

# **A Christian Response to Hinduism**

## THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO HINDUISM

Paul G. Hiebert

Hindu holy men declared Sunday, December 6, 1992, auspicious and more than 300,000 people gathered that day in Ayodhya, a pilgrim town north of Varanasi in U.P. India.<sup>1</sup> Most wore the saffron color of Hindu nationalism. At midday, they broke down the police barricades around a mosque, which was reportedly built on the ruins of the temple that marks Rama's birthplace, and hammered it to the ground. The construction of a new Rama temple was to begin that evening. Violence triggered by the demolition killed 1,700 people across the subcontinent. Supporters justified the action as the liberation of Hindu sacred space to unify the nation. Critics decried it as communalism—the antagonistic mobilization of one religious community against another—as an attack on Indian civil society. A few weeks ago, Hindu holy men began a *yatra*,<sup>2</sup> a holy march around North India which is to culminate in the construction of the temple, by force, if need be.

How are we to understand these events, and what implications do they have for the church in India and around the world?

---

<sup>1</sup> The roots of this was the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Council of Hindus) which issued in April 1984 in Delhi a unanimous resolution for the “liberation” of three temple sites in north India, at Mathra, Varanasi and Ayodhya, because 1) these were historical sites in religious life [Ayodya the birth place of Rama], 2) ancient Hindu temples stood there, and 3) Muslims under the Mugals destroyed the temples and built mosques on the foundations.

<sup>2</sup> Pilgrimage or *tirtha-yatra* is an ancient Indian tradition. Hsuan-tsang, who traveled in India between 629-645 A.D., Alberuni in his famous *Kitab-ul-Hind*, written about 1030 A.D. and Abut Fzl in *Ain-I-Akbari*, written in 1593 A.D., all conceded the important of pilgrimage in Hindu tradition. The *Tirtha-Yatra* in the *Mahabharata* mentions 270 *tirthas*—sacred rivers, mountains, forests, and shrines where gods dwell, and where seekers go to be purified. The journeys were long and arduous, requiring strength, stamina, and austerities of personal purification—fasting, sleeping on the floor, sexual abstinence, avoidance of the use of vehicles and walking barefoot.

## THE EMERGENCE OF NEO-HINDUISM

To understand recent events, we need first to define 'Hinduism.' S. Radhakrishnan writes, "Hinduism is the way of life characteristic of an entire people, it is a culture more than a creed. It permeates every aspect of the individual's public and private life." As one author put it, "Hinduism has grown like some gigantic Banyan tree, with numerous spreading branches that put down their own roots, and yet remained, however tenuously, attached to the main trunk" (Kolanad 1994, 56).

### Definitions of 'Hinduism'

India is a land of incredible diversity; of thousands of tight ethnic communities [castes and tribes] each with its own customs and religious beliefs and practices, of intense religious communities vying for power, and of political states competing for land and the loyalties of the people. Given the diversity and complexity that characterizes Indian civilization, it is dangerous in a brief review to make generalizations about what is Hinduism, let alone where it is headed.

The term 'Hindu' has been used in at least five ways.<sup>3</sup> The first definition was geographic, given to India by the invaders of India: the Turk, Persian and Arab Muslims, and the British rulers. 'Hindu' was the Persian word for 'Indian,' and was originally used of peoples living beyond the Indus River, not followers of a particular religion. For the invaders from the West, Hindu meant 'Native to India.' Consequently, Muslims were divided into Arab Muslims (who could trace their decent from West Asia) and Hindu Muslims (native converts). Similarly, the British referred to European and Hindu Christians. Hindu did not refer to a religion, but to a geopolitical structure (or state) in which outside rulers ruled a state made up of diverse

---

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent analysis of various definitions of 'Hinduism' see Frykenberg, 1993.

communities and religious. “Hindu” thus did not begin its career as a religious term, but as a term used by outsiders and state officials to designate people who lived east of the Indus (Ludden 1996, 7). This practice of equating things “Indian” with the term “Hindu” has caused endless confusion, obliterating lines between religious and geopolitical realities.

The second definition is socioreligious. The most common description which Hindus give to their religion is *sanatana dharma*, “eternal religion,” which refers to what is sometimes called Brahmanical Hinduism, a highly sophisticated worldview for categorizing all of life that emerged by the tenth century B.C. Robert Frykenberg notes (1993, 527),

[Brahmanical Hinduism] lumped all mankind into a single category and then subdivided this category into a color-coded system of separate species and subspecies, genera and subgenera; and then ranked these hierarchically according to innate (biological, cultural, and ritual) capacities and qualities.

The result was the caste system--a religious community made up of diverse castes organized in a single hierarchical system rooted in notions of purity and pollution based on blood and ritual. This meaning of Hinduism became so pervasive and deeply entrenched that it remains the dominant force in rural Indian life today despite numerous attempts to destroy it. Hinduism, here, is not a monolithic religion with formal doctrines and central institutions. Rather it is a worldview that incorporates different religious communities (*sampradayas*)--with its own gods, beliefs and practices--into a single hierarchical social system based on the concepts of purity and pollution. Each Hindu’s identity can be located ritually by religious duties appropriate for one’s specific social status, ritual status, and age [one’s *varnashramadharma*]. “Religious practices revolve around many different deities [*devas*], sectarian traditions [*sampradayas*], and teachers [*gurus*] that form centers of caste and personal devotion. As David Ludden notes, “The ideas

that define Hinduism as a religion, therefore, deeply discourage the formation of a collective Hindu religious identity among believers and practitioners. Hindu identity is multiple, by definition . . . (1996, 7).”

Many Indians have no place in this caste system. Tribals living in the mountains and forests, and untouchables in the villages are outside its pale. So, too, are Muslims, Christians, and Jews.. Others, namely the once-born Sudras, were second class citizens in the community.

The third definition of Hinduism was a product of the West’s encounter with the Indian civilization. Edward Said points out (1978) that as British rule spread in India in the nineteenth century, European scholars, painters, novelists, journalists and museum curators began systematically to create compelling images of Hindus for Western audiences. European scholars became enamored with the ancient Indian philosophies and began departments of Oriental Studies. They learned Sanskrit, and collaborated with Indian scholars to translate and publicize the Vedas and other sacred texts, which were largely forgotten in India. They defined Hinduism in terms of these ancient texts, and Hindus were presented as mysterious, exotic, sensual, despotic, traditional and irrational in their fervent religiosity. India became known in the West as “a land saturated with religion; its people . . . obsessed with the destiny and status of man in the hereafter (Wallbank 1965, 25).” In short, European imperialism invented Hinduism as coherent, unified religious tradition as its ideological other in the orient (Ludden 1996, 9), and used it to justify Western imperialism because it brought modernization and progress.

The fourth definition of the term Hindu was political. As the East India Company expanded its rule over what came to be known as ‘British India,’ it needed to govern a country made up of many rival communities. It did so by forming personal alliances with leaders in

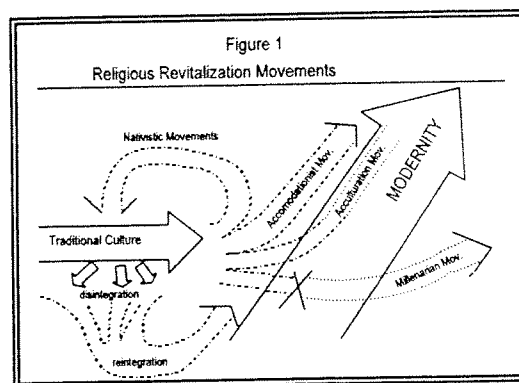
various powerful communities, and by adapting the Indian form of government based on mediating between rival communities. In this Indian polity local temples and shrines had endowed lands, *innam bhumi*, that were tax free. These generated large amounts of wealth, and were the field for struggles for control. After 1810 the British colonial government began to take over the management of local governments. It soon found itself responsible for maintaining the temples, and organizing and funding the temple rituals. British officials often found themselves participating as government representatives at temple rites. This led to the codification of an official or establishment “Hinduism” run by the British Raj. Under British rule, Hindu became a category of people who were not Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis or Buddhists. The Raj and later the Indian Government maintained this identification with temple Hinduism

The fifth definition of Hinduism is religious. Sometimes referred to as Neo-Hinduism, it is, like India itself, the product of the British Raj. It is the child born of the encounter of Indian religious philosophy with Enlightenment and Christian thought. I will use the term “Hindu” in this sense in this analysis.

### Neo-Hinduism

The last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century marked the emergence of a new form of Hinduism as an Indian response to the confrontation of Christianity and Western Enlightenment. To understand this rise of Neo-Hinduism I will draw on A .F .C. Wallace’s theory of revitalization (1956). According to Wallace, revitalization movement arise when traditional worldviews are threatened by external changes. They are attempts to find meaning in life in the face of growing anomie. Wallace argues that when cultures and religions are overrun by more powerful ones, the people respond in several ways (Figure 1).

The first response to massive outside invasions is 'conversion movements' in which people change their allegiances to the new ideology. When the British conquered India and introduced the Enlightenment, some Indians adopted a modern secular scientific worldview. Most of these came from high Hindu castes. When missionaries brought the Gospel, others became Christians in Western based churches. Most of them were untouchables and tribals who had no status in the old Brahmanical order.



A second response is 'accommodation movements' in which people adopt many of the elements of the new religion or ideology, but reinterpret these in terms of their old categories and logic. In India this was seen in the rise of the Brahma Samaj (Fellowship of Believers of the One True God) and Prarthana Samaj (Fellowship of Prayer)--reform movements that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They called for a radical transformation of Hinduism by submitting Hindu scriptures and teachings to the test of rationality. The result was a synthesis of Vedic idealism, Islamic monotheism and Christian ethics. These movements failed, however to produce a viable synthesis that could attract orthodox religious leaders.

A third response to 'cultural collision' is 'revitalization movements.' These look to the past, and seeks to revive it, through a new synthesis based on the old religion but accommodating elements of the new. In India these are the movements that gave birth to Neo Hindu fundamentalist movements.<sup>4</sup> They include the Arya Samaj and the Rama Krishna Mission.

<sup>4</sup> India's Supreme Court has recognize Neo-Hinduism as the legal representation of Hinduism. It gave an 'adequate and satisfactory definition' of Hinduism as: "Acceptance of the

The Hindu revitalization movements were the result of India's encounter with Enlightenment and Christian thought. On the one hand, Neo-Hindu scholars were inspired by the recognition given to the Vedas and Upanishads by Western scholars. They sought to create religious doctrines and institutions on the basis of the old texts, and organized Neo-Hinduism as a modern, formal 'high' religion. They rejected undesirable customs, such as idolatry and untouchable, as degenerate accretions to pure Vedic religion. They popularized their teaching by linking these to the great epics, the *Mahabharata* (with its *Bhagavad Gita*), and the *Ramayanam*, which are at the heart of popular Hinduism. On the other hand, these movements emerged out of the success of Christianity in winning untouchables. Gladstone notes (19##, 205), "Many Hindu leaders became extremely anxious about the landslide of the lower sections of Hindu society to Christianity, a 'foreign religion,' weakening not only social bonds, but also the solidarity of the society."

#### Neo-Hinduism and the Indian Nation State

Successful revitalization movements, in the long run, tend to move in one of two directions. Some become increasingly religious in nature, detached from the sociopolitical arena in which they exist. Others become increasingly politicized as they seek to wrestle power from the dominant power around them. Both of these trends are evident in the Hindu revitalization movements.

---

Vedas with reference; recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are diverse; and the realization of the truth that the number of gods to be worshiped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of the Hindu religion."



## Spiritualized Hinduism

One segment of Neo Hinduism has become increasingly religious in nature, stressing the spiritual nature of Hinduism. This has its roots in the work of Dayananda (1824-1883), Ramakrishna (1836-1886), Vivekananda (1863-1902) and the Theosophists. Swami Dayananda Saraswati founded the Arya Samaj (1875) to defend and reform Hinduism. His watch-word was “back to the Vedas,” and his emphasis was “India for Indians.” He wanted to removed Christianity and Islam from India, and make Hinduism the only religion of India. K. David notes, he became “the spearhead of a dynamic type of Hinduism unifying all sections of Hindu society and attempting to bring to light the inherent vitality of Hinduism (1979, 178).” Vivekananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna, argued that Hinduism alone can claim to be the universal religion of the world because it is not built around the life of historical persons, but around eternal and universal principles. He instilled a pride in Hindu culture and religion, and gave stimulus for the national revival of Hinduism.

Today Neo-Hinduism as a religious movement is centered around the Vishwa Hindu Parishad [VHP], the World Council of Hindus that coordinates the activities of Neo-Hindu movements and monitors orthodoxy (see Appendix 1).

One of the popular manifestations of Neo-Hinduism is the spread of ‘guruism.’ A great many charismatic Hindu gurus have major audiences in India, and have attracted Western followers. Among them are Ramana Maharishi (1870-1950), Swami Sivananda (founder of the Divine Life Society, died 1964) Ma Anandamayhi (considered by many to be a living deity), Satya Sai Baba, Rajaneesh and Bala Yogi.

A second expression of popular Neo-Hinduism is the move of religion from the hearth and home, where it was the purview of the purohits who ran the life cycle rites and family and caste rites, to temples, festivals, and religious fairs controlled by pujaris. Large temples have been revived and the celebration of nation wide Hindu festivals is increasing as neighborhoods compete to demonstrate their religious fervor. Many now attract large numbers of pilgrims who take religious bus tours to visit famous shrines. The most important actor of temple movement is the VHP and its assortment of priests and religious leaders.

### **Politicized Hinduism**

A second stream in Neo-Hinduism has become increasingly political in nature. In 1909 Pandit Malaviya founded the Hindu Mahasabha which soon developed into a right-wing Hindu political party. In 1925 Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a member of the Hindu Mahasabha, founded the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS], a Hindu religious movement which rejected cultural diversity and advocated the re-organization the nation build Hindu nationalism (theocentric state). In 1931 a young revolutionary in Maharashtra, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, was recruited for the RSS at Benaras Hindu University. He became its leader in 1940.

In his book, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, Savarkar popularized his concept of *Hindutva*, or Hindu nationalism. He argued that Aryans who came to the Indian sub-continent were a nation because they shared a geographical unity, racial features and a common culture<sup>5</sup>. He set out to create a Hindu national identity in which he hoped to make the RSS and Hindu society identical (Mangalwadi 1997, 289). M. S. Golwalkar, a leader in the RSS, wrote,

---

<sup>5</sup> Savarkar based his vision of *Hindutva* on the Italian political theorist Giuseppe Mazzini (1807-1882), and Hitler's view that race is the most important ingredient of the *nation*.

The ultimate vision of our work . . . is a perfectly organized state of society wherein each individual has been moulded [sic] into a model of ideal Hindu manhood and made into a living limb of the corporate personality of society (Golwalkar 1939, 88; quoted by Jaffrelot 1996, 59).

The RSS seeks to extend to the whole of society the Hindu nationalist concept of man who denies his individual personality. While claiming not to be a political party, it is the revitalization movement that has spawned a great number of front organizations like the Bharatiya Mazur Sabha, a trade union, and Vishva Hindu Parishad, a religious organization. The movement has millions of highly disciplined members spread all over India and abroad, and is the driving force behind the modern Hindu revitalization movement.

The central vision of the RSS is *Hindutva* [Hindudom], a Hindu National State. Bhartiya Janwadi Aghadi writes,

If there is one explosive idea that is setting the agenda for India today, it is *Hindutva*. . . . *Hindutva* has nothing to do with spirituality, but everything to do with political economy. . . . It has very little to do with Hinduism, but everything to do with an aggressive form of cultural nationalism . . . . It appears to be connected with India's past, but is actually an omen of the future . . . For some, *Hindutva* heralds the age of India's renaissance. For others, it reflects India's march towards fascism (Aghadi 1993, introductory page; cited by Mangalwadi 1997, 277).

To achieve its goal, the RSS espouses a uniform system of socialization to shape all people into one collective identity and Hindu nation. The movement has announced its intention to use political power to control educational institutions run by religious minorities so that they become the mediums for its own propaganda. M. S. Golwalkar writes,

The training that is imparted every day in the *shakha* [a local unit of the RSS] . . . imparts that spirit of identification and well-concerted actions. It gives the individual the necessary incentive to rub away his angularities, to behave in a spirit of oneness with the rest of his brethren in society and fall in line with the organised and disciplined way of life by adjusting himself to the varied outlooks of other minds. the persons assembling there learn to obey a single command (quoted by Jaffrelot 1996, 534).

How does the *Hindutva* movement deal with cultural and religious pluralism in India, a self declared secular pluralist government? Sadhvi Riothambra, a leader in the movement, says,

Wherever I go, I say, Muslims, live and prosper among us. Live like milk and sugar. If two kills of sugar are dissolved in a quintal of milk, the milk becomes sweet! But what can be done if our Muslim brother is not behaving like sugar in the milk? Is it our fault if he seems bent upon becoming a lemon in the milk? He wants the milk to curdle. . . . I say to him, "Come to your senses. The value of increases after it becomes sour. It becomes cheese. But the world knows the fate of lemon. It is cut, squeezed dry, and then thrown on the garbage heap (cited by Kakkar in Basu and Subrahmanyam 1996, 223-224).

*Hindutva* rules out any possibility of Indian Hindus, Muslims and Christian living together in harmony and as equals. Golwalkar, one of the architects of the ideology wrote,

The foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture. . . . or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment--not even citizens rights (Golwalkar 1939, 62)

According to Sarkar, *Hindutva* is a Brahmanical reaction to the threats to upper caste dominance raised by lower caste, tribal, peasant and women's movements, and by the social mobility facilitated by democratic secular politics and economic planning. Its strength is its appeal to all those for whom Mother India is a reality, which includes landowners, industrialists, shopowners, college and high school teachers and small entrepreneurs, as well as the large masses who live in rural and small-town India who feel that the present elite is much too Western oriented and forgetful of India's own cultural and spiritual heritage.

The vision of *Hindutva* emerged following the subjugation of the Hindus by the Moguls and later by a small number of British rulers. Hindu nationalist thinkers from the second half of the 19th century tried to understand the inherent political weakness of Hinduism and the fragmentation of the Hindu community. They were impressed by the success of Islam and Christian to build powerful empires, so they concluded that Hinduism had to serve the cause of

nationalism in the Indian context. They were impressed by the coherence of the Muslim and Christian communities, which is the reason for both their unity and their capacity for effective mobilization, and the universal claims of these religions which stood in contrast to the multiplicity of caste religions in India. The mission of *Hindutva* is to reorient Hindus from their exclusive family and caste loyalties to loyalty to a greater Hindu community and the nation at large. As a majoritarian movement, it defines the Indian nation as a whole and seeks to remove alternative, pluralistic definitions. In this nationalism, religious minorities have no place as long as they refuse to become Hindus culturally (Thampu 1998). In its efforts to unify India, *Hindutva* gives top priority to opposition to Islam and Christianity, and justifies communalism as morally correct, inevitable and necessary.

*Hindutva* is a totalitarian ideology because it aspires to fill the whole space occupied by society, and because it seeks to endow individuals with the selflessness ideal of total submission [*ekchalak anuvartita*] to the ascetic leader [*pracharak*]. It rejects a transcendent God and makes its chief, the *Sarsanghchalak*, the unquestioned head of the movement. This is the practice common to all Hindu sects who worship their gurus as sovereign gods. Hindu nationalism demands that Indians must worship Mother India as a goddess and make nationalism the source of all other values.

If the RSS is the parent body and force behind “Cultural Nationalism,” the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), “The Indian People’s Party,” is the political party that now rules India. It is seeking to gain control of the Nation and, through it, the people and cultures of India.<sup>6</sup> The BJP

---

<sup>6</sup> The BJP (formerly the Jana Sangh founded in 1951) and its allied Hindu organizations--the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal (the VHP youth organization), Hindu Mahasabha, and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS founded in 1925)--together called the Sangh Parivar (“brotherhood of interconnected Hindu nationalist groups affiliated with the RSS -

emerged after 1989 as a dominant political force when the old Congress control based on patronage networks of local leaders and central government collapsed, leaving a political vacuum in the ideological basis for allocation and use of power. Made up primarily of militant upper caste members, the BJP entered the arena, and over the years gained power and wide-spread appeal.<sup>7</sup> It emerged as the largest party in the 1996 election. Its first attempt to form the Indian government lasted less than two weeks, but in 1998 it returned to power and began to implement its agenda for the nation. It is commonly allied with Shiv Sena and the Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP], which is made up mainly of militant lower caste people. It is also affiliated with the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sang (BMS), the second largest trade union in the country.

The BJP's theory is that only Aryan [*Hindutva's*] cultural colonialism can keep the country together. While most of BJP's rivals are losing political appeal, the "Hindu Nationalism" movement is gaining strength and acceptability in a wider constituency [e.g. the lower castes in U.P., the Sikhs who hate Congress, the non-resident Indians].

The primary concern today is not so much BJP's present political clout, but the spread of its militant ideology among the intelligentsia, and its redefinition of the nature of the state. After

---

-represent the effort by the Hindu nation to form a Hindu nation-state based on India's native culture. The Sangh promotes Hindu majoritarianism, cultural nationalism and national "unity in diversity" based on its own definitions of India's Hindu cultural heritage. It blames communalism on minority groups not willing to work under the rule of Hindu culture. M. S. Golwalkar, former head of R.S.S., declares Muslims, Christians and Communists (in that order) the major enemies of India and promises they will not be citizens of a Hindu India (Klostermaier 1989, 406).

<sup>7</sup> The fact that BJP is essentially an upper caste backlash to retain power led to a dilemma when the Backward Classes Commission headed by Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal recommended stronger affirmative action for the so-called Other Backward Classes. The BJP formally supported the Mandal reforms at the national level, but undermined them at the local level, particularly in places where it relied on upper-caste support (Basu 1999, 18).

Independence in 1947, India declared itself a secular civil state built on the western notion of the a contract between the state and people as individuals. The BJP is now seeking to redefine the basis of the state in terms of communal entities. The government has a contract with the different constituent communities, not with individuals. Mangalwadi writes, "In India . . . religion doesn't have much to do with Truth. Its purpose is to serve as social cement, to teach human beings how to live in a community by putting the community about individuals (1997, 44)."

The BJP argues that in the state culturally diverse people cannot live together as equals. It favors a strong, centralized state based on cultural nationalism in which the safeguards of minority rights are eliminated, and the interests of the Hindu majority rule. The top BJP leaders all have RSS backgrounds, and a stress on the unity of ideological family. They are seeking to build a state on communal alliances rather than on networks of personal patronage as Congress did.

The idea that Islam and Christianity are foreign and alien is axiomatic among Hindu nationalists, who use this to justify the destruction of the Babri Masjid and burning of churches, and to argue Muslims and Christians are second-class citizens in India.<sup>8</sup> In doing so they equate "India" as an ancient civilization with "India" as an independent national state.<sup>9</sup> They support

---

<sup>8</sup> This despite the fact that Islam is as old in India as in Pakistan and Turkey, and it has developed a distinctively Indian form indigenous to the region. Today India has the fourth largest Muslim population in the world, following Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

<sup>9</sup> The conventional intellectual identification of "India" with "Hindu" and "Hinduism" is deeply mistaken. Historically, the subcontinent has included what is now India, Pakistan and Myanmar and has always has been populated by a great diversity of people, many of whom were not Hindus. Ironically, the territory now called "India" was formed by British imperialism without reference to Indian civilization at all (Ludden 199#,6).

this position by pointing to the split between Pakistan which is increasingly being Islamicized, and India, which they argue, is the heartland of Hinduism. From this perspective, the destruction of the Babri Masjid symbolized the removal of a foreign religiocultural invasion, and a restoration of the original Hinduism.

Since the BJP led coalition assumed power in 1997, there has been a noticeable increase in violence against Christians.<sup>10</sup> There has been a shift from a more or less peaceful co-existence of different religious and ethnic communities to a polity of hegemony and dominance, and from a polity of rational discourse to the argument of threat and violence, warning Christians not to abuse the hospitality that Hindus have extended to them in India.

The BJP projects itself as a deeply moralistic party. It rejects the lack of social, ethical and personal values in the Western-style democratic politics, and upholds the myth that Hinduism is moral and tolerant, and that Islam and Christianity are intolerant. It mobilizes local groups that have deep feelings of injustice, and capitalizes on local myths to organize riots against minority communities. One that justifies genocidal violence against Muslims is the notion that Hindu women are vulnerable and victimized by Muslim men.

The BJP, RSS, VHP Sangh [Family] appeals to the traditional values and concerns of popular Hindu culture, and uses these to create friction between state and populace by new styled politics built around religious festivals involving public participation and culminating in processions through communally charged towns to intensify pressure on the state and to show that all space is Hindu space. To deny Hindus the right to use public space for religio-political ends is

---

<sup>10</sup> This is reported by Valson Thampu in an unpublished paper titled, "Church and the Challenge of Hindutva". He notes that Christians have been targeted because they are smaller and less vocal than Muslims, and because they are known for being peace-loving, and often mistaken for cowardice



seen as anti-Hindu. Religion has moved from the home and temple to the street, and it has turned political.

This intrusion of what was thought to be private sphere matters into the public sphere has created a crisis in the nature of the Indian state which has to do with the redefinition of Indian civil social space and who will be allowed to participate.<sup>11</sup> The contract is no longer between the state and individuals, but between the state and religious communities. Supporters of Hindudom mobilize communal demonstrations in public space using public forms of communication to sway public opinion, and make public demands. They draw on deep cultural myths that justify the use of violence, and to define the 'other.' The public discourse is no longer that of party politics based on ideology and class, but on communal parties based on religion, ethnicity and caste.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the shift is from the western focus on the state and its relationship to individuals to the state and its relationship to communities. The result is communal politics based on the resurgence of Hindu and Muslim fundamentalisms.

### Hindu Missionary Movements

In 1898 Hinduism crashed on western shores as a viable religion for the West when Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a Hindu mystic, made a lasting impression on the people attending the Parliament of Religions in Chicago when he showed the reasonableness of

---

<sup>11</sup> The modern distinction between public and private spheres has never been strong in India, and is now breaking down. This began in the 18th and 19th century with activism by groups in public areas in such actions as the Cow Protection Movement in 1890s.

<sup>12</sup> This shift began with the institution of reserved seats for Scheduled castes and other minority communities. It was the basis on which the Mandal Commission recommended the use of communalism as basis for making demands on government. It is not so much that communal parties have become institutionalized, but that community identity is the basis for high level political activities.

Hinduism to Americans. The New York Herald wrote, “he is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him, we felt how foolish it is to send Missionaries to his learned nation (Zachariah 19##, 78).” Vivekananda preached Advaita Vedanta, a monistic form of Hinduism that affirms the equivalence of Brahman (God) and Atman (Self), the belief that all religions lead to God and salvation, and the thesis that there can be no good without evil or evil without good. Vivekananda called it sin to call a person a sinner. He founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897, and was the first Hindu missionary to America. In 1899 he established the Vedanta Society in N.Y. to attract American adherents through *jnana yoga* and *bhakti yoga*, which would become the rallying cry for generations of American Vedantists to come.

Swami Paramahansa Yogananda’s Self-Realization Fellowship [SRF] was the most influential Hindu movement in U.S. before World War II. Yogananda came to the U.S. in 1920, but, unlike Swami Vivekananda who returned to India a few years after the World’s Parliament, he lectured widely and left an estimated 150,000 devotee in 150 centers. Other missions to the West include International Society for Krishna Consciousness [ISKCON or Hari Krishnas], Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Transcendental Meditation, and Satya Si Baba, the red robed Hindu guru.

### Hindus of the Diaspora

Many Indians have moved outside the subcontinent. By the third century, Indians were trading with Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and other parts of East African. In the eleventh century, the Cholas (Tamil princes) conquered the great Indonesian empire of Sri Vijaya, and established outposts of Hinduism in Bali and other parts of Indonesia. In the eighteenth century, Indian

bakers and traders extended their activities to Burma, Malaya and Thailand, bringing their religion with them.

Following the close of the slave trade, plantation owners (sugar, tea, coffee) and public works contractors (railroads, roads, harbors, jails ) around the world needed a new source of cheap labor. They found it in India in the indentured system that replaced slavery. Starting in the early nineteenth century and continuing up to the 1920s, tens of thousands of Indians were transported to British colonies and protectorates including Fiji, Malaya, Mauritius, Ceylon, East African Protectorate (Kenya), Rhodesia, Natal, Cape Colony, Transvaal and the West Indies (Jamaica, Trinidad, Martinique, British Guiana) and settled in Indian labor colonies. Those who volunteered to go were promised a livelihood, the prospect of getting rich in five to ten years, and passage back to India. The indentured labor system, however, kept them poor, and few ever returned to India. The result of this is Indian settlements in more than a dozen countries around the world, many of which preserved their own Hindu practices which, in time, evolved into local traditions. The priests were generally Brahmin immigrants who left the plantations for the more rewarding life of religion. They became hereditary guardians of many of the shrines (Tinker 1974, 210-211). This is especially true of Mauritius, Fiji and Guyana where Indians form the majority of the population. They also form important groups Malaysia, Ceylon and Singapore. With a few exceptions, little Christian outreach has been done among Indians of the diaspora.

As opportunities in the former British colonies dwindled, Indian found new opportunities in Britain, Canada, Australia and the United States. Many of these were businessmen and professionals. An estimated five to six million Indians now live outside India (Tinker 1977, 11).

Hindus of the diaspora have brought their religion with them and have built Hindu temples in their communities. The first two Indian-style temples in U.S. were the Sri Ganesha Temple [now called the Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam] in Flushing, NY, and the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh, PA. Others include the Sri Ganesh Temple in Nashville and the Iraivan (Siva) Temple on Kauai. Today almost every major city in the U.S. and Canada, boasts a temple, large or small. Since 1985, these have become important centers for American Hindu pilgrimages. *Tirtha yatras* in cars or planes from one to the next across the country are arranged by the Council of Hindu Temples of North America. *Hinduism Today*, a magazine created to strengthen spirituality in the West is published in seven editions around the world, including one for North America.

### **THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN INDIA**

The story of Christianity in India is a long and tangled one, extending from the time of Christ to the present. In this subcontinent Christianity has encountered great empires, sophisticated scholars, and some of the most profound philosophical and religious systems on earth. In the encounter it has shaped and been shaped by India. In many ways this Jewel in the Crown of the British Empire has been the testing ground for Christianity and the modern mission movement. Here Christianity has been forced to deal with institutionalized ethnic and religious pluralism that challenged the uniqueness of Christ, and the unity of the Church.<sup>13</sup> We will look briefly at the history of Protestant missions in India, at the current state of the Church in India, and then at the lessons the Indian Church have to teach the global Church.

---

<sup>13</sup> The encounter has shaped the thinking of western mission leaders, such as E. Stanley Jones, Stephen Neill, Leslie Newbigin and Donald McGavran, and given rise to Indian theologians and leaders such as Sadhu Sundar Singh, A. J. Appasamy, V. Chakkarai, V.S. Azariah and M. M. Thomas.

### Protestant Missions

Protestant missions began in India in the early eighteenth century. They pursued two general strategies: one to reach Hindus and the other to reach tribals.

#### **Mission to Hindus**

Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Heirich Plutschau arrived in India in 1706 at Tranquebar, South East India. Both mastered Tamil and started elementary schools. Their work was based on five principles: 1) education and church should go together, 2) the Scriptures and Christian literature should be translated and printed in local languages, 3) preaching should be based on a clear knowledge of the people's cultures, 4) definite personal conversions should be stressed, and 5) the establishment of churches with Indian ministers at an early date. The missionaries bought property, and build houses, schools and churches. They set up a printing press, and started philanthropic works. They trained and sent out native evangelists to the villages, and ordained their first Indian minister in 1733.

The Tranquebar mission took the caste system for granted, and made no attempt to condemn it. Converts retained their caste identities after conversion, and separate places were assigned for different caste groups in the church. Considerable effort was given to developing self-supporting and self-governing churches.

In 1793 William Carey, William Ward and Joshua Marshman established the Serampore Mission in North East India. They practiced the British Mission Society policy of self-support of missionaries. After suffering great hardships during their early years, the team established itself in Calcutta. They sought to spread the Gospel by every possible means, opening outstations and

hiring Indian evangelists. They translated and printed the Bible, organized Baptist churches (which were in no way under Baptists in England), studied the local cultures deeply, and trained indigenous leaders. In 1818 they looked after 126 elementary schools. By 1834 six translations of the Bible, and twenty-three of the New Testament appeared. Portions of Scripture were published in ten other languages. In 1819 they established Serampore College which later became India's leading seminary.

The Serampore Mission became the model for later Protestant missions in India. Alexander Duff stressed the importance of education as an evangelistic strategy. Clara Swain and Ida Scudder introduced women's hospitals which opened the door for reaching women behind the veil. Christian schools and hospitals spread across the country.

Following the lead of the Serampore trio, Protestant missionaries condemned the caste system as the essence of Hinduism, and required converts from all castes to attend the same churches.<sup>14</sup> The result was a mass inflow of converts from the untouchable castes, and the identification of Christianity with untouchability. Despite the strong insistence by western missionaries that converts renounce their castes and join the church as a new Christian community, most Indian Christians brought caste into the church. Herbert Hofer notes (1991,157),

The studies demonstrate how the Christian community is understood both by the Christians and by their neighbours as another "*qaum*", or caste-community, within the overall social bracket. The Christians share with other *qaums* the general attitudes towards religion and morality, and they also share the general attitudes toward their *qaum*: membership through birth, group-serving loyalty, and accommodation as one community among many other . . .

---

<sup>14</sup> For an in-depth study of Protestant mission responses to the caste system see Duncan Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, 1980.

This is particularly true of the mass of Untouchables who make up most of the mission churches. In many cases, denominational differences have become the new arena in which caste differences are fought. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, the untouchable Malla have largely become Lutherans, and the untouchable Madigas Baptists. Now they justify endogamy and separation on the basis of denominational differences.

The development of truly indigenous churches was a priority from the beginning, but Protestant missions delayed the transfer of power to them, arguing that they were not ready for the responsibilities. The result was foreign control of mission churches, and increasing tensions between mission agencies and the churches. These were finally resolved when most mission agencies withdrew their control and personnel after Indian independence, and “turned over” the work to Indian mission churches.

One consequence of this foreign control was that Christianity was shaped by western forms and widely seen as a foreign religion associated with colonialism and, more recently, the global economy, and Christian converts as aliens to their own land. This was reinforced by the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century mission goal which was to Christianize and Civilize the people.

Response to missions to Hindus was mixed. Today most Christians from Hindu society are in the South (more than 6% of the population in some areas). There are few in the great Gangetic plain. One reason is that missions have worked in the south a hundred years longer than in the north. Another, and probably equally important reason, is that the South has always been cultural marginal to the North, which is the heartland of Hinduism, Hindi and Hindu nationalism. For many in the south Christianity and English gave them an identity which they did not have in the traditional Indian cultural wars.

## **Mission to Tribal**

The second Protestant mission strategy was to evangelize tribal societies found in the mountainous regions of North East India, and the hills of central India. In the North East Hills Area (NEHA), British patrols pacified the mountainous regions after 1800. The British policy was to preserve the traditional cultures as much as possible, but by destroying tribal governance and opening the hills to the outside world, British Raj had devastating effects on these cultures. There was much resistance, but the British put a stop to this by military conquest.

British Welsh Presbyterians and American Baptists began evangelistic tours and establishing schools in the region after 1836. The mission policy was to establish schools using the vernaculars to teach Christians how to read the Bible, and to train native evangelists and leaders for the rapidly growing churches. The government restricted where they could work under a “a discrete licensing policy,” but as new areas were opened up by patrols, the missionaries extended their network of schools into the hills.

Initially there was resistance to the gospel from tribal communities, but by the end of the century, Christianity was spreading rapidly among the tribes. The growth was based on an extensive educational system and a comprehensive indigenous church structure. Most of the Christian growth was the result of native evangelists and missionaries going to unreached villages and neighboring tribes, and occurred as group movements in which whole families and villages became Christian on the basis of corporate decisions.

During the twentieth century, Christianity continued to spread rapidly throughout the region. The methods most commonly used were to establish low level schools in which local leaders were trained, and itinerant evangelism by local evangelists. Relief and medical ministries



were added, but there was considerable concern lest people become “rice Christians.” Some tribes became almost entirely Christian while others had few Christians among them. Christian revival movements (1906, 1913, 1919, 1929), often rooted in the singing of songs composed by the people, contributed much to the indigenization of Christianity in the region. By the twenty-first century, the majority of people in several North East Indian states considered themselves Christians (see Figure 2).

One benefit of Christianity, socially speaking, was to help the hills tribes preserve their identity in the face of the threat of assimilation into the Hindu societies of the plains at the lowest level of the socio-ritual

hierarchy (Downs 1992, 4). In doing so, however, it fostered among some tribals the desire to succeed from India and establish their own independent nations.

A second benefit of Christianity for tribals was that it educated the young and prepared them to participate in the global world. Tribals became outstanding political and religious leaders, in both the Indian church and state, and around the world.

Outreach to the tribals in NEHA raised important missiological questions. One had to do with the validity of people movements in which whole families and villages became Christians en masse. These followed the traditional tribal patterns of making important decisions together. It was clear that many went along with these corporate decisions to maintain the unity of the village, and not for religious reasons. These movements often occurred during times of calamity, such as the great earthquake (1897), the so-called bamboo famines which take place at intervals

Assam (plains, Hindu)	2.4
Mizoram tribals	86
Manipur tribals	76
Nagaland tribals	67

of twenty-five years or so, and the failure of tribal rebellions. Debates arose whether these conversions genuine, and over how should missions and churches deal with such movements?

A second question had to do with dealing with traditional cultural practices such as birth rites, marriages, festivals, intoxicants, slavery, head-hunting, hygiene, status of women, and dress and hair style (Downs 1992, 146-164). The first missionaries and early converts called for radical changes in life style which were a major factor in the acculturative role that Christianity played. In some areas, these changes were beneficial. Head hunting and slavery declined, and the role of women greatly improved through biblical instruction and education of women. In other areas, these changes led to an undermining of the people's cultural identity. Today Christians in NEHA are increasingly connected to the world, but also struggling to rediscover their cultural heritage and identity.

### **Assessment**

How can we assess the modern Protestant mission movement in India. There have been positive and negative outcomes. One contribution of Protestant missions to India has been the establishment of the Indian Church (see Figure 3). Through the great sacrifices paid by those who went and those who supported the work, Christianity plays an important role in Indian life, particularly in the South and North East.

A second outcome has been to bring Untouchables and tribals a sense of dignity and upward mobility. Today the children and grand-children of Untouchables are Christian doctors, lawyers, professors and government officials. Tribal communities have preserved their identities

in the face of strong assimilative forces. At first this reinforced separatism among these communities, but eventually Christianity became a vehicle for bringing together different tribes and castes in larger ecumenical movements. An emerging trend is for

RELIGION	1900	1970	2000
HINDU	184,023	433,214	700,513
MUSLIM	31,552	62,877	122,570
CHRISTIAN	3,820	23,353	62,341
Orthodox	200	1,425	3,100
Roman Catholic	1,920	8,433	15,500
Protestant	650	8,137	16,826
Indian Initiated	90	6,944	34,200
Hindu-Christian	200	15,552	31,000

[Barrett, Kurian and Johnson. 2001, 360]

Christian communities to establish links all over India through the training of their leaders in inter-denominational seminaries and participation in the National Christian Council and Indian Evangelical Fellowship. Christian missions are also responsible for establishing schools and hospitals throughout India to serve the general public.

Christian missions in India have also had serious limitations. One is their identification with western colonialism and civilization. No serious student of Christianity in India would argue that Christian missions and the Church did not benefit from the British Raj. While it may be technically correct, in terms of official policy, to say that the British were neutral in religious matters, there were many ways in which highly placed representatives of the British government assisted Christian missions, and the missionaries accepted that support gratefully. It is also clear that the missionaries did not consider themselves agents of the colonial power. Their primary purpose was the proclamation of the gospel. Frederick Downs writes, “[T]he relationship

between the missions and the government can best be described as cooperation in certain limited areas of mutual coincidence of interests. In other areas there was often conflict between the two (1992,31).” What can be said is that Christian missions and the colonial government were there for their own purposes, and found each other useful.

From the point of view of the Indians, missionaries were often seen as agents of imperialism, and Indian Christians as traitors to their own cultures. No national church was free from missionary domination. Even the National Council of Churches in India was controlled by missionaries. When the independence movements emerged in the late nineteenth century, missionaries, by and large, supported continued British rule.

Another set of problems arose out of the principle of comity adopted by Protestant missions, in which they divided out the land so as not to compete. One unintended consequence, however, was that tribes and castes often became identified with denominations. For example, in South India the Baptists became known as the church of the untouchable Madigas, and the Lutherans of the untouchable Malas. Tribal and caste rivalries now take the form of denominational rivalries. In NEHA the Khasi and Mizo became Presbyterians, and the Nagas, Kuki and Garos became Baptists.

A third set of problems arose out of the lack of adequately contextualizing the gospel and churches. Christianity came in western dress, and often existed like a potted plant, dependent on outside nurture and support. Many Indians saw it as a foreign religion, and as a religion of Untouchables. The lack of contextualization also meant that Christianity came to mean articulating the right beliefs and performing the right rites. The result was a lack of depth in discipleship, and little conversion of the Indian worldview in the light of the gospel.

### Indian Initiated Churches and Missions

As we have seen, Hindu revitalization movements have tried to revive Indians of their Indianness. They do so by identifying India with Hinduism. After World War II, governance in most mission churches was turned over to Indians. These leaders are now working hard on contextualizing the Gospel in the Indian setting, and are leading the churches in mission outreach. Today, India is the second largest mission sending country in the world. Most Indian missionaries are from the South and serve in the North, which is culturally very different from the South.

Protestant church in India are also struggling with the tension of being Indian Christians, but also with being part of the global Church. Churches affiliated with western denominations are accused of being foreign and anti-Indian. In response many churches in India are seeking to identify themselves with India. The result has been a rapid rise in Indian Initiated Churches [IICs]. We will examine two types of such movements.

#### **Indian Initiated Churches**

Since 1850 many indigenous attempts have been made to form Hindu-Christian churches affirming faith in Jesus Christ, but rejecting Western missionary control and retaining India culture and nationalism. Among the first were the Hindu Church of the Lord Jesus (1858), Yuomayam (1874), and Fellowship of the Followers of Jesus (1920). Recent movements include the Indian Pentecostal Church of God (1924), The Assemblies (Jehovah Shammah) started by Brother Bhakta Singh (1942), and the Nagaland Christian Revival Church. In recent years there

has been an explosion of these Indian Initiated Churches<sup>15</sup> which have organized more than a hundred denominations by 2000.

Many of the Indian indigenous movements claim to be Christian, but some have sought to plant Hindu-Christian churches which worship Christ, but remain Hindu in identity. The largest of these is the Subba Rao movement begun in Andhra Pradesh (1942 - cf. Baggo 1968). Subba Rao conducts large healing ministries in the name of Jesus, but rejects baptism, and considers himself a Hindu.

### **Churchless Christians**

In recent years, Hebert Hoefler, a Lutheran missionary in South India, has studied the influence of Christianity outside the church. He writes,

Our statistics have shown that there is a solid twenty-five percent of the Hindus and Muslim population in Madras city which has integrated Jesus deeply into their spiritual life. Half of the population have attempted spiritual relationships with Jesus and had satisfying and learning experiences through it. Three-fourths speak very highly of Jesus and could easily relate to Him as their personal Lord if so motivated (1991, 109).

Most of these silent followers of Christ are young educated poor people who have come in contact with dedicated Christians. The majority are women and high caste people. Many have experienced the confirmation of Jesus' place in their lives through physical healing, moral growth and a sense of forgiveness of sins. David Barrett and his associates estimates that there are more than four million 'radio believers,' Hindus who take Bible correspondence courses and pray regularly to Jesus (2001, 361).

---

<sup>15</sup> In many ways these are parallel to the African Independent Churches (more recently known as the African Initiated Churches) the autochthonous churches of Latin America (Berg) and the Chinese house church churches.

Hoefer's findings have provoked a heated debate regarding the spiritual state of these "churchless Christians." Some of these are theological. Are these people indeed Christians? In Hinduism individuals are allowed to worship their own personal god (*ishta devata*), so a wife may believe in Jesus as her savior. But as a member of the family she must carry out the family duties of making evening offerings to the family and caste god (*jati* or *kula devata*). Second, should they be encouraged to be baptized when baptism means joining a church that itself is identified with specific untouchable castes? Should high caste Brahmin vegetarian converts be encouraged to eat meat to show that they are indeed 'one in Christ' with meat eating Christians from the untouchable castes? Other questions relate to Christian ministry. How should the church minister to women in Hindu and Muslim homes who will be cast out or killed if they take a public stand for Christ? Should new homogeneous churches be planted for converts from different communities to win them, and make the unity of the church a long term goal? How can leaders transform caste-based churches into covenant communities in which all castes are welcome and valued when they, themselves, are part of the caste system? These are not easy questions to answer. It is all too easy for us from outside to pass judgment on the Indian churches. We need deal first with the racism, classism and genderism in our own churches.

### **LESSONS FROM THE INDIAN CHURCH**

What can we learn as members in the Church from the case of Christianity in India?

There are many lessons, but I will focus on five of them.

#### The Church as Local and as Global

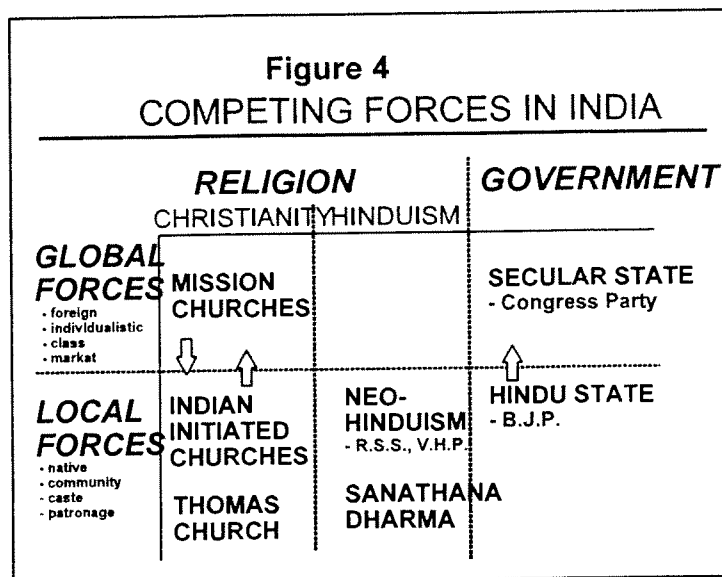
The Church in India, like the church in every country, is caught between the forces of

globalization and those of localization. In a sense, it must, in one sense, be an insider in every country, and yet remain, in another sense, an outsider—a part of one global body. To the extent it is part of the global Christian community it appears to be foreign to the local

people. To the extent it identifies itself with the local community, it is distanced from the global community and often distrusted as syncretistic. This tension manifests itself in a number of ways in the Indian churches.

### The Church in the Indian Contexts

Many of the current tensions the churches faces in India have to do with the countervailing forces of globalization and localization (see Figure 4). The modern Indian secular state and the mission churches represent the forces of globalization. The Indian Initiated Churches, Thomas Church and Neo-Hindu Nationalism represent localization movements. This raises two questions for Indian Christians. On the one hand, how can they affirm their Indian identity when that supports the establishment of a Hindu State? On the other hand, how can they support the secular state when that is seen by many as foreign? Christian leaders have largely supported a secular nation state, even though the political wing of the Neo-Hindu Nationalist movement has said it would welcome Christians and Muslims in a Hindu State if they became





truly India. The result has been a sharp increase in persecution of Christians by Hindu fundamentalists.

Since World War II there has been a shift in relationship between Indian Mission Churches and their parent mission agencies. Many of the churches still depend, to some extent on outside funds, and enjoy participation in global activities. Indian nationalists argue that this proves the foreignness of Christianity in India. Mission agencies, for their part, talk of partnership, but often give aid with strings attached. There is much discussion on how Indian churches should relate to churches in other lands.

The Indian churches themselves are caught between global and local forces. Mission churches have global connections, which give them access to resources and power. These connections, however, reinforce the widespread belief that Christianity is a foreign religion. Indian Initiated Churches, on the other hand, are seek as truly Indian, but they lack resources and global ties.

In recent years the two kinds of churches have moved towards the middle. After World War II most mission agencies turned ownership and control over to Indian leaders, who are now seeking to make their churches more Indian in character. The Indian Initiated Churches, on the other hand, have organized joint fellowships, and are setting up boards in the West to raise funds and to gain global visibility. Ecumenical relationships between the two groups is also increasing.

### **The Gospel in the Indian Contexts**

Not only must the church define itself in the Indian social context, it must define the its message in the Indian cultural context without selling out the Gospel, and it must communicate

that Gospel in ways Indians understand as Good News. Most urban mission affiliated churches are copies of the home churches of the missionaries. Indian Initiated Churches, on the other hand, are more Indian in their worship styles. Their theologies range widely from 'New Testament' churches to those in which Christ is the central god, but one among others.

### The Challenge of Caste

Caste remains a central issue in the Indian churches. This is complicated by the fact that different castes and tribes are now often associated with different denominations to form ethnic-religious communities. Christianity has not brought an end to caste in the churches themselves.

Ethnic identities raises the question of evangelism. Following William Carey, Protestant churches required all converts to attend the same churches. In 1960s Donald McGavran, a life long missionary to India, began to advocate planting homogeneous churches aimed at reaching different caste groups. This would mean Brahmins would start Brahmin churches, Sudras would start Sudra churches, and Untouchables would start Untouchable churches. For the most part, the churches in India have publically rejected this strategy, but some, particularly some western mission agencies, have adopted this approach.

Divisions in the church based on ethnicity (caste, tribe), class and gender are central issues in churches around the world. Before judging the church in India, it is important that we examine our own responses to these powerful social forces, and decide how, theologically and socially, we must deal with the issues of the relationship between unity and diversity within the Church.

### The Challenge of Religious Pluralism

Given the Hindu stance that all religions lead to God, Indian theologians, such as M. M. Thomas and R. Pannikar, have sought for ways to understand and communicate the Christian claims of the uniqueness of Christ without being colonial and foreign. They have also sought to do Indian theology within the context of global theology.

As we noted at the outset, India has been a major testing ground for Christianity and the modern mission movement. It is also the greatest challenge to Christianity in the west through its spread through the New Age Movement and through its message of religious relativism and tolerance.

### The Challenge of Injustice and Oppression

The fact that the Untouchables and the South Indians have been most responsive to the Gospel raises theological and missiological questions. Should the church have a preferential option for the marginal and oppressed, or should it seek to win the rich and powerful? Should the church speak out against systems of dominance, such as the caste system, and regional politics?

### Persecution and Suffering

The current escalation of persecutions raises another critical set of questions in the Indian church. Indian leaders have been debating how Christian should respond to them. If they turn to the secular government for protection, they reinforce in the minds of many that they are a foreign presence in India. Many argue that the church should bear suffering without resorting to the state or violence, and, in so doing, bear witness to love and forgiveness, a theme (*ahimsa*) deeply rooted in Indian culture.

We must stand with Indian church leaders as they develop a Christian response to persecution. They point out that from a spiritual perspective, the decisive thing is not what happens to Christians, but how we respond to it. Persecution is an opportunity for the church to reflect on the implications of Jesus' teaching that we love our enemies. It is as a victim that Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is not easy for those of us living in comfort and security to say this, but we must learn from our persecuted brothers and sisters the theology of suffering and the cross. Herbert Hoefler writes, "Spiritual authenticity is the critical issue in the Indian mentality. It's the issue that lies behind the guru-principle in Hinduism. It is also one of the dissatisfactions with the Western style of training and appointing spiritual leaders for a congregation" (1999, 36). In a land that highly values *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, the Christian response of love and compassion has been a powerful message to many observing the scene.

As the local and global church we must stand with our brothers and sisters in their persecution and suffering. We must minister to the traumatized victims of persecution, and recognize that they are the vanguard of Christian presence in India. This must go beyond expressions of nice sentiments and find practical expressions. We must minister to the aggressor. Being a community committed to truth, it is incumbent on us to try and remove the prejudices and misconceptions that distort the attitudes others have towards us. There are times when protesting is necessary, but it must be spiritually based and redemptive in nature. The purpose is to confront the aggressor with the nature and implications of what he is doing and to open his eyes to what he is becoming, to bring him, hopefully, to repentance. It is as Victim that Jesus prays for the aggressors, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." This is not easy.

We must stand with our Indian leaders as they develop a theology of suffering, as well as a theology of triumph. There is and will be continued persecution of the church in India. The critical question is how will the church and Christians respond to suffering. Will they seek to spare themselves from suffering, or stand as a witness to the gospel of love, forgiveness and reconciliation? We need to examine honestly and deeply implications of Jesus' teachings that we should love our enemies. From a spiritual perspective, the decisive thing is not what happens to us, but how we respond to it, and how our response is a testimony to the Gospel we preach. Ironically, atrocities are a form of acclamation, an indirect authentication of the relevance and effectiveness of the Christian message.

### **Our Christian Mission in India**

What, then, is our mission as Christians in India and around the world in that great sub-continent?

#### Proclaiming and Living the Gospel

First, we must not forget that the task of evangelizing India is not complete (see Figure 5). There are many who have not heard the Gospel, and many who have but who find it almost impossible to break out of the

Year	Number	% of Wrld. Pop
1900	203,033,300	12.5
1970	473,823,000	12.8
mid-1999	774,080,000	12.9
2000	786,532,000	12.9
2025	1,020,666,000	12.7

(Source: David Barrett 1999,25)

ideological grasp of Hinduism, and the social webs of family and caste. The work is not

finished, and we cannot turn it over to the church in India to complete. The global church must join with the church in India to proclaim the good news of salvation to every Indian. We must not come with a sense of Western superiority. We are sinners pointing others to the way of salvation. Sharing the truth is never arrogant because it empowers people to make their own decisions.

The good news is that the church in India is rapidly gaining a vision of mission. India, today, sends the second largest number of missionaries per country. Many of these go from the South and the North East to North and Central India. But Indian churches and missions cannot carry out the full task alone. We need to join them in their outreach to India.

#### Contextualizing the Church and the Gospel

Second, we must join the church in India as it develops a meaningful response to Hindutva. It is important that Indians see Christianity in India as truly India, not foreign. Indian Christians must model what it means to be good citizens who can contribute much to India by upholding healthy standards in public life, and by defending the marginal, weak and powerless.

#### Mission in the Indian Diaspora

In focusing on Hindus in India, we often lose sight of the millions of Hindus of the diaspora. They, too, need to hear the gospel, and they are often more open to receive it. For many of them Hinduism is more a cultural identity than a religious allegiance. Here a partnership between the global church and the Indian church can shape mission outreach that is seen as truly Indian.

Hindus of the diaspora are not a monolithic group. Those in Bangladesh and Pakistan live in different sociocultural and historical worlds. So too do those living in Nepal, Malaysia,

Guyana, Surinam, Sri Lanka, the East Indies, West Africa, Fiji, Europe and North America. The Christian mission to each of these must be carried out with care and sensitivity.

#### Mission to the Church in North America and Europe

Finally, we must recognize the impact of Hinduism on the West. Most of our church leaders are little aware of the challenges revitalized Hinduism poses in their communities. Today the post-modern West is increasingly drawing on the Hindu worldview in its reaction to scientism and materialistic reductionism. Hindu believes and practices are no longer seen as esoteric and foreign. They have become mainstream in Western business, medicine, entertainment and sports (Chandler 1988). While maintaining its emphasis on Christian mission around the world, the church must clearly define itself in a pluralistic, relativistic world, lest it gain the world but lose its own soul.

The church is to live and to proclaim the gospel boldly until the end of this age. In each time and place, it must discern how best to communicate that good news, but the joy of participating in Christ's mission to the world remains its vision and hope.

## Appendix 1

### Global Hindu Organizations

#### **HINDU ORGANIZATIONS** (Santana Dharma)

Arya Samaj, Ghinmaya Mission, Gitananda Ashram (Italy), Hindu Students Council, Hindu Temple Society of North America, International Swaminarayan Satsang (ISSO), Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam, Nityananda Institute, Ramakirshna Mission (New York), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangs (RSS), Saiva Siddhanta Church, Swaminarayan Hindu Mission (BSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)

#### **QUASTI-HINDU ORGANIZATIONS**

##### Yoga Vedanta

Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, divine Life Society, Ramanastram (Ramana Maharshi), Siddha Yoga Dham (Chidvalasananda), Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers

##### Social Service and/or Universalism

Ananda Marga, Gayatri Pariwar, M.A.Ashram (Mata Amritanandamayi), Sadhu Vaswami Mission, Integral Yoga Institute (Satchidananda), Satya Sai Baba, Self-Realization Fellowship, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

#### **NON-HINDU NEW RELIGIONS OR NON-RELIGIONS**

Brahma Kumaris, ISCKON, Transcendental Meditation, Veerashaivite (Swami Chinmayananda. 1998. Identity: Who then are the Hindus? Hinduism Today. October. p. 33).



### References Cited

- Barrett, David, George Kurian and Todd Johnson. 2001. *World Christian Encyclopedia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Vol. I.
- Basu, Kaushik and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds. 1996. Unraveling the Nation. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- David, K. 1979. The Hindu view of community: classical and modern. Indian Journal of Theology. 28:178??
- Downs, Frederick S. 1992. *History of Christianity in India: North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Volume V, Part 5. Bangalore: The church History Association of India
- Duraiswamy. 1986. *Christianity in India: Unique and Universal Mission*. Madras: The Christian Literature Society.
- Frykenberg, Robert Eric. 1993. Constructions of Hinduism at the Nexus of History and Religion. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*. 23:3 (Winter):523-550.
- Gladstone, J. W. *Protestant Christianity and People's Movements in Kerala*.
- Golwalkar, M. S. 1938. *Bunch of Thoughts*. Bangalore: Jagarana Prakashan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1939. *We, or our nationhood defined*. Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan.
- Hoefler, Herbert E. 1991. *Churchless Christianity*. Madras, India: Asian Program for Advancement of Training and Studies India.
- Jaffrelot, Christopher. 1996. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. New Delhi: Viking.
- Kolnadi, Gitanjali. 1994. *Culture Shock! India: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette*. Portland, OR: Graphic Arts Center Publishing Co.
- Ludden, David, ed. 1996. Contesting the Nation: Religion, community, and the Politics of Democracy in India.; Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn Press.
- Mangalwadi, Vishal. 1997. India: The Grand Experiment. Farnham, UK: Pippa Rann Books.
- Said, Edward. 1978. Orientalism.

Thampu, Valson. 1998. Church and challenge of Hindutva. St. Stephen's College, Delhi:  
Unpublished paper.

Tinker, Hugh. 1974. A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920. London: Oxford University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1977. The Banyan Tree: Overseas Emigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.  
New York: Oxford University Press.

Walbank 1965

Wallace, Anthony F. C. 1956. Revitalization Movements. American Anthropologist. 58:264-281.

Hinduism Today. December 1998. Everywhere a New Temple.

**MISSIONS IN INDIA**  
**Bibliography of Recent Books Published in India**

- Athyal, Abraham P. and Dorothy Yoder Nice, eds. 1998. *Mission Today: Challenges and Concerns*. Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute.
- Athyal, Sakhi M. 1995. *Indian Women in Mission*. Madhupur: Mission Educational Books.
- Gnanakan, Ken. ed. 1992. *Salvation: Some Asian Perspectives*. Bangalore: ATA Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. ed. 1995. *Biblical Theology in Asia*. Bangalore: ATAT/TBT.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. *Kingdom Concerns: A Biblical Exploration Towards a Theology of Mission*. Bangalore: Theological Text Books.
- Hrangkhurna, Fanfani. ed. 1998. *Christianity in India, Search for Liberation and Identity*. New Delhi: ISPCK.
- Hrangkhuma, Fanfani and Sebastian C. H. Kim. 1996. *The Church in India: Its Mission Tomorrow*. New Delhi: CMS/SPCK.
- Kavunkal, Jacob and Fanfani Hrangkhuma, eds. 1994. *Christ and Cultures*. Mumbai: St. Paul'.
- Kim, Sebastian and K. Marak. eds. 1997. *Good News to the Poor: The Challenge to the Church*. New Delhi: CMS/ISPCK.
- Marak, K. C. and P. S. Jacob, eds. 2000. *Conversion in a Pluralistic Context: Perspectives and Perceptions*. New Delhi: CMS/ISPCK.
- Mattam, Jospeh and Krickwin C. Marak, eds. 1999. *Blossom from the East: Contribution of the Indian Church to World Mission*. Mumbai: St. Paul's.
- Mattam, J. and Sebastian Kim, eds. 1996. *Mission and Conversion: A Reappraisal*.
- Rajendran, K. 1997. *Which Way Forward Indian Missions? A Critique of Twenty-five Years 1972-1997*. Bangalore: SAIACS Press.
- Rajendran, K. and John Amalraj. 2000. *Where are the Indian Leaders? Developing Leadership in Indian Missions*. Chennai: IMA.
- Sunder Raj, Ezra. 1992. *Management of Indian Missions*. Chennai: India Missions Association.
- Sumithra, Sunand and F. Hrangkhuma, eds. 1995. *Doing Mission in Context*. Bangalore:

TBT/CMS.