

A WORD FOR 'GOD'

36

A Word for God Paul G. Hiebert

Ivan threw up his hands. “What is more important—” he asked his colleague, “that people think of God as ‘ultimate reality,’ or that they think of him as a ‘person’ with whom they can communicate? Each of these, by itself, is a half-truth. Yet somehow it seems to me that we must choose between two words that carry these two meanings when we translate the word *God* into Telugu. What shall we do?”

After joining the Union Bible Society, Ivan had been asked to assist in a new translation of the Bible into Telugu. After settling down in the city of Hyderabad, he began to work with Yesudas, a high-caste convert who was also assigned to the project. Together the two had worked out many of the difficult problems they faced in translating the Bible into this South Indian language. But the most stubborn one remained unsolved. What word would they use for “God”? The choice they made was critical, for the nature of God lies at the very heart of the biblical message. To use the wrong term for “God” would seriously distort the Christian message. But although there are many Telugu terms for “god,” none conveyed the biblical meaning.

At first Ivan suggested, “Let’s use the term *deva*. That is the word the people use when they speak of ‘god’ in general terms.”

But Yesudas pointed out, “The *devas* are the highest form of personal beings, but they are not the ultimate reality. Like all things in the universe, they are *maya*, or passing phenomena. In the end, they, too, will be absorbed into the ultimate reality or Brahman. Moreover, they do both good and evil. They fight wars with each other and with the demons, commit adultery, and tell lies. Finally, in Hinduism ‘all life is one’ [see figure 2]. In other words, gods, humans, animals, and plants

Figure 2 **A Comparison of World Views**

	Biblical World View	Indian World View
Ultimate reality:	God: being & creator	Brahman: force
Temporal reality:	spirit humans animals plants matter	gods spirits humans animals plants matter

all have the same kind of life. Consequently, *devas* are not fundamentally different from humans. They are more powerful and live in the heavens. But they sin, and when they do, they are reborn as humans, or animals, or even ants.” Yesudas added, “Hindus claim that *devas* often come to earth as *avatars* to help humans in need, but because there is no difference between them it is like kings helping their commoners or saints helping their disciples. We, therefore, can use neither *deva* or *avatar*, for both destroy the biblical meaning of the ‘incarnation.’”

“If that is the case, why not use the term *parameshwara*?” Ivan suggested. “That means ‘highest of the deities.’”

Yesudas replied, “Yes, but this carries the same connotations as *deva*. In fact, all Telugu words for ‘god’ implicitly carry these Hindu beliefs! We have no word that means a supreme being who is the ultimate reality and the creator of the universe. Moreover, there is no concept of ‘creation’ as found in the Bible. The world itself is an illusion that does not really exist.”

Ivan took another approach to the problem. “Why not use the concept of *brahman* itself? After all, *brahman* is ultimate reality—that which existed before all else and will exist when all else has ceased to be.”

Yesudas objected. “*Brahman*,” he said, “may be ultimate reality, but it is a force, not a person. True, some philosophers speak of *sarguna brahman*, of *brahman* in a personal form. But even he is only a manifestation of *nirguna brahman*, which is an insular, impersonal force. It makes no sense to say that *nirguna brahman* reveals itself to gods and humans, just as it makes no sense to say that a dreamer speaks as a real person in his dream. Similarly, humans have no way of knowing about or communicating with *nirguna brahman*. Moreover, nothing really exists outside of *brahman*. The heavens and earth are not creations that exist apart from it. They are projections of *brahman* in much the same

way that a dream is a projection of the dreamer. So, in fact, we are all simply manifestations of the same ultimate reality. This destroys the biblical idea of a creator and a real but contingent creation.”

“What shall we do then?” asked Ivan. “Perhaps we could use the English word *God* or the Greek word *Theos* and introduce it into the translation. In time the word would become familiar, and it would not carry within it the implicit Hindu theology found in Telugu words.”

“How can we do that?” asked Yesudas. “When we preach in the villages, no one will understand those foreign words. We must use words the people understand. Isn’t that what the early church did when it took the Greek words for ‘god’ and gave them new Christian meanings?”

Ivan countered, “Even if we do use *deva* or *brahman* and try to give them a Christian meaning, they will still be given Hindu meanings by the Hindus. And since the Hindus make up ninety percent of the population, how can a small Christian community maintain its own definitions of these words when the linguistic pressures for accepting the Hindu connotations are so great?”

“Well,” said Yesudas, “we’re back to square one. Should we use *deva*, or *brahman*, or ‘God’? We have to use one of these.”

The two discussed the matter for a long time, for they knew that their choice would influence both the evangelistic outreach of the church and also the extent to which the church would understand and be faithful to the biblical concept of God in the next fifty or hundred years. Finally they decided to . . .