

Devout Hindus:

Anti-Church but Not Necessarily Anti-Christ

By H. L. RICHARD

H. L. Richard is an independent researcher focused on the Hindu-Christian encounter. He has published numerous books and articles seeking understanding regarding the inadequacy of Christian witness among serious Hinduism.

A highly esteemed Roman Catholic missionary to India, R. H. Lesser wrote a paper on “Hinduism and the Western Missionary” for *The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia of India*. In it, he says, “The strange but tragic truth is that though Christianity has been in India for nearly 2,000 years, though there are Christians in every corner of India, yet Christians and Hindus have never really met.”¹

Obviously, in the standard sense, Christians and Hindus are always meeting, so in what way does Lesser suggest they have never met? We meet on the surface but never penetrate below the facades and talking points of our respective camps. Are we gathering to seek a new set of talking points? Or can we determine to engage the hearts of those who seem resistant to historic Christianity?

My research on these matters has led me to many striking individuals who have wrestled with these situations. A missionary who compels attention and deeper probing is an obscure British Methodist, Benjamin Robinson, who served in south India in the 1880s. Robinson, reflecting on the *advaita* Vedanta system of Hindu thought, wrote this,

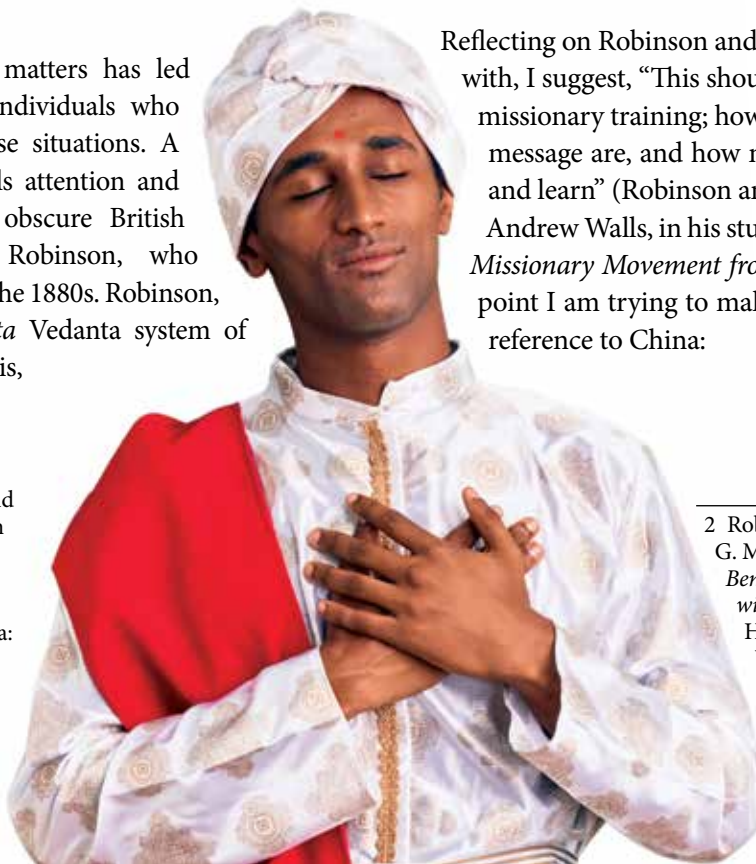
As a record of thinking it amazes one the more one studies it. There our axioms are questioned, our certainties are illusion. But when the spreading influence of that system of thought touches us more nearly, and when we have learned enough to feel its force in India, we shall find that conflict with it will compel the reconsideration of all our own schemes and systems.²

This helps explain Lesser’s remark. We need to be touched “more nearly” by Hindu life and thought. It is too easy to dismiss Hinduism as full of error and superstition, never feeling the truths that resonate so deeply with Hindus. As we begin to feel what Hindus feel about Christianity, we increasingly see the need to consider just what is truly good news to Hindus and reconsider our “schemes and systems.”

Reflecting on Robinson and the issues he struggled with, I suggest, “This should be the first lesson in missionary training; how alien both we and our message are, and how much we need to listen and learn” (Robinson and Richard 2020, xxiii). Andrew Walls, in his study of the history of *The Missionary Movement from the West*, makes the point I am trying to make in a different way in reference to China:

1 Lesser, R. H. “Hinduism and the Western Missionary,” in *The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia of India*, Vol. 3. ed. George Menachery (Thrissur City, Kerala, India: The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia of India, 2010), 50.

2 Robinson, Richard, and Arthur G. McPhee. *Cultural Gaps: Benjamin Robinson’s Experience with Hindu Traditions*. ed. H.L. Richard (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2020), 42.



... not only must the missionary get into China and Chinese; China and Chinese must get into the missionary. This involves penetration to the heart of the central traditions of China, the consciousness at the core of the nation formed by centuries of reflection, influencing millions of people who are never aware of the source of that influence.³

My recent work on R. C. Das of Banaras also pointed in this direction. In a paper outlining his life and thought, one of my conclusions was that “We are ignorant, ill-equipped, unaware even of how far we are from ready to engage the Hindu world.”⁴ Hindus and Christians have never really met. One could blame Hindus, but this is not their problem; they do not claim to have good news that we need to understand. They do not have any reason *not* to ignore Christianity.

So why title this article “Devout Hindus: Anti-Church but Not Necessarily Anti-Christ”? I’ll conclude this article by defining my terms. Especially when dealing with India and Hindu issues, all terms must be defined.

“Hindu” or “Hinduism” is notoriously difficult to define. For this article, I primarily focus on forward (“high”) caste Hindus. Still, we need a working definition to grasp this slippery concept. So, I submit the following as one of the best definitions of Hinduism I’ve come across:

It is now a matter of heated debate as to whether or not there is such a thing as “Hinduism.” On the one side is an academic analysis that suggests that what is known as Hinduism is more a collection of loosely related traditions, communities, and partly shared customs and concepts that, only through the Western Enlightenment creation of the category of “religion” and the vested, unifying interests of upper-caste Hindu informants, led to the construction of “Hinduism.” On the other side is a range of views from vehement, ideological assertions of an ancient and single Hinduism through to an instinctive contemporary fellow feeling amongst Hindus that they belong to the

same “religion.”⁵

My emphasis is on serious Hindus, or “religious” Hindus, but the best term to carry these meanings is “devout” Hindus, those who are devoted to their traditions and particularly to a particular god or guru. This is the path of *bhakti* or devotion, by far the dominant expression of living Hindu traditions (contra foci on philosophy, texts, or political machinations).

“Anti-church” in this context refers to the institutions of classical Christianity (e.g., denominations, church buildings, Christian schools, hospitals, seminaries, Bible colleges, etc.), which carry a stench of colonialism and foreignness. By no means are all Hindus opposed to all forms of expression of Christianity or church, but they are most strongly suspicious towards (if not outright hostile towards) conversion agendas that are a core aspect of the heritage of many groups.

“Anti-Christ” is generally a highly pejorative term for extreme opposition to Jesus and the Bible. In broad terms, Hindus are more opposed to evangelism and conversion than they are to Jesus. Still, given that many are slow to respond positively, an underlying hesitancy is clearly very strong among Hindu peoples. Like Lesser, we could say that this resistance is primarily due to never really meeting Christians or never really hearing the gospel or never really encountering Christ. The trappings of Christianity disguise the glory of Christ.

I wish there was a simple solution to the problems outlined, but I know none. I can only advise that we slow down, listen carefully, reflect deeply, and expect multiple expressions of good news and church to develop as Hindus and gospel messengers finally begin to meet. ❏

3 Walls, Andrew. *The Missionary Movement from the West: A Biography from Birth to Old Age*. ed. Brian Stanley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2023), 131.

4 H. L. Richards, “The Life and Thought of R. C. Das: His Theology of Interreligious (Hindu-Christian) Relations,” *IJFM* 39, no. 2–4 (Summer-Winter 2022): 133.

5 Ram-Prasad, Chakravarti. “Hindu Perspectives on Islam,” in *Religions View Religions: Explorations in Pursuit of Understanding*. ed. Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, and Hendrik M. Vroom (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 178.