowed into the country, especially for evangelistic work. Government benefits made available to the dalits were denied to Christian dalits (on the basis that they do not observe caste; therefore, cannot be listed as one of these favored castes). Nationalist groups use these government inducements to promote reconversions to Hinduism. Informally, at the village level, Hindu landlords treat Christian field laborers as “the last hired and first fired.”

Political commentators have observed that the upswing in violence against Christians has coincided with the ascendancy of the BJP also for international strategic reasons. One of the first actions of the militant Hindu groups after the BJP’s election success was an attack on Muslims. They dismantled a mosque built centuries ago by Muslim conquerors at Ayyodhya, then the site of a Hindu temple commemorating the birthplace of the god Ram. Muslims around the country rioted, and the international Islam community (with all their oil power) rose in protest. The BJP soon experienced national and international repercussions that jeopardized the whole Indian economy—and their fragile hold on power.

Soon after that the militants turned their attention on the Christian community as the archenemy of Indian culture. In an excellent article on these developments in “The Christian Science Monitor” newspaper of Oct. 5,

1998, a Christian leader in Gujarat (a state where churches were burned and Christian workers attacked) is quoted: “They are going after us because we are an easy target and unlike Muslims we don’t riot.”

Western countries also do not band together to protect fellow believers abroad, as Muslim countries do. Such nationalist movements must have an enemy to fight. “The heat is off the Muslims; it is now on the Christians,” states a scholar from the Jawaharlal Nehru University in the article.

### **Responses**

At the beginning of the article, I quoted three Bible passages. The passage from Galatians 6 is intended to summarize how the mistakes of the past, primarily by foreign missionaries, have reaped serious consequences for the life and witness of Christians in India today. The above historical summary has illustrated how past roots have reaped current reasons.

What is remarkable, however, is how Indian Christians have risen above the consequences of the past. Already at Independence, Christian leaders refused to press for a reserved minority representation in the central parliament, as the Muslims had insisted on. Those Christian leaders admirably and courageously committed the small Christian community (2%) into the hands of the nation. They wanted to disassociate Indian Christianity from the colonial past and identify themselves wholeheartedly with the national cause.

### **Opportunity for Self-Reflection**

Similarly, these recent attacks have caused some soul-searching among Christian church leaders. The accusation of disloyalty to the nation has deep historical roots, as we have seen. During my recent visit, I heard leaders question why we don’t play the national anthem at church gatherings,

for example. Do we promote patriotism in our schools and congregations?

There also was self-critique concerning some missionaries’ evangelistic techniques. The criticism I heard was directed primarily at the independent Pentecostal Indian missionaries, who often have very little formal education. Their public sermons can be harshly critical—often quite ignorantly—concerning Hindu religious practices.

We are not called to ridicule others, but to proclaim the Gospel. Ridicule can only build up defenses against the message. Ignorant and offensive ridicule deserves to be resented and opposed. Jesus said we are blessed when we are persecuted and maligned when it is “because of Me,” not when it is because of our arrogance and belligerence. (Mt. 5:11)

I also found a far greater respect for the non-baptized believers in the country. When I first researched and advocated a sympathetic relationship with them, I experienced strong opposition in Christian circles. Now I found the most sympathetic were the Indian missionary organizations. They have accepted that Western church structures are alien to traditional Indian culture. They are looking for a positive proclamation of the Gospel, which enables people to follow Jesus while affirming their cultural heritage.

### **Opportunity for Witness**

These developments have thrown the national spotlight on the Christian community. They welcome this. They agree that no one should be induced or forced to convert, and they welcome that such alleged abuses be investigated. They argue that none can be found.

Indeed, throughout the past decades when the inducement is rather against converting—and for reconverting—Harihans still join the Christian community and very few ever have reconverted. The Hindu community realizes the eco-

conomic sacrifices the Indian Christians make for the sake of their faith, for higher education and government jobs are the one clear way out of overwhelming poverty for a Harijan family. The Christian Harijans' religious loyalty draws clear attention to the meaning and strength they receive, and Hindus are strongly drawn to authentic spiritual experience.

Similarly, I was discussing with a Christian leader who had gone to Gujarat on behalf of the National Council of Churches of India to show solidarity with them and to pressure the state government leaders to give them protection. He said the Christians' adamancy and resilience were remarkable. They are simple tribal people, but their faith is an inspiration to all: "God is with us; what can man do to us?"

During the time I was in India, the tragic attack on the Australian missionary, his two sons, and companions took place. In fact, I was in a meeting with Indian Christian leaders of the organization Graham Staines served. When the news of the murders came, I was first of all struck at how matter-of-factly it was announced. Such attacks, especially on missionaries in the north of India, had become commonplace. Many of their Indian missionaries had been attacked and some killed; now it was a foreigner. I was reminded of Jesus' warning to His first disciples, as I cited at the start of the article: "As they persecuted Me."

I was also reminded of the early church's response to the attacks of the Jews as recorded in Acts 4. The leaders here also did not pray for protection or escape. They knew that persecution was inevitable in mission work. I've recounted above how even political movements and repercussions are an inevitable response to the new self-dignity which the Gospel brings. Instead, like the early

Christians, they prayed: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." (Acts 4:29)

That prayer was answered remarkably in the public witness of Mrs. Gladys Staines. Newspapers across India reported her answer to reporters when they phoned her at home the very day she heard the news. She witnessed that Jesus taught us to forgive our enemies and to pray for those who persecute you. She also thanked God for the many years her husband had been granted to serve the needy in the land.

As mentioned before, Hindus resonate wholeheartedly to deep spirituality, and they immediately acknowledged Ms. Staines as "a realized soul." "She is an example of divinity in a human being," wrote one Mr. Hanumantha Rao in a letter to the editor printed in "The Hindu" daily newspaper of 28th January 1999. The spotlight of the nation was on her, and the Holy Spirit used her to proclaim the Good News clearly and powerfully. To the great credit of India's Hindu population, their leading religious spokespersons immediately praised the Christian and condemned their own misguided Hindu thugs.

These events also raised to national attention Christian work on behalf of the poor and needy around the country. Once again, Hindu religious writers came to the defense of the Christian workers and their converts. One should not be surprised, said editorialists, that people who have been oppressed by Hinduism for millennia should convert to the religion of those who serve them so devotedly. For example, Mr. Dhiraj Kumar wrote in his letter to the editor in the "India Today" magazine (February 22, 1999) the following call to fellow Hindus to introspect rather than attack:

**"Those who feel threatened by mass conversion should ask what they have done for the tribals and downtrodden other than exploiting them and denigrating them as untouchables. At least in the name of religion the missionaries have provided such people with opportunities for education and health care. The solution for saving Hinduism lies in retro-spection and not in employing violence."**

Christians have bonded together in response to their hostile environment. However, they have gathered to pray and march in silence, rather than to riot or retaliate. They have carried the Gandhian mantle in this situation, to the admiration of the Hindu population. Ironically, in the name of protecting and preserving Hinduism, the descendents of those Hindu nationalists who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi continue to desecrate their own heritage, while Christians enact it.

We pray that through all of this God's Spirit can bring a new reputation for the Indian Christians in the land. We pray they can be accepted and respected as the pre-colonial Christians were because of their vulnerability, sincerity, and spirituality. As in the original Jerusalem congregation, they will be seen "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people, and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:47) **IJFM**

# The Dalit Situation in India Today

by John C. B. Webster

According to the 1991 Census there were about 138,200,000 Dalits in India and they constituted about 16.5% of the entire population of India. The 2001 Census has now been completed. The total population has risen to over one billion, but we do not know yet what the Dalit total is; however, if past trends continue, we may safely assume not only that the Dalit population will also have increased but also that the Dalit proportion of the total population has risen as well.

## **Dalit**

“Dalit” (Oppressed) is the name which the people belonging to those castes at the very bottom of India’s caste hierarchy have given themselves. Formerly, they were known as Untouchables, because their presence was considered to be so polluting that contact with them was to be avoided at all costs. The official label for them has been Scheduled Castes, because if their caste is listed on the government schedule, caste members become eligible for a number of affirmative action benefits and protections. Dalits have chosen the “Dalit” label for themselves for at least three important reasons. First, the label indicates that the condition of the Dalits has not been of their own making or choosing; it is something which has been inflicted upon them by others. Thus, secondly, there is an element of militancy built into the label; Dalits seek to overcome the injustices and indignities forced upon them so as to gain the equality and respect hitherto denied them. “Dalit” also indicates that all these castes (Pariahs, Chamars, Mahars, Bhangis, etc.) share a common condition and should therefore unite in a common struggle for dignity, equality, justice and respect under a common name.

## **The Dalit Political Strategy**

Both historically and currently Dalits have adopted four strategies, singly or in combination, in order to attain these ends. The first and most dominant has been the political strategy of gaining power either as an end in itself (if you have power, others come to you and you do not have to go begging to them) or as a means to other ends (e.g., greater economic and educational opportunities).

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However, Dalits have been divided over whether to pursue political power independently of other castes or in alliance with those members of other castes and communities whose interests and ideals are close to their own.

For example, there are at present Dalit members of Parliament and of State Legislative Assemblies, as well as Dalit party workers, in virtually all the major political parties, including the Prime Minister's Bharatiya Janata Party, which in its traditionalist Hindu ideology, is

### ***Their Economic Strategy***

The second strategy has been economic. Not only are Dalits extremely poor (almost half of them living below the poverty line as compared to less than one-third of the rest of the population) but they are also almost totally dependent upon the dominant castes for their livelihoods as agricultural or urban labor. Thus many Dalits have sought greater economic independence, both as an end in itself and as a means to other ends (e.g., political power, educational

## Over the past 125 years, so many Dalits have converted to Christianity that today the majority of the Christian population of India is Dalit!

quite anti-Dalit. There are also exclusively Dalit political parties at the regional level and two Dalit-led political parties, the Bahujan Samaj Party of Kanshi Ram and Ms. Mayawati as well as the Republican Party of India, have members of Parliament as well. The Dalit debate within and between the various parties over whether to get whatever share of power Dalits can through whatever alliances are most expedient or to maintain pressure from outside on those in power by maintaining some ideological and programmatic unity, at least among Dalits themselves if not with other disadvantaged groups (tribals, religious minorities, women, the poor in general) as well, has yet to be resolved. As this brief description suggests, there is little political unity among Dalits at the present time and many are wondering out loud whether the political process can deliver what Dalits have every right to expect from it.

opportunity). During the past decade a good number of international development agencies, both religious and secular, have also adopted this strategy by funding a variety of grassroots Dalit organizations engaged in a range of community development activities. These activities focus on such things as small-scale industries, teaching new skills, educating Dalits on how to take advantage of government development assistance, developing cooperatives. The task is enormous. Over 75% of the Dalit population is still rural and so these activities have to be carried out village by village. They also face opposition within each village from members of the dominant castes who want to keep Dalits as an impoverished and dependent source of cheap labor.

### ***The Social Strategy***

A third strategy, which can be described as social, has two components. Education is one. If Dalits become literate (10.2% in 1961, 37.4% in 1991) or even educated, they can move beyond

unskilled labor, earn more money, and so gain greater respect. The other is making life-style changes which get rid of those practices considered especially "low" or "polluting" and substituting those of the "higher" castes instead. For example, they should give up eating certain meats and cease working at certain jobs (e.g., cleaning latrines). The aim of education and life-style change has been to remove some of the more obvious reasons for anti-Dalit prejudice.

The social strategy was adopted by the Christian missions over a century ago and it still dominates the churches' thinking about improving the Dalits' lot. Today there are churches which are not only giving special priority to Dalits in some of their institutions of formal education, but are also developing job-oriented, nonformal educational projects to enhance skill development. The social strategy has also undergirded much of the affirmative action policy built into India's constitution. The assumption is that if Dalits get educated, get better jobs, and earn more money so as to raise their class status, then their caste status (measured in terms of mutually respectful and friendly relations with members of "higher" castes) would improve also. The problem has been that the government (controlled by the dominant "higher" castes) has never fully implemented all the progressive affirmative action legislation it has passed into law. This is a source of great resentment, especially among educated Dalits.

### ***The Religious Strategy***

The fourth strategy has been religious in nature. Its moderate form involves reform from within one's own religious tradition. For example, some Hindu sects have renounced caste hierarchy and some Hindu reformers, Gandhi being the best known, have sought to "uplift" the Untouchables. The more radical religious option, however, has

been conversion to another, more egalitarian religion. For example, over the past 125 years, so many Dalits have converted to Christianity that today the majority of the Christian population of India is Dalit! Following the induction of their great leader, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, into the Buddhist Sangha in 1956, several million Dalits have become Buddhists.

What a new religion offered to the Dalits was a new identity defined by religion rather than by caste, as well as a more egalitarian religious counter-culture. This has been only partially successful. No matter what goes on in Christian or Buddhist circles, most Indians still think in terms of caste and so simply assume that anyone who is a Christian or Buddhist is a Dalit. Moreover, both Christian and Buddhist Dalits were denied the affirmative action benefits and protections granted to other Dalits; in 1990 the Buddhist Dalits became eligible and Dalit Christians are still ineligible. By denying these to Christian (and Muslim) Dalits the government is in fact providing strong economic disincentives to conversion and strong economic incentives to Christian Dalits to return to the Hindu fold.

### ***The Christian Dalits***

As this brief analysis suggests, the present situation of Dalits in India is complex and confusing. There are no obvious, agreed upon solutions to the problems which the Dalits face; the way forward in the Dalit struggle is by no means clear. However, there are a few trends visible among Christian Dalits which are quite important for Christian thinking on this subject. First and foremost among these is a growing acknowledgement that they are Dalits and that conversion to Christianity has not really changed that significant fact of their lives, despite hopes and promises to the contrary. Most

Christian Dalits thus have a dual social and psychological identity, Christian as well as Dalit, and have to live with the tensions built into that dual identity.

A second trend is an increasing assertion of Dalit identity as a positive thing, a source of pride rather than of shame. In this they (rightly) challenge pervasive cultural norms. One expression of this assertiveness is Dalit Theology; another is a harsh critique of those missionary and Indian Church leaders who, in their efforts to “Indianize” the Church, have equated “Indian” culture with Brahmanic instead of Dalit culture. (One reason why Dalit Christians have resisted a lot of efforts to “Indianize” the theology and liturgy of the Church is because they are fed up with the Brahmanic culture which they converted to get away from!) Perhaps most obvious of all are the persistent efforts to “raise the caste issue” and exorcise the demon of caste discrimination (which is “Legion” and takes many forms) within the churches themselves. Until this is done, the churches cannot embody much “good news” for their own Dalit members, let alone for other Dalits.

Finally, there are Christian Dalits who are staunch advocates of each of the four Dalit strategies described above and are working hard at implementing those strategies. I see no evidence that one strategy, or even one combination of strategies, has become clearly predominant in Dalit Christian circles. What does seem evident, however, is that over the past two decades Christian Dalits are working more closely with other Dalits to achieve common aims and objectives than was true earlier. “Dalit Solidarity” is an end and means much desired but difficult to achieve; yet many Dalit Christian leaders have come to the conclusion that their Christian hopes for their own people cannot be realized in isolation from the realization of the hopes of all the Dalit people. **IJFM**

# An Indian Constantine?

by Vishal Mangalwadi

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ebuchadnezzar was God's servant although he was sent to destroy God's temple (Jeremiah 25:9). Cyrus—a pagan Emperor—was God's "anointed servant" who directed and funded the demoralized Jews to rebuild God's temple in Jerusalem (Isaiah 4:1, Ezra 6:1-12). Cyrus (or Darius) was moved by Daniel's fasting and prayer. He was stunned by Daniel's dramatic deliverance from the lions' den, but he also had political reasons to appease religious minorities.

Constantine the Great (AD 274-337) began experiencing the Lord Jesus in a vision in 312. He co-issued the edict of Milan (AD 313), which legalized Christianity and made it acceptable and respectable in Europe. He had probably become a believer in Christ by the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325, but he still tolerated Paganism. The man who played a historic role in Europe's Christianization did not himself become a baptized Christian until May 22, 337, shortly before his death.

None of these leaders fit our normal conception of "God's servants." It is not surprising that many Indian Christians cannot make sense of Mr. Ram Raj, a Deputy Commissioner of Income Tax in New Delhi, who is planning to lead a million Dalits ("oppressed") to abandon Hinduism and become Buddhists. If you meet Ram Raj in person you might be tempted to ask, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Some Christians are suspecting, if not rejecting, Ram Raj. However, I believe historians may judge him to be India's Constantine.

In order to appreciate Ram Raj's significance we need to understand the current ethos in the North Indian church as well as the mood of the lower caste Hindus. A few years ago three Hindus, who called themselves Ambedkarites, went to my (evangelical) pastor in Madhya Pradesh. They asked him to disciple and baptize them. Later they met me and told me that the pastor had said, "I don't care for Ambedkar. If you want to become Christians, you'd better find an evangelist. Converting someone is not my job. I am a pastor."

Last week our son-in-law and his associates received serious threats from militant Hindus for baptizing 21 people in one village over the past year. The first

*His crowd of one million Neo-Buddhists, Raj says, will stand there to defend the Christians' right to liberate those most oppressed by the Hindu society.*

reaction of some pastors in their town—some of them “evangelicals”—was to distance themselves from the frontline evangelists. Eventually 50 Christian leaders met together to affirm their solidarity, though some argued that conversions ought to be stopped.

Happily there are still courageous Christians left in North India who will risk their lives to disciple and baptize seekers. Sadly however, numerous threats, beatings and murder by Hindu radicals have prompted even “Bible-believing”, “evangelical” theologians like Rev. Valson Thampu to publicly call for a “Moratorium on Conversions.” My guess is that a majority in the North Indian Church would agree with that proposal.

It is this climate of fear and compromise that makes Ram Raj so fascinating a character. He is asking—and in fact, challenging—Christians to baptize at least 20,000, if not 200,000 Hindus in his rally. His crowd of one million Neo-Buddhists, he says, will stand there to defend the Christians' right to liberate those most oppressed by the Hindu society.

Ram Raj is reminding the Church of a truth it brought to the Indian sub-continent, that conversion is the most effective antidote to oppression. It was the British politician William Wilberforce who injected this truth into Indian consciousness during the battles in British Parliament (1793-1813) to permit Christian missions in British India. Ram Raj subsequently learned this truth from Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's writings.

Wilberforce was Charles Grant's mouthpiece for India, who argued in his

Observations (1792) that “light is the true cure for darkness.” Grant had lived in India long enough to experience its darkness—spiritual, moral, intellectual, and social. Yet he had experienced God's power to enlighten the darkness of his own heart, and had witnessed the power of the Gospel through John Wesley's work to reform a nation as corrupt as England. Grant believed that there was hope for India, and that this hope was in the Gospel. As a member of the Clapham Sect, a Member of Parliament, and the Chairman of the East India Company, he worked with Wilberforce to promote the cause of missions in order to bless India and to lead Hindus from darkness to light.

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar became the first “untouchable” to receive a Ph.D. (in Economics) from Columbia University in New York in 1916. He returned to serve as a minister to Maharaja Gaikwad of Baroda. Dr. Ambedkar found that his education and professional status did not earn him the respect that he deserved. He could not even rent a room in Baroda. Those of his caste had no rooms to rent and the upper-castes refused to rent out their rooms to him. They even had him evicted from a hotel room rented to him by a Parsi gentleman.

In disgust Dr. Ambedkar left for Bombay (now Mumbai). He then went to London to study law, returning to India with a second doctorate. By 1930 he had become a public figure. By 1932 he was the undisputed leader of the “depressed” classes in India. Yet, by 1935 he realized that the highest education, employment, money, social activism and political influence were

insufficient to liberate him from the indignity associated with having been born a “low caste” Hindu. Consequently he made his famous declaration: “I was born a Hindu; I had no choice. But I will not die a Hindu because I do have a choice.”

After India gained Independence in 1947, Dr. Ambedkar was appointed Chairman of India's Constituent Assembly. He helped write India's democratic Constitution that “abolished” untouchability and codified human equality. He then served as a minister in India's first government under Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru—only to find that neither Constitution, nor democracy, nor political power were sufficient to liberate India's oppressed people from Hinduism.

Four decades of public life and reflection drove Dr. Ambedkar to conclude that Grant and Wilberforce were right: more than anything else what India needed was conversion. He explained his position in his little book, *Annihilation of Caste*. He argued that Hindus do not ill-treat their fellow Hindus because they are worse than other human beings. They are as good or as bad as any other people in the world. They practice “untouchability” because it is central to their religion. Therefore, the only way to annihilate caste is to get out of Hinduism. In 1956, shortly before his death, Dr. Ambedkar publicly led over 300,000 of his followers in abandoning Hinduism and becoming Buddhists.

Sri Kanshiram, the founder and president of the Bahujan Samaj Party, revived the cult of Dr. Ambedkar in our generation, being inspired by the book *Annihilation of Caste*.



Kanshiram began his public life by establishing the “Buddhist Research Foundation;” he subsequently concluded that Buddhism was inadequate to help India’s oppressed.

Kanshiram therefore chose an exclusively political path to “salvation.” He succeeded in awakening the lower castes, but his path led them into a dead end. As a result many Ambedkarites have been knocking at the doors of Churches, often to be disappointed by fearful shepherds, concerned for their own safety, rather than caring for Jesus’ sheep. As a consequence, Ram Raj is now mobilizing a million Dalits (“oppressed”) to follow him from Hinduism into Buddhism.

The lower castes in India (including “Scheduled Castes”, “Scheduled Tribes” and “Other Backward Castes”) are at least 400 million people, of which about 200 million are often called “Dalits”—the most oppressed. They are victims of Hinduism and have no reason to remain Hindus. About four million of these have been educated and employed by the central, state, and local governments but continue to face humiliation because of their birth. Many of them agree with Ambedkar that they need to convert.

However, many also agree with Kanshiram that there is no salvation in Buddhism. Ram Raj says to such people:

**If you cannot live without worship of God or rituals then you should choose another faith like Christianity instead of remaining in the caste system.**

Because Ram Raj represents a politically influential group many politicians are supporting him hoping to encash his appeal, or at least to divide dalit votes between Kansiram and him.

Recognizing that many Dalits are already inclined toward Christ, Mr. Ram Raj has endorsed my evangelistic

book “Touch Thy Neighbor: Stories and Reflections on Untouchability.” (Please preview the text at [www.VishalMangalwadi.com](http://www.VishalMangalwadi.com)). Ram Raj is also supporting the plan of *Bibles For The World* to distribute a million copies of the Gospel of John in his rally. He has asked us to bring as many reporters, intercessors and volunteers as possible from all over the world to publicize, pray, distribute the Gospel of John, and my book in his rally.

Ram Raj’s appeal has a vital component that deserves our support. For two centuries Christians have spent their resources on educating the upper castes—many of who are now opposing, if not persecuting Christians in India and propagating Hinduism in the West. Ram Raj is therefore urging the Church to launch a vigorous educational effort for the lower castes, including establishing a Christian university. Incidentally, this was the very goal for which Charles Grant and Wilberforce had worked. It took them two decades to get the British Parliament (1813) to force the East India Company to spend Rs. 100,000 per year for educating Indians.

Ram Raj’s rally could trigger India’s cultural revolution, launching a tidal wave of Dalits and lower caste Hindus out of Hinduism. Many see the potential for conversions at an unprecedented scale. To me, Ram Raj’s movement offers the possibility of turning a cultural revolution into a “Reformation.” India’s cultural revolution will fizzle out as did the Chinese. Lasting blessings can only come from rebuilding our nation on biblical foundations. The question is would the church respond with vision, wisdom, speed and sacrifice? **IJFM**

# Fatal Hindu Gospel Stumbling Blocks

by D. D. Pani

The Western Missionary Movement (WMM), in its zeal to impact India for Christ, has inadvertently placed unnecessary obstacles in front of the gospel, tripping up many who might otherwise have sincerely sought Him, and turning away far more than have been reached. One high caste Hindu (who was eventually able to turn to Christ) has traced these obstacles to the fact that members of the WMM:

[have been] totally unable to distinguish between the cultural religion they tried to preach and the unadulterated Gospel of Jesus Christ as seen in the New Testament. ... Because of this ... all the arduous labors of expansion by a humane Christendom were frustrated beyond measure and the impact of Western Christendom in its religious terms remained quite limited.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the labors of the WMM have not been in vain. It has been observed that due to their great efforts, “most Indians accept Christ as the greatest manifestation of redemptive love.”<sup>1</sup> However, because of the many ways the WMM has violated the culture of India, most have been prevented from personally embracing Him. The Indian Church (the major offspring of the WMM) has for the most part continued in the example set before it and has itself become a major source of hindrance to the Hindu in his search for the true God.

Consequently, the gospel is currently advancing far more slowly than it should in India. Several major reasons exist, the most significant perhaps being the failure of the western effort over the last three centuries to properly engage the culture of India. Rather than unleash the power of the gospel on the Hindu establishment, the missionary movement has helped to re-ignite, reform and revitalize Hinduism. Incredible as it may seem, while seeking to free India’s masses through the regenerating power of the gospel, this movement has actually strengthened the grip of Hinduism on the hearts of many.

During the 20th century, various elements of the 19th century Hindu renaissance movement evolved into militant forms of Hinduism. *And these fanatical brands of Hinduism have merged into the most powerful political force in the country today.*

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Under their rule, there has been a significant rise in the persecution of Christians. Most recently this force has begun to mount an extensive and systematic effort to eradicate what is left of the WMM (along with most all non-technical Western influence). It is also now seeking to minimize the Indian Christian Church.

For all its failures, the Western missionary effort in India has been herculean, involving immense human energy and sacrifice on the part of many. The vast majority of these missionaries have been extremely sincere and have left behind much better material lives in order to obey their callings. In most all cases, they ministered in the ways they thought best. Many suffered great loss, yet continued undeterred. Most, if they could have recognized their actions as a source of stumbling, would have been horrified and would have immediately chosen to change.

It is not our place here to judge these great people of the past. Instead, for a better future, we must learn from the Hindu reactions to the passionate but culturally flawed efforts of the WMM. Even today, the Western eye cannot easily see many of the obstructions that have been created, as these impediments flow naturally out of subtle but fatal flaws in Western culture itself and in Western Christendom in particular.

India today is a nation in great tension. Though a form of stability remains for now, many strong forces are at work that could at any time cause the situation to rapidly decline into anarchy. More than ever before the WMM and the Christian West must strive to be more sensitive to Hindu culture so that they can act wisely in their future dealings with India. To accomplish this, we need a set of major paradigm shifts. Similarly, the Indian Church must be encouraged, through the remaining channels of

Western Christian influence, to make these same changes.

At present, the West's greatest need for wisdom lies in how it should deal with the issue of the repression of minorities in India. We (the West) also need to see and understand the unnecessary offenses caused by our past and present actions.

During my second tenure in India, I identified five of the gospel stumbling blocks facing the Hindu, obstacles that still remain nearly invisible to the Western eye. Many (including a number of non-believing Hindus) have written on the various problems associated with the missionary effort in India and made valid lists of items offensive to the Hindu. We would do well to study these works and humbly learn from them.

However, it is not my intent here to attempt to summarize even a small portion of these works. Instead, I want to unveil just three particularly serious stumbling blocks that are not so easy to discern and to explore (in somewhat limited detail) their origins.

### ***1. The Problem of Superiority of Culture***

Whereas in Paul's time, the Jews were best reached through signs—and the Greeks through logic—the Hindu world was (and still is) most influenced by demonstration with humility. Though admired worldwide for his general attribute of tolerance, the Indian Hindu has little-to-none for arrogance.

Since the Portuguese, there has certainly been much demonstration of Christ in India by the modern West. Sadly this demonstration has been accompanied by attitudes of narrow-mindedness and lack of teachableness. These attitudes extend not only to the various Hindu philosophies and religions, but to Hindu culture itself. Thriving in the wake of imperialism, the bulk of the Western missionary effort of earlier

generations also carried with it an air of self-believed cultural superiority.<sup>2</sup> Only rarely did Western missionaries truly seek to meaningfully engage the culture. Furthermore, except for the fact that its "air of superiority" stems more exclusively from its pride in coming from more technically and materially advanced cultures from those found in India, the current generation of missionaries is no different. To the sensitive Hindu, these attitudes neutralize the "demonstration" effort of the WMM and almost totally negate the Gospel. Such attitudes have also stifled the willingness of many Hindu intellectuals to engage in dialogue with Western Christianity. Thus, this arrogant Western mindset has been and is one of the greatest barricades to the Gospel in the Hindu world.

It is amazing to me the number of Indians who have gone through Christian schools (both Protestant and Catholic) without seriously considering Christ. It is also amazing how little it takes to discredit one's witness in this culture. One small display of anger—no matter how justified—will terminate one's witness, irrespective of the degree of demonstration that preceded the display. In such anger the Hindu sees arrogance (in the form of putting down the god-hood of another).

The advance of the Gospel is significantly threatened by those who have been preconditioned to believe in the superiority (and universality) of the Western form of Christianity *and* in the relative inferiority of Indian culture. Unfortunately, this includes not only most of India's missionary forces (both Western and Indian) but also the bulk of the Indian Church. By listening to those who advocate such demeaning views, the West continues in its cultural bias. Tragically, most of these spokesmen were then—and are now—unable to distinguish between Hindu culture and

Hindu religion. As a result, Hindu culture is viewed as evil, because the Hindu religion does not bring salvation.

## **II. The Problem of Rights and Rebellion**

After I had spent two and a half years serving professionally at an institution in India, a very perceptive friend and collaborator told me why I was not having a greater impact in the Hindu community. He related it to the attitudes this community could see in my eleven year-old son.

At first I was taken aback, but I listened and strained hard to understand without being defensive. My son was well behaved and a very good student. He was well immersed in the activities and social life of this community, as were my wife and I. But because of the culture of my home, he had become an intense individual and his strength of personality “exuded” from him. And this, my friend explained to me, was the problem.

In Indian culture, children normally remain very docile in the presence of adults and exhibit little personality in the presence of youth even just slightly older than themselves. In the company of adults they behave as if they have no rights and are very submissive to the unspoken social pecking order. On the other hand, I had taught my son (through the way he saw me react to others in the society) to respect those who proved themselves worthy of respect—and to express his personality.

In Indian culture age, position, caste and gender form the basis for respect. When a boy one year older than my son was bullying him because of his “seniority,” I taught my son to stand up for himself. Once, my son and his friends were playing cricket when a group of older boys chased them off the field and began to play. Upon learning this, I went and rebuked these boys for not respecting

the rights of the younger ones. I did not however repeat their “injustice” by chasing them off. My son watched and then listened in the local language to the discussions that followed among these older boys. Some greatly appreciated my chastening and further admonished the others, but most felt that the little children were not important and maintained their privilege to chase them off. Their beliefs followed from the culture of the home life that had reared them—as did my son’s.

Until the 14th century, the personal rights of the common Western European and common Indian alike were still heavily subjugated to the needs of the community. Thus, the individuality and personal creativity of most remained greatly suppressed. Soon, however, the combined and interactive energies of the European Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation set in motion forces that began to “liberate” the individual in Europe. In the West, the pendulum began to swing from the priority of community (in moderating one’s own actions) to that of the individual (i.e., from what is best for the whole to what is best for the part). For a time, this brought balance, and was accompanied by rapid advances in Western culture.

Currently in the West the pendulum has swung to a new and far more dangerous extreme. Yet in India (despite the invasion of values from the secular West, community) what is best for the whole still moderates most of the actions of individuals, even in the major metropolitan centers. The vast majority of Indian minds are still shocked by the rebellion of an individual (or group of individuals) against the social order, because such behavior is out-of-sync with community. What they would see as rebellion, we in the West would see as the expression of individuality. Through training my son

to radiate his personality, I had created a negative witness.

A great tragedy today is that much of the WMM work (both past and current) among low caste and no-caste Hindus represents “rebellion movements” against the Hindu social order. Both the Western “protest” mentality (which in the West has made Protestantism itself a movement that cannot be united) and Western imperialistic attitudes have worked together—and are still working together—to build a Church in India that is “liberated” from Hindu society. In some cases directly and in other cases indirectly (unintentionally), Indian Christians are taught to abhor Hindu culture and to treat with contempt what is considered to be the normal social order.

Providing “liberation” is sometimes justified based on a belief in the injustice of the oppressive control and exploitation of the lower castes by the higher. There is no denying that the caste system is unjust and exploitative. The lower class peoples are being subjected to much injustice. However, this justification is in no way in line with the spirit of the early Gentile church. Here is where the dogmatism of the Western Church and the reactive nature of the Protestant movement make it extremely hard for the preconditioned Western Protestant missionary to exercise wisdom. For both similar and different reasons, the same is true to for the Roman Catholic missionary.

The oppressed of the early church were taught by their leaders to accept suffering and loss at the hands of the culture (and its norms) for the sake of their faith and witness. The early church did not challenge many of the evil practices of the day (such as slavery) but taught its followers to be pro-active when trapped in such oppressive circumstances. The real power of their witness lay in their radiance in the face

of unjust suffering; this was the cutting edge of their witness. Martyrdom was common and persecution and oppression were the norm for many in various parts of the early Church.

Focusing on their great status as children and heirs of the creator God, they were thus free to give up their rights for the sake of their witness. They could choose with joy to be true followers of a Master who “like a lamb that is led to slaughter.... did not open His mouth.”

In contrast, the liberation effort in India today is reactive (rather than proactive) and is resulting in the polarization of Christians and Hindus. What the community-oriented Hindu sees as “the social order,” the reactive and rights-oriented Protestant (and Roman Catholic) sees as “subjugation and despotism.” What the Hindu sees as assisting in “rebellion,” the Western and Indian missionary sees as assisting in “liberation.” Because of the present day Western Protestant and Roman Catholic rights-orientation, submitting with joy to unjust oppression is not a viable or even possible option. Consequently, in the face of persecution in India today, Bishops protest and Christians march. Meanwhile the Western Christian community attempts to exert forms of external pressure.

The Hindu, who might have become a seeker, becomes permanently turned off upon seeing such displays. When Western intrusions turn small pockets of the lower castes against the ancient order, the high-caste peoples of a region become appalled. While temporary strides are perhaps being made among those groups being “liberated” by the WMM, the progress of the Gospel is being impeded overall. The expense of winning these intermediate battles (with these small pockets of

people) is losing the war (involving the vast majority).

In some regions in Northern and Central India, where larger pockets of low caste and no castes have been enticed to the gospel through the free provision of money and commodities (and liberation tactics), the regions themselves have become polarized against the gospel. Even many from the same social status as those being liberated are sickened at seeing their own kind separating from and defying the social order under the influence of foreigners (or South Indians). Of equal concern is the faith response of those being “won” under such circumstances. Most are responses to a soft gospel. Such a faith beginning does not often lead to deep commitment.

In a land of one billion, mostly without Christ, the progress of the Gospel needs to be accelerated, not hindered. There is a need both to consider an overall strategy that is appropriate and sensitive to the masses, and to subjugate these “short cut agendas” (that can so effectively win the few for the glory of the WMM) to “reason” for the good of the whole. Because utopia is not for this life, the early church was focused on the liberation of the soul, not the exercise of personal rights. In their spirit of humility, the Roman Empire was rapidly conquered for Christ.

Although we could, we will not take time now to consider the degrading effects of the problem of rights and rebellion on the effectiveness of the Western Church in reaching the West itself. I’ll simply state that, in part because of this very problem, the Western Church (though it is not yet ready to admit so) has lost its cutting edge in its home terrain.

### **III. The Problem of Control**

When I first came to India, I didn’t immediately mix with many Western missionaries, because I wanted to form independent opinions of the culture. However, I did seek some associations. The one I became most fond of was an individual about my father’s age. Over the next several years I came to appreciate this man’s great vision and burden for India. During his tenure—and with almost no Western financial support—he had raised up one of the finest Christian institutions of its kind in the country.

However, as my years of association with this good friend continued, I became convinced that he should have retired much earlier. In time I concluded that his retirement was more than ten years overdue. For the sake of her health, his wife had left the field many years before to prepare for their retirement. I became unsettled when I finally realized that he was never going to join her. Despite a generation difference in age, I began to gently probe this concern with my friend. Eventually, I realized two things. The first was that he could never let go of the institution he has raised up; the second was why.

Besides being a typical Western control-freak, he had raised up an institute that required a Western administrator to keep it going. It was a Western institution running on Western principles. Though he’d already hired a series of Indian administrators to make the institution “look” Indian-run, he still had to remain on site (behind-the-scenes) to ensure its function. Though a man of great faith and commitment, he knew deep inside that soon after he permanently left the scene his work would begin to decay.

His institution was bearing much fruit. But to me it became a symbol and mon-

ument of the failed strategies of the previous generations. Such strategies have resulted in dead-end institutions that can neither be sustained nor replicated. *These only enhance addition (rather than multiplication) in a country which now sees practically the population of Canada added to its ranks every year.*

I began to ponder the reason why so many of us in the WMM (myself included) have remained so committed to strategies that continue to fail in India. This, in time, led me to come to the following observations.

One major characteristic of the West that distinguishes it from the East is its need for control. The fatalism of the East stands in stark contrast to the aggressive self-determinism of the West. The Western mindset is focused primarily on the need to attempt to control the external—leaving little to chance. We Westerners attempt to control our own environments and time usage, our security and health, our involvements and theology, to the extent that we don't really need God. We analyze Him to the point where He no longer has many mysteries.

By contrast, the Eastern mindset is focused primarily on the need to attempt to control self—leaving the external to chance. For this reason, the culture of the West is far more structured and systematic than that of the East. India, for example, has not chronicled most of its own history. Indians are far more relational, spontaneous and open-ended. Hindu religious practices are far more individualistic and ascetic. By contrast, Westerners are more rigid in most aspects of their lives.

The outworking of both the Eastern (fatalistic) and Western (aggressive-self deterministic) systems have fatal flaws when it comes to faith. Simply stated, in the Eastern Hindu system, little is expected of God and the focus is on

reducing one's attachments to desired outcomes. In the Western Christian system, the focus (despite the rhetoric) is really on self-expectations. Further, in the Western system, the burden for a desired outcome ends up resting (in reality) on the agenda holder(s)—not God. One system teaches people to expect less of God, the other to expect more of self. The end result is the same for both systems: reduced faith. Yet, the intermediate results are very different. In the West, for example, the intermediate result is the propagation of control-centered structures.

These are gross generalizations, and in light of the advance of Western culture and technology into many sectors of the East, certainly lack universality.

The failure of the Western missionary movement to fully (or even partially) appreciate these great fundamental differences between East and West is a major hindrance to the progress of the Gospel in India. This failure helps explain why the West continues to try to establish institutions and movements in India that require their own structured and control-oriented mindset to maintain and why, in most cases, these works fail miserably when turned over to Eastern stewardship. There is also the problem of replication. Most of these works, even if they do provide some success, prove to be ends in themselves.

Fortunately, I see a new breed of Western missionary coming to India that is no longer focused as much on raising up Western institutions.

However, despite all the noise about contextualization and Church planting, I continue to see new ministries springing up that are operating from Western motivations. From the reference point of faith, the "control" emphasis of the West continues to involve degrees of unbelief—especially the emphasis of control through the use of Western financial support.

Today, with the tremendous emphasis placed on church planting in India, Western organizations need to completely rethink their strategies in light of these realities. Time is too short and the task too large for us to continue to invest in structures and methodologies that are foreign to the mental processes and cultural inclinations of the Indian disciple. Continuing down the current paths will only sustain the present marginal "addition" rate of adherents to the faith in a land where a decisive "multiplication" rate is instead needed.

## Solutions

In the previous three sections, we explored some of the less easily perceived reasons why the Western missionary movement has failed thus far to entice the core of the Hindu masses to embrace Christ. Again, because of these and other reasons the missionary movement has fanned the flame of Hinduism and greatly strengthened it. Thus, in many regions of India, the gospel is not making measurable progress.

Though it is important for us to understand the cause and effect sequence that has produced these catastrophic devel-

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*The failure of the Western missionary movement to appreciate these fundamental differences between East and West is a major hindrance to the progress of the gospel in India.*

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opments, it is more important to make the changes that logically follow from this understanding. To have any value, this paper must now investigate not only plausible solutions to the problems outlined briefly above, but must also investigate ways to accommodate some of the Western and Indian cultural tendencies that have served to produce these problems. The alternative approaches suggested below may at first prove hard for the West to implement, but being compatible with Indian culture, they should ultimately serve to accelerate the Gospel in India.

It may be of some comfort to know that the problems we face in India today are very similar to those the Apostle Paul faced during the early days of the Gentile Church. Though Paul's preliminary cultural and religious experience had led him to murder Christians, it was primarily to him that the task of forging the foundation of the European Church was assigned. Not only was he chosen to establish many new paths, he was given the task of spending much of his time fighting the preconditioning of the Jewish Christians. Because of their cultural roots, these brothers had been programmed to believe in the superiority of Jewish Culture and were thus seeking to export their culture—along with their new faith—to those who were responding to the gospel outside of Israel. Some of these Judaizers followed in Paul's wake, attempting to bring the Gentile Christians under submission to the form of Christianity that had been appropriately adopted by the believers in Israel itself.

Had Paul not fought this particular battle so effectively, the churches he established would have taken on many elements of Jewish culture and would soon have become irrelevant to the Great Commission in the localities in which they had been planted. Thus, Paul fought this battle at the top (Jerusalem Council, conflict with leaders), through proper discipling, con-

frontational letters (II Corinthians, Galatians, etc.), and prayer (Philippians). In time, his efforts—combined with the efforts of like-minded apostles and leaders—prevailed, influencing the whole of Christendom. One generation after Paul's death, Mathetes could write to a seeker:

**For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe ... and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct.**<sup>3</sup>

So the Church grew like wildfire in both the East and the West. Everywhere the Way went it adapted to the cultures of the peoples; it did not take on a distinctive culture of its own. Kingdom subjects were to stand out—not by cultural distinctives—but by the fruit of the Spirit and by lifestyles of commitment and character.

Paul had a proper view of culture and of his responsibility to it. He did not judge the cultures of the lands he lived in, nor did he attempt to reform these cultures externally. Instead he lived to regenerate individuals and to train them (as Jesus did His own disciples) “to live in the world, but not be of the world.”

We need men like Paul today, who can and who will stand against the mission sending agencies and missionary educational and funding sources of the West, and convince them to stop mixing Western culture into the agenda of the Western missionary movement in India. Paul viewed it his job to simply let the gospel loose on the people of these cultures, to let it (together with the Holy Spirit) do its work. First it would regenerate. Then in time—God's time—it would reform. His focus was on regeneration, not reformation.

In India, after many fruitful years of reaching high castes, E. Stanley Jones, exhorted the West to let go of its control-based reformation agendas and to again simply unleash the power of the gospel, by letting it go free.<sup>4</sup>

Jones was distressed by the work of his fellow missionaries because he could see the difference between regeneration and reformation. Because most Western missionaries in his generation were not able to distinguish (in their own experience) between what was scriptural and what was cultural, they were hindered in communicating the Biblical Christ. So they, for the most part, proclaimed a Western Christ instead. Without (in many cases) even realizing it, his co-workers—and those who had preceded him in North India—had taken on a job description not given to them: social reform rather than gospel regeneration.

To properly unleash the gospel, one must live in proximity to those people with whom the gospel is to be unleashed. This means living in submission to the culture, not trying to outwardly reform it. With such an approach, the missionary cannot offend. The gospel carried by the missionary may offend, but certainly his life should not unnecessarily offend. Certainly also, the gospel itself will in time reform, but only after it has first regenerated a number of individuals within the culture.

The gospel, together with the rest of Christian truth, work together like leaven in a culture to improve it. In bread batter, leaven starts out slowly, but eventually it thoroughly permeates and transforms the entire mixture. Thus, while regeneration takes place in an individual at the point of first true belief, the reformation of a culture may take many generations. For example, it took the leavening effect of the Gospel over 1800 years to bring the issue of slavery to an honest head in the West. The change came ultimately by majority

consensus after much of the population had been regenerated. But to impose reform on a culture before it has been regenerated is to impede—possibly even kill—the rate of regeneration in a culture.

### ***Proposed Solutions to the Problem of Superiority of Culture***

Earlier we highlighted the impact of Evangelical Protestantism's negative predisposition toward the culture of India. From the dearth of response of thinking Hindus to the gospel, we can only conclude that as long as the Western missionary remains unteachable concerning the virtues of Indian culture and persists in an attitude of cultural superiority, the Hindu world will continue to stumble over Christ. Our rigid spirit in this matter flows from bigotry (cultural bias). The following are suggested ways to help ourselves (and prospective new missionaries) overcome cultural bias.

*First, study the training method Christ used for eliminating cultural bias from His own disciples.*

One year I slowly worked through a complete harmony of the gospels with an Indian scholar in order to look at this topic in depth. To our amazement, we found the harmonized gospels to be a training manual in how to empower others to overcome bigotry in their own personal lives.

For Jesus, the need to overcome the problem of the negative preconditioning (bias) of His disciples in relation to other cultures was paramount. The twelve would soon be called upon to love the Samaritans and later to love the Gentiles of many different cultures. However, at the beginning of Christ's private ministry with these men, their attitudes toward the non-Jew and the outcast were clearly no different (as

shown in the gospel accounts) than those of their countrymen. With the extreme attitudes of bigotry held by the Jewish race toward the Samaritans and Gentiles at the time of Christ, this training effort was an immense task indeed. Yet, if he had not completed it, it is unlikely that a proper vision of Christ would have ever been taken outside the Jewish nation.

We found that, by using a harmony of the gospels, it is possible to observe in detail what Christ did to remove the negative preconditioning of His disciples toward the Gentiles and to make these men perpetual learners in the face of new information. Christ was so successful in this venture that Peter could one day call Paul's difficult writings "scriptures" (II Peter 3:17) and doubting Thomas (if legend is correct) could establish a rigorous Church among the uncircumcised high castes of southern India (which, despite centuries of semi-isolation, has survived to this day). Though we cannot conclusively either confirm or deny the legend of Thomas (even with modern analysis leaning slightly toward confirmation<sup>6</sup>), we can follow the lives of Peter and John into the Gentile world through both the New Testament and the writings of the Early Church Fathers. What comes through in these sources is that Jesus was successful. Using Christ's comprehensive method, we must reprogram ourselves (and others) with the same attitudes the Master imparted into His men.

*Secondly, take time to research and seriously consider a number of counter-facts related to this Western bias. Among those that should be studied in detail are:*

- a. That the past roots of Indian culture are in many ways more righteous than the past roots of Western culture (Roman civilization), and that the present day culture of India is in many

ways more righteous than the godless culture of the secular West today. (For some this may mean taking time to "tune-in" to and acknowledge the real moral condition of the West today.)

- b. The error in the supposition that superiority of technology always equates to superiority of culture.
- c. The error in the supposition that military supremacy or domination always equates to superiority of culture.
- d. The intensity and degree of philosophic development in the Indian subcontinent compared to Europe (and later in North America). Also, the relative sophistication of the philosophies developed in each location (independent of the only authentic source of revelation). One must consider the degree of Indian progress in the absence of the Judeo-Christian scriptures relative to the degree of Western progress helped along by these revelational texts. Not to bias this investigation (but to guide it), one must come to grips with the failure of the West's fixation on "systems" to deliver anything tangible or lasting in the area of philosophy. The "brilliant conclusion" of this process is that no answers can be found. Also, one must consider that modern science is in part (if not more) a baby of the Reformation<sup>6,7</sup> and not the result of a philosophical search that took place outside the influence of Christian truth.
- e. The pure and near perfect logic of the Sanskrit language and



the major technological developments ancient India has provided the world (such as our power of ten based numbering system).

- f. The fact that in community vs. individualism, the West's emphasis on personal rights is now rapidly destroying Western culture, just as the community focus of India has limited personal creativity and the rate of technological advancement there. (Note that both emphases are out of step with the Scriptures and that Evangelicals are essentially following the current Western drift.)

*Thirdly, require all missionaries to focus exclusively on Hindus, not the bigoted Indian Church.*

There are several rationale for this:

- (1) to protect the new Western missionary from being further negatively preconditioned by Indian Christians;
- (2) to prevent the Western missionary from further westernizing the Indian Church;
- (3) to enable the Western missionary to really come to grips with Indian culture; and
- (4) to allow the Indian Church to come to grips with its own culture without the distraction of continued Western influence.

*Fourthly, allow new missionaries to bond to their ministry cultures by shielding them from the oversight of missionaries of the old (negatively preconditioned) school—especially during their first several years in India.*

## ***Proposed Solutions to the problem of Rights and Rebellion***

The Evangelical Protestant “protest” mentality, coupled with Western imperialistic attitudes, has fostered (and is still fostering) an effort to build a Church in India that is “liberated” from Hindu social structure (culture). To the Indian psyche, the priorities of community and maintenance of social structure are absolutes. Thus for the Hindu, displays of arrogance and rebellion against these absolutes are abominations of the highest order. And when these displays accompany the WMM’s outreach efforts among the low and no castes, they can only mobilize anti-Christian and anti-foreign sentiments. Regardless of the Hindu reaction (which some can negate as the Hindu’s problem only), rebellion aimed at oppression is not justifiable. Though it is in keeping with the protest spirit of the Reformation, it is completely out-of-sync with the spirit of the early church and the example of Christ.

Often the proponents of what I must label “Evangelical Liberation Theology” find their justification in Christ’s example of “rebellious” against the legalism of the oppressive and corrupt religious system in Israel in His time. However, I must again encourage aspiring missionaries to take time to work through a good harmony of the gospels on this issue of personal rights and social rebellion to see what He really did. For those so aspiring, let me suggest in advance that one will find quite a different example.

In my extensive study on this issue, I was amazed by the balanced way in which Christ taught His disciples the importance of accommodating their own culture, while not remaining bound to the letter of all its traditions and ways. In doing so, He worked hard to

enable his men to understand the root and spirit of their traditions in light of the priorities of devotion to God and compassion toward man. By His words and deeds, Christ taught His followers not to submit blindly to traditions but to regulate their submission to traditions by the priority of loving God and neighbor. Thus, He slowly stripped away the legalism that the culture’s preconditioning had built into His followers, replacing their bigotry with a spirit of love and compassion.

It is important to observe, however, that in the process of stripping away their prejudice and legalism, Christ was not attempting to make social rebels out of His followers. For example, one day Christ asked Peter: “What do you think, Simon? From where do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?” Then in response to Peter’s correct answer Christ added, “Consequently the son’s are exempt. But, *lest we give offense, go...*” And on the wings of a miracle performed only in the sight of Peter himself, the Master paid their yearly temple tax (even though He Himself was the temple!) There are many other examples of Christ’s sensitivity and submission to the culture of the Jews. It is also important to note that the Jewish Christians of Israel remained zealous for their culture and continued to be nationalistic.

The delicate balance that Christ maintained during His training of the twelve enabled Him to strip away their bias and legalism while at the same time empowering them to be appropriately submissive and sensitive to their own culture. The effectiveness of this training is well demonstrated through the follow-up ministries of the Apostles and their disciples.

### ***Additional principles to ponder***

Our job is simply to unleash the gospel by giving people a proper vision of Christ,

not to externally mold people while peddling a Western version of Him.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, if the gospel is to be properly unleashed, one must live near those to whom the gospel is to be given, in submission to the culture, not trying to reform it. This also means engaging the culture in constructive and real (meaningful/practical) ways, not just peripheral ways. By extension this mandates that the aspiring missionary seeking to impact the mainstream of India should come with something other than just ministry skills (and, before coming, should have been able to engage the mainstream of the secular

seems able to shed his tendency for high self-expectations.

In relation to faith, Christ's ministry with the twelve and seventy had at least two simultaneous aims: (1) raising God-expectations and (2) destroying all self-expectations. Because of his fatalism, the Indian starts with (a) low God-expectations and (b) limited self-expectations. Thus, because of his Hindu roots, the Indian disciple only needs his God expectations to be raised. But while the Western mentor rigorously attempts via teaching and preaching to accomplish (1) in light of (a), he inadvertently (either consciously or sub-

Again, the reader is directed to study the life of Christ (using a good harmony of the gospels) to discover the Master's method for imparting faith. However, because of our Western baggage, this can only be a start. In dealing with growing Indian disciples, we will have to resist any temptation to demonstrate and motivate high personal expectations. It is only as our personal self-expectations go down that our God-expectations can rise. "When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith on the Earth?"

In addition, let me suggest that the WMM immediately drop all Western

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*In light of the potentially explosive ... social movements currently sweeping through the oppressed classes of India, it is particularly important at "such a time as this" that the Western Christian community and the Indian Church relate in a culturally appropriate manner to these movements.*

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culture of his/her own country, to the point of bearing fruit).

The gospel will revolutionize a culture after (and only after) it has regenerated many within it, but the former takes much longer.

### ***Proposed Solutions to the Problem of Control***

During nearly two and a half decades of study on how Christ built faith into His followers, I have come to see that the current Western models for building faith can only fail in India. I have also come to see that the cultural background of the Hindu makes him more fertile ground for great faith if he is properly disciplined. He has far less baggage than the agenda-centered Western disciple, who, despite much effort, never

consciously) by demonstration serves to accomplish the opposite in relation to (2), thus raising the Indian's self-expectations. And because the power of demonstration is more powerful than preaching and teaching, the Western mentor (with high-self expectations of his own) can only raise the self-expectations of the Indian and cannot accomplish (1). Because of the struggles the Indian disciple faces with attaining high God-expectations (by virtue of his Hindu roots) he ends up with: (I) only moderately raised God-expectations and (II) greatly raised self-expectations. The result is a very legalistic disciple with very little faith. Apart from following Christ's method for building faith, the mix of the Western-trainer and the Eastern-trainee can usually only end in this (I and II).

structures and major on protocols natural to the eastern mindset and culture. For example, rather than planting community churches with mixed castes present, works should be established which expand along extended family lines and are governed within these families themselves (without Western funds and with minimal Western influence). Also, rigorous efforts of labor and prayer should be focused on raising up many Indian prophets with Eastern mindsets (not Eastern philosophy) in different sub-regions and among the various people groups. These must be extremely well-equipped individuals who can serve in an unstructured manner similar to the god-men and gurus of Hinduism, in order to mobilize large people movements.

## *A Tentative Description of Mission Frontiers*

by Ralph D. Winter

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must yet go, beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.

### **Conclusions**

Today the population of India is increasing at an absolute rate of approximately 2.3% per year and is already at 1.02 billion. Yet, despite the West's incredible investment of finances and manpower into India over the past two centuries—and the continuing presence of foreign and Indian missionaries today—the absolute growth rate of Christianity in India is still only 2.8%.

<sup>8</sup> If the differential between these two rates were to remain the same, nearly two additional centuries would be required to completely reach India for Christ. Hope lies in the observation that because of the great efforts of the WMM, “most Indians accept Christ as the greatest manifestation of redemptive love.” <sup>1</sup> If we from the West can retool, this grave situation could be magnificently salvaged to the great glory of God.

In this paper I have attempted to identify several of the stumbling blocks facing the Hindu, which the West seems to have trouble seeing. I have also tried to explore the Western mindset at the root of these obstacles in order to help make the offenses more visible. Finally, I have suggested a number of difficult but practical solutions to help minimize these stones of offense, so the Gospel can start to move at high speed through this land of one billion to regenerate and reform its great peoples.

In light of the potentially explosive nature of several of the social movements currently sweeping through the oppressed classes of India, *it is particularly important at “such a time as this” that the Western Christian community and the Indian Church relate in a culturally appropriate manner to these movements.* To fail to do so in the name of “liberation” and “social reform” is to invite an unprecedented backlash from the anti-foreign and anti-Christian forces that are already polarized against the West and its form of Christianity. The leaders of the early Church learned not to bring persecution on themselves by causing unnecessary offense. They did not stand as judges of the pagan cultures of their day, but rather were the well-wishers of those without Christ, even as they were martyred. They sought release for all from the prison of Satan and showed unconditional love to oppressor and oppressed alike. Therefore also, let those who stumble in India, stumble only over the gospel itself—not over snares laid in their paths by the West. **IJFM**

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# Submission to Oppression in India: Lessons from History

by D. D. Pani

You are standing in the faint haze at dusk at the confluence of India's two most holy rivers. In the background you hear the eerie and continuous beating of drums. All around, and seemingly echoing in the distance, are the shrilling sounds of holy men blowing on large conch-shells. Behind you are the mysterious camps of thirteen Sadhu sects, the master ascetics of the Hindu faith. While the entrances to most of these camps are veiled and closed to the public, some are open to the steady queues of devotees coming to receive a blessing from one of these naked, long-haired men. The wind is blowing and the air is frigid, yet stoned on opium these demon-possessed holy men sit unfazed and oblivious to the near freezing elements, using only ash to partly cover their birth suits. As they mark the foreheads of each expectant devotee with a reddish-orange colored paste, they keep uttering ancient blessings from their scriptures. They seem very detached.

The wind picks up, causing you to turn. Something on one of the floating foot paths stretched across these wide rivers catches your eye, then quickly vanishes. By the light of the moon, you find yourself mesmerized by the steady streams of humanity slowly crossing these rivers on these floating paths. They seem to be coming from everywhere, all converging on this most sacred site. You are at the "Sangam," the place where not only the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers—but also the mythical Saraswati river—all join. You are told that this is the most auspicious day of this historic feast. Again you feel the pulse of this literal sea of humanity, all slowly walking forward while chanting the same ancient Vedic mantras used by earlier generations, some even possibly 3000 years ago.

According to reports, some 50 million are in the area. Of this, some 30 million (3% of India's entire population) are simultaneously attempting to converge, on this most auspicious of days, on this spot to take their once-in-a-lifetime holy dip at the location where these three rivers meet. *If these reports are true, you realize that you are standing in the midst of the single largest gathering of humankind in the history of the world.* Later you learn that actual numbers were even bigger, possibly 70 million. You know that such a single gathering as this will not occur again for another 12 years.

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And you wonder, Why are all these enduring the cold, the darkness, the stench, and the pushing of the crowds? Old women and men. Young and middle-aged. In all manner of dress. Chanting. Pushing. Freezing. Waiting. Lining the far banks as far as you can see in every direction. People. Members of Adam's fallen race.

*Why are they all here?*

Then you are reminded that the reasons for this presence—the individual human dramas that have brought each pilgrim here—are almost as many as the numbers themselves. The astrologers had predicted that it is this date that offers the highest chance for one to find release from the endless cycles of life, enabling one at the end of this life to re-merge with the Cosmos, or what they call “god.” By bathing in these muddy and most highly polluted waters, many believe their sins will be washed away.

20,000 police are on duty round the clock to keep order and direct the crowds. As soon as one finishes bathing, he or she is quickly urged to move out by another route, so that others may come. On the faces of many, as they emerge from the waters, you see the earlier expressions of expectation replaced by stares of disappointment. As one of the very few Christian observers at this scene, you at once feel that these endless rivers of lost sheep are instead going to their death.

You begin to feel like you have just stepped back in time. Yet the digital watch on your wrist reminds you that it is the year 2001, January 24. You remember what the late Hindu Iqbal once wrote, “The Roman, the Egyptian and the Greek civilizations have all vanished, but there is something in us that makes sure we don't get destroyed.”

Then a uniformed official nudges you to keep moving on yourself.

Is the preceding account simply dramatized fiction? Or could it be a very accurate re-creation of the impressions of a follower of Christ attending the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad this past winter?

I wish it were just fiction.

Indeed, the myriad of facts accurately depicted within this imagined description point to the high degree of vitality found today in Hinduism's many streams. Many other examples could easily be given.

### **Why the Final Frontier**

Why is it that *without either* Western funds or the presence of foreign missionaries inside its borders, the Church in China grew from about one million (in 1950) to over 80 million believers in less than 50 years?<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, why is it that in India during this same period *with both* foreign missionaries and abundant Western funds, the growth rate of Bible-focused Christians has only slightly exceeded the population growth rate (PGR) in India<sup>2</sup>, and is less than the PGR in North India?

Why is Hinduism growing stronger in India today?

Finally, despite the incomprehensibly massive effort by the Western Church to reach India in the past three centuries, why does India remain the Final Frontier of missions?

### **Resilience of Hinduism**

Despite a series of seemingly insurmountable challenges, India remains the last of the world's great classical cultures that still strongly follows various forms of its ancient pre-supposition systems. Brahmanism (the ruling ideology of India today) had earlier faced the internal Buddhist threat (600 BC–300 AD) and the external Moslem threat (1200–1757 AD), and had prevailed. But perhaps the greatest challenge to India's

religious and social order occurred during the period 1757–1900 AD, when Indian society was under heavy of Western influence and European colonization. Yet rather than witnessing a complete shift in the peoples of India toward these new and extremely powerful influences, we see Brahmanism bounce back once again.

Instead of finishing off Brahmanism, Christianity (combined with other Western ideals) injected tremendous regenerating power into an Indian society left stagnant by centuries of oppressive Moslem rule, and more than half a millennium of decaying Hinduism. During the Hindu renaissance that resulted from this foreign infusion of enlightenment, India also witnessed a revival of its Brahman priesthood and a renewed sense of national pride.<sup>3</sup>

At the root of this renaissance lay the challenge of the gospel of Christ to the vigor of Hinduism itself. After the social reforms and contributions facilitated by such great Western Christians as William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, Hindu renaissance groups began to rise up all over India. Though these groups arose primarily in reaction to the gospel, they invariably adopted Christian teaching and ethics—but without Christ. So for the first time in India's Brahman history, democracy and social justice became chief concerns among the Hindus.<sup>3</sup>

The shock presented by the threat of the gospel to Hinduism worked to revive Indian philosophy. Many of the philosophical ideas that these groups borrowed from the Bible were then attributed to their own scriptures instead (such ideas including their intellectual focus on the one formless God, which many Hindu leaders began to equate to all the variant “gods” of their worship).

Using much of what they had learned from the Christians, many of these

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groups—in the name of Hinduism—even became successful in imitating nominal Christianity to their own satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

### **Fruit of Dependence**

This is not to say that the missionary movement from the West did not see fruit, but that most of the fruit came from low-caste and no-caste groups, those who had something to gain materially and in terms of social status. Many were literally enticed into the “faith” by food and other commodities (so-called “rice Christians”). I’ve observed in my dealings with many Indian Christians whose heritage is from these ranks that they still primarily view God in terms of what He can do for them. They want His provision, His healing and His solution for their problems in life, but they are not interested in His Lordship and His Commission. Their devotion often seems to retain much of the “tit-for-tat” mentality seen in most all streams of Hinduism. To date there has been little real impact on the upper-castes, who for the most part dominate the country. These upper-castes remain the main initiators and controllers within all levels of Indian society.

Thus, not many of India’s “Pauls” (men and women capable of moving beyond a dependence relationship with Christ to a relationship of unselfish service) have been raised up. This sad condition follows in part from the fact that the Western missionaries in India were (and still for the most part are) incapable of truly engaging the core of

Hindu culture. In general, they have disdained Hindu culture, viewing it as evil. Consequently, their ministry has remained primarily peripheral to the culture, the main response being from only the low- and no-caste. Those Indians who have responded have normally been forced into Western structures of worship and education. Thus the church that has arisen in India is essentially Western, clustered into a number of separated communities with cultures that are quite different from their cultures of origin.

### **From Inflating the Costs: Addition Only**

In India today, seekers wanting to embrace Christ must be willing to literally change communities. Tragically, this required change is far more radical than can be imagined, as it involves rejecting one’s former culture and adopting a completely new one. As mutual rejection is normally involved, all bridges to past relations end up being painfully and disastrously destroyed in the process. As a result, there is little-to-no multiplication of the kingdom—merely addition. The high-castes that do occasionally come to Christ are most always prevented from becoming Pauls. With each new addition many, many more are turned off and polarized against the foreign religion known to them as “Christianity.” This partially explains why the gospel is going backwards in so many regions of Northern India and advancing very slowly in the South.

### **A Tragic Testimony**

An Indian friend shared the following testimony. As a college student on a vacation in a different state in India, he met a U.S. missionary. Although a staunch high-caste Hindu himself, after extensive interaction with this missionary, my friend believed in Christ. A week or so later, when he phoned his family to tell them he had “become a Christian,” they promptly asked him not to come home. They were concerned they would never be able to find mates for their daughters if their community learned that he had sold out to this foreign religion.

The missionary who helped him find Christ also encouraged him not to go home. Today my friend is a pastor who runs small schools in several villages in India. Many years ago he took an Indian Christian wife and he is now completely westernized. In the approximately two decades since embracing Christ, he has never gone back to his native home.

Many would call my friend’s life a success story; I consider it a great tragedy.

Why couldn’t he have been encouraged to simply tell his family that “he had taken a new guru” and would not be home for awhile? Then, once his faith had become strong, he could have been sent home to demonstrate his zeal for—and his commitment to—his family, his community, and his own culture.

Being a private matter, he would not have been forced to reveal the identity of his guru and could have continued to make periodic sorties back to his spiritual parents for training. After a long time, once his family and community were totally convinced of his zeal for them and excited about the positive changes they saw in him, he could have revealed that his new guru was in fact Jesus Christ. As people could see that his commitment to his community and to Hindu culture had not changed, the

proof of his life would have quelled all concerns. With proper follow-on discipling he might also have been able to start a people movement in his own state. He might now be seeing great multiplication for the kingdom, rather than the extremely slow addition of his present village work.

Sadly, in these villages, he is—and always will be—viewed only as an outsider.

Some would argue that to let him return home would have been to risk his reversion back into Hinduism. This follows from a flawed view of what constitutes the unadulterated essence of following Christ. Had my friend been trained and empowered to follow this essence while keeping his own culture, there would have been little real temptation for him to forsake his divine Master. But (if both to him and his mentors) reverting back to his culture means forsaking Christ, then certainly the temptation would have been high. In reality this temptation is really only the artificial creation of his Western mentors.

Further, because he abandoned his people, his family and the people of his home locale have become further polarized against the gospel. They view him as a traitor. And with respect to them, is he not a traitor? Because of him they have not considered, are not considering, and probably never will consider Christ.

### ***The Conquest of Romana***

Over the last three hundred years the long siege of North India by the West in the name of Christ has been conducted largely without respect for the fact that India remains one of the world's great classical civilizations. Rather than consider the conclusive lessons from history for dealing with classical cultures, the West has not taken seriously its need to properly relate to Hindu culture.

Further, the Western Church has not sufficiently empowered the fruit of its

efforts in India (the Indian Church) to become an inexorable leavening force. Had the West only taken instruction from its ancestors over the last three centuries, the current outcome in India might be very different.

Whereas their own spiritual ancestors relied primarily on the regenerating and leavening effects of the gospel to win the Roman Empire to Christ, the Western Church of the past three hundred years has relied (as we will see) more on reform tactics and power-control approaches in its (unsuccessful) attempt to reach India.

### ***Roman Oppression***

Christianity was initially ignored in the Roman Empire as a Jewish sect. However it soon became viewed as a treasonable innovation and was forbidden. Following on the heels of Jewish abuse, Christianity quickly found itself being slandered and persecuted from many sides. Adopting this new faith carried with it the possibility of punishment by confiscation and death. It was not until Constantine's edict in 313 AD that Christianity's existence in the Roman Empire finally became legal. Thus, during the first three centuries of its existence, Christianity found itself precariously launched into the most unfavorable of earthly circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

Christianity's unwavering demands for repentance and renunciation (of both self and the world) kept many from joining its ranks. Compared to the competing religions of the time (many of which promoted the love of pleasure), Christianity offered few tangible earthly favors. Its Jewish origin, combined with the poverty and relative anonymity of the majority of its followers, were deeply offensive to the proud Greeks and Romans. Indeed, Celsus scoffed that, "weavers, cobblers, and fullers, the most illiterate persons" proclaim the "irrational faith," and are especially good at acclaiming it "to women and children."

While his derision of Christians contains some truth, there were initially some (though not many) from the higher and educated classes.

Nevertheless, from the middle of the second century on, there were numerous church fathers (such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement, Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian) who surpassed—or at least equaled—the most eminent of their pagan contemporaries in both talent and culture.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of many difficulties Christianity continued to advance, its unstoppable progress furnishing stunning evidence of its divine origin and power to satisfy the deep inner needs of man. Further, the moral sincerity and authenticity of the Christians stood in stark contrast with the widespread corruption of the age. While the vulgar and frivolous could only be repelled, the deepest and noblest of the Empire could not fail to be impressed. The partiality and passion of the poor and oppressed for the gospel only further confirmed Christianity's comforting and redeeming power. Thus, in the hands of God, these tremendous hindrances became some of the very means of advancement.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Fruit of Submission to Oppression***

Far too often persecution led to martyrdom, which in turn led to attraction. Rather than deter seekers and followers alike, public executions served to motivate observers toward an ambition of the "noblest and most unselfish form." Every genuine martyr became living proof to the truth and holiness of Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

History reports no mightier, longer and deadlier conflict than the war of extermination waged by pagan Rome against the defenseless Church. "It was a most unequal struggle, a struggle of the sword and of the cross; carnal power all on one side, moral power all on the

other.” Because concession was impossible, eventually one of the two participants would have to surrender. It has been observed that:

... no other religion could have stood for so long a period the combined opposition of Jewish bigotry, Greek philosophy, and Roman policy and power; no other could have triumphed at last over so many foes by purely moral and spiritual force, without calling any carnal weapons to its aid. This comprehensive and long-continued martyrdom is the peculiar crown and glory of the early church.<sup>4</sup>

As this battle progressed, Tertullian boldly exclaimed to the pagan challenger:

All your ingenious cruelties can accomplish nothing; they are only a lure to this sect. Our number increases the more you destroy us. The blood of the Christians is their seed.

By the middle of the second century this progress was extended to all parts of the empire such that Tertullian could also say in his *Apology*:

We are a people of yesterday ... yet we have filled every place belonging to you—cities, islands, castles, towns, assemblies, your very camp, your tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum! We leave you your temples only. We can count your armies; our numbers in a single province will be greater.<sup>5</sup>

### **Summary of the Victor and His Tactics**

In time the war of attrition between the pagans of Rome and the church came to a conclusion. What began in Rome under Nero in 64 AD, ended near Rome at the Milvian bridge under Constantine on Oct. 27, 312 AD. Whereas Tertullian

did not see the end, his observation that “the blood of the Christians is the seed of the Church” provides a perfect description of the reason the defenseless and submissive could conquer so powerful a foe.

Taylor gives a summary description of the humble opponent responsible for the successful 300 year siege that eventually conquered the pagan Roman Empire:

The church of this period appears poor in earthly possessions and honors, but rich in heavenly grace, in world-conquering faith, love, and hope; unpopular, even outlawed, hated, and persecuted, yet far more vigorous and expansive than the philosophies of Greece or the empire of Rome; composed chiefly of persons of the lower social ranks, yet attracting the noblest and deepest minds of the age, and bearing, in her bosom the hope of the world; ‘as unknown, yet well-known, as dying, and behold it lives;’ conquering by apparent defeat, and growing on the blood of her martyrs; great in deeds, greater in sufferings, greatest in death for the honor of Christ and the benefit of generations to come.<sup>6</sup>

The final victory of Christianity over the mightiest empire of the ancient world can be attributed, not to physical force, but to the moral powers of patience, perseverance, faith and love. This is truly one of the most awe-inspiring spectacles of human history.<sup>4</sup>

### **Lessons from Romana's Conquest**

*First, it must be noted that the conquest of the Roman Empire did not start with Christians demanding or promoting religious freedom and human rights; rather it concluded with these results.*

Based as they were upon the absolute authority of the state, ancient Greece and Rome often mercilessly trampled the individual rights of many of their inhabitants. In terms of personal belief, however, the individual in Greece and Rome enjoyed almost unlimited liberty of expression, not only in conversation, but also in their writings and on stage (even if their sentiments were cynical or irreverent).

Nevertheless, a sharp distinction was made between liberty of private thought and conscience (which is inalienable and beyond the reach of legislation) and the liberty of public worship. It is true that the Roman senate and the Emperor would, by special edict, usually allow conquered nations and peoples the freedom to worship and to practice their religion—even in Rome. Yet this policy did not flow from a regard for the sacred rights of conscience; it was a pragmatic policy derived from the need to keep the Empire more manageable. Included in these edicts was the express prohibition of making converts from the state.<sup>4</sup>

But Christianity was not the religion of a nation. Instead it claimed itself to be universal and the only true religion. It attracted Greeks and Romans in much larger numbers than it did Jews. Its converts were from every people and sect. Of more concern to Rome was that it refused compromise with any form of idolatry.

Further, their refusal to pay the emperor (or his statue) divine honors; their aversion (not all) to imperial military service; their general disregard for politics, civil concerns and temporal affairs (as compared to the spiritual and eternal); and their unusually close associations and frequent gatherings—all these drew upon the Christians not only the suspicion of hostility, but the unpardonable presumption of conspiracy against the state. As such, it directly threatened the very existence of the Roman state religion. The all-absorbing political interest of Rome dictated that



even limited toleration of this novel movement could not be granted.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Seeds of Religious Freedom***

It was the Christian apologists of the second century who “first proclaimed, however imperfectly, the principle of freedom of religion, and the sacred rights of conscience.” Tertullian boldly tells the heathen that everybody:

... has a natural and inalienable right to worship God according to his conviction, that all compulsion in matters of conscience is contrary to the very nature of religion, and that no form of worship has any value whatever except as far as it is a free voluntary homage of the heart.

Justin Martyr expressed similar views.<sup>7</sup>

At the close of this period, Lactantius wrote the following:

Religion cannot be imposed by force; the matter must be carried on by words rather than by blows, that the will may be affected. Torture and piety are widely different; nor is it possible for truth to be united with violence, or justice with cruelty. Nothing is so much a matter of free will as religion.<sup>8</sup>

And when, in early 313 AD, Constantine issued his new edict of toleration:

... [he] provided the world with the first proclamation of the great principle that every man had a right to choose his religion according to the dictates of his own conscience and honest conviction, without compulsion and interference from the government.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, it is the blood of persecution that became for the West the seed of civil and religious liberty.

We must emphasize that the individual rights and religious freedom granted the Roman world by Constantine did not come as a result of three centuries of the Christian Church demanding these commodities. Instead these gifts resulted from both the submissive willingness and the supernatural ability of the Christians of the empire to continue on without these commodities in such magnificent poise for a very lengthy period of time.

Throughout these long centuries each generation would teach the next to submit with dignity and courage to the injustice and persecution of their brutal oppressors. Thus, during this extended period of almost constant aggravation and persecution, the Christians remained the most peaceful subjects in the empire. They never participated in the frequent insurrections and rebellions that served to destabilize and undermine the empire. Instead they proved themselves to be the empire’s best patriots, as by the power of their personal virtue, they helped renovate Roman society from within.<sup>9</sup>

*Secondly, we observe that many of the evils of oppression in the Empire were dissolved—not through the external process of reform—but through the gracious endurance of these evils by the Christians.*

Perhaps the best example of this comes through the profound testimony of Christian slaves. When converted slaves:

... with the full sense of their intellectual and religious superiority still remained obedient to their heathen masters, and even served them more faithfully than before, resisting decidedly only their immoral demands (like the beauty Potamiaena [who was martyred], and other chaste women and virgins in the service

of voluptuous masters)—they showed, in this very self-control, the best proof of their ripeness for civil freedom.<sup>4</sup>

The ancient Greek and Roman republics had no concept of the general and natural rights of men. They existed by the absolute dominion of a minority over an oppressed majority. They only regarded the free-born rich and independent citizens as men (in the full sense of the term), denying this privilege to foreigners, laborers, the poor, and slaves. Further, they considered it their natural right to go to war with any foreign nation (without distinction of race) in order to bring it under their iron rule. Consequently, during the time of the early Church, the greater part of humanity living within the borders of the Roman Empire lived under the hopeless and brutal plight of slavery.

This evil was so thoroughly woven into the domestic and public life of the heathen world that even the greatest philosophers (like Aristotle) regarded it as both natural and indispensable. Even to these great thinkers the abolition of slavery was considered among the impossible. Christianity during the persecutions had no influence over the state; thus, in early days the abolition of slavery was utterly out of the question. The enormous number of slaves alone (half the empire) dictated this. The world was far from ripe for such a giant step.<sup>4</sup>

### ***The Pursuit of Endurance and Its Fruit***

Yet to this end Christianity labored from its outset:

... not by outward violence, nor sudden revolution; this, under the circumstances, would only have made the evil worse; but by its moral power, by preaching the divine descent and original unity of all men, their common redemp-

**tion through Christ, the duty of brotherly love, and the true freedom of the spirit.**

In her persecuted condition, the Church operated outside the machinery of the state and was not in a position to influence civil legislation. With her focus on eternity and her hope fixed on the soon return of Christ, she had little concern for earthly freedom or temporal happiness.<sup>4</sup>

Ignatius, writing to Polycarp, counsels that servants should serve all the more zealously for God's glory so that they might receive higher freedom from God. He urges that no slave should seek redemption at the expense of a Christian brother, so that they don't become slaves of their own impulses.<sup>7</sup> Tertullian declares outward freedom a worthless commodity without the soul's ransom from sin's bondage:

**How can the world make a servant free? All is mere show in the world, nothing truth. For the slave is already free, as a purchase of Christ; and the freedman is a servant of Christ. If thou takest the freedom which the world can give for true, thou hast thereby become again the servant of man, and hast lost the freedom of Christ, in that thou thinkest it bondage.**<sup>5</sup>

Later, aided by a concurrent movement in philosophy, the church began to see the fruit of their labor. Improvements in the slave-code of imperial Rome must be attributed both to Christianity and to later Stoic philosophy. But it was the triumph of Constantine that brought the most important improvements in this period.

For example, under Christian influence Constantine issued a law in 315 AD forbidding the branding of slaves on the face "to prevent the disfiguration of

the figure of celestial beauty (i.e. the image of God)." In 316 AD he facilitated the emancipation of slaves by an edict requiring only a written document, signed by the master. This was instead of the earlier requirement for a ceremony in the presence of the prefect and his lictor. Often when a slave owner and his slave became Christians, the nature of the old relation virtually ceased:

**... both came together to the table of the Lord, and felt themselves brethren of one family, in striking contrast with the condition of things among their heathen neighbors as expressed in the current proverb: 'As many enemies as slaves.'**<sup>4</sup>

Thus we see once more that it was through the endurance by the Christians of the evil of slavery, coupled with their teaching of Christian truth, that this oppression was reduced. It would be many centuries before this particular evil would finally be eradicated in the West by the long-term leavening effect of the gospel.

*Thirdly, we observe that the Christians were deeply engaged in the culture at most all levels and did not seek to secede from it—even in times of persecution.*

For this reason, as the Gentile Church expanded into new areas, it remained vulnerable by not forming separate communities (which would have caused it to become isolated from the cultures and communities of the areas into which it was moving).

While the Christians of the empire labored to not be of the world, they remained in the world. Tertullian writes: "We are no Brahmins, nor Indian gymnosophists, no hermits, no exiles from life."

He continues:

**We are mindful of the thanks we owe to God, our Lord and Creator; we despise not the enjoyment of his works; we only temper it, that we may avoid excess and abuse. We dwell, therefore, with you in this world, not without markets and fairs, not without baths, inns, shops, and every kind of intercourse. We carry on commerce and war, agriculture and trade with you. We take part in your pursuits, and give our labor for your use.**<sup>5</sup>

Though it is true that monasticism did begin to develop in the third century, its effects (both negative and beneficial) did not become pronounced until later.

### ***Their High Degree of Cultural (and Community) Involvement***

In relation to profession the early church followed the instruction of Paul: "Let each man abide in that calling wherein he was called."<sup>10</sup> No respectable pursuit was forbidden, proving the universal application of Christianity and "its power to enter into all the relations of human life and into all branches of society, under all forms of government."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, of the total involvement of Christians in the cultures and communities of their habitation, the unknown author of the Epistle to Diognetus writes:

**For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. ... But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they dis-**

play to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. ... They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear then that the Christians of the Roman Empire remained a vital part of the communities and cultures where they lived, even in persecution. Rather than withdraw, they continued to penetrate their communities in all walks of life. So when they were persecuted, the testing of their faith had more impact. They were not unknown, but rather well known; their lives were an open book.

*Fourthly, responsibility for the growth of the Church was not handed over to full-time professionals, but rather remained in the hands of the people.*

Remarkable as it may seem, for work within the Roman Empire following the era of the Apostles, we can point to no great missionaries' names until long after this period. In the Roman Empire there were no missionary societies or missionary institutions or even organized efforts.

**Christianity once established was its own best missionary. It grew naturally from within. It attracted people by its very presence. .... And while there were no professional missionaries devoting their whole life to this specific work, every congregation was a missionary society, and every Christian believer a missionary, inflamed by the love of Christ to convert his fellow-men. Every Christian told his neighbor, the laborer to his fellow-laborer, the slave to his fellow-slave, the servant to his master and mistress, the story of his conversion, as a mariner tells the story of the rescue from shipwreck.<sup>4</sup>**

*Lastly, Christianity had several other unique advantages during this period that helped attribute to its rapid growth:*

1. The prevalence of the Greek language and culture;
2. The early translation of the Scriptures into the various languages of the Empire: Latin (2); Syriac (2); and Egyptian (in three dialects);
3. The order and unity of the Roman Empire;
4. The undermining of popular religion and public morality by a skeptical and materialistic philosophy;
5. Comparatively safe and easy communication within the

empire and extensive commerce;

6. A pervading sense of hopelessness.

### ***Parallels for the Last Great Classical Culture***

Whether the fullness of time has come for India—as it did for the Roman Empire some two millennia ago—has yet to be seen. Already most of the unique advantages available to the gospel in the Roman Empire during the first three hundred years of Church history also now exist within India. Only two languages dominate the subcontinent (Hindi and English) and the Scriptures have long ago been translated into all of the main regional languages. Secular democracy still reigns and provides order, though its continued duration may be tentative.

The invasion of India by secular Western culture and its values is rapidly undermining the moral fiber of the nation, and because of weaknesses in India's own ancient presuppositional systems, rampant corruption sickens all levels of the culture. Modern telecommunications technology and the world's most extensive rail system nicely connect the country. For most, the future provides many worries and major uncertainty.

Additional advantages exist for India. To date there has been much genuine demonstration of Christ in India by both the West and the Indian Church. Consequently, most people now living in urban areas (and many living in the rural areas) have heard of Christ, and many have a deep respect for him.

Along with the advantages, there are many parallels in the hindrances facing the advance of the gospel. Just as the early Church posed a threat to the state religion and was under deep suspicion, so now Biblical Christianity poses the greatest threat to the agendas of the Hindu Fundamentalists movement cur-

rently in political control of the land. Because of the insensitivity of the Western missionaries (past and present) to Hindu culture, suspicion abounds. In many areas, those turning to Christ are viewed as traitors—sellouts to the West. Finally, the constituency of present day Church in India is very similar to that of the first century Church in the Roman Empire—not many rich, not many free, not many mighty, not many noble.<sup>11</sup>

Whether the fullness of time has come for India may now perhaps depend on how the Indian Church soon chooses to respond to the growing oppression and persecution by Hindu fundamentalist forces.

Many questions now remain:

*Will the Indian Church respond with the spirit of the modern West, that is, in protest and defiance? Or will it be submissive and humble, like the Early Church?*

*Will Indian Christians judge and resent their oppressors while openly demanding their rights? Or like the silent Christ and the Empire's many martyrs, will they allow themselves to be proved worthy?*

*Will the Western Church allow the Indian Church to be tested? Or will it attempt to maintain control of the situation through finances and power-tactics?*

*Will—in order to reach this classical culture—the Indian Church and the assisting Western Church continue to take their lead from the Protestant Reformation? Or will they decide to take their cues from the example of the Early Church?*

For three centuries now, this reform-oriented approach has continued to fail. Why? Because it is not a starting strategy for an ancient classical culture. Reformation tactics are effective for making mid-course corrections in a predominantly Christianized culture. We cannot reform that which has not first been regenerated. What is currently needed in India (which is far

from being Christianized) is regeneration—not reformation.

## Conclusions

The lessons learned from the Early Church's successful siege of the Roman Empire—and their applications for India—are obvious and logical.

For the *fullness of time* to come to India, both the West and the Indian Church must develop a completely new stance.

Until now a substantial portion of the Evangelical missions effort in India has been aimed at facilitating the combined temporal and spiritual liberation of the Dalits and the other disadvantaged peoples. Meanwhile, little attention has been given to the other segments of the population. Often the temporal side of this liberation effort has been aimed at freeing these peoples from the oppression of the existing social order through various forms of external social reform. This dangerous course is nothing less than an Evangelical version of Liberation Theology.

The focus of the Dalit Christians (and others who have been brought into the kingdom in this way) remains on the temporal. By viewing the "temporal oppressors" as "the enemy" (rather than viewing the Evil One as our prime foe), we end up assailing the higher castes. They too (the high caste temporal "oppressors") need spiritual liberation, not abuse from Christians. Instead, the very militant Hindu forces—which our earlier tactics served to revive and energize during the previous three centuries—are being further enraged by our abuse (and empowered by their rage). Thus, it is they who are now persecuting us. Our own blood and the blood of our Indian Christians may soon be on our own Western heads.

For many the question still remains: What now should the Western and Indian Churches do in the face of the intensifying

oppression and persecution of the Church in India? Rather than continue to ponder this question, let all who seek to serve the cause of Christ in India now submit with great joy to the difficult lessons of history responsible for the heroic and humble conquest of Romana. **UJFM**

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# Renewing the Call to Reach the Hindu World

The Institute of Hindu Studies launches a collaborative effort to foster a witness for Christ among Hindus.

The Institute of Hindu Studies (IHS) at the U.S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena served as the host for a *Rethinking Forum* for ministry to Hindus held July 20-21, 2001.

Those with a heart for the Hindu world are challenged by the stark reality that 90 percent of Indian population are in castes and communities where Christian missions are not yet planning to work. With a strong conviction that there is a need to alter our approach to caste Hindus, the fifteen invited participants laid out a rough framework for networking more effectively both among themselves and the mission community at large.

The IHS, in conjunction with the Forum, will work to facilitate the birthing of Christ-centered movements within Hindu cultures and communities. With representatives experienced in ministry within the Hindu religio-cultural bloc throughout South Asia, the group was unified in the strategic desire to see these Christ-centered worship communities form outside the walls of the existing church.

*"The rethinking tradition is over a century old and calls for the adapting of Biblical faith to Hindu cultures,"* says H. L. Richard, author and participant at the Forum. The IHS is making an effort to affirm its place in that tradition, embarking on projects for those concerned with the establishment of a contextual Biblical witness to Hindus.

Future fruit from the forum will likely include seminars in churches and schools, training of cross-cultural teams and the creation of both a journal and a web page.

A follow-up conference is tentatively slated for September of 2002.

As a resource base, strategy center and a facilitator of knowledge the IHS seeks to serve the mission agency community, local churches and their affiliated denominations and individuals by providing reliable information on India, Hinduism and the Indian Diaspora. To receive more information on the ministries of the IHS please contact us!

1605 Elizabeth Street, Pasadena, CA 91104-2721 • 626.398.2314 • [ihs@uscwm.org](mailto:ihs@uscwm.org)

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*This article first appeared in Mission Frontiers in August 2001 and is reprinted with permission.*

# A Message to the West: India Needs You

by Satya Shodhak

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*Satya Shodhak is a Christian activist in central India. He began working with farmers through social and political activism in the 1980's, and has spent time in jail on several occasions for their rights. He moved into church planting work in the early 90's for which he was imprisoned twice. This movement has created great momentum among dalits and lower caste in central India and has resulted in hundreds of thriving churches. Satya envisions India to be on the verge of a mass conversion to Christianity, and wants to mobilize churches in the West to become involved.*

While the message of the cross and redemption through Jesus was most likely first received in India by the high caste Brahmin (in the state of Kerala),<sup>1</sup> they mostly kept it to themselves. Not until the 14th century, when Catholic missionaries came to this coastland area, did the message of the Gospel begin to travel to the fishermen and the lowest of the lower caste and to the untouchables.

Many on the coastland received these white missionaries with great awe, but the high castes viewed them with suspicion as 'agents' of some foreign 'system.' In time the Western effort moved inland and was joined by Protestant forces who also attempted to interact with the high castes. Dr. Shillander (one of the great missionaries of the past century) has well said that when the Gospel first arrived in India, the initial response of these high caste was to refute the message, saying, "It's not true!"<sup>2</sup>

Still people continued to convert, so the Brahmin changed their response. Instead of saying, "It's not true," they began to say, "It's not new!" To support this they pointed to their own great saints and literature, re-writing and interpreting their scripture to respond to the Christian Gospel. They generalized and glorified their own religious history, trying to steer the receptive people away from Christ.

Despite this opposition, Western missionaries continued to make progress, the Gospel having its greatest influence over the lowest of the lower castes. In response, the Brahmin's third and final attack was, "It's not you!" "Your Christ is good and easily accepted," they said, "but the followers of Christ are nothing but hypocrites, so we reject Christianity totally."

As people continued to convert, Brahminical attacks became stronger and more strategized. They began to divert people's attention away from the enemy of Brahmanism (Christianity) in order to focus on the evil of Western rule. To this end, they portrayed the nation as "Bharatmaata" (goddess mother of India) and the Indian culture (popular lower caste culture) as a religion.

Historically, it can be seen that man is always looking for a better system, but God continues to bring people to Himself. Throughout nations and cultures, people feel more comfortable and secure following a system of beliefs, but God wants people to be drawn to Him, not to a system.

In time Ghandi became the sure “saviour” of the nation. The lower caste were always shackled by their color, language, and work. Because they were not of the ruling caste, their “Dharma” (obligation) was to serve the “head” (which is Brahmanism). This they accepted as a reality because it was in accord with the Sanskrit, the scripture of the Brahmins. Thus for these low caste, real freedom, which was social justice for all, remained in the background.

Prior to the British Raj, the “Peshwas” (Brahmins) ruled, through religious control, in much of India. After the British became established, these Peshwas began to unsettle the British Raj by sowing hatred against the culture, law, and Christian religion of the British. Finally, when British rule failed, the Brahmins were able to get back in power in the name of Hindu.

Currently, the government in power in India is doing everything possible to make “conversion” illegal. This is in essence an attack on the freedom of choice guaranteed by India’s constitution, and upon which the constitution is based. This government is attempting to rewrite the constitution to advance its own agenda. Recently, to consolidate the Hindu vote, the government launched a hate campaign against Christian missionaries, Christian institutions and anything to do with Christ. These Hindutwa forces, mostly run by Brahmins, represent a very small segment of the Indian population.

In response, a small portion of the Indian church is trying to defend

the cause of Christ in India against the accusations and ploys of the Brahminical forces. The attacks are many. One of the most recent is the move to force the Indian church to sever all ties with the Western church. They want to segregate the church from the West and weaken her to the point that she has no voice.

Over the years, Brahmins have created many “church-like” organizations to address peoples’ spiritual and physical hunger, while remaining loyal to Brahminical Hinduism. With few exceptions, almost everything done in the name of Hinduism is written in Sanskrit, which is the spiritual language of Brahmins. Very little has been written in Pali, Tamil, Marathi, Gurumukhi and others. The Sanskrit language was created by the Brahmins. Through the years, this small percentage of India’s culture has been able to convince the world that India is a Brahminical Hindu nation.

In spite of the mistakes of missionaries and the Indian Church, Christ still remains attractive to many and continues to pose many challenges to the existing religious system. One great social reformer who understood Brahmanism for what it was and spoke reverently of Christ and his teachings was Mahatma Phuley. He prophetically stated that if the evil discriminative scriptures (speaking of scriptures used to subjugate the low and no castes) are not destroyed by the Brahmins, someone else will rise up and burn them. This came to pass on December 25, 1940 when Dr. B. R. Ambedkar publicly burned the Brahmin scriptures. He chose the birthday of Christ to point people to the true liberator and proclaimed freedom from religious slavery for the untouchables. Because of this historical association with Christmas, the untouchables and Shudras now look to Jesus Christ with respect and hope.

Service to lepers and people affected by other fatal diseases has been the hallmark of Christ’s love in India. Although no one can speak against this service, Brahmins have tried to undermine Christian involvement by giving glory to Gandhi through observing his death anniversary as a day to honor leprosy service in India. The work of Mother Theresa, however, has presented the biggest challenge to those who are trying to defend the Brahminical Hindu faith. No one dare challenge the love and power of Christ that flows from the example of her life and service to India.

### ***How the Western Church Can Help Effect Change***

India is looking toward the West for resources. The free market economy has opened India’s doors for money to come in, but the lower castes are being adversely affected by these changes. Their hopes for employment decrease as Westerners enter the country. One of the prevailing thoughts among western Christian leaders is that India should be moving toward financial independence. This thought has no Biblical basis. Indeed, I believe that one of the biggest ways the West can help is through their abundant resources.

Another way the West can help is by sending many more Western missionaries. The church within India has been long divided by caste, color, geographical location, language barriers, and culture issues within the country. Our nation needs to see the global church come together in spite of all their differences and model unity within the body of Christ. We need to see others working without discrimination. If the Western church ministers in India, we see that it is possible to share the love of Christ without moving in the discrimination and prejudice that has held us captive for so long.

Due to the caste system in India which has been in place for centuries and largely based on color, Indians respect light skin. Although this has been a stumbling block to the spread of the Gospel, the body of Christ can turn it into a stepping stone. The Indian church has not been able to break through caste barriers to minister to those of the upper caste, but Westerners may have a much better opportunity to gain the respect of upper caste people simply because of their color. Any Indian would listen to someone who came all the way from a Western country to share something with him.

The organized Indian church has many problems, and has lost its hunger of earlier years. However, there is a movement outside the church consisting of various mission and para-church organizations created to help fill in the gap. The Western church could help assist in prayer for revival, as well as bridge the gap between the existing church and the para-church organizations.

One philosophy spreading through the church is that Westerners should not come, but just send their money. Their resources could go so much further (statistically speaking) and their presence would simply be a distraction anyway. *This thought could not be farther from the truth.* More recent policy based on this idea has created a major hindrance to the spread of the Gospel in India. Indians are very attracted to the idea of belonging to something global. Christianity connects Indian Christians by family to people from all over the world. Meeting together with brothers and sisters from the West is essential to the missions movement in India.

The proper use of wealth can help. Wealth attracts those who are poor. I have never met a person who initially came to Christ with entirely pure motives. We come with our needs. There are some in the body of Christ

today who view many third-world converts as “rice Christians” (in other words converting on the basis of what they will receive), while the rich and healthy who convert are “genuine believers.” This idea dishonors God. We are not here to judge the motives of anyone who says they desire a life with Christ. We are called to give and serve those who are in need.

E. Stanley Jones, in his book *Songs of Ascents*, describes three basic human needs: the need to belong; the need for significance; and the need for reasonable security. “These needs” writes Jones, “were created in us by a God who loves us and wants them met. Christianity in Christ provides all needs through the body of believers. Human need has always been the open door for the Gospel – just serve the need.” (p. 302).

### **Two Personal Examples**

I'd like to recount two true stories which exemplify how the Lord is using Westerners in a powerful way to bring Indians into the kingdom. I'm sure the stories are countless, but these particular two happened to me.

While traveling to a village in Maharashtra, I approached an old and tired looking woman. I looked into her eyes and spoke, “You remind me of my grandmother. What is your name?” “Mang,” she replied. “No, I didn't ask you the name of your caste, I asked your name. The God I worship has no caste,” I said. She grabbed my arm excitedly and said, “Which God do you worship?” Eagerly I replied, “I worship Jesus Christ.” She said, “I do too! When I was a little girl nearly 60 years ago, two white single missionary ladies came to our village. They told stories about Jesus and taught the children a song. I asked Jesus in my heart that day and memorized that song, and from that day to this you are the first Christian I have met.” I had tears in my eyes as I

listened to her speak. She continued, “I have been a village midwife, and in all these years, not one baby has died. Even if women had a doctor, they always wanted me to be with them. They thought I had some kind of black magic, but I knew the doctor was inside me—Jesus living in my heart. Now you are here to share the joy.” Her name was Banabai, and she became a dear and honored friend. The Holy Spirit was her teacher all her life. She didn't need our mission strategies or church doctrines. She had Jesus, and he met her needs.

The second story happened while I was working among the Jaat community near Delhi. I met a hungry and disillusioned man while standing in a line in New Delhi. He was an educated man, but had faced a life of much sadness. He had heard the Gospel before, and now hungered to speak with someone who walked with Jesus. We ended up talking throughout the night, and he accepted Christ. However, his family had little interest in the Gospel because they associated Christianity as a religion for the poor and untouchables. Then some of our Western friends helped our witness with my friend's family. And when Jesus invaded the life of this family through our Western brothers and sisters, they became followers of Jesus. In time, they also realized the futility of their beliefs held so strongly in regard to the caste system and accepted their lower caste brothers and sisters as well. His grace is sufficient!

Hindus can remain culturally Hindus by following Christ, but cannot afford to observe untouchability, which is a sin against God and a crime against the Indian constitution. No one will freely admit the truth that casteism remains an issue in India among Christians and non-Christians alike. However, especially with regard to eating and marrying, the divisions remain. There is a



need to address this issue on an international platform.

I feel that India needs all ethnic groups from all over the world to share the Gospel. The foundation has been laid, the bridges have been prepared by the Lord throughout history. The seeds have been sown, and we need labourers from everywhere to serve the neglected and lost sheep without a Shepherd.

differences while working together with love and respect for each other.

People don't have to be addicted to drugs or have AIDS to listen to the Gospel. The Dalit and lower caste movement of today is the outcome of missionary work among the poorest of the poor through education and hope. Millions of lower-caste Indians and Dalits are crying for freedom and dignity. There are multiple

belief of one God and equality for humanity. From this movement came Islam, Christianity, and Sikhs—all recognizing the need and great hunger for one God.

There is only one response needed to meet the heart cry of the Indian people. It is seen in the example our Saviour gave in the midst of his betrayal. He took a towel and basin and washed the dirty feet of his disciples. Love and service has always been the key to Christ. Jesus has empowered us to respond through the power of His Holy Spirit to let the peoples of India also see His love and glory where they will find true peace and joy, and where they will finally end the Indian search of the centuries. **IJFM**

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*God is asking the church today to be Moses for the people of India. His body can help rescue the lower-caste Indians from the bondage of Brahmanism which has held them for so long.*

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Nearly half of India is ready and waiting to receive the King of Kings.

### **Potential Dangers**

As always, there are potential dangers and caution is needed if the Western Church is to help India. For example, it would be a hindrance to enter into India without an understanding of the many cultural issues we face. I am not saying we need to be scholars of the popular culture, but sensitive that Christianity will look very different in India than in the West and it is our love for Christ rather than the organization of 'the church' that will hold us together.

It is not helpful to come to serve in India if one thinks that all the answers come from the West. Trying to organize religion or legislate morality will not be helpful, but service and love through the power of Christ should be the banner of the West. Jesus Christ is not *A* church but *THE* church, and that truth needs to be conveyed. The beauty of the church is the privilege of being a world Christian, not a nationalist Christian. Our calling should be to embrace our

movements going on in India because the needs are so overwhelming. The Lord Almighty heard the cry of His people in slavery in Egypt (Exodus 2:23). God is asking the church today to be Moses for the people of India. His body can help rescue the lower-caste Indians from the bondage of Brahmanism which has held them for so long.

*The history of India is filled with conversion from Hinduism.* As early as 500 BC, a lower caste tribal leader, Sidartha Gautam (known to the world as Buddha), left his throne to serve the people and seek the truth so he could respond to the spiritual need to those he served. Around 321 BC, Chandra Gupta Maurya (who was from a lower-caste tribe) could not be satisfied with Brahminical Hinduism. He became a Jaina monk, and asked people to follow a moral code of conduct. After his death his grandson, Emperor Ashoka, came into power and strongly believed in one God. He embraced the Buddhist code of conduct, and expressed his loyalty by giving all of his wealth to further spread the message of Buddha. Then came the Sufi saints who spread the

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# The Conversion Confusion

by Herbert Hofer

The issue of conversion has become increasingly controversial in India. In fact, the definition of conversion has been a great historic controversy also within the church up to the present day. Some say it's a gift of God in Baptism also for infants. Others say it's a decision one can make at the "age of reason." Others say it's a moment, a "warm feeling," speaking in tongues, a born-again experience, and on and on. If Christians themselves are not clear about it, it's no wonder devout Hindus and secular politicians are unclear.

A second issue about which everybody is unclear is the relationship of Baptism to conversion. As mentioned above, some say Baptism is the very act of conversion. Others say Baptism is a public testimony of one's conversion decision. Others say "Baptism in the Spirit" is the only baptism that matters. Some say Baptism in water is essential for salvation; others say it's necessary but not essential; others say it's not even necessary. In the debate about conversion and Baptism in India, what are we Christians going to say that we can all agree on and others can understand?

Finally, a third controversy is what conversion and Baptism have to do with membership in a church. Can one be converted to Christ and never join a congregation? Once one is baptized, must one join a congregation? Does conversion/Baptism put one into the "invisible Church" so that one's membership in an organizational church really doesn't matter? Can Holy Communion be offered to an unbaptized convert? How about the other services of the church like marriage or burial?

My experience in India is that this third controversy is the critical one. It's membership in a church that is so contrary to Hindu piety, so upsetting to Hindu families, and so threatening to Hindu politicians. If we can clearly state that one can convert to faith in Jesus and one can even be baptized, without ever joining a church, most of our difficulties with the Hindu community and the political parties will be over. It's conversion into a new culture; it's baptism into a new community, that is the problem.

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*Dr. Herbert Hofer is a former missionary to India, having served from 1968-1983 with the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. He currently is professor of theology at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon. This article appears in the Appendix to the newly updated and expanded edition of Churchless Christianity, published by William Carey Library.*

## ***Is Church Membership Essential?***

Christianity grew out of Judaism. Judaism is an ethnic religion. It is a tradition of a people. They gather in worship to celebrate their identity. Christianity began with that tradition. The early congregations functioned like Jewish synagogues. The Christians gathered once a week as in their Jewish heritage. They read and

community. Conversion need not follow the Jewish community/synagogue model of Christian life.

In regard to the episcopacy, a traditional dictum has been that the episcopal order is of the “bene esse” of the church, but not of the “esse” of the church. Having bishops can be acknowledged as good for an effective church and ministry, but it is not essential for a church and a ministry to be valid. Similarly, on the

there is a difference between conversion and church membership.

At a conference in January 2000, an evangelist shared the following incident. The local tahsildar (government official) came to know of his evangelistic work and approached him. He asked, “Are you converting anyone?” “Well, what do you mean by conversion? Is it alright if people pray to Jesus, learn about Him, guide their life after Him, and accept Him in their hearts?” “That’s all alright, but no conversions!”

The official’s concern was not spiritual but political, not moral but cultural, not individual but communal. The evangelist said he left church membership up to the converts. They could join the nearby city congregation if they wished. It was good but not essential. It was their decision how they want to grow and live in the faith.

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## *Conversion need not follow the Jewish community / synagogue model of Christian life.*

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interpreted the Scriptures. They enforced spiritual and moral discipline. They married among each other. Even the initial Gentile converts were accustomed to such a spiritual life, as most came from the “God-fearers” who habitually had participated in synagogue life.

This was the early pattern of Christian life. Converts joined a new community. You were baptized into a church. The pattern was set and continued through the centuries.

However, we must question if this pattern is of the essence of the Gospel, if it is commanded by God. We can readily think of many Biblical exceptions to the rule: Naaman, Cornelius, the jailer at Philippi, Bartimaeus, the Ethiopian eunuch, the Samaritan woman at the well, the Samaritan leper, the centurion at the cross, the Gadarene demoniac, and on and on. These all seem to have been converts. Some were baptized. We don’t know that any joined a congregation, and we know assuredly that many did not.

They all gave a public testimony to Christ. They all seemed to accept Him as their Lord and Savior. None was required to join a congregation. In fact, a few were specifically instructed not to leave their community and not to join the convert

basis of Mark 16:16, it’s been summarized that baptism is necessary, but not absolutely necessary. We seem to have a similar situation with the matter of church membership. It is good but not essential. It is necessary but not absolutely necessary.

## ***What Does Conversion have to do with Church Membership?***

Every pastor knows from personal experience that church membership is no guarantee of conversion. How many times have we conducted a Christian rite (a Baptism, a wedding, a Confirmation, a Lord’s Supper, a funeral) having plenty of doubt in our minds about the Christian convictions of the participants. We know all too well that many church members see their membership rather than their conversion as their assurance of salvation.

We know how personally disconcerting it is to find people outside of the congregation whose faith outshines many for whom we conduct all the rites (cf. Lk. 7:9). The pastors who minister to non-baptized believers in India certainly express this godly amazement. We all know from firsthand experience that

## ***Why Not Promote Faith Communities rather than Churches?***

We also must distinguish between church communities and faith communities. The church is a faith community, but not all faith communities are churches. One can be a part of a Bible Study group or a prayer group quite separate from one’s congregation. A faith community may be a group with whom one relates face-to-face, or one may participate at a distance. No doubt, Naaman and the Ethiopian eunuch and the Gadarene demoniac and the others felt they were part of the faith community, though they never had face-to-face contact. The faith community is the classical “invisible Church,” with a capital “C.” One can be part of the Church and never part of the visible church.

The objections to conversion in India center on the cultural and political issues of church membership. Politicians realize that church membership means

new community affiliation and new political influence. It means obedience to a new organization's rules and a clergy person and a community discipline. Families and cultural leaders fear a self-removal from traditions and responsibilities. Conversion isn't the issue. Baptism isn't the issue. Church membership is the issue.

If one remains within the family and the culture and the political party, there is no problem. Can one be a loyal member of the BJP as a Christian? If so, no problem.

Finally, there are styles of faith community evolving in India, which are not the hierarchical, Western-style organizations. The Sri Narayana and the Sai Baba groups, for example, are much more informal. They don't have membership rolls or required attendance or

ordained clergy or formal discipline. Yet, they are powerful forces in people's lives. They follow the cultural tradition of providing religious opportunities rather than religious laws. They are faith communities, not "churches."

Any religion must have standards. It must stand for something. It must hold up lofty goals and expectations. It must identify for its followers what is good and necessary and helpful. There is no objection to such religious teaching, also among the most strident Hindu fundamentalists. The objection comes when demands are made, when separation is expected, when affiliations are changed. Can conversion be to the standard and not to the church?

Membership in the Church (capital "C") is not a matter of joining an organization or conformance to institutional patterns

or obedience to appointed individuals. It is a matter of faith, of relationship to God in Christ. It's the same issue St. Paul dealt with time and again in his day, and which we institutionalized. Christians need to hear again and again:

**Do not let what you eat (we might add: or any other non-spiritual requirement) cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.... for the Kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by all. (Rom 14:15-18)**

**IJFM**

# Between September 11 and November 4

by H. L. Richard

Christians in the post-September 11 world must learn to think and communicate with great care. It is gratifying that political leaders have been careful to insist that there can be no holy war between Islamic and Christian nations. Political motivations have at times caused statements hazy on truth, but greater damage is being done by xenophobic forces and one wishes that the Christian churches would everywhere be in the front line of support for internationals resident in the US.

Triumphalistic statements about the superiority of Christianity over other faiths, and of the West over other societies, are both irresponsible and unconvincing. One of the first lessons in missionary training is against ethnocentrism, the placing of one's own culture and heritage in the central position and viewing all of life from that center. Peoples around the world have a rightful pride in their cultures and heritage; thankfully many are very appreciative of the USA and its achievements, but most are flabbergasted by US murder statistics (particularly school children shooting deaths), the extremes of consumerism, and the output from Hollywood that circles the globe. Certainly internationals in Christ do not want their nations to follow the path of America.

In India perhaps one sees most clearly the damaging effects of confusing the City of God and the City of Man, and lessons from this history need to impact analyses of the striking events spoken about from India in these days. Triumphalistic arrogance towards Hinduism is one of the marks of Christian mission among Hindus. Alexander Duff, one of the greatest of missionaries to India, explicitly sought the destruction of Hinduism, and many Christians today continue to think and speak in a similar way.

But a desire to supplant Hinduism reveals a failure to think clearly. Biblical reflection on mission among Hindus must begin with careful analysis of the complex phenomena labeled as "Hinduism". The assumption that "Hinduism" is a religion like Christianity leads to serious distortions. All students of "Hinduism" know that it has no creed that is broadly accepted. (Many *sampradayas* have definite creedal positions, leading some scholars to suggest that these differing "schools" or "sects" of Hinduism are the Hindu phenomena that match the criteria for "religion", so that "Hinduism" contains a number of different "religions" under its vast umbrella.) Since "Hinduism" is not primarily

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theological, it is very hard to think of it primarily in “religious” terms. It is a truism that “Hinduism” is holistic, touching into every area of life. This provides the clue that it is better to think of “Hinduism” as a multi-faceted civilization rather than as a religion.

To change the broad outlook on Hinduism in this way leads to important transformations. It is manifestly obvious that the biblical mandate for mission is to plant gospel seeds within civilizations, and certainly is not to supplant civilizations. The transformation rather than destruction of Hindu civilization is the only appropriate biblical agenda.

One of many specific areas where this change of outlook has radical ramifications is in consideration of caste. “Hinduism” is an evolved and evolving faith (if it should be considered “a faith” as opposed to a conglomeration of faiths as suggested above), and nowhere is change more evident in the present day than in the area of caste. When dealing with a non-creedal, evolving “religion” one must be constantly alert to the fact that “truths” of the past cannot be assumed to be “truths” for the present generation of Hindus.

Modern Hindu Indians do not defend their history of caste oppression and are deeply disturbed by the continuance of serious problems related to caste in Indian society. To suggest that statements from ancient books about caste define current Hindu views and practices is unfair, untrue, and certainly un-Christian. Yes, India has serious problems in this area. So do Indian churches, as caste continues to play a massive role in church politics and lies

behind innumerable problems in Indian Christian circles. India, and its caste system, is changing rapidly. But the collapse of caste or of Indian civilization is unimaginable, and it is no part of a biblical world-view to wish for such a thing.

It is striking to note that the great Dr. Ambedkar, who initiated the first mass conversions from outcaste Hinduism to Buddhism, shared this basic perspective, and it is one of the main reasons he chose to convert to Buddhism rather than to Christianity. He wrote that “if the Depressed classes join Islam or Christianity, they not only go out of the Hindu religion, but they also go out of the Hindu culture. What the consequences of conversion will do to the country as a whole ... is well worth bearing in mind” (quoted from M. E. Prabhakar, “Dr. Ambedkar and Indian Christianity” in *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: A Centenary Tribute*, A. P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam (eds.), Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991, pg. 80-81). Perhaps rather than talking of “Hindu culture,” the point that Dr. Ambedkar is making is more clear in terms of “Hindu civilization.”

The heart and glory (as well as the stumbling block) of biblical faith lies in the concept of incarnation. God became a man and lived among us, then left his followers with a mandate to go and do likewise among the complex cultures of the world. In the colonial era (when historic missions made a massive impact), it was impossible to avoid some association of the gospel of Christ with colonial power. However much many missionaries lamented this fact (and

more than a few saw how the message of incarnation was distorted by the reality of “Christian” colonialism), it impacted their work and remains of crucial importance in the churches and societies of the non-western world. No greater challenge lies before the churches of the world and the western missionary force than that of transcending the colonial legacy and demonstrating the true gospel of incarnation in all the civilizations, societies, and cultures of the world; which certainly includes the complex of cultures and religions and castes that make up the Dalit population of India. **IJFM**