



The Burden of the Past

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India has been a key mission field for Western missionaries for decades. Yet it remains, at best, 3 percent Christian. In examining the causes, Dr. Herbert Hoefler addresses the effects of the missionary heritage.

I T WAS MY FIRST SUNDAY in India. My wife and I had enrolled in the Tamil language school at the United Theological Seminary. Looking forward to the opportunity to experience Indian Christianity first-hand, we went to the Lutheran church nearby.

It was 1968. I was looking forward to getting away from the drab, boring liturgy on which I had been raised in the States. But, as some of you might guess, what we experienced was all too similar to what I had left—only it was sung yet more slowly and yet more unenthusiastically. In sum, it was the same liturgy, but worse!

I thought, “Well, this is an urban congregation. Things will be different in the villages.” When we finally got to visit remote villages and join in their worship, what I found was more of the same. But at the end of the worship there was one moment of real enthusiasm and strong singing; it was when they began the Tamil-lyric songs.

Historically, the Western missionaries had passed on what they knew, both in the Gospel *and* in the cultural forms. It was not done with an agenda of destroying or even displacing Indian culture. They wanted to share the classic, proven heritage of the church through the ages. Our Missouri Synod missionaries honestly felt the Western liturgy was a treasure to be shared.

To my even greater surprise, this had happened not only in my Missouri Synod’s mission history but almost across the board. I know of one exception in the area of worship forms: the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church. They had received the blessing of a talented musician among their early converts and far-sighted missionaries who had him cast the traditional Lutheran liturgy into indigenous forms. I have not had the privilege of participating in their worship, but hear it is an inspiring experience.

But something even more surprising about those early experiences hit me. In spite of all the drabness and slowness in the liturgy the people come to worship! What a testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit among these people, I thought—and still think. While pastors in the West experiment with ever-new forms to try to attract people to worship, in India they come in flocks even when it is the same form Sunday after Sunday. One stands in awe of the Indian church. Certainly there are significant forms which the Indian church itself has created, such as processions and funeral forms and *bhajans* (traditional antiphonal chants between a guru and his disciples). However, these have not displaced the decidedly Western form which was established initially by early missionaries.

In Culture

This early experience of worship forms was, of course, just a foretaste of things to come. Let’s take the matter of food. Christians are renowned in India as meat eaters. In fact, it is a standard expression at pastoral conferences that “We haven’t really eaten unless we’ve had meat.”

Where did this habit come from? Certainly there was meat eating in India before the missionaries came on the scene. The poor of the land would eat anything just to survive, and most of the converts came from the poor. But vegetarianism was the general cultural standard—and considered the ideal. Christians, by and large, have rejected that standard, seemingly following the lead of the Western missionaries once again.

What this represents is *not* Western cultural imperialism. On the one hand, we have Westerners who were simply following their own preferred eating habits. On the other hand, we have people convinced of the freedom of the Gospel. There is no reason that people cannot eat meat. God had specifically allowed it in the new covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:3). He had specifically confronted Peter with it in the vision at Joppa (Acts 10:15). The Christian faith is a spiritual celebration of freedom, not a religious obedience to laws and superstitions.

Within the church in India, meat eating also came to be linked with baptism. A Hindu convert might be expected to eat beef before she would be baptized. Why? To demonstrate that she was free from old superstitions connected with anti-Christian beliefs like reincarnation. Similarly, Muslim converts might have to demonstrate their rejection of their previous faith by eating pork.

Such cultural insensitivity was true not just a century ago among the early, “unreflective” missionaries. I blush to relate another incident I experienced 25 years ago. Our Missouri Synod had a long tradition of Muslim missions. I was sitting on the verandah with a long-term missionary to Muslims. We happened to be eating pork. When one of the rare Muslim converts came by, this senior missionary beckoned the young man to join us, urging him to eat some pork. When the convert hesitated, he mocked him. I vividly recall the confusion on this young man’s face.

Here was the revered father in the faith who had brought him to the

Lord. His spiritual mentor was insisting that he do something that clearly made him sick to his stomach.

Was this a test of faith? Was this the next, necessary step in true submission? To my joy, the young man steadfastly yet politely refused and soon went on his way. However, I had experienced in person what I had long read about in theory: the destruction of culture in the name of Christianity.

In Community

Let me pursue this sad story to illustrate another aspect of the great problem we missionaries have created for the Christian community. Even after his baptism, *both* the Christians and the Muslims continued to see the young man as a Muslim. For the general Muslim community, he was an embarrassment and an insult—an infidel who had degraded the holy faith before the world. His experience of social exclusion would not be limited to his past religious community. The Christian community had no place for him either. Missionaries likely gave him employment as an evangelist—but he had no real friends. He was a Muslim among Hindu converts. Only the missionaries would receive him, though with increasing impatience. Finally, scandal arose: No Christian family could be found to give him a bride, so he went out and arranged a Muslim bride for himself. How could the church continue to employ him? How could he be an evangelist? Shouldn’t some sincere, true witness to the Gospel be put in his place?

In a publication from Hawaii called *Hinduism Today* there was a challenging article by Swami Dayanandan entitled “Conversion as an Act of Violence” (*Hinduism Today*, November 1999, page 52). His comment is quite apropos to this young man’s situation:

Religious conversion ... is an act of violence because it hurts deeply, not only the other members of the family of the converted, but the entire community. ... When the hurt of the religious becomes acute, it explodes into violence.

Once again, we have the biblical mandate. Our Lord Himself has told us that He did “not come to bring peace but a sword... and to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother.... Anyone who loves his father or mother more than Me is not worthy of me.... And anyone who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me” (Matt. 10:34-37). It would be unfair to call the violence of conversion a form of cultural imperialism. It is the inevitable result of the Gospel call. But what changes are mandated?

Consider the case of marriage and the family, which are orders of God’s creation. Every society strives to keep these foundations intact. Any time we undermine an order of God’s creation we violate His good intent for that society. Therefore, Paul teaches the Corinthian congregation, “If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.” He goes on to assert, rather mysteriously, that such respect for God’s order of creation has saving implications: “For the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (I Cor. 7:12-14).

Culture is another of these orders of creation which we are called to keep intact. In the Old Testament, certainly the sinful aspects of Canaanite religion were to be rejected, such as idol worship and temple prostitution. But archeologically we recognize that the Israelites learned from—and replicated—the Canaanites’ temple architecture. Strikingly, the apostle Thomas seems to have done the same thing in India with Hindu temple architecture, judging by the famous St. Mary’s Church, located outside Nagercoil.

Similarly, the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 affirmed that Gentile converts did not have to become cultural Jews. Gentile culture was to be affirmed in anything that did not contradict the Gospel.

Limits of the Missionary Heritage

Lack of a Theology of the Kingdom

The Kingdom of God is more than the Church, local or global. The work of God is bigger than the work of the Church. We Protestants lack a theology of the Kingdom as the broader context for our theology of salvation. We would do well to learn from the ancient churches—both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions are more advanced in this area of thinking and action.

Why couldn't we have used bhajans instead of Western liturgy? Why couldn't we have built temples and *mandapams* (covered rest areas in front of a temple)? Why couldn't we cite great Hindu poets? To do so would be to acknowledge the greatness of God.

Why can't Christian men wear the *veshti* (skirt-like cloth) and Christian women the *tilak* (decorative dot on the forehead)? Why can't we be vegetarian, as God had ordained in the original creation (cf. Gen. 1:29)? Why do we have to have pastors and

bishops and elections and committees for everything under the sun? There is no reason the Indian church cannot be Indian, or "Hindu" in the cultural sense.

But the Indian Church is a Westernized community, from dress to worship style to the way we organize ourselves. It is the burden of *our* past. We cannot escape it. Yet we do not have to drag others into it. We can rejoice that followers of Christ might yet be freed from the cultural entrapments of the missionary era. We ought not seek to replicate the Western church in India. It just doesn't fit the culture—and vast numbers will never join it.

Instead, we ought to release a discipleship of Jesus that flows smoothly along the highways and byways of this great land. Rather than

hymns which are heavy with doctrinal theology, we would do well to consider lyrics which bounce with simple praise. Instead of congregational activities, the emphasis ought to be on private family and individual devotional practices.

Lack of a Theology of Experience

Of all Protestant church bodies, in my opinion, the one that comes the closest to the heart of India is the Pentecostal. Admittedly, they are often the most offensive in their evangelistic methods and cultural restrictions. But they have a central emphasis in their theology and practice which reaches right to the heart of Indian religiosity.

Traditional Hindu religiosity emphasizes three sources of authority in discovering religious truth:

- *srti* or ancient writings;
- *yukti* or rational thought;
- *anubhava* or experience.

The purpose of using *srti* and *yukti* is only to get to one's own *anubhav*—and only then, Hindus believe, do they know the writings and teachings are true.

Of course, this emphasis on *anubhava* is central to Pentecostal

theology and practice as well. An Indian seeker will commonly want confirmation through visions, miracles, answered prayers and healings. Most other denominations are uncomfortable with all this subjectivity. They prefer to remain at *srti*—in this case the Bible—and *yukti*—the dogma; but the Indian drive is for *anubhava*. The Pentecostals will gladly and skillfully lead them there, by the Holy Spirit.

Lack of a Spontaneous Spirituality

Another area where I feel our Pentecostal brethren are closer to the general religious culture of India is in their selection of clergy. We have formalized, structured, and centralized the appointment of spiritual

leaders. In contrast, among the Pentecostals one must gather a new congregation of believers and thereby become recognized and ordained as a pastor. People come because of the attractive spirituality of the leader—similar in some ways to a Hindu guru.

In contrast, we non-Pentecostals train our future pastors in seminaries and assign them to congregations—and they may or may not be spiritual leaders. They may be more like *pujaris*, simply performing religious rituals for the people. They are leaders by training and assignment, not by popular acclamation as with a guru.

Likewise, our congregational life is a structured spirituality, quite unlike the traditional pattern of Hindu spirituality around us. We have membership rolls and times and days of worship. At other times, our worship centers are locked shut, quite in contrast to the spontaneous pattern of worship typical around India.

In this respect, Roman Catholic churches have structured themselves more closely to the cultural pattern than the Protestant churches. Worshipers can come and go, even on a Sunday morning, and no one particularly notices. Roman Catholic church buildings also are often kept open, at least during the day, and many have a roadside shrine besides for those who feel moved to worship more spontaneously during the week.

Lack of an "Evocative" Theology

Western theology is based upon Western philosophy, particularly Western logic. It is deductive and systematic. Its goal is logically arranged syllogisms and dogmas. Theology is reduced to rationalism.

Indian religious philosophy is much more varied, employing logical systems drawn from the paradoxical character of ultimate realities. So, what are seen as logical contradictions in Western philosophy are appreciated as profound truths in the Indian mind. In Indian thought, religious truth must be integrated with all other thought—for truth can only be one.

There is also the conviction that

Why can't we be vegetarian, as God had ordained in the original creation?

religious and ultimate truth must not be reduced to simple dogmatic statements. Religious truth is not merely rational. It also is never irrational. It has been referred to as supra-rational.

In order to convey these insights which are beyond rationality, Indian religious philosophers used evocative theology. What I mean by this term is the goal of evoking spiritual insight, not through hard logic but through creative insight. The religious philosopher frequently uses stories and parables and allegories and “koans” to stimulate insight. Typically, it is an “Aha!” experience.

Indeed, this non-rational approach to religious teaching is arguably much closer to the writings of the Bible. Prophets used allegories and symbolic acts to convey their message. Wisdom literature abounds in allegories and imaginative, evocative imagery. Jesus used parables and hyperbole. Paul used mystical language (e.g., being “in Christ,” “dying and rising” with Christ, Christ living “in me,” etc.).

Actually, theology begins and ends in mysticism. Rational argument guards against error. It does not embody the truth. It must lead to faith and commitment and inspiration. Any theology which does not evoke such a spiritual response is lifeless and purposeless.

In my opinion, the one theologian of India who expressed the Biblical message in truly Indian forms was Sadhu Sunder Singh. He had only minimal exposure to Western theological training. He quickly freed himself from that misorientation and deculturalization. His message was continually conveyed in provocative and evocative parables, stories, and allegories. Similarly, the most powerful village preaching I have heard is in simple telling of Bible stories—as it reaches the heart. This is where the Holy Spirit can work faith and repentance and renewal of life.

Role of the Church in the Kingdom

Our goal is not to replace the church. As an organization, it is here to stay. It is its own cultural group,

among the wide array of sub-cultures in India. Indian Christians should be allowed to worship and organize as they wish. In my interviews for the initial research for the book, *Churchless Christianity*, I found that the Christians really didn’t want high caste non-baptized believers in Christ in their churches. That would change all the social dynamics. They would lose all their positions of status and power in the organization the moment a traditional village leader joined.

The existing church is primarily a forum for the *dalits* (lower castes). We should recognize this fact—and let them have that base. They deserve this opportunity to develop and exercise their potentialities. The mass conversions to Christianity, especially in the South and among the tribes, was, in large part, a movement of social liberation. They were rejecting the despised role they had endured for so long within Hinduism. Christianity was a marvelous way out, and it still is for many.

However, we must never let the theology of the church become the theology of the Kingdom. Dalit theology must speak out against the caste system and all it has done to oppress and suppress the poorest and weakest. But a theology of the Kingdom calls us to reflect further. Is the caste system of itself sinful? Is it more sinful than any other system of social organization? Its abuses must be opposed, but its benefits also must be affirmed in a theology that affirms culture as part of God’s Kingdom work.

A century ago the conversion to Christianity brought social prestige and financial benefit. I remember asking one of the first converts in a village congregation why he originally decided to become a Christian. He said, “I saw the missionary wearing shoes, and I thought I’d like to wear shoes too.” There were incentives and expectations at that time.

However, the movement was far deeper than that. It was a movement of the soul, and it still is.

We know it is no longer the case that there are economic advantages

for a dalit to convert in fact, just the opposite. Yet the conversions among the dalits continue. Why? Because downtrodden people need the opportunity to assert their self-dignity. It may cost their stomach, but they will save their soul.

The church will assert its dignity as the child of God in terms of the issues it faces. The culture of India was not the culture of the dalits. They were excluded from it, so, of course, they want to replace it. They should have a theology of righteous anger.

The cultural experience of most in India has been different. These will be moved by the same Spirit to assert their identity as children of God in terms that fit their cultural situation. Each must hear and affirm and trust the other. In a country as culturally diverse as India, there must be theologies and approaches to truth as different as those James and Paul, of Jesus and the author of Hebrews, of John and Jeremiah. Yet, they are part of the one faithful witness.

We must affirm the role of the Indian church, the Westernized church, in the mission of God. The Indian church can reach the 20 percent dalit population. However, God is not limited to the existing church. There is so much more to do that this church with its burden of the missionary past cannot carry forward. God’s Kingdom work is far greater than the Church’s work. Will the Church serve the Kingdom beyond its borders? Will we?

As we become more aware, God is moving beyond. He has moved beyond. The Spirit blows where He pleases (Jn. 3:8). The only question is if we will be keeping up with Him. 🌐

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