

EVANGELISM OF THE HINDUS

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This is an essay on evangelization of the Hindus in India. Being a retrospective study, it may lack in scientific methodology, and prepared in a hurry, it may lack depth and thoroughness.

One can do no better than begin this paper by praising God for his grace to us in India in sending large numbers of his servants with the good news of Jesus Christ. In grateful memory of these innumerable company, this paper is thankfully dedicated to them.

This paper begins with the assumption that God is always the author of all evangelistic activity; that God has no partiality, wishing that all may be saved and that none may perish; and that he loves all mankind. It is also assumed that the finest among human agents are but unworthy servants, when all is said and done. As such, any glory or credit that accrues, goes only and solely to God.

First, we shall look at the history of evangelism of the Hindus. Then we shall try to see if we can draw some lessons from this. We shall then enter into a discussion on men, message, and methods in evangelism of the Hindus based on our lessons from history. At the end we shall briefly look at some modern concepts on this subject.

The history of evangelization of the Hindus is shrouded in obscurity. There is a general tradition that Thomas, the apostle of our Lord, brought the Gospel to India, and a particular tradition strongly held by the Kerala Syrian Christians that Thomas came to Kerala, preached the Gospel both to the Jews and the Hindus in 52 AD, and that he established seven churches. Having appointed elders from four Brahmin families, he left Kerala, later to be martyred in Mylapore near Madras.

This is not the place to enter into the merits or otherwise of this tradition. Suffice it to say that the lack of inscriptions, monuments, or records does not have the same validity in a land where records are scarce even for Indian history, where Brahmins never wrote down their scriptures, but always passed it on by oral tradition. If this tradition is reliable, it proves several things. Firstly, that even in the first century the good Lord remembered the poor Hindus and even sent one of his twelve chosen ones. Secondly, that if divine methods are used, Brahmins could easily be converted, and that in much less than two decades, seven churches could be established in a pagan land stretching from Kotungallur to Kollam even in the first century, in most unsettled times.

If the period of the Thomas visitation and the tradition itself is covered in obscurity, the next two or three centuries are even more obscure. One knows almost nothing about how this church fared, whether it evangelized the neighboring Hindus, or how it grew. We are up against almost a total blank.

The next event in history seems to be the visit or visits of some Syrian Christian families to Kerala between the fourth and eighth centuries. There is more evidence for this than the Thomas tradition. Perhaps they were traders who were facing persecutions in their own land of Syria, which we know did occur at various times. Did the Syrians

evangelize? If they did, we have no record of their success or otherwise. There is a tradition that some of these Syrians intermarried and others did not. Does this mean that Hindus of the neighborhood married these visitors, or did the neighbors get converted before marriage? We have no means of knowing now. It seems doubtful that these merchants, so fond of the pepper trade, could be great evangelists, particularly when one remembers that for centuries the Bible was hidden from the common man (as the Bible was in Syriac and only a few knew the Syriac language). These Syrians were well known in those eventful times for their trade and for their martial qualities. They were respected by the Hindu chieftains and princes. However, one sees in these influxes the Divine Grace to the end that there should be a nucleus of Christians in India always.

One must sadly admit that although it is likely that there were Christian communities in other areas also, we know nothing of their whereabouts or doings, since nothing has survived of these groups.

The next important event in the history of the Indian Church was the coming of the Portuguese in 1498, under Vasco da Gama, mainly as adventurers and traders. But it must be said that these Portuguese had been sent by their kings to spread Christianity also. The pope had gaily divided the world into two halves and given the eastern half to the Portuguese. It must be said to the credit of these Portuguese settlers, that for the next two and a half centuries they tried with great zeal to spread Christianity in the land under their control, their headquarters being Goa. Some of the methods they employed, like encouraging Portuguese men to marry Kerala belles (after baptizing the latter), destroying temples and mosques in the area under their occupation, and assuring the poorer sections of the Hindus Portuguese protection as incentives to conversion, were highly irregular, to say the least. But it must be said to their credit that at least they were very zealous in their Christianization program. Thousands of low caste Hindus were converted.

Among the Portuguese two names stand out for their zeal, Francis Xavier and de Nobili. The first was a Spaniard who had rejected the teachings of the reformers while studying in France, and had come under the influence of the zealot and fanatic Ignatius Loyola, another Spaniard. Xavier did marathon service in teaching and preaching, baptizing many and instructing more. He travelled widely in south India, but finally left India for other eastern lands. One gets the impression that even he was disgusted at the quality of the converts the Portuguese had made. He was, perhaps, even more disgusted with the life the Portuguese led, full of greed and avarice for earthly gain. The other person, de Nobili, who came to Madura, South India, was a pioneer among the Jesuits in his method of approach to the Hindus. He believed that to convert the high caste Hindus he must himself become like one, and so he donned the Hindu saffron robe of the mendicant or Sanyasi. He called himself a Kshatriya and engaged a Brahmin cook, studied sanskrit, and the vedas, and gave infrequent but long discourses to inquirers on the lines of Hindu students of philosophy. He further declared that a Hindu need not leave his social or economic background, but could continue to use the same caste marks, wear tufts of hair like any other Hindu, could wear the sacred thread and could continue to live in the same family background

as long as he did not worship idols. This he called the theory of accommodation. At first the whole thing must have seemed a novel thing to many Hindus and a few Brahmins were "converted," but as the novelty wore off, only low caste Hindus were converted later. It must be said to his credit that he at least saw a problem in the high caste Hindus' hardness to the Gospel and also saw the need to divest western forms from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In this he was indeed a pioneer.

However, he made the mistake of going too far and made Christianity look the same as Hinduism. One gathers from Abbe Dubois that even after 200 years there remained many Hindu customs like caste among these Christians of South India. There is even now a greater tendency among the south Indian Christians to casteism than the north Indians. One would just like to point out that there is nothing new in the methods now being advocated by many churches, whereby Hindu forms are given to Christianity. It is at least as old as de Nobili himself.

The next period one may call the time of Protestant missions, although the Roman church also made tremendous advances in this period. Before we do so, we must pause to state how good God always has been to send repeated streams of his people so that those Indians and Hindus who wish to come to Jesus may do so. One also suspects that when one generation becomes weak in teaching and Christian leadership, he brings his others to replenish and reinforce.

Only an omnipotent and gracious God could have arranged all the factors that led to the modern missionary movement, now associated with the coming of the Protestant missionaries. Men in important positions, like the king of Denmark, were moved by God to send missionaries to India to evangelize the Hindus.

Thus came the first German pair, Ziegenbalg and Pluetschau, to Tranquebar in South India. These products of the pietist movement in Halle laid the pattern for most of the later Protestant missions. First establishing something like the much-maligned but necessary mission compound; then translating the Scriptures into local languages which had never been done before in all the centuries of Christianity in India; teaching and instructing from the Bible and exhorting to live good godly lives. As pioneers they did very well. They were accused of paternalism, which was perhaps inevitable and pardonable in those early days, and anyway it is far easier to criticize them than to find an alternative.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century there came William Carey to Bengal with the avowed object of converting the Hindus, and trusting in the promises of God (Isaiah 54:2,3), with his motto, "Attempt great things for God, and expect great things from God." Elements in his work which were new were that the work should support itself financially and that Christian education was essential for growth. For this he started Serampore College, emphasizing translating the Bible in various Indian languages. He also made the Western churches aware of their great responsibilities to evangelize the Hindus of India.

God's hand in these decades is also seen in raising up Christian members of the British public like Wilber Force, who fought a prolonged battle for the cause of evangelization of the Hindus. But the East India Company would not allow missionaries to come to India.

This period is also remarkable for the number of Christian institutions like hospitals and colleges which sprang up all over the country. At one time it looked almost as if India might turn to Christ in a big way but it never happened. This era of Protestant expansion was also characterized by a new sense of responsibility which the Indian church felt for evangelizing their own countrymen. Indian church leaders grew in number and stature. Christian knowledge, education, and literature has multiplied at an astonishing rate.

This period is also noteworthy for great expansion of the Gospel to the tribal areas, and great mass movements. To these missionaries must go the credit for giving at least one phrase to the Indian people, the so-called "missionary spirit," but to them must also go the discredit that centuries passed and they were not able to evangelize the Indians.

What lessons can we learn from this history of evangelization of Hindus? First, there is much more than accident in these repeated influxes of Christians to the land of the Hindus, some more, some less concerned with the salvation of the Hindus. Surely there is the hand of the Almighty in all of this, and it is consistent with the kind of God the Bible speaks about.

Except for the Apostle Thomas, whose arrival is not beyond dispute, there seems some kind of progression in the evangelistic fervor of our visitors. God has thus prepared our generation for the great leap forward. God is preparing us for this.

What is equally obvious is that in spite of all these centuries of evangelism, in 1971 only 2.67 per cent of the population were Christian, and that they live in only a few states of the union. Other states are virtually without Christians. Moreover, even these are mostly urban, so that villages remain practically untouched. The conclusions are obvious.

Then perhaps, we can learn something about missionary methods from history. There seems no mathematical relationship between method and results, although this is only an impression. One missionary goes to a tribal area and wins thousands to Christ while others sweat and labor for decades and nothing seems to happen. In some institutions, like hospitals, no one is converted, while in others many are converted. A man like de Nobili, who sacrificed much, gained no more than many missionaries who worked among some other groups.

There is no recognizable pattern between methods and magnitude of converts. Unfortunately, we do not know enough about the prayer life of all these missionaries so that we can't try to equate their "production" of converts with their prayer life. The life of men like Praying Hyde, however, shows that there may well be a relationship between prayer and conversions.

Perhaps we can draw one conclusion safely, that no evangelist can reproduce better Christians than himself. The Portuguese reproduced unsatisfactory Christians of whom even one of their own felt so disgusted. De Nobili did the same. Syrians did the same. Perhaps the Protestant missionaries have done the same. It seems a fairly valid conclusion, because one tends to copy the example given. This is human weakness. Great is the responsibility of the evangelists to live holy lives before God and men. History also teaches, lest we should forget it, that Christianity

is no more a foreign religion than Islam or Hinduism, for it also came from outside India. In apologetic preaching in India, this should be hammered home much more often than is ever done.

Can we learn anything about the message and its relevance to India and Hindus from history? Although the evidences are few, it would seem that the great interest in Christian education evidenced by the Hindus from the time of Duff in Bengal, the great appreciation that Christian service in Christian institutions have drawn from Hindus generally, and the fact that the spirit of service is not only widely recognized but called "missionary spirit" would go to show to some extent that the message of Christ as proclaimed in India, has some relevance to the Hindu mind.

Further, the impetus that the wide Christian teaching has given to neo-Hinduism and Hindu reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chander Sen, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo seem to indicate that the message of the Bible in India in these latter times has produced some lasting changes in Hindu thinking. The formation of many groups like the Prarthana Samaj, in the west of India and the Arva Samaj in the north, and the Brahma Samaj in the east seem to indicate that a new spirit did arise in Hinduism. From these, it would seem that the message has gone home in some measure at least, to provoke the thinking Hindu to action, however perverted. It seems safe to assume that the Gospel which has been preached in India may have not dealt a mortal blow to Hinduism, but certainly has seriously injured it.

In a sketchy appraisal of the history of Hindu evangelization, one did not have the occasion to point out how institutions started with very good intentions and soon lost their essential original Christian character and thrust. This seems the inevitable conclusion one draws from a careful survey of educational and medical institutions at least. Even the orphanages in the south are facing serious problems. Can we say that the phase of Christian institutions in evangelism is finished or nearly so? The only alternative seems to be to enter areas of Christian service like leprosy work, care of the mentally retarded and epileptic, village medical work, and perhaps public health work also, where others are unwilling to serve. One recognizes great possibilities in the first three categories. Unfortunately, the Indian Christian medical doctors and their mentors don't seem to realize this. For a long, long time to come, these areas are likely to be open.

One did not have time to review in this short historical survey, the effect of church unions and indigenization of Hindu evangelization. It will be remembered that both these projects were started to make evangelization of Hindus easier and it is fair, therefore, to ask if more Hindus have been converted in these last twenty-seven years when these measures were taken. It is almost certain that those groups who have formed such unions have had very little conversions. It seems paradoxical that those groups which refused to unite just for the sake of unity, have had more Hindu conversions than the others. As far as one can make out from available data, there seems no basis for thinking that the Hindus resist conversion because Christians are divided. Church unions, therefore, seem to have forgotten to lay the golden egg. From all accounts, they have done very little in Hindu evangelization. With regard

to indigenization, one has to be more cautious. Perhaps it depends on what one means by this word. If by this is meant divesting the Christian message from its European garb, and Christian worship from Western forms, then perhaps there has been some useful results. There is some reason to think that the Western apparel and accompaniments may hinder the effectiveness of the message to the Hindus. However, the evidence is not altogether unequivocal.

Time did not permit us to survey the history of such movements as ashrams, and the use of Hindu thought forms to Christian message in India. There may be some substance to the statement that Sadhu Sunder Singh is supposed to have made that for Hindus the Christian message must be given in Indian glass tumblers or containers or something to that effect. One feels that something like this was done by the apostles in the West when they went from the Jews to the Greeks. One is reminded that John used the Logos concept and Paul may well have used the words, flesh and spirit, from the Greek gnostics; but it cannot be doubted that they did use Greek thought forms to convey the typically Hebrew message to non-Hebrews. Once it is realized that there is a real danger in such an exercise, one feels there is real scope for such messages.

There is little doubt that none of the historical Christian movements we studied laid emphasis on this, and those pioneers like de Nobili, who did, went too far.

This takes us to what is today called Indian Christian theology. This is such a huge subject that one cannot adequately deal with it in a paper like this. Yet, one must say that there is a real need to express the message of Christ in thought forms understandable to the Indian mind, if this is possible without damaging the content of the message. As Sunder Singh tried to say, but what no one at the time heeded, there is a real need to give the Gospel wrapped or contained in Indian dress or Indian containers. It is interesting that this process does go on involuntarily almost among the poorly-taught Hindu converts; and it is fascinating to see how they use Hindu thought forms and expressions in their explanations for fellow Hindus. Some conservatives are likely to think that the wrappings and trappings do not matter and all that matters is the message. This is an over-simplification. These thought forms and phrases are very much part of the message, just as language is a means of communication.

It should also be remembered that just as one does not use Greek, the original language of the Gospel, so also one may have to discard Western phraseology and thought forms and adopt Indian thought forms and expressions to the Hindus so that the message may make some sense. One wonders how many evangelists have the courage to ask Hindu listeners what they thought about the message, whether they understood it. Often they will be told that most of it was incoherent to him. "We did not understand a thing," is a common criticism by Hindus of the ordinary evangelist's message. One wonders how separated evangelists can become from the common people of this land. One can only call it ludicrous in the extreme when some American returned evangelists use Americanisms which mean nothing to the Easterner; let alone the Hindu.

There is much truth in the idea that anything foreign is rejected immediately by the human being. Just as he rejects a kidney or a heart, man

rejects the Gospel also, if it is made to appear foreign to him. One has learned from one's sad experience how one's highly developed Western ideas go like water off a duck's back when given to the average Indian. The tragedy is that so few of the evangelists deal with ordinary men and women. They are always travelling and meeting the same kind of nominal Christian crowd and inquirers that they have ceased to think about the common man at all.

It is an essential step in human tissue transplantation to expose the recipient to immunosuppressor drugs. Something analogous to this may well have to be done in preaching the Gospel to Hindus also. Like tissue transplants the original qualities of course should not be sacrificed in this process wherein lies the beauty and challenge of transplant surgery. One would think that there is immense beauty and joy in trying to communicate to Hindus the Gospel in forms he can understand. Nobody should think that this is possible only to great theologians. Any Tom, Dick, and Harry can carry on a long conversation with a Hindu and learn his thought forms. Each Hindu is different. There is immense scope for great originality which the blessed Holy Spirit can give to illumined minds.

This is a strategy paper. What is the best strategy for the Hindu? One should at once say that we should recognize the enemy, his strength and his weakness. One should also in the same breath say that the enemy is Satan who has deceived the poor Hindu and not the Hindu himself. "We wrestle against powers and...not against flesh and blood," says the apostle. This is important to recall lest we hate the Hindu and treat him as our enemy. One must also remember that the only weapons which prevail against this foe are spiritual weapons. In worldly methods, Satan and the world are task masters, and we don't have a chance against these.

The evangelist's method against Satanic deception of the Hindu is therefore not weapons of argument, reasoning, logic, nor even Indian Christian theology, but truth, righteousness, faith, and so on, as seen in Ephesians 6. If there is one thing that sounds foolish, it is this. One would think that Joshua must have at first thought it was silly to walk round and round the well-fortified city of Jericho. What a silly spectacle that must have been. Yet there is a lesson there for us which we in India have not yet learned fully: that the author of saving faith is God Almighty alone and that without his help and cooperation, all preaching is plain drivel, useless gibberish. One cannot over-emphasize this aspect. One thinks of the many occasions in one's experience when a poorly-attended Gospel meeting was due to lack of prayer.

Spiritual weapons alone can produce spiritual victory and conquests. How does one react with the Hindus? Logically he is the victim of a great fraud and deception and, therefore, it behooves us to treat him with the compassion he deserves, provided he understands that one is not agreeing with his religion nor his philosophy. This subtle ability to hate the sin and love the sinner is rather a difficult art and needs much practice. Nothing is communicated if not conveyed with love. To communicate to the Hindu, one must love the Hindu. This is easier said than done, as anyone knows who has tried. It is like walking on a razor's edge. His behavior patterns are based on his worship of monkeys, cows, snakes,

rats, and even genitalia, and such behavior does not endear one to a civilized Christian. Only the Spirit of Jesus Christ can give one the power to love such unlovely beings. But basically, it must be emphasized that he won't be saved unless someone loves him.

It is sad that we have no material with us to do some research on the part love from a Christian played in Hindu conversions. But one has a hunch that this is considerable. One fears that converts fight shy of this point and are not utterly honest, fearing that their testimonies may be spoiled by the public avowal of human love as an inducement for conversion. One has no doubt at all that nothing can be truly communicated without love, not even science. Fear and suspicion bar learning and communication. One has no hesitation in saying that the Hindu is weakest here. His loneliness, his lack of a love experience, his desire for love. Here he is very vulnerable. Should not one attack here?

The Hindu is strongest in philosophical and argumentative discussions. Here one should give him a wide berth. Dialogues with him on the whole are quite useless. It is more likely that he will make you a Hindu rather than vice versa. He is in his element in debate of any kind.

To conclude then, evangelization of the Hindu is urgent business because there are so many unconverted Hindus (about 340 million). Moreover, they may convert Europe and America to Hinduism if one is not careful. They have been known to do this with Buddhism in history. Further, there is every chance they may become a very important people in this geographical area. And surely Hindus are more vulnerable today than at any other time in history perhaps. They are fast losing faith in almost everything Indian. There is a vacuum in their experience of life and they are hungering for reality. Only Christ can fill it. There is the ominous possibility also that they may turn to communism or other ways. And above all, Christian compassion demands that we help them in their hour of spiritual need.

Our enemy is Satan, not the Hindus. Our weapons are spiritual, not carnal. Our hope is not in clever methodology, but the power of the Spirit, and love and prayer. The most important thing is to stop talking about it and start doing something about it. After all, this is God's work. He is committed to bless us.

Note: The question is often asked, "Is there a Christ of Hinduism, the hidden Christ, etc.?" This is a controversial subject. One does not wish to enter into any controversy. But one feels that there is no more Christ in Hindu scriptures than many other great religion or mystic poetry. Various claims have been made. All one can say honestly is that one has not seen any Christ in Hinduism.