

ISFM 2012: Still an Exotic?

Syncretism in a Hindu Insider Movement: K. Subba Rao's Legacy

by *H. L. Richard*

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Current discussions and controversies related to insider movements are overwhelmingly related to issues in the Muslim world. But the discussion of insider movements has been deeply impacted from Hindu contexts, where insider phenomena have deep roots. India has produced more notable insider *individuals* than insider *movements*, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) and Kandaswami Chetti (1867-1943) being two early examples.¹

By far the most striking insider movement story in church history is the account of the Secret Sannyasi Mission told by Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929); however there is no historiographical reason to believe that such a mission ever existed.² A peculiar variety of insider movement developed in the city of Sivakasi in the far south of India starting in the second decade of the twentieth century and continues to the present time, the main peculiarities being that the movement has been predominantly among women and relates in intriguing ways with existing churches.³ The movement that developed around K. Subba Rao in Andhra Pradesh, south India, beginning in the 1940s is the best documented and most viable insider movement to have appeared in the Hindu world. Subba Rao was syncretistic in his teaching and practice, and that will be the focus of this analysis of the Hindu insider movement that developed around his life and work.⁴

The Life and Work of Kalagara Subba Rao (1912-1981)

Subba Rao's movement is a specimen of folk religion, and as such there has been little concern within the movement for its history or for the documents it produced. Yet the events surrounding the Subba Rao movement are recent enough that the central incidents can be quite reliably dated. Subba Rao was born in 1912 and married in 1937. In 1942 he experienced a vision of Christ that transformed his life and led to the Jesus movement that continues to this day.⁵

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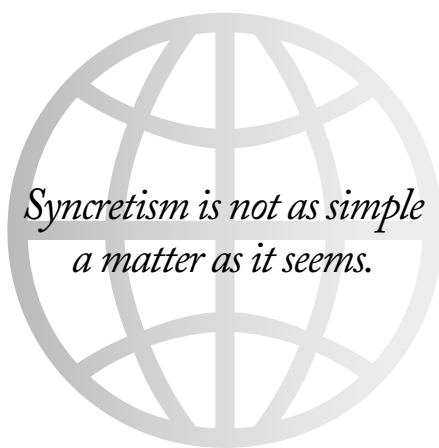
Both the account of Subba Rao's vision of Christ and the ministry of healing in Christ's name that eventually developed have been preserved with hagiographical rather than historiographical concerns in mind. Subba Rao wrote a song about his conversion experience and that song appears first in the current collection of his compositions.⁶ Stories of the development of his healing ministry lack time frames and dates but are believable. My research, however, did uncover a blatant contradiction in accounts of Subba Rao's pre-conversion experience. The received story is that Subba Rao had no contact with Christians that might have influenced his vision in 1942. But in fact he had met the noted Pentecostal evangelist Lam Jeevaratnam due to his wife seeking (and finding) relief under Jeevaratnam's ministry (Richard 2005:45f.).

Fundamental to any understanding of Subba Rao is his reactionary rejection of Christianity and its institutions, and this attitude likely explains why influence from Pentecostal Christianity was ignored. Within the Subba Rao movement there is no traditional account for why Subba Rao first rejected Christianity, perhaps because it is considered an obviously right path. Dr. B. V. Subbamma, who became acquainted with Subba Rao after commending his work in her study of *New Patterns for Discipling Hindus* (1970:94-97), recounted to me that Subba Rao attended the Lutheran church in the village of Munipalle for a time, with others of his caste status following along due to his influence in that society. But he and his friends were not well received by the Christians of Dalit background; there was a fight about who got to sit on chairs and who sat on the floor and the Christians claimed the church had been built for them and not for these newcomers.⁷

By the 1950s Subba Rao had become known for his healing ministry. He was also uncompromisingly focused on Jesus Christ, whom he proclaimed

in the midst of a vibrant critique of all religious traditions. In practice—and surely this was related to the association of Christianity with Jesus—Subba Rao's critique of religious traditions centered on a critique, almost always a mocking, of Christianity. It is thus no surprise that his early years were marked by rather severe conflict with the established churches. His first English publication in 1958 was a deeply critical tirade against the church and its ministry, fittingly entitled *Retreat, Padri!* A second edition released in 1972 suggested that church relations had improved.

The first edition was couched in language commensurate with the unrelenting attitude of the Christian



religionists and padres towards me, and my own antipathy for them and their ill-conceived religious routine and belief of years long past. Strong words were needed then, to express my uncompromising feelings in the early days of my ministry for my Gurudev, Jesus Christ. The feelings are still inherent in me, but my voice has been mellowed by the open mind of my listeners. (Richard 2005:49, from Rao 1972:5)⁸

Nothing like actual cooperation ever developed between the Subba Rao movement and the established churches. The movement continued its central focus on physical healing, but was also certainly a devotional (*bhakti*) movement centered on faith and love

towards Jesus Christ. Along with these emphases the idiosyncratic teaching or philosophy of Subba Rao marked the movement. It is very difficult to estimate the numbers of adherents to Subba Rao's teaching. There was no formal organizational structure, and as will be noted there was opposition to baptism and sacramental practice. The movement developed a slogan of "no caste, no creed, no religion," but in fact was and is solidly rooted in the Kamma ("clean Shudra" in the caste hierarchy) community.

The Question of Syncretism

This paper rather boldly proclaims that Subba Rao and his movement are syncretistic, but it must be admitted that syncretism is not as simple a matter as it seems. Hopefully some razor-sharp critique of aspects of Subba Rao's work will be presented here, and in the process syncretism will be shown to be a dull knife. There is room for a great deal of difference of opinion regarding exactly what is syncretistic, and even when it is agreed that a practice or idea is syncretistic there is room for difference regarding what exactly constitutes the syncretism.

For a simple example, consider the ritualistic opening of Subba Rao meetings. A large crucifix (where dripping blood plays a significant part) is central to the manifest devotion. Is the crucifix itself syncretistic? The participants all remove their shoes. Is that syncretistic? Or is the Western wearing of shoes syncretistic? Are both neutral? Does motive (as much as act) indicate syncretism? Dozens of candles are lit at the foot of the cross/crucifix, and handfuls of incense are then burned on live coals held in a censor. All stand with hands folded (palms together against the chest) and sing the thoroughly orthodox Trinitarian "Holy, Holy, Holy" song that is sung by all Protestant Christians in Andhra Pradesh. Are these acts syncretistic? Why? Why not?

No sacramental practice exists in the Subba Rao movement; is that syncretism, or just aberrant teaching/practice? The Bible is honored in theory, but hardly in practice. During meetings there is a reading from the New Testament, randomly chosen without advanced preparation, with some comments from the leader following the reading. At the close of meetings there is a time of “blessing” where leaders place their right hand on the foreheads of attendees. At times something very like intercessory prayer is offered, but some leaders merely pronounce the name of Jesus over people (following Subba Rao’s procedure for healing). The hand-on-forehead routine seems clearly borrowed from Pentecostal practice. Is the mere pronouncing of the name of Jesus syncretism or acceptable biblical practice? If the theology behind the practice is semi (if not completely) monistic, is that error, or syncretism, or both? Often oil or water is blessed and sprinkled or carried away by devotees, another practice that challenges simplistic assumptions about syncretism.

Subba Rao’s Syncretism

This paper is not a challenge to the concept of syncretism, so I will now move to some clearly erroneous teachings of Subba Rao, at least some of which are without doubt worthy to be labeled as syncretistic. A cautionary note is necessary, however. Subba Rao was not a systematic thinker; hyperbole and paradox (perhaps contradiction) are abundantly present in his teaching. There are also remarkable tensions between his teaching and his practice in some areas, as will be pointed out as part of this analysis.

Subba Rao’s neglect of the Bible and sacraments has already been noted. The casual use of the New Testament in meetings is consistent with clear teaching that decentralizes Scripture. The third stanza of the sixth song is a good example.

H*indu devotional movements are not book centered; the Christian method of cross-referencing various biblical statements seems odd to Hindus.*

The Book is a dense jungle;
What do you seek in there?
It is nothing but a fence to guard the
earth-stained sinner.
The heavenly guru himself told that
the letter kills;
Why don’t you leave that deadening
load and go forward? (Richard
2005:87-88)

Before also offering a critique let me first suggest an appreciative reading of this stanza. There is a sense in which the Bible is a dense jungle, and there is a focus on Bible study that leads to neglect of obedience. In such situations it is entirely appropriate to call people to leave “that deadening load” and go forward. But how does one find the way forward? Surely the way forward is found in a proper reading of the Bible, or at least of the teaching of Jesus? Yet this stanza suggests that Jesus (the heavenly guru) teaches that the letter kills. Those words are in fact a statement by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6, and are a reference to the Old Testament law. Jesus said the exact opposite about his own words, which are “spirit and life” (Jn 6:63). Despite sympathy for Subba Rao’s point, the denigrating of the Bible, which is at least implied here, can only be considered harmful to true spiritual life.

Is this approach to the Bible syncretistic? A strong case could be made for defining matters in this way. Hindu devotional movements are not book centered, and the traditional Christian method of cross-referencing various biblical statements seems odd to Hindus. On the other hand, Subba Rao’s life and work are marked by a reactionary spirit (Richard 2005:154f.). The example of Bible-toting Christians who did not sufficiently manifest the reality of Christ in their lives was more likely the stronger factor in Subba Rao’s problematic decentralizing of Scripture.

Certainly that was the case regarding the practice of baptism.

Baptism was the central point of conflict between Subba Rao and traditional Christians. Subba Rao’s opposition to baptism was neither subtle nor sophisticated.

Forgetting the spirit they held onto the
body and got caught in lustful ways;
They clip the sacred tuft of hair, wipe
off our forehead marks, and change
our clothes;
They immerse us in water, wipe away
our old names and compose new
names.
That, they say, is the way to salvation.
O God, if a pig is immersed in the
holy river
Does it become an elephant king?
(Song 9, stanza 2; Richard 2005:92)

This mocking of baptism was in accord with Subba Rao’s wider teaching against all ritualism. Song 2 stanzas three to seven provide a good example of this, while also illustrating Subba Rao’s Christo-centrism and other themes that will be considered shortly.

Outward cleansing is useless;
Only inner purity will give me heaven,
he said.
Only the divine sacrifice made on
the cross
Is the way and the truth leading to
eternal life.
There is no use for shadows on
the curtain,
But he called me to seek the truth
that is hidden behind the curtain.
Destroying ignorance is true knowledge;
And that cannot be done by rituals,
he said.
Leave the illusion of looking for
heaven elsewhere;
Leaving that illusion, see heaven
within yourself. (Richard 2005:82f.)

In one of his few published prose works, Subba Rao stated that “Ceremonies are

useless. They are harmful. They mislead. Prayer and worship are the worst forms of ceremonial" (Rao 1965:9). Subba Rao was certainly reactionary against popular religion and its ritualism. To Christian friends he affirmed that baptism was not a problem if accompanied by a change of life (Richard 2005:75, nt. 25). Yet despite the anti-ritualism of the teaching, a distinct ritual developed under Subba Rao's own leadership. The ritualistic singing of the Protestant "Holy, Holy, Holy" hymn is especially striking in light of the dubious teachings to be noted below. Upon questioning, I was informed that Subba Rao himself introduced that song and its regular, ritualistic use.

The denigrating of ritual and baptism are related to the rather overwhelming dualism in Subba Rao's teaching, where the body is repeatedly considered bad while the spirit is good. This perspective is present in the last two songs quoted above, and often is much more explicit, as in song 20 stanza four and song 27 stanza seven which refer to the body as "a leather puppet of pus and blood" (Richard 2005:110, 124). Subba Rao's denigration of the physical body is particularly remarkable in light of the central focus of his ministry, which was physical healing. "Syncretism" does not seem to be an adequately comprehensive rubric for analyzing and discussing Subba Rao's issues related to dualism, denigration of the body, reactionary stances and radical inconsistency between teaching and practice, matters that nonetheless need to be critiqued.

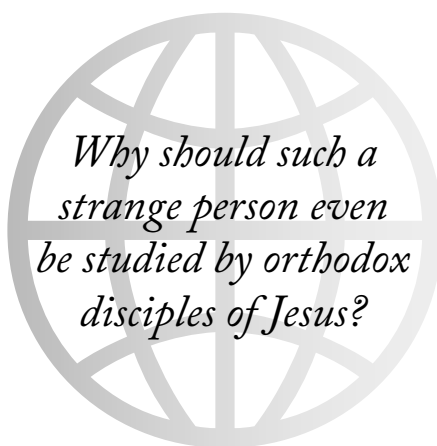
The central area for identifying syncretism in Subba Rao's thought lies in a number of concepts that overlap traditional categories of anthropology (the doctrine of man, not the modern discipline), soteriology, Christology and pneumatology—indeed, every realm of traditional Christian thought. To begin let me quote some truly jarring statements, to be followed

by analysis and critique. Song 23 stanzas 13–17:

I am no more in the futility of differentiating "I" and "mine."
Without me where are you, my Jesus?
Now I understand the secret mystery,
my beloved;
Then why the foolishness of worshipping you?

I forgot myself and I created you (in my place);
The forgetfulness has gone and knowledge has dawned, my Jesus,
I have seen myself in you, my beloved;
I know now that I am the supreme spirit.

I have begotten and I am begotten;
I have to worship myself, my Jesus;
That is the total sum of your teaching,
my beloved;



That is the essence of the meaning of your life.

I saw you and forgot myself;
In me I saw you, and I become both earth and heaven, my Jesus;
There is no more the bondage of sin and virtue, my beloved.
There is no more slavery to the law.

You became me and I became you;
How can I worship you any more, my Jesus?
How can you worship me, my beloved?
How can separation be between you and me any more? (Richard 2005:117-118)

This is by no means a singular statement, as demonstrated by stanza three of song 34; the refrain of this song is "My brother Jesus kindly taught me that I am all."

I am the creator and also I am the creation;
I am the male form and I am the female form;
I am omnipresent and I am being, consciousness and bliss;
I am eternal life without birth or death. (Richard 2005:137)

I suspect, perhaps even hope, that some of you are wondering at this stage why such a strange person should even be studied by orthodox disciples of Jesus. The answer lies in the last (sixth) stanza of this strange song 34.

To break down the guard and to ruin the castle of religion,
To release Jesus who is imprisoned in it,
I brought him out by hand and showed him to all;
So come, brothers, following (him) is salvation. (Richard 2005:138)

These thoughts certainly represent syncretism with a pantheistic or advaitic or monistic worldview, yet as the closing line above shows it is a completely Christocentric syncretism focused on a life of discipleship to Jesus. It is also a syncretism that in many ways is in theory rather than in practice. The comments against worshipping Christ in the stanzas above are affirmed in prose in a strangely absolute polarity: "There are only two alternatives: (1) Living like Jesus so as to become Christ; or (2) worshipping, praying, and do all the rest of things except living like Him" (Rao 1965:13).⁹ Yet nothing is more fundamental to the Subba Rao movement than the deep heartfelt devotion and worship towards Jesus Christ that is evident in their singing, particularly the "Holy, Holy, Holy" song already mentioned, which includes the stanza "Holy Son, incarnate ocean of love, saving men" and closes with "Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God, three in one, to Thee forever belongs the great glory" (Richard 2005:139). And there is neither anything whatsoever in their practice that suggests a worship of one's self, nor anything resembling a worshipful attachment to Subba Rao.

While exhortations to “become Christ” and “worship yourself” certainly transgress Christian orthodoxy, there are further problems regarding some massive oversights in the teaching of Subba Rao. One such is a total neglect of the teaching of God’s forgiveness of our sins, related with neglect of any concept of atonement. Another is complete neglect of the New Testament emphasis on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as the supreme blessing of the new covenant. The latter point (and arguably the former as well) is closely related to Subba Rao’s strange anthropology (doctrine of man), which might be called an advaitic (or monistic) anthropology. At times the exhortation to worship yourself seems tied to one’s *becoming* Christ, but there is a constant stress throughout Subba Rao’s writings that Christ indwells all things, and it seems to me that this focus on an immanent and omnipresent Christ accounts for the neglect of Christ’s indwelling of his people by the Holy Spirit as a special new covenant blessing.

This is just a sampling of erratic statements that could be quoted and analyzed, but the point is surely sufficiently clear that Subba Rao was a follower of Christ who was syncretistic in various ways.¹⁰

Properly Responding to Syncretistic Insider Movements

When I began (and titled) this paper I did not imagine that I would conclude that “syncretism” is an inadequate paradigm for analysis of difficult issues in Subba Rao’s life and thought, and even now I desire that to be a secondary conclusion, with a focus on problems in insider movements and appropriate responses to such matters. The easiest response to Subba Rao’s syncretism is simply to dismiss him and his movement as aberrant and not worthy of any further engagement. But, in line with evidence from other insider movements, Subba Rao was a sincere lover of Jesus Christ and pointed many others to like sincere

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devotion; is there a biblical basis to ignore fellow disciples of Christ due to syncretism and error?

Subba Rao was ardent in his advocacy for Jesus, however much we may question and oppose some of his interpretations. This ardent advocacy is standard in insider movements, yet somehow it is often suggested that insider movements are marked by covert or private faith that fails in public profession of Christ. It is obvious that if there is a “movement” of any kind, there is vibrant sharing of faith. Subba Rao was not a Christian and avoided any formal association with institutional Christianity; yet he was bolder in proclaiming Christ among Hindus than most Christians can ever be.¹¹

The reactionary element in Subba Rao’s life must be taken into account when considering a proper response to him and his movement. It is important to reflect on how deeply the entire development of insider movements is related to similar reactions against established Christianity, though in my understanding few insider movements are remotely as reactionary as Subba Rao was. Yet avoidance of association with Christianity is pretty much the defining mark of insider movements. A purely theological assessment of Subba Rao’s syncretism accompanied by a simple dismissal (or, worse still, rebuke) of this man due to his errors would only feed the separatist reactionary spirit that marked his thought and his movement. Similarly, this type of response to other insider movements will almost certainly drive them into deeper isolation and (potentially) error. A *pastoral* response to insider movements is thus vitally important.

Eighty years have passed since Subba Rao’s life-changing vision of Christ. His legacy to his own movement (and to the Hindu world) is his Christo-centrism.

Despite his anti-sacramental, anti-organizational and anti-church teaching, a movement developed that has the marks of a New Testament *ekklesia* (church). For all their reaction against Christianity, the Subba Rao movement is warmly welcoming towards disciples of Jesus who approach them as humble disciples of Jesus. What is Subba Rao’s legacy to the wider Christian world? Even during his lifetime, friction with Christian teachings and institutions had moderated. Lesslie Newbigin, certainly not unaware of aberrant teachings, opined that he would welcome the Subba Rao movement into the World Council of Churches, although he recognized that they themselves would not desire this (Thomas 1977:124).

What is the legacy of Subba Rao to a Christian world in light of the stunning growth of insider movements all across the world in the early 21st century? Part of it is certainly the recognition that insider movements are a conundrum.¹² No simple formulaic response is possible. An insistence that insider individuals and movements must associate with institutional Christianity will almost certainly compound the polarization between traditional Christian Jesus movements and these new Jesus movements.¹³ The Subba Rao movement had and has much to learn from traditional Christianity, but is that a one-way street? Subba Rao lamented that

Christians think that they have nothing to learn from me, but everything to teach me. They are too blind to see how Christ is glorified through a religionless man like me. Religion is their only concern. Baptism is their only concern. Not Christ. (Quoted in Airan 1965:89-90)

It seems that a consensus has formed that “indigenous churches” need to be self-theologizing as well as self-governing, self-propagating and

self-supporting; does this not surely also apply to Jesus movements beyond Christendom? There also seems to be a consensus that the Western church needs to learn from the developing churches of the non-Western world; surely this also applies to Subba Rao and insider movements.¹⁴

This consideration of Subba Rao and his remarkable movement is certainly not definitive for analysis of the phenomena of insider movements. It might in fact further muddy the waters rather than clarify. But theological clarity that is out of touch with ground realities is quite the opposite of biblical wisdom. In wrestling with the theory and practice of insider-ism, may we seek and find the wisdom that comes from above; "pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). **UJM**

Endnotes

¹ Upadhyay's remarkable story is told by Julius Lipner (1999). See Chetti's own account from 1915 of why he stayed out of Christianity while following Christ (Chetti 1969[1915]). Herbert E. Hoefler's study of *Churchless Christianity* (2001) drew attention to the variety and vast dimensions of "insider individual" phenomena in south India.

² See Sharp (2004:63-65) and Dobe (2010). A *reductio ad absurdum* case against the existence of the movement is on the surface of the fantastic stories told in Zahir 1919.

³ On the Sivakasi movement see Hoefler 2001:21-26, Wingate 1997:139-147 and Kent 2011.

⁴ See my fuller study of Subba Rao (Richard 2005) for biographical details and analysis and particularly for a translation of the 34 songs written by Subba Rao that are both the primary source for understanding his thought and the center of the devotional appeal of the movement.

⁵ Leadership in the Subba Rao movement is still with immediate disciples of the founder. His immediate successor, Sri Kesava Rao Chowdary, passed away on Jan. 24, 2006, but leadership has not yet passed on to a new generation.

⁶ A detailed study of this song is presented in my study of Subba Rao (Richard 2005:57-77).

⁷ Interview of April 30, 2002; Subbamma was a convert from Subba Rao's Kamma community to Lutheran Christianity.

⁸ "Gurudev" was Subba Rao's preferred title for Jesus Christ, meaning "Divine Guru."

⁹ This idea is expressed in verse song 28 stanza three:

In my madness of devotion I
worshiped you and thought the
worship of your feet
Was real love; I vexed you, I wept,
and I made you weep.
I worship you no longer, but live
like you and follow you. (Richard
2005:126)

¹⁰ It is perhaps necessary to note that I do not consider Subba Rao's refusal to identify with Christianity or his ongoing identification as a Hindu as aspects of his syncretism.

¹¹ B. V. Subbamma recounted to me how Subba Rao would berate Hindus for following Krishna as an excuse for their immorality, something Christians dare not do but which Subba Rao could do as he spoke as a Hindu to his fellow Hindus (interview of Oct. 7, 2003.)

¹² An aspect of the conundrum is related to people who appreciate and desire to support such movements, yet themselves are not and cannot be insiders. Thus these well-intending people (among whom I include myself), like all cross-cultural workers, necessarily taint as well as hopefully assist sincere movements to Christ.

¹³ Many opponents of insider movements stress New Testament teaching on the unity of all followers of Christ, yet their insistence on such unity *on their own terms* in fact compounds the disunity.

¹⁴ I personally have benefited from Subba Rao's anti-religion apologetic, and although I do not think he arrived at a proper enunciation of this teaching, he pointed me to the neglected reality of the indwelling of Christ in every human personality (cf. Charles Hodge, God is "present also in every human soul" (1885:385)).

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