

# 2

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## Grandmother's Funeral Mamoru B. Ogata

**I**t was almost midnight when the phone rang and Masashi heard about his grandmother's death. "Come quickly," his mother said. "The funeral will be day after tomorrow." Masashi had expected the call, for he had visited his grandmother a week before and seen that she was very frail. Much to Masashi's joy, she had accepted Christ during that visit. He had sat by her bed and told her about the gospel and invited her to believe. Though she was weak, she had nodded her head, and her peaceful smile convinced Masashi that she was a believer. But that had only added to his anxiety about what he would have to do at her funeral, which he knew would be conducted according to Buddhist tradition.

During the three-hour train ride to his parents' home the next day, the young seminary student recalled the events that had led up to this moment. He had grown up in a small village with two Shinto shrines and a Buddhist temple. There were no Christians in the area. Masashi's father worked in a nearby chemical factory and in his spare time worked a small farm. He was proud when he had completed his new house, and even more so when he was elected president of the village and made responsible for the village religious activities.

Masashi had gone to Tokyo for his education and had graduated from Waseda University. While there he had heard about Christ through some young people. He had experienced the power of God and the support of a Christian fellowship during some difficult experiences in his life. Masashi had become a disciple of Jesus. Back home, the villagers had commented on the change that had taken place in his life, now that he was a Christian. Later, after he had prayed for his mother

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when she was ill and she had recovered, she had become sympathetic to his new faith. He had led one of his brothers to Christian faith. They were the only Christians in the village. The other brother had remained skeptical of Christianity.

It was afternoon when Masashi arrived at his father's house. The relatives were already making preparations for a Buddhist funeral. After greeting his parents, he said, "Father, Grandmother became a Christian when I was here a week ago. She should have a Christian funeral." But Masashi's father had refused. He did not want any criticism from the relatives or villagers. Masashi had helped in the funeral arrangements out of respect for the grandmother he had loved dearly, but he knew that he would face a difficult decision when the funeral took place.

The next day the men of Masashi's house association placed the body in the coffin they had made, dug the grave, and prepared the altar for the Buddhist funeral. The women had helped feed and entertain the more than two hundred guests who arrived for the burial.

At the climax of the ceremonies, Masashi stood in line as a member of his family. His father was first, his mother second, and he as the eldest son was third. Behind him was his Christian brother, watching to see what he would do. Each in turn was expected to offer burning incense to the dead. All were watching Masashi as his turn came to venerate his grandmother. As he approached the coffin, Masashi. . . .

From: Paul G. and Frances F. Hiebert:  
Case Studies in Missions. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987

## 4

### Family Gods Paul G. Hiebert

Marcella looked at the beautiful young woman seated on the mat and at the baby playing with his mother's hair, so innocent of her dilemma. "If only life were that simple!" thought Marcella, knowing that she had to give some answer to this new believer. The answer that came to her from her classroom days was clear. Karnamma should have nothing to do with the worship of her family idols or with other Hindu rituals of her household. But the classroom discussions never dealt with the complexities of real life. Marcella wondered whether she could in good conscience ask Karnamma, a new Christian, to pay a price that she as a missionary had never begun to pay. And did the Bible not teach that a woman had certain responsibilities to her family? But what were those responsibilities when the wife became a Christian and the rest of the family remained Hindu?

Five years before, Marcella had come as a doctor to South India and started a hospital in a small town. Not only had this won her the good will of the Hindus and Muslims of the region, but it also had opened the door for an effective medical and evangelical ministry among them. She had a particular burden for young mothers, so twice a week she went out to hold maternal clinics in remote villages, often staying overnight in some Christian's home. Most of the converts had come from the "untouchable" castes, and much of Marcella's work was among the women of these despised groups. As her reputation spread, however, she began to find the doors open for ministry to women from the higher castes. She was invited into the homes of expectant mothers in the "clean" section of the village, and there learned to love and appreciate the women who had so few opportunities to hear of Christ.

"Lord," she often prayed, "please open the door for the gospel to enter these homes!"

One day Karnamma came quietly when Marcella was at camp, waiting patiently at the door until the missionary noticed her. As a Komati, a member of one of the highest-ranking clean castes, she had risked the anger of her family and friends by coming. She knew that they would beat her when she returned if they found out that she had come to the Christian hut in the "untouchable" hamlet where Marcella was spending the night. After Marcella invited her in, Karnamma sat by the door and in desperation told her story.

Six years before, Karnamma had been married by parental arrangement to Ramayya, a promising young merchant in Peduru. There had been the usual traumas of a young bride who was leaving the loving care of her parents to live with her husband in the household of his father and mother and, in this case, two married brothers. Karnamma had been spared a domineering mother-in-law and jealous sisters-in-law, but as the youngest wife in the house she had to do much of the cleaning and cooking. Everyone was pleased when she became pregnant, but a little disappointed when the child was a girl. "We will make a special offering to Vasavi Kanyaka, so that next time it is certain to be a boy," they said. "At least you have shown yourself to be a mother."

Karnamma enjoyed the added prestige of motherhood, even though she often could not act the role. Her father-in-law and mother-in-law, Krishnayya and Achamma, had the right to play with the child whenever they wished. Besides, she still had to do most of the menial work in the house. First one and then the other of Ramayya's older brothers moved away to large towns where they got good jobs. Both had had the opportunity of going to school. Ramayya remained at home to run the family store.

As Achamma became bedridden with arthritis, Karnamma had to take responsibility for running the household. With this came the obligation to make the evening offerings of food and incense to Vasavi Kanyaka Parameshwari, the goddess of all the Komati (merchants). Different members of the family had the right to choose their own personal gods (*ishta devata*), but all Komati were also expected to worship their caste deity (*kula devata*). Ramayya worshiped Krishna, but Karnamma had chosen Vasavi Kanyaka as her personal deity. Vasavi had been a young Komati virgin who lived centuries before. When the king, who was from another caste, tried to marry her, she committed suicide to avoid the sin of marrying out of caste. She went to heaven and there was the patron of all Komati. Karnamma made a pilgrimage to Vasavi's shrine in the city and promised her special

to a son a year later, all took it as a sign of Vasavi Kanyaka Parameshwari's approval.

Now assisted by two servants, Karnamma had more free time, including time to listen to the family radio. She was surprised one day to hear a Christian preacher whose speech showed that he was a converted Brahmin, the highest of all castes. She had heard about Christianity but assumed that it was a false religion followed only by "untouchables." She listened carefully and, over the next few weeks, became convinced that Jesus Christ is indeed the Lord of high-caste people as well as low. After one of the messages, she knelt by her bed and prayed for salvation. A deep peace filled her life.

Karnamma wondered what it meant to be a Christian. She continued to listen to the radio broadcasts and managed to get a copy of the New Testament. When she shared her experiences with two or three of her closest friends, she found that one of them had also been listening to the broadcast and was interested in the gospel. At first Karnamma continued her duties around the house. But one day, after hearing a sermon on the uniqueness of Christ and the sin of idolatry, she began to question the daily offering of food and incense to Vasavi Kanyaka and the ancestors. Was it not arrogant for the Christians to claim that theirs was the only god? Were there not many gods, all as equally worthy of worship as the Hindus claimed? She could worship Christ, but Karnamma wondered why she must condemn the worship of Vasavi Kanyaka, or Krishna, or any of the other household gods. Moreover, what was she to do as a wife in a Hindu home? Was it wrong for her, as a Christian, to perform the family worship rites? On the other hand, how could she, as wife and head of the household, not do so?

That evening, deeply disturbed by her inner conflict, she refused to make the offerings, claiming to be sick. Her mother-in-law somehow managed to perform the rites. The next night her husband was angry when she again wanted to avoid the ceremonies. He was even more angry when she told him of her new faith in Christ. He said, "I have never stopped you from listening to the radio, even though I knew you were listening to a Christian preacher. After all, you have a right to have your own personal god [*ishta devata*]. But you are still my wife and a member of our family, so you must continue to offer our family sacrifices to our caste and household deities [*kula devata*]. Does your new god think that he is the only god? How can he forbid us to worship our own gods?"

Karnamma was silenced by his attack and resumed her duties to the household gods. She rationalized that this was the only way she could

readily seen and appreciated the changes that had taken place in her life after her conversion. She was also afraid that she would be thrown out of the house and village if she refused to obey her husband. She knew that her parents would not take her in if they found that she had turned against the goddess of all Komati. She saw no way out.

A week later Karnamma heard that the missionary doctor was coming that day for a clinic in the hamlet of "untouchables" outside of town. In the evening she slipped out of the house as if to go to the market, but instead made her way across the fields to the house where Marcella was staying. "What shall I do?" Karnamma asked. "How can I as a Christian offer sacrifices to idols? On the other hand, how can I deny my responsibilities as a wife and mother, and what will happen to me if I don't comply?" Then she sat silent, eagerly awaiting Marcella's answer. Finally Marcella broke the long silence and said. . . .

# 5

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## Food Offered to Idols Simon P. David

Rajasekaran looked across the room at the large picture of the blue-faced god Krishna, heavily garlanded with marigolds and tinsel, and then at the printing-press workers gathered around the small shrine set up before the god. It was Friday, and Rajasekaran realized that he had arrived just at the completion of weekly prayers to Krishna, the patron god of the press. Like many businessmen in this city in South India, the proprietor provided money to purchase coconuts, bananas, and sugar to offer to the deity at the weekly *puja*. He believed that the prosperity of his shop was due to the blessing of the god for his faithful offerings.

As assistant editor of a Christian magazine, it was Rajasekaran's responsibility to work with the press workers in order to make certain that the publication was properly printed on schedule. Today there had been some urgent matters to take care of, so he had come earlier than usual. He had hurried into the room, and Mani, the press foreman, had seen him before he realized that the *puja* ceremonies were still going on.

Over the past months, Mani and the editor had developed a close friendship as they worked together. Rajasekaran hoped someday to win his friend to Christ, but right now Mani was pulling him by the hand toward the group receiving the food that had been offered to Krishna and having *kunkumam* (colored powder) placed as spots on their foreheads to signify that they had been purified by eating the leftovers of the god. Rajasekaran knew that for many Hindus, including Mani, eating the food offered to a god was a sign of goodwill, much like receiving a Christmas present. But he also knew that for orthodox

Hindus, partaking of the food and the *kunkumam* was part of the worship of an idol. Rajasekaran did not want to harm his relationship with Mani, but he also did not want to compromise his Christian witness. He saw Mani hold out the platter of food, and he. . . .

# 11

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## Too Many Wives Paul G. Hiebert

**T**om and Sarah Ward looked at the old chief seated on his stool in front of his hut, and at his wives squatting expectantly behind him. They had prayed two years for Amadu's conversion. Now he had summoned them and told them that he and his wives were ready to become Christians and wanted to be baptized into the church. The young missionaries expressed their joy at his decision and told him they would ask for a meeting of the church council the next day to act on his request.

Now, as Tom and Sarah sat under the night sky brilliantly lit with stars, they wrestled with the question of what they should recommend to the church council the next morning. Their decision seemed to depend on a number of entangled issues. Should the church baptize polygamists and their wives? And what about Amadu? He was the chief of the village and a natural leader. Should they recognize this and make him a leader in the church? They knew that even if they did not ordain him as the leading elder in the church, the people would recognize him as such. Did Paul's instructions that a leader have one wife apply only to the apostle's own cultural setting, or did they apply to the church at all times? And what about themselves? Should they as young missionaries take a stand against their mission's policy if they disagreed with it or if it hampered the growth of the church, even though this might lead to their dismissal?

Two years earlier, shortly after they arrived in Africa as American missionaries, the Wards were sent by their mission board and the West Africa Evangelical Church to begin a church in a new tribe in the Ivory Coast. At the outset they went to see Amadu, the local chief of the

village where they felt called to work. They asked him for permission to live near the village and talk to his people about Jesus Christ. He welcomed them and gave them a place to build their house. Amadu had listened without comment when they shared with him the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ. But he showed no opposition when five families and two single men in the village decided to become Christians. The married men were young and had only one wife each, so the Wards had not faced the question of polygamy. Gladly they baptized the converts and organized a new church. Mugbe, one of the married men, was recognized by the other Christians as their leader, so Tom and Sarah spent considerable time teaching him the Scripture and the responsibilities of a church leader. But the church was young, and the converts could not read, so they mainly looked to the missionaries for guidance in their newfound faith.

Now the chief wanted to become a Christian. What should they do? If they accepted him into the church, the door would be wide open for them to reach other families in the village. But what about his wives? At first the question seemed only to be one of polygamy, but the more they discussed the case, the more they realized that there were many other social factors involved.

First, both the West Africa Evangelical Church and the African Evangelical Mission, under which the young missionaries served, had already taken a strong stand against polygamy. In this they agreed with the stand taken by other mission agencies that had begun work in West Africa in the late nineteenth century. At the Lambeth Conference organized by the Anglican Church in 1888, a resolution had been passed that stated:

It is the opinion of this Conference that persons living in polygamy be not admitted to baptism, but that they be accepted as candidates and kept under Christian instruction until such time as they shall be in a position to accept the law of Christ.

The wives of polygamists may, in the opinion of this Conference, be admitted in some cases to baptism, but it must be left to the local authorities of the church to decide under what circumstances they may be baptized.

The African Evangelical Mission had resolved that the wives of a polygamist could be baptized if they were true converts, because they were usually the involuntary victims of the custom. But the mission would baptize no man who retained more than one wife. A polygamist was encouraged to "free himself" for baptism by putting aside all wives except one; otherwise he must wait until God freed him by the death of all but one of his wives.

The Ward were aware of the fact that some of the African churches, after they became independent from mission control, were beginning to reexamine the question of polygamy. In Tanzania one church had decided:

An unbeliever who has more than one wife, if converted to Christianity and requiring baptism, may be baptized with his believing wives and children with the permission of the Bishop. (He is not to take any more wives as long as any of his wives are still alive.) And they can be received for communion.

As they discussed the problem, Sarah and Tom talked about the biblical teachings regarding polygamy. Did Paul in 1 Timothy 3 require "one wife" of all Christians, or only of the leaders? And what about the traditional marriages? Were the traditional tribal weddings true marriages that had to be honored? If so, were they not asking the old chief to divorce some of his wives if he had to send them away? Which was worse—polygamy or divorce?

The young missionaries considered the impact of various policies on the growth of the church. On the one hand, if they permitted polygamy among the laity, one of the great barriers to the spread of the gospel in the tribe would be removed. Would this not, however, open the door for sin to enter the church? On the other hand, the church might accept only those who were polygamists *before* their conversion and take a strong stand against Christians' taking more than one wife. But once they accepted polygamists into the church, it would be hard to eliminate polygamy from the church in the long run. In other parts of Africa where polygamists had been admitted into the church, young Christian men under strong pressures from their kinsmen often took second wives, particularly when their first wives were barren. They knew that they would be disciplined; but after a time, if they showed proper repentance, they could be reinstated with their wives because there already were polygamists in the church. Finally, the church might follow the policy practiced by many other churches in Africa and deny church membership to polygamists altogether. But did this not hinder the growth of the church, and was this not condemning new believers for sins they committed before they became Christians? Was monogamy essential for conversion, or could it be handled as a matter of spiritual growth within the church?

Tom and Sarah had also considered the specific case of Amadu. If they asked the old chief to give up all but one of his wives, which one should he keep? The first marriage had been arranged for him by his parents. That wife had borne him no children, so he had married a

second who gave him three sons and a daughter. Later his first wife died, leaving him to care for two widows and several children. By tribal custom, he was automatically "married" to the widows. In time these wives had also borne him children. Finally, as a tribal chief, he had taken another wife to add to his prestige and cement relationships between the clans. It was this young wife who now cared for him daily in his old age.

What about the wives and children who were put away so that the chief could be baptized—what would become of them? How would they respond to the gospel? And what about widows? According to the customs of the tribe, widows were automatically married to the nearest kinsman of their deceased husband. If polygamy was prohibited, who would care for them? The church would have to find other ways to provide for widows and their children.

There was also the question of leadership. If the church admitted the old chief into membership, he would automatically become the church leader. Mugbe might remain the official pastor, but everyone, in fact, would look to the old chief for leadership. How did this fit with Paul's teachings about a leader being the husband of one wife?

Finally, Tom and Sarah wondered about their own relationships to the various groups with whom they worked. What about their relationship to the mission? If they believed the mission policy to be wrong, were they obligated as missionaries to enforce it? What about their relationship to the West Africa Evangelical Church? Some of its young leaders were beginning to question the mission policy and were calling for a reexamination of the whole issue. What about their obligations to the church in their village, and to the non-Christian villagers? Were they not responsible under God for opening the door of salvation to these people?

It was late when Tom and Sarah finished their discussion and agreed that tomorrow they would recommend to the church that. . . .

# 13

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## The Christian Polygamist Samuel Nkulila

**B**ishop Yohana had just concluded a two-week crusade in the city of Moshi, Tanzania, and 350 persons had committed their lives to Jesus in the last evening alone. One of those was a man by the name of Musa. Because of the conversion of this man, the pastor and committee of one of the smaller churches in the city had a rather large problem—Musa had too many wives.

Musa was a man of some means. He owned 200 cows, a big farm, and had 10,000 shillings in the bank. His farm lay a few miles from the edge of the city where the small church was located. Musa had a friend in the city who belonged to the church, and he had attended services several times with his friend. They had some long discussions about the Christian faith. On one occasion his friend had introduced him to the pastor of the church.

On the morning after his conversion, Musa knocked on the door of the pastor. After greeting him, Musa told him with unmistakable joy that he had become a Christian. A slight shadow came over his face, however, when he confided to the pastor that he now had a problem that he didn't have before his conversion.

"Pastor," he said, "I praise God for saving me from sin. But according to your teaching, I am supposed to have only one wife. I have seven wives and twenty-five children! What shall I do?"

The pastor was taken aback. In his rather small and poor congregation, they had not yet faced this dilemma. With little time to consider, the pastor fell back on the missionary teaching in the Bible Institute where he had received his training. "Of course, the Bible, which is God's Holy Word, demands that you remain with your first

wife only. The rest can go. If you stay with them, you will be committing adultery. Also, if you stay with them, you cannot take Holy Communion in the church. So, go quickly. Get yourself organized. Keep the first wife with her five children and send the others and their twenty children away."

The new convert went away from the pastor's home with a heavy heart. "What kind of religion is this?" he asked himself. "When one person is saved, does it mean that others must be lost? I thought that coming to Jesus was supposed to take away my burdens. Now it seems that a much heavier one has fallen on me."

The next day, Musa decided to travel by bus some hundred miles from his home to see Bishop Yohana. He explained his situation to the bishop, who listened thoughtfully and was very sympathetic. He asked Musa if he truly would follow Jesus if something could be done to care for his seven wives and twenty-five children.

"Of course, Bishop," Musa replied. "That is all I request."

"Go home now, Musa," the bishop said kindly but firmly. "I am going to discuss your case with the church committee next week, and we shall let you know what has been decided."

The following week, Bishop Yohana called the committee together. It was the first time they had faced the issue of polygamy in their congregation. It was quite a challenge to them, and they talked for hours.

The bishop said, "Gentlemen, the crucial issue here is the welfare of the family. If Musa keeps only his first wife and her children, who will care for the other six wives and their children? Since Musa is well able to care for them all, can we not find a more humane approach to the problem?"

One of the deacons said, "Musa can do one thing. He can build another house, where he will live with his first wife, at least one mile from the grouped houses of the former family. He can still be responsible for seeing that his other wives and children are getting food, clothes, and medical care. But he should not sleep in their houses anymore."

Musa's friend, who was also on the committee, lamented, "This is inhuman. Musa's family has been together for over twenty years, and now, simply because he has become a Christian, must the family fall apart?"

But another committee member shouted angrily, "That is how the Way is—a hard and lonely journey. We are to forsake all else if we want to follow Jesus."

The meeting was a tough one. Scripture after Scripture was quoted on both sides of the issue. One side quoted Scriptures to support the

idea that Musa should have nothing to do with any except his first wife. The other side quoted Scriptures about Christian love and compassion for all people. To them, there was also an issue of fairness and justice. They maintained that Musa was a rich man, and he had an obligation to support his whole family. Musa, they pointed out, was fully prepared to do this.

The bishop went home without the case having been settled, but the church committee dedicated itself to a week of prayer and Bible study. At the end of the week they came to a conclusion. The committee decided that Musa could not continue in polygamy and still have fellowship with their church, for that would be a stumbling block to the whole community. They would allow him, however, to visit his former wives and their twenty children. He should also support them financially and see that their needs were met.

Musa seemed quite relieved by their decision, and expressed his agreement. He began attending Sunday school, and after six months he was baptized.

Another six months went by. Then one Sunday afternoon at the close of the service, there was a meeting of the church elders. Musa interrupted the meeting with these words, "Forgive me, Elders, but I want to inform you that my third wife, Wandi, has been blessed with a baby girl. Now, praise God, we have twenty-six children!"

A dead silence greeted Musa's words. Obviously Musa had not followed their advice. Now how should they deal with him? They would have to confront him the following Sunday, but what should they say?

### Postscript

When the elders met the following Sunday, they decided on a different approach. They would tell Musa that he could stay with his wives, trusting that the Holy Spirit would speak to the "illegitimate" wives and convict them to leave Musa. In this way, it was hoped that those who felt free to go should do so, and eventually, the "true" wife would remain.

Musa's friend left the meeting still wondering if they could not have found a better solution.



## 28

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### A Sacrifice to the Goddess of Smallpox

Paul G. Hiebert

Venkayya felt the burning forehead of his young daughter. He had prayed fervently all afternoon, and still the fever mounted. The angry red spots on the child's face and body left no doubt that she had smallpox. Would she die like so many other children in the village? Did God really care? Or would giving one *paisa* to the goddess Misamma spare her life? Should he listen to his younger brothers and give in to the village pressure? What did the Bible mean when it said that a Christian should have no other gods but God?

Venkayya's problems began when a plague of smallpox came to Muchintala, a small village south of Hyderabad, in South India. The village elders called the government doctor; he distributed medicines and gave shots, but these had little effect on the disease. When a number of children died, the elders called the village diviner to determine the reason for the plague. He announced that Misamma, the goddess of smallpox who lived in a rock under a tree outside the village, was angry with the village. The villagers had offered her only two goats instead of the usual water buffalo at her festival five years before. Since then no feast had been held, and Misamma expected a sacrifice from the village every three or four years.

When the elders heard this, they hastily made arrangements for a water-buffalo sacrifice. Messengers were sent to every house in the village to gather donations to purchase the animal, since every household was expected to contribute something to satisfy the goddess.

When a messenger came to the house where Venkayya and his two younger brothers lived, Venkayya told the man that he and his brothers

had become Christians three years earlier, so they could not make a contribution for the sacrifice. It was against their religious beliefs.

The messenger reported this to the high-caste elders, who became very angry. How could anyone in the village, especially an "untouchable" such as Venkayya, disobey their orders? They summoned Venkayya and demanded an explanation. He told them that he and his brothers had become Christians, and that Christians worshiped no gods but the God of the Bible. He would take care of them.

The elders said that they did not object if Venkayya and his family worshiped the Christian God. Everyone had a right to worship his or her own god (*ishta devata*). But this was something different. Misamma was not a god like Rama, Allah, or the Christian God, who live in the heavens. She was only an earthly spirit who lived near their village. If the village did not keep her satisfied, she would continue to plague the children. Everyone in the village had to contribute something or she would be displeased. Besides, giving her something to eat was not worship. Even the Muslims, who worship only one god, gave money to buy the water buffalo so that their children would not die.

When Venkayya told the elders that a Christian could not offer a sacrifice, even to local spirits, they grew more angry. It was all right, they said, if he killed his own children by refusing to make the sacrifice, but he was to blame if other children in the village died. Moreover, he was disobeying the village elders, and that was an unforgivable offense. To show their authority and pressure him to change his mind, the elders placed Venkayya, his brothers, and their families under a village ban. No one in the village could talk to them, sell them goods, or marry their children—or he or she, too, would come under the ban.

The next week was difficult for the new Christians. They had to walk to the next village to buy food. Because they were forbidden to go to their caste well, the women had to fetch water from the stream a half-mile outside of town.

When more children died, the elders summoned Venkayya and told him that if he did not contribute a few *paisa* (cents) for the offering, they would bar him from working his fields. Again Venkayya held fast to his convictions.

The following week was unbearable. The young men of the village prevented Venkayya and his brothers from irrigating their pitifully small rice fields. Under the hot sun, the paddy began to wilt. If something was not done soon, there would be no harvest and nothing to live on next year.

Finally, Rangayya and Pullayya, Venkayya's younger brothers, came to him and said, "We must give in to the pressures of the elders or we will all die. God will understand if we give them a few *paisa*. We will

tell him we did not give it as an offering to the spirit—but as a tax demanded by the village elders. Besides, Misamma is not a goddess living in the heavens. She is only a local godling living in a rock. Offering her a sacrifice is not worship. It is only food to placate her anger. It is like giving something to a belligerent official to keep the peace."

Four days later, his own little daughter came down with the dread disease that was taking so many in the village. Venkayya began to doubt his own judgment, so he went to see the missionary living forty miles away. The missionary prayed for the child and exhorted Venkayya to stand firm in his refusal to contribute to the sacrifice.

Today, he and the family had prayed all afternoon, but God seemed so far away. The medicine the doctor gave him made little difference to the girl's rising fever. Was he wrong in refusing to contribute even a few *paisa* to the elders? Clearly, local spirits like Misamma were not gods like Jehovah. Was it wrong, therefore, to feed them to keep them happy? They were little different from the officials who made life hard for everyone in the village and needed to be placated with gifts. Maybe the missionary was wrong. He really did not understand the village or the local spirits. Why couldn't he, as a father, pray for God's healing of his child, and give a *paisa* for the sacrifice at the same time?

As night came, Venkayya looked at his wife as she pleaded with God for the life of her child. Would God heal the little girl? And if God did not, what would he say when villagers scoffed at his God? Maybe his brothers were right. Maybe he should go to the village headman and give him one *paisa* to help buy a water buffalo for Misamma. Then his daughter might live. And even if she did not, he would not be blamed for the deaths of other children. Then he could work the fields and his family live in the village in peace.

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## 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

2 A Comparison of World Views

|                   | Biblical World View                             | Indian World View  |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Ultimate reality: | God: being & creator                            | Brahman: force   |
| Temporal reality: | spirit<br>humans<br>animals<br>plants<br>matter | gods<br>spirits<br>humans<br>animals<br>plants<br>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, *devas* 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 . . .

# 41

## Unity and Diversity in the Church

Paul G. Hiebert

**I**n the early summer of 1979, John Thompson argued wearily with himself as he looked out the tent at the hot road baked by the South India sun, and at the dust swirling around an oxcart passing under the shade of a large banyan tree. In a few minutes the delegation of elders from the Farmer caste led by Venkat Reddy would come to hear his decision. Would he force them to take defiled Untouchables into their new church? Or would he ask the Untouchables (*harijans*) to start their own church near their hamlet outside of town?

As he reflected, John thought back over the past few years. He and his wife, Shirley, had come to India six years earlier. Their mission board assigned them to pioneer work in the villages near Nellore. They managed to build a small bungalow and to hire three Indian evangelists to begin the work. For six to seven months each year—after the intense field work following the monsoon rains let up—they toured the villages with the evangelists, camping in tents and preaching in the village squares at night. In the mornings they visited homes, and Shirley was often invited into the inner rooms reserved for women. In the afternoons John held Bible studies with the evangelists and curious inquirers from the villages. After preaching one or two nights in a village, they moved on to the next, for John was responsible for evangelizing more than three hundred villages.

The pace was grueling, particularly in the hot summer months, but there were rewards. At first, few were interested in the gospel, but prayer and faithful witness bore fruit. A number of families from the

village of Konduru who belonged to the Farmer caste publicly became Christians. After their baptism, they wanted John to teach them more about their new religion. The Farmer caste was *suvarna* (clean) and ranked high in the village hierarchy of castes. John spent a week with them and taught them from the Bible, but he was concerned about their growth. Only two of them, an old man and a young boy who had been to the city, could read and write. However, there were other villages in which the people had never heard the gospel; there was no one else to go to them, so John moved on.

A year later, John returned to Konduru to hold meetings in the Untouchable hamlet a furlong outside the village. He had come to realize that if he preached in a main village, only people from the clean castes would attend. The Untouchables, who made up more than 20 percent of the population, rarely showed up in such places in the main villages because they were considered ritually defiling. A person belonging to a clean caste who touched one of them had to take a ceremonial bath before he or she could eat or enter the temple. If John wanted to evangelize the Untouchables, he would have to go to their hamlets which were located outside the main villages.

John's meeting in the hamlet near Konduru went well, even though the Farmer-caste Christians did not attend. They said they were too busy with field work at the time. Their church had grown to fifteen families, and they had built a small church building at the edge of the village near their homes. There they met fairly regularly for worship services.

The second night, after the meeting in the hamlet, several elders of the Leatherworker-caste led by Pappayya came to John and asked whether Untouchables, too, could become Christians. John joyfully told them that the Gospel was for everyone. He pointed out that in Christ all persons are equal, that there are no distinctions of caste, class, or race. Over the next few days, six families of Leatherworkers publicly converted to Christianity and were baptized. John was very happy.

However, when John told this to Venkat Reddy and the elders of the Christian Farmers and asked them to accept the new converts into their church, they were shocked. How could they as clean caste people permit Untouchables to enter into their church? They would be defiled and their fellow castemen would put them out of the caste. They would be shunned by their friends and relatives. They would not be able to visit or witness to them, to eat with them, or to exchange brides and grooms with them. They would have no place to marry their children.

John told them that the gospel made all people one, but they said that if he forced them to take the Untouchables into their church, they

would return to Hinduism. They said he did not understand their place in the caste system in the village. They would return the next day to hear his answer on the matter.

John realized that all people live in social systems that regulate their relationships with one another. In India there was the caste system. John knew this system was rooted in Hinduism and that Hinduism would wither and die if it were abolished. At the top were the Brahmins, the Hindu priests who performed the rituals and sacrifices necessary for the salvation and well-being of the people. Below them were many castes of rulers, merchants, craftsmen and laborers. At the bottom were the Untouchables, those ritually so impure that they were forbidden to enter the temples or to live in the clean caste villages. It was their duty to handle dead animals, clean the latrines, and do other defiling tasks so that the upper castes, particularly the Brahmins, might remain pure. Without this purity, the Brahmins could not supplicate the gods, and destruction and disorder would follow. At its very core, Hinduism rejected the equality of all humans. Its scriptures declared that people were born unequal and that their station in life was determined by the good and evil they had done in their previous lives. Those who had lived good lives were born Brahmins and were closest to salvation. Those who had done evil were born Untouchables. Their only hope was to bear patiently their lot in life so that in their next lives they would be born clean.

John also knew that because of this caste system, millions of Untouchables lived in the most grinding poverty and oppression. They could not walk through the villages where the clean castes lived. They could not return goods they purchased or cook food for others, for they defiled everything they touched. Many were virtual slaves to their clean caste masters.

John wondered what the gospel had to say to all of this. If he tried to break down the caste system in the church by requiring clean caste and Untouchable converts to worship together, would he not drive the clean castes away, and leave a church that would itself be branded as Untouchable? Becoming a Christian would then be perceived by respectable caste Hindus as becoming a member of an exceedingly low segment of society. Would this not close the door to the evangelization of high-caste people?

On the other hand, if he organized separate churches for the two groups, would he not be allowing Hinduism and its caste distinctions into the church, and so undermine the gospel? Moreover, would the Untouchables be drawn to the gospel if the church offered them no deliverance from their bondage? Other churches in South India had found that where equality and a rejection of caste had been made a

condition for entry into the church, many Untouchables entered. When the caste system was permitted inside the church, some high-caste people came, but the Untouchables stayed away.

John spent the afternoon and next morning in prayer and the study of the Bible. He reviewed Paul's teachings about the unity of the body of Christ in the face of animosity between Jews and Gentiles that threatened to split the early church. He recalled the divisions in the Western churches. And he thought about the realities of life in the Indian village and the ways in which its social organization affected the growth of the church.

Now the Farmer elders were coming for his answer. What should he say to them, and to the elders of the Leatherworker Christians? Should he force them to form a single church? If he did, the Farmers would probably return to Hinduism. Or should he encourage them to form separate churches and then seek to build fellowship between them over time? But what would this say about the unity of the body of Christ to both groups? These arguments were rushing through his head as he saw the Farmer elders come down the road.