

A Christian Response to Hinduism

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO HINDUISM

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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. 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, and as an attack on Indian civil society. Later Hindu holy men began a *yatra*, 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 the world?

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'

The term 'Hindu' has been used in at least four ways. 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 (Ludden 1996,7). For the invaders from the West, Hindu meant 'Native to India.' Consequently, Muslims were divided into Arab Muslims (who could trace their descent from West Asia) and Hindu Muslims (native converts). Similarly, the British referred to European and Hindu Christians. This practice of equating things "Indian" with the term "Hindu" has caused endless confusion.

The second definition is socioreligious. The most common description which Hindus give to their religion is *sanatana dharma*, "eternal religion." This 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, genres and subgenres; and then ranked these hierarchically according to innate (biological, cultural, and ritual) capacities and qualities.

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 their own gods, beliefs and practices--into a single hierarchical social system based on notions of purity and pollution associated with blood lines and caste¹. Each Hindu's identity can be located ritually by religious duties appropriate for one's specific social status, ritual status, and age [one's *varnashramadharmas*]. 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).” This meaning of Hinduism is so pervasive and deeply entrenched that it remains the dominant force in rural Indian life today despite numerous attempts to destroy it.

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, are second class citizens in the community.

The third definition of Hinduism was a product of the West’s encounter with the Indian civilization. European scholars translated the Vedas and defined Hinduism in terms of these ancient texts. They invented Hinduism as an exotic religious tradition that stood in contrast to the rational religions of the West.

The fourth definition refers to ‘Neo-Hinduism.’ the religious movements which were born out of the encounter of Indian religious philosophy with western thought. It is this definition that will be used in this study.

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 the Enlightenment. To understand this rise of Neo-Hinduism it is helpful to use A .F .C. Wallace’s theory of revitalization (1956). According to Wallace, revitalization movements arise when traditional worldviews are threatened by external forces. 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. The first response to massive outside cultural 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 these 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 culture, but reinterpret these in terms of their old worldviews. In India this was seen in the rise of the Brahmo 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. These 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 attract most orthodox Hindus.

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-Hinduism, such as the Arya Samaj and the Rama Krishna Mission.

The Hindu revitalization movements were the result of India's encounter with the West. On the one hand, Neo-Hindu scholars were inspired by the recognition given to the Vedas and Upanishads by European 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 *Ramayana*, which are at the heart of popular Hinduism. On the other hand, these movements emerged out of the success of Christianity in winning untouchables. Hindu leaders became anxious about the landslide of the lower sections of Hindu society to Christianity, which, they said, weakened the solidarity of the society.

Neo-Hinduism and the Indian Nation State

Successful revitalization movements, in the long run, 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.

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 remove Christianity and Islam from India, and make Hinduism the only religion there. 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, the World Council of Hindus that coordinates the activities of Neo-Hindu movements and monitors orthodoxy.

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 home, run by *purohits* who conduct 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. Many now attract large numbers of pilgrims who take religious bus tours to visit famous shrines. The most important actors in the temple movement are the priests and religious leaders of the VHP.

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. 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 the 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. 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,

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 central vision of the RSS is 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).

If the RSS is the force behind "Cultural Nationalism," the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), "The Indian People's Party," is the political arm that is seeking to gain control of the nation and, through it, the people and cultures of India. The BJP's theory is that only *Hindutva* can keep the country together. 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 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. In other words, the government should have 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. 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. In doing so they equate “India” as an ancient civilization with “India” as an independent national state. They favor 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.

Since the BJP led coalition assumed power in 1997, there has a been a noticeable increase in violence against Christians. 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 rational discourse to threats and violence.

Hindus of the Diaspora

Many Indians have moved outside the subcontinent. By the third century, Indians were trading with Ethiopia. In the eleventh century, the Cholas 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 and public works contractors found a new source of cheap labor in India. The result was Indian settlements around the world in which Hindu beliefs and practices were preserved. Indians also found new opportunities in Europe, North America and Australia. An estimated five to six million Indians now live outside India.

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 systems on earth. Here Christianity has been forced to deal with religious pluralism that challenges its claim of the uniqueness of Christ, and with ethnic pluralism that challenges the unity of the church. In the encounter it has shaped and been shaped by India. In many ways India has been the testing ground for Christianity and the modern mission movement.

Protestant Missions and Churches

Protestant missions began in India in the early eighteenth century. They pursued two 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. 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.

In 1793 William Carey, William Ward and Joshua Marshman established the Serampore Mission in North East India. 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, studied the local culture, and trained indigenous leaders.

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 cultural practices and widely seen as a foreign religion associated with colonialism. Christian converts were often treated as aliens to their own land.

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. 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 concern lest people become “rice Christians.” 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.

Assessment

How can we assess the modern Protestant mission movement in India? There have been positive and negative outcomes. One contribution of Protestant missions has been the

establishment of the Indian Church. Through the great sacrifices paid by those who went and those who supported the work, Christianity now plays an important role in Indian life, particularly in the South and North East. Christian missions have also built schools and hospitals throughout India to serve the general public.

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. Today, Christianity has become a vehicle for bringing together different tribes and castes in larger ecumenical movements such as the National Christian Council, Indian Evangelical Fellowship, the Church of South India, and the Church of North India.

Protestant Christian missions in India have also had serious weaknesses. One is their identification with western colonialism and civilization. No serious student of Christianity in India would argue that Christian missions and the Indian 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 Indians, missionaries were often seen as agents of imperialism, and Indian Christians as traitors to their own cultures. Most national churches were under missionary control. Even the National Council of Churches in India was governed by missionaries.

Another set of problems arose out of the principle of comity adopted by Protestant missions, by 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. In Northeast India the Khasi and Mizo became Presbyterians, and the Nagas, Kuki and Garos became Baptists. Tribal and caste rivalries took the form of denominational rivalries.

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

Indian Initiated Churches and Missions

Hindu revitalization movements are trying to help Indians reaffirm their Indianness by identifying India with Hinduism. Protestant church in India are also struggling with the tension of being Indian Christians, but also 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.

Indian Initiated Churches

Many attempts have been made to form Indian-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 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).

Hoefer's findings have provoked a debate regarding the spiritual state of these "churchless Christians." Some questions 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 *avarna* 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? These are not easy questions to answer.

LESSONS FROM THE INDIAN CHURCH

What can we learn as members in the global Church from the churches in India?

The Church as Local and as Global

The church in India, like the church in every country, is caught between the forces of being both global and local. The church must be native in every country, and yet remain part of

one universal body. To the extent it is part of the world Christian community it is seen as foreign by the local people. To the extent it identifies itself with the local community, it is distanced from the global community and is often distrusted as syncretistic.

The tension between local and global forces raises the question of the church's identity in the Indian context. The mission churches are tied to the global Church. The Thomas Church, and Indian Initiated Churches represent movements to affirm the Indian identity of the church. The tension also raises the question of the Indian Christians's relationship to their national government. Should they affirm their Indian identity when that supports the establishment of a Hindu State, or should they support the secular state when that is seen by many as foreign?

Since World War II there has been a shift in relationship between Indian Mission Churches and 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. Indian Initiated Churches, on the other hand, are seen 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.

Not only must the church define itself in the Indian social context, it must define its message in the Indian cultural context without selling out the Gospel. Moreover it must communicate that Gospel in ways Indians understand as Good News. Most urban mission affiliated churches are copies of foreign churches. 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.

I 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 and church unity. 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. For the most part, the churches in India have publically rejected this strategy, but some have adopted this approach.

Divisions in the church based on caste, tribe, class and gender are central issues in churches around the world. It is important that churches around the world examine their own responses to these powerful social forces, and decide how, theologically and socially, they must deal with the issues of the relationship between unity and diversity within the Church.

The Challenge of Religious Pluralism

Given the Hindu view that all religions lead to God, Indian theologians have sought for ways to understand and communicate the Christian claims of the uniqueness of Christ without being colonial and foreign. The issue of religious pluralism is now one of the greatest challenges to Christianity around the world. Indian theologians have also sought to do Indian theology within the context of global theology.

Persecution and Suffering

The current escalation of persecutions raises another critical set of questions for the Indian and the global church. How Christian should respond? If they turn to the secular government or foreign agencies 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 violence or help from the state. In so doing it can bear witness to love and forgiveness, a theme (*ahimsa*) deeply rooted in Indian culture. Others call for political responses.

The global Church 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 Christians 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.

The global church must stand with Indian Christians in their persecution and suffering. It must minister to the traumatized victims of persecution, and recognize that they are the vanguard of Christian presence in India. It must also minister to the aggressor. Being a

community committed to truth, it is incumbent for Christians to try to remove the prejudices and misconceptions that distort the attitudes others have towards them. 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.

There is and will be continued persecution of the church in India. The critical question is how will the church and Christians respond. Will they seek to spare themselves from suffering, or stand as a witness to the gospel of love, forgiveness and reconciliation? Ironically, atrocities are a form of acclamation, an indirect authentication of the relevance and effectiveness of the Christian message.

Our Christian Mission in India

As Christians and churches in India and around the world, what is our mission in India? First, we must not forget that the task of evangelizing India is not complete. There are many who have not heard the Gospel, and many who have but who find it almost impossible to break out of the ideological grasp of Hinduism, and the social webs of family and caste. The work is not finished, and the church in India cannot complete it alone. The good news is that the church in India is rapidly gaining a vision for missions. 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. The global church must join with the church in India to proclaim the good news of salvation to every Indian. But outsiders must come as co-workers and partners in the Gospel.

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 Indian church and the global church can shape mission outreach that is seen as truly Indian.

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.

Finally, we must recognize the impact of Hinduism on the rest of the world. Most of our church leaders are little aware of the challenges Hinduism poses in their communities. Today the post-modern world, in its reaction to scientism and materialistic reductionism, is increasingly turning to Hindu believes and practices. In a pluralistic, relativistic world, the church must clearly bear witness to the uniqueness of Christ as the only way to salvation, but do so with humility and love.

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.

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