Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION: CORY WILLSON

From their origins, Christian communities in India have had to wrestle with cultural and religious diversity that boggle the minds of most Christians from Europe and North America. Today India persists in being a theater for Christian engagement with multiculturalism and religious pluralism. Being thoroughly Eastern, Indian Christians are uniquely positioned to help tear down caricatures of the interface between Hindus and Christians as a meeting of East versus West—of something indigenous or of foreign import.

The lordship of Jesus lays claim to every area of human life. In order for an authentic Christian community to take root in any context, the implications of Christ’s all-encompassing reign must be brought to bear on every aspect of culture. Christianity is inherently an indigenous faith. This means that the gospel must be translated into language and practices that are understandable in a given culture. Becoming a Christian should not entail abandoning one’s inherited way of life. The indigenizing nature of the gospel enables Christianity to free itself from cultural imperialism and make itself at home in every culture. This reality of indigenization has significance for how we understand Christianity. Without denying its Hebrew or first-century Palestinian Jewish roots, Christianity should be viewed as neither an Eastern nor Western religion. More accurately, Christianity is a global religion manifesting itself in Eastern and Western cultural contexts throughout history. There are significant lessons to be learned from every place that Christianity has made itself at home.

In this issue of Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue, we examine the historical and contemporary experience of Hindu-Christian relations in India. The lead article, written by Dr. Atul Aghamkar, provides an overview of the modern history of Hindu-Christian relations in India. He identifies contemporary challenges and opportunities that Indian Christians must face in a rapidly urbanizing and industrializing country with a cultural heritage that goes back over five millennia. The global church has much to learn from how the churches in India translate the Christian faith in their diverse cultural contexts.
Dialogue in Context: A Focused Exploration for 2011

In the first year of this journal’s life, we concentrated on issues related to dialogue that were “supra” in nature, ranging from religious pluralism to convicted civility. Beginning with our first issue of 2011, which focused on Muslim-Christian dialogue in Europe, we began a year-long exploration of global perspectives on interfaith dialogue, addressing context-specific issues that drive the needs and opportunities for dialogue in contexts around the world. Broadly speaking, giving primacy to a specific context allows for a measure of concreteness, creates space for cultural diversity, enables both theology and missiology to be in conversation, and highlights the concerns of the practitioner. We hope that by rooting interfaith dialogue in a particular context, we will accomplish the following:

- Give voice to the daily experiences, issues faced, and struggles confronted around the world. No two contexts are alike.
- Religious plurality is part and parcel of the historic foundation and lived experience of many non-Western societies. Toward that end, insights from the non-Western world may help the global Church understand how to engage in mission in religiously plural contexts.
- Part of being a truly global Church means that we must listen to one another, acknowledging both the sufferings and gifts each member contributes to the wider body.

Global Interfaith Developments

The World Evangelical Alliance, World Council of Churches and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue have recently produced a joint statement that addresses theological and practical issues concerning interfaith dialogue. The statement begins with the missional identity of the Church and seeks to maintain gospel principles in the proclamation of the word of God. The document can be viewed at: www.worlddevangelicals.org/resources/view.htm?id=288.
Inattention to the potential found in informal dialogue may have significant consequences since twenty-first century Christian mission in India will be radically different from that of previous centuries.

―Dr. Atul Aghamkar

Introduction
India, often referred to as Bharat or Hindusthan, is a land of plurality, diversity, and complexity. Although India is strongly influenced by Hindu beliefs and practices, it has also demonstrated an amazing sense of tolerance, acceptance, and adaptability with other faiths and religions over the centuries. Historically, there have been occasional clashes between the religious communities, and yet many religions, religious movements, and other faiths have emerged and flourished in India—often tolerating each other and sometimes absorbing certain precepts and practices so as to enrich each others’ spiritual journey.

Christianity in India, though perceived to be a comparatively recent phenomenon, can be traced back to at least the third century, if not to the very first century. The strong tradition of Saint Thomas Christians points to the arrival of the gospel through one of Jesus’s disciples, Thomas, in the first century. Without going into the merits or demerits of this tradition, we can be assured that the Christian faith was present in India long before the emergence of the modern missionary era, prospering for 2000 years alongside the dominant Hindu society. The fact that many forms and practices of Hinduism have been adopted by the Christian community in India is an indication of mutual enrichment and cohabitation.

Christians in India have demonstrated many responses to the dominant Hindu and, to a certain extent, the Muslim, Sikh, and Buddhist communities. Christian perceptions, attitudes, and approaches to each religion range from highly negative to an overtly positive interaction. On the one side, most early missionaries (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), who were largely products of the Pietistic movement, looked at the native religions as sinful if not Satanic. Hence, their approach to them was more condemnatory. In contrast, particularly in the middle of the twentieth century, a more sympathetic and positive attitude emerged among the Christian missionaries—some of whom even abandoned their missionary vocation and absorbed many religious precepts and practices of the native religions into their own faith. This often led to syncretistic religious practices. However, a large segment of the Christian community in India probably is more inclined to live harmoniously with the people of other faiths, often entering into what we call “informal dialogue” over many central issues of faith and practices. “There are many situations in India where informal dialogue has long been an established reality made possible and often inevitable by the proximity of neighbors of different faiths.” This aspect of informal dialogue perhaps has more potential in making a difference with regard to Christian life and witness in India, sadly very little attention is given to informing, equipping, and mobilizing Christians in India to undertake such informal dialogue with people of other faiths.

Such inattention to the potential found in informal dialogue may have significant consequences since twenty-first-century Christian mission in India will be radically different from that of previous centuries. While acknowledging some damaging and disturbing trends that may have adverse effects on the life and witness of the Christian community, it must not be forgotten that a huge percentage of both the literate and the educated masses are showing signs of openness and positive inclinations towards a deeper and better understanding of Christianity and particularly the person of Jesus Christ. In such a context, it is extremely important to consciously develop positive and constructive ways of establishing a neutral

Population of India

Though roughly a third the size of the United States, India’s population is over three times that of the United States. With its 1,171,000,000 population projected to rise, India will likely overtake China as the most populated country in the world by 2050. Currently, the number of children under the age of 15 living in India (352,866,393) is larger than the population of the United States or of Spain, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, Portugal, the UK, Poland, Norway, the Netherlands, Ireland, Hungary, Denmark, and Austria combined.
AN OVERVIEW OF HINDUISM

With over 900 million adherents, Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world. It is also one of the world’s oldest religions and India’s most ancient religion. Hinduism is unique in that it has no single founder and no agreed upon central text (though the Vedas, the Epics, the Bhagavad-Gita, and the Puranas are commonly accepted by Hindus). It is sometimes referred to more as a family of religions or a way of life rather than as a singular religion. Over millennia, it has proved to be elastic enough to contain within it numerous enlightened leaders that have propagated distinct practices, sacred texts, and beliefs. While many of these spiritual gurus have attracted considerable followings, none of these sects have been canonized as constituting official or orthodox Hinduism.

Some approach Hinduism by examining the origin and evolution of the word itself. The term Hindu is derived from the Sanskrit word Sindu, and was at first a geographical term that designated the territory around the River Indus. The Persians (6th c. BCE) and the Greeks (4th c. BCE) referred to this territory as the land of Sindu and used it to refer to the peoples and cultural practices of the natives of the Indus Valley. In the nineteenth century, British missionaries and colonialists added the “ism” to the word and emphasized the religious as well as the geographical and cultural aspects of the Indus valley peoples.

Others approach Hinduism from more of a pragmatic perspective. Here Hinduism is viewed as a comprehensive way of life and referred to as Sanatana Dharma, or eternal religion. Hinduism is a complex and all-absorbing system that has evolved over time by syncretizing elements of other religions. It has also been a breeding ground from which three other religions in India have developed: Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism.

Eastern thinking—and especially Hindu systems of thought—does not follow the contours of Western linear reasoning. Eastern religions are primarily known through personal experience and not by creeds and abstractions. It is often said that the axis on which Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, spin differs greatly from that of common Western philosophy. Hence, caution must be taken when attempting to learn about Hinduism by studying ideas and terms in isolation from Hindu practices. Yet even with the diversity of sects and practices within Hinduism and their inherently experiential nature, there are some shared ideas that—while configured differently in various branches—are familiar to philosophical and folk expressions of Hinduism alike.

The atman, the eternal self (or soul/spirit), is the ultimate reality that underlies a person’s existence. The essence of the self, accordingly, is spiritual rather than material being. Samsara is the process of reincarnation where the atman takes on new physical bodies in the ongoing process of death and rebirth. The goal of this journey is moksha (liberation) where the atman is finally free of this cycle of reincarnation. But what governs this ongoing process of samsara? Dharma is the class (varna), gender (ashrama) specific duty or morality that each person must fulfill in order to act virtuously and support the social order. Those actions found to be in harmony with a person’s dharma will result in a positive reaction (karma) and directly impact a person in the present or future reincarnated life. Conversely, actions in conflict with a person’s dharma will result in a negative reaction (karma) that will prolong the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara).

Through this interconnected web of religion, personal duty, and class structure, Hinduism constitutes a totalizing way of life that provides unity and coherence for its adherents and society.1

platform from which ongoing dialogue at various levels can be articulated and undertaken. Often it is not the precepts of the Christian faith that are offensive to the people of India; rather, it is the way the Christians present them in their life and practice (or in some instances, fail to practice what they proclaim) that offends people. In the wake of emerging Hindu fundamentalism in India, it is imperative that the Christian community grapple with how to sympathetically interact with people of other faiths so that many misperceptions and misunderstandings can be addressed, thus paving the way for articulating Christian witness in a more constructive manner.

Overview of Essay

Neither theology nor interfaith dialogue is conducted in a vacuum. Cultural and historical dynamics must be studied before attempting to set forward suggestions for Christian witness in a particular context. How is the gospel message heard through the spoken word as well as the lives of Christians? What prejudices and objections first need to be addressed in order to faithfully convey the good news of Jesus? This essay offers a general survey of Christian witness among Hindus in India since the eighteenth-century early modern missionary era in order for readers to the challenges and opportunities for Christians to pursue informal dialogue as a means of Christian mission.

The first section of this essay explores an overview of contemporary challenges for Christian mission in India, as well as the corresponding need for new practices and approaches to interaction between Hindus and Christians. Following this, the second section surveys the historical backdrop of Hindu-Christian relations over the centuries. This history continues to impact engagement between these two religious groups today. Of particular importance is the legacy of Western colonialism and its association with Christianity, as well as the debates over the nature of conversion and the implications for understanding Indian identity. The third section offers a summary of significant changes in Christian views of Hinduism during the last two hundred years. Such change in perception has opened up a deeper understanding of Hinduism and enabled Christians to offer a visible witness of the gospel in ways understandable to those in Hindu cultures. The final section of this essay recounts firsthand experiences of interfaith relationships with Hindu scholars and leaders and highlights the possibilities of informal dialogue to create space where the gospel of Jesus can receive an open hearing among Hindus.

I. The Cultural and Religious Landscape of India

The Key Changing Landscapes of Global Christianity

Throughout the history of Christianity, missiological challenges have always been significant, but how the Church responded to them made the difference. In a sense, the future of Christianity is determined by how well the Church articulates her response to the contem-
porary challenges, even as the Church itself is radically changing. At the beginning of the twentieth century, approximately 66 percent of all Christians lived in the historical Christian heartland, with 24 percent in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania. However, in 2000, David Barrett’s research revealed that the majority of Christians were found in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania. He estimated that at least sixty percent of the world’s Christians are now found outside of Europe and North America. Therefore, the reality, perceptions, issues, and challenges of the Christian mission moved from primarily being Euro-America centric to Asia-Africa and South America centric.

India, though still considered a country with a small Christian minority, has emerged as a nation with an increasing number of people claiming to be Christian. Even the opponents of the Christian faith in India agree that the number of Christians is increasing in India and they predict that this trend will pick up strong momentum in the near future. In the wake of such predicted changes, Christian mission in India will have to be prepared to face and respond to the challenges in a new and strategic way.

**Significant Changes in India**

**Sociocultural and Economic Changes**

While talking about the missional challenges in India, we have to take into consideration the context. With its 4,635 distinct people groups and numerous linguistic groupings, India has been one of the toughest nations in the world as far as evangelization is concerned. With more than two centuries of modern Christian missionary work, we have seen a breakthrough among at least three hundred people groups, primarily among the Dalit (outcastes) and tribal people, but have also seen the reality of India’s resistance to the gospel. The stronghold of traditional Hinduism, casteism, Brahminical supremacy, linguistic complexity, and many other issues presented formidable challenges to Christian mission.

However, in recent decades, India has been going through a subtle but certain transformation. This transformation is certainly affecting every aspect of Indian life. With the introduction of the open market economy, the process of globalization has dawned on us and there are sufficient signs that it will stay with us for a long time. Without arguing about the pros and cons of these changes, we are aware that these are affecting India positively and negatively. The increasing influence of information technology, with its fast and easy modes of communication, has made people aware of what is happening around and beyond their world. India, therefore, is emerging as one of the indisputable powers of the world. Increasing literacy and compulsory primary education significantly adds to the pool of educated and skilled workers. This information explosion coupled with easy global information access makes people aware of the knowledge and opportunities available beyond their traditional boundaries. While regional languages remain important, recognizing English as one of the complex factors, are contributing to the amazing transformation of India.

**The Transition from Foreign to Indigenous Mission**

India is on the threshold of a new era for mission. The post-independence era, beginning from the early 1950s, although considered the sunset for foreign mission, proved a blessing in disguise. The departure of foreign missionaries and structures cleared the way for the Indian church to think through the realities in fresh ways. A significant indigenous missionary movement with hundreds of indigenous missionary societies and thousands of missionaries emerged. A new breakthrough has been reported among different people in various parts of India and especially in the north and northwest of India. What is important to note is that these breakthroughs were reported not only among the traditionally receptive segments that are on the periphery of Indian society, but also the Other Backward Communities (OBCs), and the urban lower and middle classes. Several segments of Indian society previously resistant to the gospel are now showing signs of openness toward the message of Jesus. Several high-caste Hindus—secular but educated and upwardly mobile, from the middle classes—show signs of openness to change. This openness has in some cases turned into receptivity in certain parts of India, resulting
Response: Abhijit Nayak

Interfaith Dialogue: More Than Buzzwords

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Interfaith, interreligious, or Christian dialogues with other faiths sound simple enough in the context of India. Yet, as the popularity of this reawakened concept sweeps through the ranks of church and mission in the twenty-first century, are we really clear on the theological and missiological basics involved? In the multifaith context of India, how can Evangelical Christians effectively engage in interfaith dialogue with people of other faiths? Reflecting on the contemporary scenario, Atul Aghamkar stresses the importance of informal interfaith dialogue in the midst of significant emerging challenges in India such as the rise of Hindu fundamentalism, Christian attitudes towards Hinduism, and the misconceptions about Christianity in India. His suggestion for informal and non-confrontational dialogue in the context of India flows from his early years of missionary experience and engagement. While appreciating and supporting the reflections and proposals of Aghamkar, I would like to underline and to continue reflecting on three of the points that he has made in his presentation. I write as an Indian Evangelical but intend this response for all Christians.

One of the important points missing in the presentation of Aghamkar is the need for dialogue between Christians and Hindutva groups. In the past two decades or so, fundamentalism is on the rise and religious groups are in conflict in India. Since 1947, Hindu-Muslim riots have become part and parcel of Indian history. Similarly, Hindu-Christian conflict is an ongoing problem that has resulted in deadly violence in various Indian states. Hindu fundamentalism (Hindutva) greatly opposes religious conversion, provoking self-defensive and also offensive reactions towards Islam and Christianity. The problem of conversion is a crucial issue and it has become the subject of passionate debate in contemporary India. On the one hand, Hindus and Hindu fundamentalists plead for a ban on conversion because it disturbs the social peace and threatens the Indian identity. On the other hand, Christians argue that conversion is a fundamental human right that should be protected in Indian democracy. In this context, interfaith dialogue between religious communities (Hindus and Christians) at various levels becomes urgent and crucial. Informal and non-confrontational dialogical process with the hardcore Hindus and fundamentalists should not be a program-driven event but spontaneous—part and parcel of day-to-day life that comes out of Christian living and practice.

The second significant challenge in promoting interreligious dialogue that Aghamkar identifies are the misconceptions (perhaps true to some extent) about Christianity in India. Unfortunately, Christianity in India is still considered foreign. Christianity is seen as an imposition from the West and still controlled by Western ideology, theology, money, and power. Even though Christianity has been in India since the first century, it is not accepted as indigenous, as Indian theologian Paul Bhaktiaram remarks in Atlas of Global Christianity (2009) that Christians are still seen as “those with questionable patriotism, if any, and whose allegiance seems to be directed to the West rather than their motherland.” Hindu scholars Rajiv Malhotra and Neelakandand, in a recent work, Breaking India (2011), accuse Western Christianity as “anti-India players” for creating faultlines between people groups (Aryans, Dravidians, and Dalits) in the name of human rights and other empowerment projects with the help of Indian agents, namely Christian missions and their leaders. I would add that the program-oriented attempts of Evangelical Christians to promote interreligious dialogue in the Indian context is also perceived to be a Western agenda.

Interfaith dialogue requires self-evaluation. Evangelical Christians are not ignorant of the fact that we are still not really an Indian local church and we need to free ourselves from Western cultural captivity. There has been a lot of talk about contextualization, but real efforts and initiatives toward making Christianity more Indian have failed; perhaps even Evangelical Christianity does not see it as a need except for some exterior décor. Christians in India socially try to live like Indians, but as soon as we cross the threshold of the church building, our language, attitude, gestures, and symbols take on Western accents. According to one estimate, there are about 82,950 long-term missionaries from India in more than 200 agencies, nearly all serving cross-culturally in India, but most, if not all, of these significant indigenous missionaries depend economically on foreign resources. Administratively, indigenous mission agencies are controlled by and connected to Western centers of power. Most of our evangelical training institutions in India are identified as purveyors of Western modernity. Given this enduring Western influence, there are significant challenges for dialogue. Freeing the India Christianity from Western cultural and economic captivity is the need of this hour. This attempt would enable the Evangelical Christians to engage in dialogue with the Hindu community in India easily and meaningfully.

Finally, negative attitudes towards other religions and particularly Hinduism stand as obstacles to interfaith dialogue in India. Interfaith dialogue is talking with other religious groups about their beliefs so that one can understand the other better and learn from each other. However, it is not only talking, but also listening to Hindu adherents. Evangelical Christians and Christian missions are eager to preach and teach but show no signs of listening to people of other faiths. Christianity in India will need to heed the words of Hindus and listen to their beliefs, customs, and religious experiences. In my judgment, listening before preaching to Hindus is the first act of sound interfaith dialogue. It must therefore be incorporated into theological and missiological basics of interfaith dialogue. Listening to Hindus will enhance the possibility of reflection on the effectiveness of both formal and informal interfaith dialogue. A stricter obstacle is that some of the evangelistic methods and the literature put out by Christian ministries may make others suspect that our commitment to interfaith dialogue is not wholehearted and that we seek to instrumentalize the dialogue for conversion. The key purpose of evangelical interfaith dialogue is not conversion but mutual knowledge, growth, and the clearing away of prejudices and those ideas that are false or only partly true and in need of correction. Also, one should not assume that the Hindus are not tolerant towards Christianity. This will help us to avoid a stereotypically judgmental attitude.

My own story in coming to write this response is a result of my ongoing journey
as a fellow pilgrim with other Christians and missionaries in India. I was born in a small town in Orissa, India. For a significant portion of my childhood, we lived in a remote village in Orissa among Hindus. I have worked as a cross-cultural missionary, Bible teacher, and pioneer worker in different states of India. In many ways, Evangelical Christianity defines my identity and drives my motivation. I grow weary of seeing how Evangelical Christianity in India has failed to understand the importance of interfaith dialogue. My own public evangelical style of preaching during my work in India sometimes was harshly critical—often quite ignorantly—concerning Hindu religious practices. Both Indian missionaries and Christians must listen to their Hindu neighbors. But as someone who loves the body of Christ, I long to see more of what God is able to do in India. The proximity of cultures in our time makes interfaith dialogue both possible and necessary.

Various types of dialogue have taken place in the Indian context in the past. Whenever one religion was in contact with another, debates, arguments, and conversations took place. My point here is that interfaith dialogue (both formal and informal) should take place with Hindu fundamentalists as well as ordinary Hindu adherents. In this context, I doubt that the Evangelical community can take hold of the interfaith dialogue initiative if it avoids engaging with Hindu fundamentalists. Missiological approaches to the interfaith dialogue are not present. I am not aware of any Evangelical Christian institution that has engaged in dialogue with Hindu fundamentalist groups in India. For instance, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then Prime Minister of India, called for a “national debate on conversion” in 1999. No evangelical group or any other Christian denomination in India responded to the call for debate and initiated dialogue. In this case, interfaith dialogue failed to take root in the Indian soil. If we had engaged in dialogue on the conversion issue, it would have prepared ways for open interactions and mutual understanding.

Interfaith dialogue is the appropriate way to promote harmony and understanding on common human issues in a pluralistic society of India. Evangelical mission that is set in the context of the mission of God in India cannot but be interfaith dialogical. The nature and scope of interfaith dialogue in the Indian context should be, as Aghamkar suggests, “a non-confrontational dialogical approach” in order to create “a more positive atmosphere and cordial relationships with people of other faiths in order to communicate the message of Christ effectively.”

in the formation of new churches mostly house churches. Though the authentic number of these churches is yet to be verified, there is some indication that a new and vibrant church is emerging in India among the people once considered nonreceptive.

The Rise of Hindu Fundamentalism

However, the increasing influence of Christianity and the growing Christian population have alerted the fundamentalist groups. In some cases, the right-wing political parties together with the fundamentalist groups have brought about systematic persecution and harm upon the Christian community. Cases of severe atrocities have been reported in different parts of India, especially in the areas where the growth of the Christian Church is reported. Several laws and bills have been enacted to prevent conversion to Christianity. Various militant and fundamentalist groups have begun to challenge the spread of Christianity, taking aggressive measures to curtail the increasing influence of Christianity in India. These measures include systematically attacking Christian leaders, demolishing church buildings, intimidation, production of anti-Christian literature, and forced re-conversion.

In addition, there is an increase in the production of Hindu apologetic literature aimed to attack Christian faith at an academic level and challenge the foundational beliefs upon which Christianity is built. This aggressive fundamentalism is an indication of the growing awareness among the educated caste Hindus about the threat Christianity might pose to their traditional religion.

II. Historical Reactions, Opposition, and Misperceptions of Christianity

Christianity never had smooth sailing in India. It often faced opposition from different segments of the Hindu community. Opposition from the Hindus was frequently based on partial truths, or no truth at all. Whatever their objections, Hindus found it difficult to understand and accept Christianity as a foreign missionary religion. Numerous misconceptions about Christianity still exist in the minds of the Hindus today.

Christianity: A Western Religion

One of the most often discussed and debated objections to Christianity is that it was introduced to India by Western traders and missionaries, growing “under the pall and patronage of foreign rulers.” To support this argument, many point out that Portuguese and British rulers were instrumental in spreading Christianity in India. The gospel came to India—so most Hindus think—basically through the Western, white colonialists; therefore it has been fiercely opposed by the Hindus as the religion of the imperialists.

Further, Hindus believe that the Portuguese and the British rulers, at least to some extent, were sympathetic toward the Christianization of India. This led to a confirmation of their suspicion that these foreign rulers had been using Christian missionaries for spreading their own

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With 4,635 different people groups, eighteen officially recognized languages, and a long and complex history that dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization (around 3000 BCE), India is anything but a homogeneous culture. As the world’s third largest religion, Hinduism is by far the largest religious group in India, making up 80 percent of India’s total population of 1,171,000,000. The appropriation of Hinduism in various cultures outside of India is by no means monolithic. Yet given that over 90 percent of all Hindus reside in India, it is important to begin an exploration of Hindu-Christian interactions with a contextual focus on India.©
Response: Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj

Spiritual Act and Social Tact: The Internal Dialogue of the Yesu Bhakta Movement

Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj is a commended worker from and an elder at the Tamil Brethren Church in Bangalore and also serves as a lecturer at the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, where he teaches courses in both the Theology and Mission departments.

Introduction

In his insightful article Atul Aghamkar draws our attention to many sensitive and critical issues that followers of Christ in India face. In my response, I would like to pick up on the significant point he makes following Hans Staffner's observation that "conversion to Christianity is often looked upon as a social act rather than a spiritual act." I would like to describe how many followers of Christ adopt social tact in pursuing spiritual acts as disciples of Christ. In so doing, I would like to draw attention to the internal dialogue taking place both within individuals and within one section of the community of Christ followers that stands beside the informal dialogue that Aghamkar helpfully describes and rightly encourages.

"Matta, Pitta, Guru, Devam" is an oft-quoted maxim in India. It simply means, "Mother, Father, Teacher, God," and signifies the order introduced by Western powers. Becoming a “Christian” therefore entails turning your back on thousands of years of religious and cultural heritage and rejecting the role your family plays in your present and future life. Understandably, these attitudes and practices have far-reaching implications for Christian discipleship.

Yasu Bhaktas

One distinctive approach to negotiating issues of fidelity to one's community and membership in an institutional church has been Churchless Christianity. Theologically speaking, of course, this is a misnomer. A disciple of Christ is by definition a member of the body of Christ, the Church. However, since the phenomenon itself was rather novel, its coinage seems to have made sense. The terms “non-baptized believer” and Yesu bhakta (devotee of Jesus) are also employed. An able proponent of this form of discipleship, Swami Muktanand, explains the phenomenon:

To become a Christian means that one has to leave one's birth community and join another community. It also means that one has to reject one's culture (one's way of life). However it is not a necessity that to be a follower of Christ one has to become a Christian. This false teaching has come from the Europeans who saw the Hindustani life as demonic and convinced people that in order to become a follower of Christ one has to reject the Hindustani lifestyle and adopt an European lifestyle. … A Hindu follower of Jesus also known as a Yeshu Bhakta stays in his Hindu community practicing his Hindustani culture and giving allegiance to Christ and Him alone.

Yasu Bhaktas and the Institutional Church

YBs have a strained relationship with the institutional church because membership in it is seen as the final act of social dislocation. Hence the YB does not attend church but prays at home. While he may have learned of Jesus in school, his experience of Christ grew when his prayers, often for healing, were answered. He feeds himself spiritually by listening to Christian radio and TV. Clearly a follower of Christ, he nevertheless celebrates festivals like Pongal, and for all cultural and family intents and purposes lives as any other Hindu does.

When queried further about the nature and reasons for their lifestyle YBs admitted the following:

- They fear the reactions of relatives if they take baptism.
- They expect Jesus to take them to heaven and to take care of their children.
- God expects for them to lead a decent life as a follower of Jesus.
- They understand Jesus as teaching us to avoid a sinful life and to do good to others.
- They do not feel bad about not receiving baptism, nor do they feel that God is displeased because of it.
- If they accept baptism, they feel they should stop going to the cinema, smoking, and other bad habits.
- They attend Christian public meetings, but their wives do not come along.
- They do not try to persuade their wives to join their Christian faith, as it would only cause conflict in the home and among the relations. Now they are still accepted by their caste people and family members.
- The best way to reach their wives would be through Christian literature. If there were Bible women, they could possibly speak with them; otherwise, only prayer for them is possible.
- They would not be interested in joining a cottage prayer meeting even if it was nearby.

While YBs are numerous, they are largely indistinguishable from the general Hindu population since their discipleship does not entail membership in the institutional church, yet they maintain devotion to Christ. That is to say, Christian spiritual acts are pursued with Hindu social tact.

Internal Dialogue

The process of negotiation that YBs clearly engage in is what I would like to call internal dialogue. It is an engaging conversation between their attraction to the life and person of Christ and their rootedness in Indian culture and practice. While the traditional options of evangelism by extraction and discipleship of rejection does not appeal to them, through this internal interreligious dialogue they are forging a fresh form of discipleship that is at once Christocentric and Indocentric.

Such an internal dialogue is not pursued casually but with much thought and care. It surely such a rich area is ripe for study, research, and establishing fresh forms of engagement.
is not pursued in a formal set up after the prerequisite training is gained, but rather in an informal sense, feeling their way forward in what can be an uncertain and dark corridor for them. It is not pursued adopting the formal top-down method, of waiting for established religious leaders to lead and guide them; rather, it follows a bottom-up methodology led by the rank and file with little guidance from religious leaders. It is not pursued in the way that official interfaith dialogue often is—by focusing on official doctrinal positions—rather, it is done in and through the warp and woof of life, attending to the everyday weighty issues of life, family, and culture. This often makes it rather messy, rather tentative, rather ad hoc, because such is the nature of life as is known by YBs. While at times it could be harmless for the YBs, at times it could invite persecution and even threat of death. There is no one rule, one established method, one pattern that it follows; rather, it has a multivalent character, follows multiple forms, adopts numerous rules as it is pursued by a host of people from a variety of backgrounds. So in reality there are numerous dialogues being pursued and they proceed at various levels. Whatever character and shape it may take, this internal dialogue is rather fruitful for it yields to indigenous forms of discipleship and indeed even mission. It is therefore to be treated as a rich and unique contribution of Christ's followers in India, and indeed a suggestive approach to engaging with the millions of India and beyond.

**Dialogue with Dialogue**

Surely such a rich area is ripe for study, research, and establishing fresh forms of engagement. One thing is clear in responding to internal dialogue: we would do well to pay close attention to ground-level reality and appreciate the issues and struggles that YBs face as they pursue this dialogue. We will approach it with as little prejudice as possible. Clearly in a country as diverse and religiously plural as India, such a form of discipleship cannot be swept off the table as being deviant and questionable even before study. Yet we will also take care before we pronounce, as some do: "I am convinced that the Christian faith will permeate India only as part of Hinduism, what I call 'Christ-ized Hinduism.'" Or before we announce, as some do: "The real move toward an indigenous Christian faith can *never* come from the Christian community. It must grow out of the 'Churchless Christianity,' with the help and encouragement of the church."7

While the Indian church cannot be expected to retain the Western format and still expect to move forward, neither can it be expected to adopt the YB pattern alone. Besides being so varied and diverse in itself, painting the church with a monochrome hue will do no justice. From the people movements that transpired in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to creative movements like the YBs to those who are turning to Christ from OBCs (Other Backward Communities) and Dalit backgrounds, the church is comprised of various groups that display a multicolor variety. Patterns of devotion to Christ are to be situated within this broad framework and cannot be forced into a straitjacket of one particular practice, however Indian and appealing that may be for some. Just as this internal dialogue is being pursued, there are other forms of dialogue that are and should be taking place within the church. We will do well to mount a mature and informed dialogue on these forms of internal dialogue for the benefit of God’s mission in the world.  

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**AN OVERVIEW OF THE CASTE SYSTEM**

The caste system in India is a hierarchical social structure that divides society into prescribed occupations and social groupings based on ethnicity and kinship. The origin of the caste system structure is derived from ancient Sanskrit texts that associate various castes with specific functions for the one body of society. At the top of the hierarchy are the Brahmins, who are the priestly caste. Brahmins serve as the mouth of the body, providing for the spiritual needs of the community. Below this is the Kshatrya caste (the arms), which consists of the warriors and kings. Their function is to protect and to rule over society. Next is the Vaishya caste (the thighs), made up of merchants and landowners. Commerce and agriculture are considered to be their domains of responsibility. Finally, Sudra is the lowest caste (the feet), which includes peasants, servants, and farmers. As unskilled laborers, their role is to provide manual labor for society. Outside of the caste system—and in reality beneath it—are the outcastes, Dalits, and tribal groups, which make up around a fifth of the Indian population. Due to social stigmas concerning purity and pollution, these outcastes, “untouchables,” or non-caste peoples experience ongoing discrimination and social injustice. Some of these peoples refer to themselves as “Dalits,” the Hindi word for “oppressed” or “downtrodden.”

Government policies have been implemented to help minimize the negative social impact of the caste system, but discrimination and prejudices endure within Indian society. Urbanization, economic opportunities, and educational developments are helping soften some of the harsher elements of the caste system!
Christianity: A Threat to Caste and National Integrity

Historically, conversions to Christianity, especially in central and northern India, brought divisions among Hindu society, castes, and families. By becoming Christian, people sever relationships with their family, caste, and society. They cut themselves off from their own people and relatives. This uprooting from a convert’s social, cultural, and religious traditions is strongly objected to by the Hindus. This allegiance to another social group is perceived to be a threat to national integrity. Staffner is right when he observes that conversion to Christianity is often looked down upon as a social act rather than a spiritual act. It signifies “the change over from one social community to another.” When Christianity is perceived to be a dividing factor in the society, it is no wonder that most Hindus shun it.

Under such circumstances, if anybody becomes a Christian, that person is ostracized from the caste and all of their relationships are severed. Is that person declared to be an outcaste. Being declared an outcaste, especially for the Hindu, is perceived as a great punishment. Such expulsions are considered to be a great social stigma; therefore, rarely does a Hindu take any step that will disassociate oneself from his or her own caste associations. Such persons, in the eyes of the Hindus, have alienated themselves from society, consequently from the nation. By giving allegiance to a foreign religion like Christianity, a person is perceived to have become a threat to national integrity.

The Problem of Conversion

An underlying theme in the above-mentioned misconceptions of Christianity is related to the nature and dynamics of conversion. Specifically, what happens to Indian identity when Christianity is introduced to the life of a person and a community? Is it possible to be Indian without being Hindu, or is there something essential about Hinduism to Indian identity? Questions like these point out the importance of examining some misconceptions about Christian conversion.

Conversion as Unnecessary

Hindu society has never felt comfortable with the idea of religious conversion, and has raised serious objections to it. Conversion is difficult for a Hindu to comprehend. From the standpoint of Hindu religious orthodoxy, it is pointed out that religious conversion is not always genuine and lasting; in any case, it is unnecessary and futile. It is not genuine because Hindus hold that there can be no such radical change in religious convictions as to compel a convert to change over from one religion to another. The Hindu may not question the validity of the conversion experience, but he seriously doubts whether converts from Hinduism to Christianity experience such a total and conscious change of convictions as to take this decisive step of breaking completely away from their ancestral faith—especially because such a migration is unnecessary, according to him.

One can continue to be a Hindu while believing in other religions; hence there is no need to change religions. Many Hindus admire Jesus as a great teacher, saint and even god, but as one of many gods. To a Hindu, “the essential nature of Ultimate Reality is unknowable. It can only be partially apprehended in human experience. Therefore no absolute claims for Truth can be made by any religious community.” For the Hindus to acknowledge Jesus as the God and the Savior is to nullify the divinity of the other gods and goddesses of Hindu-fold. Therefore, “to claim one’s own way as the only right way is seen as spiritual arrogance of the highest order.” Change of religion also amounts to looking down on one’s traditional religion, society, caste, and family.

Christians Convert by Unfair Means

For many Hindus the only possible explanation for conversion to Christianity is the unfair means of coercion and persuasion. It is often said that the poor and the needy were the main targets of Christian missionaries, and that these people responded to the welfare programs provided to them. The large percentage of those who became Christians were from the lower or the lowest strata of the society; therefore they are frequently said to have become Christian for material reasons. They are often referred to as “Rice Christians.”

Historically, it can be proven that some Western powers of the eighteenth century encouraged conversions of Hindu subjects by force. Hindus hold that undue pressure, bribes, force, and other unfair means are part of the conversion strategy of the Christian missionaries. So, in the opinion of most Hindus, what Christianity has to offer is only a new materialistic way of earthly living, with added formalities, platitudes, ostentation, and pretension.

Conversion Defiles

To a Hindu, his religion is pure and holy and admirable. Defecting from it, one becomes impure, polluted, and defiled. Hindus perceive Christianity as a religion of lower moral and ethical standards. Therefore, they not only resist conversion but even oppose it.

There are historical reasons for this perception. Julian Saldanha, in his book Hindu Sensitivities towards Conversion, says, “The roots of this opposition to conversion reach back into the mission history of the colonial era and have to do with the manner in which Christianity was introduced in India. The missionaries were identified with the beef-eating, alcohol-drinking foreigners.” These foreigners, largely the Portuguese and the British, were in India basically for purposes of trade. Their lifestyle was rarely up to Christian standards. When the Hindus found...
that these white traders called themselves Christians, they perceived all Christians in the same manner: “It is not surprising that the missionaries and their converts soon came to be called Firangis and Mlenchhas, contemptuous terms connoting barbarians and irreligious persons.”3 Such terms exhibited a certain attitude toward Christianity. This is how most Hindus perceive Christian converts. Thus, Hindus normally keep themselves aloof from such a religion.

Each of these Hindu views of Christianity and objections to conversion must factor in to how Christians interact with their Hindu neighbors. The historical roots of the Christian presence in India do not permit historical amnesia. Christians must identify areas where they sense an openness to the person of Jesus while being mindful of these deep-seated objections and aversions to Westernized Christianity.

III. Christian Attitudes toward Hinduism
There is no single Christian attitude toward Hinduism. Most Evangelical approaches, however, have been based on the assumption that Jesus is the only way of salvation and that all other religions are inadequate in their approach to God. An evangelical attitude has dominated in India.

Evangelical Attitudes
Since most early Protestant missionaries came to India as a result of what is called the Evangelical Awakening, they all had similarities in their assumptions, doctrines, and attitudes. There was a unanimous belief among the Evangelicals that all humankind is fallen due to sin and rebellion against God and therefore is under the condemnation of God. However, through repentance and faith in Jesus, everyone has an opportunity to be saved. Conversion of souls by preaching the gospel was considered to be the primary duty of the missionary in India.

These missionaries often confused the external forms of Hindu religion with its real spiritual message. In the writings of the early missionaries, the evils of the caste system, cow worship, female infanticides, child marriage, and idolatry were often referred to as an inevitable part of Hinduism. Often, practices were misinterpreted or misrepresented by the missionaries. “These very well suited their purpose of showing the moral superiority of Christianity.”4 Their exaggeration was usually done out of ignorance, but occasionally it was also done deliberately.

Missionaries stood firm in their commitment to defuse Christian knowledge, primarily by starting educational institutions, translating the Bible, and publishing books, tracts, and periodicals. However, much of the literature published was polemic in character and reflected their negative attitude toward Hinduism. Veheement criticism of Hindu beliefs and practices was undertaken to expose their evils. Missionaries did everything they could to eradicate the influence and practice of the Hindu caste system. By opening their educational institutions to all castes, they waged war against traditional caste restrictions.

Change in Attitudes
A change of attitude took place gradually among Evangelical missionaries. Several contextual factors contributed in bringing about this change in attitude toward Hinduism. Theologically, a new wave of liberal thinking emerged, which began evaluating Christianity’s unique claims. Additionally, the emergence of Indologists, who presented a less-biased cultural picture, brought to light a brighter side of India and Hinduism. Attempts were made by some Indologists to translate ancient Hindu literature into English. This evoked some enthusiasm among the people of the West. A new look at India as a land of ancient culture, religion, and philosophy began to take shape, forcing many to look at Hinduism more objectively and positively.

Another significant contribution to this shift in views of Hinduism was made by Swami Vivekananda in 1893. His series of lectures on Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago aroused great interest in the West. The World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 also played a role in helping shift Christian views of Hinduism. Documents from the conference asserted several positive things about Hinduism and emphasized the need of changing the traditional missionary attitude toward it. As a result, the “older attitude of contempt and hostility toward Hinduism had disappeared from missionary propaganda in India.”5 This new group of Christian missionaries showed more sensitivity toward Hindu culture, religion, and practices. Other religions, including Hinduism, were considered to contain certain elements of truth. Therefore, some began advocating for Christians to engage in interfaith dialogue. A good Christian was expected to listen patiently to what people of...
other religions were saying. Through this process, it was believed, we may be able to unveil the hidden Christ, who is already present in other cultures and religious communities. Therefore, the responsibility of Christians is to affirm other religions, even to learn from them. People of all religions are considered valuable and credible, since God accepts their devotion as well. This approach took one more step toward a positive understanding of other religions. It has encouraged Christians to seek a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of these religions.

This development of openness to finding and learning from those aspects of goodness and truth in Hindu cultures is a significant shift in Christian witness among Hindus. Nevertheless, this change in perception is good but incomplete. Thoughtful dialogue must take place within the Christian community on how to address the contemporary challenges and opportunities for new forms of interaction between Hindus and Christians. This essay will conclude with a personal example of how I have attempted to navigate these challenges while creatively building on areas where there has been openness to the person and work of Jesus among my Hindu friends.

IV. My Journey towards Informal Dialogue

It was my very first year of church planting and pastoral ministry in the central Indian city of Nagpur. My denomination, Christian and Missionary Alliance, had initiated pioneer church planting ministries in key cities of India, and I was appointed as a fresh seminary graduate to initiate church planting ministry in Nagpur. While our first initiative was primarily focused on the rural migrant workers in the western part of Nagpur, our second initia-
from the possession as a result. There was a spiritual power encounter noted by both the trainees and the villagers. During our visit, we also witnessed a young mother suckling her child, who began to sway as if under a trance with blank eyes. As soon as I noticed what was happening I asked others for the name of the woman. I called her by name and assured her from Scripture of the power of Jesus Christ over the spirit that seemed to have taken hold of her. She came out of her trance and found release from the spirit that was troubling her. Later she affirmed to us in subsequent visits that the spirit possession did not occur again, and she was glad about the relief she experienced in Jesus.

Watching the power encounters, the Brahmin priest invited us to return during their annual village festival, where the local goddess would be the center of worship, and the devotees would break coconuts on their heads. (The villagers believed that to be able to break coconuts on their heads demonstrated the power of their goddess working in them.) The village festival was still many months away after the training period, and so after our field visits again over the weekends for three months, other missionaries located in Mudugurki, which was closer to Ramandodi, continued to minister to people, bringing healing and deliverance throughout the year. In a few months after our visit, there was news from that village: the woman we had ministered to medically was healed of her festered wound on her foot caused by a branding by a village doctor to heal her fever. This demonstration of power was an informal ritual that the villagers recognized as the power of their goddess working in them. The demonstration of power was an informal possession that the villagers recognized as the power of their goddess working in them.

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Requests form an important part of the informal dialogue in ministry. Requests from the people included requests to visit them, to pray for them, to share from the Bible, to help with their needs and problems, such as their health, marriage, education, and work. When requests from people came to me, they indicated their willingness to engage in a conversation with me. At this point, this only required me to determine whether I would be able to meet the expectations of the requests. Many times, just the thought of not being able to meet the needs stopped me from engaging in the conversation. However, if I realized there could be others who could help in meeting those requests, then I would make the effort to engage in the conversation. Willingness to entertain requests itself illustrates a key principle important in any form of dialogue. In this, I suggest it is an imperative for the missionary to make room for two-way interactions with others.

Requests also demanded that I be a good listener. Requests did not present themselves in the first encounter with people. When villagers came to see me, it usually meant that they might have a request or two. However, I had to learn to wait for the request to be presented. Sometimes, when no requests came up and the conversation tended to be on the level of courtesies, I had to be proactive and ask the visitor for the purpose of the visit. This meant that listening and communication skills were vital, and I needed to develop my skills in this area. Another aspect was that I also had to learn to recognize when requests presented themselves in nonverbal forms. This was difficult. Nevertheless, requests such as a waving hand beckoning us to come near were easy to understand. However, even this posed a challenge, when the person beckoning was a total stranger. For instance, during a visit to another village, Mugulapally, as we were approaching the village, we could see from a distance an old woman we had never met gesturing strangely with her hand to us. At the sight of this the team expressed apprehension about proceeding to the village. After talking to her we found out that there was a sense of desperation and helplessness in the woman and her request seemed reasonable. It did not matter that the other villagers thought that she was deranged; here was a request directed to us that was doable. The request was for us to pray with her to Jesus, and it only needed our willingness to entertain the request.

I suggest that prayer is a part of informal dialogue. In the context of the institute campus, those ministered to come to the minister. Christian workers need to seriously consider prayer as a form of religious informal dialogue in their ministerial praxis. Increasingly, some people belonging to other faiths see the practice of prayer as problematic in Christian institutions. Some of them see this as a Christian ploy to convert them. However, the rule of thumb should be to make prayer available to those who request it. This gives the people freedom to choose whether to participate in this form of religious dialogue.

Overall, this brief study has offered reflections on experiences of informal interreligious dialogue that were in response to the felt needs of specific people whom I encountered in ministry. I have argued that in addition to cultural and religious challenges, responding to felt needs and power encounters needs to be handled with prayerfulness in order to navigate these relationships with sensitivity and firm commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ.
Hindu temples are places of communal worship. While having their personal deities at home, most Hindus regularly visit and worship at various temples where they believe that particular gods or goddess reside.

the religious communities,” “the Christian community,” and “the dominant Hindu and, to a certain extent, the Muslim, Sikh, and Buddhist communities.”

This acceptance of a communitarian paradigm for understanding Indian society particularly skew the discussion of conversion. Dr. Aghamkar is rightly concerned about Hindu misunderstandings related to conversion, yet his presentation assumes the existence of a Hindu community that one must leave to join the Christian community.

To bring these broad paradigmatic concerns into focus I will examine a seemingly simple statement by Dr. Aghamkar. "Hindu society has never felt comfortable with the idea of religious conversion." After examining this statement from a number of angles, I will close with the suggestion that a rejection of the perspective assumed in this statement leads to a more fruitful dialogue with Hindus.

First, what exactly is "religious conversion"? If this refers to a change of faith or change of focus of worship, such things have constantly been happening within “Hinduism,” which is multi-theological, with numerous gods and ways of salvation. So it seems likely that "religious conversion" in this statement refers to leaving "Hinduism" and joining Christianity or Islam. But this is a thoroughly modern idea, certainly not something that “Hindu society has never felt comfortable with.”

But the “Hindu society” phrase also needs more careful analysis. It is becoming a truism that Hinduism does not fit the “religion” paradigm. One excellent study of mission history in India that makes the case for this is Geoffrey Oddie's Imaigned Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793–1900 (2006). An essentialist, text-based description of “Hinduism” as “the religion of India” was developed by Orientalist scholars and was picked up by missionaries, who were slow to recognize the fallacy of the paradigm. (As Oddie shows, the paradigm was convenient for the promotional arm of missions; the simplistic “Hinduism is a false religion” tag continues in popular use in fundraising and apologetics.)

A flawed perception that India had a dominant text-based religion led to the more egregious development of the idea of a single Hindu community. John Zavos studied the roots of this development in The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India. The existence of “a Hindu community” is dubious at best, yet is a powerful political idea in modern India. That this dubious idea is assumed as valid by Christians as well as by Hindus does not validate the construct.

The roots of these erroneous paradigms lie in the Enlightenment, which developed the idea of a religious sphere separate from normal secular life. This concept destroys a biblical view of life, and of course many biblical Christians have fought and are fighting this ideology. But this Enlightenment worldview wreaks still greater havoc when applied outside Europe, where it is seen in the development of the idea of “world religions.” The Enlightened European defines what is “religious” and what is “secular,” what is "culture" and what is "religion" in various faith traditions across the world, pretty much always doing violence to holistic indigenous concepts in the process. Evangelical Christians share the Enlightenment perspective (this is certainly syncrtism) in discussing world religions and cultures.

So Enlightened Orientalists defined a Hindu religion as the dominant faith of India, as they also developed the concept of Buddhism as a single religion (see Tomoko Masuzawa's analysis of the birth of Buddhism as a world religion in The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism). By the 1920s (not before!) there was an accepted list of world religions, despite massive distinctions and disagreements within each of the so-called world religions. In India the idea of “Hinduism” became a dominant paradigm despite the complete inability to develop a meaningful definition of this multi-theological, multi-cultural, and multi-caste entity.

“Christianity” is nearly as dubious an entity as “Hinduism.” The vast diversity of Christian traditions, differing authorities appealed to (Bible, church, tradition, experience, etc.), and mutual recrimination among sects defies comprehensive definition as a single entity. A dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism is thus inconceivable. Significant specificity is necessary for meaningful encounter; an evangelical Baptist and a neo-advaitin can meaningfully understand what each other stand for and can meaningfully dialogue. (This example is presented to make clear that there are meaningful corporate “religious” groupings, although defining them as "religious" introduces the danger of Enlightenment reductionism to merely a “spiritual" area of life.)

This alternate paradigm, deconstructing “world religions” and identifying the Enlightenment error in assuming that Christianity and...
Hinduism are meaningful categories, opens fresh light on questions of dialogue and of conversion. As a dialogue partner I am no longer speaking for a reified “Christianity” but rather for discipleship to Jesus; I am no longer calling someone out of “Hinduism” but to repentance and faith in Christ within the broad civilizational patterns of India. The dialogue becomes Christo-centric rather than “religion” oriented. “Conversion” as leaving Hinduism and joining Christianity can and should be repudiated; it also is an Enlightenment rather than biblical paradigm. (Conversion as change of heart, repentance, and faith is certainly biblical and can become central to the dialogue.)

This alternate paradigm that flees the syncretism of the Enlightenment “world religions” paradigm would have subtly transformed the dialogical encounter that Dr. Aghamkar had with his friend Mr. Deotal. The end (goal?) of Dr. Aghamkar’s dialogue was reduced misunderstanding and tension between Hindus and Christians; but if a conversion had occurred, with abandonment of “Hinduism” and communal engrafting into “the Christian community,” the end result might well have been an increase in misunderstanding and tension. Plus, one gets the sense that Dr. Aghamkar had to be careful about how he spoke of Christ and conversion, lest he give offense.

The alternate paradigm can be much bolder in proclamation while maintaining dialogical sensitivity. Jesus calls all people to repent and follow him, but that is a very different matter than “religious conversion” as practiced in modern India. Disciples of Jesus do not promote “Christianity” as a separate sociological group; rather, that group also needs heart conversion to the way of Jesus, and disciples of Jesus are to follow him within their own families and cultures. To follow Jesus will mean a change of theology and focus of worship, as often happens within the complexity of Hindu traditions. This no doubt would all be rather new and confusing to Mr. Deotal, who only knows of Christianity as a foreign religion that wants to increase its numbers by decreasing the number of Hindus. But it would focus dialogue on discipleship to Jesus in a way that is not possible when Jesus is seen as belonging to Christianity and the Christian community.

New patterns for discipling Hindus are needed, and the reconstruction needs deeper foundations than merely substituting dialogue for proclamation. My thanks to Dr. Aghamkar and the editors for inviting me into this dialogue towards a more fruitful interaction with Hindus.

THE CHALLENGE OF MISSIONS BEYOND THE DALIT AND TRIBAL PEOPLE

Written by Atul Aghamkar. Compiled by Joshua Muthalali.

Christian missions in India have had the greatest success amongst the Dalit and tribal populations. Initially, the early missionaries targeted the upper castes, especially the Brahmin communities, under the assumption that if the Brahmins are won, then the other castes would follow. However, such an evangelistic approach yielded limited success. Most Brahmins and the higher castes could not easily accept Christian doctrines such as creation and the equality of human beings. Rather, they perceived Christianity as a significant threat to their traditionally acclaimed high status, privileges, and rank in the caste-dominated Hindu society. Those that became Christians had to face severe persecution and painful separation from their families. Eventually, with the rising opposition, missionaries began to move out of the urban centers and resumed their efforts among the socially, economically, and religiously exploited outcasts. These outcasts, also known as the “untouchables” or “Dalits,” proved to be the most open and receptive to the gospel.

Most foreign and native missionaries still continue this focus on the Dalits. Inadvertently, the focus has led to the misconception that persons from other castes are resistant to the gospel. The challenge for the missionary today is to overcome the misconception that the upper castes are staunchly opposed to the gospel.

I greeted him and introduced myself. Having heard my name, he looked perplexed because probably he expected worship services. I rang the bell and waited for the response. Soon the door was opened by a tall middle-aged man. I greeted him and introduced myself. Having heard my name, he looked perplexed because probably he expected...
a Westernized person with an English name who spoke in broken Marathi. Because I wore Indian kudta, spoke in fine Marathi, and my name was very Indian, he seemed confused as to who I was. He invited me to come inside and asked the reason for my coming. I had already composed myself. So I said, “I am a follower of Jesus Christ”—I purposely did not say that I am a Christian because of its stereotyped connotation. I continued, “I teach the teachings of Jesus Christ to a group of followers of Jesus." He nodded with positive affirmation. “To provide regular teaching to this group of people," I said, “I am searching for a hall, and your college hall is an ideal place for us to meet." I tried to present my case straightforwardly. As I waited for his response, he threw a question at me. He said, “Are you a worshiper of Jesus Christ?” I said “yes.” To my delight and surprise, he said, “I am also a worshiper of Jesus Christ.” This came as a real shock since there was no indication that he was a Christian. He then stood up and invited me to come into the inner room of his house. I was rather hesitant, but followed him into his Puja ghar (worship room); he led me to the center of that small room and, pointing his figure to the framed picture of Jesus Christ, exclaimed, “I just worshipped Jesus this morning.” To prove his point he showed a bunch of fresh flowers offered in front of the picture of Jesus.

That was the beginning of our long friendship. He not only gave me permission to use his college hall for our regular worship services, but also began inviting me to give a series of lectures to his college students about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. For a number of years, I, along with a team of young people from our church, were invited to present the message of Christmas and Good Friday to the college faculty, staff, and students. On one occasion, he invited me to give a lecture on the biblical view of consuming alcoholic drinks. He also introduced me to his network of Gandhians who regularly meet to reflect on Gandhi’s teachings, which inevitably included the sections from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. On another occasion, he even invited me to address a group of devotees of Saint Tukdoji Maharaj. I deliberately wore a white Indian kudta and pajama, and I sang Marathi Bhajans (an Indian way of devotional singing primarily used by the Hindus in their temples) and gave a short devotional message on the teachings of Jesus, which were all received reverently by those present.

Over a period of five years that I was in that city of Nagpur, Mr. Deotale became a great friend of mine and spent numerous hours with me discussing informally various aspects of teachings of Jesus Christ. Never once did we argue or fight over our faiths. Through his friendship and contacts, I had numerous opportunities to present the message of Christ to hundreds of his students, staff, and faculty. And as a result, we developed a very cordial and positive atmosphere to listen to each other’s views. This paved the way for me to establish a very positive rapport with a segment of his college faculty and students and provided me a platform to present Christ and his teachings to them in a non-confrontational manner. It must be noted, however, that Mr. Deotale disagreed with me on a few occasions, but because of the kind of rapport and respect we had established with one another, that disagreement never became a point of tension or clash.

Throughout my ministry in Nagpur, I tried to carefully and consciously conduct myself among my Hindu neighbors in ways that did not feed into their stereotypes of Christians and Westerners and certainly not as an attacker who is hostile to Hindu society. Realizing that a large segment of educated urban Hindus are neutral if not sympathetic towards Christ and his teachings, I chose to use that common ground to initiate dialogue and build rapport with them. This required discernment and careful observation, but it was worthwhile in taking the time to discern this and then focus on those who demonstrated a positive orientation towards Jesus Christ. This provided numerous opportunities for me to share Jesus with people who were open and neutral towards Christianity. Often this allowed them to ask pertinent questions about Jesus and his teachings, and my response to such queries was also received positively. It left behind a positive impact and to a large extent changed their stereotyped perceptions about Christ and Christianity. Through this I learned a very valuable insight: never assume that all Hindus or people of other faith are hostile towards Christ and Christianity; rather, most of them are quite open to hearing about the gospel—if presented in a more informal and non-confrontational manner.

Today, Indian Christians—and especially Evangelical Christians—have a great opportunity to develop a non-confrontational dialogical approach to mission that creates a more positive atmosphere and cordial relationships with people of other faiths, in order to communicate the message of Jesus Christ effectively.
Hindu-Christian Dialogue in India

Overview of Hinduism

Hindu-Christian Dialogue in India


Population of India


- K. V. Paul Pillai, India’s Search for the Unknown Christ (New Delhi: FAZL Publishers, 1979), 167.

- A person who leaves the Hindu fold and joins another religion is normally considered an outcaste and thus polluted and defiled.

- S. S. Madhav Patankar, American Missionaries and Hinduism: A Survey of Their Contacts from 1813 to 1910 (Mumbai: Munshiram Manoharial Oriental Publisher, 1987), 81.

- Patankar, American Missionaries, 335.

Interfaith Dialogue: More than Buzzwords


- See particularly chapters 11, 15, 18 in Rajiv Malhotra Aravindan Neelakandan, Breaking India: Western Inventions and Dravidian and Dalit Faultlines (New Delhi: Amaryllis, 2011).


- For a detailed survey on conversion debate, see Sebastian Kim, In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Religious Diversity


Spiritual Act and Social Tact


- Pongal is the three-day festival in January that is primarily a social event involving the whole village community. Many village Christians also participate in the festivities, though avoiding the one or two traditional home rituals.

- Hoefer, Churchless Christianity, 5–6.

- Also see D. R. Wrangham, The Church and Conversion: A Study of Recent Conversions to and from Christianity in the Tamil Area of South India (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 139–51.


An Overview of the Caste System


Neither Hinduism nor Christianity


- Tomoko Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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Stanley Jones and His Interfaith Exercise


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Stanley Jones and His Interfaith Exercise

The Early Years
Dr. Eli Stanley Jones (1884–1973) was one of the pioneering proponents of using dialogue as means of evangelism and interfaith communication. Born January 3, 1884, in Clarksville, Maryland, Jones had his upbringing under the aegis of the Methodist Church. In fact, he would never have come to India if the Methodist Missionary Society had not requested him to do so.

Jones first served in India as a pastor and district superintendent in the Methodist Episcopal Mission beginning in 1907. He was called into a wider field of service as an evangelist to the educated and student classes of the land. It is said of him, “In his great days Jones was probably the best known Western Christian in the whole of India.” Such was his influence among the members of the Indian intelligentsia. He was a highly skilled orator, known to easily draw an audience of four to five hundred educated Hindus and Muslims in any city that he visited.2

Jones felt a special call to work as a missionary to high-caste Hindus and to Muslims. He was one of those few of his generation who recognized himself as having the vocation of an evangelist to the intellectuals. Jones’s deep interest in India is exceptionally motivating, and regardless of seasons and generations it is beneficial to look at his life and his innovations—both as examples of style and approach with special reference to India. Jones was a missionary with a difference, and this essay is concerned primarily with that difference.

Interfaith Work and Roundtable Conferences
Unlike many other missionaries of his age, Jones treated other religions with much sympathy and respect. During the summer holidays, he conducted an ashram in the Himalaya Mountains where representatives of all groups and classes of people gathered for refreshment of body, mind and spirit. Jones tried his best to remove the misconception of the Indian people that Christianity is a Western religion. His conviction of the Person of Christ, contributions, and thoughts are prominent. In his attempt to present Christ, he found out that the method of comparative religions—studying parallel ideas in each religion—was beside the point. He concluded that such an attempt would only end up in controversy; moreover, it is unnecessary and unwise.3 He wrote:

“I present what I have and leave him to come to his own conclusion. Again and again I am pressed by a Hindu to show the differences between the faiths. I always refuse. For the moment I call attention to differences, there is controversy. And Christianity cannot be seen in a controversy.”4

To reach non-Christians with the gospel of Jesus Christ, Jones came up with the innovative idea that is so popularly known as the Round Table Conferences. He was determined always to approach all such conferences with an attitude of sympathy towards the viewpoints of others—to sit where people of other faiths sit. In his opinion, the deepest things of religion need a sympathetic atmosphere. In an atmosphere of debate and controversy, the deepest things and hence the real things of religion wither and die.1 Through the Round Table Conferences, he wanted to make dialogue more intimate and personal in approach than a professional meeting. In the very first such meeting, he had an audience of several Hindu friends to whom he began to narrate his own personal conversion and subsequent experience. The Christ of experience was the point that touched the vital chords of his listeners.

One of the greatest detriments to the growth of Christianity in India, according to Jones, was the inseparable relationship between Christianity and Western civilization, and Western missionaries were the malefactors in continuing this ill-advised marriage. This alien element in Christianity is the one that often separates Christ from Christianity. Jones was convinced that if the educated Indians had the opportunity to see Christ, without all the Western garb, they would gladly receive him. He urged that Christianity must be identified with the people of India: “the Indian must remain Indian. He must stand in the stream of Indian culture and life and let the force of that stream go through his soul so that the expression of his Christianity must be Eastern and not Western.”6

Manner of Dialogue
According to Jones, “the word ‘dialogue’ means ‘through words,’ an exchange of words that can be helpful to get understanding of each other’s standpoint and outlook. But it can be very shallow, inconclusive, and fruitless.”7 Therefore, he made sure that his conferences were different. He usually invited about fifteen members of other faiths and about five or six Christians to compose the Round Table. The participants comprised representatives who were not exposed to Western education and who spoke the vernacular language, that is to say, Pundits, Sadrus, Muslim Maulvis. The Christian representatives were also mostly Indian. The forum did not highlight questions pertaining to a certain civilization or the prominence of East against West, or vice versa, not Christ or Krishna, but only what each person’s religion meant to that person in his or her own experience. The method used by Jones had three exceptional elements: experimentation, verification, and sharing of results. He invited others to tell what their religions meant to them and what the religion had brought to them. Their discussions revolved around what religion brought in terms of light, of inward peace and harmony, of redemption from sin and from the power of this world, of God and what they are verifying as true in experience.8

Jones once said that in the thirty years of his experience in holding such conferences, he never came across a single person who claimed to have found God previously. This, he said, is due to the fact that the Indian mind seeks for the impossible—seeking not communion with God, but union with God, for a Hindu meditates on himself as God. I am God is the inner refrain. However, he adds, “It is a refrain but not a realization. Life doesn’t back it. At the same time, he could
find those in contact with Jesus Christ who could tell of finding God. God was real to them all and they were in communion with Him. This is the uniqueness of the Christian approach.79

When Jones sat in the Round Table Conferences, he did not sit as an enemy of India’s heritage, but as a friend presenting a Savior. In the meeting, there were many who believed that all religions are fundamentally the same and that all roads lead to the same God. However, after the conference they reported to Jones that “Jesus is the Way of the New Testament.” Jones’s attitude toward people of other faiths was positive, with a delicate sense of spiritual appreciation. He argued, “No one has right to teach others who is not learning from them.”80 Jones’s outlook was that humanity is fundamentally one. He declared, “I can no longer think of a man as a mere Hindu or Muslim or Parsee or Christian. He is a brother, man facing the same problems and perplexities which I face.”81

Jones also took care that the good, noble, and great in the Indian outlook on life need not be destroyed by the presentation of the gospel because he understood that Jesus not only saved people from evil but saved the good in them. According to him, the servant-type evangelist’s profound need for interfaith dialogue will always persist in India. He said that one conquers not by haughtiness and pride, but by humility and self-sacrifice.82

Christian Ashram Movement as Supplement to Institutional Churches

Jones established a Christian ashram in 1930 at Sat Tal (seven lakes) in the Nanithal district of Uttar Pradesh. An ashram was not an institution in the modern sense, but the residence of a Rishi or a sage who had renounced all his earthly possessions and attachments and who concentrated entirely on a life of meditation for attaining union with God. Often the Rishi had sishyas or disciples who lived with him to be trained in this life more by living in intimate contact with the Rishi rather than by any oral teaching. They lived together as one family. The Rishi was always available as a guide, counselor, and spiritual father to his disciples. All were possessed by the one dominating passion to enter into an intimate relationship with God. The objective of Christian ashrams was not to transplant these ancient ideals completely, but to adapt the same idea into a modern context without lowering the inner spiritual significance.

Jones believed that the Christian ashram should be deeply church-centered: not a separatist movement,83 but a permeative movement, permeating the churches with transformed people. Church is the koinonia that was born out of Pentecost. This koinonia became the soul out of which the organization grew. He said, “Where you have the koinonia, you have the Church; where you do not have the koinonia, you have an organization, but not the Church, except in name.”84 He discovered that the Indian mind wanted both a corporate and individual life.

Jones did not discount the church and its need for growth, but doubted whether it was big enough, responsive enough, and Christlike enough to be the medium and organ through which Christ would come to India. The church in India must give an ear to the cry of the Indian mind. It must emphasize a corporate life and strong fellowship of the people who come to it. Life is corporate as well as individual. In Christian ashrams, Jones found both a corporate and individual life. It is said that 95 percent of those who come to these Christian ashrams go away transformed. It is a remarkable example of missionary adaptation in both intra-cultural and cross-cultural mission.

Conclusion

Though many viewed these conferences with skepticism, Jones was elated to see many lives being transformed at the end of the conference. In his words, “God has become reality in the life of many who attended the Conferences.”85 In Jones’s view, “the valuable thing for us as Christians in the Round Table Conferences with non-Christians lay in the fact that we were compelled to rethink our problems in the light of the non-Christian faiths and in the light of the religious experiences of non-Christians. So while these conferences have been valuable in our approach to the non-Christian faiths, they have proved of even greater value to us in facing our own problems, spiritual and intellectual.”86

We can highlight many lessons and insights to learn and continue to ponder from Jones’s interfaithe endeavors:

1. Jones approached representatives of different religious systems with utter respect, humility, and transparency. He did not sit back, waiting for them to make contact; he took the initiative to invite them for discussion.
2. Each conference was a time for mutual learning and understanding. Though these Round Table Conferences were for intellectual discussion, Jones cleverly used it as an avenue for evangelism.
3. Even when Jones was appreciative of everything good in other religions, he held on to the unique identity of the Person of Christ. In fact, he used Christ as the ultimate “trump card” to convince his audience. The unique Christ was the irreducible minimum for his interfaith dialogue.
4. The deep and unique insight of the ashrams and their model for the church—as the corporate life of continuing fellowship that is also connected through the everyday life of a person—should be a challenging method and model for our day.
5. The social involvement and service of the church in the pains and sufferings of the common people of our society and presenting a Christ who emancipates people and brings newness of life and meaning is unassailable, without parallel in its entirety.

This unique approach of Jones is relevant and applicable today more than any other time in the past, particularly when interreligious dialogues are happening at greater frequencies the world over. Particularly in the present situation of increasing religious intolerance, Jones’s efforts can be replicated effectively by the Church for her mission in the world. In doing so, however, let us not forget the necessity of projecting a contextually appropriate figure of Christ, for the person of Christ alone can make the difference.  

My heart has been split between two worlds:  
One part of me is firmly planted in the United States.  
One has been left on the other side of the globe.  
I find myself in tension, now a part of both.

By joining two distinct and often unrelated images to form a new whole, I offer a metaphor for making seemingly impossible personal connections between lives and across cultures. Just as when images are paired and new patterns of light, color, shape, and texture are formed, so also, by stepping across language, physical, social, cultural, and religious barriers, a new realm of relationships and community becomes possible. I invite you to take that step and rediscover the greater story in which we are all connected.

I long for the suburbs of Los Angeles to meet the slums of India: for urban college students, professors, and businessmen to meet rural tea workers, rice farmers, and shop owners, and for each to see God’s image in the other.

Perhaps that is what it truly means to be a part.

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