

# Relating with Hindu Diaspora

Anglican & Lutheran  
Reflections



edited by

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# Contributors

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**Ruth Tetlow** is coordinator of the Birmingham Faith Encounter Programme (UK).

**Robin Thomson** is an educator and author with extensive experience teaching Bible and training church leaders in India.

**The Reverend Canon Dr Andrew Wingate** was the founding Director of the St Philip's Centre for Study and Engagement in Leicester, and is now a consultant and teacher in the area of Inter Faith Relations, particularly with Scandinavia. He remains an Associate staff of the Centre.

# Preface

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Relations between people of different world faiths are important points of growth, learning and generosity. It is not that the adherents of such faiths regard the central components of the faith that they themselves hold dear to be interchangeable with other world faiths. Nobody expects them to do so. It is, rather, that they have come to the realization that shared understanding gives enhanced scope for understanding of one's own tradition and for understanding of The Other. These layers of understanding are important for all of us who live in a complex modern world and who interact with faith, tradition and culture of many other people beyond ourselves in everyday life, whether it be in a social, political, educational or religious context. Pluralism is a precious way of life and is in constant need of nurture and care. The world invites and challenges us to an understanding of the layers of meaning and motivation that inspire some and impede others in living the lives they feel called to live for themselves and for others, lives of service and responsibility, of freedom and justice.

One of the ironies and limitations of accelerated communication is that information can remain unprocessed. We find ourselves part of this logjam of discernment because we can and do move quickly to the next area of information and to the next topic of significance. This means that we leave behind us people and things that continue to matter. The other significant factor is the range of human experiences that are lived out within diaspora situations and identity. The movement of people as individuals and as families has accelerated in the past decade although it has been a feature of life internationally for many generations. The impact of warfare, natural disasters and economic instability has necessitated migration on an unprecedented scale in the twenty-first century. People search for dignity and stability, for peace and opportunity, thinking more often than not about the generations that will follow them than primarily of themselves. Part of what they bring with them is their identity. Frequently it is the new contexts that bring to the surface questions that have never before had the opportunity to arise or to be addressed. This movement brings its own dangers.

The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham welcomed our Consultation on Anglican and Lutheran Relations with Diaspora Hindus because this is the sort of work in which it excels. The distillation of theological expertise in the areas of Inter Faith relations and Christian mission brought us to the heart of the international need for peaceful co-existence and the advocacy of this as an urgent priority on the part of people of faith and people of Faiths. The multi-ethnic diversity and the fruitful relationships of respect and creativity across the community of Birmingham on the ground also made Birmingham the right place for our Consultation. I should like to acknowledge the contributions of learning and of hospitality and sheer human generosity that were afforded to us in the preparation for the Consultation and throughout its life. I should like furthermore to thank those who came from near and far to share their stories and to raise their issues. The combined Anglican and Lutheran perspectives further deepened our theological resources, our ecclesiastical experiences and our understanding of a broad range of societies worldwide. It also honoured the bonds of relationship between Anglicans and Lutherans through the Porvoo Communion of Churches.

Consultation is the beginning rather than the end. Its role is to stimulate comparison and conversation, to develop breadth of understanding and depth of response. In its being a new beginning, my thanks go to everyone who made Birmingham 2014 possible and contributed so selflessly to its success in terms of finance, ideas and presence. One of the phrases used in one of our sessions was: the need for conflict resilience, particularly where conflict resolution currently is unattainable. Both in microcosm and in macrocosm, the phrase: conflict resilience speaks more and more to a world crying out for grace, mercy and peace.

The invitation contained in this volume is given to everyone who reads it to take its spirit into his and her heart and to add your personal commitment to our partial expression. It is also an invitation to engage in that journey of understanding with God and neighbour. We cannot do this on our own. We need the encouragement and the stimulus of those of Faiths other than our own. This Consultation is a staging post of this process for Hindus, Lutherans and Anglicans. We invite all of you to join us.

– The Most Reverend Dr Michael Jackson  
Archbishop of Dublin

Chairperson: Management Committee of the Network of Inter Faith Concerns of the Anglican Communion

# Gratitudes

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The Management Group of the Anglican Communion Network of Inter Faith Concerns (NIFCON)—and particularly Andrew Wingate and John Joshva Raja, this colloquium’s principal organizers—acknowledge that the Consultation on Anglican and Lutheran Relations with Diaspora Hindus would not have been possible without help from many individuals and agencies.

In particular, gratitude is extended to the Interfaith Desk of the World Council of Churches; The St Augustine’s Foundation; the Anglican Communion Interfaith Office; The Spalding Trust; Us. (formerly, USPG); The Teape Trust Fund, Cambridge; The Episcopal Church; Shri Venkateswara (Balaji) Temple, Oldbury, Birmingham; and most especially, to The Queen’s Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education for their gracious hospitality.

As well, thanks is given to Barrie Mosher, principal, Mosher & Associates, for the gracious donation of his services as layout editor of this report.

# From Bangalore to Birmingham

## A Consultation Overview

**Andrew Wingate**

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The Anglican Communion Network of Inter Faith Concerns (NIFCON) was established in 1993, following on decisions made at the Lambeth Conference of 1988—which gave a priority to interfaith relations. The next Lambeth Conference, in 1998, encouraged the calling of international consultations by NIFCON. The first of these was held in Bangalore in 2003, at the United Theological College, where Joshva Raja was a faculty member, with particular focus on South Asia—where the churches are in a minority situation; and the multi religious context varied.

In reporting on the Bangalore Consultation, I noted that much of NIFCON’s work up to that time had centered on relations between the Anglican Communion and Islam—particularly after 9/11/2001, not surprisingly. However, during the Bangalore Consultation we had become aware of two particular aspects of the Indian context. The first was the situation of minorities within an increasingly Hindutva-dominated India. We were made aware of the specific issue of the anti-conversion bills in Tamil Nadu—and even stricter in Gujarat—and of measures taken by churches to counter these things. Moreover, the Bishop of Gujarat alerted us to the much more intense issues in there, where the church is much weaker. We heard much impassioned plea for prayer and solidarity with both Christians and Muslims. It was pointed out that Gujaratis have travelled over the world, as business classes, and we were encouraged to engage in advocacy in our own areas of the world.

We were exposed too to the Dalit issues, and also the complexity of Hinduism, and of the need to appreciate the good; but were urged not to romanticize this, as often done by the media in the West—in contrast with Islam.

As it concluded, the Bangalore Consultation issued a number of recommendations—one of which was that Hindu-Christian Relations should be taken seriously by the Anglican Communion; and indeed as well, dialogue with Buddhists and with other religious traditions with their roots in India. Emphasis was given to the sense that Hindutva is a serious danger to the Christian churches; and to issues of mission and conversion—as guaranteed by the Indian constitution, but threatened in some parts of India (not least in Gujarat). Questions of caste were highlighted—among them, how to balance dialogue with the majority higher caste Hindus with advocacy for Dalits, tribals, and minority communities. We affirmed the importance of solidarity from the wider community; and of working for social peace, harmony, and fundamental human rights. The Pentecostal movement, much of it inspired from the United States, has increased much in recent years in India, making ordinary Hindus nervous about Christian mission and social work. Having so noted, we acknowledged the danger of fundamentalism in all faiths—including Christians; thus the need for dialogue with fundamentalist Christians.

Much has happened in the eleven years since the Bangalore Consultation. Since that meeting, so much religious rhetoric has been used in justifying violence involving Muslims, Jews and Christians—especially in the Middle East and Africa. These have had deep repercussions on the West, in both Europe and the Americas. On the whole, Hindus have not been involved—except in Sri Lanka’s civil war. But within India itself, tensions have come and gone, and have included issues related to Pakistan and other neighbors around, and questions related to Kashmir and North East India.

The Indian communities in the west have become more and more important—economically, socially, and politically. This also includes their religious and spiritual contributions at all levels of society. This can be symbolized by the celebration of Diwali in England every October—now a celebration rivalling Christmas in a city like Leicester!

Thus when, in October 2014, another NIFCON consultation was mounted—this time in Birmingham, UK—like Bangalore, a major multireligious city, the delegates were aware of a new reality. India now had a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government once again, as in 2003 when NIFCON met in Bangalore. However, in 2014, it was not a minority or coalition government; rather, it held an absolute majority, and led by Narendra Modi, a Prime Minister with a strong Hindutva and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) history. The consequences of this for India as a whole, for the diaspora Hindus, and for minority Christians and others were not yet clear; but Modi’s



September 2014 visit to New York, punctuated by a vast rally in Madison Square Garden, suggested that perhaps we had entered a different world.

The 2014 NIFCON meeting, held at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham, was, therefore, hugely relevant: an opportunity to think through what this change might mean in the West for Hindus and Christians alike; and for Anglicans and Lutherans in particular to consider how and where they could point the way forward.

Chairing the Birmingham Consultation was Michael Jackson, Archbishop of Dublin, Chair of NIFCON, and Co-Chair of Porvoo. The steering committee included Canon Dr Andrew Wingate and Dr Joshva Raja of the NIFCON management group;<sup>1</sup> Dr Laura Johnson—administrator and major participant; the Rev'd Bonnie Hills, now Inter Faith Adviser of the St Albans Diocese, formerly Chaplain in the Diocese of Leicester; the Rev'd Robin Thomson—South Asia Concern; Ruth Tetlow—Diocese of Birmingham; the Rev'd Dr David Cheetham, Theology Department Head, University of Birmingham; the Revd David Hewlett, Principal of Queen's College. Much thanks are due to all, and especially to Dr Johnson, for whom this became a major task carried out in an exemplary way.

Of the Christian participants, fifteen came from outside Britain and Ireland: five each from India and the USA; one each from Malaysia, Bangladesh, Kenya, Germany, Norway, and Sweden. UK participants included one each from Wales and Ireland, two from Scotland, and twenty from England. Hindu participants included keynote speaker Professor Anant Rambachan (Minneapolis, Minnesota), an occasional consultant to WCC and other Christian organisations; Dr Shaunaka Rishi Das, Director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies; and Dr Sharada Sugirtharajah, University of Birmingham. Paresh Solanki (consultant to the national Hindu-Christian Forum) spoke on the work of that forum on practical projects. Dr Gopal Patel, Oxford Centre, introduced his *Bhumi* ecological project. Dr Somusundra Raja, Trustee of the Balaji Temple, facilitated a most significant visit to the temple, as well as the grant given from there. Professor Krishnan, vice Chancellor of the Karnataka State University, Mysore, came especially for the conference. It should be noted, however, that while much dialogue occurred, the Birmingham meeting this was *not* a Hindu-Christian Dialogue conference; rather it was a consultation on Christian relations with Hindus. This explains why the consultation planners arranged for Hindu resource persons, rather than aiming for equal numbers of Hindu and Christian participants.

The Birmingham Consultation featured lectures, the texts for several of which are included in the body of this volume. Setting the tone was a keynote address by Anantanand Rambachan, on "Possibilities and Opportunities in Diaspora Relations." Responding to Professor Rambachan was Israel Selvanayagam, who remarked particularly on justice issues relating to caste and conversion. Lucinda Mosher gave a historical and contemporary overview of Hindu-Christian relations, from her perspective as a faculty member of Hartford Seminary (Connecticut, USA). Eve Rebecca Parker shared her doctoral study of Devadasi young women, Dalits married to a God in Southern India. A powerful presentation was given by Kumar Rajagopalan, a Baptist minister, formerly of a Brahmin background before conversion, who describes himself today as, in some ways, a *Jesu Bhakter*. Ruth Tetlow introduced the DVD about the Faith Guiding program she had developed, and which consultation participants would see in action during their site-visit to the Balaji temple.<sup>2</sup> Shaunaka Rishi Das, Director of the much valued Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, offered some reflections on Hinduism and Modernity.

Archbishop Michael Jackson made a presentation on the Anglican Communion interfaith document *Generous Love*, and its potential inspiration for Hindu-Christian relations. The consultation also heard from Professor Kajsa Ahlstrand, from Uppsala, who spoke about her leadership in the production of an equivalent document for the Church of Sweden.

A series of panels provided an opportunity for brief presentations by many of the conference participants. These included the Bishop of Bedford, Richard Atkinson, joint chair of the Hindu-Christian Forum UK, and a major supporter of this conference, along with Robin Thomson; Dr Sharadha Sugirtharajah of Birmingham University; Dr Albert Walters, who spoke about Hindu-Christian relations in Malaysia, and in Bangladesh, where he is now Principal of the Anglican seminary; Christopher Rajkumar, who spoke of his work with the National Christian Council of India, including work in Jaffna; Laura Johnson on her doctorate on dual belonging in the South Indian context.

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1 Wingate and Raja were primary motivators for the calling of (and fund-raising for) the Birmingham conference. Sadly, the serious illness of his father necessitated an emergency trip to India by Raja, causing him to miss the first three days of the conference.

2 The possibility of NIFCON involvement in expanding the reach of Faith Guide training was raised by Archbishop Michael Jackson.



In addition, four thematic workshops—on Evangelism, Conversion and Hindu Relations; Caste and Diaspora Hindus, Fundamentalisms, and Idolatory—explored issues which were threads throughout the whole conference, and in Hindu-Christian relations in the diaspora as well as in India. In the first two, it was acknowledged that *conversion* and *evangelism* have long been areas of contention between evangelical religions, on the one hand, and religions not concerned with mission (thus seemingly non-exclusive in their theology). Mention was made of ISKCON (the Hare Krishna movement) as a clear example of “evangelism” on the Hindu side—as also are a wide range of Guru movements popular in the west, especially in the USA.

The *Fundamentalisms* workshop emphasized the plural. This is, of course, a Christian reality, with the growing power of the Pentecostal movement throughout the diaspora, as well as India. At the same time, the overwhelming victory of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party in the Indian elections in May 2014 had raised big questions about what to expect in coming years, including the ever growing profile of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the villages of India and in cities like Leicester as well.

*Idolatory*, always a point of contention between Hindus and Muslims, is a question that arises whenever a Christian group visits a temple in the diaspora. Thus, note was made of the ongoing need to define idolatory and to make clear what Hindus actually are doing in worship.

The matter of caste was given attention as a particular contemporary issue in Britain. Participants learned of the degree to which the question of whether caste should be included in British equality legislation had polarized the Hindu community in cities like Leicester and within national organizations. They also heard a powerful additional presentation by Meena Varma, General Secretary of the Dalit Solidarity Forum.

The final morning of the consultation featured presentations on models of best practices, offered by a number of participants. John Thatamanil, of Union Theological Seminary (New York City) described intensive training courses given to teachers in seminaries and colleges elsewhere, on how to teach interfaith dialogue. Michael Rusk (parish priest in Oadby outside Leicester, UK) spoke on a Hindu-Christian lunch club for the elderly, and other local activities. Gopal Patel, of the Oxford Centre, presented his *Bhumi* project, an ecological initiative in Britain and India, and how this is rooted in Hindu philosophy. Paresh Solanki described the practical initiatives taken by the Hindu-Christian Forum UK, in Leicester, Luton and elsewhere. Ivar Flatten told of the remarkable world music festival and interfaith dialogue—of which he is the initiator and inspirer—which is held in Drammen, south of Oslo, Norway. Jemima Prasadam spoke of about her nineteen years in Lozells, Handsworth, one of the most multi-cultural inner-city parishes in Britain, just a few miles from leafy Edgbaston, where Queens is situated. It was noted that when she retired at the age of 75, just a week before the conference, she had been made an MBE (Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) for her local work, and was celebrated as Auntie Jemima by the local Hindu Temple.

At a special session during the consultation, for which an additional twenty people joined the participants, Andrew Wingate introduced his new book on the theme of the whole consultation: *The Meeting of Opposites? Hindus and Christians in the West* (SPCK, October 2014; Wipf and Stock, 2015). Three insightful and positive responses were given by Michael Rusk, Anantanand Rambachan, and Kajsa Ahlstrand.

A highlight of the consultation was a visit to Balaji Temple, Oldbury, and participants were welcomed very warmly to this magnificent building complex by the South Indian community and were able to observe evening worship led by the several Hindu priests. An excellently led tour included observing the small hills outside, dedicated to different religions. Rowan Williams had dedicated the ‘Christianity’ hill when he visited the temple; an identifying marker included mention of loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves. The consultation presented two bushes, which a Hindu and a Christian in our party planted on the hill, in recognition of our dialogue commitments.

Tamils are now a major part of the Sri Lankan Hindu Diaspora in Britain, Canada, the USA, Germany, and elsewhere. So, it was significant that our temple visit included a lecture from Dr Raja, our main host, on the history and present reality, as he saw it, of the Tamil problem in his native Sri Lanka (from where many of the devotees in this temple come).

Worship was a vital part of the conference. Bonnie Evans-Hills had set up a beautiful meditation room in the former squash court in Queen’s—with paintings by Jyoti Sahi and others, and many other decorations. Services in the chapel included a variety of Indian Christian chants and movement—in the tradition of Father Bede Griffiths and the much loved Saccidananda Ashram of Shantivanam in Tamilnad. At one, an Indian Catholic

## Wingate – From Bangalore to Birmingham

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Christian, who recently completed her doctorate in Indian dance, gave a beautiful rendering of the Lord's Prayer. The closing Eucharist was led by the Rev'd Ray Gaston.

As the consultation adjourned, the steering committee took note of suggestions for further action—including the possibility of a formal dialogical engagement between equal numbers of Hindus and Christians—with Indians included in both cohorts.

# Opening Address

Kenneth Kearon

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I bring you greetings on behalf of the Anglican Communion—a worldwide family of churches comprising 85 million people in over 160 countries. We are an evolving and fast changing Communion, seeking to face head on the many challenges facing anyone today who strives to express religious faith in a modern society. We are at heart a relational Communion, a family of Churches bound together by ties of friendship and partnership. We take shape when we meet in our conferences and consultative assemblies.

This commitment to relationships led us as far back as the mid-19th century to seek greater unity among Christian Churches, and our commitment to Christian ecumenism today is unwavering. That same commitment to relationships has undergirded our long standing commitment to inter-faith relationships, and why we as a Communion through the Network for Inter-Faith Concerns (NIFCON) celebrate our participation in this event today.

You don't need me to describe the way in which inter-faith issues have shot up the public agenda, not always in the most helpful or positive way. As we all experience rapid and dramatic social change at a rate unheard of before, so too that can create insecurity and a loss of identity, which at its most extreme, can lead to xenophobia and fear of anyone who is "different".

As faith communities we have deep resources and experience to help us address these issues. As Anglicans our commitment to reconciliation as central to our faith is unwavering, as I expect it is for all of us represented here. But commitment to reconciliation can be hollow if there is not also an honest acknowledgement of the very obvious fact but there are some within each of our communities who use faith as a justification for discrimination, hatred and even violence. We have to acknowledge that, as we also challenge it.

The most effective challenge to that sort of distortion of faith is the event you are engaging with over these days—honest, open conversations, where we share experiences, face our challenges, and together find ways of addressing them. So for the Anglican Communion, this is an important event, and I wish you every blessing and success on what you undertake in the course of this Conference.

– The Reverend Canon Dr Kenneth Kearon  
Secretary General  
Anglican Consultative Council  
29 October 2014

# Possibilities and Opportunities for Diaspora Relations

Anantanand Rambachan

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Although obvious, it is always good to remind ourselves that the relationships do not occur between religious traditions; relationships are initiated and sustained by persons who embody the traditions to which they are committed. Though embodying our traditions and shaped in various ways by their histories, including the history of relating to persons of other traditions, we are not passive inheritors. We enjoy the gift of freedom that enables self-examination and critical reflection about our relationships with others. We can heal, we can forgive, we can transform and we can enter into new relationships. Our freedom is a source of hope and new possibilities. It is good to remind ourselves also that meaningful relationships between persons committed to different religious traditions do not require that we conceal our core theological commitments and values. To do so is not only dishonest, but it problematizes the fact of diversity and may even suggest an ideal of religious homogenization. We need to speak of the possibilities and opportunities for relationship in the midst of our diversity and to identify together the values that nurture such relationships.

In April 2008, I had the honor of delivering the Lambeth Interfaith Lecture at the invitation of Archbishop Dr. Rowan Williams. I concluded that lecture by expressing sadness at the absence of sustained theological engagement between our two traditions and I made a plea for theological dialogue. Although we cannot ignore the socio-political realities and current tensions that inform our relationships, we should not reduce the meaning of our traditions to these realities or allow our relationships to be determined solely by these factors. Even so, our response to such issues must be significantly informed by our theological commitments. I feel very deeply that we must seek to ground our relations in the profound theological insights of our respective traditions and in our understanding of the meaning of human existence. As Hindus and Christians we seek to determine the meaning of our lives in the world in relation to that which we regard as ultimately significant and as having the highest value. While we ought not to ignore the many pragmatic or even political reasons for building relations with each other, the roots of our motivation cannot be merely instrumental, but must go deeper and be nourished intrinsically by our centeredness in the Source and Goal of existence, the One we speak of as God, or, in the language of the Upaniṣads, Sat (Truth). This is what differentiates our discourse and dialogue. Without overlooking our differences, we need to earnestly seek, affirm and celebrate our shared understanding of life and what it means to be human. The diaspora offers us new and special opportunities for this mutual work. In what follows, I want to share my own thoughts about the fertile theological meeting place of our traditions and invite your reflections.

The Upaniṣads, referred to as the *jñānakāṇḍa* or the wisdom section of the Vedas, define God as “That from which all beings originate, by which they are sustained and to which they return (Taittiriya Upaniṣad 3.1.1). Other Upaniṣads (e.g. Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.2.1-2), speak of God as the indivisible and uncreated One from which the many are created. The Upaniṣads contest the existence of anything but the One God before creation, and the emergence of the world from anything other than God. The universe, Chandogya Upaniṣad emphatically states, does not spontaneously appear from non-existence. The world is willed into being by an intentional creative act of God. The Hindu tradition understands God to be source of everyone and everything. The Bhagavadgita (9:17-18) speaks of God as Father (*pitā*) and Mother (*mātā*) of the universe, and as its nourisher (*dhātā*), lord (*prabhuḥ*), goal (*gaṭiḥ*) and friend (*suhṛt*).

The understanding of the one God, who is, in the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams, “the unique source of everything,” and outside of which nothing exists, is fundamental to our traditions (Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 11). Our affirmation of the oneness of God is as important as our particular understandings of God. The danger of overlooking the universal God of our traditions is the tribalization of God and our limiting of God to the boundaries of our communities. The inspired poet of the Ṛg Veda was aware of this danger when he spoke of God as “The One Being the wise call by many names.”

We share also the understanding that this creation is the overflow of God's fullness (*ānanda*) or what Archbishop Williams calls God's "sublime eternal happiness (Tokens of Trust, 13)." Taittiriya Upaniṣad 3.6, speaks of all beings as originating from, sustained by and returning to fullness (*ānanda*). Our common affirmation of the truth of a universal God who is the source of all existence is not theological footnote. It is fundamental for our relationship and we need to contemplate its implications for how we see each other. For Mahatma Gandhi, the implication is unity and identity with the other. "I believe," wrote Gandhi, "in the absolute oneness of God and, therefore, of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source. I cannot, therefore, detach myself from the wickedest soul nor may I be denied identity with the most virtuous (Mahatma Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 1)." For the Methodist theologian, Wesley Ariarajah, the implication of what he refers to, as a "radical recovery of God as creator," is our identity as brothers and sisters, and as pilgrims and not strangers. We do not own God. "We belong together to God our common creator."<sup>1</sup> The oneness of God is transformative for our traditions. It means little unless it overcomes alienation between us and enlarges our understanding of community beyond religious boundaries. The tent of Abraham is too small for God.

The transformative significance of God for our relationships as Hindus and Christians is not to be found only in our shared understanding of God's oneness and in God's significance as the Origin (*prabhavaḥ*) of all. Hindu traditions affirm unreservedly, the equal existence of God in all. Īśa Upaniṣad begins with the famous call to see everything in the world of movement as pervaded by Īśa (God). There is no life outside of God and there is nothing that exists which is not sustained by God. In the perspective of the Bhagavadgītā 13:27, one sees truly only when one sees the supreme God (*paramēśvaram*) existing equally in all beings. One who sees God everywhere and sees everything in God, Bhagavadgītā 6:30 teaches, never loses God and is never lost to God. This Hindu insight about divine immanence is often and wrongly identified with theological pantheism. The Hindu emphasis on God's transcendence, in so many scriptural passages, is overlooked.

Although the interpretation of the meaning of Christian texts is a task entrusted primarily to Christian theologians, our interreligious context offers us the opportunity for reading and learning from each other's sacred wisdom. Mahatma Gandhi, long before the practice became more popular, spoke of the "duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world." As a Hindu reader therefore, you will understand the appeal to me of those Christian texts that speak of God's all-pervading presence. Psalm 139 instructs about the encompassing divine reality rhetorically: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." In Acts 17:27-28, Paul reflects on the paradox of the human quest for God, and cites a text some attribute to a Greek philosopher, Epimenides: "They would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God-though indeed God is not far from each one of us. For 'In God we live and move and have our being.'" Rowan Williams speaks of divine immanence in the language of divine action. "It means that within every circumstance, every object, every person, God's action is going on, a sort of white heat at the centre of everything."<sup>2</sup> In his version of the Ramāyaṇa, the religious poet, Tulsidās, beautifully meditates on the paradox of God's immanence. In Ayodhyākāṇḍa (Chapter on Ayodhya), Rama, God-incarnate for millions of Hindus, who is exiled in the forest, approaches the sage Valmiki inquiring about a suitable place to construct a new home. Valmiki's rhetorical reply is not unlike the question in Psalm 139. "You ask me, 'Where should I stay?' I ask you humbly to tell me where you do not exist; then I will show you a place."

The equal presence of God in all beings (Bhagavadgītā 18:61: "God dwells in the heart of all beings-*īśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānaṃ hr̥d̥deśe 'rjuna tiṣṭhati*") is the source of the inherent dignity and equal worth of every human being. It is our spiritual antidote to any effort to deny the personhood, worth and dignity of another. After commenting on the divine activity that is intimately present in every human being, Rowan Williams makes an inference that Hindus will endorse: "And if that doesn't make us approach the world with reverence and amazement, I don't know what will."<sup>3</sup>

The implication, I want to suggest, for both Hindus and Christians, is that we cannot honor and value God and devalue human beings. We cannot give our assent or support to any social or cultural system that is founded on human inequality and indignity. Our understanding of God requires diligence and discernment in identifying such systems and in articulating critiques from our theological centers. To see women as inferior to men, to prefer the boy-child, to mistreat the elderly, to ascribe unequal worth and to demean persons on the basis of birth, and to discriminate and practice violence against gay people are all in fundamental contradiction to our deepest theological

1 Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, 11.

2 Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 35.

3 Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 35.



convictions. Today, it calls us with urgency to reverence for our common home, the earth, to united efforts to halt its degradation and to promote ecological responsibility in our nations, communities and corporations.

The positive implications of divine immanence are just as important as the rejection of inequality and injustice in caste-ism, racism and sexism. The single value and practice that, for me, expresses best the meaning of Hindu spirituality is compassion (*karuṇa/dayā*). In the Bhagavadgita 12:13, Krishna describes the religious person who is dear to him (*yo madbhaktaḥ sa me priyaḥ*) as one who is free from hate and who is friendly, compassionate and forgiving. It is important to underline that he speaks not just of freedom from hate (*adveṣṭā*), but positively of friendship (*maitraḥ*) and compassion (*karuṇa*). Earlier in the text (6:32), he described the best Yogi as one who self-identifies with others in joy and suffering. The saint-poet, Tulsidās, also gives pride of place to compassion as the expression of the religious life and describes it as being one with the other in suffering and happiness (*para duḥkha duḥkha sukha sukha*) (Uttarakāṇḍa). He identifies the essence of ethics (*dharma*) with working for the wellbeing of others and its opposite (*adharma*) with oppression.

For the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther, the religious life is a life of service. The meaning of service is enriched immeasurably by understanding that the “recipients of service are Christ incarnate within human need.”<sup>4</sup> He invites Christian fathers to imagine holding the baby Jesus in their hands when changing the dirty diapers of their children. “I confess to thee,” writes Luther, “that I am not worthy to rock this little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and they most precious will?”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus’ parable of the separation of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-36 teaches powerfully that our understanding of God must find expression in serving God present in the needy. “Truly I tell you whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” It is of profound significance to me that the central and most common form of worship (*pūja*), across the diversity of Hindu traditions, is a ceremony of hospitality in which one offers to God the necessities of life that include the three mentioned by Jesus in the Matthew parable: water, food and clothing. In the famous commencement address delivered in the Taittiriya Upaniṣad 1.11.2, the teacher instructs his graduating students to become persons who regard mother, father, teacher and stranger as divine (*Deva*). Our hospitality to God in worship is must be extended in service to others. To regard someone as a *Deva* or divine being in the Hindu tradition requires that we respond with hospitality. It is the generous giving of oneself to others that flows out of one’s vision of truth and which is free from calculations of personal benefit. As a contemporary Hindu monk, Swami Tyagananda puts it, “If God dwells in me and in everyone and everything in the world, then no matter who I am dealing with and who I am working for, I am really dealing only with God and working only for God.”<sup>6</sup> The Sanskrit word used in the Bhagavad Gītā is *dāna* and the text commends generosity that expresses a conviction about the goodness of giving without expectation of receiving in return. In the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 5.2 such giving is commended as part of a fundamental triad that includes self-restraint (*Dama*) and compassion (*Dayā*).<sup>7</sup>

For both of our traditions, the life of generosity and compassion expresses best the meaning of liberation. In the major traditions of Hinduism such liberation is never brought into being by human action. In the case of Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta, liberation is already accomplished and available. For Rāmānuja, liberation is a gift of grace. Liberation frees us to joyously devote ourselves to the wellbeing of others (Bhagavad Gītā 5:25; 12:4). The single purpose of liberated action is the care of the world (*Lokasaṅgraha*) (Bhagavad Gītā 3:25). Krishna describes the actions of the liberated as *asaktaḥ*, or free from the desire from personal benefit. Martin Luther describes a similar state of joyous self-giving in gratitude for the gift of salvation. “From love there proceeds a joyful, willing and free mind that serves the neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. We do not serve others with an eye toward making them obligated to us. Nor do we distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or ingratitude. Rather, we freely and willingly spend ourselves and all that we have whether we squander it on the ungrateful or give it to the deserving.”

For both of our traditions, however, there are challenges in articulating the meaning of liberation for life in the world. There are interpretations of the meaning of liberation that seem to negate and devalue the world and to advocate for detachment that is not differentiated from indifference. In some Hindu traditions, the world is equated with *Samsāra*, a negative concept suggesting that from which we must be free. In the case of the Christian tradition, we are familiar with interpretations of the meaning of salvation that are future-oriented and put the emphasis on the afterlife and much less on life in this world.

4 Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, 7.

5 Cited in Schuurman, p.91.

6 Swami Tyagananda, *Walking the Walk*, 52.

7 This is the text cited by T.S. Eliot in the final section of his famous poem, *The Waste Land*.

In both of our traditions, however, there are alternative ways of understanding the meaning of liberation that value the world and our lives here and now. In the case of the Hindu tradition, and especially for a tradition like Advaita Vedānta, the problem is not the world or existence here. The fundamental problem is *Avidyā*, our ignorance of *Brahman* and liberation does not await the death of the body but is a way of being in this world. It is the overcoming of estrangement from the world and other beings by awakening to the one indivisible reality that exists in each one of us most fundamentally as self. It does not negativize the world, but affirms our unity with all. For the Christian tradition, the Lutheran theologian, Kristin Johnston Largen, contends that without overlooking the “not yet” character of salvation, Christians can accept the “now” of salvation and live out its meaning here. The meaning of salvation is not exhausted in passively awaiting the future. “Seeing the kingdom here among us is something akin to seeing the face of Jesus in the faces of our neighbors. It means recognizing that we do not have to wait for a new day; it has already dawned. It means that we live in the presence of God moment to moment, even though that presence is sometimes veiled.”<sup>8</sup>

What I have spoken about as a place of challenge for our traditions offers also the opportunity for deep learning across our traditions. Christian liberation theology articulates powerfully, in a voice like that of James Cone, the necessary connection between liberation and justice. Our understanding of liberation is incomplete if it does not imply an active concern for the oppressed and the poor. The compassion/*Dayā* that we both agree to be at the heart of what it means live the religious life cannot be indifferent to oppressive, social, political and economic systems. I believe that the Hindu understanding of the meaning of liberation provides motivation and justification for social engagement in the world, but there is much to learn from Christian theologians and activists who have been more explicit in making this connection. Our traditions call us to see the suffering of others as our own.

My attempt to identify fundamental theological meeting places between our traditions is not a call to overlook or to treat lightly our inter or intra-religious differences. As the poet of the *Rig Veda* reminds us, it is the wise persons who speak differently. Diversity is not dismissed as the consequence of ignorance. By attributing differences to the speech of the wise the text, in fact, invites a respectful and inquiring response to difference. Wisdom must not be identified solely with our way of speaking and we should not assume that wise persons always speak identically or that wisdom is manifested only in consensus. When encountering the ancient religious traditions of our neighbors, we would do better to assume that they endure because they speak wisely and meaningfully to the human predicament and ask how we could learn from and be enriched by their distinctive ways of speaking.

Our relations, however, should be grounded in those shared theological commitments that we affirm in our distinctive and rich ways. I attempted to identify a number of these commitments. First, we share an understanding of the universe as having its origin in the intentional creative act of an uncreated universal God who is one. Second, we regard human beings as belonging to a diverse but single community. This follows naturally from the unity of God. Third, in our special ways, we understand the One God to be present or active within all, conferring dignity and equal worth to every human being. In each one, we are called to see the ultimately valuable One. Fourth, we agree that our value for God who brings forth all and who is present in all requires our work together to overcome structures of inequality, indignity and injustice. Fifth, and positively, we see the life of compassion and joyful and generous self-giving as expressing, fundamentally, the meaning of the religious life. The expression of compassion in the public sphere is concern for the public good or what Krishna, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, speaks of as *Lokasaṅgraha*. Sixth, we celebrate the meaning of the liberated life in a joyous embrace of life here and now. Liberation enriches the meaning of the life we live in the world.

These theological meeting places do not exhaust the points of intersection between our traditions, but I regard them as fundamental. They exist at the core of what the religious life means for me. We need to create opportunities for deeper theological study and dialogue between our traditions so that religious lives may be mutually enriched and we may become better servants of others.

Although it is quite common for Hindu-Christian dialogue to focus on matters of controversy and tension between our traditions, I have intentionally not followed this approach in my presentation to you. I am aware of these and do not wish to underplay their significance. My concern, however, is the fact that these issues are too often addressed without any search for theological consensus or addressed only on the basis of normative claims of a single tradition. I believe that our approach to matters of concern may be quite different if considered from those theological meeting places that I have tried to identify.

How would starting from these meeting places influence our conversations about conversion and proselytization practices? Are there practices that we will both repudiate? How do we see the relationship between conversion and aid

8 Kristin Johnston Largen, *What Christians Can Learn from Buddhism: Rethinking Salvation*, 147



to the poor and needy? How will it shape our conversations about religion and the state and about religion and nationalism? Do we have a shared understanding about the nature of religion that enables us both to critique the identification of our traditions with a nation-state? How will we speak of social hierarchy and injustice? Are we committed to values that make it possible for us to speak together and not down to each other? How do we talk about the predicament of minority religious communities? Hindus outside of India know well the fears and challenges of being a minority. How do our experiences in the diaspora inform our responses to the concerns of minority communities in India?

I wish to close by lifting up the two persons who I regard as the greatest exemplars of friendship across our traditions: Mahatma Gandhi and Charles Freer Andrews. Gandhi and Andrews differed considerably in background and training. Andrews was British and belonged to the nation that exercised imperial rule over India. Gandhi was Indian and led a struggle against British rule in India. Andrews was Christian; Gandhi was Hindu. Andrews was trained for the Christian ministry; Gandhi was educated as a lawyer. Gandhi's opening words in an article that he wrote after Andrew's death provide insight about their attraction to each other. "Nobody, probably, knew Charlie Andrews as well as I did. When we met in South Africa we simply met as brothers and remained as such to the end. It was not a friendship between an Englishman and an Indian. It was an unbreakable bond between two seekers and servants."

"Seekers and servants"—two beautiful words offered to us by Gandhi-ji. As seekers, they embodied openness to deeper understandings of God and religious truths by empathetic attentiveness to each other's traditions. As servants, they committed themselves to the service of the poor and oppressed. Gandhi gave his closest friend the affectionate title *dinabandhu* (friend of the poor). Our world, more than ever, needs Hindus and Christians who are seekers and servants, learning from each other and laboring side by side to overcome suffering. Let this be our gift from the diaspora.

# Reflections on Hindu-Christian Relations

## A Response to Anantanand Rambachan

### Israel Selvanayagam

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Anantanand Rambachan's essay is characterized by lucid style and clarity of thought. Breaking away from the dominating trend of speaking in terms of "isms", he talks in terms of concrete and creative ways of *re-lating*. While our Hindu-Christian dialogue can sometimes be like the prolonged sweetness of honeymoon talk, our identifying groups in terms of "isms" can easily lead straight to rancorous divorce. It is encouraging to hear his emphasis on points such as the freedom we enjoy (in our diaspora), the confidence we cherish to heal and transform, and the possibilities we hope to share with transparency our theological commitments and values. Seeking the possibilities to work together for liberation runs through the paper and he has helpfully referred to the visions and views of Hindu thinkers, from Ramanuja to Mahatma Gandhi, and Christian thinkers from Martin Luther to Rowan Williams.

I came to the UK for the first time in 1988 as a doctoral student to complete my dissertation on the theme "Vedic Sacrifice and the Bhagavad Gita," guided by Julius Lipner, a renowned scholar in Cambridge, later the author of the celebrated book *Hindus, their Beliefs and Practices* (2010).<sup>1</sup> Lipner was a half-Indian who has defined himself a Catholic-Hindu. Most of the members of a theological community I lived with treated me as a Hindu, as they had no knowledge of the system of theological education in India where study of other religions with detailed and in-depth study of the Hindu religious traditions was compulsory. I was pleasantly surprised by the quality and breadth of resources, the order of their preservation and the commitment of the teachers to help their struggling research students. I had very bad experience in Indian university/college libraries. Now I understand why Indian research students of all disciplines want to go to the West, even though India has good resources. After ten months of research, I returned to India and continued to teach and to coordinate programs on interfaith dialogue at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, Madurai. I came back to UK for a short period of research and to give a series of lectures. I was intrigued by superficial slogans such as "one truth-many religions," which had been on the lips of a wide range of people from university professors to illiterate masses in India. I have found such position to be the main obstacle to dialogue with commitment and openness.

I came back to UK in 1996, as a mission partner to teach in two theological institutions. Everything, including the weather and human relations was cold! I felt that neither Hindus nor Christians made any efforts to understand my strange position. Interestingly, I had been taught the Hindu religious themes at postgraduate level in India by Eric Lott, a British Methodist missionary scholar; and in turn I came here to teach Hindu and other Asian religious traditions, as well as interfaith relations to Lott's Church and its ministers and missionaries. I was associated with the National Hindu-Christian Forum and NIFCON. Now I realize that I too was suffering from a Diaspora syndrome, which meant that I was over-praising my own church and culture in India. My British colleagues and students nodded to whatever I said, though I could not understand the meaning of the nodding!

After twelve years of service in various capacities, I returned to India. I was shocked by the depressing combination of conservative, fundamentalist and political trends in the churches and institutions, as well as in the behavior of several Hindus. This was compounded by the dwindling of scholarly and academic interest in Hindu traditions and the communal criticism of some publications by well-known leaders. Some of us lamented this, saying that we have some ancient civilizations in India, but what is in shortage is civility! Later I renewed my commitment to promote study and research in both Brahmanic and non-Brahmanic Hindu traditions as well as Hindu-Christian dialogue, based in a Lutheran Theological college and Research Institute in Chennai. Remark-

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1 Julius Lipner, *Hindus, their Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2010).

able in the field is that, following the tradition set by a few missionaries, Western scholars have gone to the breadth and width of the Indian religious traditions. It is always an uncomfortable feeling to see American and European scholars mastering the language, engaging in field research and producing scholarly books and articles on even our local legends (*sthalapuranas*). How wonderful would it be to make resources available for both Hindu and Christian scholars to research and publish! Further, recently we inaugurated a Programme on Interfaith. I must say that it has been near-impossible to get Hindu friends for a sustained dialogue. We may get one or two guest speakers but not friends and partners for a sustained dialogue.

Moreover, it is sickening to hear of honor-killing or suicide over interreligious or inter-caste love and marriage. Though untouchability is illegal in India, it is practiced in different forms and those on the receiving end of violence are the hapless Dalits. You may have read about the series of gang rapes; one opinion is that such things have always happened and the difference is that, thanks to the ever increasing sophistication of mass media, they are now reported to the public. Also I have experienced an indifferent bureaucracy influenced by religious communalism, witnessed corruption in the form of bribery even in broad daylight and payment for vote. I can present many stories of Christian irritation and Hindu harassment, often using the majority power and political influence. Our new Prime Minister Narendra Modi is promising a program of “Clean India.” We hope and pray that he will clean up, not only streets and rivers, but also all areas of public life and administration in India.

I am glad about Rambachan’s mention of scriptural interpretation. He aptly quotes from both the Hindu and Christian scriptures to affirm that God is the creator and sustainer of the world, the all-encompassing presence. It is encouraging to hear that Gandhi has advocated that we read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. Some earlier Christian missionaries suggested an empathetic reading of Hindu texts, though this has not got into the mind of Christian leaders and people.

Scripture also plays the role of providing an identity for a faith community. The multi-scriptural reality of the poly-paradigmatic Hindu religious tradition presents certain problems. At the beginning of September (2014), during his visit to Japan, Prime Minister Modi presented two copies of the Gita to the Japanese government, saying that there could be no greater gift from India. He did the same when he met the US President at the end of the month. Eyebrows were raised in India, as a number of the non-Vaishnavite majority felt betrayed. Critical selection of scriptures and passages and different interpretations have been advocated in the Hindu traditions, while scriptural hermeneutics in the Christian tradition has reached greater sophisticated heights. We need to move together in this area, educating those fundamentalists and fanatics in both traditions for developing a proper approach to our scriptures. I am intrigued by the speaker’s reference to the Rig-Vedic verse, “Truth is one and the wise call it differently.” A simple exegesis reveals the context and meaning of this verse. The “truth” here is not a supreme Truth or God, but a bird-shaped altar of the Pravargya ceremony in preparation for the Soma sacrifice. The following is the most modern translation of the particular verse of the Rig Veda (I.164.46): “They say it is Indra, Mitra, Varuna, and Agni, and also it is the winged, well-feathered (bird) of heaven [i.e. the Sun].”<sup>2</sup> Rambachan elsewhere has noted that this is one of the over-worked phrases and images, which may be helpful to counter exclusivism; but negatively, they may make the search for interreligious understanding redundant and unnecessary, and difficult to generate enthusiasm for initiating interreligious dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

And the Upanishads also have different strands of thought, including the continuing Vedic ritual, introduction of karma samsara, one personal God and the supreme Brahman. The fierce debate within Vedantic tradition vouches for the complex nature of the Upanishads. Also, the Bhagavad Gita tries to respond to an explosive situation, created by contradicting schools of thought, by working out a synthesis between action (*karma*), knowledge (*jnana*) and devotion (*bhakti*). But simultaneously, it reaffirms the power of Vedic ritual, creation of castes, the invulnerability of soul and the automatic operation of the karma samsara.

Moreover, the Christian scripture has been used and abused by fundamentalists who often denigrate the Hindu scriptures. It will be a creative and fruitful exercise to read the scriptures together and to share reflection within the framework of “commitment and openness.” In the mid-eighties, a group of Saiva-Christian friends met regularly for such an exercise in Madurai at the initiative of Dr Thomas Thangaraj. Unfortunately, this project could not be sustained.

Dr. Rambachan has given a fascinating reflection on God, taking insights from Hindu and Christian writings. For example, he highlights that God is the unique and all-encompassing source of the whole of creation.

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<sup>2</sup> Jamison & Brereton, Oxford 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Current Dialogue, WCC, 17, 1989, 25.

There is no place or time that God is not present. Creation is “the overflow of God’s fullness” or “sublime eternal happiness.” But God’s name is profaned by misuse, and it can be sanctified not only by some devotees and followers but also, indirectly, by atheists, agnostics and so on. There are many visions, traditions and interpretations of God, and a theological dialogue or comparative theology is the need of the hour. If the immanent God’s action is going on as “a sort of white heat at the centre of everything,” then its relation to liberation from oppressive forces needs to be clarified. The running thread in the Bible is that God is hot and zealous, ushering a liberation process and burning with anger against all forms of injustice. But later on God was conceived as an unmoved mover who determines the destiny of every human being. God’s relationship with karma-samsara, either as creator and governor, or as destroyer deserves far more analysis than what is available. In what way does the compassionate God create new possibilities and opportunities with unconditional acceptance of all without any discrimination?

It is refreshing to hear again the values of human dignity and equality of men and women including the most vulnerable girl-child. It is public knowledge that female infanticide and feticide has caused growing imbalance in the male-female ratio in India. While Christians have gone public with their sharp divisions on homosexuality in this country and have produced helpful documents, I have yet to see such material produced by Hindu friends in the UK and India. At the same time there have been profound reflections on “our common house” in both communities and it will be good to know stories of their joint efforts to save our “mother earth.” Hospitality to God and humans has been emphasized and I would have appreciated a note that gift (*dana*) originally meant lavish payment to Brahmin priests. Moreover, the neo-Vedantic stress of treating the other as divine has been rejoined by the question: “When will a Dalit and a woman be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with Brahmin priests performing puja in the sanctuaries of temples?”

Not long ago, many Christian Churches started to ordain women ministers and consecrate bishops. I am aware of voices for continued reformation until a woman will be the Pope (or Mome!) in Rome. They are joined by other voices that the ecclesiastical centers of Rome, Geneva and Canterbury should move down to the margins. Then only we will praise God in gusto for his/her compassion and function for the wellbeing of the universe as the Bible and Gita point out.

I do not need to repeat that the hierarchical and divisive caste system is the single-most source for many troubles and a point of embarrassment in Hindu-Christian dialogue. It is so cancerous that even Islam and Christianity, with their proclaimed value of equality, are not free from its sway. It has been shocking to know that, even in the UK, there is practice of caste discrimination and untouchability—as a research has revealed. Many of us thought that at least one positive effect of globalization would be the abolition of caste; but what seems to happen is that caste is globalized! I am sure that concrete efforts are being made to help the victims and challenge the victimizers.

Jesus condemned his contemporary conservatives who whitewashed the monumental tombs of the prophets of old but forgot their message and failed to continue their work to humanize the world. No doubt, Luther and Gandhi were icons of spiritual heroism, but we should avoid making them idols. I have a feeling that we need to move further than Luther and Gandhi. Luther’s horrible anti-Judaic and anti-Moravian action has been realized and have been apologies offered.

Lutherans and others should acknowledge the limitation of Luther’s thinking and come forward with confidence to re-read the Bible, reformulate the Christian fundamentals and re-form the church accordingly in the light of the emerging contexts. It is pointed out again and again that if Gandhi, who denounced untouchability, had agreed to the proposal in the Constituent Assembly to abolish the caste system, we would have a radically different India and religious communities. Then, to move to my own community, while I am a theological fan of Rowan Williams, I am not uncritical. As I have elsewhere pointed out, his stress on a mystical approach to the Mystery or the Unknown needs to be balanced by an equal stress on concrete action according to what is known and obvious, an emphasis that is far from being exhausted.

Dr. Rambachan has given the helpful suggestion that we monitor conversions, distinguishing between genuine and forced, and relating the experience of minorities in the Diaspora to those of their own countries. I would suggest the constituting of a Hindu-Christian Monitoring Group to assess the situation objectively and report accurately. They may also have an eye on India and assess the situation firsthand. It is significant to note that the manifestly “Christian country,” the UK, is much more secular than the intensely religious “secular India.” Religious behavior of politicians and authorities at all levels who are supposed to safeguard the secular polity of India is highly questionable. Further, the racist attitudes and behavior in the UK and the caste-ist attitude and

behavior in India need to be compared and lessons must be learned about proper measures to check them. For example, I am aware that every major Church in the UK has a program unit on racial justice.

I am aware that Rowan Williams, while he was Archbishop, launched a listening exercise in relation to the religious minorities; and I am sure my friend and colleague Andrew Wingate will share the result at some point. In India there is a Minorities Commission to take care of the religious minorities. I have heard people say that its functioning is unsatisfactory. I am not knowledgeable enough to make comments. But one painful thing I can share is that, while Hindu Dalits, (and the recently added Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh Dalits) enjoy the benefit of reservation (meant for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes), the Muslim and Christian Dalits are exempted. Particularly, since 1950, Christians have been campaigning on this, involving popular figures like Mother Teresa, and the promise of certain earlier governments remains unfulfilled.

Finally, it is very helpful to be reminded of Gandhi and C. F. Andrews, brothers and friends, seekers and servants. It was possible to be so for two of the best minds of their time, one Indian and the other British. They truly “embodied openness to deeper understanding of God and religious truths by empathetic attentiveness to each other’s traditions, laboring side by side.” What forms should such commitment take today? In the early eighties, Wesley Ariarajah, who was then on the staff of the sub-unit on interfaith dialogue of the WCC, organized a Hindu-Christian consultation in North India on the theme “Mobilising Resources for a Just Society.” Earlier, in the process of interfaith conversation in the temple town of Madurai, we proposed an interfaith home for rehabilitation of those beggars who had deforming and even bleeding leprosy. But when the question of sharing financial resources was raised, the conversation stopped! We need to move on from rhetoric of ideas and concepts to sharing resources and undertaking joint projects with shared visions, commitments and resources. If the initiative and sharing is from one side, and those on the other side are merely guests with a nominal presence, then it cannot be joint action.

In Oct 2014, I participated in a consultation on belief in heaven and hell, held at the Peace Trust in Kanyakumari (Cape Commorine). The star of the meeting was, naturally, the saffron clad Swami Agnivesh, an Arya Samaj leader, national champion of the emancipation of bonded labourers and child labourers, and human rights activist with international repute. It was refreshing for me to meet him after about twenty-five years. He spoke against superstition in all religions, which is the main hindrance for social engagement to secure justice and peace. He reminded us of the Arya Samaj principle of selecting those Vedic portions that speak of simple, profound and integrated spirituality that existed before the spurious additions of extravagant rituals, caste system, belief in karma and idol worship. He distributed his challenging book, *Applied Spirituality: Inter-faith Dialogue for peace, human rights and social justice*.<sup>4</sup> In my view, this booklet has the power to ignite the mind, kindle the spirit and warm the heart. He is truly radical but his basic premise, shared by others, is undeniable. That is, any religiosity or spirituality that does not lead to work in solidarity with the victims of injustice and with those who are vulnerable because of many impediments, is not genuine and authentic. Here we have a challenging affirmation that can help us to act together, creatively making use of the possibilities and opportunities before us.

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<sup>4</sup> Swami Agnivesh, *Applied Spirituality: Inter-faith Dialogue for peace, human rights and social justice* (New Delhi: Hope India Publications, 2005). Now published as *Applied Spirituality: A Spiritual Vision for the Dialogue of Religions* (Uttar Pradesh: Harper Collins India, 2015).



# United States Hindu-Christian Relations

## Some Observations

Lucinda Mosher, Th.D.

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In July 2014, the Hindu American Foundation, an advocacy organization based in Washington, DC,<sup>1</sup> registered its official concern about the results of a survey conducted by the Pew Research Institute.<sup>2</sup> According to this poll, “despite exponential growth in the Hindu American population and the growing popularity of Hindu practices such as yoga and ayurveda,” fewer than one in four Americans admit to knowing a Hindu. As a whole, Americans know little about Hinduism and tend to view it rather negatively. None of this surprises my Hindu friends.

American Hinduism is an incredibly diverse, wonderfully important aspect of what Harvard University’s Diana Eck has termed “America’s new religious landscape.” However, American Christian knowledge of Hinduism is limited. Conversely, to American Hindus, the sheer variety of forms Christianity takes in the US can be daunting. Any dialogue or analysis will be affected to some extent by the “numerous ‘fault-lines’ of identity along which one can differentiate [America’s Hindus], these being lines of language, ethnicity, race, nationhood, gender, attitudes toward the modern world, experience with colonialism, age, economic status, social status, sectarian identity, and so on.”<sup>3</sup> These same fault-lines complicate Hindu-Christian relations. When it comes to Hindu-Christian understanding, clearly there is much work to be done. Yet, because it glosses over the internal diversity underneath both umbrella terms, the very framework *Hindu-Christian* is problematic. Be that as it may, that is the framework I have been given. This essay offers some observations on US Hindu-Christian relations from my vantage-point as a moral theologian who works in the arena of America’s religious diversity.

## Guru-Centered Hinduism in the US

American Christians who wish to engage seriously and openheartedly with their Hindu neighbors do well to know something about the history of Hinduism in the United States. They will learn that, while it is likely that Hindus numbered among South Asian agricultural workers in California in the mid-1800s, and that it is certain that Caribbean Hindus migrated to the US during the 1800s, and while Hindu philosophy was intriguing to Massachusetts intellectuals during the same period, it is commonplace to speak of Swami Vivekananda’s address to the World’s Parliament of Religions on September 11th, 1893, as the point of arrival of Hinduism in the US. The Vedanta Society, which emerged from his work in the US, has been called America’s first Hindu organization.<sup>4</sup>

If Vivekananda can be said to have launched the first of a series of guru-centered, internationalist, missionizing movements bringing Hindu thought and practice to America, then Yogananda, who brought Self-Realization to the US in the 1930s, is the second.<sup>5</sup> Spiritual entrepreneur Maharishi Mahesh Yogi arrived in 1959; by the early 1980s, he had more than 1.5 million Americans practicing Transcendental Meditation as his disciples.<sup>6</sup>

When, in 1965, a major change in US immigration policies brought South Asians to America in larger numbers than ever before, charismatic gurus from India were among them. Swami Satchidananda, for example, arrived for

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1 The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an advocacy organization that “seeks to serve Hindu Americans across all sampradayas (Hindu religious traditions) regardless of race, color, national origin, citizenship, caste, gender, sexual orientation, age and/or disability.” It educates the public about Hinduism, speaks out about issues affecting Hindus worldwide, and builds bridges with institutions and individuals whose work aligns with HAF’s objectives—with particular focus on human and civil rights, public policy, media, academia, and interfaith relations. [http://hafsite.org/about?q=about/who\\_we\\_are](http://hafsite.org/about?q=about/who_we_are).

2 <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/>.

3 An adaptation of an assertion about Islam by Jamal Elias in his *Islam* (NY: Pearson, 1998), 15.

4 Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 98.

5 Eck, 106.

6 In 1973, the Transcendental Meditation movement founded an institution now known as Maharishi University of Management. In 1974, the university was moved from California to the campus of recently defunct Parsons College, Fairfield, Iowa, where it remains.

the famous Woodstock Festival in August 1969, and stayed to establish the Integral Yoga Movement. At about the same time came A. C. Bhaktivedanta, founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Unlike earlier movements, notes Diana Eck, ISKCON—ritually complex and quite specifically in the Vaishnava stream theologically—“was hard-core devotional Hinduism of a sort American had never seen before.”<sup>7</sup> Krishna Consciousness has never been the largest Hindu movement in the US, but it has been one of the more visible.<sup>8</sup> Some of its adherents have been unabashedly Hindu; others have eschewed that umbrella term. Having survived some embarrassing struggles, the movement has matured into a respected partner in American multifaith collaboration.

Meanwhile, in 1957, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, an American convert to Hinduism, founded a temple in San Francisco—and in 1970, a monastery in Hawaii—in the Shaiva tradition. The movement launched in the US by this “homegrown” guru remains well known for its magazine *Hinduism Today* and yoga centers bearing his name.<sup>9</sup> His engaging, 1,008-page textbook *Dancing With Śiva: Hinduism’s Contemporary Catechism* remains influential.<sup>10</sup>

## Temple Hinduism in US

A direct result of the radical change in immigration policy in 1965 was a rekindling of American interest in Vivekananda. New waves of immigrants from India “discovered” him in the US via the Vedanta Society, and fresh attention was focused on him (and the particular philosophical Hinduism he taught) during the Parliament of the World’s Religions held in Chicago in 1993.<sup>11</sup> So, while Vivekananda is seen as inaugurating guru-centered Hindu movements in the US, his thought has also had strong influence on the shape of American temple-based Hinduism. The first decades of post-1965 immigration saw the blossoming of American temple-centered, devotional Hinduism—thus the need for mandirs.<sup>12</sup> Some American mandirs are makeshift: a warehouse, church, or storefront having been repurposed. Others have been specially built from the ground up.<sup>13</sup> The first two in this category, both dedicated in 1978, are located near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and near La Guardia Airport in Flushing (Queens), New York. In most regions, coming together as American Hindus has trumped sectarian concerns. Numerous “ecumenical” temples have been designed, therefore, in a manner that attempts to satisfy *in one place* the devotional and theological sensibilities of Vaishnavites, Shaivites, and others. In recent decades, however, the number sectarian temples has expanded—and some of those associated with BAPS are huge and exquisitely beautiful!<sup>14</sup>

No matter the size, one of the challenges inherent in temple-building is the need for zoning variances and permits. The rules, and the questions posed by examiners, quite often are founded on a Christian presumption that Hindu temples have “members” of a “congregation”—like churches do. In fact, some do. But most do not—and this has ramifications when trying to make a case before a zoning board whose concern is that sufficient parking spaces are planned and that neighborhood traffic patterns will not be disrupted.

As US Christian clergy have taken note of the establishment of Hindu houses of worship in their neighborhood, the notion of inclusion of mandir executives in local clergy councils has sometimes come to the fore.<sup>15</sup> For example, in 1997, when Hindus rededicated a Unitarian church for their use, a member of the Woburn (Massachusetts) Clergy Association proposed that a representative of this new mandir be invited to join. Another pastor-member opposed the idea sharply, arguing that to include Hindus would be to downplay, or even dismiss, the uniqueness of Jesus and the Christian message.<sup>16</sup>

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7 Eck, 116.

8 Eck, 117.

9 Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami was controversial in that, when it came to the matter of “who gets to speak for Hinduism in America” during the second half of the 20th century, he decided that—in the US and beyond—it should be he, frequently speaking for Hinduism writ large at noteworthy international gatherings.

10 Subramuniyaswami, *Dancing With Śiva*: (San Francisco: Himalayan Academy Publications, 1979); subsequently joined by *Living with Śiva* (1991) and *Merging with Śiva* (2001).

11 Eck, 104.

12 Eck, 86.

13 Eck, 86-87.

14 BAPS: Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha.

15 The inclusion of rabbis had been the norm in many places for quite some time; the inclusion of imams had at least begun.

16 Eck, 81.



By contrast, the Long Island Council of Churches (LICC) has taken an aggressively inclusive approach. It has given seats on its Board of Directors, its Personnel Committee, and its Public Issues Committee to representatives of several other religions—Hindus among them. The LICC continues to see itself as an ecumenical Christian organization that is deeply involved in interreligious education and dialogue—and is glad to have the support of many non-Christians. It was instrumental in the establishment of the Long Island Multifaith Forum in 1994, and provides it with an Executive Director to this day.

The increased visibility of Hindu mandirs in the US has provoked curiosity about what goes on inside. While field trips by Christians—a confirmation class, for example—are most likely to be taken to a synagogue or a mosque, visits to Hindu sites are also popular. In recent years, some US Hindu leaders have actively encouraged and provided concrete guidance for temple tours. Fred Stella, the resident Pracharak (Outreach Minister) of the West Michigan Hindu Temple and President of the Grand Rapids (Michigan) Interfaith Dialogue Association gives an annual workshop for mandir executives on “Bringing the Community Into the [Hindu] Temple & the [Hindu] Temple into the Community,” in which he stresses the importance of making non-Hindus aware that they are welcome to visit the local mandir. He has also produced a short guide on “Providing the Most Excellent Temple Tour Experience.” Princeton University researcher Deepa S. Iyer<sup>17</sup> has made use of the online journal *Huffington Post* to publish a succinct essay on “How To Visit A Hindu Temple: What You Will See And What It Means,”<sup>18</sup> in which she encourages visitors to look for three confluences: the confluence of unity and diversity; of ritual and devotion; and of the individual and the infinite. For visitors to the central Connecticut mandir he founded, Amrutur V. Srinivasan, author of *Hinduism for Dummies*, has created *Prayer Walk at the Satyanarayan Temple*. This booklet provides a station-by-station guide to the mandir’s iconography, with prayers to be chanted in front of each deity. While the primary intent of this to encourage and guide second-generation Hindus, the author recognizes its value to the temple’s non-Hindu guests.

On one tour of a mandir in New York City, my Christian seminary students and I came upon a group of adults working together in one of this temple’s classroom. After we introduced ourselves, one of the women responded. “You know,” she said, with a twinkle in her eye, “we Hindus like to visit churches, too!” And so, a few weeks later, after a few well-placed phone calls on my part, the Ganesha Temple’s Bhagavad-Gita Study Circle enjoyed a guided tour of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, as guest of the cathedral’s dean. The lesson here: Hindu neighbors may indeed welcome a Christian’s unconditional invitation to come and see.

## Predatory Proselytism

Where America’s Hindus and Christians are well acquainted with each other, wonderful things can and do happen. For example, one Western Michigan mandir community works with the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity to build homes, and helps the Salvation Army provide Christmas presents for families in need. The Christians are glad for the collaboration; the Hindus appreciate it when, as a result, Christian institutions accord them respect. During the summer of 2014, a ceremony inaugurated the founding of *Hindu Sanatan Parishad of Michigan*, an organization serving the region’s growing Bhutanese/Nepali community—most of whom are Hindu. The ceremony’s venue? “Right smack dab in the middle of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church,” one of the Hindu participants told me proudly, “with Jesus himself looking down upon us in blessing.” Christian neighborliness toward Hindus does indeed abound in western Michigan. However, western Michigan is also the headquarters of *Mission India*—an organization that broadcasts polemics about Hindu dharma and engages in aggressive proselytism.

America’s Hindus are quite disturbed by what they’ve come to term “predatory proselytizing”—especially when it takes place on university campuses. Vineet Chander, Coordinator of Hindu Life at Princeton University, tells of intercepting an Evangelical Christian guidebook on how to go about converting students of Hindu background to their brand of Christianity. Their approach, he says, “combines good cheer with trashing of Hindu symbols and rituals,” as he describes it. This sort of thing makes some Hindus suspicious of *any* kindness offered by their Christian neighbors, he says. On the other hand, he knows Christians who are as offended as he by aggressive missionaries. As annoying as that behavior can be, Chander still argues that his fellow Hindus need to be more

17 Deepa S. Iyer is a researcher at the Princeton University based initiative Innovations for Successful Societies <http://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/>

18 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/deepa-s-iyer/hindu-temple-visit\\_b\\_855277.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/deepa-s-iyer/hindu-temple-visit_b_855277.html).

nuanced in their critique of proselytism generally. “Hindus need to make it less a critique of proselytism in theory,” he suggests, “and more a critique of specific methods.”<sup>19</sup>

In the US, in addition to Christian efforts to turn Hindus into Christians, we also have what might be called the Christianizing of Hindu practices. By this I mean the taking of a practice such as hatha yoga, draining of its original religious context and content, and reconceiving it as mere exercise. Thus, especially in strongholds of the Christian Right, one will find groups in the US that practice so-called “Christian Yoga.” Coming from a different attitudinal place are US groups who espouse what they call “Yoga Spirituality” as something distinct or de-linked from “Hinduism.” Whatever the motivation, the practice of yoga without understanding, acknowledging or appreciating its Hindu origins is particularly irksome to some activists. Since November 2010, the Hindu American Foundation has been reaffirming the link between Hinduism and yoga through its *Take Back Yoga* project, which was gotten positive coverage by the New York Times,<sup>20</sup> Cable News Network (CNN), and National Public Radio. From the Christian right we also get occasional opposition to the offering of yoga as an activity in required physical education classes in public schools—because these Christian parents don’t want their children to be obliged to “practice Hinduism.”

The same US Christian parents who react negatively to the notion of their children being required to try yoga are likely also to assume or assert that Hindus practice “idol-worship.” Their assumption is exacerbated with American immigrant Hindus who use the word *idol* to mean *murti* without understanding that, to the Christian ear, its tone is negative, that to use it is to reinforce misconceptions. As do my Hindu colleagues in interfaith work, I encourage Hindu leaders to use the Sanskrit term, reminding them of the colonialist baggage carried by the English term *idol*. We stress the difference between the terms *idol* and *icon*—the latter naming something that points beyond itself to the divine, that serves as a window to the numinous. With my Hindu colleagues, I believe it is as important for America’s Hindus to push back against Christian hegemony in matters of vocabulary as it is for Christians to learn the vocabulary of Hinduism. As one Hindu colleague puts it, “there needs to be space for Hindus to speak with their own terms, from their own context without resorting to (or being forced into) a discourse of defense and explanation.”

And, we need to leave space for *multiplicity of explanations*. In the American-Hindu context, as Chander points out, “it is hugely problematic for American Christians to think that there is a single Hindu position on anything, including *murti* use. The nuance and complexity of Hindu positions and practices too often gets lost. This perpetuates misunderstanding.” For example, Christians may be puzzled to find that a Vedanta Society altar will include images of Jesus and the Buddha. They may be surprised to learn that a particular image—Ganesha, for one—may be interpreted quite differently from one stream of Hinduism to another. With regard to the murtis themselves, “some American Hindus will tell you that ‘we don’t really *worship* these images; they are just symbols.’ But that’s a problematic claim for them to make on behalf of all Hindus,” Chander explains. “It might be okay from the viewpoint of Advaita Hindus; but ISKCON devotees most certainly would not say that! That statement is not true for them.”<sup>21</sup> Likewise, American Christians need to be helped to understand the multiplicity of Hindu explanations of the divine-human relationship. In tours of American “ecumenical” mandirs, it is exceedingly common to hear some version of the Advaita Vedanta Vivekananda popularized. It is easy to explain, and many American Hindus espouse it—but not all do.

Closely linked to the Christian assertion that devotional use of murtis is “idol-worship” is Christian derision of Hinduism as “polytheism.” To correct this, many educators counter by arguing for Hinduism as another monotheism with a well-developed understanding of the complexity of the Divine. “The intent is well placed,” Chander admits; “but too often it is an attempt to fit Hinduism into a ‘monotheism’ the Abrahamic world has created. Monotheism versus polytheism is a binary that does not serve the situation well. This sort of thing happens a lot,” he says, “when Christians set the questions and categories for conversations with Hindus.”<sup>22</sup>

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19 Phone conversation with the author, October 2014.

20 “Hindu Group Stirs a Debate Over Yoga’s Soul,” *NYTimes*, November 27, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/28/nyregion/28yoga.html?src=me&ref=homepage&r=0>

21 Phone conversation with the author, October 2014.

22 Phone conversation with the author, October 2014.

## Toward a Cohort of Hindu Chaplains in the US

Chander expresses his concerns from his vantage-point as a professional spiritual-caregiver to Hindus at a prestigious US university. Of particular interest to me, as director of Hartford Seminary's Multifaith Chaplaincy Program, is the rise of Hindu interest in chaplaincy as a vocation. The US military's first Hindu chaplain was a woman: Pratima Dharm. She served from 2006 until Fall 2014—when she became the first-ever Hindu chaplain at Georgetown University (Washington, DC). She joins at least a dozen other Hindus serving officially as spiritual-caregivers on US university campuses. It is a growing field. The Hindu chaplain at Duke University has called for the establishment of Hindu chaplaincies on 100 campuses by 2020! At present, one Hindu has received board certification as hospital chaplain through the Association of Professional Chaplains. Another woman is well on her way to earning that same credential. Her struggle has been to find coursework in Hindu theology that will be accepted as equivalent to Christian theological school coursework.

And that points to an important conversation taking place among prominent American Hindu activists who are determined—not only to have Hindus numbering among America's hospital, military, and university chaplains—but to be sure that these chaplains' credentials are authentic from a Hindu perspective. Most of them have made peace with the title *chaplain*, despite its Christian origins, but are still having a hard time explaining and selling the notion to first-generation immigrant temple executives. They would like to found a dedicated graduate school for the formation of chaplains, but resist calling it a “seminary” or “theological school”—again, because these are “Christian” labels—despite the examples offered by well-established Jewish and Buddhist “seminaries”. The set of national standards developed by the Association of Professional Chaplains undergirds the credential most widely accepted by hospital spiritual care departments. However, these standards are articulated in terms presuming that most applicants will be Christians who have earned a Master of Divinity degree in an accredited theological school. A white paper on “Equivalency Issues for Buddhist Candidates for Board Certification Through the Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc.” has been posted. A similar white paper for Hindus cannot be too far in the offing.

## Hindu-Christian relations with regard to public prayer

A common responsibility of chaplains is the offering of ceremonial, formal, public prayer. Interestingly—while the US Constitution guarantees the separation of Church and State—since 1789, each chamber of the United States Congress has had a chaplain—and every session opens with prayer.<sup>23</sup> So may the sessions of state and local legislative bodies. The US House and Senate each have a policy whereby a member may invite a religious leader to serve as guest chaplain for a session—and a few (almost all of them Christian) have invited Hindus.

Thus, on September 14, 2000, Venkatachalapathi Samuldrala, a priest of the Greater Cleveland Shiva Vishnu Temple became the first-ever Hindu to give the opening prayer in the US Congress. The occasion was the address, on that day, of a joint session of Congress by the Prime Minister of India. Pandit Samuldrala's prayer aroused the ire of the conservative-Christian Family Research Council (FRC), who spoke out against in in their own newsletter and (possibly) on right-wing media. Mainstream media pushback by the organization Americans United for the Separation of Church and State embarrassed the FRC sufficiently that they withdrew at least some of their posted statements.

On July 12, 2007, Rajan Zed, of the Indian Association of Northern Nevada, became the first Hindu to offer the opening prayer in the US Senate, specifically. In what has been called “an astonishing and shocking breach of protocol,” three fundamentalist Christians heckled Zed from the Senate visitors' gallery as he began his prayer.<sup>24</sup> The protestors were arrested and Zed's prayer proceeded, but later on, the American Family Association, a Mississippi-based right-wing Christian organization complained that allowing Zed to pray at a session of the US Senate implied congressional endorsement of Hindu “non-monotheism”.<sup>25</sup>

On June 4, 2013, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, head of the Aadheenam Monastery in Hawaii, gave the opening prayer for the House—without incident. All went smoothly again a year later, when Rajan Zed returned

23 <https://www.senate.gov/reference/office/chaplain.htm>.

24 <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/blogs-news/hindu-press-international/rajan-zed-opens-us-house-of-representatives-session-with-hindu-prayer/13701.html>.

25 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/12/AR2007071202007.html>.

to the halls of Congress—this time to deliver the opening prayer in the House of Representatives.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Zed has made something of a cottage industry of offering opening prayers. He has solicited invitations to be “the first Hindu” to offer invocations at sessions of city councils, state legislatures, and so on—all over the US—often to the dismay of local Hindus, who feel that he steps on their own efforts at advocacy and outreach.

A very different opportunity for Hindu prayer in the public square derives from the fact that, since 1775, the US has had a tradition of a presidentially declared National Day of Prayer (NDP). It has always been a Christian initiative; but, ostensibly, anyone ought to be able to take part. In some locales, NDP observance is joyfully multifaith. For example, in 2007, the Grand Rapids (MI) observance featured a full day of “Hindu-Christian Conversations” at a Methodist church, with panel discussions, music, liturgical dance, and more! Sponsorship and participation was ecumenical on both sides.<sup>27</sup> However, the privately-funded National Day of Prayer Task Force, which has made itself the overseer of thousands of National Day of Prayer events at the state and local levels, facilitated by its many local chapters, prefers that the NDP be explicitly Christian.

*Trouble in Troy*, a Harvard University Pluralism Project case study, tells the story of Padma Kuppa, a young Hindu civic leader who, inadvertently, found herself in the center of a firestorm when her desire for her city’s National Day of Prayer observance to be more multifaith collided with the desire of local chapter of the National Day of Prayer Task Force to keep it “pure.”<sup>28</sup> In 2004, Kuppa sought, and received, permission from her mayor to offer one of the prayers given on the Troy City Hall steps during that year’s NDP observance—and did so! Outraged, the Troy National Day of Prayer Task Force leadership sought a City Council resolution ensuring that Troy’s 2005 observance would be “Christian.” A public debate ensued in the Troy media. In the end, the Christian Right kept control of the City Hall steps for the 2005 event, but without mayoral support. Instead, the mayor was among the speakers at a parallel Interfaith National Day of Prayer Celebration, organized by the newly constituted Troy Interfaith Group, and held at nearby Westminster Presbyterian Church. The Troy Interfaith Group lives on. One of its most interesting projects has been the construction of a Community Interfaith Labyrinth, dedicated June 1, 2008.

## Formal Dialogue

The Troy Interfaith Group is an element of what Diana Eck calls America’s expanding interfaith infrastructure—its network of multifaith organizations and formal dialogues. In recent years, the interfaith offices of both The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have acknowledged the need to be more engaged with the breadth of America’s religious diversity. Both current officers are interested in Hindu-Christian dialogue, but neither office has the resources for a new formal project at this time. Both say that any formal engagement with Hindus by TEC or ELCA would take place through the interfaith office of the National Council of Churches—and the NCC has nothing of that sort planned for the near future.<sup>29</sup>

So, beyond the occasional local interfaith partnership, where *are* US Episcopalians and Lutherans engaged with Hindus in formal dialogue? I am aware of a recent enterprise in southern California. During the first decade of the 21st century, women’s interfaith organizations were founded in upstate New York; southern California; and Metro Detroit, Michigan—and each of them had an Episcopalian or a Lutheran (or both) and a Hindu among the founding members. But the most robust and longest lasting example is the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue that has met annually since 1998, at a conference center in Potomac, Maryland. Its co-sponsors have been the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. As the name implies, all Hindu participants have been Vaishnava (and mostly ISKCON at that); there has been no desire to include the full range of Hindu traditions—but Vaishnava itself is not a monolith.<sup>30</sup> The Christian delegation, on the other

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<sup>26</sup> June 19, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> [http://m.shorelinemedia.net/white\\_lake\\_beacon/archives/article\\_8ff54f37-dca4-5de5-af10-ee4bd74171a5.html?mode=jqm](http://m.shorelinemedia.net/white_lake_beacon/archives/article_8ff54f37-dca4-5de5-af10-ee4bd74171a5.html?mode=jqm)

<sup>28</sup> For information about the Pluralism Project Case Study Initiative, see: <http://www.pluralism.org/casestudy>. For a copy of the Trouble in Troy case study (and permission to use it with a group), contact [epierce@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:epierce@fas.harvard.edu).

<sup>29</sup> These assertions are based on phone conversations during Fall 2014 with the Reverend Margaret Rose, Deputy for Ecumenical and Interfaith Collaboration, The Episcopal Church; Kathryn Lohre, assistant to the presiding bishop and executive for ecumenical and inter-religious relations, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; and Dr. Antonios Kireopoulos, Associate General Secretary, Faith and Order and Interfaith Relations of the National Council of Churches USA.

<sup>30</sup> Francis X. Clooney, S. J., “Prologue: Reflections on Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue,” in *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 20:2 (Spring 2012), 7.



hand, has always been ecumenical. While the majority have been Roman Catholic, participants have included many Episcopalians,<sup>31</sup> as well as several Lutherans and Methodists.

The two-day format has in fact taken on the style of a retreat. Papers are shared, but so is fellowship; discussion takes place, but so does worship. One Catholic participant calls it “a model of how learning and prayer can establish a path of interreligious sensibility that goes beyond mutual understanding and respect to a deeper level of interpersonal solidarity.”<sup>32</sup> Where other longtime participants have reflected on the theological significance of this dialogue, one has described it as “a dialogue between friends....who choose to return to this annual spring meeting year after year, sometimes traveling a great distance, for no other reason...other than to be part of these intimate discussions about understanding God.”<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

When American Hindus and Christians get to know each other, they are often surprised at the degree to which they share certain aspects of religious life, albeit practiced in different forms. They may also come to deeper understanding of the complexity of each vast community. They may discover that they share common concerns about the rising generation and its commitment to maintaining the structures and institutions that support devotional practices. At some point in the conversation, however, the American Hindu may well say to the American Christian, “Hinduism is not a religion, it is a way of life.” This happens a lot, and it is frustrating to the Christian for whom Christianity is also very much “a way of life.” In such smug declarations by his fellow Hindus, Vineet Chander hears a subtext: “The implication is that we don’t fit into your framework of *religion* as something linear or opposed to *secular*. And there is also a reaction to colonialism built in. Implied in the claim that ‘Hinduism is a way of life rather than a religion’ is a sense that ‘we Hindus are flipping the rules of the game!’” The implication that *Hinduism* is bigger and broader is a veiled push-back against Christian hegemony. As an American Christian with an open heart for my Hindu neighbors, I find this point of clarification helpful.

31 Episcopal participants have included Rev. Barbara Henry (active in DC in the 1980s), Rev. James Davis, Rev. Charles Gibbs (Executive Director, United Religions Initiative), Eric Schwarz, Rev. Elizabeth Orens (All Souls Memorial Episcopal Church, DC), Rev. Dr. Lucy Lind Hogan (National Cathedral). Rev. David Rodier has also participated; he is now affiliated with one of the break-away “Anglican” movements in the US.

32 Gerald Carney, “Reflecting on Our Journey,” in *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 20:2 (Spring 2012), 233.

33 Samuel Wagner, “A Dialogue of Friendship,” in *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 20:2 (Spring 2012), 244.

# My Journey of Faith from Hinduism to Christ to Hindu Yesu Bhakta

**Kumar Rajagopalan**

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I was born in Chennai in 1964 into a Hindu Brahmin caste family. My parents are Shaivites and the key family deity is Karthikeya or Muruga, the brother of Ganesh and the son of Siva and Parvati. My upbringing in India was quite orthodox and my parents were and still are very religious. With respect to caste from what my mother recently shared with me, I realize they were quite progressive, openly interacting and associating with those of other castes. I recall servants being well treated and being on very good term with my parents and their closest friends in India are Muslims. However my mother said that caste rules were scrupulously adhered to when my grandparents and members of my father's family visited.

## Migration to Britain

My father was the manager of nationalized Indian bank and in 1973 he was transferred as manager of the London branch. A place of worship was set up in the home and the lack of a temple led my parents and others to dream of constructing a temple dedicated to Karthikeya. My siblings and I accepted and practiced the Hindu faith, though we were growing in our knowledge of the Christian faith as we studied at a Catholic primary school.

The key event that led me to begin questioning Hinduism took place in 1981, when we returned to India for my brother and me to undergo the Uppanyanam, the sacred thread ceremony. Subsequently we practiced the prescribed morning and evening prayers.

I was disturbed by how caste played out within the temple context in Britain and how it was openly discussed among the South Indian Brahmin community. At the inauguration of the Karthikeya temple in East London, my brother and I, along with other Brahmins, were invited to enter the sanctuary to recite prayers. I recall feeling extremely uncomfortable when a teenager of my age and different caste kept telling me that I was a Brahmin and I could enter the sanctuary.

Such experiences caused me to drift away from my Hindu faith, as I could not accept a god who made distinctions by virtue of birth. At the same time my study of the sciences and the influence of friends at school led me into atheism/agnosticism. I went to university with such an outlook on life and regarded religious faiths as a crutch for the feeble minded and weak willed.

At university, the first Christian I met told me that my grandmother was burning in hell. Later another Christian came alongside me and gently but clearly shared the gospel. While he was not reluctant to share his faith, what I most vividly recall is his genuine friendship in spite of my very cynical attitude. He gave me a Gideon Bible, and I read through Luke's gospel twice. I also went to numerous Bible studies, at which I was deliberately difficult. Through the study of the sciences, particularly Chemistry, I came to accept that there must be a God. If so, then which God should I follow? The witness of my friend and the private reading of scripture, one night led me to kneel in front of a church and ask the Lord to reveal Himself to me, if He was real. The following Sunday, 5th May 1985, at a Baptist Church where the gospel was preached from Luke, I accepted and embraced Christ as my Lord and Savior.

In the light of my journey of abandoning Hinduism because of its caste division and discrimination, the key verse for me is Galatians 3: 28, "For there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." I am well aware of the fact that throughout church history this has not been practiced, but it is what followers of Christ should aspire to and there are some examples where this has become a reality, e.g. the Azusa Street Revival in 1906.

## Church Experience

I need to preface the description of my experience in church by saying that I know that the church I attended while at university and the church in London deeply cared for me and had my best interest at heart. Their unhelpful practices are a result of factors that shaped the Western mindset and practice, which are outlined below. I encountered an issue within church life, which I now realize is rooted in the universal human tendency to seek the assimilation of the other into one's ways of being.

***It happens at the socio-political level.*** What is being sought by significant sections of British society is the assimilation of migrants into a British way of being and living, whatever that may be.

***It happens within the various faith traditions.*** People who embrace Islam from other backgrounds are required to adopt the dress code, dietary laws, and the various traditions of the Islamic community. This includes men getting circumcised, and reading the Koran and reciting prayers in Arabic. Similarly those who embrace the Hindu faith from other backgrounds are required to and willingly accept various traditions and practices of the Hindu faith.

***Therefore, it is no different when people from other backgrounds embrace the Christian faith.*** An issue that the early church encountered and addressed in the first Jerusalem Council regarded whether the new believers should be circumcised (Acts 15: 1-35). Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Council came to the radical conclusion that Gentile believers did not need to be circumcised, and a key plank of Jewish identity was set to one side.

In short, this assimilating tendency is always present, and is currently being practiced by Christian missionaries coming to Britain from other parts of the world.

## History of Western Christian Mission

However within the past few hundred years the assimilating tendency of the Western Christian missionary endeavors has gone hand in hand with Western imperial colonial expansion and the belief that cultures are on an evolutionary continuum from primitive animism to advanced Western Christian culture, which stands at the pinnacle of cultural development. Therefore, in the Christian missionary efforts, the goal was to make new believers as much as possible into carbon copies of those who shared the gospel.

In *A History of Christian Missions*, Stephen Neill describes Father Fernandez's missionary methods in Maduri: "Father Fernandez followed the method, familiar to him from Goa, of turning the converts as nearly as possible into Portuguese."<sup>1</sup> Such assimilating tendencies have survived into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century church. So when I became a believer and entered the church I encountered two very unhelpful practices.

First, there was the drip, drip negativity towards other cultures. As an Indian and ex-Hindu I heard constantly about the need to convert the idolatrous Hindus; I heard constant criticism of arranged marriages, and of the strong extended family. Whenever the two-thirds world, including India, was featured in intercessory prayer, the emphasis was always about their woes and needs. I heard constant praise of the missionary endeavors and achievements of those who'd gone out to darkest Africa and Asia. And I heard about *music*! Disparaging remarks about South Indian classical music, which was based on Hindu worship, were frequent; Hindu music was often referred to as "squeaky bongo."

Conversely, I heard frequent positive statements about western culture. Music! At the university Christian Union, I heard praise of Western Classical music, though some of the composers led lifestyles contrary to the gospel. Emphasis on personal faith and relationship with God led to an affirmation of individual freedom and choice, over and above community loyalty. The nuclear family was seen as being both Western and Christian. I heard of the benign civilizing influence of the Christian West on the rest of the world. Even today certain mission organizations display a patronizing colonial mentality.

Therefore, I was hearing a negative portrayal of my culture—which was considered to be backward and unchristian, and positive portrayal of Western culture—which was considered to be Christian and the most advanced.

When I embraced Christ, my brother used to call me a "coconut", a derogatory term meaning that having embraced the white man's faith. I was now brown on the outside and white on the inside. He insisted that I could not be an Indian and follow Christ, which is what I wanted to be and do. The most disconcerting aspect of my

1 Neill, Stephen, *A History of Christian Missions*, 156.



church experience was hearing that I *did* have to jettison my Indian culture and embrace white western culture, i.e. that *I must become a coconut to follow Christ*. The church was telling me that I could not be an Indian follower of Christ. Please note that it was never explicitly stated in this way, but was implied by the two unhelpful tendencies that I have described above. As a young believer I felt that I had to listen to, and follow, what experienced Christians were telling me—but this came into conflict with my desire to be an Indian follower of Christ.

### First Steps to Becoming a Hindu Yesu Bhakta

I began to find a way forward when, in the early 1990s, I attended a support group for followers of Christ from Asian background, which was run primarily by Asians. At this meeting, through a series of studies, I learned that important aspects of my Hindu/Asian culture were affirmed in the Bible:

- The emphasis on community rather than the individual, including a community of faith. (1 Corinthians 12 & Ephesians 4)
- Respect for authority and leadership. (Hebrews 13: 17)
- Respect and care for the elderly by the family. (1 Timothy 5: 4)
- High regard and support for the immediate and the extended family. (1 Timothy 5: 8)
- Great emphasis on sacrificial hospitality. (Genesis 18: 1-8 & Hebrews 13: 2)
- Emphasis on hard work. (2 Thessalonians 3: 6-13)
- No secular/sacred divide. (1 Corinthians 8: 6)
- Upholding of strong moral values (Ephesians 4: 25-32).

Within the church, however, there was never any affirmation of my Asian culture. But we were also honest about the errors and shortcomings in our culture to which the Bible drew our attention. There is a very unhealthy emphasis on honour, particularly family honour within Asian culture. Our families often said that, by embracing Christ, we had brought dishonour to our family and community. We stood by the teachings of the Lord that we needed to bear the cost of following Him and uphold His honour above that of all others. (Luke 14: 26-27 & John 5: 22-23) Whilst consumerism and affluence is a global phenomenon, it is central to the Asian diaspora; while there are mitigating factors for this, its ungodliness cannot be ignored. (Matthew 19: 16-30)

We agreed that the pursuit of success, status and fame is idolatrous and ungodly within our culture. (Luke 14: 7-14) This exercise helped me to take the first significant step towards understanding and embracing the fact that, in cultural terms, I could be a Hindu Yesu Bhakta. In this title, “Hindu” refers to the cultural aspects of the Hindu faith; “Bhaktas” means “a person of faith.” From about 2005 onward, I began to feel less at ease with Western Christian practice, which I had accepted unquestioningly. In 2007, I was gently challenged to reconnect with my Hindu roots and had the chance to meet Hindu Yesu Bhaktas in India and the US. Beyond accepting and sharing with others positive aspects of my Hindu/Asian culture cited above, I also began to explore aspects of Hindu spirituality. Some simple steps that I now use are:

- **Personal devotion:** When I am able to do so I sit cross-legged on the floor to do my daily reading, prayers and meditation.
- **Worship:** I have found the musical compositions by the Christian band *Aradhna* very helpful in enabling me to worship the Lord from the heart. Even though I do not speak Hindi, I find the musical style very helpful.
- **Communion:** Using coconut, coconut water, bananas and milk has been another way to reconnect with my Hindu spirituality.

I have been challenged to explore two key aspects of Hindu practice: One is loving devotion of Meerabai to Krishna, and of Avvaiyar to Ganesh, and later, to his brother Muruga. There is a loving abandon and devotion to their respective lord, which was a feature of Christian discipleship in the past, but in my experience is virtually absent today within the Protestant denomination. Related to the above point is the idea of *sannyas* (renunciation), in order to seek to know God. I am challenged by the devotion, love and commitment that people have to knowing God and their willingness to take such sacrificial steps. I am aware of Hindu Yesu Bhaktas who

go further, with respect to abiding by certain Hindu religious practices. In my journey to date I am not at that point. I have been told by some Hindu Yesu Bhaktas that my commitment to justice puts me at odds with their desire for greater levels of contextualization. I am not convinced by this argument. Given my spiritual journey my commitment to justice will always take precedence.

## Next Steps in My Journey to Be a Hindu Yesu Bhaktas

As I continue in my journey to be a Hindu Yesu Bhaktas, here are several steps I hope to take. I would like to explore further how aspects of Hindu spirituality can help me in my walk with Christ. I would like to find ways to present to Christians how aspects of Hindu spirituality can help them in their walk with Christ.

Within the church, I would like to help those engaging with Hindus to do so with greater levels of appreciation for Hindu culture and spirituality. In particular, I would like to help the church to understand how to disciple and offer pastoral care to new believers in such a way as does not alienate the new believer from their family and community.

My journey is not unique and I am aware of others who have travelled a similar path. I would like to meet and dialogue with those who are at different points on this journey, to understand their perspectives. There are those who have never felt the need to go on such a journey; and this is may be increasingly true of younger-generation Asian believers who are more at home within white Western Christian culture than the Asian culture. There are others who are pushing the contextualization window to such a degree that they may be in danger of syncretism. I see value in meeting with those of different perspectives to dialogue and find mutually beneficial ways forward on these issues. Such efforts could also benefit future generations of Asian background followers of Christ.

With my Hindu friends and family, I would like to share how Christ meets the human longing for genuine communion with God, as He offers abundant life both now and in the life after. My mother has often expressed her desire to break free of the cycle of birth and death in her present life, but feels that she'll not do so. I genuinely believe that, on the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ has broken every conceivable barrier and offers her and all humanity forgiveness, new birth and new life here and for eternity with Him. Through Christ, I know life in all its fullness, even in the midst of trials and difficulties; and in love I would like to my Hindu family and friends to know this for themselves. (John 10: 10b)

## Conclusion

My journey toward becoming a Hindu Yesu Bhakta has been both painful and joyful; and I fully expect my continuing journey to be a mixture of such emotions. The key goal for me is to be true to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the witness of Scripture, and the godly counsel of fellow believers—that I may be a Hindu Yesu Bhaktas whose walk with God and sharing of the gospel, honours and glorifies God.

# The Problem of Understanding Conversion

## Religious Change and Interfaith Dialogue

James Harry Morris

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The topic of conversion, if only in the background, plays a large part in the dialogue concerning Anglican and Lutheran relations with Diaspora Hindus. Stemming from a variety of factors—including the history of Indian legal resistance to conversion efforts based on the idea that forced conversions have taken or are taking place,<sup>1</sup> aggressive conversion efforts by some evangelistic groups,<sup>2</sup> and the opposition of Hindu fundamentalists to conversion grounded in its ability to challenge the caste system, social structures, and promote westernization,<sup>3</sup>—the continued hostility to conversion as an idea or reality presents a stumbling block to efforts of interfaith dialogue in all its manifestations.

The problems of conversion in the Indian context have been elucidated well by scholars such as Christy Femila Johnson, Robin Thomson, K. P. Aleaz, A. Pushparajan,<sup>4</sup> and others. It is not my goal to reproduce such research in this essay. Whilst acknowledging that there are a plethora of reasons that cause conversion to remain a problem for interfaith dialogue, especially from the Hindu perspectives, the problem is not one-sided and seems to be grounded in the way that conversion is perceived and understood by both Christians and Hindus.<sup>5</sup> Herein I argue that we must understand conversion as a radical change, best described as “turning.” In understanding conversion as a “turning,” we also realize that conversion rarely occurs without conflict. I hope this can prove a useful starting point for further reflections and thought, and that by clearly defining a Christian understanding of conversion that this paper will help to move interfaith dialogue away from the problems associated with it.

The idea of forced conversions, which has played such a large role in impeding Hindu-Christian relations,<sup>6</sup> is a false concept. Whilst there is limited documented evidence that forced conversion has taken place in India<sup>7</sup> it is not a completely alien concept in Asian mission history. Turning briefly to my own area of research: in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Japan, some converted daimyo (大名—Feudal Lords) forced their subjects to convert and simultaneously wiped out traditional religious practice.<sup>8</sup> This was a common missionary method “for ensuring political unity and ideological purity by means of Catholic uniformity.”<sup>9</sup> However, forced conversions do not create steadfast converts. When the expected economic benefits of conversion did not materialize, *daimyo* turned

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1 Sarah Claehtout and Jakob De Roover, “The Question of Conversions in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 40, No. 28 (Jul. 9–15, 2005): 3048–3055. Laura Dudley Jenkins, “Legal Limits on Religious Conversion in India,” *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Vol. 71, No. 2, Galanter-Influenced Scholars (Spring, 2008): 109–27. Keely McCarthy, “Conversion, Identity, and the Indian Missionary,” *Early American Literature* Vol. 36, No. 3 (2001): 353. Robin Thomson, *Changing India: Insights from the Margin* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 2002), 146–48.

2 Christy Femila Johnson, “Who Needs ‘Conversion?’” in *Discipleship and Dialogue: New Frontiers in Interfaith Engagement, Essays in Honour of Dr. Israel Selvanayagam*, ed. Eric J. Lott, M. Thomas Thangaraj and Andrew Wingate (Delhi: ISPCK, 2013), 80.

3 Ibid. 76–81. See also, A. Pushparajan, *From Conversion to Fellowship: The Hindu-Christian Encounter in the Gandhian Perspective* (Allahabad: St. Paul Publications, 1990), 79; Arun Shourie, *Harvesting our Souls: Missionaries, their Design, their Claims* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2010), 81–109; M. M. Thomas, *Ideological Quest within Christian Commitment: 1939–1954* (Bangalore, Madras: Christian Institute for the Study of Religions and Society, and the Christian Literature Society, 1983), 148.

4 Johnson, “Who Needs ‘Conversion?’” 70–84; Thomson, *Changing India: Insights from the Margin*, op cit; K. P. Aleaz, *Theology of Religions: Birmingham Papers and other Essays* (Calcutta: Moumita Publishers and Distributors, 1998); A. Pushparajan, *From Conversion to Fellowship: The Hindu-Christian Encounter in the Gandhian Perspective* (Allahabad: St Paul Publications, 1990).

5 Johnson for instance illustrates that conversion is a highly politicized topic with perceived dangerous consequences, see: Johnson, “Who Needs ‘Conversion?’” 76–82. Similarly Pushparajan argues that the perceived negative effects of conversion include, amongst other things; the denationalization of converts; harm to national interests; support of self-determination; and social repercussions. Pushparajan, *From Conversion to Fellowship: The Hindu-Christian Encounter in the Gandhian Perspective*, 79.

6 Thomson, *Changing India: Insights from the Margin*, 146–48

7 Ibid. 146–47.

8 Jurgis Elisonas, “Christianity and the Daimyo,” in *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 4: Early Modern Japan*, John Whitney Hall ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 327–28.

9 Ibid.

away from Christianity, expelled missionaries, and killed Christian subjects who refused to apostatize.<sup>10</sup> Such fragile conversions which result from force cannot be classified as conversion in any real sense.

Conversion includes a variety of factors such as the person, society, culture, and religion, and is a change which consists of “context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences.”<sup>11</sup> It is a contextual, process over time including factors which are multiple, interactive, and cumulative.<sup>12</sup> For A. D. Nock, conversion is:

the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right. It is seen at its fullest in the positive response of a man to the choice set before him by the prophetic religion.<sup>13</sup>

In this sense forced conversion cannot be viewed as conversion. Rather, it is the type of religious change that Nock and Emefie Ikenga-Metuh call “adhesion.”<sup>14</sup> It is a change in religious membership, which can occur as a single event and does not necessarily involve any change of conviction or belief.<sup>15</sup> In stating that forced conversion is not really conversion at all, but another type of religious change, adhesion, the position of religionists is made clearer. Forced conversion should not factor into our discussions about conversion, but due to a lack of clarity in dialogue about what conversion is, it is often the dominant feature. The perception of conversion as something which can be forced is only part of the issue. It is my contention that by understanding conversion as a “turning” and as a radical change, we understand that conflict is to some greater or lesser extent a part of the process. In doing so we admit that conversion is problematic, but that conflict arising from it is natural and should not impede interfaith activities.

Nock’s idea of conversion as a process of turning is mirrored by theologians such as Jon Sobrino who argues that conversion is a turning toward God with an implied change of direction of one’s life, a change more correctly understood as a rupture.<sup>16</sup> Such radical change or rupture has the potential to “be unsettling and disruptive.”<sup>17</sup> This is a turn, not only towards God, but towards life.<sup>18</sup> It is bound up in the experience of two realities: an encounter death, where people are dehumanized and impoverished—in the name of a specific, religious or secular god on the one hand—and a situation where in the name of a different god, life is given or actively sought on the other.<sup>19</sup> In this context moral activity becomes aimed at turning a person into a new person.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, for Gustavo Gutiérrez, conversion is grounded in the idea of turning both to God and to neighbor.<sup>21</sup> Turning to God implies conversion to the neighbor, and means “a radical transformation of ourselves.”<sup>22</sup> This transformation leads the converted to “commit [themselves] to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed...not only generously, but also with an analysis of the situation and a strategy of action.”<sup>23</sup> William Barclay, Ronald D.

10 Ibid. 333.

11 Dong Young Kim, *Understanding Religious Conversion: The Case of Saint Augustine* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 3. See also: Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 7–18.

12 Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 5.

13 A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 6–7.

14 Nock, *Conversion*, 6–7; Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, “The Shattered Microcosm: A Critical Survey of Explanations of Conversion in Africa,” *Seminar Proceedings* (Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Vol. 17, 1987), 11–27.

15 Ikenga-Metuh, “The Shattered Microcosm,” 20.

16 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church of the Poor* (London: SCM Press Ltd. 1985), 144.

17 Thomson, *Changing India: Insights from the Margin*, 147.

18 Sobrino, *The True Church of the Poor*, 146.

19 Ibid.

20 Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroad: A Latin American Approach* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1981).

21 Gustavo Gutiérrez, “A Spirituality of Liberation,” *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Conn (New York: Alba, 1978), 307–13.

22 Ibid. 309.

23 Ibid.



Witherup, Karl Rahner, Barry L. Callen,<sup>24</sup> and others have also viewed conversion as a process of turning, bound up to some extent with aspects of social responsibility and justice, and the historical and social context of the convert's spiritual life.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of conversion as “turning” has strong biblical support. Isaiah uses the language of turning in the context of turning away from the worship of idols (Isaiah 25:20–22), whilst Ezekiel speaks about turning away from wickedness (Ezekiel 33: 8–20). These themes are combined in 2 Kings 17 where God implores Israel to turn away from the intertwined sins of idol worship and wickedness (2 Kings 17: 9–18). Similarly, in Acts conversion is viewed in terms of turning away from wickedness, sin, and idolatry (Acts 3:17–26 and 15: 19–21). In apostatizing, people are also seen as turning—turning away from God (Isaiah 53:6) and toward idols (Psalm 40: 4). This is important for Sobrino, who views conversion as a turning, not from atheism, but a turn in the face of idolatry.<sup>26</sup> Idolaters are those who “bring death upon others in the name of some [secular or religious] god.”<sup>27</sup>

The use of the term “turning” implies a change in direction. If I can analogize religions as crowds on a busy street, in which members of one religious crowd walk in more or less the same direction, then conversion sees a member of this crowd turn, change direction, and by necessity collide with those who are continuing to walk in the direction that the convert previously followed. These collisions with those of the previous faith result from the deep personal changes associated with conversion. Conversion has ethical effects which involve reorientations in attitudes towards “the poor, corruption, selfishness, ambition, which would lead to change at a personal and family level.”<sup>28</sup> It can lead to economic changes,<sup>29</sup> and can provide strong challenges to social and national life.<sup>30</sup> It can also involve a turning from culture, family, or society—especially when Christianity is wrapped in Eurocentric and colonial clothing.<sup>31</sup> As a turn towards neighbor and a turn towards social responsibility and justice, conversion can challenge the status quo. It turns the individual away from her previously held reality, that of the social groups to which she belongs and society at large. For some Hindu nationalists this is part of the problem;<sup>32</sup> however, such change is a necessary part of conversion especially in the context of World Christianity.

If, in recent years, it has been asserted that the theologian has moved to the periphery, and that God has either relocated or always been located there,<sup>33</sup> then this also affects our conception of conversion as “turning”. Conversion becomes not only a turning to God, but a turning to the periphery and to a God who Herself is turned toward the periphery. Turning to a God who is turned toward the periphery, and turning toward the periphery

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24 William Barclay, *Turning to God: A Study of Conversion in the Book of Acts and Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975); Ronald D. Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1994); Karl Rahner, “Conversion,” *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Conn (New York: Alba, 1978), 203–11; See also: Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (Freiburg : Herder ; London : Burns & Oates, 1964); Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (U.S.: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2008); Barry L. Callen, “A Mutuality Model of Conversion,” *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 145–59.

25 Dong Young Kim, *Understanding Religious Conversion: The Case of Saint Augustine* (Wipf & Stock, 2012), 78–81.

26 Sobrino, *The True Church of the Poor*, 146.

27 Ibid.

28 Thomson, *Changing India: Insights from the Margin*, 149.

29 A good example of this can be seen in Murray Last's study of conversion to Islam amongst non-Muslims in Nigeria. Murray Last, “Some Economic Aspects of Conversion in Hausaland (Nigeria),” *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion (New York and London: Holmes and Meier Publishers Inc., 1979), 236–46.

30 Thomson, *Changing India: Insights from the Margin*, 149. See also: Mangalwadi, *Missionary Conspiracy*, 75.

31 Ibid. 150–51. There have been a variety of studies on how Christianity has been linked to European culture and colonialism, with converts being expected to change dress, habits, eating customs, views etc. Here I will refer the reader to a few which deal with the issues: T. O. Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982); Leonardo Boff, *Good News to the Poor* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1992); Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981); J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).

32 Johnson, “Who Needs ‘Conversion’?” 76–82.

33 For discussions on the relocation of theologian and God refer to the following texts by Mario Aguilar: “Quelle and Liberation Theology: Theologizing in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Latin America,” *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid* (London: SCM Press, 2010); *The Theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid: Indecent Theology and Queer Narratives* (Santiago, London and New York: Fundación Literaria Civilización, 2010); *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology* Volumes 1-3 (London: SCM Press, 2008); *Theology, Liberation and Genocide: A Theology of the Periphery* (London: SCM Press, 2009); “Public Theology from the Periphery: Victims and Theologians,” *International Journal of Public Theology*, Vol 1 (2007), 321–37.

itself, constitutes further challenges to the action of both convert and Church, which can involve conflict.<sup>34</sup> This is because the concept of a turning conversion toward the periphery first and foremost highlights the dignity of humans at the periphery, acting as a challenge to the convert to share in the powerlessness of the poor<sup>35</sup> and calling for a recognition that social injustice arising out of sin are to be “redeemed by God who marches and remains within the periphery of society and within the realities of the poor and marginalized.”<sup>36</sup>

Indian theology has developed a fresh and context-related understanding of mission by listening to different voices and contexts, and has created an attitude that has led to a positive encounter with Christians neighbors.<sup>37</sup> However, it is clear from recent discussions that it has not been able to fully rid itself of its Eurocentric and colonial baggage.<sup>38</sup> By understanding conversion in terms of a radical turning toward the periphery, within the wider parameters of a liberative theology, we challenge this baggage. This vision of conversion shows that conflict is an integral part of the process. All converts are called to challenge injustice, but this challenge is grounded in the praxis of love of God and neighbour.<sup>39</sup> I have briefly outlined an understanding of conversion which distinguishes between the idea of conversion and adhesion. It is an understanding that sees conversion primarily as a turning towards God and towards the periphery; and as such, it is suggested that conversion is a radical act which cannot be devoid of conflict. Understanding that conversion involves conflict does not nullify our attempts at interfaith dialogue. Rather it helps us to refocus, viewing conversion no longer as a stumbling block, but as a radical change grounded in love.

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34 Mario Aguilar explores how theologizing at the periphery will lead us into a rethinking of the way we theologize, see: Aguilar, “Public Theology from the Periphery: Victims and Theologians,” 321–37. Theologizing at the periphery is said to challenge the reality of hunger, poverty and the status quo, see: Mario Aguilar, *Church, Liberation and World Religions* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2012). For Jon Sobrino it calls Christians to share in the powerlessness of the poor, see: Sobrino, *The True Church of the Poor*, 98. For Enrique Dussel the periphery acts in class struggle because in the periphery we recognise that all social justice arises from sin, the centre has no relevance for the periphery because it has not developed reasons for challenging injustice, see: Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Enrique Dussel, “Barbarian Theology,” in *The Scope of Political Theology*, ed. Alistair Kee (London: SCM Press, 1978), 37–43; Aguilar, *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology* Vol. 1, 41–55; and Paul E. Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

35 Sobrino, *The True Church of the Poor*, 98.

36 Aguilar, *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology* Vol. 1, 51.

37 Felix Wilfred, “Indian Theologies: Retrospect and Prospects, A Sociopolitical Perspective,” *Another Possible World*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid, Ivan Petrella and Luiz Carlos Susin (London: SCM Press, 2007), 131–61.

38 In theological circles the decolonialization of the Church is a continued topic of discussion, refer to: Miguez et al. *Beyond the Spirit of Empire*. Enrique Dussel, *Politics of Liberation: A Critical Global History*, (London: SCM Press, 2011); Jung Mo Sung, *Reclaiming Liberation Theology: Desire, Market, Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2007); Ivan Petrella and Marcella Althaus-Reid (eds), *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

39 Aguilar, *Theology, Liberation and Genocide: A Theology of the Periphery*, 132.

# Theologising in the Brothels with *Mathamma*

## Towards an Indecent Dalit The(a)logy

Eve Rebecca Parker

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I want to begin with a brief tale, one that has been shared with me three times now by three different friends in India: Once upon a time a parachutist found himself caught up in a storm and he was swept off several kilometers away from where he was scheduled to land. Instead, he somehow landed up on top of a tree. Confused, but grateful to be alive, he looked down and was very happy to see someone passing by. He called down, “Excuse me Sir, can you tell me where I am?” The man on the ground responded, “You are on top of a tree.” At this, the parachutist asked, “Are you a theologian?” The man on the ground appeared shocked. “Why, yes; I am” he said; “but how did you know that?” The Parachutist responded: “Oh, that it is easy; because what you said is correct, but is useless to me.”<sup>1</sup>

The truth is there are many useless theologies that offer little hope to those stuck in the most difficult moments of life when they are in need of real direction and help in the midst of their suffering. For Felix Wilfred, “what enhances theology is not its claim to offer a total and satisfactory explanation of the entire reality, but the help it can give people to relate harmoniously the various dimensions of reality.”<sup>2</sup> Much like the man passing by, offering no real help to the man stuck on a tree, a theology that is exempt from the realities of life—of poverty, grief, racism, caste-ism, sexism, and other such forms of oppression—is useless to those “stuck on a tree”, whether or not it is deemed systematically correct, such theologizing without an understanding of place and context—especially for the oppressed and most downtrodden—offers little hope to those suffering or experiencing *dukha* (when life is denied). A theology that is “integral and integrating” is one that “centres around the experiences of the poor and the suffering,”<sup>3</sup> and in their midst of their suffering finds moments of hope and liberation. It is for this reason that Dalit theology, a theology shaped by the brokenness of the Dalit experience, apparent in what Nirmal refers to as the “dalitness of Christ,”<sup>4</sup> centers on the need to be indigenously rooted and identity specific and fundamentally a praxis focused theology of liberation for the Dalit people. This paper contemplates the “Dalitness” of Christ in the brothels of South India, by engaging with the lived realities of those who have been dedicated to the goddess Mathamma, and have experienced violent forms of discrimination for being Dalit women who are poor and vulnerable and forced into sex work. Such theologizing involves a theological *yatra*, or journeying, into the rural village of Nagalapurum in the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, where girls as young as three have been dedicated to the temple and used as village sex workers.

We begin with the meeting of Mathamma Kanagarathinam, a woman dedicated to the goddess *Mathamma* and used as a village sex worker. Mathamma has been socially and politically categorized as a contemporary *devadāsī*, a title given to groups of women who have been relegated outside of the elitist space of Indian history, existing today as outcaste, marginalized, sacred prostitutes. They have become objectified as “harlots” in need of reform and their profession and institution has been criminalised. The term *devadāsī* translates from Sanskrit as *deva*, god and *dasi*, female slave; it has been designated to a vast number of communities of women who have come to be regarded as “sacred prostitutes.” Sociological and anthropological studies have portrayed the *devadāsīs* as “ritual specialists” rooted in auspiciousness,<sup>5</sup> dedicated to temple deities in marriage, whose functions have been transformed and fragmented throughout history. Their present-day social cataloguing situates

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1 The story is also quoted in Felix Wilfred, Preface, *On the Banks of the Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), ix.

2 Wilfred, *On the Banks of the Ganges*, 24.

3 Wilfred, *On the Banks of the Ganges*, 24–25.

4 Arvind Nirmal, “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,” in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. A Nirmal (Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1989); or in Nirmal, ed. *Heuristic Explorations* (Madras: CLS, 1990).

5 Kersenboom-Story highlights the auspicious nature of the chosen *devadāsī*, stating: “The *devadāsī* was neither a vestal virgin nor an ascetic nun, nor they are opposite, a public woman or sacred harlot. Her function and identity has a third possibility...she was primarily a ritual specialist whose professional qualification was rooted in auspiciousness: her powers were believed to bring good luck and ward off evil.” See Saskia Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali: Devadasi. Tradition in South India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarstdass Publishers, 1997), 131–47.



their identities as illegal,<sup>6</sup> marginalized sacred sex workers. Society has rebuked these women to an indecent, immoral and impure social status. As a result, the majority of contemporary *devadāsīs* face persistent violence, emitted in varying forms, by oppressive structures of hegemonic control, and divergent systems of subjugation, including: poverty, sexual exploitation, stigmatization and caste based marginalization.

Mathamma Kanagarathinam was dedicated by her parents at the age of four to the goddess because she was sick, she said:

When I was a young girl, about three years old, I became sick and so my mother and grandmother dedicated me to the temple. After puberty I served the temple by dancing. The higher caste men would abuse me, they would threaten me if I did not do what they wanted and they said that I was their property. I became a temple prostitute. When I gave birth to a child these people would say that this is the child of god, and they would also be used by the village and the higher caste men.

Following the dedication, Mathamma Kanaganitham was healed. This was determined to be a sign that she was a divine intermediary of the goddess. A ceremony of dedication took place<sup>7</sup> in the style of a traditional marriage, where she was symbolically offered to the goddess. During the ceremony of dedication a necklace was tied around her neck. This is referred to as the *pottu*, *mangalyam*, or *tali* and used to mark the identity of dedicated women, who are forbidden from ever removing it; the consequences of doing so, would be severe from the goddess. Traditionally, the dedicated women are then considered to be divine and auspicious; yet this identity has seemingly become fragmented.<sup>8</sup> At the age of twelve, a “deflowering ceremony” took place for Mathamma Kanagarathinam, where a high-caste man paid Mathamma’s parents for her virginity. Following this, other men of the village would pay Mathamma for sex; these men belonged to different caste groups. If Mathamma resists the requests for sex, it is deemed as an insult to the goddess. Following the dedication and deflowering ceremony, Mathamma became the property of both the goddess and the village. Her body became a canvass on which patriarchy and caste-ism engraved itself in the name of the Divine.

Of contemporary *devadāsīs* who had been dedicated to the goddesses *Mathamma* and *Yellamma* whom I interviewed in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the vast majority had been dedicated in childhood by their parents due to sickness, or dedicated by family members as a result of extreme poverty.<sup>9</sup> The children of those who have been dedicated face further stigmatization from their community, as a result of the Mathamma mother’s unmarried status. The children of the Mathammas are often refused an education,<sup>10</sup> and as a result are further marginalised by the community and state. Despite these factors of oppression, the majority of Mathammas interviewed were committed to their worship of the goddess. As one woman stated: “my identity is with the goddess. People may wish to remove me and my family entirely; but I was called by the goddess, and I still have hope in her.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, when asked about the role that the goddess *Mathamma* plays in the life of Mathamma Kanagarathinam, she stated: “I am the property of the goddess; *Mathamma* controls how I live.”<sup>12</sup> Yet Mathamma Kanagarathinam knew nothing of the oral myths surrounding the goddess. All that Mathamma knew was to live in fear of the goddess and to obey the high caste men. Her status as a dedicated sacred prostitute had been communicated to her as the dominant forces of the village saw fit. This is a dramatic shift from how such women were described in the narratives of the early Christian missionaries, where these women were seen as Priestesses holding respected and feared identities.

6 Department for Women, Children, Disabled and Senior Citizens in Andhra Pradesh, “Andhra Pradesh Prohibition of Dedication Act 1988,” accessed December 12, 2013, [http://wcdsc.ap.nic.in/entitlement\\_women.php](http://wcdsc.ap.nic.in/entitlement_women.php).

7 The practice of dedicating young girls and women to deities is known in anthropological terms as ‘theogamy.’ See, Kamal K. Misra and K. Koteswara Rao, “Theogamy in Rural India: Socio-cultural Dimensions of the Jogini System in Andhra Pradesh,” *Indian Anthropologists* Vol. 32 (2002): 1–24.

8 Priyadarshini Vijaisri, *Recasting the Devadasi: Patterns of Sacred Prostitution in Colonial South India* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2004), 618.

9 Field notes, (Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, December, 15–17 2013).

10 See, Maggie Black, *Women in Ritual Slavery: Devadasi, Jogini, and Mathamma in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, Southern India* (London: Anti-Slavery International, 2007).

11 Prasu Interview (Field notes, Andhra Pradesh, December 13, 2013).

12 Mathamma Kanagarathinam Interview (Field notes, Andhra Pradesh, December 12, 2013).

The narrative of another dedicated Mathamma, named Bama, who was interviewed in Tamil Nadu, reveals the implications of the contemporary efforts of Christian missionaries who have worked towards mobilising the outcaste communities, inclusive of rehabilitating the Mathammas:

I am told to accept Christ as savior, as in him I can be redeemed for my sins. By doing so, I receive one meal a day from the Church. Before, we had three meals because of the money I earned from the men in the village. I am told to accept Christ, but Christ does not accept me. The church will not let me and my children be baptized. I am not welcome to come to church services. I am not welcome because I am prostitute. So [if] the goddess Mathamma will [not] release her wrath because I have accepted Christ, and the Church still does not welcome me because I am a sex worker, what hope is there for me?<sup>13</sup>

Mathamma is manipulated this time by the superstitions of the church, who declare that she will be punished and excluded from the Kingdom of God if she does not beg for forgiveness and stop the practice of sex work. However, if she removes her *tali*, she offends the goddess and believes that she will face her wrath; she believes that her children could get sick, her village could face a drought or she may die for such disobedience. The body of the Mādiga Mathamma has become the manipulated subject of male desire. Their enforced roles as sex workers from childhood have left many with AIDs/HIV, and other sexually transmitted diseases, and reproductive tract infections.<sup>14</sup> From a young age, the social order has determined that they are available for sexual exploitation, as their sexuality is considered an impure corruption that requires controlling. As one Mathamma, from a rural community in Andhra Pradesh, said, “I am not considered relevant enough to be treated by the doctors despite being sick, but my body becomes relevant when the landlord needs to release his anger or fulfil his sexual desires.”<sup>15</sup>

It is in the midst of such suffering that this paper asks: where is the Dalit Christ? He who is encountered in Dalit Christian theology, as the broken, downtrodden God, who was crucified “outside the gate” of Jerusalem; who—like the Dalits—is banished to the margins of society; the outcast yet Divine Christ “who dwells among them (John 1:14), who shares their life, its struggles and sorrows;” the God made man who is a “co-sufferer” of the Dalit people.<sup>16</sup> As to date, Dalit Christian theology has yet to enter the brothels of the contemporary devadasis, where according to the Dalit Solidarity Network minor Dalit girls are dedicated on a daily basis, and forced into sex work; or to journey with the Dalit women who, in their thousands, are trafficked to Mumbai and Delhi, where their bodies become the objects on which men may re-insert their patriarchal hegemonic bodily fluids of systematic control. Perhaps such places are considered too indecent for even a “broken” God to be contemplated?

Yet, if Dalit Christian theology is to be relevant to the lives of the most downtrodden, then it must be borne out of the existential experiences of those who have been labelled as the “Dalit of Dalits”: the Dalit women who are the sacred prostitutes of the village, whose lives are lived in the presence of the goddess, but whose narratives have been controlled by divergent systems of oppression. I argue that Dalit theology has steered clear of such narratives, where worship of the goddess remains intrinsic to the life of the village, particularly where Dalit deities such as Mathamma are present, because—as will be discussed—they create a predicament of loyalties with regards to methodological reasoning: on the one hand whether to be indigenous and identity specific; and on the other, whether to deny any hope of liberation being found in an Indian identity that has become embedded within the folds of Hinduism. Yet I wish to suggest that by taking part in a theological *yatra* that is shaped by the pathos of the sacred prostitutes, the mythology of the indigenous Dalit goddess makes relevant the liberative presence of Christ in the Indian village, revealing a Dalit theology that is both liberative and relevant to the experience of the sacred sex workers—as it is both identity specific and yet rooted in goddess the(a)logy. This requires crossing religious boundaries by engaging in a Dalit Christian theological discourse that submerges itself in Dalit village religiosity.

In order to contemplate the Dalit Christ in the brothels of Mathamma, the indigenous religious identity of the so called sacred prostitutes of the temple who have been dedicated to the goddess *Mathamma* must be taken into consideration—in order to encounter the hybridity and multiple religious belonging of sub-Dalit caste groups. A Dalit theological discourse that takes into consideration the religiosity of the most marginalized Dalit

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13 Bama Interview (Field notes, Tamil Nadu, December 11, 2013).

14 Black, *Women in Ritual Slavery*.

15 Prasu Interview (Field notes, Andhra Pradesh, December 13, 2013).

16 See Wilfred, *On the Banks of the Ganges*, 154–55.

communities requires an interdisciplinary approach that delves into the sociological religious identity and religious belonging of a marginalized people, whilst using a womanist theological lens that challenges homogenous and patriarchal hermeneutics; and journeys towards a the(a)logy where the goddess of the *Devadāsi Mathammas* challenges androcentric theologizing and creates space to contemplate Christ with a Dalit womanist agenda of devotional (*Bhakti*) resistance against suppressive ideologies—such as caste, class and patriarchy. The intention is to journey with Dalit Christian theology into indecent territories, where the bodies of Dalit women who are *Mathammas*—sex workers, village prostitutes, trafficked *joginis*, and reformed *Devadāsīs*—become the lens through which Christ is contemplated.

## The Re-birth of the Goddess in Dalit theologizing

In the rural villages of South India, the Divine is the Mother Goddess, as Brubaker describes: “Whatever her name, her story, her physical representation, or the details of her worship, the goddess in question is the tutelary deity of a South Indian village. The village topocosm is her domain, its destiny is in her hands, and its inhabitants are her people.”<sup>17</sup> The first encounter with the divine for the Dalit people throughout history is rooted in the mythology of the mother goddess; it is the goddess who is considered the divine protector from smallpox, the one who will bring the rain for harvest, and bless the women with fertility. It is the goddess who understands the cries of lament, the prayers for change and gives the Dalit women of the village the courage to go on. The Dalit feminist poet Meena Kandasamy describes how, in the strength of the goddess, Dalit women find hope in the midst of their daily oppression. She writes: “My Maariamama bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on to a stranger’s lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings.... Call me names if it comforts you. I no longer care.”

The ethnologist Edgar Thurston’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century studies on the Indian village reveal how each village claims its own mother goddess: “Each is supposed to be guardian of the boundaries of the cherished. She is believed to protect its inhabitants and its livestock from disease, disaster and famine, to promote the fecundity of cattle and goats, and to give children.”<sup>18</sup> The Mathamma institution finds its origins in such a village, where historically “Dalit women also served as priests...they represented the presence or voice of the deity.” A Madiga Dalit girl would be chosen in childhood as the divine representation of the goddess on earth; she was feared by all castes, and would be the ritual specialist of the village.<sup>19</sup> In the religions of the Dalits, the goddess was considered as protector of the untouchables, incarnating herself in women, and challenging caste purity laws. She was the deity of the oppressed, and as such held a vital social space for the authority of women. Yet, over time, the place of women as priestesses of the village became transformed. Some argue that this was in part due to the European missionaries. Taneti, for example, highlights the shock and disgust expressed by the missionaries at the sight of a woman preacher among the natives, where such women were described by the Christian missionaries as being “deviants” and “concubines.”<sup>20</sup> Others, such as Linda Epp, maintain that such transformations occurred as the goddess identity was re-imagined as being part of a divine married couple. This resulted in the increasing stress on the necessity for women to be married and female sexuality to be controlled.<sup>21</sup> Liddle and Joshi note that “the concept of marriage, involving male control of female sexuality, is important for understanding how the mother goddess was incorporated into the patriarchal Brahmin religion. In the villages, the old matriarchal religion was brahminised by providing orthodox male deities as husbands of the mother goddesses.”<sup>22</sup> However, despite consistent efforts to control the religious deities of the Dalits, Clarke highlights how the goddesses of certain Dalit communities inclusive of the *Ellaiyamman* goddess of the Paraiyars refused to be colonized by the high castes. Clarke describes how the “Paraiyars’ goddesses remain single, unmarried, and unobliged to the Hindu Gods. They

17 Richard L. Brubaker, “Barbers, Washermen, and Other Priests: Servants of the South Indian Village and Its Goddess,” *History of Religions*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1979) 128–52, at 129.

18 Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of South India*, Vol. VI, (New Delhi: Cosino Publications, 1975), 105.

19 James Elisha Taneti, *Caste, Gender, and Christianity in Colonial India: Telugu Women in Mission* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

20 Taneti, *Caste, Gender, and Christianity*.

21 See, Linda Joy Epp “Violating the Sacred?”: The social reform of devadaris among dalits in Karnataka, India, Unpub Ph.D. dissertation (York University, UK, 1997), 126.

22 Joanna Liddle & Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 54.

refuse to be co-opted and domesticated by the larger symbols of power as represented by the Hindu gods.”<sup>23</sup> Certain goddesses, therefore, remain counter-cultural and identity specific to Dalit communities.

The non-brahminical religions of the rural villagers belonged to the Dalit people, many of whom attempted to reject brahminical impositions to their religious beliefs. Liddle and Joshi suggest the rejection came as a result of the attempt to control women’s sexuality: “The religious myths of the brahmins may tell the story of women’s destructive power and how it was constrained by men through control of women’s sexuality, but the religion of the common people tells the story of women’s continuing power and resistance to male control.”<sup>24</sup>

The socio-religious identity of the dedicated Mathammas appears to have been negatively transformed as a result of caste and colonial influences—where religious identities and divine rights embodied in the female form came to be considered as dangerous, and thus in need of controlling. There is, therefore, a need to reclaim such mythology—as Dalit cultural resources inclusive of the village music, goddesses, and drums can be purposefully used as a tools of both social and psychological liberation, when reclaimed by the Dalit people as a source of indigenous theological praxis. They enable the agency of the Dalit women and men to be expressed through mythological and religious narratives and worships styles, used as a means of resistance and protest against hegemonic structures. One such example can be witnessed in the worship of the goddess Matangi.

Matangi is referred to as “the outcaste goddess”, who is associated with pollution and left-over food; “as an embodiment of inauspiciousness and the forbidden, the goddess exemplifies the transcendence of social norms associated with Tantric practice.”<sup>25</sup> The goddess challenges ideal notions of Indian womanhood as well as ridiculing societal rules of purity and pollution, “through the offering of impure substances and practices the Tantric sadhaka aims to overcome worldly values regarding pollution...”<sup>26</sup> For the “outcaste” Dalit communities, “Matangi is then perceived as liberating in nature, offering her devotees the chance of salvation through transcendence of pollution.”<sup>27</sup> She is worshipped by the offering of left-over food, that for the high-caste Hindus would be considered impure; and she rewards those deemed polluted with her protection. Foulston remarks that “these connotations of inauspiciousness and death indicate Matangi’s connection with the boundaries and periphery of Hindu society, key themes in Tantric practice.” The goddess challenges notions of purity as she “embodies the idea of transgression and provides a prime focus for Tantric adherents aiming to overcome aversion to social pollution in the hope of achieving religious liberation or gaining magical powers for worldly aims.”<sup>28</sup> The Dalit goddess Matangi is, therefore, the goddess of the periphery—taking the side of the oppressed and challenging social practices of the here and now. As one Dalit folk song reads:

You are the deity who expels our troubles; come rid us of evil.  
 You are present in the neem leaves for driving out women’s afflictions.  
 You are present in the fire, the head of our religion.  
 You have lived with fame in our village, Malaipallaiyani...  
  
 You are the goddess who guards boundaries:  
 You protect with your spear;  
 You will protect us from 4408 diseases;  
 You will protect the Harijans from the torture of the High caste.”<sup>29</sup>

Francis Clooney asks how we can learn from faiths other than our own, noting that doing so will drive “us deeper, into the world of commitment, faith, and encounter with God.”<sup>30</sup> The goddess myths, beliefs, and traditions of the Dalit communities enable a re-imagining of the sacred images of the Divine within Dalit Christian—theologizing that had otherwise remained androcentric. As Carol Christ has said, the “Goddess is a symbol

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23 Satianathana Clarke, “Paraiyars Ellaiyamman as an Iconic Symbol of Collective Resistance and Emancipatory Mythography,” in Gnana Robinson, ed. *Religions of the Marginalised: Towards a Phenomenology in the Methodology of Study* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 38.

24 Liddle & Joshi, *Daughters*, 55.

25 Lynn Foulston et al. *Hindu Goddesses: Beliefs and Practices* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 123.

26 Ibid, 123.

27 Ibid, 123.

28 Foulston, *Hindu Goddesses: Beliefs and Practices*, 123.

29 As quoted by Sathianathan Clarke, who notes that, “this is part of an opening prayer of adoration sung by the local Paraiyar Pucari, K. Pallaiyan.” See, Clarke “Paraiyars Ellaiyamman,” 35.

30 Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*.



of the divine as female and therefore of femaleness as divine or in the image of divinity. Re-imagining divine power as Goddess has important psychological and political consequences.<sup>31</sup> This is particularly the case when contemplating Christian theologies amid dedicated sacred sex workers. The dedicated Mathammas and *devadāsīs* are directly associated with the divine feminine. Therefore, the psychological implications of journeying with the symbolism and myths relating to a female deity offer the opportunity to move away from static patriarchal images of the divine; and thus to reimagine a liberative goddess that is not physically and sexually controlled by hegemonic communities by reclaiming the identity of the goddess.

Further, re-imagining the divine as female within Dalit Christian theological discourse is psychologically and politically critical for the women who have for centuries been dominated by a male God—which has resulted in female subservience to male power at the expense of a historically matriarchal identity. Carol Christ suggests that “the masculinity of God makes it difficult for women to see ourselves as being ‘in the image of God’ and to affirm our own power. The pronouns used to refer to God—He, Him, His, never She, Her, Hers, nor even It or It’s—reinforce the message.”<sup>32</sup>

The Dalit theologian Appavoo, suggests that the Divine should be considered as *pettavarē*; “the parent who bore us and who has both feminine and masculine qualities.” Appavoo’s use of the noun *pettavarē*, focuses on the mother as the bearer of the child.<sup>33</sup> He conveys his theology and Christology to the Dalit villages through imagery and mythology that merges with the socio-religious identity of the Dalits. He concentrates on the need to find useful means of empowerment and liberation for the rural village Dalit communities using their own identity focused resources,<sup>34</sup> inclusive of using the *udukku* (hour-glass drum)—which is a tool used to signify “empowering possession by the village goddess.”<sup>35</sup> By doing so, aspects of the Dalit identity that were devalued and controlled by the high castes, inclusive of the Dalit deities, are transformed and reclaimed in order to oppose hegemonic powers inclusive of caste, gender and class control. Further, the Divine is portrayed as being fundamentally inclusive—as both Mother and Father: *Tāyi tagappanārē sagalattaiyum pettavarē-eṅga* (Oh, Mother and Father, parent who created everything).<sup>36</sup> Revealing an empowering reengagement with the Dalit identity and the Divine feminine; the feminine aspects of the village goddesses permeate a place for the Dalit woman in worship and theologizing.<sup>37</sup> However, as Gabrielle Dietrich remarks, “we may not gain much if we address God as father and mother as long as the division of labour between mothers and fathers in day-to-day life remains unchallenged.” Fathers have never been present in the lives the dedicated sex workers or in that of their children’s. Thus, “understanding the links between the struggles of caste, class, gender, and the organization of the family—that is, the fundamental roots of oppression in social structures—is the first step toward creating a relevant indigenous feminist theology.”<sup>38</sup>

## The(a)logical Contemplations on the Divine

Carol Christ is representative of feminist theologians who have acknowledged the difficulty in producing a systematic feminist Christology that excludes patriarchal hegemony and is relevant to the bodily realities experienced by women. For her, “the need to counter the dualistic and androcentric assumptions which had determined patriarchal religions made it necessary to turn to Goddess symbolism.”<sup>39</sup> Her the(a)logy is, therefore, shaped by the embodied existential stories of women who are the oppressed and represent the “underside” of a dualistic worldview and who seek authentic selfhood.<sup>40</sup> She contends that in women’s movements where such selfhood is

31 Carol Christ, “The Road Not Taken: The Rejection of the Goddess in Hinduism and Judaism” in *Patriarchs, Prophets and Other Villains*, ed. Lisa Isherwood (London: Equinox, 2007), 29–30.

32 Carol P. Christ, *She Who Changes: Re-imagining the Divine in the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 26.

33 Zoe C. Sherinian, *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology* (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2014), 155.

34 *Ibid*, 157.

35 *Ibid*, 155.

36 *Ibid*, 9.

37 Zoe C. Sherinian, “The Indigenization of Tamil Christian Music: Music Style and Liberation Theology,” *The World of Music* Vol. 47 No. 1 (2005), 127–28.

38 Zoe C. Sherinian, *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology* (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2014), 28.

39 Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker, *Contemporary Spiritualities: Social and Religious Contexts* (London: Continuum, 2001), 101.

40 *Ibid*, 102.



sought as “quests for truth or justice or being,” spirituality is a central component.<sup>41</sup> Similarly Dalit feminist theology focuses on the need to witness the spiritual and Divine selfhood apparent within the authentic narratives of the Dalit women who represent the downtrodden of history—thus producing embodied theologies shaped by resistant movements of Dalit women. The(a)logy shaped by counter-cultural Dalit goddess spirituality and worship holds the potential to ideologically dismantle inherent processes of subjugation inclusive of androcentric Christology and oppressive purity laws imposed by the Hindu caste system, by decentering the theological powers and experiencing God in the communal experiences of Dalit women and marginalized societies. This requires a theological journeying with the narratives of the oppressed exposing divergent images of God.

For a Dalit *devadāsī* Christian theologising in the case of the dedicated Mathammas, this requires contemplating narratives of goddess spirituality and salvaging a Christian theology that becomes relevant to Dalit women who have only experienced the marginalizing potential of male-centric Christian theologies—while also taking into consideration patriarchal brahminical societal control over female deities that has transformed the goddess mythology and worship, resulting in the fractured identities of the *devadāsīs*. Conscious and unconsciously, androcentric theologies have impacted the socio-religious and communal attitudes, as Daly argues; “the use of patriarchal symbols will inevitably reinforce the power of patriarchy and the use of feminist symbols will inevitably reinforce the power of feminism.”<sup>42</sup> The religious identities of the dedicated Mathammas, and Dalit communities as a whole, are sites of contestation and transformation that seek to challenge the dominant forces, but at times become subservient to subconscious control. Dalit religious communities appear to have been culturally excluded and “either marginalized or coo-opted”; they, therefore, have to be “vigilant in their endeavour to preserve their own culture and religion.”<sup>43</sup> It is for this reason that goddesses inclusive of *Mathamma* and *Yellamma* are often known specifically as Dalit deities that are feared by caste groups. The myth relating to the goddess *Mathamma* is inextricably linked to other goddesses worshipped by Dalit village communities inclusive of the goddesses *Yellamma*, *Ellaiyamman* and *Mariyamman* (also another name for *Mathamma*).<sup>44</sup> A re-reading of such myths from a Dalit perspective exposes the rebellious resistance of Dalit symbolic mythology that offers liberative themes for a counter-cultural Dalit feminist Christology.

The myth relating to *Mathamma* is very much like that of the *Yellamma*, where Renuka the auspicious original form of the goddess, is considered defiled and immoral by her husband Jamadagni, after she has supposedly “mentally prostituted” herself by being tempted by her neighbor. Following her murder, at the hands of her son, by order of her husband, she is re-born into a new body—after her son accidentally chops off the heads of both an “untouchable” woman and his mother, then replaced them onto the wrong bodies when bringing them back to life. It is in this form that she is worshipped as a village goddess to the Dalits, as both untouchable and goddess. The local village worship of the *devadāsīs* is a “living reminder of Renuka’s mixed state (that is, goddess/prostitute)....Today’s so-called ‘devadāsī problem’ is similar to that which Renuka faced long ago,”<sup>45</sup> where societal forces persistently attempt to implement control and punishment onto the bodies of the women. Many important themes of resistance can be extrapolated from the myth of Renuka. Firstly, one cannot ignore the “borrowing of Hindu story lines, mythological characters and themes.” Clarke highlights how there is “a resolute effort by the Paraiyars to work within the mythological symbolic world of Hinduism.”<sup>46</sup> However there has also been a conscious effort to re-mythologize the origins and functions of the deity to make her a relevant force of resistance against caste Hindus.

When read through the hermeneutical lens of the Dalit, the goddess *Mathamma* is witnessed as a central deity to the outcaste Dalit communities because of her reborn, “untouchable” status; when her son, Paraśu Rāma, went to behead her, she clung to her ‘untouchable’ maid, and as a result became polluted. When she was brought back to life, she—the deity—was incarnated into an untouchable body. It is as the “polluted” goddess that she becomes *Amma* (mother) to the Dalits—as,

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41 Ibid, 102.

42 Ellen K. Wondra, *Humanity has Been A Holy Thing: Toward a Contemporary Feminist Christology* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1994), 31.

43 Clarke, “Paraiyars Ellaiyamman,” 37.

44 Yoginder Sikand notes that: “Although the Madigas and other Dalits claim Ellamma as one of their own, she has now been transformed into an incarnation of the Goddess Durga and incorporated into the Brahminical pantheon of ‘respectable’ deities. See, Yoginder Sikand, *Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003), 72.

45 Epp, “Violating the Sacred?” 23.

46 Clarke, “Paraiyars Ellaiyamman,” 37.

for the Dalits, the divinity of the ‘wholly other’ lies in choosing to ‘belong’ to the Dalit self by becoming one with the community and getting polluted in the process. This idea of getting polluted, as the essential condition of the divine self-disclosure, could be noticed in the popular devotion to another Dalit Goddess, Matangi... where the devotees offer her the leftover food from their plates. By doing so the goddess privileges ‘pollution’ as divine necessity in her self-disclosure.<sup>47</sup>

*Mathamma* myths also focus on the symbolic victimisation and resistance of women, as both Renuka and the “untouchable” woman are the victims of the male antagonist who survive and go on to become a divine power and source of hope and resistance. Read from this perspective,

the goddess is thus a source of hope to those who are ill not because she has healing powers as such, but because she ultimately adjudicates the battle of mysterious demonic forces and turns the flow of vows and curses in favour of the petitioner.<sup>48</sup>

Clarke further highlights how the myth “reinforces the fact that formidable divine power is generated to protect and guard her subjects from all harm.”<sup>49</sup> Christian Dalit theology that perceives the Divine in Christ as the pained, polluted, broken and untouchable One, “who became the belonged to the un-belonged”<sup>50</sup> must consider a critical and constructive journeying with such aspects of the divine feminine that are historically rooted in the identity and communities of Dalits where *Amma* is central and enables the women of the community as her direct intermediaries to challenge social constructs such as the purity laws and the practice of untouchability. This in turn leads to a re-reading of the Christian scriptures—for example, Luke 8:43–48, where the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years, who would in the context of the Hindu purity laws be considered impure based upon her bleeding, takes it upon herself to touch the cloak of Christ. In doing so she is healed, and as a result “the power” is said to have gone out of Jesus. When considering the text through the lens of *Mathamma*, Christ can be considered as becoming polluted in the process, losing power to help the faithful outcaste. The woman is the agent of her own change, taking it upon herself to mediate the divine power through the healing of her body and as such challenging her untouchable, impure status.

Religious expressions of the divine goddess and spirituality in Dalit communities can be both transformative and at times oppressive as can be witnessed by the embodied narratives of the contemporary *devadāsīs*. They are, however, the place in which Christ must be contemplated for the Dalit communities, as they are the spaces in which Dalit communities have their own experiences of the Divine.<sup>51</sup> Returning to Francis Clooney’s questioning, “how do we learn from religious traditions other than our own? how are we to assess what happens when that learning leads to affirmation and empathy, and thereafter affects how one lives one’s own life?”<sup>52</sup> we can respond that, when contemplating Christ amid the spiritual narratives, myths, and worship traditions of the goddesses of the Dalits, the gospel is contextualized into the narratives of the people and the revelation of the incarnate Christ is witnessed on what Felix Wilfred refers to as the banks of the Ganges. As the “Ganges then, symbolizes the divine passing through our lives making everything alive and flourishing; it signifies the continuous flow of divine grace passing right through our life and its innumerable expressions.”<sup>53</sup> Christian theologizing, therefore, recognizes the flow of the Divine passing through the Dalit villages, where the Divine becomes untouchable, polluted, victimized, and oppressed in order to be the God of the Dalits. Wilfred and Nir-mal contend that the conditions of the Dalits, “the fact of being humiliated, excluded and rejected goes with the very heart of Christian faith which is witnessed in the rejection of Jesus, his humiliation and passion that God is a God who is on the side of the poor and marginalized.”<sup>54</sup> Christ’s incarnation, is, as Prabhakar Dayam states, “a

47 Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, “Gonthemma Korika: Reimagining the Divine Feminine in Dalit Christian Theology,” in Sathianthan Clarke, et al, eds., *Dalit Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 144.

48 Paul Younger, “A Temple Festival of Mariyamman,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 48, No. 4 (1980), 493–517, at 507.

49 Clarke, “Paraiyars Ellaiyamman,” 37.

50 Dayam, “Gonthemma Korika,” 146.

51 Clarke, “Paraiyars Ellaiyamman,” 50.

52 Francis X. Clooney, S. J., “Passionate Comparison: The Intensification of Affect in Interreligious Reading of Hindu and Christian Texts,” in *Harvard Theological Review* Vol. 98, Issue 4 (2005), 367–290, at 367.

53 Wilfred, *On the Banks of the Ganges*, xii + i.

54 Ibid, 132.

journey of knowing the human pain and getting polluted in the process of claiming the parenthood of the god/ess. Pollution is a necessity of the divine disclosure.”<sup>55</sup>

Dalit religiosity is shaped by the hybridity of multiple religious belonging that has significantly transformed throughout history. Contextualizing Dalit Christology amidst the Dalit village religiosity challenges Dalit theologizing to further encounter the Christ of resistance and rebellion who challenges the status quo and breaks down hegemonic systems of oppression. As such “dalitness is the key to the mystery of his divine human identity;”<sup>56</sup> the Dalit goddess must become one with the un-belonged in order to be incorporated into the emancipatory mythology of oral Dalit traditions, just as it is the polluted and downtrodden aspects of Christ, that make Him a Dalit. A Dalit Christian theologising that takes into consideration the lived religiosity of Mathamma communities requires a dialogical hermeneutic—one that reflects upon what Francis Xavier Clooney refers to as the “intensification of faith in the midst of interreligious dialogue,” as it takes into consideration the potentially “emancipatory mythography”<sup>57</sup> of the goddess *Mathamma* using a Dalit feminist hermeneutic of suspicion while also grappling with the existential realities of the contemporary dedicated Dalit Mathammas—who are treated as village sex workers; forced into the margins of society; persecuted by all within the community; labelled as harlots, sluts, and prostitutes; trafficked into the cities; raped, exploited, vilified and abused. Such theologizing must be done in continuous dialogue with the oppressed, which is why this is a theological *yatra*—one that in India is particularly long and confusing, with many side roads, as “this dialogue is open-ended and it leads us into the depths of mystery, to understand which we need to be in continuous journey with others.” In agreement with Felix Wilfred,

dialogue is not simply a means to achieve something. Every dialogue has the mystery as its horizon. Thus, the path of theology is not one which leads from faith to the clarity of knowledge about it, but rather a movement from faith to its realisation in life through dialogue.<sup>58</sup>

A theological journeying with Christ into the brothels of the sacred prostitutes of south India exposes the inadequacies of androcentric theological discourse that chastises and dictates the bodies of women. The Mathamma *devadāsīs* are entangled within a web of oppression, struggling against divergent forces of exploitation and vilification that has resulted in their identities being stolen and transformed. Their personal narratives have been excluded from the majority of social and religious contemplations, to the extent that they have become a by-product of reformist, rehabilitation programs and socio-political and religious power games that do not take into account the contextual religious identities or the socio-economic situations of the contemporary dedicated sacred sex workers. Contemplating the place of God in the midst of their struggles requires an identity specific Dalit liberation theology. Whether Dalit feminist theology will emerge as a direct challenge to such narratives of oppression, depends upon Dalit theology entering the brothels of South India and asking: Where is the “broken” and “downtrodden” Christ of the Dalits, when the brothels are filled with the stagnant scent of unwanted sex; when a Dalit child is trafficked to the city and her body is used, abused, and forced into the flesh market; when the Church’s imposed moral agenda further banishes the sex worker’s body to the margins of society, labelling her a “whore” and a “harlot” —she whose sexuality needs marrying off and controlling. Where is the Dalit Christ then? In fact, it is her narrative, her voice, and her suffering that exposes the inadequacies of the social order and makes real the ultimate promise of the cross.

## Mathamma and the Multiple Religious Belonging of Dalit Communities

This section will explore Christ’s promise that “prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matthew 21:31), by calling for what the *mujerista* theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz calls the “Kin-dom of God”—a term coined to remove Western patriarchal impositions on Divine revelations that captures the personal, humane God, who knows the suffering of Her people. Kin-dom theology is a political theology of liberation and solidarity where the struggles of the oppressed mediate “what is yet and not yet.”<sup>59</sup> A the(a)logy where the sacred prosti-

<sup>55</sup> Dayam “Gonthemma Korika,” 146.

<sup>56</sup> M. E. Prabhakar, “Christology in Dalit Perspective” in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, ed. V. Devasayaham (Chennai: ISPCK/Gurukul, 1997), 414.

<sup>57</sup> Clarke, “Paraiyars Ellaiyamman,” 35–53.

<sup>58</sup> Wilfred, *On the Banks of the Ganges*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Karen Baker Fletcher, “Spirituality,” in *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*, ed. Miguel De La Torre (MA: Chalice Press, 2004), 121.

tute becomes the mediator of the Kin-dom expresses the evil and corruption of the here and now and embodies hope from the brothels, where liberation is found in the Kin-dom of prostitutes, as mediated from the God of liberation to the most marginalized peoples. The *devadāsīs* require an indigenously rooted practical theology of liberation to be applied to their daily existences in order to truly grapple with the pathos of Dalit female plight. This is a journeying Dalit, theologizing with Christ who goes into the brothels of the Mathammas to reclaim a lost identity.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher suggests that “our religious identities are not *sui generis* and unaffected by other dimensions of who we are; rather, our very understanding of the religious dimension of our identity is informed by the diverse features of our location and experience.”<sup>60</sup>

## Christ's Kin-dom for Prostitutes

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. (Matthew 21:31)

Through the teaching of Jesus, we are led to the conclusion that the poor person is Jesus. The prostitute is Jesus. Whoever does not help the prostitute does not help Jesus. Whoever claims to love God who cannot be seen and does not love the prostitute who can be seen is a liar.

– Dom Antonio Batista Fragoso<sup>61</sup>

The Dalit goddess is “sent out into the village to live from the gifts of the people. Here she utilises her powers to protect all those who sustain her with food, offerings and worship.”<sup>62</sup> Dalit goddesses are symbolically the protectors of the boundaries, who take the side of the oppressed. Like Christ they journey into the margins, and are worshipped by the excluded whilst seeking emancipatory liberation from hegemonic structures. From the goddess traditions we can also find affirmation in Christ who interrupts earthly forces of oppression by challenging injustices, he extends his solidarity to the promise of liberation for the oppressed to the Kingdom of God, a place where the prostitutes and other socially marginalized groups will be welcomed and liberated from all earthly oppressions.

The *mujerista* theologian, Ada María Isasi-Díaz uses the term “Kin-dom of God” in her theologizing (as noted above) as a means of moving away from the male-centric imagery of God that is evoked by the term “Kingdom.” The notion of a “Kin-dom” theology adheres to the Dalit community call for resistance and solidarity. Focusing instead on the “Kin-dom” transforms the heavenly realm into a space of kinship, solidarity, equality, and most importantly for the Dalits, a place devoid of the caste system, a place of belonging for the un-belonged.<sup>63</sup> Isasi-Díaz contemplates the role of Jesus as mediator of the Kin-dom, yet proposes that Jesus as *Jesucristo* is not the sole mediator. She “insists that a serious Christology needs to consider him as the full expression of what is human. This is what his life and ministry communicated, and therefore it is how he mediated the Kin-dom....” She argues that, as a mediator, Jesus is part of a community; it is here that he expresses his full humanity. Mary and the disciples are, therefore, also part of this mediator.<sup>64</sup> When contemplated from this perspective, the prostitutes are not only welcome into the Kin-dom of God, but are also mediators of the Kin-dom to come, because they were and are part of Christ's community. They are the marginalized and oppressed whom Christ takes the side of. It is through their bodily experiences within the community of the oppressed that the God/ess of liberation is revealed.

The deities of the Dalits function to develop a community of belonging for the un-belonged, the Divine is also the “indwelling spirit who energises and empowers Dalits,” while working within and amongst them as the divine agency that “inspires, protects, and participates in the Dalit quest for ‘being-in-wholeness.’ *Dalit(the)os* is about the interrelationality between Dalits and the Divine.”<sup>65</sup> The incarnate Son of God offered the Kin-dom to

60 Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 88.

61 Dom Antonio Batista Fragoso, a Brazilian bishop and a founder of the Pastoral da Mulher Marginalizada, as quoted in Margaret Guider, *The Daughters of Rahab: Prostitution and the Church of Liberation in Brazil* (London: Fortress Press, 1995), 73.

62 Clarke, “Paraiyars Ellaiyamman,” 50.

63 Edwin David Aponte, *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies* (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2006), 119.

64 Miguel A. De La Torre, *Hispanic American Religious Cultures* (California: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2009), 745.

65 Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, “The Diversity and Dialectics of Dalit Dissent and Implications for a Dalit Theology of Liberation” in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 65–66.



the prostitutes, sinners and outcastes; He transformed their vulnerabilities into alternative spaces of empowerment, and with them became marginalized and downtrodden. Such “interrelationality” is further addressed by Marcella Althaus-Reid, who states:

if as liberationists claim, Christ is neither male nor female in the sense that Christ represents the community of the poor, then Christ should be portrayed as a girl prostituted in Buenos Aires in a public toilet by two men. Obviously such portrayal would be considered indecent, because we are bringing to the surface the hidden face of the sexual oppression of women but for that reason it should be seen as true theology.<sup>66</sup>

It is the bodies of the women who are forced into prostitution—have been consumed by poverty, disease, STDs, AIDs, HIV, judgment, control and castigation—that a true Christology is developed. They are the mediators of the Kin-dom of God, because they have experienced the absolute oppression of earthly powers and receive the promise of Christ in the Kin-dom to come. The Kin-dom of Christ on earth is, therefore, witnessed by the community of mediators who are the oppressed. It is here that a body theology is derived from the pathos and struggles of the communities of the downtrodden and witnessed in emancipatory protests and resistance movements where the Divine can be contemplated. This is because as Anderson-Rajkumar describes, “a Dalit female body stands therefore at the threshold of justice, challenging us to look beyond the barriers and recognise in the other, a sister and a brother... they speak of the possibility of life and the possible resurrection of new meaning of love.”<sup>67</sup> Theologizing in the brothels of the sacred prostitutes of South India reimagines Christ amidst the struggles of the silenced and exploited sex workers; it presents challenging Christological contemplations where the Divine is present in the most indecent of spaces; and it is in the moments of resistance that we can catch glimpses of the Kin-dom of God.

## Conclusion

The social narratives of the devadāsīs become the key for biblical interpretation, as their bodily experiences pose a direct challenge to hegemonic patriarchy based on the lived reality of their bodily oppressions. To quote Aloysius Pieris, “the Bible as we understand it in our Asian context, is the record of a religious experience of a ‘nonpeople’ struggling to be a ‘people,’ in which God is an intimate partner.”<sup>68</sup> The devadāsīs give life to the “nonpeople” of scripture by giving a voice to the struggles endured by women for centuries at the hands of patriarchy. The voice becomes one of protest when Christian theology becomes an inclusive and indecent the(a)logy that delves into the communities of the oppressed. In agreement with Prabhakar Dayam, “Christian theology must become a Theo/alogy in terms of its language and content in order to be true to the inclusive vision of the Dalit community.”<sup>69</sup> A Kin-dom community of resistance becomes present only when the indecent merges with the sacred in order to reveal contesting sights of protest and empowerment for the bodies that have been downtrodden under the hegemonic forces of caste, patriarchy and decency. Dalit theology needs to further contend with the interreligious and contextual narratives of Dalit religiosity in order to expose an identity specific Christology, that becomes relevant and salvific for the Dalit women who have been forced into sacred prostitution. This would require engaging in a “deeper exploration of the communal and feminine experience, from the bottom up” as Vijaisri remarks; “in this context one needs to reconsider the issues of religious power in juxtaposition to caste power in unravelling the collective life of various touchable and untouchable communities.”<sup>70</sup> The theologian must then become an “insurgent”<sup>71</sup> rebelling against the orders of the patriarchal prophetic texts of scripture and moving into indecent Christological spaces of reflection—where the Christian faith can gain affirmation and empathy in the lives of the most downtrodden excluded “other”; where the prostitutes, the harlots, and the whores are the mediators of the Kin-dom of God; where Christ’s Kin-dom of hope and liberation is revealed.

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66 Marcella Althaus-Reid, “On Wearing Skirts Without Underwear: ‘Indecent Theology Challenging the Liberation Theology of Pueblo’ Poor Women Contesting Christ,” *Feminist Theology*, 20 (1999): 39–51, at 41.

67 Anderson-Rajkumar, “Turning Bodies Inside Out: Contours of Womanist Theology,” in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (New Delhi: OUP, 2010), 200.

68 Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 124.

69 Dayam, “Gonthemma Korika,” 147.

70 Priyadarshini Vijaisri, “In Pursuit of the Virgin Whore: Writing Caste/Outcaste Histories,” in *Unfinished Gestures: Devadaris, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 64.

71 Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Searching for a Queer Sophia-Wisdom: The Post-Colonial Rahab” in *Patriarchs, Prophets and Other Villains*, ed. Lisa Isherwood (London: Equinox, 2007), 134.



# Ecumenical Involvement from the Margins

Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar

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The ecumenical movement has contributed imaginatively and importantly to recent thinking on mission by facilitating a critical and crucial shift in its thinking vis-à-vis the margins. Rather than speaking of “mission TO the margins,” the new paradigm introduced is “mission FROM the margins.” This paradigm recognizes the agency of the margins and eschews any tacit inclination to treat the margins as the passive objects and placid recipients of missionary patronage.<sup>1</sup>

## The significance of the “From the Margins” Paradigm

As a methodological posture, this (re)turning to the margins to learn from the margins (which I would like to call “methodological metanoia”) has theological significance. It calls attention to our failure “to recognise God’s alignment with those consistently pushed to the margins.”<sup>2</sup> When we close our eyes “to those who live through suffering and pain,” we fail to see God’s presence and perceive God’s vision.<sup>3</sup> Recognising the margins as the sites of divine self-disclosure leads us to a “new awareness of God’s own mysterious productivity in places where we least expect it, even on a cross.”

There is this strong recognition within the World Council of Churches that the agency of the marginalized must be recovered, that the vision for justice, peace and life that emerges from marginalized communities can make Christian witness courageous, compassionate and critical in today’s world. This is reaffirmed in Deenabandhu Manchala’s editorial for the *Ecumenical Review*’s issue on “Justice, Peace and Marginalized Communities,” when he says, “If the church does not participate in the ongoing revolutionary struggles of the victims of injustice... the church will lose an opportunity to participate in the reign of God unveiling itself among the excluded and despised people of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

## Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Margins

The question for us today is to discern and discuss how this new paradigm may be applicable to Inter-Religious Dialogue. One of the most persistent accusations against dialogue has been that formal forms of inter-faith dialogue have been unapologetically elitist in their orientation and thereby estranged from and irrelevant to the margins. For me the “grain of truth” (however detestable and contestable it may be) of this accusation of the elitist orientation of dialogue, may begin to emerge if we focus our attention on the perspectives which have foregrounded dialogue.

One case study pertaining to religious conversions in India—in particular the conversions of the marginalised communities—will expose the tacit ways in dialogue can have an elitist orientation when it fails to acknowledge the agency, agenda, and autonomy of the margins in employing religion as a reason for hope.

## The Curious Case of Conversions in India

The issue of religious conversions has most often been a contentious and conspicuous agenda on the dialogue tables. In the Indian Christian theological context, the proponents of inter-religious dialogue have unequivocally

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- 1 Two recent projects of the WCC which require mention as having highlighted this subversive paradigm recently include
    - a) The WCC’s new mission statement entitled ‘Together Towards Life: which has an important section on ‘Mission From the Margins’, and
    - b) A study project entitled ‘Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives’ supported by the Just and Inclusive Communities programme of the WCC for the centenary celebrations of the Edinburgh 1910 conference, which has resulted in Edinburgh 2010 conference publication under the same title.
  - 2 *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Contexts*, the new Mission statement of the World Council of Churches, paragraph 37.
  - 3 Joerg Reiger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots of Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).
  - 4 Deenabandhu Manchala, “Justice, Peace and Marginalized Communities,” in *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol 64, No 4 (Dec 2012), 426.

condemned “religious conversions” per se, especially if it concerned the socially marginalized Dalits and Adivasi (tribal) communities. Such conversions were often termed “conversions of convenience” and these converts were pejoratively called “rice Christians.” In recent decades, there has been an increasing tendency within Hindu fundamentalist outfits subscribing to the ideology of Hindutva to use the rhetoric of forcible conversions to inflict violence on the marginalised communities like the Dalits and other religious minorities. In such a context there is a danger that if Christian proponents of interfaith dialogue continue to denounce conversions, in isolation from the perspective of the Dalit communities, inter-faith dialogue becomes irrelevant to the margins.

As we understand the issue vis-à-vis our concern about the elitist bias of inter-religious dialogue, what is crucial in our understanding of the conversion issue in India is the way in which Dalits and Adivasis are imagined and constructed so as to serve the anti-conversion agenda of the fundamentalist groups like the Hindutva,<sup>5</sup> and how often inter-faith dialogue subscribes willingly to these assumptions. It is important to analyse this construction because in many ways this construction has been uncritically accepted by Christian proponents of interfaith dialogue.

In its anti-conversion rhetoric, Hindutva has made use of the report of the Niyogi Commission—a commission set up by the government of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh in 1954 to assess the work of foreign missionaries.<sup>6</sup> The Niyogi Commission introduced a new argument into the discussion on conversions, thus contributing to a distortion and demonising of conversions as, “a form of exploitation threatening the integrity of the Indian state.”<sup>7</sup> The report introduced the argument that weakness, ignorance and poverty were reasons which made the poor lose control over free will and thereby rendered the deprived sections of the community as being “vulnerable to the inducements of converting to another religion.”<sup>8</sup> It achieved this by essentializing India’s economically weaker sections (read Dalits and Adivasis) as “essentially disabled, incapable of distinguishing motives and inexperienced in the exercise of their own judgement.”<sup>9</sup> The implications of this report for the current context are succinctly brought out by Gauri Viswanathan as follows:

The Niyogi commission landmark report set the lines of an argument that have continued to the present day, blurring the boundaries between force and consent and giving very little credence both to the possibility that converts change over to another religion because they choose to. Interestingly in charging that Christian missionaries took advantage of the weakened will of the

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5 The conceptualisation of Hindutva can be traced to a book published in 1923 named ‘*Hindutva*’ by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar an ideology of this politics. (Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva*, (Nagpur: V.V. Kelkar, 1923). Later several editions were republished). The Hindutva ideology effectively seeks to reduce India to a Hindu nation comprising of Hindus – undermining the pluralistic ethos of the country. One of the chief arguments of Hindutva was the accordance of primary status to ‘Hindus’ – those who considered India as both *Pithrubhumi* (fatherland) and *punjabhumi* (holy land)—as against adherents of other faiths. Hindutva rests on three pillars of ‘geographical unity, racial features and common culture’. It is however with regard to the third pillar that much of the debate on the nationalist ideology of Hindutva has been framed which is also important to understand Hindutva’s curtailing of conversions in the interests of sustaining the caste-system which is at the heart of this pillar of ‘common culture’. Hindutva in its definition of Indian culture equates Indian culture with a parochial and selective version of Hindu culture. It introduces a concept of nationalism defined in terms of culture which conflates Indian culture with ‘Hindu’ a predominantly brahminical and sanskritised version of Indian culture. This becomes clear if we consider Savarkar’s definition of culture:

[W]e Hindus are bound together not only by the ties of love we bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood that courses through our veins and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affections warm, but also by the ties of common homage we pay to our great civilization—our Hindu culture, which could not be better rendered than by the word Sanskriti suggestive as it is of that language Sanskrit, which has been the chosen means of expression and preservation of that culture, of all that was best and worth-preserving in the history of our race. We are one because we are a nation, a race and own a common Sanskriti (civilization). Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* 2d ed. (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969), 91–92.

At the heart of this *sanskriti* is the religious duty to preserve the caste system. This makes Hindutva resist any attempts (including conversion) to break down of the caste structure, even through resorting to violent means.

6 Andrew Wingate, writing about the Niyogi commission report says, “For a commission chaired by a retired high court judge, the language is emotive and conclusions sweepingly negative about evangelism and conversion.” Andrew Wingate, *The Church and Conversion: A Study of Recent Conversions to and from Christianity in the Tamil Area of South India* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 34.

7 Gauri Viswanathan, “Literacy and Conversion in the Discourse of Hindu Nationalism,” in *Race and Class*, 2000, 42:1, (New Delhi: Sage Publications), 4.

8 Viswanathan, “Literacy and Conversion,” 4.

9 Ibid. 4.

poor and disenfranchised, the report confirmed an elitist view of freewill and autonomy as the privileges of the economically advantaged classes.<sup>10</sup>

It is indeed true that in the context of the conversion discourses, “[T]he free-willed subject who can ‘convert’ of his own accord rather than be ‘converted’ by others, is certainly gendered, but is also located in a distinctively Indian matrix of social hierarchy.”<sup>11</sup> The argument floated by the Niyogi Commission report has become a tool in the hands of the Hindutva forces today. Hindutva’s arguments—made through the tacit invocation of binaries which construct the other as a placid, weak and inarticulate object and reduce the other to a controllable, unthinking self—only perpetuate new patterns of sustaining the existing asymmetries.

One should not buy into this rhetoric of inducement perpetuated by the Hindutva forces which renders the *Dalits* and *Adivasis* as inarticulate and placid in the exercise of their rationality in the whole process of conversions. Such a view devalues their agency and instrumentality as conscious subjects of concrete historical events.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, when we discuss conversions in the context of Hindu-Christian dialogue, we cannot ignore that conversions are a means by which Dalits and Adivasis seek to liberate themselves from the caste system and its oppressive symbolic world.

We need to take into due consideration the perception that the “full repository of symbolic resources” that religious conversion offers for the Dalits “on the one hand, enables Dalits to disentangle themselves from the significations and ramifications of the older caste-founded identities and on the other hand empower Dalits to associate themselves with representations and actualization of newer...identification.”<sup>13</sup> When this new found identification engenders identity-crossings and fosters liberation from the past grid of identity constructions that rendered Dalits and Adivasis obligated to the caste system, it is perceived as a threat and thus opposed.<sup>14</sup> Due credence should be given to the understanding that religious conversion is “one way that Dalits employ in their attempts to erase the subjugating symbolic world view of the past and transfigure the liberating symbolic world vision of the future.”<sup>15</sup> That these conversions have been largely met with active opposition from caste communities is understandable in a context where caste is a determining social, economic and political factor. In this context understanding Dalit and Adivasi conversions *vis-à-vis* the caste-system will re-cast conversions in the framework of justice and prompt the re-visiting of Hindu-Christian Dialogue (which is founded on the denouncement of conversion), its foundations and purposes. This is one concrete contribution that the perspectives from the margins can present for inter-religious dialogue.

### Re-sourcing Dialogue “From the Margins”

What will be the shape of inter-religious dialogue which is informed by the margins? I will touch on two areas of engagement.

- **Rethinking Dialogue Partners:** Inter-religious dialogue, which takes into serious consideration the question of the margins, will adopt a critical approach towards the choice of partners in interfaith relations. In a context where there is a growing recognition of the nexus between dominance, power and religion, it is necessary to bring a socio-political lens to the choice of dialogue partners. Out of such “political consciousness” emerges the affirmation that “[T]oday our partners in dialogue are not necessarily those religious leaders who are a part of the exploitative structures, but those who suffer from exploitation.” Such a view subverts the traditional and popular views of interfaith dialogue.<sup>16</sup> Recognizing that those affected by exploitative structures are “overwhelmingly the poor,” Shanta Premawardhana identifies

10 Viswanathan, “Literacy and Conversion,” 4, 5.

11 Chatterjee, *The Making of Indian Secularism*, 243.

12 Sathianathan Clarke, “Conversion to Christianity in Tamil Nadu: Conscious and Constitutive Community Mobilization Towards a different Symbolic World Vision,” in Sathianathan Clarke and Rowena Robinson (ed.), *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 323–50, at 336.

13 Sathianathan Clarke and Philip Peacock, ‘Dalits and Religious Conversions: Slippery Identities and Shrewd Identifications’, in Sathianathan Clarke, et.al (eds.), *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 178–95, at 191.

14 Viswanathan, “Literacy and Conversion,” 6.

15 Clarke and Peacock, “Dalits and Religious Conversion,” 190.

16 Shantha Premawardhana, “The Strange Exorcist,” in *Masihi Sevak: Journal of Christian Ministry*, Vol.XXXIV, No.2 (August 2009), 61–70, at 63.

these people as the “partners in dialogue, to build alliances and to challenge the power structures of government, corporations and indeed religions that exploit and destroy our communities.”<sup>17</sup> To prevent dialogue from remaining elitist in its orientation and participation there is a growing need to acknowledge the need to learn from the ongoing conversations “among people who are in poor and oppressed (subaltern) communities...to which we who sit at ecumenical and interreligious dialogue tables do not have access.”<sup>18</sup> In our dialogue meetings we ensure that we are conscious of the “presence of absence” and make sure that perspectives of the margins are represented that presented.

- **Re-affirming life through the Scriptures:** Revisiting inter-faith dialogue from the perspective of the margins brings new questions and possibilities for the place and role of scriptures in inter-faith relationships. Scripture has had an important place on the dialogue table. The way in which scripture was treated in dialogue has reinforced hierarchy and power, especially when dialogue around scriptures has become a matter of drawing sophisticated and felicitous linguistic parallels as an end in themselves. There is some truth in Joerg Reiger’s fear there is sometimes a danger that dialogue whose sole occupation is with scriptural texts ends up in what he calls “a fool’s paradise, a community gated by linguistic means for those who can afford it.”<sup>19</sup> Not everybody can afford the linguistic means that often becomes the basis for inter-religious dialogue concerning the scriptures. Most often the process of dialogue over the scriptures has not been the most inclusive.

Scriptures pose further problems. As Heidi Hadsell acknowledges, “[so] often in human history scripture, both Christian and that from other faith traditions, has been the cause of conflict and violence, rather than conflict resolution and peace making.”<sup>20</sup> Writing in the context of Jewish-Muslim relationships, A. Rashied Omar and Rabia Terri Harris recognize the importance of reading scriptures in a way which affirms life. According to them, “in a context where our sacred texts and stories provide opportunities for justifying violence....What is needed is a reinterpretation of the narrative, so that healing and a transformed relationship with the perceived enemy become integral parts of a renewed spiritual vision.”<sup>21</sup>

From the vantage point of their experiences of oppression, marginalized communities often bring a fresh understanding of the scriptures as sources from which life in its fullness can be foraged and fostered. This is quite contradictory to the oppressive and polemic use that scriptures are often put to in inter-religious relationships. I can recount an example from my own experience. Following the gruesome violence against Dalit and tribal Christians in the Kandhamal district of Orissa in August 2008 (in which some forty people were killed and thousands displaced from their villages following the burning of their homes), I was visiting one of several refugee camps set up for the thousands who had been displaced. I met a group of Dalit Christians who, despite having suffered for embracing the Christian faith, had started a “prayer fellowship” in the refugee camp. Out of curiosity I asked the man who was the leader of the group what he thought of those people who had burnt his house, killed his relatives, and made him a refugee. Amidst the uncertainty and the miserable conditions of the refugee camp and in the most sincere manner, he said that he and his family prayed that *the power of the resurrected Christ would touch his persecutors in the same way that it touched Saul in the Bible and converted him into the apostle Paul, an apostle who became even willing to risk his life for the cause of the very people he once wanted completely to annihilate*. His reply left me stunned. What is fascinating is the manner in which he was able to re-imagine his own story in the light of a larger biblical narrative to re-humanize someone who had been most inhumane towards him.

In the seamless manner in which he placed these narratives alongside one another, we can see the Bible as being truly the book of life. In their appropriation of the biblical narratives, the most marginalized communities have the capacity to foster what Maria Arul Raja calls the spirit of “re-creation,” which will enable “both the ‘re-

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17 Premawardhana, “The Strange Exorcist,” 64.

18 Shantha Premawardhana, “Reflections on the Future of Mission: Learnings from Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol.XXII, No.1 (January 2011), 84–95, at 86, 87.

19 Joerg Reiger, *God and the Excluded* (Fortress, 2001), 171.

20 Heidi Hadsell, “Can scripture be used towards peaceful relationships,” in Anantanand Rambachan, A. Rashied Omar and M. Thomas Thangaraj (eds.) *Hermeneutical Explorations in Dialogue: Essays in honour of Hans Ucko* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), 52–64, at 52.

21 A. Rashied Omar and Rabia Terri Harris, “Beyond ambivalence—Peacemaking through the Prophetic Example” in *Faces of the Other* (WCC, 2005), 22.

creation' of self-identity from the debris of the battered self and the recreation of any reality into a new reality" to be creative intervention.<sup>22</sup> This is a crucial contribution from the margins to the dialogue tables today.

### Conclusion

The language of "Mission from the Margins" is not merely a linguistic shift. It is epistemological and ethical in nature. As Vitor Westhelle says, margins "*have a disturbing revelatory potential, the potential of disclosure and the power of exposure.*"<sup>23</sup> The irruption of the margins today calls for rethinking the epistemological privilege that is accorded to the "mainstream" voices in the present terrain of interreligious dialogue and for reshaping "dialogue from the ground up"—so that through dialogue one can truly recover the promise of promoting peace, fostering freedom, and upholding human dignity and integrity. Interreligious dialogue that embraces the agendas and agency of the margins can reinvent dialogue as a dialogue *of* and *for* life, and can enable dialogue to become what the Chiang Mai Statement, entitled *Guidelines on Dialogue*, describes as a "joyful affirmation of life against chaos, and a participation with all who are the allies of life in seeking the provisional goals of a better human community."<sup>24</sup>

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22 A. Maria Arul Raja, "Harmony in the Midst of Anarchy: The Anatomy of the Spirit of Dalit Liberation," in *Vidhyajothi Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol 63 (1999), 416–28.

23 Vitor Westhelle, "Margins Exposed: Representation, Hybridity and Transfiguration," in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Still At the Margins: Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years After Voices From the Margins* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 68–87, at 69. Emphasis mine.

24 S. J. Samartha, *Dialogue Between Men [sic] of Living Faiths* (Geneva: WCC, 1971), 10–11.



# Radical Dialogue

## A New Dialogical Intervention

### R. Christopher Rajkumar<sup>1</sup>

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Dialogue is a powerful medium to transform conflicts of any nature. It happens only with mutual consent and acceptance. In India, it has been popularized by faith-based organizations to promote interfaith and inter-religious understandings towards societal harmony.

Basically, dialogue is an approach to communicating the events in everyday life as eloquent conversations. The meaning for conversation is to turn around or to transform. Therefore, dialogue is nothing but a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together in order to understand each other's positions and to enhance the understanding with human dignity. But, it does not happen always. There are polarities. The researcher witnesses today that all around the world there are people and communities that are on opposite sides of terrible conflicts who considered as enemies to each other because of their religious and political ideologies and vantage-points.

Today, the world's communities are in search of means and tools for social harmony. Nation-states adopt the political dialogue, economic dialogue, cultural dialogue and such on. In most contexts, interfaith and inter-religious dialogue is found, accepted, and recognized as a potential tool. However, it has got its own limitations in its ability to work or facilitate consensus on controversial concepts that are given consideration.

According to Israel Selvanayagam, an Indian pluralist and an interfaith scholar and activist, interfaith dialogue has four perspectives:

- a. ***Socio-political perspective:*** This perspective would keep the role of faith communities in nation-building and working together for the common good.
- b. ***Cultural perspective:*** This would keep inculturation as the bottom line for the dialogue. The whole question here would be whether the plurality or diversity of cultures collide or contradict.
- c. ***Theological Perspective:*** This sort of dialogue would consider different experiences of God and ways of talking about God.
- d. ***Missiological perspective:*** Some faith communities are missionary in character, and which would be interested in numerical accounts of conversions; others are non-missionary. There is always tension between the missionary and non-missionary traditions. So, the purpose of this dialogue is to facilitate realization by both sorts of faith communities that they have obligations towards establishing societal harmony and the common good.

Shanta Premawardhana, a Sri Lankan-American interfaith scholar and activist raises several questions about interfaith dialogical engagements. His general observations are:

- a. Interfaith dialogues have become more superficial; they tend to stay at surface level.
- b. The genuineness of dialogical engagements must be assessed and studied.
- c. An 'I' – 'YOU' attitude dominates interfaith dialogical engagements.

Therefore, he recommends a "justice and solidarity" approach to interfaith dialogical engagements.

In every notion of interfaith dialogues or dialogical engagements, ideas of faith(s), scripture, or God are at play. However, while harmony may be found in their different names for God, there are numerous, complex reasons why faith communities may remain polarized. Furthermore, the world is also filled with secular, non-

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theistic, and scientific ideologies which oppose theistic ideologies. Since they are ever-present, attention must be given to them as well. Therefore, dialogue initiatives might investigate possibilities for secular schools of thoughts to come together to explore their differences. If that happens, it would be a radical change in the areas of dialogical engagements. Opposites living together is not only a challenge, but is also the reality of the society in which the identities of these communities will be upheld. Therefore, radical dialogue could be a possible means and a tool for “just-peace” and “inter-cultural” solidarity.

## Radical Dialogue

The world today needs to be provided with an innovative means and tool to obtain just-peace through the transformative learning towards reconciliation and positive interaction—not to avoid harsh realities, but to deal with them in practical ways. The general understanding of war and terrorism make the “other” more determined, leaving everyone with wrecked communities and toxic environments.

The “just-war” concept of the politics in so-called developed countries has created havoc. In order to maintain peace and harmony, war is justified and introduced as a tool for peace. As a result, often, common and innocent people are caught between destructive actions of the military, the police, militia, and terrorist groups or gangs. In most cases, out of fear, people have had to oblige, cooperate, obey, and even pledge allegiance against their faiths and beliefs. Here it seems the concept of “peace” and “just-war” stand opposite to each other. What is needed is a radical dialogue between “just-war” and “just-peace.”

This shift could also try to see the possibility of a radical dialogue between the state and resistant movements in contexts such as Indian Government’s “Green Hunt” program on the “red-corridor” areas in India and any such elsewhere too. This would definitely facilitate the possibility of exploration of two opposite ideologies so that, in spite of their differences, they might consider living interdependently in one diverse community. Together, they have the possibility of embodying a process of radical dialogue, in which transformation may take place in the society and its patterns of thinking towards “just-peace.”

It is easy to categorize people, communities, and ideologists which are involved in radical dialogue—even declaring them to be enemies. Such apprehensions are encountered in the process of “Radical Dialogical Engagement” but the process is still important in terms of recognition, understanding, acceptance, and mutual and reciprocal learning towards societal transformation. Radical Dialogues would draw new and challenging inspiration from many ideologies; the observations of ideologues, thinkers, leaders, and activists; and the stories of ordinary people who live with integrity. If we are looking for more meaningful, hopeful, constructive engagement, stick around. Throw in your two cents! To someone else, it might be gold.

## Conclusion

Radical Dialogue would mark a shift in our traditional approaches in that it can be expected to lead to a free flow of meaning, which has potential transforming power in relationship among the people and ideologies. The two different polarities involved can learn to embody it. This could be perhaps the most significant shift in dialogue: in which the power would no longer reside in a group or a person, but would be aligned with life itself.

# Double Religious Identity and Hindu-Christian Dialogue

Laura M. Johnson

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My contribution to this consultation will be to talk about Hindu-Christian dialogue within an individual's context—in particular, my own context as someone whose Christian faith has been influenced by Hinduism. The basis for myself as case study comes from my doctoral research<sup>1</sup> into individuals within Hindu-Christian dialogue who may claim, or be assigned by others, a type of double religious identity<sup>2</sup>—what I call “blurred between Hindu and Christian.” Through the study of selected people throughout history (such as Robert de Nobili, Abhishiktananda, and Bede Griffiths), I wanted to demonstrate that double religious identity can manifest itself in a number of ways, and that it didn't have to follow that the Christian identity and spirituality of the person in question was watered down.

For example, a person may align themselves with Hindu culture as part of their Christian mission method. For example, Robert de Nobili took on the Hindu way of *sannyāsa*, or renouncer, both aesthetically and in terms of lifestyle, in an attempt to convert Hindus (specifically, Brahmins) to Christianity in the early part of the seventeenth century. This was a forerunner of a method of Christian mission called “inculturation,”<sup>3</sup> which is not without its critics (myself included) and is considered by some to be as controversial now as it was then. On the other hand, double religious identity may have much more obvious and straightforward roots; you may be a child brought up in the faiths practiced by your parents: a Hindu mother and a Christian father. Michael Amaladoss notes that such identities are not uncommon, writing that “...there are some in India today who feel that they are heirs to two religious traditions. Hinduism or Buddhism is not exterior to them. It is their heritage. So they make a conscious effort to integrate them in their lives. They occasionally call themselves Hindu or Buddhist Christians.”<sup>4</sup> These are but two examples of the manifestations of Hindu-Christian double religious identity. Before I proceed to presenting myself as a case study, it is necessary to give some background on the theology of double religious identity and its importance for Hindu-Christian dialogue.

## Background

A question I want to answer right at the beginning of this paper is “why are such identities important for Hindu-Christian dialogue?” (Indeed, for any dialogue?) I turn to Felix Wilfred here, who writes that dialogue “never takes place among religions; dialogue is always among people. Therefore we need to pay attention to the subjective quest and religious search of people, individually and collectively.”<sup>5</sup> These identities are important, then, because they reflect that “subjective quest.” I am also reliant on feminist methodology, which comes into play by supporting a more flexible notion of what religious identity “is;” i.e. that it is a fluid concept, not a static one. Jeannine Hill Fletcher describes identity as a “verb, not a noun,”<sup>6</sup> which makes an awful lot of sense to me. If

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1 L. Coles, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue and the Blurred Boundaries of Religious Identity* (PhD thesis, Canterbury Christ Church University, 2013).

2 I expound upon the reasons for picking this term rather than “multiple religious belonging” or other variations in the thesis work. Linguistically there is a wealth of terms used to describe “double religious identity,” which has led Catherine Cornille to denounce the term “belonging,” preferring “identity” or “identification” to be used. This is because she believes it expresses better what people are actually experiencing—Cornille does not believe it is possible for people to “belong” to two religious traditions at once, but it is perfectly possible for them to “identify” with another one [Catherine Cornille, *Interreligious Dialogue and Cultural Change* (Wipf and Stock, 2012). In the thesis, I explore her stance further and lean on her argument to rest on using the term “double religious identity” (Coles, 2013, 42-43)].

3 Throughout the thesis, I refer to inculturation in two different modes: The deliberate method employed by missionaries, and the spontaneous inculturation which comes “from below” (through practitioners and believers themselves). I take my cue on this from Paul M. Collins, who says that there are two types of inculturation, the intentional and the unintentional [Paul M. Collins, *Christian Inculturation* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 118].

4 Michael Amaladoss, *Beyond Inculturation: Can the Many Be One?* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 108.

5 Felix Wilfred, *Sling of Utopia: Struggles for a Different Society* (Delhi: ISPCK 2005), 64.

6 Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 96.

religious identity is understood as something porous and capable of change then it allows, in theory, people to have many aspects to their religious identity. Those who question the authenticity of multiple religious identities may see such approaches as akin to consumerism, picking the bits of religion that they like best and discarding the parts that make them feel uncomfortable. To hold more than one religious identity simultaneously, it would seem, offends the black-and-white simplicity of identifying labels such as “Hindu” or “Christian,” and can be deemed less than authentic or proper. However, should it always be the case that religious identity is not authentic if it is non-singular? Religious identity is an evolving concept, which can be influenced by the presence or discovery of other religious identities.

What I found during my doctoral research was that “double religious identity” can be stereotyped as a form of consumerism or (negatively perceived) syncretism.<sup>7</sup> However, I believe that this is because religious identity can often be perceived as a single entity, when actually a person’s religious identity is composed of many different facets which are capable of change. For the purposes of my thesis, I took just six possible facets of what constitutes religious identity, including:

- Politics
- Aesthetics
- Theology (which can be subdivided to “personal” and “public”)
- Spirituality
- Culture
- Inculturation

Perhaps the shortest example I can offer here is of Robert de Nobili, whom I have already mentioned. Aesthetically, he took on the outward signs of a Hindu sannyāsin by adopting *kāvi*—ochre/saffron-colored robes.<sup>8</sup> He also briefly adopted the sacred thread, with Christian adaptations, such as attaching a crucifix to it<sup>9</sup> before discovering that the sacred thread was discarded once one pursued sannyāsa anyway.<sup>10</sup> This was a means to an end for de Nobili; that end being to communicate the Gospel more effectively to Hindu Brahmins. This meant that he may have *looked* Hindu; the *outward image* of his religious identity had changed. But his spirituality, his theology had not; these were still Christian. So you could argue that his *aesthetics* (as a part of his whole religious identity) were Hindu-Christian—arguably, a type of double religious identity.<sup>11</sup>

Double religious identity, then, is best understood as an *umbrella term*—as any of those facets listed above could change from single (let’s say Christian, for argument’s sake) to incorporating double (Christian *and* Hindu) religious identity. A change in the “spirituality” facet is most commonly understood as leading to double religious identity. But I argue that it can be a change in *any* of those facets that can lead to a double religious identity—and that change may occur over an entire lifetime. I believe that by taking a broader approach to what constitutes and influences a person’s religious identity, such identities as “Hindu-Christian” can be better understood.

With this backdrop in mind, I would now like to present myself as a case study. I want to demonstrate how double religious identity itself is a journey, one that someone may or may not (indeed, choose not to) arrive at. This was not part of my doctoral research, but the subject of my thesis was very much dictated by my own passion, and sometimes yearning, for Hinduism while being a Christian. I hope that it may be of interest, and demonstrate how the understanding of one’s religious identity can be a dialogue in its own right.

## Myself as Case Study

Because the issue of religious identity is subjective, I need to be aware of my own bias and how this informs the way I write and the way I interpreted the case studies for my PhD. This includes asking myself the question

7 I say this because syncretism is not always perceived negatively. For example, see Perry Schmidt Leukel’s chapter “In Defence of Syncretism” from his *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2009).

8 Vincent Cronin, *Pearl to India: Roberto de Nobili* (New York: Harper Collins, 1959), 70.

9 de Nobili (1881), 650.

10 Cronin, 118.

11 de Nobili’s “double religious identity” was in terms of *culture* and *aesthetics* (as he was a forerunner of *inculturation*) and therefore to say he had a double religious identity is not a statement on his faith but rather on how he was perceived.

“Why did I choose to pursue this aspect of Hindu-Christian dialogue for an academic thesis?” To refer to the biographical method, Merrill and West suggest that “[a] topic we choose in others’ lives may be motivated by or raise profound issues in our own.”<sup>12</sup> Also, within feminist methodology, Rita M. Gross points out that “... autobiographical elements are quite common in feminist theology, as feminist theologians explore and explain how their formative experiences helped shape their theological outlooks.”<sup>13</sup> So, by drawing on both feminist and biographical methodologies, I believe I am able to expose certain details about how my theological interests came to rest upon double religious identity. What’s more, these methodologies justify the importance of doing so.

I want to introduce another influential theology, known as comparative theology, which Francis X. Clooney defines as “...the practice of rethinking aspects of one’s own faith tradition through the study of aspects of another tradition.”<sup>14</sup> Rose Drew questions whether Clooney’s admission that Hinduism has led him into a greater appreciation and dialogue with his own (Christian) faith means that he can “...now claim some measure of Hindu faith.”<sup>15</sup> She quotes Clooney himself as saying that “comparative theology ‘opens the door to a kind of multiple belonging.’”<sup>16</sup>

My fascination with Hinduism and with what Clooney calls the “imperfectly formed insider”<sup>17</sup> recognizes some of itself in the experiences of other comparative theologians for whom the longing to understand the religious life and faith of another has led to the strengthening and renewal of their own personal religious convictions. Clooney explains further that “Though in many ways still outside the other tradition, one becomes enough of an insider that that the tradition’s realities work powerfully and invite an assent. The theologian is captivated, in a way analogous to how she or he might experience religious truths and realities in her or his home tradition.”<sup>18</sup> People like Francis X. Clooney and Paul Knitter<sup>19</sup> have spent many years immersing themselves in (through both study and sometimes practice of) another religious tradition. My faith journey has really only just started in comparison to theirs! But already I am acutely aware that Hinduism captures my attention more than studying Buddhism, Sikhism or any other religious tradition and perhaps this is because it speaks to me on a level other than the scholarly, at times. For now, I am content to begin to identify myself with some of the expressions that comparative theologians make and accept that this may be or may lead towards a type of double religious identity.

How does this answer the issue of how I came to choose these case studies? Simply because I was fascinated by those who tried to entertain Hindu and Christian identities simultaneously, and I identified with their desire to learn—not only about, but also from and through—Hinduism. My first encounter with such a person was Bede Griffiths, when I read his collection of essays, *Christ in India*. It might even go further back than that: I was so absorbed in the ways in which Christian mission in India impacted on Hinduism that I wrote my undergraduate dissertation on it. Either way, Bede Griffiths set me off down a path to find others like him. I encountered my case studies through a desire to understand and know why some people have a Hindu and a Christian religious identity simultaneously, and the impact this had on them and the dialogues they were involved in.

My faith journey as a Christian has been bound up with Hinduism since I was a 16-year-old old student, and I can honestly say that I would not be the Christian I am today without Hinduism; it has opened me up to different ways of expressing my Christian faith and exploring spirituality. The language of comparative theology definitely speaks to me, although the extent to which this comes under the umbrella term “double religious identity” is up for debate. In my own experience at least, they are very much intertwined. Just one example of the impact of Hinduism on my Christian faith is the draw I felt towards yoga and meditation. I wanted to try to incorporate these aspects of Hinduism into my Christian faith—and when I went looking for a way in which to do this, I found an established contemplative tradition in Christianity. Another example is the beautiful way in which Hindu worship occurs and delights all the senses. This has led me to a greater appreciation of Anglo-

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12 Barbara Merrill and Linden West, *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 5.

13 Rita M. Gross, *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 89.

14 Francis X. Clooney, “Comparative Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook to Systematic Theology*, edited by John Webster, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 654.

15 Rose Drew, “Challenging Truths: Reflections on the Theological Dimension of Comparative Theology,” in *Religions* 2012:3, 1041-2053, at 1046.

16 Clooney, cited in Drew (2012), 1046.

17 Francis Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 101.

18 Clooney (2004), 102.

19 For example, see Knitter’s 2009 publication *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian* (Oxford: One World, 2009).



Catholic worship—“smells and bells”—which is very different from my childhood experience of going to church. My *theology* and *spirituality* (both of which I identify as particular facets of an individual’s religious identity) have certainly been influenced by Hinduism to a very large extent; and I expect to acknowledge further influences as I continue to engage in dialogue. Furthermore, I believe that my religious identity has been colored, for the better, through Hindu-Christian dialogue.

## Conclusion

I hope that, by offering myself and my own experiences as a case study, I have demonstrated how double religious identity does not have to be dismissed as a selective attitude or a syncretism which is inauthentic. Rather, it can be an important part of one’s faith journey. This can all be affected by different facets of one’s religious identity—politics, inculturation, aesthetics, theology, spirituality, culture—engaging with another religious identity and tradition (in my case, Hindu and Christian).

Recalling Felix Wilfred’s words, that dialogue always takes place among people, I believe that double religious identity is something that cannot be ignored. When someone is described (or refers to themselves) as “a Hindu-Christian,” it might at first seem paradoxical, confusing, even bizarre; yet it is such identities as these which make the study of interfaith dialogue appealing and attractive. I do not mean to say that every person who encounters another religion through dialogue will change their religious identity; rather that, for some people, learning about another religion can give them pause for thought about their own beliefs to the extent that they are significantly affected by the other religious identity. In some cases, this might lead to a complete change in religious identity, through conversion; but at other times it could lead to a double religious identity. I believe, in the light of my own experiences and my doctoral research, that the necessity to explore what such identities mean for Hindu-Christian dialogue should not be overlooked.

# Interpreting Faith to Visitors

## Commitment and Openness in a Pioneering Faith Guiding Course

Ruth Tetlow

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Since 2007 I have been the Co-ordinator for the Faith Encounter Programme, a small inter faith educational project based in the West Midlands, which has mainly become known for developing the Faith Guiding course, accredited by the Institute of Tourist Guiding.<sup>1</sup>

### The Birmingham context

The context of the city of Birmingham is significantly more multicultural and multireligious than the national average for the UK. In terms of national origin, Pakistani, Indian and Caribbean people are the most numerous minorities. According to the last census figures available (2011), 46% of Birmingham's people described themselves as Christian; 22% as Muslim; 3% as Sikh; and 2% as Hindu. The figures for Muslim, Sikh and Hindu residents are significantly higher than the national average, while the figures for Christians and those professing no religion are significantly lower. Numbers of other faith communities, chiefly Buddhist and Jewish, are less than 1%, and are roughly in line with the national average. The city is the scene of long-standing interfaith work, going back even before the foundation of the Birmingham Interfaith Council in 1974. After the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the need for greater understanding was particularly urgent; and this realization was only increased by the tragic London bombings of 2007. In 2005, a Department for Communities and Local Government report on *Race and Faith* found that half the population perceived an increase in racial and religious tension in Britain since 2001. Government policy began to prioritize *community cohesion*.

### The nature and aims of the Faith Guiding course

In this context, the Faith Encounter Programme was set up in 2007, as a small charity with the objective of developing mutual respect and understanding between people of all faiths and none in the West Midlands. It has been steered by a small but experienced group of people of six different faiths. With myself as self-employed Co-ordinator, we have developed a pioneering *Faith Guiding* course as a means of achieving this objective. We began training people of all faiths from local places of worship to lead guided tours for groups of visitors of all ages and faith backgrounds at their own place of worship. The need for this work had become apparent in Birmingham during the preceding twenty years, as more and more school, college and adult groups had undertaken such visits either as part of their religious or theological education, or motivated by a wish to build positive relationships. Many places of worship were not equipped to receive this attention; although they offered warm hospitality and did their best to provide informed guides, these people often had little appreciation of the religious or cultural standpoint of their visitors or their purpose for visiting. The result was that real communication was limited; and, sometimes, the encounter was open to misunderstanding or even gave offense. The training offered on the course enables such visits to be more educationally productive, spiritually enriching and sensitively tailored to the backgrounds of the visitors.

The name of the project, Faith Encounter Programme, reflects my conviction, based on experience, that *encounter* is sometimes a more appropriate word than *dialogue* to describe meetings between a number of people of different faiths. It arose out of the study I undertook for my M.Phil. dissertation on "The Missing Dimension:

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<sup>1</sup> [www.itg.org](http://www.itg.org).

Women and Interfaith Encounter in Birmingham,”<sup>2</sup> in which I carried out participant observation of a group of eleven women of six different faiths.

The word *encounter* is likely to refer to several people or positions—including groups of people. The participants encounter one another with body and spirit as well as mind, and often with several senses, such as smell, touch and sight. Examples include the beauty of flowers, candles and incense frequently experienced on visits to places of worship. The communication is holistic and may be nonverbal. The word *dialogue*, on the other hand, should mean talking *through*; but, in contemporary English, it tends to evoke the picture of a verbal intellectual exercise where two sides are engaged in a discussion of theological issues. Where it is *interfaith dialogue*, it implies people of two different faiths trying to understand one another, but on opposite sides of a debate. I agree with Israel Selvanayagam, who has said that dialogue, “...involves serious commitment to one’s convictions, and openness to the extent of being vulnerable.”<sup>3</sup> I use both words—*encounter* and *dialogue*—depending on the context.

The Faith Guiding Certificate was developed, with the accreditation of the Institute of Tourist Guiding (Level 2, as it is site specific) and the support of staff of University College, Birmingham, who had expertise in teaching leisure and tourism. The course has now been completed by over 100 people, mostly in the West Midlands, together with a small group in Leicester. They have been drawn from the following faiths: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Unitarian, and Zoroastrian.

The course comprises three elements: faith knowledge, guiding skills, and understanding of other faiths. Besides thirty-six hours in class (usually, three hours per week over twelve weeks), extensive private study (or evidence of prior learning) totaling over 100 hours is required by the Institute of Tourist Guiding. Participants keep a weekly journal of their personal responses to the course. The assessment is through a one-hour written examination and a short assessed guided tour conducted at the participant’s own place of worship. Each participating faith has a university caliber Faith Tutor; so, for example, the Muslim participants will spend 10 hours at the beginning of the course with a senior Muslim scholar, learning how to put across their faith accurately and concisely to complete outsiders. They should be able to speak about the faith as a whole, not just their own particular tradition, and should have a sense of how it is seen by outsiders. This makes up the first and foundation element of the course, known as Faith Interpretation. The second, Guiding Skills (eighteen hours) is taught by a Blue Badge Guide (Institute of Tourist Guiding); and the third, Understanding Other Faiths (eight hours) is taught by a qualified and experienced interfaith practitioner (often the Co-ordinator herself). Even those experienced in guiding at their own place of worship find they have much to learn from the professionalism of the Blue Badge Guide—for example, about repeating any question that they are asked, before answering it, in order to make sure the whole group has heard. The course includes four visits to different places of worship to experience good practice and learn about the different faiths. Much learning also takes place incidentally during the course, as participants get to know one another as friends and practice presenting their faiths.

## The ethos of the course

Participants in the Faith Guiding course learn to treat each other with courtesy and respect. The Faith Knowledge aspect of the course trains people to witness to their own faith with clarity and confidence, but without preaching or attempting to convert. The outcome is left in the hands of God. They learn to interpret specialized language, which makes them think deeply about the real meaning of words and phrases that may have been familiar all their lives, such as, “God is known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” to give a Christian example. Those participants belonging to faiths which are rooted in other cultures who commonly use words that cannot be accurately translated into English, learn to explain them. Sikhs, for example, have to explain *langar* and *Guru Granth Sahibji*, while Muslims have to translate *hajj* and *halal*. Christians, too, learn that their faith has cultural expression, and that—for example—Arabic speaking Christians may call God *Allah*; while Christian women in India often remove their shoes and cover their heads for worship. In England, Christians put up Christmas trees in church and celebrate harvest festival in the autumn—which is not biblical and would be thought strange in other Christian churches around the world. Faith guides learn to distinguish between religion and culture, to respect the integrity of each other’s faith, and to recognize and understand differences while building on areas of common ground. This means starting sentences with the words, “As Hindus/Christians/Jains etc. we believe...,”

2 University of Birmingham M Phil dissertation, 2004.

3 I. Selvanayagam, “A Second Call,” *CLS* 2000, 203.

rather than making general statements that imply a particular belief is universal. This enables them to engage in dialogue as well as witness.

The Faith Guiding course embodies the principle of “Commitment and Openness,”<sup>4</sup> which lies at the heart of interfaith dialogue. Mutual respect develops between people of different faiths who are clearly committed and able to express that commitment. They find they are speaking the same language and each recognizes a deep spirituality in the other that forms a genuine bond. On the other hand, there must be openness to the other position, a serious attempt to understand intellectually and enter into the experience of the other spiritually. The result is usually a growth in faith on the part of both participants in the dialogue, as new light is shed on their own faith. For instance when Muslims speak to Christians of their reverence for Isa/Jesus and the way in which they see him as a prophet, the Christians see their Lord in new ways.

Other themes expressed by the way the course is conducted are those of community and of concern for the less privileged. No one is excluded from taking part. This is done by keeping fees low and waiving them for those on benefits or very low incomes. Hindu priests, for example are often paid only a subsistence wage by their congregations; but several have taken part in the course. People of widely varying age and status often take part in the course and find they are all treated as equals. In a recent course, a friendship developed between a Buddhist man in his seventies and a Muslim woman in her twenties.

During the course, a strong sense of community is fostered through participative exercises, especially in the Understanding Other Faiths section. One of the most memorable is when participants are paired with someone of another faith and are asked to speak without interruption for two minutes on topics such as “How does your faith help you cope when times are hard?” The partner listens and then shares—again without interruption—on the same topic. Mutual friendships are also fostered among the group through the experience of overcoming nervousness when speaking in front of the group. Some find this a very daunting prospect but grow in confidence bit by bit, until they are able to take the practical examination in front of two examiners and the whole group in their place of worship. The sense of community on that day is powerful, as each wills the others to succeed. As Gareth Jones has said,

People (of different faiths on the course) gain from each other’s enthusiasm, and there’s also a sense of shared vulnerability....[A]rising out of this I’ve noticed a real mutual encouragement—people want each other to do well, they want each other to fulfil their potential.<sup>5</sup>

## Benefits of the course

The Faith Guiding course is of benefit in a number of ways; but, first and foremost, to the faith guides themselves. Some of those who start the course have experience in hosting visitors and are not sure that they have much to learn; while others are very nervous and don’t believe they will ever be able to lead a tour with a group. Those with experience find they value the multifaith context of the course and the opportunity to stand in the shoes of visitors at other places of worship. They often gain additional professional skills, such as maintaining eye contact with everyone in the group. Those who lack self-confidence gain it through the mutual encouragement of the group, the non-judgmental atmosphere and the opportunity to practice among friends. A sense of the benefits to participants, who become faith guides, can be conveyed from their own responses:

*...it was an excellent opportunity to ask all those questions to each other about our faiths that you would otherwise never have the courage to ask. (Sikh faith guide)*

*I am inspired by the camaraderie and I now have the ability to receive groups confidently and professionally. (Zoroastrian faith guide)*

*I learnt how to explain concepts for my own faith while being sensitive to others. (Christian faith guide)*

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<sup>4</sup> Selvanayagam, 189.

<sup>5</sup> Gareth Jones (Christian and Inter Faith Tutor) at Walsall Faith Guides’ Awards Evening, 06.06.11.

*Since finishing the course I have been getting regular visits from schools...to our Mandir, and I have also been asked to do presentations at schools. (Hindu faith guide)*

As this comment from one of our Hindu graduates indicates, faith guides have the opportunity to gain other forms of speaking experience. Requests come into the Faith Encounter Programme for speakers to visit schools, colleges and adult groups in the West Midlands and beyond. A good example was the invitation to take people of six faiths to Pershore High School in Worcestershire, where they engaged with several hundred pupils aged 15–18. Faith guides are also invited to take part in interfaith events and can thus develop their dialogue skills.

Secondly, there are significant benefits to the places of worship and faith communities involved. As a Sikh told me recently, many different types of encounter take place during a visit. The visitors encounter a sacred building with all its sounds, symbols, practices and atmosphere. The faith guide encounters the visitors, who may themselves be of different faiths. There is an encounter of different cultures, which challenges the faith community to see itself as outsiders see it. While recognizing differences of doctrine, tradition and practice, profound areas of common ground are also usually discovered, which can then form the basis for future relationships. These include a seeking after the eternal perspective on life, care for humanity and all of creation, and a commitment to work for peace and reconciliation. Faith guides become more aware of intra-faith diversity as they seek to respond to the perceptions and questions of the visitors. For example, a Sunni Muslim may find s/he is asked a question about Shia practice that a visitor has seen on television. All these experiences can be shared with others in their own faith community. The host community is challenged to engage more fully with the locality and wider area, and to find new ways of sharing its insights without proselytizing. The new faith guide may encourage his/her place of worship to improve the quality of its presentation, its system of booking visits, and its backup literature—so as to improve the warmth and efficiency of the welcome that can be offered. The Faith Encounter Programme moves communities to move beyond safe boundaries and to take risks in relationships.

The third group of people to benefit from the Faith Guiding training, is naturally, the visitors. There are huge numbers of them. Two large places of worship in the area received over 5,000 visitors last year, while five others received over 1,000. Many local places of worship receive a few hundred each year. The Faith Encounter Programme has enjoyed the support of the Birmingham Standing Conference on Religious Education (SACRE) for the last five years—not least because the Faith Guiding approach has fit in with their development of a new approach to the Religious Education (RE) syllabus.<sup>6</sup> This involves learning *from* religion, as well as learning *about* religion; and its promotion with Birmingham schools has been the responsibility of the Religious Education Adviser, Simone Whitehouse. She has written:

The value of having someone trained as a faith guide should not be underestimated....This is at the heart of community engagement, of interfaith dialogue, where pupils can openly ask “Why does that happen?” “What is this?” and “Why are they doing that?” and be given the chance to reflect on what those answers might mean for them. This is the crux of meaningful...religious education.<sup>7</sup>

She also says how important it is that the visit meets the needs of the class in terms of linking with the curriculum. Even Faith Guide training does not fully equip guides to manage this; so the Faith Encounter Programme holds follow-up workshops to introduce the dispositions that are the focus of the Birmingham syllabus.<sup>8</sup> Pupils on a Faith Guide tour are enabled to see the place of worship as the heart of a religious community on their own doorstep. They may be offered a rare spiritual experience in a beautiful building (or a building containing beautiful artifacts) that a classroom-based talk, even by a visiting speaker, could never replicate. The Faith Guide is able to serve their community by bringing their own commitment to life in the context of the building, for the visitors.

## The future

The course has already been extended throughout the West Midlands and to Leicester; and there are hopes of extending it elsewhere in the country. What lessons have been learned that will have to be borne in mind if this

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<sup>6</sup> [www.faithmakesadifference.org.uk](http://www.faithmakesadifference.org.uk).

<sup>7</sup> Personal submission.

<sup>8</sup> [www.faithmakesadifference.org.uk](http://www.faithmakesadifference.org.uk).



process is to be successful? The delivery of the course, with its three elements, is a complex process, thus needs an experienced hands-on program director to coordinate all the aspects. The Institute of Tourist Guiding's requirements give a very useful framework, assuring quality and recognition. However, it is essential that the course be tailored to the local situation—not just in terms of the number of different faiths that can take part, but also the needs of local school groups and the context of local faith communities. This may mean running a shorter, simpler training program. In some places, there may be an interfaith center that can take responsibility; in others, a local steering group will have to be established. In some cases, a university or college may be involved; while in others, all the practicalities will have to be set up for the first time. In some places, a local multi-faith forum may welcome the course as a valuable part of its ongoing program. In a large monocultural area, the variety and needs of places of worship will be different from those in a very diverse city; but the course will still be useful—even if only two or three faiths take part and some of the diversity comes from different Christian denominations.

## Conclusion

In terms of models of interfaith activity, the phrase “face to face and side by side,” coined by Sir Jonathan Sacks, the UK's former chief Rabbi, is relevant and has become widely used—particularly by the UK's Department of Communities and Local Government.<sup>9</sup> “Face-to-face” is where people of different faiths get to know each other and each other's faiths by talking face to face; “side by side” is where people of different faiths cooperate with each other on common activities, usually to benefit their local community. Gareth Jones, in his address to the Faith Guides' Awards evening in Walsall in 2010, made the point that the Faith Guiding course enables faith guides to do both. They work alongside each other to benefit their local communities; and in the process, they meet face to face and get to know what faith means to each other. They learn not just about the outward expressions of faith—what people do or wear—but they appreciate their inner commitment—their ethical behavior and deep spirituality. Some quotes from faith guides bear this out:

*I learned how people live their lives by their religion, the group members are real people not just “Christians” or “Hindus.”* (Sikh)

*I am grateful for the insights into other people's religions—there was a feeling of warmth and love.* (Christian)

A visit to a place of worship should be a rich experience, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. When the visit is interpreted through the eyes of a follower of the faith who is enthusiastic, warm hearted, knowledgeable, and also appreciative of the background of the visitors, it becomes a unique opportunity. Faith guides themselves “discover the emotional connection that each of us has to our own faith and how for each of us faith is a source of inspiration, joy and comfort.”<sup>10</sup> A tour will make a lasting impression if the visitor “has journeyed within themselves and been stimulated to think how we can better learn to live together and enhance the world around us.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Face-to-face and side-by-side: a framework for inter faith dialogue and social action,” consultation document from DCLG, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Gareth Jones in Walsall Faith Guides' Awards Evening, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Gopinder Kaur Sagoo (Sikh Tutor) in a personal reflection, 2011.

# Evangelism, Conversion, and Hindu Relations

Robin Thomson

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“Changing your religion is the greatest sin on earth. It is like changing your mother.”—a listener to a Radio Leicester phone-in programme on conversion

Conversion is “violence... against humanity, against cultures, against religions...My dharma is not violence. It does not allow conversion. And that dharma has to be protected.”—Swami Dayananda Saraswati, 1999

“Conversion belongs to the times of colonialism. We have entered the era of unity, of coming together, of tolerance and accepting each other as we are—not of converting in the name of the one elusive “true” God.”—Francois Gautier, *Asian Voice*, March 30, 2002

**E**vangelism and conversion continue to be sources of tension between Hindus and Christians. We need to demythologise, get behind the misunderstandings—on both sides—and try to produce clear definitions.

## Conversion: Some issues to be Clarified

What lies behind the reaction against conversion? It is seen as a threat to family, community and culture; as the product of social and political forces; as linked to the colonial past; as a mark of religious exclusiveness.

Conversion is complex. There are inner aspects—people’s genuine beliefs and aspirations—but also outer effects on the community, on social and cultural relationships. As Gauri Viswanathan notes, conversion “unsettles the boundaries by which selfhood, citizenship, nationhood and community are defined, exposing them as permeable borders.”<sup>1</sup> People’s motives in conversion may also be complex: a combination of spiritual and social, economic and cultural. Who does the converting? Christians believe it is God’s work, but there is also the place of the human agents. Their motives could also be complex and their methods may raise questions.

Conversion is practiced by people of both communities, Hindu and Christian. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a basic right, to be upheld. But it should not be abused through exploitation, manipulation or any kind of coercion. The methods used to propagate faith must be explicit, based on love, respect and transparency. Those considering changing their faith should consider carefully the impact on their family and community. The Apostle Paul’s dramatic conversion is not the only model. The Hindu Christian Forum UK is working on revised “Ethical Guidelines”, updating the earlier “Goodwill Statement” of 2002, which endeavor to bridge some of the misunderstandings.<sup>2</sup>

## Evangelism

What is the agenda? We must consider three areas of misunderstanding: the distinction between evangelism and proselytizing; methods of evangelism; and the distinction between evangelism and persuasion.

### Evangelism and proselytizing

When members of the Hindu Christian Forum UK met the Archbishop of Canterbury in December 2013, they questioned him about making “evangelism” one of his three priorities. He suggested a meeting with his

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<sup>1</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, 1998, 16.

<sup>2</sup> see Andrew Wingate, *The Meeting of Opposites?* (SPCK, 2014), 168.

adviser on evangelism, Rev Chris Russell. At the meeting it was suggested that evangelism implied superiority over others. Russell replied that for him evangelism meant “sharing good news” about Jesus. This was different from “proselytizing” which implies an agenda of “making converts” or somehow forcing or manipulating people. Sometimes, it should be remembered,

dominant communities prefer to use the term “proselytism” rather than “conversion” to indicate the forcible nature of religious change... The use of the term “proselytism” further denies subjectivity, agency, or choice to the subject and replaces individuals with masses as the unit of analysis.<sup>3</sup>

We noted that Jesus condemned proselytizing and instead called people to discipleship. On the other hand, Christians today are in danger of losing contact with the core of our belief. This leads us to become reticent—the opposite problem.

### Methods of Evangelism

If we communicate in a way that contradicts the character and example of Jesus we are denying him. The method must have integrity with the purpose (the end determines the means). Evangelism is not just a matter of words. It includes life, worship, church structures and practices—demonstrating the truth of the gospel. Evangelism is not about numbers or “church growth”. It is about transformation of individuals and communities—being and becoming the gospel. It was agreed that we need to clarify what are inappropriate methods.

### Evangelism and persuasion

Is evangelism just “sharing the good news”? Does it include persuasion? Is there a purpose or desired result? On the one hand, evangelism is not a product to be marketed. It is sharing together. On the other hand, it does call for a response. We shared some goal statements, both Hindu and Christian:

[The] work of helping Sanatan Dharma (commonly referred to as Hinduism) to flourish so that all the people of the UK have access to the oldest, and many have called it the wisest and deepest, religious and spiritual heritage that humans have ever perceived. –NCHT website

Evangelism is one beggar telling another where bread can be found. –D. T. Niles

To seek to know the true and living God along with our Hindu friends, *which includes* respecting their search for God *and* sharing with them our experience of God, *so that* they will also experience God’s love, grace, peace, forgiveness and justice shown to us all in the Lord Jesus Christ. –*Engaging with Hindus*

There is something in the wisdom of spiritual life for everyone. In response to the suffering and spiritual needs of others we prioritize outreach...Our presentations are an honest representation of “who” we are and what we have to offer... all things lead to and culminate in devotion or bhakti--our ultimate contribution. We believe Jesus came into the world to demonstrate God’s character of love and justice and to open the way to God. He did this by telling people the good news about God’s love, healing the sick, showing solidarity with the poor and marginalised, and confronting injustice. He gave his life on the cross to show God’s love and deal with the fundamental barrier between us and God. We aim to celebrate this good news of Jesus; share the good news with people of all backgrounds and to try to serve them as he did. –www.southasianconcern.org

Timothy Paul (USA) has proposed MARG (Making Authentic Relationships Grow) as a path of spiritual discovery and gradual acceptance and surrender to the reality of Jesus as the Lord who brings salvation within Hindu culture. There are five steps on this journey:

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<sup>3</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, 1998, 16.

- ***Sabandh / relationship***: building authentic, respectful relationships.
- ***Anubhav / experience***: experiencing spiritual reality, especially the reality and power of prayer.
- ***Bhakti / devotion***: joining in worship to Jesus through thanksgiving, singing and prayer.
- ***Balidan / sacrifice***: learning about the central truth of Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection.
- ***Sharanam / surrender***: inviting people to surrender to Jesus—without calling them to give up their Hindu heritage.

In this process “it seems that Hindus grow to love Jesus before they come to know him in an exclusive relationship”, but in the end he becomes for them “Mukthinath, the lord of salvation.”<sup>4</sup>

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4 Timothy Paul, “Impacting the Hindu Diaspora in North America,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* (Fall 2009), 26:3

# Introducing *Generous Love*

## An Anglican Theology of Interfaith Relations

### Michael Jackson

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**G***enerous Love: the truth of the Gospel and the call to dialogue* is a 2009 report from the Anglican Communion Network of Inter Faith Concerns (NIFCON) that seeks to make a contribution, from an Anglican perspective, to the climate of respect and understanding which are essential to good relations across and among world faiths.<sup>1</sup> Every possible time for doing this is testing and traumatic, but the present moment is particularly difficult in this regard; and, for this very reason, urgent and essential. Gaza and Israel, Syria and Iraq show us sustained signs of human disaster and structural devastation in terms of dignity and survival, cruelty and hatred. The so-called Islamic State metes out human enslavement, abuse of women, men and children, summary execution and mass killing. This all constitutes publicly verifiable behaviour and activity on the part of far too many human beings who need one another and cannot admit or accept this reality. Eventually we all need those whom we have designated our enemies. Particularly in situations of cruel distortion and manifest injustice, there is always need to hold on to the bedrock criterion of interfaith encounter: never compare the best of yourself with the worst of the Other. The difficulties internationally of the year 2014 sadly mean that there is much less of an appetite for exploring interfaith issues creatively or compassionately at a popular level at a time when the need for this has perhaps never been so urgent. The whole thing has indeed gone tabloid.

### Background and Hopes

And so, I go back only a short time, six years in fact, to *Generous Love*. This particular document was drafted by an expert member of NIFCON and written up by the members of NIFCON Management Group in 2008 to facilitate, in the first instance, the bishops of the Anglican Communion gathered by the then archbishop of Canterbury for The Lambeth Conference. Once we met with them we realized that locally they had identified problems and were in trouble and were having grave difficulties in articulating the issues. Bishops are very much caught between service and leadership in today's world and this makes it all the harder. The document speaks confidently in the capacity of the Gospel to reveal God's truth. And it does so also confidently that deep within the call to live a fulfilled and fulfilling human life, and furthermore a Christ-like life, is the call to dialogue: the dialogue of life and the dialogue of relationships and the dialogue of ideas and the dialogue of commitment. For the Christian, the life of God is, in and of itself, a life of engaged being; all three Persons of the Trinity tell us this time after time.

### Why Bother?

A number of things in general prompted us in the direction of commissioning and writing such a document. The first was the recognition that in the twenty-first century, people live as members of the broad range of different world faiths, of no expressed faith and of no faith whatsoever alongside one another as neighbours; this is irrespective of whether or not they practise public religion, because personal and public culture along with residual faith are highly interwoven in terms of personal and community identity; it is all the more slow and problematic because the downside of diversity is that everyone wants to hear her own voice. The second was the need for Anglicans to reflect and act locally with the confidence which fresh resources of information and understanding bring in making this possible. Simply stated, you may already be doing something and not quite understanding either its vitality or its importance when it has both. When you get the chance to compare what you are doing with other people and what they are doing, your own thing may turn to be rather interesting and innovative—but to you it simply was what you did and you had no reason to recognize it as ground-breaking in any way. The third is the recognition that international events have a local impact everywhere on the lives of us all and that

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<sup>1</sup> For the full text of *Generous Love*, see: [http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/resources/generous\\_love/index.cfm](http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/resources/generous_love/index.cfm).



global conflicts necessitate the development of dialogue between the different Faiths whose people are caught up in these events. Over the summer months, the plight of the Yazidis in Northern Iraq has specifically brought this to the forefront, as has the recognition of diaspora Jihadists recruited for enacted reality (war) by virtual reality (website) in the Northern and Western worlds. The fourth I suggest to be the enforced nomadism and settlement abroad of people who never wanted to leave their countries and find themselves forced to live where they often do not feel in the least bit welcome. They are our neighbours in a very tangible, and to them painful, way. We need to respond to our changing environment and to find the right language, the right articulation of theology, to do so effectively. In our attempt to do this through *Generous Love*, we have sought to remain true to the gift of life and love given us in the person of Jesus Christ and to the ways in which Anglicans pray, think and act.

## With Islam and Beyond Islam

So much of the work and thought in which Christian churches and people engage in the Inter Faith area centres on Islam and its peoples. The danger, therefore, is that the beginning becomes the end and we do not explore any further than *one* world faith and its culture, or engage beyond this horizon. Like you, I can see how this has come about. We hear and speak much about the “three Abrahamic faiths” and monotheism, as if both of these sets of terms are simple and self-explanatory. This becomes a short cut to pluralism of engagement but it is inadequate because it is partial in its reach and insufficient in its depth. And, despite itself, this type of simplicity can become exclusive. The three faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are, in fact, extremely complex and across them the term *monotheism* is not simply interchangeable. This concentration on three interlocking faiths shuts our eyes and ears to the invitation to engage with other world faiths such as Hinduism and Buddhism, for a start, and to enjoy the richness of who we are as religious and spiritual beings with and for one another. It is for such a reason as this that we are gathered here together in these precious days.

In significant parts of contemporary Christianity there is hostility to interfaith engagement. It stems from a conviction that if one’s adherence to Christianity is the focus of one’s *deepest* convictions, then all energies should be poured into this. There is the fear that one is “watering down” one’s spiritual time by devoting some of that time to another world faith. Then, there also is fundamentalism which holds that any faith other than one’s own is wrong and must be resisted because it is an erroneous and destructive worldview. Most religions have such a fundamentalist side. Even Christians interested in interfaith matters are often slow to proceed further with an agenda of critical friendship because of the *de facto* bullying to which they are subjected from within their own traditions. But it is in the conviction that extending the range of listening and understanding, of engaging and learning to enable more people to respect and to be respected before God and neighbor is the right thing to be doing in our time that we as Anglicans, in concert with the Lutherans with whom we are in communion through The Porvoo Agreement,<sup>2</sup> seek to engage with Hindus of the diaspora.<sup>3</sup>

## Diaspora

Diasporæ are interesting, indeed fascinating. They model emotional closeness and critical distance and often intense alienation. They push out the boundaries of experience, of opportunity and of danger; they are often particularly problematic for the second generation of those who have left the homeland and the home landscape and who may indeed have been born abroad. Deracination becomes a distinct possibility. Handling this can become highly problematical. The diaspora gives a range of contexts which reflects the global reality of today’s world; the other thing which is an important commonplace is the way in which globalized communication makes another’s local something local to you and to me; our local is changed for ever. This is why the internet revolution can, when properly used, make such a difference to understanding and to sympathy well beyond the limitations of information as an end in itself. We hear too much about its destructive power, although that certainly is a grim

<sup>2</sup> The Porvoo Agreement of 1992 established the Porvoo Communion, comprising thirteen mainly northern European Anglican and Lutheran churches. It takes its name from the city in which a joint celebration of Holy Communion was held after the signing of the agreement to full communion: the Porvoo Common Statement. For more information about the agreement, see: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/europe/the-porvoo-agreement.aspx>. For the English translation of the Porvoo Common Statement, see: [http://ecumenism.net/archive/docu/1992\\_porvoo\\_common\\_statement.pdf](http://ecumenism.net/archive/docu/1992_porvoo_common_statement.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> NIFCON convened an international consultation on Anglican and Lutherans relations with diaspora Hindus, 29 October – 1 November 2014, in Birmingham, UK.

reality as the recruitment of jihadists has recently reminded us. Home politics remain a fascination for those who live and work in the diaspora which, of course, has its own political system in which they may, for numerous reasons, have only a small numerical and emotional buy-in.

### God—and Human Life as a Response to God

A number of words and phrases appears in *Generous Love* and they express something of our contemporary Anglican understanding of Inter Faith relations. One pair is “presence and engagement.” Another is “*the dialogue of words* and *the dialogue of life*.” Yet another pair is “sending and abiding.” Each of these linked expressions communicates something of what we wished to convey in this document whose sub-title is: *the truth of the Gospel and the call to dialogue*. In the section entitled “Beginning with God,” we, as Christians, accept the limits of human knowledge and recognize that, when we meet people of faiths and beliefs other than our own, we do this meeting in the name and the strength of the one God who is Lord of all. In this we are following the example and spirit of St Paul. In our meeting with people of other Faiths we are guided by the generous love of the creator God, the truth of the Son who shows us the radiance of God’s glory and calls us into perfect freedom, and the command to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace—in our encounters with all people. Such is the thrust of the argument of *Generous Love*.

### Something on Language

We were and remain very aware of the metaphorical role of all language and of the role of language and of voiced ideas in pointing beyond what, in and of themselves, they say. We are also aware that a metaphor is not an empty vessel but carries the responsibility of articulating not only something or someone that matters, but something or someone that in an ultimate sense is real. In a religious framework, the language of God gives expression, however inadequate, to the existence of God in the lived and living experience of adherents and to the effects that such religion has on members of the human race and family. This includes all of those with whom the adherents of a particular religion, as a paradigm of divine and human encounter and inspiration, engage; and for whom, within the paradigm of ecology, they have responsibility in relationship with the whole creation. A religion is about God and the world. For these reasons *Generous Love* speaks unashamedly and confidently of the God of Christian revelation as Trinity of Three Persons in One God—historically and traditionally named Father, Son, Holy Spirit—as a definition of the core of our belief and the inspiration of our practice. This is, therefore, not the trumpeting of a sense of superiority over others but the assertion of who we are in primary theological terms and the articulation of this way of being as a community and as individuals living obedient to this God through Scripture and Tradition and Reason. And the community is explosive rather than implosive: it always looks out with a keener instinct to serve than it looks in to conserve.

### Points of Engagement

All three of these descriptions of God are nodal points of engagement with people of any and all faiths, precisely because they give expression us vehicles of expression as who we are and provide the space for dialogue with all others around history and interpretation, prayer and practice, doctrine and life. We do not become a different self when we engage—with respect, love and distinction—with people of faiths other than our own. Reason combines a willingness to think and live under the Wisdom of God and to engage in dialogue with the successive revelations of such Wisdom particularly in critical and scientific thinking and decision-making. Tradition sweeps any current generation into the stream of history and asks of those who live in a present moment to reflect honestly and honourably on who they are and on the limitations of the novel idea of the moment over against the earlier expression in thought and action. This is very, very hard for many people in a world of spin and dissatisfaction. It also asks of us, by the same token, that we be critical and do not simply recycle what has been done before, as if it is new simply because we know about it or are the people who give it voice. But perhaps most of all it asks us to respect the intentionality of integrity—where such exists—in what others have done before we were even an apple in our mother’s eye. Scripture is far from simple. On one level it gives voice to reason as the wisdom of God; on another level it is incontrovertible as the voice of God; on another level it is a series and a succession of literary creations and deposits around historical happenings. When we see all of this acting together it is, in

fact, useful and helpful and—most important of all for any part of any faith—generous and elastic. We are who we are in relation to ourselves, to others and to our inheritance, as God is who God is in relation to God's Three Persons and to the creation that God has created and is regularly recreating and regenerating hour by hour. This interpretative threesome is therefore both dynamic and organic in each and all of its parts. It is well placed for interactive dialogue.

## Religion is Here to Stay

We are especially conscious of the heightened profile of religion in our present times, not only globally but locally. And we are also conscious that this has become confused with the question of whether people do or do not “come to church” in the Northern Hemisphere. We are also conscious of the continuing forward march of a form of secularism that is inimical to religion itself. The latter is very prevalent in the diaspora setting and therefore a significant pressure point in and religious dialogue around shared integrity. These developments require an active response from those who have not previously been so challenged along with the affirmation of generous love itself as the motive force of our religious response to God in our responding to “the other.” As Anglicans, we are intent on living a life of community consonant with the Trinitarian basis of Christian faith, in such a way that the public good may be formed in dialogue and partnership with those of robustly differing convictions but with ultimately shared hopes. The public good infuses the public space such as is created for all who differ from one another as well as for all who agree with one another. It is my personal conviction that for people of faith, the public space should be a holy space.

As Anglicans, we are convinced that we need to differentiate between the principles that should inform communal living and the conduct that flows from a misuse and misunderstanding of such ideals lived out in hardened prejudice or calculated neglect. In this way, we can challenge policy makers but we need to do so from a place in which we ourselves enact and live by the principles and practices which we espouse as public ideals for all. So, without contradiction, while we seek actively to engage with those who are religiously and socially different, we seek also to stand alongside fellow-Christians who, living in contexts where they constitute small minorities, feel themselves vulnerable and in deadly dangers. Equally, and further, we acknowledge that there are situations where members of other religious communities have the same experience and for them we seek to advocate equivalence of respect and living justice. And so we seek to avoid the accusation of sectarianism. The dialogue of life is not to be idealized; often it is little more than an uneasy stalemate and, because it is intensely local with personalities knowing one another far too well in neighbourhoods and competing for services out of need and greed, it can be more destructive of human flourishing than it is giving of human freedom. But there is a solidarity of human and emotional experience, however distinct and disparate and divisive, for example between mortared citizens of Gaza and mortared citizens of Israel.

## Some Key Themes

Often it is said that you learn more about yourself religiously by engaging with people of other faiths. This is not, however, enough. We need to push ourselves harder than this in order to turn positive concern into attitude and to turn attitude into engagement and to turn engagement into solidarity. And I hope that we can apply these possibilities to our understanding of world faith-traditions other than our own. The following key themes of *Generous Love* show something of the capacity of Anglican Christianity to engage with respect, solidarity and creativity with those of other world faiths.

1. The conviction that the Holy Spirit is a divine organ of God's presence in the lives and communities of which we and others are part is something which lies at the heart of *Generous Love*. The document speaks of “the sovereign unpredictability” of the Spirit's mission in the world. It is this that sets us free to engage with people of different Faiths in seeking the common good and to understand in terms of the Spirit who and what we find – without contradiction.
2. We all face the challenge of discerning the loving purposes of God within the religious plurality of human-kind. This enriches our theological engagement with people of World Faiths other than our own because it recognizes the theological intentionality of who we are and why we do what we do.

3. The understanding of Trinity and Deity in the Anglican tradition is something that can facilitate openness to comprehensive dialogue. I do not mean this in terms of mere numerical plurality and singleness, nor again in terms of physical manifestation in human form combined with ontic inaccessibility in our understanding of God *per se*. I mean it in terms of the dynamic of relationship within the Godhead and the derivation and sharing by the human follower, in the patterning of his or her own life on the threefold expressions of the being of God.
4. Of the Scriptures, *Generous Love* says that “the formative texts were hammered out by people living amid religious plurality and shaped by them.” This recognizes the impact of context on both revelation and reception: and relieves Christianity of a sense of disembodied superiority over other world faiths. A further aspect of this is today’s interest in Scriptural Reasoning. It enables our own Scriptures to speak in new ways when they are brought alongside sacred texts of other religions. It is the quality of the respect which helps vastly in this context across the chasms of incomprehension and differences of worldviews. It also connects individual enquirers with the things that matter most to people of faith in other traditions of World Faiths.
5. Something more can be said on tradition and reason within the Anglican paradigm. It is important to remember that Anglicanism is not a church; rather it is a theology lived ecclesially. There is a provisionality about Anglicanism in regard to World Christianity which is at the heart of its identity and its quest for unity as an expression of such identity. This is the wider reach of generous love as a working theological method. Tradition can be described as an appeal to the mind of the church as that develops; reason as an appeal to the mind of the cultures in which the church participates. This is what we argue in *Generous Love*. Both are shaped by the lived experience of Christians with others in their double contexts of church and society. Neither is self-authenticating in itself. In the Anglican tradition, reason draws on philosophical, sociological and psychological insights that may derive from any tradition, theological or secular, and all of this new distillation is deployed, under God, through engaged discipleship of service, prayer, worship, mission and dialogue. Discipleship is concerned with the welfare of the whole society and its center is pastoral practice. It revolves around accepting hospitality, addressing need and naming injustice and thereby acknowledging openly our dependency on others in relationship with them: “they” become “us.” For this we actively need people of other faiths.
6. Our engagement with others is not a concession on our part of something which is ours to dispense, as if we have more than enough or do not ourselves need it; it is the recognition of shared civic and human space as holy and made holy precisely by the lives which we live for the common good and, therefore, for others as well as for ourselves. It is an expression of the incarnational logic at the heart of the Christian story. It is also the recognition that “we come to learn that the spaces in which we meet one another do not belong to either host or guest; they belong to God as do the so-called ‘neutral spaces’ of public life”—a direct quotation from *Generous Love*.
7. The realism that interfaith relations are characterized by provisionality, paradox and disappointment: although this may seem to end *Generous Love* on a low note, it is honest and cautious. It is very important to be expectant and realistic together because, once combined with compassion and creativity, these sustain hope.

## Creative Pairings: Sending and Abiding

I take one final example from *Generous Love* simply as an example of what can be possible once we as Anglicans use our imagination in an Inter faith direction. The phrase *sending and abiding*, the title of our final section, reflects a creative tension in our relations with people other than ourselves. Were it not to be the case, we should have indeed given up on engaged corporate and community life itself. The words also express something vital in the way in which the Son of God was sent into the world and abides in Christian communities today, and they challenge us to become more “Christ-like.” They speak of risk and adventure along with acceptance and commitment. It is for this reason that *Generous Love* explores how we ourselves, by maintaining our *presence and engagement* among communities of other faiths, abide as signs of Christ’s body in each place. Likewise *Generous Love* articulates the ways in which we are being sent by the Spirit and invited to engage our energies with groups be-

yond our own confines and limitations, for the shared transformation of society. We can differentiate across the Persons of the Christian God but we cannot divide up the Christian God. Thirdly, *sending and abiding* gives expression to the work with which we have been entrusted, namely to offer *embassy and hospitality* to our neighbours.

Each one of these phrases is therefore interpenetrative of the other, in the ways in which they are all lived out at one and the same time. It is what the Cappadocian Fathers call: *perichoresis*: dancing around one another and doing this together. All three of them require being set within the framework of another creative pairing: *individual and community* if we are to address in any sustained way the questions of personality and identity which, however unconsciously, fuel the energy of the human being and the responses to creation and environment. These are some of the contributions which *Generous Love* seeks and wishes to make to the rich tapestry of interfaith life worldwide.



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For further information regarding the worship band *Aradhna*, see [www.aradhnamusic.com](http://www.aradhnamusic.com)



