



Land of Dharma

Herbert Hoefler

Foreword to *Living Water and Indian Bowl*
by Dayanand Bharati (William Carey Library, 2004).
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India is a land of many different religions. Hinduism is a way of life with many different belief systems. It is significant that the proper name for “Hinduism” is “Sanatana Dharma” or “the eternal way of life.” You can have whatever beliefs you like, but you are expected to live out “dharma.” Your religion is expected to participate in the values and customs and organization of society.

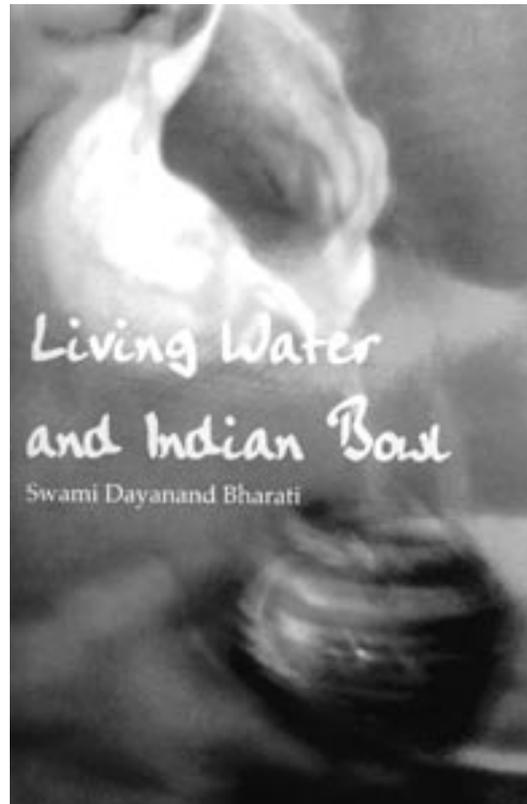
For Westerners, it can be disconcerting that Dayanand Bharati in this book does not address many philosophical or theological issues. In this regard, Dayanand is very “Hindu” (in the cultural sense) in his outlook. The emphasis is not on orthodoxy but on orthopraxis. Dayanand’s critique of Christianity is not that its teachings are heretical or false in India. His critique is that Christians do not follow dharma. They do not participate in the Indian way of life. For Westerners, these external matters can seem peripheral, but in the Indian context it’s the way you live and act that matters, not what you believe.

Hindus respect any religious person. Even as a foreign missionary, I have always found a willingness by Hindus to give me the benefit of the doubt. They

assume that I am a person of spiritual character. To that extent, they anticipate that I am participating in the dharma of the land. Any Christian pastor is generally welcomed into Hindu homes for prayer and teaching. If a Hindu finds you to be a person of character and propriety, it does not matter to him that much if you have differing theological beliefs. What matters first and foremost is that you are a person of dharma.

I was speaking with an evangelist in South India about a new congregation that had been started in a slum area. At the dedication of the small worship facility, local Hindu and Muslim leaders were invited to address the crowd. He reported that they all praised the congregation and the work, even though converts had come from their own religions. They said they rejoice that the congregation’s ministry had brought more dharma into the community: order, respect, decorum. The bottom line is not what you believe but what you are.

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Rejection of Dharma

It is argued that the Christians do not want to be part of dharma. The vast majority are from the "dalit" background, i.e., the untouchables and tribals. Even though they were counted among the Hindu population, they never felt a part of the religion. In fact, they strongly resented the Hindu way of life, for they were excluded and demeaned by it. Millions of dalits have become Christian precisely in protest against the dharmic way of life that had opposed them for so many centuries.

At the time of the British colonization, when most of the conversions took place, becoming a Christian had a double payoff. On the one hand, it was an assertion of human dignity over against their Hindu persecutors. On the other hand, it was a move into the prestigious world and benefits of the Western powers in the land. The converts often got special treatment, including education opportunities, overseas travel, and employment from their Western co-religionists.

During the period of the mass conversions among the dalits, there was a popular opinion that Western civilization was more advanced than Indian civilization. By joining the Christian religion, dalits were not only rejecting an oppressive civilization but joining a higher one. In the South, there were enough numbers of converts that they could safely and conveniently remain in their villages. In the North, however, the numbers were fewer, so many of the converts moved into the towns and cities to become part of the Western mission life there.

These movements of socio-religious revolt against Hindus continue to this day. No longer is there any opinion that Western culture is superior, but there is strong opinion among dalits that the oppressive attitudes and practices of Hindu dharma will never change. This conviction continues to be the impetus for many conversions to Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. These movements are highly political, for converts change their voting patterns and social allegiances. They no longer accept the Hindu ideologies that they feel have kept them oppressed for so many centuries. They want justice now, not in some future life.

As dalits, Christian converts had no desire to be a part of the general culture, the dharma, of the nation. They resented and rejected it. Much of our Western view of the Indian caste system has been colored by the experience of dalit Christians.

However, those 600 million who are in the caste system of India very much value it and enjoy it. They are embarrassed by the centuries-long oppression of the dalits and, since Independence, have generously effected "affirmative action" programs seeking to undo the suppression, at least economically.

Of course, the anger of the dalits remains, and we see it reflected in the "dalit theology" of today. Often this theology is full of vituperative and antagonistic analyses of dharma. Such attitudes certainly are understandable and to some extent relevant. However, it must be clear that such theology from India is not "Indian theology." It is the theology of the dalit church. It speaks to the 20% of the Indian population who are dalits. It does not speak to the 12% who are Muslim or the two-thirds who are in the castes.

India is a land of many different cultures and many different religions. Within Hinduism itself, one can identify hundreds of different religious traditions. Indigenous Christian theology grows out of the thought forms and quests of the culture. In the Indian context, there would then need to be hundreds of different theologies.

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One of these indigenous theologies has begun to develop, the dalit theology. It has its legitimate place. The church with its Westernized forms also has its place. The Christians are comfortable with its forms of worship and governance. They are Western forms, but that is why they were welcomed, and now they are well-rooted in the dalit church.

However, we must be clear that these forms and this theology do not speak to the vast majority of the land. The vast majority will never join the dalit church. We cannot expect the dalit church to have an effective outreach beyond its own dalit community. Certainly, as only 2.5% of the Indian population, the Indian church has plenty to do in evangelizing and serving their fellow dalits.

A Dharmic Theology

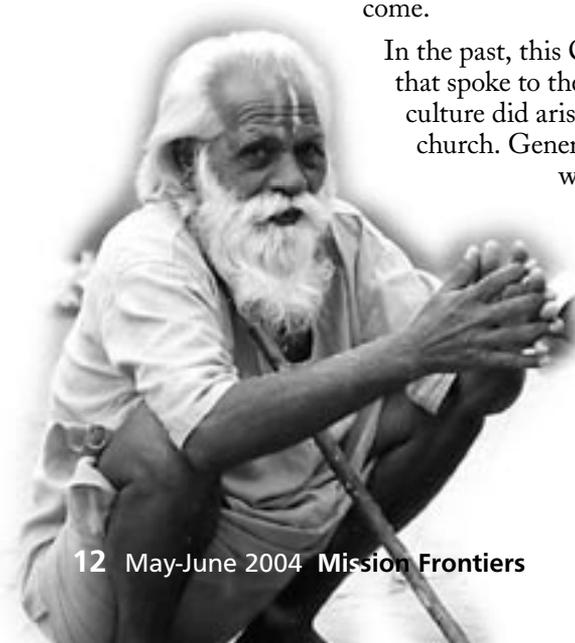
In this book, Dayanand Bharati does not propose to write an Indian theology. His role is more negative than positive, more iconoclastic than constructive. Dayanand attempts to show why the existing church in its structures and practices and thinking cannot relate to the two-thirds of

India who are in the castes. In the Western world, it took centuries for a John of Damascus and an Origen and a Thomas Aquinas and a Martin Luther to arise. These great theologians arose from the culture and spoke to the culture,

in very different ways. It may well take some centuries for their equivalents to arise on the Indian scene. In this book, Dayanand attempts to clear the path for such Indian greats yet to come.

In the past, this Christian voice that spoke to the general Hindu culture did arise in the Indian church. Generally, these were the voices of caste converts, who were attempting to relate their

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Christian faith to their own cultural identity. They needed to do this both for the sake of their own comfort in the faith and for the sake of conveying the faith to their fellow "Hindus." However, we cannot realistically expect those voices to be heard in the church today.

As part of the social movement toward personal dignity among dalit Christians, dalit leaders have asserted that their agenda will be the agenda of the church. They will speak for the church, since they are the vast majority. The voice of the church will be a dalit voice. They did not leave Hindu dharma in order to once again fall under caste Hindu leaders and theologies. In Protestant churches, dalits want dalit pastors and they elect dalit leaders.

With this reality, the place of the caste Hindu in the church is problematic. It will be very difficult for a dharmic theology to develop. The soil isn't there to nurture and support it. The dharmic way of life simply is not the culture of the vast majority of Christians, whether in outcaste villages in the South or in mission cantonments in the North.

Culturally rooted dharmic theology will have to grow in different soil than that in the organized church of India. Dayanand Bharati's unique role has been to serve as a spiritual guide and interpreter for some of the "Jesu bhaktas" (devotees of Jesus) around the country. I don't know that anyone else has ever attempted this ministry in the history of Christian mission in India. Because Dayanand's voice is unique today and significant, we must give it special attention. If a theology that is rooted in dharma is to develop, it will have to develop outside the church. Dayanand is crucial in keeping that spark of possibility alive.

A Dharmic "Church"

However, in the Indian context, a dharmic Christian theology will remain secondary to the development of a dharmic Christian way of life. Western Christianity is always asking for and promoting theology as the life and sign of the church. My guess is that the historical emphasis, even to this day, on developing an Indian theology has much more to do with pleasing the Western church than to relating to the real interests of the Indian people. Our church leaders are trained in the West and trained to speak to the West, and our seminary curricula and content are modeled after Western interests. Our church theologians rejoice to please their Western audiences.

A truly dharmic theology will have to develop outside of these precedents and expectations. It will have to be a church significantly different from the organized church that we have now, largely populated and determined by dalits. It will have to be a church characterized much more by dharma than by theology.

Here is where our attention turns to the hundreds of thousands of Jesu bhaktas living outside the organized church. They need to be strengthened and guided in their lonely struggle to be faithful to our Lord. We can only hope and pray that many more Christian gurus like Dayanand Bharati will respond to God's Spirit. They won't come out of the formal seminaries, but out of the soil of the land, just as the great gurus of Hinduism do. They will need to arise in each of the hundreds of caste groups where Jesu bhaktas live and pray. These Jesu bhaktas need nurture not only to remain steadfast in the faith but to share it effectively among their families and communities.

Even though the Jesu bhaktas (for the time being, at least) must remain separate from the church, they also sorely need the church. They can easily slip into heresy. They can easily compromise their faith and their witness. They can easily get exhausted by the struggle and meld back into the Hindu religious fold. At least until they have their own Christian gurus, they will need pastoral guidance and support. They need the affirmation and support of the organized church, though not its control and direction.

I hope that this book will motivate church people in India and around the world to appreciate the struggles of the Jesu bhaktas. They are the key to reaching the dharmic world of India. The Jesu bhaktas

must be enabled to develop a church life that is rooted in dharmic soil where they live. This book should be a resource for all of those who even now reach into the lives of the 600 million people who live in India's caste system, through mass media, evangelistic conventions, pilgrimage centers, literature, Bible correspondence courses, etc.

Thanks to this book, we have a good idea of what we shouldn't do and some suggestions as to what we should do.

Will we respect the dharmic culture of India, will we love the people of India's castes, will we value the courageous Jesu bhaktas, enough to change our ways? If we don't, we know we will be just as unsuccessful in our outreach to caste India in the future as we have been in the past. If we take the ap-

proach Dayanand Bharati proposes, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ may flow smoothly and powerfully, with fewer unnecessary hindrances.

Can you imagine a church in India that draws on all the beauty and profundity of the ancient cultures of India? What a contribution that would be to the great nation of India and to the worldwide Christian fellowship. Let us join Dayanand Bharati in praying and working for that day. 🌐

Hundreds of thousands of Jesu bhaktas need to be strengthened and guided in their lonely struggle to be faithful to our Lord.

To order *Living Water and Indian Bowl*, see pages 20-21.



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