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**Witnessing to Christ
in a Pluralistic World**

Christian Mission
among Other Faiths

Edited by

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The photo on the cover shows 'Christ Temple' at the Tao Fong Shan center for dialogue, spirituality and studies in Hong Kong. The center and the Christ Temple were built in the 1930s as a meeting place for Buddhist monks from China and Christians. The center functioned in that manner until the beginning of World War II. Today the center, with its Chinese and Buddhist architecture, continues to be a place of dialogue between people of living faiths.

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MISSION AMONG HINDUS: THE 'FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS' AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN HINDU AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Pramod Aghamkar

Introduction

Diwali or the Festival of Lights is synonymous with the popular Hinduism and embodies its core religious values. No other Hindu festival can keep alive the religion, unite the community or affirm the myths by connecting them to theological truths as *Diwali* does. High popularity of *Diwali* due to religious, communal, and cultural significance is well known around the world.¹ The United States Senate passed a historical resolution in 2007 to recognize *Diwali*, welcoming the Hindu festival.²

Worldwide receptivity of *Diwali* can serve as a bridge between Hindu and Christian communities for communication of the Gospel message. Contextualizing *Diwali* demands attention to a number of questions: What is *Diwali*? What theological truths undergird the festival? How might a contextual engagement of these theological truths facilitate better communication of the Gospel--in follow-up and discipleship processes, in worship, liturgy or teaching? This paper examines the form and meaning of Hindu and non-Hindu *Diwali* festivals, delineates Christian *Diwali* celebrated in Dayton, OH, USA and proposes creation of a Christian *Diwali*.

Hindu Demographic, Socio-Economic and Religious Affinities of Asian Indians in the USA

The Asian Indian community is one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in North America. The 1990 census indicated the number (not all Hindus) increased 125 percent during the 1980s.³ The Sikh community grew to

¹ Julia Roberts, London, Nov 4, IANS. <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/110394/julia-roberts-wants-diwali-celebrated.html> (11 March 2011).

² Aziz Haniffa, 'Senate also adopts Diwali resolution' *India Abroad* 38.8 (23 November 2007a), A6.

³ Edwin Scott Gaustan and Philip L. Barlow, *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2000).

more than a million by 2002 and probably has doubled today.⁴ The growth was 9 to 10 times faster than the general population, and by 2008, the Indian community was numerous enough to be taken seriously by American politicians.⁵

Indian cultural traditions remain strong in the United States. In June 2009, a group of about 25 Hindu professionals gathered in a huge home to talk about the economical situation in America. The home resembled a miniature Hindu centre with huge idols dominating the great room and a separate alter for more deities. The idols [about 4' x 3'] had been shipped directly from India, and the host acknowledged the rightful role in all of the success. Hindu prayers during the meeting vividly reaffirmed the group's commitment to their Hindu identity, while being American immigrants.

Hindu Religio-Cultural Adaptations in the Indian Communities

The Hindu worldview is based on the multiplicity of paths to the One (God), a concept referred in Bhagavad Gita 7:2; 9:23-24.⁶ For example, Gandhi considered all faiths valid 'as long as [they] reach the same goal'.⁷ The inclusive notion infers tolerance and automatically nullifies exclusivism, thus denouncing proselytisation. Traditional values are held high by the community as an ancient Hindu *dharma* (religion).⁸

In the United States, this worldview is increasingly engaging American culture. Modern missionary Hinduism is shaped by *gurus* and organizations associated with Krishna Consciousness.⁹ Yoga and meditational activities show a growing Hindu religious engagement across cultural boundaries. The first Hindu prayer offered to open the US Senate on July 12, 2007 marked a milestone in history.¹⁰ Recently, extreme changes are encountered by the Hindu community as a few transgress strict marriage patterns.¹¹

⁴ Gurmukh Singh, 'A Community of Overachievers' *India Abroad* 33.41 (11 July 2003), M3.

⁵ Haniffa, 2008 'Asian community poised to swing US elections' *India Abroad* 39.2 (10 October 2008), A14-A15.

⁶ Swami Sivananda, *The Bhagavad Gita* (Shivanandanagar India: The Divine Life Society, 1995), 85.

⁷ M. K. Gandhi, *My God* (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1962), 35.

⁸ M.R. Dua, 'Where's our Indian-ness?' *India Abroad* 33.41 (11 July 2003), M14.

⁹ Correspondent, 'ISKCON devotees on unique trip from Pennsylvania to Mexico' *India Abroad* 33:41 (2003), C1.

¹⁰ Haniffa, 'Senate also adopts Diwali resolution' *India Abroad* 38.8 (23 November 2007), A12.

¹¹ Sandip Roy, 'My family thought it was an American thing' *India Abroad* 39.42 (17 July 17 2009), M12.

The Pluralism Project lists 723 Hindu temples in the US.¹² Additional Jain, Sikh, and Indian Buddhist centres, however, could increase the number to as high as 1500, based on the growth of the community today. About fifty temples visited by the author exhibit traditional sacred architecture, but show innovative or adaptive patterns of assimilation. *Pooja* (prayer) programs designed to meet the community needs.

An estimated five million people from India and a dozen other Asian countries are now living in the US and celebrate *Diwali*. Normally *Diwali* celebrations draw crowds of around 50,000 in Irving, Atlanta, Chicago, and Boston.¹³

A few Hindu sects incorporate Jesus into their pantheon of deities. The majority of Hindus in non-western countries view Christianity as a foreign religion and its converts as unpatriotic. Antagonism towards evangelistic activities by extremists remains strong.¹⁴

A creative presentation of the Christian message – by using local festivals and especially parts of *Diwali* compatible with the Gospel – would be well received and improve rapport between the faiths. Any social or household setting could be used, for '[a]t least 80 percent of India's Christian population is estimated to have come to faith via a group decision process'¹⁵. A shared celebration of *Diwali* between Christians and the Hindu community could open new possibilities for unprecedented effectiveness of the Message.

Form and Meaning of Hindu *Diwali*

Diwali or *Deepavali* – literally meaning a row of lamps – annually falls on a new moon day during the months of *Ashwin-Kartika* (October-November). The five-day celebration begins from the 13th day of the dark half of the lunar month *Ashvina* until the second day of the light half of *Kartika*.¹⁶ The festival includes the following general activities rooted in a number of ancient Hindu myths and traditions.

Day one, *Dhanteras*, or *Dhantrayodashi* is associated with the worship of *Dhanwantari*. He appeared at the churning of the ocean carrying nectar in his hand. Buildings and home entrances are adorned with traditional motifs and auspicious hangings. Hindu families buy gold as a sign of

¹² Pluralism Project, <http://www.pluralism.org/resources/statistics/tradition.php#Hinduism> (17 June 2009).

¹³ Monika Joshi and Ayoti Mittra, 'Community Braces for Festive Season' *India Abroad* 39.2 (10 October 2008), A48-A49.

¹⁴ Suman Guha Mozumder, 'Christian groups protest Orissa violence outside United Nations' *India Abroad* 39.4 (24 October 2008), A15.

¹⁵ Roger E. Hedlund, *Mission to Man in the Bible* (Madras, India: Evangelical Literature Service, 1985), 228.

¹⁶ Jayant Salgaonkar (Ed), *Kalanirnaya* [Semi Almanac] (Mumbai, India: ABC Prakashan, 2009), 10.

increase and worship five grains on this day. Most worship cattle the day prior or during this period as the symbol of wealth.

The second day is *Narak Chaturdashi*. The day preceding *Diwali* Lord *Krishna* killed the demon king *Narakaasura* and rescued 16,000 daughters from captivity. The story conveys his ultimate victory over evil. On the new moon of *Kartik* Lord *Rama*, his wife *Sita* and his brother *Laxmana* returned to the kingdom of *Ayodhya* after vanquishing the evil king *Ravana*. The citizens of *Ayodhya* decorated the city with earthen lamps to welcome Lord *Rama* who is revered as the role model king and husband. This day libations are offered to appease *yama* the deity of death.

The third day is important one for business community and to be devoted to the propitiation of *Laxmi*, the goddess of wealth. According to a myth, *Laxmi* appeared on the new moon day (*amaavasyaa*) of the month *Kartik* during the churning of the ocean for nectar. It is believed that she loiters through by-lanes and showers blessings. On this day *Laxmi* is worshipped along with cash, gold, silver and account books.

Day four is called *Varshapratipada* and marks coronation of the king *Vikramaditya*. According to a Hindu myth, *Krishna* stopped the city of *Gokul* from offering prayers to Lord *Indra* who in anger sent a deluge to submerge the people. Nevertheless, *Krishna* saved the city miraculously. This day is considered the most auspicious day to start any new venture.

Bhau Beej, (*Bahi Tika* in Nepal) observed on day five as a symbol of love between siblings. Sisters offer prayers for brothers with an *aarati* (prayer/praise chants). A brother stands in place of *Krishna* who did the noble deed by killing the demon *Narkasura*. A ritual for a brother's longevity and prosperity includes a special square shaped space drawn on the floor, lined with various designs in corn powder or rice grains. A brother(s) may taste a bitter fruit (*Karith*) from a plate holding a lighted earthen lamp before stepping into the square. The sister(s) put a red mark on the brother(s)' forehead and make clockwise and anti-clockwise signs by hand holding silver and gold coins respectively. After eating sweets, the brother (s) in exchange offer presents as a token of love and promise to care for the sister(s). Those who do not have a brother perform a *pooja* (worship/prayer) to the Moon-God.

Most common in *Diwali pooja* (worship) is *aarati* led by a priest or a family head, which includes singing while a plate with a lighted lamp, incense, turmeric, and red powders is circled clockwise facing a deity. The *pooja* ritual at home includes an offering to *agni* (fire), welcoming, installing, foot washing, and decorating the deities followed by the offering of food, fruits, clothing, or money.

Fresh flowers, specific herbs, and plants including *jhal-phaag* used in the rituals.¹⁷ Orange flags are installed. Lamps are kept constantly burning in front of the family deities. *Shloka* (verses) chants, the ringing of bells

¹⁷ *Jhal-phaag*: A combination of milk, *ghee* (clarified butter), honey and spices.

and the blowing of conch shells symbolize blessings bestowed. *Prasada* (offered food) is distributed to all.

An interesting custom characterizing *Diwali* in North India is indulging in gambling. It is believed that the Goddess *Parvati* played dice with her husband Lord *Shiva* on this day and decreed that whoever gambled on *Diwali* night would prosper throughout the ensuing year. The tradition of playing cards and rummy with monetary stakes on this particular day continues until now.¹⁸ The proposed Christian *Diwali* will exclude this element.

Non-Hindu *Diwali* Festivals

While the Hindu *Diwali* is based on religious myths, Sikhs, Jains and Neo-Buddhists (not discussed) celebrate *Diwali*, but for different reasons.¹⁹

Sikh Diwali

The Sikh community celebrates in *Diwali* the story of their struggle for freedom based on history.²⁰ The foundation stone of the global centre of Sikhism, the Golden Temple called *Har Mandar* in India was laid on *Diwali* day in 1577. *Guru Hargobind Singh*, the sixth Sikh *Guru*, was released from the captivity of a Muslim emperor in India in 1619 with 52 other chiefs. He ‘earned the appellation of *Bandi-Chhor*,’ meaning deliverer from prison.²¹ The released *guru* arrived at Amritsar on *Diwali* day, the Golden Temple was illuminated with lamps, and the day came to be known as the *Bandi Chhor Divas* (day of freedom). Thereafter, *Diwali* in Sikhism commemorates his triumphant arrival and regards the movement dedicated to justice.²²

¹⁸ *Diwali Pooja*, <http://www.Diwalifestival.org/Diwali-pooja.html> (18 June 2009).

¹⁹ The term Neo-Buddhists refers to converts to Buddhism from low caste community under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the central part of India since 1956. As untouchables the community followed animism with Hindu ideas of *Diwali*. Post conversion *Diwali* incorporated elements of Buddhism. See B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Bombay: Siddharth Publication 1957). Bhau Lokhande, *Boudhanche San, Utsav ani Mansikta [Buddhist Festivals, Celebrations and Manners]* (Wardha, India: Sudhir Prakashan 2009).

²⁰ Sikh Festivals, <http://www.allaboutsikhs.com/sikh-festivals/the-sikh-festivals-divalibandichhorh-divas.html> (18 June 2009).

²¹ Brigadier Hardit Singh, “Guru Hargobindji, His Life and Times.” Review *Guru Hargobindji, His Life and Times*, *Abstracts of Sikh Studies* (October -December 1996), 79.

²² W. Owen Cole, *The Guru in Sikhism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1982), 26.

According to Sikhs, the *Guru* accomplished these extraordinary things through immense spiritual power.²³ *Guru* Hargobind Singh and martyrs are venerated during *Diwali* by offering incense and flowers. The recitation of *Grantha Sahib* (the Sikh scriptures) and religious discourses are held in *Gurudwaras* (Sikh temples). The celebration includes *Kirtan* (devotional singing), a communal meal, and the distribution of food--all without idolatry.²⁴

Jain Diwali

Jains tend to celebrate *Diwali* for mystical reasons and as a reminder to follow in the footsteps of *Tirthankar* (teacher) *Mahavira*.²⁵ *Mahavira* believed to have attained *nirvana* (eternalness) around 2500 years ago on *Diwali* day. 'A new era started from this day which is called *Nirvana Samvat*, which is in vogue among the Jains.'²⁶ Celebrations include *pooja*, *aarati*, Jain vegetarian food, new clothes, and decorations in homes by the lighting of clay lamps. Worship of the Hindu Goddess *Laximi* is common among certain Jain groups. A collective *aarati* in Jain temples is followed by food.

Non-Hindu accounts show *Diwali* to be a flexible multi-faceted festival. Hindus celebrate it for myths, Sikhs for historical facts and Jains for mystical reasons. Hindus in Nepal feed dogs and cows in north India to express humane concern for the cattle.²⁷

Although neither the form nor the reason of celebration is intrinsically Hindu, Jain, or Sikh, several common principles can be summarized – the truth prevails, light overcomes darkness, and the source of prosperity is supernatural. *Diwali* gives opportunity 'to choose the right path that would lead to a life of purity, divinity, and happiness'.²⁸ Concern for family and humane treatment of cattle are priorities. Though the principles are 'non-Christian', they are not 'un-Christian'.²⁹

²³ Sameerjit Singh, *Personal Interview by the Author*, Dayton, OH: Dayton Gurdwara (2009).

²⁴ Ranbir Singh, *The Sikhs and Their Religion* (Dublin, OH: Sikh Educational and Religious Foundation 1999).

²⁵ Reshma Chandrakant, *Personal phone interview by the author about Jain Diwali*. 28 July 2009.

²⁶ Hukamchand Bharill, *Tirthankara Mahavira and His Sarvodaya Tritha* (Bombay: Shri Kundkund Kahan Digambar Jain Tritha Suraksha Trust 1981), 61.

²⁷ A.P. Nirmal, 'Celebrations of Indian Festivals' *Primal World Views* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Daystar Press 1976), 81.

²⁸ Ashwin Kumar, 'Happy Deepavali'. A Message Script Presented at the Hindu Temple of Dayton, Dayton, OH.2008, 35.

²⁹ Nirmal, 'Celebrations of Indian Festivals,' 81-82.

Since the festival of *Diwali* encompasses Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist observances with variability, could this lead to a contextualization of a Christian *Diwali*?

A *Diwali* Celebrated by Christians in Dayton (Ohio, USA)

A new celebration of *Diwali* by the Indian Christians of Dayton (OH, USA) began with an idea of incorporating and performing native music for the Indian Diaspora. The founder of Satsang Ministries (the author) took initiative to plan the celebration. His prior experience living among Indian communities in India provided insider's perceptions of the religions represented including the knowledge of the languages, myths, deities, art, *mantras* (chanted prayers), and music. He believes that the celebration of *Diwali* is especially compatible with the message of Jesus, who proclaimed 'I am the Light of the world' John 8:12, and 'you are the light of the world' Matthew 5:14.

Vision:

Create and celebrate a Christian *Diwali*.

Purpose:

To plant Gospel seeds in native soil by using the form and compatible elements from *Diwali*. To break down barriers, begin meaningful friendships, gain trust, and build bridges for the Kingdom.

Communication:

Methods included formal, informal, relational and word of mouth. Orange flyers stated details with artists' names and lead singer's picture. Music was emphasized particularly for the Indian Diaspora. The leader formed a team of Indian believers and church friends to accomplish the task.

Venue:

Neutral venues preferred e.g. fellowship or school halls.

Decoration:

Indian women decorated the hall with clay lamps, souvenirs, handmade paintings, etc. Except for images, almost anything Indian was welcomed. A backdrop with pictures of beautiful lamps, Indian flags, and lighted lamps with flowers on the tables for guests made it festive.

Community:

Involvement by multi faith communities was encouraged. A Hindu leader and a pastor lighted the traditional brass lamp together to mark the beginning of the event. Indian leaders shared stories of *Diwali*. The pastor's role was to welcome attendees and to share briefly the Christian meaning of light, based on the story of Jesus. Indian guests, the pastor, and the main singer received customary flowers. The Indian community felt connected when church people served them tea and refreshments.

Music:

Traditional Indian music and instruments such as harmonium (Indian key board), drums (*tabla*), cymbals, violin, and even *tambora* (stringed instrument) are essential. Artists in Indian attire performed seated on a decorated platform.

Hindi, India's national language and *Ghazal* a well-known music style in India and the Muslim world was chosen. Lyrics closely resembled the poetic wisdom literature in the Bible. The author's brother, Prasad Aghamkar, well versed in the language and in *Ghazal* music, was the main singer. Indian people associate God alone as the source of true wisdom and the communicators of pure wisdom command respect from across social boundaries (1 Kings 10:24; 5:12; 4:34). The missionary implication of wisdom literature in the Bible is very relevant during *Diwali*.³⁰

The Message:

The message in songs covered similar points found in the address to people of other religions on Mars Hill (Acts 17). A point of contact established by taking up religious themes from popular Indian songs and poets as did St. Paul 'to engage the Athenian worldview and culture'.³¹ Family and socio-cultural issues were mentioned, followed by answers to the deeper concerns (Acts 17:22). Lastly Jesus is presented as the Light through songs written by the singer or converts from India (Acts 17:24).

The singer presented the message gradually without syncretism and refrained from attacking obvious things (Acts 17:23). Love, justice, life, and God were topics used in Christian *Diwali* celebrations in other cities.

The challenges included the idea of Christian *Diwali* was questioned by Hindu antagonists; theological concerns surfaced over decorative iconography and songs with mythic stories requested during the concert. The interfaith nature of the event and wise interaction helped to defuse the situation. Internally, westernized Christians of Indian descent worried that *Diwali* was a non-Christian practice; however, participant observation in the Christian *Diwali* helped to resolve their retrospective concerns.

The annual celebration of *Diwali* in Dayton made possible interaction with hundreds of Hindu friends. In its tenth year, the celebration has multiplied to other cities in partnership with local churches and Indian Christians.

Christian *Diwali* Suggested Beyond Dayton

The next step is to offer suggestions for structuring authentic Christian *Diwali* celebrations on a wider scale. The following suggestions are based on Dayton Christian *Diwali* and the author's experiments elsewhere. He

³⁰ Hedlund, *Mission to Man in the Bible*, 144.

³¹ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2005), 75.

believes that Christian *Diwali* can retain much of the form of *Diwali*, while giving the story of Jesus new meaning and a pivotal significance. The Gospel story renders new meaning to theological themes known previously. It opens the door for the Indian community to experience the fulfillment of the Truth in a native way.

The use of native festivals such as *Diwali* can fulfill a fourfold purpose for the Kingdom: Build bridges of friendship, plant Gospel seeds, disciple seekers, and educate Christians.

Vision:

Use native festivals such as *Diwali* for the Kingdom purpose.

Day/Time:

Adapt the same, namely the five days including the new moon day in the month of *Kartik* (October-November) similar to Jain and Sikh communities.

Festivities:

Utilize maximum native elements such as clay lamps, Indian gift articles in colours depicting Christian art, symbolism, and verses to communicate the message. Visual witness to the Jesus story through the Indian motifs is important. Illumination of church buildings and centres during this period would create goodwill. Most importantly, the message is sent that Christians hold a non-separatist stance.

Family Prayer:

Preparation would include taking a holy bath, cooking vegetarian food, white garb and women wearing non-occult ornaments. Christian *aarati* would include the reciting of Psalms while lighting a clay lamp on a platter symbolizing Jesus, oil symbolizing the Holy Spirit as the family learns the Bible together led by the head of the family. *Bhajan* (singing) in native languages while seated on the floor with open Bible in a high place should be normal.

The Christian *Bhau Beej* would include visits by brothers to sisters' homes. Preparation may include a ritual place with the symbol of the cross and the Bible verses on the floor drawn by corn powder or rice grains where the brother(s) sits. A platter with a lamp, oil, flowers, and sweets from sisters will mean prayer for longevity and spiritual growth (Deuteronomy 6: 6-9). Brothers may respond by sharing gifts to their sisters symbolizing a promise to pray.

The new *Bhau Beej* would be very meaningful in follow up and discipleship of new believers in India. Ostracized new Christians would find it timely and deeply meaningful to be incorporated in the native manner in the Body of Christ as brothers or sisters (Matthew 19:29). The *Bhau Beej* based on Biblical promises could give greater value to the step of new believers from Hinduism and make the transition acceptable for their non-Christian relatives. Practicing Indian family values at the festival time could create stronger connections, build bridges and open new avenues for witness into Asian Indian homes.

Corporate Worship:

Church services, recitation, Indian singing, dances, and Bible dramas by the community would be ideal during the public facet of Christian *Diwali* celebrations. Open sanctuaries could welcome all to join to worship for five days. The native style of sitting on the floor, usage of flowers and certain colours without icons would create an inviting space for all. Taking Holy Communion during *Diwali* as a family or in churches could be the culmination of the festival.

Festival of Service:

The church as the community of light could get involved in humanitarian and ecological projects especially during *Diwali* time. Holistic concern would demonstrate the way of Jesus to encounter the forces of darkness, poverty, and injustice. Its purgative potential to redefine the meaning of the light is encompassing. Christian mercy acts communicate that God is concerned with history and nature.³²

Dialogue and Witness:

Diwali probably is the most natural time for the celebrants to understand the true meaning of light at the deepest level. Gospel roots start mostly in contextual events, words, or actions. Christian *Diwali* activities are not meant to be regimented so much as a shared time of engagement.

Contextualizing festivals and *Diwali* in particular is an effort limited or nonexistent in India. A home festival with an emphasis on the Light and the Word was introduced during the Christian mini mass movements in the central part of India in the mid 20th century. As the author observed, the practice was limited to mission compounds and remains almost untraceable today.

However, Roman Catholic Churches in South India have celebrated *Pongal* (Harvest festival) for a long time. Recently indigenous Protestant groups are encouraging adaptations of *Pongal* and village festivals in South India.³³ These steps hold potential of a move towards making *Diwali* a normal festival for Christians.

Observations

The Christian *Diwali* of Dayton has consistently been able to bring together hundreds of Indian people including friends of Arabic orientation to church halls or campuses at the invitation of Indian Christians. Members of Indian Diaspora especially felt respected by provision of a new interfaith celebration that is positive toward their identity. Additionally, trust and communication level between non-Christian Indians and the Christian

³² Nirmal, 'Celebrations of Indian Festivals' *Primal World Views*, 83.

³³ Ebe Sundar Raj, *Sat Guru Aradhana*. (Mussoorie, India: Nivedit Good Books 2007), 54,103.

community improved. A church lay leader said, 'Being a non-threatening festive event, it provided us a venue to invite non-Christian friends.' Meaning, it would not have been possible to invite them to join traditional Christian meetings. *Diwali* gatherings enhanced meaningful interaction and helped plant Gospel seeds in soils otherwise inaccessible.

A man of Arabic orientation unexpectedly told his Indian friend after a *Diwali* music concert about reading the Bible daily at home (probably secretly). Such a confession is inconceivable in a traditional setting and its Kingdom value cannot be underestimated. Seekers and native new believers tend to retain local practices and customs mostly due to social pressures or out of ignorance. The tension between embedded compatible *Diwali* elements and forms of western Christianity remains. Free adaptation by indigenous believers could lead to spontaneous contextualization with didactic values for contextualizers today.³⁴

A fresh study could help missiologists understand how new seekers initiate incorporating Gospel elements while practicing old traditions and how Christian *Diwali* could be assimilated as part of the normal Christian celebration in certain areas. The local churches' involvement renewed their vision for contextualization and follow-up. Possibilities of new dialogues and hospitality ministries to pave the way and soften differences between extremist Indian groups and Christians emerged. The westernized Indian Christians comprehended through participation the missiological implications of almost everything done in *Diwali*. A contextualization team has been trained and willing to embark on the Christian *Diwali* mission, trusting in the Holy Spirit to bring transformation of lives.

The festival of *Diwali* provides the necessary framework, structure, and organic occasion to proclaim Christ as the light of the world. It gives stepping-stones, clues, and redemptive analogies for the cross-cultural witness.³⁵ Christian *Diwali* is not shifting from radical rejection to wholesale acceptance of a Hindu festival. The process of discarding incompatible elements is not to be minimized. Serious in-depth study of the Word, traditions, and experimentation to acquire insider perceptions are necessary in order how best to adapt the festivals. A contextualizing community of new believers, pastors and lay leaders, must be gathered to critique cultural practices in a hermeneutical process.³⁶ Christian contextualization is a sacred interaction between the Gospel (story) and the native festivals (myths). The Gospel is as relevant as its contextualization.

³⁴ Pramod Aghamkar, 'Building Church on Holy Ground: Proposals to Contextualize Church Buildings in India' (Ph.D. Dissertation, E.S.J. School of World Mission and Evangelism, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2002).

³⁵ Hedlund, *Mission to Man in the Bible*, 56.

³⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, 'Critical Contextualization' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11.3 (1987), 104-112.

Jesus is the key to cast new meaning and give fulfillment to *Diwali* festivals (Hindu, Jain, Sikh or Buddhist).

Concluding Remarks

The Christian *Diwali* in Dayton based on the popular phenomenon was a radical step of willful immersion into native cultures, which includes the conceptual and prevailing ideological world (Matthew 28:18-20). Christian *Diwali* finds its fulfillment only in illustrating, communicating, and heralding the story of Jesus. The Gospel confronts the darkness non-polemically, unites orthodoxy and orthopraxis, and compels balance between celebration and service. The vast arena of contextualization of *Diwali* remains an untapped native tool and demands a drastically changed approach towards it by the Indian church.

Dissemination of the Christian *Diwali* locally and globally with the Kingdom cause is not an option but an obligation. The positive steps would ‘...allow the faith a chance to start a history of its own in each people and its experience of Christ’.³⁷ A professional Indian woman, an active member in a temple, said after a Dayton celebration in 2007, ‘The last song was very touching and meaningful to us’. She and her scientist husband who plays Indian drums for the Christian *Diwali* referred to the Gospel song. Their response reaffirmed the new meaning communicated by the event – through *Diwali*, the Gospel encountered ‘but on the deeper level of the underlying existential realities, ‘the hearts’.³⁸ Innumerable non-Christian Indian friends around the world could willingly join, engage, and respond in similar words if given an opportunity to discover the true meaning of the Light through Christian *Diwali*.

³⁷ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

³⁸ Tiina Ahonen, *Transformation through Compassionate Mission* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, Finland, 2003).

MISSION AMONG HINDUS: WITNESSING CHRIST IN THE COMPANY OF HINDUS

K.P. Aleaz

This paper envisages a perspective that ‘Mission to People of Other Faiths’ can be reconceived today as ‘Witnessing Christ in the Company of People of Other Faiths’. The first section clarifies the significance of this shift of emphasis and submits it to the august participants of Edinburgh 2010 for consideration as a direction for mission-thinking in the days to come. The second and third sections are specifically on witnessing Christ in the company of Hindus. Indian Christian thinkers had and is having numerous dialogues with Hindus and their faith experiences and diverse enriching affirmations of Christian faith have emerged as a result of this and the second section indicates the highlights of a few of these. The third section is on the contributions of a few Hindu witnesses to Christ, specifically Neo-Vedantic understandings and interpretations of Jesus. Finally we provide some concluding observations.

The Rationale for Witnessing Christ in the Company of People of Other Faiths

Understanding the religious experiences of the people of other faiths would enrich our Christian understanding and experiencing of the person and function of Jesus as well as the gospel. With humility we may have to accept that there are certain dimensions of meanings regarding Jesus and the gospel which are unfamiliar or not known to us which can be explained to us by people of other faiths. A deeper meaning of Christ and the Christian gospel may emerge in a process of an inter-religious communication. People from diverse religio-cultural backgrounds will, within and for their contexts, understand the meaning of the gospel.¹

The hermeneutical process and interpretation is important here. It is the hermeneutical context or the contextual socio-political and religio-cultural realities which decide the content of our knowledge and experience of the gospel. Knowledge is formulated in the very knowing process and understanding the gospel of God in Jesus, and is a continuous integrated non-dual divine-human process. Nothing is pre-given or pre-formulated.

¹ K. Aleaz, *Some Indian Theological Reflections* (Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2007), 68.

We cannot accept some timeless interpretation from somewhere and make it applicable to our context. Understanding and interpretation belongs exclusively to us and to our context, and there is the possibility for the emergence of new meanings of the gospel in the processes of this.² One important aspect of the Asian-Indian context is religious pluralism and we, Christians, are in pilgrimage to progressively integrate the truth revealed to others in our own experience of Jesus Christ. We have a duty to identify the glorious ways in which God's revelations are available to us in other religious experiences which can help us to experience new dimensions of meanings of the gospel of God in Jesus.³ Rather than evaluating other religious experiences in terms of pre-formulated criteria, it is important for us to allow ourselves to be evaluated by them in our understanding of the gospel. They, in the Holy Spirit, will provide us with new meanings of the person and function of Jesus, rather than we dictate to them always. From a particular understanding of Jesus, we have to come to a universal understanding of Jesus.⁴ Universal Jesus belongs to the whole of humanity in the Holy Spirit. Here there is growth and newness in the very conception of the person and function of Jesus.

Here we are challenged to evolve a more comprehensive role for other religious experiences in Christian experience than what has been envisaged in the past. To reduce the role of religions to a liberational praxis is a reductionism. To reduce the interpretation of religions solely in terms of folk tales again would be a reductionism. Of course our focus should be the people, as has been emphasized by the Asian theologians. How the comprehensive religious life of people of other faiths is related to the gospel of God in Jesus is the basic question to be answered in the third millennium.⁵

There is a suggestion here for a relational convergence of religious experiences. An important aspect of relational convergence of religious experiences is mutual conversion. Being born in a religion does not mean that we should die in that religion in the same way as we were born. We can get converted into the true spirit of one's own religion and in that very conversion get converted into another religious experience as well. The faith experience of an Indian Christian is not pre-formulated, but is in a process of formulation through the guidance of Hindu and other religious experiences. Indian Christian theology is a conversion of Christian theology to the Indian religio-cultural context. In the very conversion to Jesus in India, there is a conversion to the religio-cultural context of India,

² K. Aleaz, *The Gospel of Indian Culture* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1994), 177-282.

³ Cf. K. Aleaz, *An Indian Jesus from Sankara's Thought* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1997).

⁴ K. Aleaz, *The Role of Pramanas in Hindu-Christian Epistemology* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1991), 99-100.

⁵ K. Aleaz, *Religions in Christian Theology* (Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2001), 183-208.

effecting thus a double conversion which points to the possible relational convergence of religious experiences. Religious conflicts are transcended in such an understanding of conversion.⁶

This points to a perspective in inter-religious relations in which all the religious resources of the world are conceived as the common property of the whole humanity. All religious experiences and traditions are simultaneously ours. We do not have any one particular religious tradition alone as our own and others as belonging to others. All are mine as well as all are for all others. All belong to all. It is a religious perspective in which while remaining in one's own religious faith-experience, one can consider other faiths as one's own, as the common property of humanity, for an increasingly blessed and enriched life. It should be noted that if one is intimately familiar with one's own religious system alone, that is a very religiously poverty stricken condition. Here the affirmation is of an inter-connected identity and uniqueness of each of the religious experiences as our own.⁷

Highlights on Christian Dialogues with Hindu Faith-Experiences

Indian Christian thinkers, some of them converts from Hindu faith, since the second half of 19th c., had numerous dialogues with Hindu faith-experiences out of which they have articulated Christian theological reflections on God and Jesus Christ in diverse ways and these reflections are part of the glorious history of Indian Christian theological heritage. These theological reflections provide us new creative insights regarding the Gospel today. New dimensions of meanings regarding the person and function of Jesus have emerged through these reflections. In terms of these reflections Christians are able to witness Christ in the company of Hindus today. There are interpretations on Trinity as *Saccidananda* as well as on the Christian notion of God as corresponding to *Nirguna* Brahman. Christ is interpreted in diverse ways such as God's appearance in the midst of appearances, embodiment of supreme self-sacrifice, one who has to be placed in Ultimate Reality, who enables us to return to unity and who eliminated *avidya* (ignorance), a case of *vivarta*, as theocentric; as extrinsic denominator (*upadhi*), name and form (*namarupa*), the effect (*karya*) of Brahman as well as the reflection (*abhasa*), pervasion, illumination,

⁶ K. Aleaz, *Theology of Religions: Birmingham papers and Other Essays* (Calcutta: Moumita, 1998), 339-353.

⁷ Aleaz, *Theology of Religions*, 176-180; W. C. Smith, *Faith and Belief*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 11; *Towards a World Theology: Faith and Contemporary History of Religion*, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981), 4-21; 38-44.

unification and delimitation of Brahman in creation, as *Istadevata*, *Isvara*, *Avatara*, Initiator of new creation and the *True Prajapati*.⁸

To speak of Brahman as Saccidananda means that Brahman knows Himself/Herself and from that self-knowledge proceeds His/Her eternal beatitude. Brahman is related of necessity only to the Infinite Image of His/Her own being, mirrored in the ocean of His/Her knowledge. This relation of Being (*Sat*) to Itself in self-knowledge (*Cit*) is one of perfect harmony, bliss (*Ananda*). The Christian doctrine of God as Trinity has a strong resemblance to the Vedantic conception of Brahman as *Saccidananda*, because in the Trinity the Father's knowledge is fully satisfied by the cognition of the *Logos*, the Infinite Image of his Being, begotten by thought and mirrored in the ocean of his substance and his love finds the fullest satisfaction in the boundless complacency with which he reposes on his Image and breathes forth the Spirit of bliss.⁹ *Saccidananda* is communion of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. It is in the Father's self-awareness and presence to Himself in the Son, that everything that is has come to be. The Son, as he is representative Son of man, is the representation of the created beings in *Cit*; the created beings awake to Being through the Son. *Ananda*, the Holy Spirit is the expression of love in God, love between God and humans and love between humans.¹⁰ *Nirguna* Brahman corresponds to Absolute Personality and does not mean impersonal, abstract, unconscious Being. It means that the attributes which relate the Infinite to the finite are not necessary to His/Her being. Therefore it rightly corresponds to the Christian notion of God.¹¹

Jesus Christ is God's appearance in the midst of appearances. In Christ the absolutely transcendental God serves Himself/Herself from Himself/Herself to produce the appearance and to become appearance.¹² The event of Jesus as Christ has to be placed in the Ultimate Reality.¹³ Creation is a case of *vivarta* as Brahman remains unchanged by effecting

⁸ K. Aleaz, *Dialogical Theologies: Hartford Papers and Other Essays* (Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2004), 111-26.

⁹ Brahmapandhava Upadhyaya, 'A Vedantic Parable', *Sophia* 4:8 (Aug. 1898), 119; 'An Exposition of Catholic Beliefs Compared with the Vedanta', *Sophia* 4:1 (Jan. 1898), 11; 'Our New Canticle', *Sophia* 5:10 (Oct. 1898), 146.

¹⁰ Swami Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974), 79-80, 82, 88, 91, 95, 97, 98, 176-79, 184-85; *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point. Within the Cave of the Heart* (Bombay/Bangalore: The Institute of Indian Culture/CISRS, 1969), xiv, 80, 96-97.

¹¹ B. Upadhyaya, 'Notes', *Sophia* 1:2 (June 23, 1900), 7; Johanns, 'To Christ through the Vedanta', *Light of the East* 1:1, (Oct. 1922)-12:7 (April 1934); R. V. De Smet, 'Categories of Indian Philosophy and Communication of the Gospel', *Religion and Society* 10:3 (Sept. 1963), 20-26.

¹² Cf. Carl Keller, 'The Vedanta Philosophy and the message of Christ', *The International Review of Missions* Vol. 42 (1953), 377-89.

¹³ J. G. Arapura, 'The Use of Indian Philosophical Traditions in Christian Thought', *The Indian Journal of Theology* 29:2 (April-June 1980), 68-71.

the world and similarly Christ's incarnation is also a case of *vivarta* because when the divine Logos takes unto Himself/Herself the human nature the novelty which follows this actuation is entirely on the side of the human nature.¹⁴ There is a progress possible from 'Christo-monism' to a theo-centric Christology.¹⁵

Renunciation or Love and Sacrifice which Christ has taught us through his life are similar to giving up duality to find the God behind it. The death on the Cross of Jesus Christ can be experienced and expounded as dying to the body and ego as well as the material world.¹⁶ In understanding the work of Christ people from Hindu background are unable to find meaning in the idea of expiation and juridical justification, rather the function of Jesus is experienced as releasing precious life for humanity and making people his devotees. The role of Christ is not of one that mediates the propitiatory requirement to satisfy a righteous God. Rather, the mediatory potency of Christ is that of a potency of the most decisive paradigm case of radical re-centering and self-knowledge. Jesus' acknowledgement of the divine Self as his true Self was so complete and his re-centering so maximal that in and through his life, death and continuing presence in the faith of the believing community a potency for the self-realization is released.¹⁷ Jesus is the initiator of new creation. Christian faith is not primarily a doctrine of salvation but the announcement of the advent of a new creative order in Jesus. The good news is the birth of Jesus and the problem of the Christian is to reproduce him. Christianity is not a juridical problem but a problem in genetics. There is no gulf between God and human beings. God and human person have met in Jesus; not merely met, but fused and mingled into one. To be Christian is to gain this consciousness and this sense of harmonious blend with the divine.¹⁸ We can understand and experience the person of Jesus as the extrinsic denominator (*upadhi*), name and form (*namarupa*), effect (*karya*) as well as the reflection (*abhassa*) and delimitation (*ghatakasah*) of God, the Supreme Being (*Brahman*). We can understand

¹⁴ R. V. De Smet, 'Materials for an Indian Christology', *Religion and Society* 12:4 (Dec. 1965), 11-13.

¹⁵ S. J. Samartha, *The Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism* (Madras: CLS, 1981), 8-12.

¹⁶ Cf. Kalagara Subba Rao, *The Outpouring of My Heart*, translation into English of his Telugu compositions, ed. By C. D. Airan (Guntur: Shrimathy Parripati Sita Mahalakshmi Satya Narayan, 1964).

¹⁷ D. D. Hudson, 'Hindu and Christian Theological Parallels in the Conversion of H. A. Krishna Pillai. 1857-1859', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 40 (June 1972), 196-205; Christopher Duraisingh, 'Reflection on Theological Hermeneutics in the Indian Context', *The Indian Journal of Theology* 31:3-4 (July-Dec. 1982), 271-5.

¹⁸ Chenchiah, 'Jesus and Non-Christian Faith', in *Rethinking Christianity in India*, ed. By G. V. Job et al (Madras: A. N. Sundarisanam, 1938), 49, 54-55, 58- 60; 'Christian Message in a Non-Christian World. A Review of Dr. Kraemer's Book', in *Ibid.*, pp 16-17, 19, 21-24, 26-27, 35-36, 42-43.

and experience the function of Jesus as to manifest the all-pervasive (*sarvagatatvam*), illuminative (*jyotih*) and unifying (*ekikrtya*) power of the Supreme Atman (Being), as to manifest that the Supreme *Brahman* as Pure Consciousness (*prajnanaghanam*) is the Witness (*saksi*) and Self of all (*sarvatma*) and as to manifest the eternally present (*nityasiddasvabhavam*) human liberation.¹⁹ The Fall is our fall into the present mode of consciousness, where everything is divided, centered on itself and set in conflict with others. Sin is alienation from our real Self; it is to fall into a separate, divided self. Redemption-atonement is the return to unity; it is awakening to our true being in the Word. In Jesus the sin which brought a divided consciousness into the world is overcome, and nature and humans are restored to their original unity with God.²⁰ Hindu faith has the conception of sin as *avidya* i.e., the ascription of a false autonomy to created being. Christ has brought us redemption in the sense that he became the very antithesis of self-assertion taking upon himself all the consequence of human assertion of a false autonomy, even unto death on the cross and drawing the whole creation back to the full recognition of its dependence on its source, the Parent God.²¹

Christ can be conceived as the *True Prajapati* as the Vedas explains to us that *Purusa*, who is later conceived as *Prajapati*, the Lord of creation, sacrificed himself for the *Devas*, i.e., emancipated mortals.²² The Christ of Hinduism is hidden and unknown. *Isvara* is the unknown Christ of Hinduism. The role of *Isvara* in Vedanta corresponds functionally to the role of Christ in Christian thought.²³ Fundamentally the Hindu doctrine of *Avatara* is akin to the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, the distinctiveness being Christ is the Incarnation of the whole Being of God for all times and he came to redeem the sinners.²⁴ It has also been pointed out that the place of Jesus Christ in the Hindu religious heritage of India is as one of the *Ishta Devatas* or chosen deities or favorite deities. Hinduism readily grants such a place to Jesus Christ. From the side of a disciple of Jesus what is needed is, he/she must not deny other mediators between God and humans, other experiences of God's presence in the human heart, the validity of other *Ishta Devatas*. Such denials lie outside the positive experience of the

¹⁹ Cf. K. Aleaz, *An Indian Jesus from Sankara's Thought, Op.Cit.; Christian Thought Through Advaita Vedanta* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1996).

²⁰ Cf. Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* (London: Fount Paperback, 1978).

²¹ Cf. Sara Grant, *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian* (Bangalore: Asian Publishing House, 1991).

²² Cf. K. Aleaz, (comp. & Intro.), *From Exclusivism to Inclusivism: The Theological Writings of Krishna Mohan Banerjee (1813-1885)* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999).

²³ Cf. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981).

²⁴ A. J. Appasamy, *The Gospel and India's Heritage* (London & Madras: SPCK, 1942), 256-58, 75-93; V. Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar* (Madras: CLS, 1930).

Christians and therefore have no validity. As we have the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, others have their own Lords and Saviours. The theory of multiple avatars is theologically the most accommodating attitude in a pluralistic setting.²⁵

A Hindu Way of Witnessing to Christ

In the Indian Renaissance of 19th and 20th centuries, numerous people of other faiths, especially Hindus, have acknowledged the religious and ethical significance of Jesus for them in diverse ways. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen and Mahatma Gandhi are some of the prominent figures among them. Ram Mohan was all for the ethical teachings of Jesus. Keshub was the pioneer in conceiving Trinity as *Saccidananda* in terms of the three functions of the one God. Gandhiji very much appreciated the life of Jesus centered on renunciation and he received enormous inspiration from the Sermon on the Mount for his own life and work.²⁶ We in this paper shall specially focus upon the Neo-Vedantic way of witnessing Christ.²⁷

We can identify a development in the conception of the person of Christ in Neo-Vedanta. The later Neo-Vedantins Swamijis Akhilananda²⁸, Prabhavananda²⁹ and Ranganathananda³⁰ are more emphatic on the role of Jesus as an Incarnation as distinguished from an individual human person. According to them, Jesus is one of the *avataras* or the descents of God, born without *karmas* and above *maya*. An *avatara* has the unique power to transmit spirituality, transform human lives by touch, look or wish, and reveal divinity through transfiguration. There is an important difference even between saints and incarnations. Whereas saints are at first bound souls who later became illumined, the incarnations are the veritable embodiments of divine light and power from the very beginning of their lives. As a divine incarnation, Jesus had much compassion and the power to redeem. Also, as an incarnation Jesus was a *yogi* of the highest type who practiced all the *yogas* namely *karma*, *bhakti*, *raja*, and *jnana*. Jesus as an

²⁵ S. K. George, *Gandhi's Challenge to Christianity*, 2nd Edition (Ahamedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1947), 48; S. J. Samartha, *One Christ-Many Religions. Towards a Revised Christology* (Bangalore: SATHRI, 1992), 142-50.

²⁶ Cf. M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Madras/Bangalore: CLS/CISRS, 1970).

²⁷ For a detailed study on the subject Cf. K. Aleaz, *Jesus in Neo-Vedanta: A Meeting of Hinduism and Christianity* (Delhi: Kant Publications, 1995).

²⁸ Swami Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949).

²⁹ Swami Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, Second Indian Edition (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1979).

³⁰ Swami Ranganathananda, *The Christ we Adore*, Fourth Impression (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1969).

incarnation had constant vision of God and through *samadhi* he realized the identity and unity of the individual self with the Supreme Self.

But, we should note that in the earlier Neo-Vedantins like Swamiji Vivekananda³¹, Abhedananda³² and S. Radhakrishnan³³ the emphasis is more on presenting Jesus as an ideal, perfect human person. The difference between a human person and Christ is a difference in manifestation; but as Absolute Being there is no difference between the two. The resources of God which were available to Jesus are open to all and if we struggle as he did, we will develop the God in us. What Jesus does is setting an example, by showing the path of perfection. True, those earlier Neo-Vedantins also had no problem in worshipping Jesus as Divine; as one who reveals the Absolute, as a herald of truth on earth. So we can say that Neo-Vedanta keeps a balance between following the path shown by Christ and worshipping him. Jesus is simultaneously a divine being for us to worship and an ideal for us to imitate.

Though Neo-Vedantic Christology may agree that as a divine incarnation Jesus has the power to redeem, transmit spirituality and transform human lives, but this is realized not in the way the Christian Church conceives the atonement. In Neo-Vedantic view, the Christian doctrines, especially the doctrine of atonement goes against the spirit of Jesus³⁴. What Jesus does is to show us the way to become perfect, to show us our true nature which is divine, and to bring us to realization which involves the regaining of the lost selfhood³⁵. Death on the Cross³⁶ signifies dying to the lower self and resurrection means rising to the higher universal

³¹ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. I-VIII (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1968-1972).

³² Swami Abhedananda, *Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda* (in ten Volumes) (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1967).

³³ S. Radhakrishnan, 'Reply to Critics' in *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, ed. by Paul Arthur Schilpp (New York: Tudor Publishing House, 1952), 807-809; *Eastern Religion and Western Thought*, second Ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 32, 53.

³⁴ Swami Ranganathananda, *The Christ We Adore*, *Op. Cit.*, 44-48.

³⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, *Op. Cit.*, Vols. I, 328, 341, 381, 468; Vol. II, 307, 481; Vol. V, 293; Vol. VI, pp 98-99; Vol. VII, 4, 7, 29, 72, 76, 88-89; Vol. VIII, 141, 190, 262.

³⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, *Op. Cit.*, 97, 184, *The Heart of Hindustan*, Madras: G. A. Natesan & Co., 1932, 120; 'Fellowship of the Spirit' (Address at the Centre for the Study of World Religion, Harvard, 1961) in *Radhakrishnan Reader. An Anthology* ed. By Nagaraja Rao et al., Bombay: Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan, 1969, 468-69; Swami Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, *Op. Cit.*, 179, 183, 189, 195, 197; Swami Satprakashananda, *Hinduism and Christianity. Jesus Christ and His Teachings in the Light of Vedanta*, St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1975, 174-190; Bhavani Sankar Chowdhury, *The New Wine of Jesus: Christ Taught Vedanta* (Calcutta: One World Publishers, 1982), 12, 93-95.

Self. The Cross is the expression of spiritual power or soul force through which alone we can conquer evil. The Cross of Christ is the very perfection of the teaching of non-resistance of evil. Resurrection³⁷ affirms that human person is really spirit. Resurrection means the resurrection of the subtle body made of subtle elements. Above all, it is the affirmation of the Neo-Vedantic Christology that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are not so much historical events which occurred once upon a time as universal processes of spiritual life, which are being continually accomplished in human lives. Following the example of Jesus, we can also die and resurrect and Jesus as an *avatara* can of course help us in our endeavour. Thus we may both worship Jesus and follow his path.

Conclusion

Search for insights regarding the life and work of Jesus, the meanings of the Gospel of God in Jesus, is an ongoing process and there is a need for Christians to get help from the religious experiences of people of other faiths for this important endeavour. If in the first eighteen centuries, the search was more or less by Christians alone, since then the search has begun in the company of people of sister faiths. But two hundred years or for that matter even two thousand years are nothing compared to the time ahead of us, ahead of creation. Many more dimensions of meanings of Jesus are yet to emerge. This is only the beginning. Hence the importance of the further contributions of sister faith experiences will continue to emerge.

People of other faiths are not enemies of Christians, rather fellow travelers. Their religions and cultures are no more for destruction of Christian missions; rather they are treasures for the enrichment of the Gospel of God in Christ. Therefore witnessing to Christ hereafter is always in the company of people of other faiths. For this the Hindu faith experiences can take the lead as diverse enrichments have already come from that angle.

³⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, *Op. Cit.*, 47,170, 176, 222, 223, 226; Swami Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, *Op. Cit.*, 79-80, 198, 200, 201, 204, 209-212; Swami Satprakashananda, *Hinduism and Christianity: Jesus Christ and His Teachings in the Light of Vedanta*, *Op. Cit.*, 186-88; Bahrain Sankar Chowdhury, *The New Wine of Jesus. Christ Taught Vedanta*, *Op. Cit.*, 12, 95.

MISSION AMONG HINDUS: HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

H.L. Richard

The historical roots of the Hindu-Christian encounter are buried in the uncertainty of traditions about the Apostle Thomas and the gradual growth of a Christian community in South India in the early centuries of the Christian era. Intrigues between Roman Catholic and Protestant missions and this indigenous Christian community are outside the scope of this paper, and little from the documented history of the St. Thomas Christians is of interest in the area of Christian mission among Hindus.

So the history of Christian mission in India is about Roman Catholic and Protestant missions that arrived in India in conjunction with European colonial powers. That mission among Hindus is intertwined with colonial history is an emotionally charged reality that is best faced from the start. There are both Hindu and Christian voices that stigmatize Christian missions among Hindus as an aspect of colonial domination.¹ This simplistic paradigm will not influence this paper.

Colonial realities massively impacted both missionary Christianity and Hinduism. The very term and construct of a world religion called “Hinduism” developed during the colonial era. Standard textbooks on world religions and Hinduism all wrestle with the complexity of “Hindu” as a religious designation, and most call for “contextual specificity” as the generic “Hindu” label is so broad as to be nearly meaningless.² Geoffrey Oddie has shown how the consciousness of a Hindu religion developed among Indians in reaction against missionary criticisms of what the missionaries imagined about a monolithic religion called “Hinduism.”³

Christianity’s implication in the colonial enterprise moved a steady stream of disciples of Jesus to seek distance from at least colonial realities,

¹ By Hindus, Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India: Continuities, Changes, Dilemmas* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1994) and Sita Ram Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1989). For a Christian example, see Dharmaraj 1993.

² I am indebted to Richard Fox Young (2002) for the phrase ‘contextual specificity’ in reference to the many varieties of Hindu religious (and non-religious) thought and practice.

³ Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagining Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006).

and at times from Christianity itself.⁴ Thus the disputed nature of Hinduism is not the only complex variable in considering Christian mission among Hindus.

There is no simple way to outline a subject as vast and complex as Christian mission among Hindus, but some arrangement of data is needed. Due to significant differences in approach and in results, this paper will divide the subject according to the social status of Hindus engaged by the Christian mission. The low castes, among which success was significant, will be considered first; the high castes, among whom success was limited and among whom approaches went through various changes, will then be discussed.

It was particularly among the lowest of caste groups, today known as Dalits, that Christianity took root in India.⁵ Among a few dozen Dalit peoples, “mass movements” developed whereby over a period of years and decades many thousands professed the Christian faith. R. E. Frykenberg gives a good summary of how these movements developed.

Only by means of agents through whose efforts that message could be translated into locally understandable idioms that were acceptable and attractive, and only after a period of incubation within a potentially new host culture and community, did such movements explode. Only after the new early converts had absorbed and acculturated the Gospel message, together with new and modern technologies that helped them to transmit their new world view, was there a release of spiritual energy that turned and then transformed whole communities.⁶

John Webster suggests that “the modern Dalit movement began with what Christian missionaries called the mass movements”.⁷ These movements are responsible for the origins of Christianity as it exists in most of India today and define the events taking place where Christianity is currently growing in India. There is a voluminous and growing literature on these movements, and numerous points of fascination and controversy that can only barely be mentioned in this paper.

⁴ Examples to be noted further on in this paper include Robert de Nobili, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, E. Stanley Jones, and Manilal Parekh.

⁵ The name *Dalit*, which means the oppressed, is of recent coinage. Other names for these peoples were/are untouchables, scheduled castes, *panchamas*, *harijans*, *pariahs*, etc. The government of India still uses ‘Scheduled Castes’, a term rooted in a schedule (list) originally drawn up by the British government in the 1920s. There is considerable debate about whether “Dalit” should apply only to the castes on this list, or if it can/should also be applied to the Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Castes, etc. There is also debate in some circles regarding the validity of counting Dalits among Hindus; this paper takes the traditional view that these are Hindu peoples.

⁶ Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford History of the Christian Church, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 241.

⁷ John C. B Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1992), 22.

It is now clear that the early Dalit people movements were not about attaining freedom and dignity so much as finding better patronage from influential foreign missionaries. Two quotations will need to suffice in support of this statement, taken from studies in the far north and far south of India.

There is furthermore no clear suggestion in the sources that the labourers became Christians because they wanted liberty from the caste system as such. Rather, they converted because they believed the new masters would treat them better than the old ones. Likewise, there was no question of the converts looking for greater mobility within Christianity, even though this was what they actually gained in the long run.⁸

The evidence is that Chuhras, accustomed as they were to patron-client relationships, sought to adopt the missionaries and missions as new, more benevolent patrons. It is equally clear that this was a role that the missionaries did not relish and that they resisted.⁹

This change of faith and patronage on a large scale forced the development of indigenous leadership and indigenous patterns of faith and life. Yet it also almost necessarily included Westernizing tendencies, often quite ironically with locals pressing for Western forms and patterns as they desired distance from their former socio-cultural contexts. Again two quotations will make the point.

Some in the West would question whether the “Gothic” architecture, with enormous structures and lofty spires pointing heavenward, that congregations at such places as Megnanapuram and Nazareth erected with their own hands, in competition with each other, could truly be seen as “Indian” or “indigenous.” The retort made by local leaders was that, as former slaves, Shanars (aka Nadars) were not about to copy the styles of temples used by their former masters and were only too glad to find, adopt, or copy new forms for the expression of their faith in buildings that they had erected for their Christ.¹⁰

Paradoxically, Westerners had urged an Indian to indigenize according to Indian paradigms that the Indian believed inappropriate; and the Indian adopted Western dress opposed by Orientalizing Westerners.¹¹

⁸ Henriette Bugge, *Mission and Tamil Society: Social and Religious Change in South India, 1840-1900* (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1994), 163.

⁹ John Webster, ‘Dalits and Christianity in Colonial Punjab: Cultural Interactions’, in Judith M. Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg, Eds., *Christians, Cultural Interactions and India’s Religious Traditions* (Studies in the History of Christian Missions, Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 2002), 103-118.

¹⁰ Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, 225.

¹¹ Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Studies in the History of Christian Missions. Grand Rapids, USA: William B. Eerdmans and Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2000), 142.

Christian education was a major focus of mission among Hindus, among the poor due to their need for development and among the higher castes as an evangelistic strategy (to be noted further below). Higher level education became a powerful source of Westernizing tendencies in Indian society, and also among the more elite Christians who qualified for higher education. The devolution of missionary authority to national Christians in the mid-twentieth century tended strongly to the advantage of the urban elite Christians, to the detriment of the truly Dalit rural masses of Christians.

The churches that have resulted from the people movements of past generations are thus not closely related to Hindu cultural norms. Christianity is effectively locked out of thousands of Hindu castes and communities in modern India, with ongoing mission work still very much focused on the many and various Dalit people groups. The problem for non-Dalit Hindus is well summarized by Herbert E. Hoefler:

Christian congregational organisation, modes of worship, names, customs of dress (especially among women), styles of church art and architecture, religious language, eating habits, selection of religious leadership, approaches to religious nurture and propagation, attitudes towards Indian history, and expectations on personal habits often differ significantly from the mainstream of the society. Yet, few will today attempt to defend these differences on the grounds of theological necessity. These practices are simply the developments of the Western missionary tradition over the past several centuries. The effect, however, is the same as that of insistence on beef and pork eating, and on circumcision and Sabbath observance: change of cultural habits along with change of faith.¹²

This continuing issue of the relevance of current (and historic) Christianity to Hindus leads to the discussion of attempts to engage higher caste Hindus with the message of Christ. Often this is what is in mind in discussions of Christian mission among Hindus, but these attempts to find relevance in relation to classical Hindu traditions need to be understood in light of the fruitful propagation of Christianity among lower caste peoples.¹³

Robert de Nobili's pioneering work in Madurai is well known and almost iconic among those focused on the higher castes of Hindus. Nobili

¹² Herbert E. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2001 [1991]), 151; Hoefler is discussing and commending Hindus who follow Jesus without formal alliance with Christianity or the church, on the lines (noted below) of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay and Manilal C. Parekh. There is of course vast diversity of church organization and practice in India.

¹³ This paper juxtaposes the high castes and Dalits, each roughly 20% of the population of India. Half the population is the very diverse and hard to define "Other Backward Castes" (OBC, government of India official designation) or middle castes or Shudra castes, many of which are basically Dalit, many others basically high caste; all such rankings are severely contested in Indian social contexts.

distanced himself from Europeans and their foreign ways and religion and radically adapted to high caste religio-cultural ways until his work was halted in 1612 due to controversies surrounding his methods.¹⁴

Similar sentiments were expressed and experiments attempted at other times in Christian mission among Hindus. A striking example from a decidedly different theological perspective is from the Protestant decennial missionary gathering in 1892:

The principle I contend for, then, is this: *that the books which we publish should be carefully related to Hindu thought, expressed in its terms, done in its style, adopting where it can its positions, and leading on, still in Hindu fashion and in its terminology, from points of agreement to essential points of difference.* In this way we may, perhaps, be able to furnish an effectual exhibition of legitimately ‘Hinduized Christianity’.¹⁵

Christian higher education in India was developed in the mid-nineteenth century with a very different perspective. There was a clear focus on the evangelization of high caste Hindus, but with a simplistic understanding of Hinduism as a false religion. There was also a desire to undermine and destroy this ill-conceived “Hinduism,” as indicated by the patriarch of Christian higher education, Alexander Duff:

While you [evangelistic missionaries] engage in directly separating as many precious atoms from the mass as the stubborn resistance to ordinary appliances can admit, we shall, with the blessing of God, devote our time and strength to the preparing of a mine, and the setting of a train which shall one day explode and tear up the whole from its lowest depths.¹⁶

This negative, even cynical, view of Hinduism and of Christian mission among Hindus was prominently held and vigorously advocated for throughout mission history, and is by no means extinct even at the present time.¹⁷ But in the development of Christian higher education, more liberal

¹⁴ The controversies were not stirred by Hindu objections, but by objections from another European Catholic priest.

¹⁵ H. Haigh, ‘Vernacular Literature’, in *Report of the Third Decennial Missionary Conference held at Bombay, 1892-93, vol. 2*, A. Mainwaring, Ed. (Bombay: Education Society’s Steam Press, 1893), 667; italics in original

¹⁶ George Smith, *The Life of Alexander Duff, D.D., LL.D.* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1881), 68.

¹⁷ Duff wrote of Hinduism that “Of all the systems of false religion ever fabricated by the perverse ingenuity of fallen man, Hinduism is surely the most stupendous” (1988[1839]:204). Note a recent similar sentiment that stirred controversy in India: “More than 900 million people are lost in the hopeless darkness of Hinduism, worshipping 330 million gods and goddesses created by the imagination of men and women searching for a source of truth and strength” (International Mission Board 1999:1). Note that a later edition of this booklet, without any indication that a change had been made, altered this opening line to “More than 900 million people seek healing from disease, salvation from natural disasters, definition of their place and role in life, acceptance in their communities and meaning in life through the path of Hinduism” (International Mission Board 2000:1).

views came to dominate. There were some success stories of individuals coming to faith in Christ, but not to the extent that early educational missionaries had hoped. And, as John McKenzie well stated,

It was not only the flow of converts to the Christian Church that was seriously checked; Hinduism was proved to be not a mass of rock that might be mined and blown up, but a living plant with many roots, that was capable of eluding the art of the sapper and miner.¹⁸

Christian higher education came to be commended for its suffusion of Christian principles into India and into Hinduism. There is no question that Christianity impacted Hinduism, and by the mid-twentieth century that reality became part of the focus of a new Christian approach to Hindu, dialogue.

But changes in Christian attitudes to Hinduism in the nineteenth century influenced more than just educational missions. A dominant new paradigm emerged, presenting Christianity as the crown or fulfillment of Hinduism. Fulfillment was a central idea at the Edinburgh 1910 gathering, as noted by Wesley Ariarajah:

In summing up its findings, the Commission reiterated its conviction that the Christian attitude to Hinduism, notwithstanding the elements which the Christian must reject, should be one of understanding and sympathy. It said that the Christian should seek the noble elements in non-Christian religions and use them as steps to higher things, for Hinduism in its higher forms “plainly manifests the working of the Holy Spirit.” The “merely iconoclastic attitude,” the Commission said, was condemned by the majority of its correspondents as “radically unwise and unjust.”¹⁹

The fulfillment motif came to dominance because it affirmed the centrality of Christ (or Christianity) while also being respectful towards other religious traditions. It was also, however, conveniently hazy, and there were a number of different angles by which to define exactly what was being fulfilled by what.²⁰

In the heart of the fulfillment era another iconic figure appeared. Brahmabandhab Pathway was not noted at Edinburgh 1910, partly due to his not being Protestant and partly due to his having fallen from favor even with his Roman Catholic Church. But Upadhyay’s radical adaptation of

¹⁸ John McKenzie, ‘Higher Education.’ In *The Christian Task in India*, John McKenzie, Ed. (London: Macmillan, 1929), 91.

¹⁹ Wesley Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought* (Currents of Encounter, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 27; Ariarajah is quoting from *Commission on the Missionary Message: Hinduism*, II, (Bound Manuscripts, WCC Library), 267.

²⁰ Discussions of fulfilment theology point out this conundrum; note Paul Hedges’ broader analysis of the haziness of fulfilment theology in his discussion which begins with this line: “The question as to what fulfilment theology is immediately encounters a very great problem, namely, the vast range of thought that has been classified under this title”, *Preparation and Fulfilment*, 26.

Hindu forms (both cultural and intellectual) was powerfully influential in what has been called “the Calcutta School” in the 1930’s and became yet more prominent when promoted by the founders of the Sacchidananda Ashram (1948; Jules Monchanin and Swami Abhishiktananda) in Trichy (south India). The fresh breezes welcomed into Roman Catholicism by the Vatican II Council allowed Upadhyay to be widely recognized as a prophetic forerunner in Christian mission among Hindus.

Upadhyay sought to maintain a Hindu identity while being Roman Catholic; troubles with the church, not entirely unlike those of Nobili centuries earlier, ushered him into full identity with Hindus. Protestant Manilal C. Parekh walked a similar path; into Christ and the church and then out of the church and into an ambivalent state as a Hindu lover of Christ. The missiological ferment that produced fulfillment theology and striking figures like Upadhyay and Parekh also sparked the growth of Christian ashrams, an attempt to alter the foreign face of Christianity in India.

E. Stanley Jones was among the enthusiastic promoters of Christian ashrams and made a clear distinction between Christ and Christianity in his evangelistic work among Hindus. But the Christian ashram movement failed to develop into the transformative force its proponents aimed towards.²¹ The complexity of the Hindu-Christian encounter precludes simple solutions (such as a Christian ashram movement), and Christian mission among Hindus remains fraught with strains and struggles in many directions.

The last decades of the twentieth century brought transformations to the entire concept of Christian mission among Hindus. From the Indo-centric project outlined in this paper, globalization and its accompanying migrations brought mission to Hindus to the doorstep of churches across the world (though most still seem oblivious to this) while opening new channels for international Christian influence into rapidly urbanizing India.

Sensitive Christians alert to the complexities and challenges of this history and current reality have called for and engaged in interreligious dialogue, some seeing this as part of the Christian mission among Hindus while others would define it as parallel to mission. Dialogical efforts, however, remain marked by elitism and distrust. Let me again give two supporting quotations.

²¹ The first Protestant Christian ashrams were established in the 1920s. Roman Catholic ashrams have proliferated since the 1960s. The failure to significantly impact either the church or Hindu society is often lamented by ashram advocates. For example, see Vandana, *Christian Ashrams: A Movement with a Future?* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1993).

It seems to me that negative stereotypes, some deeply and almost unconsciously held, haunt both sides of most well-intentioned attempts at Hindu-Christian dialogue.²²

There are few Hindus who are interested in (contemporary) Christian theology, and there are fewer still that have a desire to enter into a dialogue with their Christian counterparts.... Celebrations and affirmations of dialogue notwithstanding, there seem to be few new ideas; there seems to be little progress.²³

Christianity in its encounter with Hindus today is marked by theological diversity, if not conflict and confusion.²⁴ Mission among Dalits (and tribal peoples) proceeds with vigor, usually under Indian Christian initiative and leadership, creating massive controversy as many Hindus react against what they perceive to be proselytism.²⁵ Dialogical efforts continue between Hindu (high caste, generally) and Christian leaders, while Hindu discipleship to Jesus outside of Christianity is “increasingly pervasive and influential”.²⁶ A century after Edinburgh 1910, vigorous debate and activity continues to mark Christian mission among Hindus.

²² Richard Taylor, ‘Current Hindu-Christian Dialogue in India,’ In *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, Harold Coward, Ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 124.

²³ Klaus Klostermaier, ‘The Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue,’ In *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*. Harold Coward Ed. (Maryknoll, USA: Orbis Books. 1989), 265; For further examples on these lines see, Iswar Prasad, ‘Preparation for Inter-Faith Dialogue.’ In *Christian Ashrams: A Movement with a Future?* Vandana Mataji, Ed. (Delhi: ISPCK), 102-106; and Francis Clooney, ‘Hindu-Christian Studies as a Necessary Luxury in the Context of Today’s Pluralism.’ *Hindu Christian Studies Bulletin* 7 (1994), 39-44; cf. Bob Robinson, “despite general Hindu reluctance to initiate dialogue, there are some exceptions” in *Christians Meeting Hindus: An Analysis and Theological Critique of the Hindu-Christian Encounter in India* (Regnum Studies in Mission, Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), 155.

²⁴ The rather simplistic categorization of exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist Christian theologies at least clarifies the breadth and depth of the diversity.

²⁵ For an example of the negative reaction, note *Conversion is Violence* (Saraswati 1999). For a brief and balanced discussion of the issue, see Vempenny 1999.

²⁶ Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, 465.