

INDIGENIZED CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IN INDIA: SOME CONSIDERATIONS



JACOB JOSEPH

Jacob Joseph is the Dean of the School of Worship and Music at New Theological College, Dehradun, India. He holds a Masters in Church Music from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a Certificate in Applied Ethnomusicology from Payap University (Chiang Mai), and is currently pursuing DMin studies at Gordon Cornwell Theological Seminary. He is married to Bitha Jacob and has three children.
Contact: jacobkudiyil@hotmail.com

One of the greatest challenges of the Indian Christian church is its Western heritage. Most mainline denominations follow a Westernized liturgy and music in their worship. When missionaries came to India they translated the Bible and their own hymns into the local languages for use in worship. But now even a century later, churches still use the same hymnal and the translated Book of Common Prayer for worship. In addition, the Indian church has largely adopted Western pews and postures, with newer generation churches increasingly adopting songs from Euro-American contemporary Christian music, making the worship of the church even more Western. With that in mind, I would like to propose in this article some possibilities toward further indigenization of Christian worship in India.¹

CHANGE OF FOCUS FROM EVANGELISM TO WORSHIP

Until now, the primary motivation behind indigenization was to attract more people to the church. That motivation has sometimes caused people of other religions to think that the Christians are faking something to make Christianity more attractive. Attempts at indigenization in the area of mission have given a negative picture of Christianity as a kind of “wolf in sheep’s clothing.”² In my opinion, the church should change for the sake of worshipping God in the language and culture of the people, not simply to attract more churchgoers. As American pastor John Piper says:

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity, but worship abides forever.³

To make the indigenization authentic and meaningful, the church needs to initiate radical changes from the center: that is, in their worship. Then indigenized missions will flow naturally from the indigenized worshipping church.

WORSHIP POSTURE

Christian churches should consider returning to Indian heritage in their worship styles. Churches might leave their pews behind and follow the more typical Indian style of sitting on the floor and praying while kneeling. This worship posture may even draw the worshiper closer to the original meaning of the word worship as it is used in the Bible. The Hebrew word *hīštab‘wâ*, translated as “worship,” literally means “to bend oneself over at the waist.”⁴ Expression of homage, devotion, and awe in the presence of God can be expressed by removing sandals and cleansing oneself before entering the worship space.⁵

LANGUAGE OF WORSHIP

The language of worship needs to become more culturally understandable, creating a new liturgy with awareness and understanding of aspects of Indian culture. Even if

churches continue to use their Western liturgies—for example, based on the *Book of Common Prayer*—they can be translated into the common (vernacular) languages of the people.

It is also important to develop indigenous terminologies to teach Christian doctrine. William Carey and his team developed Sanskrit terms for their biblical translation, providing a set of standard Sanskrit terms for the theological education of future generations.⁶ The contemporary church needs to continue to seek out these culturally relevant terms for theological concepts. Using Indian words to explain Christian doctrine will lead people to a better understanding of their faith, and that understanding will lead to clearer, more appropriate worship.

ARCHITECTURE OF THE WORSHIP SPACE

The architecture of the worship space is another area that might be indigenized. Today most of the mainline Christian worship spaces are imitations of Western structures, ignoring the significance of appropriate architecture altogether. What would it look like to have a Christian theological perspective on architectural design?


ROLE OF MUSIC

As I suggested above, I believe the idea of indigenization and change in the church should begin with the church's worship, rather than specifically with its outreach to others. The common music styles of the people, such as *bhajans* and *keerthans*, could be given a place in corporate worship. This is the music that every Indian hears early in the morning from the temples. These forms, originating in the Hindu *bhakti* (devotion) traditions, are easily adaptable for congregational use.

Another musical possibility is the reconfiguration of the hymns into Indian musical forms. Hymns carry a rich theology from throughout the history of the faith, and they can be used effectively in Indian contexts by connecting them to indigenous melodic forms and adapting the lyrics appropriately.

CONCLUSION

Indigenization is not an attempt to appear like other religions of the country or to compromise with other religious faiths. Marva Dawn offers a good criterion to evaluate our attempts for indigenization: “We make use of the cultural forms, new and old, but we dare never let up in the struggle to make sure they are consistent

with the ultimate eternal world to which we belong.”⁷ That ultimate eternal world, according to Rev. 7: 9-10, includes a future of peoples worshiping God with the unique cultural gifts he's given them. This is a future worth “worshiping toward”⁸—a future in which all of India's people groups will have a new song to sing before the throne of the Lamb. 

¹ A longer version of this article was previously published in the *Global Forum on Arts and Christian Faith*, vol. 2 (2014), WP1-11; available at www.artsandchristianfaith.org/index.php/journal/article/view/8. The longer version of this article proposes additional areas of indigenization, including the reading of Scriptures, preaching styles, and integration of worship into the everyday life of the believer.

² Hindu critic Sita Ram Goel views the indigenization process as “disguised in Hindu form” and “casting covetous glance before mounting a marauding expedition,” (quoted in Bharati, Dayanand 2004 *Living Water and Indian Bowl: An Analysis of Christian Failings in Communicating Christ to Hindus, with Suggestions Toward Improvements, revised edition*. Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 79).

³ Piper, John 2010 *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions, 3rd ed.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 15. See also, Piper's article “The Missional Impulse toward Incarnational Worship in the New Testament” in Krabill, James R. et al, eds. 2013 *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 96.

⁴ Peterson, David 2002 *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 57–58.

⁵ See Exodus 3:5 and Exodus 19:10.

⁶ Mathew, C.V. 1999 “The Saffron Mission: A Historical Analysis of Modern Hindu Missionary Ideologies and Practices”. Delhi: *Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge*, 56.

⁷ Dawn, Marva 1995 *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 10.

⁸ C. Michael Hawn writes about worship that can “pull the hope of Revelation into the present” in that it will “give us glimpses of the gathering described in Revelation 7” in Krabill, James R. et al, eds. 2013 *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 430.

