

# Christ-Followers in India Flourishing— But Outside the Church

A review of *Churchless Christianity*, Herbert E. Hoefler.

—H. L. Richard

*A Missouri Synod Lutheran missionary, Herbert Hoefler, made a careful study some years ago, describing it in a small book entitled Churchless Christianity. But it was not hailed at that time as the landmark study which it truly is. H.L. Richard then wrote up a 15-page review of it. Provided here is a condensed version of that review.*

— The Editor

**I**N STRIKING research undertaken in the mid-eighties and published in 1991, Herbert E. Hoefler found that the people of Madras City are far closer to historic Christianity than the populace of any cities in the western Christian world could ever claim to be. Yet these are not Christians, but rather Hindus and Muslims. In their midst is a significant number of true believers in Christ who openly confess to



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faith in fundamental Biblical doctrines, yet remain outside the institutional church. It was the locating and understanding of these that especially motivated Hoefler's research.

Fundamental questions on the nature of Christianity and the Church are raised by this study. The colonial legacy of Christianity as a foreign religion is taken seriously, and steps toward transcending the constrictions of this heritage are suggested. Dr. Herber Hoefler, author of *Churchless Christianity*, knows he is treading new ground, and so is careful to document his facts and conclusions while allowing that his views are far from definitive, but rather only exploratory.

## A Brief Background

In October of 1980 Hoefler surveyed pastors in three Lutheran as well as five Church of South India dioceses regarding their knowledge of unbaptized believers in Christ. That study identified 246 believers, more than 80 of whom Hoefler proceeded to personally contact. Though these people were traditionally thought of

as "secret believers," Hoefler notes that just 6 percent of the pastors queried indicated that they felt the people were denying Christ by not taking baptism. "In most cases the pastors also reported that the non-baptized believer welcomes him and other church workers to his/her home. Their faith in Christ is public, and their relation to the church is as close as possible" (xii).

It is important to note that throughout his study Hoefler is careful to maintain a high definition of what constitutes a believer in Christ. He describes a meeting with some Hindu families who had a high view of Christ (as an *avatara*, but not sinless), and pride in their stand for religious harmony and learning from the best in all religions. He comments:

Such people—who are, of course, very numerous—I do not classify as non-baptized believers in Christ. They have neither orthodox belief nor devoted practice which is expected of a follower of Christ. Jesus has no special place in their spiritual life, and they have made no break with their Hindu pattern of worship. (9)

It is demonstrated that low-caste unbaptized believers are often outside the church due to political and economic pressure. The church is composed, largely, of lower-caste people, and cultural change in joining the church is, for them, minimized. The largest problem in embracing Christianity and the Church for these low-caste people is the loss of government benefits involved in any legal change from Hindu to Christian religion. For the high-caste non-baptized believer in Christ (NBBC), however, the issue is social. His family and social group are far removed culturally from "Christian" society, and cannot understand conversion in anything but sociological terms. Hoefler summarizes the impossible predicament of the high-caste NBBC by pointing out:

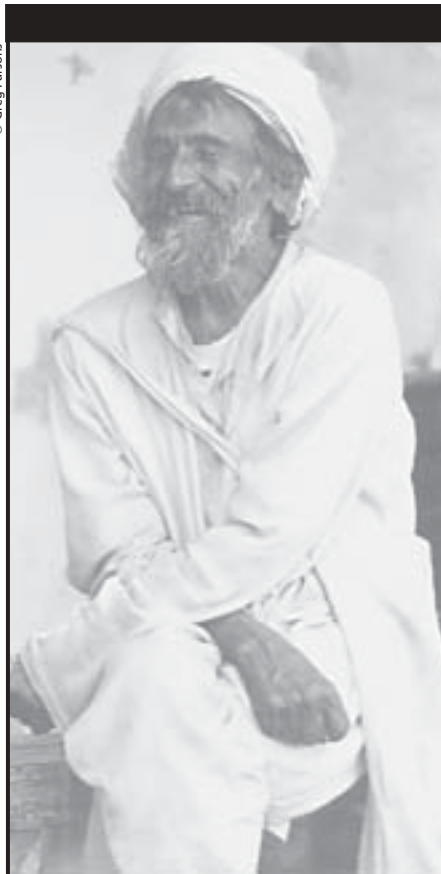
We cannot ignore the close association in Indian tradition

between religion and culture. The NBBC is caught in a predicament where he wants to distinguish between these two in his life, whereas neither most of his Hindu kinsmen nor most of his Christian co-believers are able to. The common Protestant reaction to the close association of Indian culture with Hindu religion has been to develop a separate culture for the new religion: differences in devotions, festivals, names, appearance, lifestyle, worship, gestures, etc. If you are to join this religion, you must get accustomed to its culture. This is the basis for all the accusations about a 'forsaking' of the family heritage.

The NBBC is trying to change religion without changing culture, even to the extent of asserting that he's not really changing religion at all. Unfortunately, he suffers from suspicion and rejection on the part of both Hindu kinsmen and Christian co-believers. Even if one is baptized, but does not participate in the mores of the Christian "culture," he will not be accepted. Sometimes the only way he can assert his cultural identity is by keeping aloof from the Christian community—which doesn't really know what to do with him anyway. The tragic consequence of this strategic aloofness is that the Christian community can then self-righteously judge the genuineness of his faith, and the NBBC ends up even more isolated and deprived spiritually (52).

Hoefler is rightly sympathetic to people in this situation, and demonstrates that their religious activity, while centered on Christ, often follows a Hindu rather than traditionally Christian pattern. That is, the church building is used like a temple for occasional visits when the need is felt; a picture of Christ is central to their devotion; they attend large Christian conventions rather on the

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pattern of taking a pilgrimage; and they follow an *ishta devata* theology of Jesus as a personal, chosen deity among many gods, if not in abstract theology, at least in practice in their highly pressurized situations. Interestingly, Hoefler comments that "these spiritual seekers are on the Indian quest for *shanti*, and they have found it in Christ. They are still Indians, they haven't yet become Protestants" (62). His highly appreciative closing summary must be quoted in full:

The general portrait of the non-baptized believer in Christ in rural Tamil Nadu, no matter

from what background he may come, is an encouraging one. He is a thoughtful and sincere person who takes his spiritual life seriously. He responds with gratitude and faithfulness when he has reached conviction about the love and power of Christ. Most often this conviction comes in some experience of healing, but it also often derives from the experience in a Christian school. The strength of his relationship with the church depends on whether the local congregation is of his own caste background or not. He clearly needs this relationship because of the financial, social, and spiritual problems he faces. In spite of all these problems, however, he/she presents us with a clear Indian experience of Christ as the fulfilment of the traditional spiritual quest for peace of mind and a clean heart. The non-baptized believer of rural Tamil Nadu is an admirable person. Thanks be to God (64).

Having become convinced of the quality of faith of the NBBCs, Hoefler sought a way to gauge their quantity. A survey of Madras City was the simplest way to get solid data on this, and had the advantage of providing an urban counterpart to the less scientific rural study. As the Department of Statistics at Madras Christian College had previously done political surveys, it was equipped for a broad-based analysis. Hoefler explains:

We decided to broaden the Madras City study in order to give us an idea of the place of Jesus Christ in the faith and practice of the whole population, not only the NBBCs. For our theological understanding and practical planning it is important to know the general background of which the non-baptized believer is a particular phenomenon. The questionnaire was designed in order to give us a clear idea of how Hindus and Muslims are already related to Christ and how we might best reach them (69).

No unbaptized believers were identified among the Muslim sample population. But “our primary problem seems to be lack of effort rather than lack of results. Once again, the sociological differences between the Christian and the Muslim community are the major barrier” (99). Among the Hindu population the results were striking indeed. “In Madras City our regular church ministries are reaching primarily 12 percent of the population, the Harijan community,” he notes (95).<sup>1</sup> Yet Hoefer found the number of high-caste Hindus who worship Christ equal to the entire Protestant population of Madras! It must be noted again that Hoefer employed a high definition for an NBBC. He points out that “even if we take the ‘hard-core’ figures of those who worship only Jesus, in terms of numbers the Hindu Harijan worshippers are only one-half of the total [NBBCs]. There are as many Protestants wholly devoted to the worship of Christ as there are people of all castes outside the church. The ‘churchless Christianity’ is a diverse group but certainly united in firm devotion to Christ under most difficult circumstances” (98).

### Sorting It Out

“What does all this mean?” asks Hoefer as he begins his final section evaluating all the data. He again carefully warns against taking his suggestions as anything more than tentative. God has done an unexpected work and we must continue to observe and learn from it. The primary point, without which all discussion of the subject will be misdirected, is to see that the “problem” of these believers staying outside the church has nothing to do with theology but rather with sociology. As Hoefer says:

The issue is the sociological distortion of theology in practice. If baptism and the church were carried out in practice as our theology conceives them, there would be no problem and there would be no non-baptized believers. It is clear, furthermore, that the communalized nature of the

church exists quite apart from baptism. Even among the non-sacramental churches where baptism is considered unnecessary (e.g. the Salvation Army) or merely symbolic (e.g. the Baptists), the church is just as exclusively communal as among those churches who emphasize the necessity of baptism. The character of the church is formed by the struc-



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ture of the society irrespective of the theology or practice of baptism.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the primary questions raised for us by the phenomenon of non-baptized believers in Christ around us are not about their authenticity but about ours; about our recognition of sociological realities in ecclesiastical structures and mission planning and about developing a style of church fellowship

which makes the call of Christ and gift of His Spirit available to all in the fullest possible freedom and power (150).

In the final chapter Hoefer considers implications for the future. New structures are needed as well as new missiological insight. This is especially imperative in light of the irrelevance of present Christian activity:

It is important for the church to share its inner experience and “mysteries” in a manner which is acceptable to those it seeks to reach. Most of the 80 percent of India around us feel no need for what we have to offer. They are quite proud of their own spiritual heritage, even if they have never drawn upon it seriously themselves. (197-198)

At issue is really a matter of fundamental mentality, not merely a change of candles to oil lamps. Can Christianity really be absorbed into this totally different religio-cultural environment? Certainly, it cannot be done by the church, but it has already begun among the non-baptized believers as we have seen in our survey. Christianity grew out of Judaism because Christ was incarnated there. However, when He was “grafted into” a totally new tree, we must only expect a new hybrid, a Church of Gentile customs and a theology of Gnostic and mystical ideas. Only then will Christ “of whom and to whom and through whom are all things” be “all in all” among the varying cultures of the world.

However, some might argue that this [the “smothering embrace of Hinduism”] is the danger with the *ishta devata* strategy I am proposing. It will lead not to an indigenous Christianity but to a Christianized Hinduism. Perhaps more accurately we should say a Christ-ized Hinduism. I would suggest that really both are the same, and therefore we should not worry about it. We do not

want to change the culture or the religious genius of India. We simply want to bring Christ and His Gospel into the center of it.

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 (207-210).

One leaves Hoefler rather gasping for breath as his vision stretches so far beyond our normal parameters of thought. Our emotional ties to historic Christianity and its cultural forms inevitably give birth to feelings of uneasiness as we think of "Christ-ized Hinduism."<sup>3</sup> But Hoefler has wrestled with the complex and disturbing rise of what Robin Boyd called the "Latin captivity of the Indian church."<sup>4</sup> He confesses to having learned a great deal from Hindus and high-caste NBBCs regarding the fact that Christ is "captivated" within the Indian church. He says he writes on behalf of numerous Christian workers, of whom "many are bending and ignoring missiologically frustrating church practices in order that the call and nurture of the Gospel can readily go beyond the church walls. Their greatest frustration and anger is directed not against the non-baptized believers but against the rigid church rules and rigid congregational attitude which hinder the free flow of the Gospel into the community. They want to be servants of the Kingdom, rather than servants of the church" (xiii).

Nonetheless, one must question whether Hoefler in the end is either too traditionally attached to the church or just not careful enough to define what he means in saying that this churchless Christianity needs the church. Did Gentile Christianity need the Jerusalem church? Arguably, it needed to be protected from that

church. It needed sensitive apostles from that church, and this seems the parallel to today. India's NBBCs need to be guarded against a great deal of trouble that Christians will cause them (clearly enough demonstrated in Hoefler's study), but they certainly need help. May all potential helpers be as careful and quick as the apostle Paul to renounce oversight and insist on immediate leadership from within the local context! Herbert Hoefler's study documenting the existence and vitality of faith in Christ outside the institutional church may well be the most significant missiological publication related to India to have appeared in the second half of the



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twentieth century. On the basis of experiential findings, followed up with careful research, Hoefler challenges the assumptions and practices of established church and mission structures. He calls for a paradigm shift in thinking about service for Christ in India, and for radical adjustment of ministry models to deal with a significant but ignored work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. In eight years since the publication of *Churchless Christianity*, little notice seems to have been taken, debate has not been stirred and, most tragically, ministry strategies that affirm and empower the NBBC have not been born.

Yet this is a book that demands debate and response. But where and by whom might this begin? Hoefler's is yet one more voice against the "captivated" Christ of the Indian church. What hope lies in his plea that "what we desperately need is that these mumblings of frustration

become a rising chorus of objection which we can no longer ignore" (xiv)? After a century of refining its ability to ignore just such "mumblings of frustration" and "anger against church rules and rigid congregational attitudes," one wonders if even a "rising chorus of objection" would be greeted by institutional leaders with anything other than rebuke as for lack of humility and ungodly impatience. Rather than vainly objecting to the church, the need is for pioneer ministries within Hindu contexts to be born—movements to empower NBBCs and help them forward in Biblical and contextual discipleship. As a new reality in discipleship to Christ emerges, the existing churches will adapt or die. Thus it happened in the first century as the Gentile churches overtook the Jewish; herein lies the hope of India in the 21st century. Herbert Hoefler has given a foundation for hope and a direction for planning; who now will take action?🌐

1. Terminology related to caste is almost as controversial as caste itself. Hoefler at one point is careful to point out that by speaking of "high" caste he is merely using traditional terminology and does not at all accept that there are higher and lower people. His chosen term for what are traditionally called "outcastes" (or Pariahs or panchamas or Scheduled Castes) is the Gandhi-coined term "Harijan," meaning people of God. This is now for many as unacceptable a term as those previously mentioned as it is considered condescending. The politically correct term of the hour is Dalit, which means "the oppressed."
2. It seems strange that in his long and helpful discussion of baptism Hoefler never refers to the complex legal issues involved therein, which most strikingly demonstrate that the baptism of non-Christians in India involves decidedly extra-Biblical (if not anti-Biblical) elements. (On this see Saldanha, J., *Conversion and Indian Civil Law*, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore, 1981.) Further, he makes no concrete suggestions on the line of reconceptualizing baptism in terms of the initiatory rites (often involving water) of numerous schools and sects of Hinduism. Omitting these rather obvious points is the only major flaw in his study.
3. Hoefler does not seem to be careful enough in defining this striking terminology. At this point he is clearly viewing Hinduism as primarily cultural phenomena. On this point see the striking analysis of Hans Staffner in *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community* (Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1988). Staffner argues that, "Hinduism is a culture that has room for many religions," and "Christianity is a religion which can become incarnate in any culture."
4. Boyd, Robin H., *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1974.