

PREVIEWS OF CHRISTIAN INDIGENEITY IN INDIA¹

Roger E. Hedlund²

Response to the presence and message of Christianity in South Asia has resulted in a variety of contextual expressions. Indian churches of indigenous origins are one such response. Other manifestations took place outside the orbit of the church. This article will explore some of the expressions of this response from the recent past.

1. Hinduistic Movements

Among historic attempts are several Hinduistic movements which tried to accommodate and adapt Christian concepts. The earliest religious reform movements were quite radical, seeking both religious and social reform. States Farquhar, "All these movements oppose both idolatry and caste."² Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was the pioneer reformer in the Hindu community, the Brahma Samaj the most influential new

² Roger E. HEDLUND (D.Miss, rogerhudlund@earthlink.net) has been a resident of India since 1974, teaching missiology at the Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India (1974-1978), and more recently serving as Professor of Mission Research at Serampore College, Serampore, India (1994-1997). He is currently Managing Editor of *Dharma Deepika: A South Asian Journal of Missiological Research and Director of the Dictionary of South Asian Christianity Project.*

¹ This article is extracted from the author's recent book, *Quest for Identity: India's Churches of Indigenous Origin: The "Little Tradition" in Indian Christianity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), published for the Mylapore Institute for Indigenous Studies, Chennai, India.

² J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, first Indian ed. (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), p. 29.

movement. Established by Ram Mohan Roy at Calcutta in 1828 as a theistic society or “church,” the Brahma Samaj was intended to precipitate a renewal movement among the classes. To a large extent inspired by Christianity, yet derived from the Upanishads and the Gita, theistic and hostile to the Vedanta of Sankaracharya, the Brahma Samaj may be understood as a Hindu revival movement.³

Farquhar believed that modern religious movements sprang from the soil of the old religions of India (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam), and viewed Christian mission as a continuation of church history and not as a modern movement.⁴ Farquhar’s conclusions may be challenged at several points. One, he failed to include Christianity as one of the ancient religions of India. Two, he treats Hinduism as a unitary whole consisting of but two groups of sects, Vaisnava and Saivite, a simplistic view with erroneous assumptions. Three, he was unaware of new Indian forms of Christianity which are the subject of our present investigation.

M. M. Thomas provides a perceptive analysis of Ram Mohan Roy’s controversy with Joshua Marshman of Serampore showing that the central issue revolved around Christology. “Rammohan Roy was a Protestant Hindu moving away from the amoral and monistic/polytheistic tendencies of traditional Hinduism under the influence of western liberalism.”⁵ Marshman defended the orthodox doctrine of Jesus Christ. At this early stage of the encounter, Roy was not prepared to embrace the full-orbed Christological and Trinitarian creed which Marshman wanted to impose. This tragic insensitivity pushed Roy into a premature definition of his understanding of Jesus Christ.⁶ Thomas criticizes Marshman for a rigidity which did permit sufficient latitude for an Indian approach to the mystery of Christ. Marshman’s intransigence forced Roy into a unitarian stance.⁷ The church in India thereby was deprived of a potentially innovative theologian and a distinctively Indian theological perception. Roy rejected

³ Nicol Macnicol, *The Living Religions of the Indian People* (London: SCM, 1934).

⁴ Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements*, p. 1.

⁵ M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM, 1969), p. 9.

⁶ Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 14.

⁷ Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 35.

the Indian belief in incarnations (and with it the Christian doctrine of incarnation), "because he cannot see it except as idolatry, doing violence to the unity of the Godhead."⁸

The second leader of the Brahmo Samaj, after the death of Ram Mohan Roy, was Debendra Nath Tagore who remained devout and loyal to the original Samaj which later was split under the third leader, Keshub Chandra Sen, who founded the second church or Samaj. Further schisms followed. Keshub later founded the New Dispensation Samaj at Calcutta. He also founded the Prarthana Samaj (Prayer Society) at Bombay, a theistic society with striking parallels to Christianity, one which rejected belief in transmigration and the inspiration of the Vedas but retained Marathi devotional hymns and other Hindu practices.⁹ The Prarthana Samaj engaged in service toward the depressed classes, and its members were active in the Indian Renaissance.¹⁰ Mahadev Govind Ranade was its most influential leader.

The flamboyant Keshub Sen is a key figure in the Hindu dialogue with Christianity and a pioneer in the development of Indian Christian theology. Typical of the English-educated, westernized elite of the nineteenth century in Bengal, he was dissatisfied with Hinduism and began to study the Bible and theology. In 1857 Keshub joined the Brahmo Samaj, and soon became its leader.

Keshub had a deep personal feeling for Christ and sometimes called himself the slave of Jesus. Many Hindus regarded him as a Christian, and truly Christ became the center of his life and guiding force in all his thinking, although he never converted to Christianity. There is no denying the reality of his experience of Christ and the genuineness of his effort to express his experience and his knowledge in terms of his own well-loved Indian tradition. Keshub's lectures on Jesus bear witness of his love for Jesus Christ.¹¹

In contrast to Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Sen had no difficulty accepting belief in incarnation. In Thomas's judgement, "Keshub's doctrine of Divine Humanity which links the incarnation with the whole

⁸ Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 22.

⁹ Aleyamma Zachariah, *Modern Religious and Secular Movements in India* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1990), p. 44.

¹⁰ Zachariah, *Modern Religious and Secular Movements*, pp. 41-45.

¹¹ David C. Scott, *Keshub Chunder Sen* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1979).

creative process has a certain theological quality which still remains to be explored by the Indian Church.”¹² Sen’s devotion to Christ, his passion for his fellow Indians to appropriate and follow Christ according to an Indian pattern, are important for indigenous Christianity. “The idea of a Christ-centred integration of the Indian and western religious and cultural heritages expressing itself in an indigenous Christianity is highly relevant to the future of the Christian Church in India.”¹³

The “Brahmo” movements were strongly theistic, hence closer to Christianity than to Vedanta.¹⁴ They stand in contrast to movements marked by hostility to Christianity such as the Arya Samaj whose Gujarati Brahman founder, Dayamanda Sarasvati, appealed to Indian nationalism. The Ramakrishna Mission is representative of the attempt “to acclimatize Hinduism to modern India.”¹⁵ The attempt was highly successful through the advocacy of Swami Vivekananda under whose leadership “Vedantic Advaitism came to the forefront as the leading system of religious thought in India.”¹⁶ As Vivekananda vehemently rejected the Christian concept of humanity as sinful and in need of grace, he opted for a “mystical” Christ and the mystic’s experience of the Ultimate.¹⁷

Rabindranath Tagore and S. Radhakrishnan are examples of a reconciliation effort to build bridges between the two. Radhakrishnan’s Hindu apologetic sought “to redefine Hinduism for the intellectuals of modern India, from the standpoint of Advaita Vedanta.”¹⁸ His neo-Hinduism denounced Christianity’s exclusiveness but advocated an inclusiveness which would bring Christ into the Hindu pantheon—an invitation to death by absorption, as Thomas states it.¹⁹

The present study does not focus upon such Hinduistic groups, but it is important to note their presence. Likewise the existence of “Messianic” movements in tribal and other “subaltern” communities is a vital subject

¹² Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 68.

¹³ Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 72.

¹⁴ Scott, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, p. 106.

¹⁵ Scott, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, p. 108.

¹⁶ Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 111.

¹⁷ Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, pp. 123, 137.

¹⁸ Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 150.

¹⁹ Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 179.

with a number of interesting parallels,²⁰ but they are outside our immediate sphere of investigation.

2. Hindu-Christian Movements

Our subject has much more to do with Hindu *Christian* movements some of which exist as organized groups outside the church or as Hindu devotees of Christ. Here one thinks of E. Stanley Jones whose evangelistic influence attracted followers of Christ far beyond the organized church. Taylor describes Jones as,

...a brilliantly innovative evangelist. He was innovative principally in relation to culture and context. His legacy to us is both his style and approach, on the one hand, and his remarkable innovations on the other. His style was Indianising and de-westernising in the cultural, social, economic, and political spheres—all treated evangelically. It was timely—he usually dealt with current questions and problems. This style was based on deep and extensive immersion in many aspects of contemporary Indian culture—much of it outside the confines of the church. And it was based on great sympathy for and empathy with those he met in this immersion.²¹

Jones made a distinction between Christ and Christianity. His was the "Christ of the Indian Road." Christ must be distinguished from western culture. Eventually Jones dropped the term Christianity altogether. Indians must be free to follow Christ without compromising their nationalism.²²

²⁰ Stephen Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions* (Bombay and New York: Asia Publishing House, 1965). India has been fertile soil for messianic movements, especially among tribes. Many movements are named in this state by state coverage. See also by the same author *The Gond and Bhumia of Eastern Mandla* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1968), pp. 196-98 for an example of a Hindu reform movement aimed at absorbing the Gonds.

²¹ Richard W. Taylor, *Acknowledging the Lordship of Christ: Selected Writings of Richard W. Taylor* (Delhi: ISPCI & CISRS, 1992), p. 195.

²² Paul A. J. Martin, *The Missionary of the Indian Road* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1996), pp. 77-81.

Jones was an evangelist who supported Mahatma Gandhi and the movement for national independence. Jones's Wesleyan Holiness may have been a much greater formative influence on indigenous Christianity than is generally recognized. A recent study shows that Jones practiced a radical missiology which combined radical social witness with radical spirituality in the Indian context.²³ Jones preached spiritual transformation leading to social transformation. He utilized the ashram as an indigenous forum of reflection. "He argued for the inculturation of Christianity in India using Indian philosophy and culture as sustaining structures for the presentation of the Gospel."²⁴

India has produced a number of thinkers and leaders with a broad "Indian" perception of the church, e.g., Sadhu Sundar Singh, Nehemiah Goreh, Brahmobandhav Upadhyaya, P. Chenchiah, V. Chakkarai, M. M. Thomas, and others.²⁵ Each of them has written and their ideas are discussed in numerous books and theses.

One remarkable Hindu believer in Christ at Madras was O. Kandaswamy Chetti, founder of the Fellowship of the Followers of Jesus, who openly confessed his faith in Christ as the only Saviour but declined baptism. His aim was to strengthen the unity of those among the Hindu community who shared an attachment to Christ whom he regarded as the fulfillment of history and of human cultures. He believed that the followers of Christ within Hindu society would "prepare the way for a movement from within Hindu society toward a Christ who shall fulfil India's highest aspirations and impart that life of freedom for which she has been panting for ages."²⁶

From time to time one hears reports of secret Christians at various locations. An account tells of an unusual group of women in South India,

²³ David Bundy, "Radical Holiness: Social Justice and Evangelism in the Work of Eli Stanley Jones," *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 14 (1998-1999), pp. 7-19.

²⁴ Bundy, "Radical Holiness," p. 10.

²⁵ Philip Daniel, "Theology of Conversion in the Indian Context" (D.Miss. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1984).

²⁶ O. Kandaswami Chetti, "Why I Am Not A Christian" (a personal statement read as a paper at the Madras Missionary Conference in 1915) and quoted in Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, and the Christian Literature Society, 1969), pp. 207-214.

at Sivakasi, who for various reasons are not able to practice their faith openly but who continue for years, even decades, as fervent though secret believers. Meeting together at considerable risk, they are "Christians of a very clear character, who live daily the teaching that they have been given," for whom prayer, sacraments, and the Bible are vital.²⁷ They are described as a basic community sustaining and passing on the faith for as much as three generations. Nurture, worship and pastoral care are in the hands of women.²⁸ Various questions may be raised as to what is essential in the gospel and how far one can remain culturally a Hindu and religiously a Christian, but the compromise reached was clearly effective for preserving the strength of the family and for maintaining the faith.

Similar questions arise in connection with a recent "Churchless Christianity" proposition which grew out of the study on "Non-baptized Believers in Christ" (NBBCs) carried out in Madras during the late 1970s. A survey conducted through the Research Department of the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College concluded that Madras has a large number of secret believers, persons not yet baptized, at least equal to the size of the Christian community in the city.²⁹ While not identifiable as "church," this category forms a significant component of South Indian religious life and represents one aspect of the indigeneity of Christianity.

The "Churchless Christianity" terminology has an earlier history in the Rethinking Christianity group of P. Chenchiah, V. Chakkarai, A. N. Sudarisanam, G. V. Job, and A. J. Appaswamy. As such, the concept has much in common with the Christian ashram proposal.³⁰

²⁷ Andrew Wingate, "The Secret Christians of Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu: One Pattern of Conversion in a South Indian Town," *Religion and Society* 33:1 (March 1986), pp. 73-87.

²⁸ Wingate, "The Secret Christians of Sivakasi," pp. 86-87.

²⁹ Herbert E. Hofer, *Churchless Christianity: A Report of Research among Non-baptised Believers in Christ in Rural and Urban Tamilnadu, India, with Practical and Theological Reflections* (Madras: Gurukul, 1991).

³⁰ See Victor Premasagar's introductory note to the reprint of P. Chenchiah, V. Chakkarai, and A. N. Sudarisanam, *Asramas Past and Present* (Madras: CLS, 1996). The "Rethinking Group" published their reflection in G. V. Job and others, eds., *Rethinking Christianity in India* (Madras: Sudarisanam, 1938) as an Indian reply to H. Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper, 1938). For further discussion, see Robyn H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: CLS, 1975) and Robin Boyd, *Khristadvaita: A Theology for India* (Madras: CLS, 1977); also V. C. Rajasekaran,

This Madras phenomenon requires further investigation. Meanwhile it will be helpful to look back at several movements in the recent past in South India.

3. Indigenous Christian Movements in Kerala

A number of religious revitalization movements occurred during the nineteenth century in Kerala. An indigenous Christian revival movement was founded by Justus Joseph, a Brahmin convert. Converted through reading the Bible, the family members were baptized in 1861. Ordained to the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) ministry in 1869, he became a popular preacher. Thousands were stirred in the revival at Travancore under his ministry.

Joseph however sought a wider scope for dissemination of his views. This led to conflict with the missionaries. Joseph wanted to work within the church but was suspected of propagating heresy. He expected the Second Coming in 1881. Joseph separated and established the Kanneett Revival Church in 1875. This was a clearly indigenous structure with duties for members, revised rituals, direct revelations, and innovative interpretations. All members were expected to obey the church regulations.

The Revival Church in 1881 became *Yuomayam*. Completely separate from any Christian denomination, it now considered itself the fulfillment of Christianity and all religions. After the death of the founder in 1887, the movement declined under his successors (his son and his brothers), then dwindled to a few persons in a few locations. This movement was the product of ferment created by the translation and publication of the Bible in Malayalam. The founder was always regarded as Christian, his lyrics and hymns found in the hymnals of the Syrian Church. A century ago his was an example of contextualization.³¹

Turner lists Church of Revealed Salvation, or Pratyaska Raksha Sabha, in the early 1920s, among the outcastes in Travancore.³² As the

Reflections on Indian Christian Theology (Madras, CLS, 1993).

³¹ Information about *Yuomayam* is from Joseph Chakko Kurundamannil, "Yuomayam: A Messianic Movement in Kerala, India" (D.Miss. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Missions, 1978).

³² *Bibliography of New Religious Movements in Primal Societies*, vol. 4, *Europe and Asia*, ed. Harold W. Turner (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977-1992), p. 99.

traditional home of Christianity in India it is expected that a number of independent movements should be found in Kerala.

4. Independent Movements in Tamil Nadu

4.1 Hindu Christian Church

In Tamil Nadu a schism took place at Nazareth in 1857 led by one Arumainayagam Sattampillai following the disciplinary action against a catechist by SPG missionary Caemmerer who previously in 1850 had dismissed Sattampillai from Mission employment. Sattampillai led several congregations to break away and established a separate church at Prakasapuram, one mile from Nazareth. A church building was erected in the pattern of a Jewish temple. A number of Old Testament practices were incorporated such as observing Passover, worship on the seventh day, washing feet and legs before worship, and offering frankincense. Some Hindu rites were accepted as well as Hindu marriage law and inheritance law. The Hindu Church of Lord Jesus is also known as Jehovah Messianism, Sattampillai Vedam, Nattar Sabai (meaning "National Church"), and Hindu Christian Church.³³

After Sattampillai's death the church split, declined from 6,000, then dwindled and died. According to Hardgrave, only the site remains. That, however, is only part of the story and not entirely correct. Thangaraj records that the split occurred when the founder donned high priestly garments and decreed that the church should offer animal sacrifices. The community reacted vehemently and most of the members separated to form the Hindu Christian Community.³⁴ This community still exists today known as the Indian Church of the Only Saviour. Its Christology is quite orthodox, but Judaistic influence has led to some doctrinal peculiarities. All the Jewish festivals of the Jewish calendar are celebrated—New Moon, Trumpets, Atonement, Tabernacles, Passover, Pentecost, and New Year—

³³ Robert L. Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnadu: The Political Culture of a Community in Change* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969).

³⁴ M. Thomas Thangaraj, "The History and Teachings of the Hindu Christian Community Commonly Called Nattu Sabai in Tirunelveli," *Indian Church History Review* 5:1 (June 1971), pp. 43-68.

along with certain Old Testament purification rules.³⁵ At the same time, the historic causes of the original schism, i.e., conflict with the foreign missionaries, led to a strong nationalistic spirit “rejecting all western and missionary influence.”³⁶ There is no fulltime ministry, as each congregation selects its own ministers who are directly responsible to the congregation.³⁷ This anti-authoritarianism appears a reaction to the Anglican hierarchical system as well as to the unsympathetic response of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) missionaries. Its worship has been described as a combination of Jewish and Christian practices which appears “more Indian than the worship in other churches” with the singing of South Indian classical tunes by a congregation standing with folded hands.³⁸

The Hindu Church of Jesus Christ never gained a wide following, but the schism in the Tinnevely church had a strong influence on the emergence of the Nadar caste as a self-conscious community. Although in 1857 Sattampillai did not secure the funds to publish his pamphlet against Caldwell and Kearns, his manuscript appears to have been the first attempt by a Nadar to establish the claims of the community to higher status through the mythological reconstruction of a kingly past.³⁹

Based on Hindu mythology, the Nadars (Shanars) were denied entrance to Hindu temples. The Nazareth schismatic mixed Hindu and Christian creation notions to establish *divine status* for Nadars who claimed to be Northern Rajputs as well as descendents of Noah!⁴⁰ Hardgrave documents other pretensions of the Nadar community to higher status, resulting in the hostility of the Maravars and leading to riots. The Hindu Church of the Lord Jesus is part of the turbulent story of the rise of a caste from low status to prominence.

³⁵ Thangaraj, “The History and Teachings,” pp. 63-64.

³⁶ Thangaraj, “The History and Teachings,” p. 57.

³⁷ Thangaraj, “The History and Teachings,” p. 58.

³⁸ Thangaraj, “The History and Teachings,” p. 65.

³⁹ Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnadu*, p. 78.

⁴⁰ Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnadu*, p. 89.

4.2 CMS Evangelical Church.

More recently in 1925 one hears of a schism in the CMS Tinnevely Mission by the Alvaneri Circle and group of pastorates who declined to accept the new diocesan structure which took place when CMS and SPG were merged to form an episcopal church.⁴¹ The schism grew to involve ten pastorates and circles calling itself the "Tinnevely CMS Evangelical Church" (CMS Suthangh Suvishesha Sabai). It retained the rituals and traditions of the CMS.⁴²

These earlier movements in Kerala and Tamil Nadu served as a forerunner for a proliferation of independent churches throughout South India in the later part of the century.

5. Christ-centered Healers in Andhra Pradesh

One of the most interesting examples is that of K. Subba Rao whose vision of Christ in 1924 led to an extensive Hindu-Christian movement in Andhra Pradesh. Frequently mentioned in books on Indian Christian theology, the main study by Kaj Baago was published in 1968. Subba Rao's theology, say Baago, is "truly indigenous; Christo-centric, but at the same time unmistakably Vedantic."⁴³ Sunand Sumithra, on the other hand, doubts whether Subba Rao's thought should be called theology since Rao is not a theologian and his "theology" is deficient in its understanding of sin and salvation, the church, holiness, and the cross.⁴⁴ Sumithra is troubled because Rao does not follow the orthodox, i.e., western theological categories but rather brings in Hindu assumptions of

⁴¹ Hugold Grafe, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. 6, part 2, *Tamil Ndu in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1990), p. 78.

⁴² Gordon Hewitt, *The Problems of Success: A History of the Church Missionary Society 1910-1942* (London: SCM, 1977), p. 75.

⁴³ Kaj Baago, *The Movement around Subba Rao: A Study of the Hindu-Christian Movement around K. Subba Rao in Andhra Pradesh* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1968), p. 13.

⁴⁴ Sunand Sumithra, *Christian Theology from an Indian Perspective* (Bangalore, Theological Book Trust, 1990), pp. 202, 198.

renunciation, karma, and mystical union with Christ.⁴⁵ Subba Rao's denunciation of the church must be understood in light of his earlier rejection of all religion. Likewise, his attack against the clergy can be interpreted as a reaction to corruption and other shortcomings. His anger, then, is a challenge to Indian Christians who instead of being transformed by the gospel had transformed Christianity into religious ceremonies—hence his call to liberate the imprisoned Christ from the jail of religion.⁴⁶

In contrast to Vivekananda and popular neo-Hinduism, Subba Rao proclaimed that all religions lead to blindness and ignorance. Salvation means realization of oneness with Christ, which is the purpose of discipleship.⁴⁷ The Hindu notion of renunciation is reflected, and so is the idea of mystical union with the deity. As Robin Boyd notes, direct *experience* of Christ, not dogma, is what matters in a typical Indian approach.⁴⁸ Many Indian theologians have been critical of the church, none more so than Subba Rao who was especially caustic toward sacraments and the ministry.

In his appraisal, H. L. Richard appreciates Subba Rao's radical contextualization. "That Subba Rao appeared more Hindu than Christian is a positive rather than negative point."⁴⁹ The controversy continues. In the place of Subba Rao other healers and seers deserve closer scrutiny.

An entirely different case is that of M. Devadas. The Bible Mission founded by Devadas is one of the few indigenous Christian movements to have been the subject of an academic dissertation. The Birmingham thesis by P. Solomon Raj⁵⁰ describes a vigorous movement with a large annual convention attracting more than 20,000 at Guntur. Is the Bible Mission founded by Devadas in Andhra Pradesh a syncretistic false sect, or an indigenous expression of biblical Christianity?

⁴⁵ Sumithra, *Christian Theology*, p. 200.

⁴⁶ Baago, *The Movement around Subba Rao*, p. 15.

⁴⁷ Baago, *The Movement around Subba Rao*, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Robin Boyd, *Khristadvaita: A Theology for India* (Madras: CLS, 1977), pp. 8, 313.

⁴⁹ H. L. Richard, "K. Subba Rao: The Christ-centred Hindu Healer of Andhra Pradesh: Part 3," *To All Men All Things* (August 1995), p. 5.

⁵⁰ P. Solomon Raj, *A Christian Folk-Religion in India: A Study of the Small Church Movement in Andhra Pradesh, with a Special Reference to the Bible Mission of Devadas* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1986).

In his perceptive analysis, P. Solomon Raj of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church from which founder Devadas broke away, gives a positive evaluation. Raj shows the "peculiar" doctrines and practices of the Bible Mission as authentically Indian, culturally relevant, and having biblical precedent. In taking this approach, Solomon Raj differs from the popular opinion of many mainline Protestant Christians. Devadas' teachings, according to Solomon Raj, represent insights arising from the Indian realities. The Bible Mission, then, represents *bona fide* Indian indigenous Christianity.

Solomon Raj shows that the traditional mission-founded churches are really *western* appendages. This is true of the Lutherans and other traditional denominations including the Church of South India and Church of North India. Solomon Raj predicts that movements such as this will have an ever increasing impact upon Christianity in India.

The history and teachings of the Bible Mission have been summarized in an article by K. Devasahayam.⁵¹ The published writings of the founder are available in English translation.⁵² Devadas believed in the verbal inspiration of the Bible, but he also accepted a continuity of direct revelation through visions and dreams and God's speaking and writing in the air.⁵³ His was a world of divine intervention resisting Satan and casting out demons, of healings and miracles.⁵⁴ These teachings and practices respond to the problems and needs of the world in which the average Christian in India lives, issues not addressed in great traditional churches and theology.

Doctrinal peculiarities? Though Devadas died in 1960, his followers believe it is possible to experience fellowship with the spirit of Devadas. For this reason "wherever they meet for prayer they keep an empty chair carefully covered with white linen in a corner for the spirit of Devadas to come and sit with them."⁵⁵ This is an innovative extension of the Christian doctrine of the communion of saints.

⁵¹ K. Devasahayam, "The Bible Mission," *Religion and Society* 24:1 (March 1982), pp. 55-89.

⁵² Various booklets by M. Devadas, "Mithra, the Friend: God's Great Plan of Salvation for All Mankind Revealed" (Guntur, 1995); "Maxims to Rebuke Satan" (Guntur, 1996); "Praising God for His Divine Qualities" (Guntur, 1997).

⁵³ Raj, *A Christian Folk-Religion in India*, pp. 86-91.

⁵⁴ Raj, *A Christian Folk-Religion in India*, pp. 66-83.

⁵⁵ Raj, *A Christian Folk-Religion in India*, pp. 57-58.

Solomon Raj shows that Devadas' ethical teachings were founded on his understanding of God as holy, and they are "fully evangelical and true to the teachings of the Bible."⁵⁶ Devadas' emphasis on prayer has had an impact beyond the Bible Mission on the Christians of Andhra, his lyrics are found in the Telugu hymnal. Devotional practices of the Bible Mission are part of India's *bhakti* tradition. Devadas' theology is the oral theology of the Indian *guru* tradition.

The Indian background, basic theological views of Devadas, and practices of the Bible Mission reveal distinctive characteristics of an indigenous, non-traditional church with space for dreams, visions, healing, and other practices including substitutions and adaptations of Hindu festivals and practices. Increasingly the real leaders of the Christian movement in India may well be its "humble faithful" and grass-roots charismatic leaders rather than the powerful elected officials who generally represent India at international conferences. "The future church in India will have minimal rules and adaptable constitutions and statutes to guide it, all these rules, constitutions and statutes being ever subject to the overall guidance of the Holy Spirit."⁵⁷

If so, this should greatly alter the image of Christianity in South Asia, whether through the Bible Mission founded by Devadas or any number of other small, indigenous churches. Solomon Raj feels that the biggest handicap of the Bible Mission is an inadequately trained clergy, and yet he quickly adds that seminary education is not the solution.⁵⁸ Indigenous Christian movements may require resourceful training methods. The study by Raj is an important contribution to the study of Christianity in India as well as a significant addition to studies of indigenous independent Christian movements in Africa, in Philippines, and in other Asian countries. Movements such as the Bible Mission in Andhra Pradesh offer insights for application in the church as it seeks to fulfill its mission and offer a truly contextual theology and relevant witness in India.

In a study of recent Christian movements among the Kammars and Reddys, it is pointed out that the congregations of new converts in Andhra "bring with them their cultural assets like some festivals, family functions, marriage customs, etc., and thus they have the joy that they follow Christ

⁵⁶ Raj, *A Christian Folk-Religion in India*, pp. 219, 227.

⁵⁷ Raj, *A Christian Folk-Religion in India*, p. 340.

⁵⁸ P. Solomon Raj, "Father Devadas and the Story of a Folk Church in India," *Dharma Deepika* 1:1 (June 1995), pp. 61-68 (67).

without rejecting what is valuable in their own culture."⁵⁹ In coastal Andhra Pradesh, Indian Christians of caste Hindu backgrounds retain their traditional social and cultural identity as openly confessing disciples of Jesus Christ.

6. Indigenous Initiatives in Bengal

The first example of an indigenous church in Bengal was the Johnnagar Church at Serampore, says Chatterjee.⁶⁰ This small congregation was formed and maintained through the initiative of native Christian families who also instituted their own missionary society which for a short time conducted missionary work in and around Serampore. This enthusiasm was short-lived due to adversity and meagre response from the surrounding population but also for lack of encouragement by a new set of mission societies and missionaries not favourable to the formation of an indigenous church.⁶¹

The indigenous initiative languished until revitalized by Lal Behari Dey in the second half of the nineteenth century. Dey's conversion was marked by social and cultural continuities with his background on the one hand and with conflict and confrontation with the Scottish missionaries on the other.⁶² To achieve the objective of an indigenous Bengali church, Dey proposed the union of all Protestant churches in a new Bengal Christian church, thus liberating them from foreign control. Christianity, Dey believed, "could not hope to advance unless it was indigenized."⁶³

⁵⁹ P. Solomon Raj, "Christianity among the Kammars and Reddys of Andhra Pradesh," in *Christianity in India: Search for Liberation and Identity*, ed. F. Hrangkhuma (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), p. 71.

⁶⁰ Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, "The Pioneers of Indigenous Church Movement in Bengal" (an unpublished paper presented at the Hyderabad Conference on Indigenous Christian Movements in India, October 27-31, 1998).

⁶¹ Chatterjee, "The Pioneers of Indigenous Church Movement," p. 5.

⁶² Antony Copley, *Religions in Conflict: Ideology, Cultural Contact and Conversion in Late Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 230-35.

⁶³ Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, p. 237.

Under the dominance of English missionaries, however, Dey's proposition remained unfulfilled.⁶⁴

Dey's effort was important. The story of other indigenous interventions is interwoven with the predominance of Keshab Chunder Sen and others whom he impressed. One such was Krishna Mohan Banerjea, Sanskrit scholar and Christian apologist of the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ Banerjea believed that certain elements in the Vedas bore witness to Jesus Christ. He went so far as to equate Jesus Christ with *Prajapati* of Vedic Hinduism and Indian Christians as the descendants of the Vedic seers.⁶⁶ His argument may not be accepted by scholars today, but must be understood against the context of his time.⁶⁷

Another was Brahmabandhab Upadhyay who sought to "baptize" the truths of Vedantic Theism as stepping stones to Christ and thus utilize Advaita as a platform for Christianity.⁶⁸ His proposal was "to win over Hindu philosophy to the service of Christianity as Greek philosophy was won over in the middle ages."⁶⁹ He recognized that the teaching of Christ

⁶⁴ Chatterjee, "The Pioneers of Indigenous Church Movement," p. 100. See also the paper at the same conference by Nikhiles Guha, "Indigenous Christian Movements in West Bengal."

⁶⁵ T. V. Philip, *Krishna Mohan Banerjea: Christian Apologist* (Madras: CLS, 1982).

⁶⁶ Philip, *Krishna Mohan Banerjea*, p. 125.

⁶⁷ A recent popular attempt, borrowed from Banerjea, is made by Joseph Padinjarekara, *Christ in Ancient Vedas* (Burlington, Canada: Welch Publishing, 1991) and *Gospel for India in Indian Cups* (Willowdale, Canada: International Mukti Mission, 1993). So also the popular Indian evangelist, Sahu Chellappa, "Is Christianity A Necessity?" (n.d.). In his portrayal of Jesus as *Prajapati*, Chellappa states that *Prajapati* forgives sins and that *Prajapati* is Jesus, ideas rejected by Hindu scholars. The Vedic reference is to a fertility ritual alien to Christ's sacrifice by crucifixion. See M. S. Vasanthakumar, "Christian Mission and Its Christological Messages" (an M.A. Thesis, All Nations Christian College, Hertfordshire, U.K., 1997).

⁶⁸ Julius J. Lipner, "Introduction" to Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, eds. Julius Lipner and George Gispert-Sauch (Bangalore: United Theological College, 1991), pp. xxxvi, xxxvii.

⁶⁹ Upadhyay, *Writings*, p. 18.

contradicted a number of Hindu doctrines. Nevertheless, he believed that Christian beliefs should be restated in Vedantic terms.⁷⁰

As Copley observes, these Bengali converts to Christian, alienated by their own community and not fully accepted by the Europeans, tried "to discover a new Indian Christian identity."⁷¹

Banerjea and especially Upadhyay are among the Bengali pioneers of indigenous Christianity in India. They made an enormous contribution. Yet the church in Bengal remains small. There are reasons that are beyond the scope of this investigation but which undoubtedly intersect with the emergence of the Brahmo Samaj. Response in Bengal was in forms of Hindu renewal movements rather than Christian conversion. Yet it was a Hinduism reformed by Christian contact and ideals. The title of M. M. Thomas' book on the Indian Renaissance is, thus, illustrative.⁷² Historians also note the interventions of Christian missionaries on behalf of exploited and oppressed peoples in Bengal resulting in various social movements. Religious ferment in Bengal, Serampore being a contributor, gave rise to religious reform movements and to an emergent nationalism.⁷³ Copley suggests that pro-Christian trends in Bengali Vaishnavism were turned "away from Christianity and into a proto-nationalist movement" by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.⁷⁴ Moreover it seems probable that the Brahmoism of Ram Mohun Roy and Keshub Chunder Sen "effectively vaccinated Hinduism against Christianity."⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Bengal has produced a number of brilliant advocates of Christianity in an Indian mode.

Discernable in each of the foregoing movements is the quest for an Indian identity of the Christian faith. The quest finds expression today in a plethora of new movements, indigenous mission agencies, independent churches and fellowships of Indian origin and under Indian leadership. The preceding glimpses from Indian history help us better to understand something of the diversity of indigenous Christianity in India today.

⁷⁰ Upadhyay, *Writings*, pp. 45, 138, 228.

⁷¹ Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, p. 216.

⁷² Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*.

⁷³ Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, p. 208.

⁷⁴ Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, p. 210.

⁷⁵ Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, p. 212.

Contemporary expressions of Christian indigeneity are many and varied in the different regions of the Indian sub-continent.