



A Response to H.L. Richard's *Community Dynamics and the Praxis of "Church"*

by Timothy C. Tennent, Professor of
World Missions and Indian Studies,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

H.L. Richard has provided an important service to the on-going discussion concerning the nature of Christian community by his re-focusing our attention on the M. M. Thomas–Lesslie Newbigin debate. I explored this debate in some detail in my article, “The Challenge of Churchless Christianity” which appeared in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* in October, 2005, and so I have been asked to write a reply to Richard.

There is much in the article with which I am in agreement. First, Richard rightly points out the particular challenges which are inherent in community identity in India. India has long been plagued by communalism and it is difficult for those who have not lived and worked in India to fully appreciate the complexity of Indian sociology and how it influences Christian identity. Second, Richard has helped us by using the well respected work of anthropologist K. S. Singh. Using Singh's data, Richard points out that among the 586 major community segments in India there are 48 distinct Christian communities (*jati*) in India.

However, (and this is the important point) there are 227 communities of the 586 in which the Christian presence is an important segment living along with the Hindu or tribal or Buddhist, etc. In other words, there are many millions of Christians in India who are living out their faith in a non-communal way, i.e. they are Christians within a larger community (*jati*) which holds to some other religious affiliation. However, this is a situation which is common to Christians all over the world, and all through time.

If Richard wants to insist that Hindus who come to Christ need not change their communal allegiance from one of the 586 community segments to one of the 48 who are exclusively Christian, then I am in hearty agreement—and so is Newbigin. We need more Christians who come out of a Hindu or Buddhist of Hindu background in each of the 586 major segments to retain their community allegiance and identity. If this is the meaning of “Christ centered communities within Hinduism” then I think we are all in agreement.

However, I think that Richard is actually saying more than this. Richard insists that a Hindu who follows Christ need not become a “Christian” when he or she follows Christ. What does this mean? If Richard means that someone need not change their cultural identity to one of the 48 exclusively Christian groups, then Richard is right, a Hindu should not become a “Christian.” Furthermore, if a person is legally registered by the local magistrate as a Hindu, and belonging to a particular Hindu group, it is not necessary for a person to change their legal status. But, if Richard is saying that following Christ within Hindu community never implies a disruption of one's prior Hindu religious identity, then he has mis-read Newbigin. Newbigin insists that even though we remain within the sociological community of our birth, our following of Christ must take on visible forms.

In his *The Finality of Christ*, Newbigin insists that the church must involve a “visible community.”¹ When Newbigin calls for “visible community” he is not talking about mere “church extension” or the “aggrandizement of the community.” He is not pushing any particular high-church ecclesiology. Rather, Newbigin is rejecting what he regards as M. M. Thomas' over spiritualization of ecclesiology which says that Christianity is

primarily concerned with ‘faith’ and not with ‘religion’, meaning by the term ‘religion’ gathered, organized communities.

So Richard is right that Newbigin does not insist that one has to sociologically break with the Hindu community, which involves a host of traditional cultural practices. However, Richard fails to recognize how important it is that these believers gather in public ways. Perhaps this is important to Richard, but he does not make it explicit. Would Richard insist on the need for any public identity within the

*DOES RICHARD maintain
that followers of Jesus
from a Hindu religious
background can retain
their prior religious, not just
social, identity?*

Hindu community for these followers of Jesus? Does Richard maintain that followers of Jesus from a Hindu religious background can retain their prior religious, not just social, identity? If so, then Newbigin would respond to this proposal the same way he responded to Thomas. He would argue that their ecclesiology is overly docetic, i.e. a conception of Church which is not properly grounded in real life sociological realities. For example, he asks, “if someone belongs to a community sodality known as Hinduism, but at the same time confesses ultimate loyalty and allegiance to Jesus Christ, is it not naïve to not expect that there will be various points whereby commitment to Christ will “override his obligations as a Hindu, [and that] this allegiance must take visible—that is, social—forms?”²

It doesn't really matter how many versions of "Hinduism" are practiced in India. Newbigin's point is that there will inevitably be points where a tension will develop which requires a faithful, public response. In conclusion, Newbigin would not only reject the anonymous Christian ideas of Karl Rahner, but also any kind of privatized follower of Jesus in India who does not publicly and visibly demonstrate their solidarity with Christ and those who follow Christ.

Endnotes

¹Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1969), 96.

²George R. Hunsberger, "Conversion and Community: Revisiting the Lesslie Newbigin-M. M. Thomas Debate," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July, 1998), 115, quoting Newbigin.

A Response to Timothy C. Tennent

by H.L. Richard

I appreciate very much that Dr. Tennent has put/kept the focus on the central points in the Thomas-Newbigin debate, which are also the central points in the current debate about "insider movements" or the nature of "church" in the Hindu world. It seems the core issues in the debate revolve around what it means to be Christian and what it means to be Hindu.

If I am accurately reading Dr. Tennent's response, he is in agreement that communitarian Christianity is problematic (and also that communal Christianity disguises the gospel for many peoples). His proposal seems to be that a non-communal Christianity be developed, and he suggests that the Anthropological Survey of India data supports that this type of Christianity is already present and growing.

There are two problems here, one being how far this really is happen-

ing and the other being how far this is even possible. The ASI data seems to suggest that it is happening, and that would certainly be a step in the right direction. But the ASI was not addressing this matter directly and gives no population data. Certainly the past decade has seen a heightening of tensions in the area of Christian-Hindu relations, and conservative Indian Christians seem to be increasingly stressing separate community identity as Christians rather than moving away from this distorting paradigm.

Certainly from a Western perspective it seems possible to transcend communitarian expressions of discipleship. But from a contextual perspective things look very different. The water-tight categories of "Hindu" and "Hinduism" are a product of colonial stumbling rather than necessary historical/theological developments. (See my review of Geoffrey Oddie's *Imagined Hinduism* elsewhere in this issue of *IJFM*.) "Christian" (as my paper too briefly suggested) has a meaning in context from that colonial heritage which even includes living under a different

*I GATHER FROM
Dr. Tennent's response
that he will not accept
this definition, and that
is where our discussion
needs to begin.*

legal system for those who are baptized. (This is clearly pointed out and is the basis for Hans Staffner's study on *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community*.)

So the historical and legal contexts of India make the term "Christian" (and its vernacular equivalents) necessarily to involve a separation from

birth community. It seems to me that Dr. Tennent's position (this is Hans Staffner's point) amounts to saying *we cannot be true to the Bible until there is a very basic change of legal reality in India, but we are willing to live with that problem/compromise rather than adjust our understanding of and terminology about "Christianity"*. It seems to me that a more serious approach to this problem should at least be recognized as valid.

The current meaning of "Hindu" is yet more complex and controversial. The focal point of tension in the disagreement under discussion seems to be about being "religiously" Hindu. The only hope for something resembling clarity and agreement in this area will involve a clear definition of terms. By "Hindu" I do not mean something necessarily religious; my use of the terms "Hindu" and "religious" is on the lines spelled out by Julius Lipner:

It is not necessary to be religious, namely to believe in some world-transcending reality, personal or otherwise, in terms of which human fulfilment may be attained, to be Hindu. The overwhelming majority of Hindus *are* religious, at least in this minimal sense, and the overwhelming proportion of human endeavour that has gone into the making of historical Hinduism *has* been religious in this way. This is a very important fact about Hinduism.... But it is important to note that one may be accepted as a Hindu by Hindus, and describe oneself perfectly validly as a Hindu, without being religious in the sense noted. One may be polytheistic or monotheistic, monistic or pantheistic, even agnostic or atheistic, and still be a Hindu. This is why I have described Hinduism as essentially a cultural phenomenon (*Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Julius Lipner, Routledge, London, 1994, pg. 7; italics original).

I gather from Dr. Tennent's response that he will not accept this definition, and

that is where our discussion really needs to begin. Dr. Tennent writes about a “disruption of one’s prior Hindu *religious* identity” (his italics); but this is a statement that has no relevance in light of the understanding of “Hindu” spelled out by Lipner. (The point being that of course in Christ one’s prior religious allegiances, both faith and practice, will be impacted, but this does not necessarily require a change in one’s identity as a Hindu since “Hindu” does not refer to any specific religious faith/practice.)

Then again Dr. Tennent questions “Does Richard maintain that followers of Jesus from a Hindu background can retain both their prior social *and* religious identity?” (italics his again). Again the question itself is making assumptions that “Hindu” necessarily involves a distinct religious identity, which Lipner shows not to be the case. (A strong tendency to change of community, communitarian if not communal, Christianity seems to be evident even in Dr. Tennent’s terminology, as he refers here to “Hindu background” and at another point talks about those who “come out of a Hindu background,” the “coming out” suggesting communal change. Dr. Tennent’s comment suggesting that a Hindu who converts to Christianity might choose not to inform a magistrate about the conversion is simply pointless; baptism effects a change of legal status under Indian law, whether or not a magistrate is informed at the time of the conversion.)

Because Dr. Tennent is working from a different understanding of “Hinduism” there are necessary miscommunications between us. He suggests that “Richard fails to recognize how important it is that these believers gather in public ways.” I obviously should have spent more time on the point, but I did clearly say that “that there is a corporate aspect to discipleship is everywhere in the Bible.” Dr. Tennent suggests his use of the slippery term “religion” can be understood in this way: “meaning by the term ‘religion’ gathered, organized communities.” It seems to be his assumption that any gathered, organized community

that focuses on Jesus Christ will necessarily be non-Hindu, but that is where I put forward the Subba Rao movement as clear evidence that this is not the case.

When Dr. Tennent suggests that “it doesn’t really matter how many versions of ‘Hinduism’ are practiced in India,” the misunderstanding is most apparent. The many “Hinduisms” show that “Hindu” incorporates multi-religious realities. That Christ-centered, corporate religious realities can exist within the Hindu framework under the Hindu umbrella has been suggested and promoted for centuries, and Newbigin affirmed his agreement with this in the example of de Nobili. This (which is not what Newbigin was critiquing in MM Thomas) can be thought to be necessarily docetic (or naïve) only if different understandings of “Hinduism” and “Christianity” are assumed.

In closing, Dr. Tennent stresses the need for followers of Christ to “visibly demonstrate their solidarity with Christ and those who follow Christ.” I hope my comments above make clear that I am in full agreement with this. But I hope there is not again a miscommunication due to varying presuppositions. New corporate expressions of public discipleship to Jesus within Hindu cultures and communities certainly do not need the label “Christian,” nor do they need any particular kind of relationship with existing “Christian” churches and denominations. It is enough that (like many other new church developments) they recognize their spiritual kinship with all disciples of Christ in any and all communities. No blueprint for wider ecumenism should be suggested, let alone imposed, on these developing Christ-centered movements.

A Final Comment

by Timothy C. Tennent

I have no quarrel with Richard’s point that Hinduism is for some a religion and for others merely a geo-

graphic identity. He is absolutely right. This is not about maintaining cultural and social particularities. My point is that one cannot maintain Hindu religious identity and at the same time be a follower of Jesus Christ... That has nothing to do with broader views of Hinduism. Catholicity implies that we identity ourselves with other followers of Christ. My own dissertation figure, Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, proudly called himself a Hindu-Catholic, but it had nothing to do with the churchless Christianity notion of our current discussions. Catholicity implies that we identity ourselves publicly with other followers of Christ. **IJFM**