

Missionary Engagement with Indian Religion & Culture: Anomalies Among Methodists

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Any survey of missionary engagement with Indian religious faith and culture inevitably takes us into other related issues. There is, e.g. the question of the extent to which this has contributed to the shaping of Indian Christian identities, including forms of Indian Christian Theology and liturgical life. The resulting process is somewhat complex, even bewildering, as many things in India are bewildering.

1. In 19th century missionary writings it is all too easy to find examples of fierce *denunciation* of ‘Hindu idolatry’, emotively heightened with expressions like ‘disgustingly immoral’, ‘irrationally superstitious’, ‘heathen abominations’ (Anthony Copley’s account of ‘Ideology, Cultural Contact and Conversion in Late Colonial India’, the subtitle of his book *Religions in Conflict*, OUP 1997, is one useful source of such negative missionary attitudes, though somewhat one-sided).

The recent questions raised by postcolonial critics concerning the use in the 19th century of the term ‘Hindu’, and the extent to which missionaries contributed to the shaping of a single Hindu identity, need not detain us here. That they were part of the process of the hardening of the boundaries is clear. Equally clear is the fact of a centuries-old growing incorporation into a loosely related umbrella tradition – even if we have to refer to this as ‘Brahmanic hegemony’. For now we leave it at that.

Missionary engagement of some kind with the varied religious life of India was, of course, inescapable. Being primarily debate with those the missionaries saw as enveloped in darkness, the context and tone of their ‘engagement’ was necessarily polemical. The context may have been the bazaar preaching often expected of missionaries, or perhaps the presenting of the Gospel to youth receiving the new education offered in the mission schools whose work was promoted by the British government. Yet, even when the aim was to ‘understand more clearly the reasons for their resistance to conversion’ (as Will Sweetman put it, ‘Heathenism, Idolatry and Rational Monotheism’, in Vol. III of *Halle and the Beginning of Protestant Christianity in India*, ed. Andreas Gross et al., Halle 2006, p.1263), at least there was the felt need at times to look, though with polemic intent, more carefully into Hindu religious sources.

In some places there were conversions of Hindus from the ‘higher’ castes (e.g. over 200 ‘Brahmins’ connected with De Nobili’s work in Tamilnadu, and two centuries later there were a few such conversions in West Bengal, associated with the work of Carey, Marshman and Ward). Even so, the conclusion some recent critics have drawn from a great deal of missionary Gospel-presentation is that they were giving ‘answers to questions Hindus were not interested in asking’. Even by the third quarter of the 19th century many missionaries were despondent at the lack of response among the

‘highest’ castes.

This fierce denouncing of Hindu religious life by missionaries and other Europeans did of course make an impact on Hindu self-perceptions. This is not the place to run through the various Hindu reform movements of the 19th century. Various religious and cultural practices were either given up or radically revised; and even theologies were reinterpreted. Indeed, in spite of the great resentment concerning western fulminations against all things Hindu, and until recent decades when militant Hindu nationalism became more widespread, in general there was remarkable appreciation of the self-denying commitment of what became called ‘the missionary spirit’. There was also disgust felt by orthodox Hindus at some of the practices of all westerners, missionaries included (especially what they ate and drank).

Many centuries earlier, of course, even indigenous to Hindu religious life there had been many counter-cultural poets and ecstasies who were scathing in their ridicule of what they saw as the lifeless ritual and meaningless beliefs of many of their fellow-Indians.

2. Being able to typify some missionaries as *ambivalent* in their attitude towards Hindu religious life and cultures is at least an improvement on total negativity. The very first Protestant missionary to India, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, found himself increasingly interested in probing, early in the 18th century, the mysteries of Hindu religion. He felt the need to learn more, but found his efforts vigorously criticised by his mission authorities. Scholars differ somewhat in their views of Ziegenbalg’s attitudes. They did change as he learnt more, but retained to the end his inherited Christian view, sharply hedged around with Protestant doctrine, that, taken as a whole, Hinduism is a heathen ‘abomination’ fatally marked by ‘Ignorance’ ‘Nescience’ (*ajñāna*). Yet, at the same time he clearly came to appreciate various aspects both of the quality of religious life of Hindu people and of important elements in their systems. In evaluating Ziegenbalg’s engagement with Hindus, Hans-Joerg Hinze refers to these two sides of his attitude as a ‘vast ambivalence’ (cf I. Selvanayagam, who sees that engagement as genuinely ‘dialogical’).

In passing, we can note that 100 years earlier Italian Jesuit Robert de Nobili was certainly far more willing than were any Protestants, within his celebration of Mass for Brahmin converts, to incorporate selected rituals and imagery that were part of their own tradition, to accept caste differences and to some extent spiritual and metaphysical traditions – regarding them as merely ‘cultural’ forms of indigenous self-expression. Yet, in the end his denunciation of key elements of Hindu life and belief systems was similar to Ziegenbalg’s.

On the continuance of caste after conversion they differed greatly. ‘In keeping with his anti-hierarchical (pietism) ... (Ziegenbalg) insisted on equal treatment and respect for each convert’ (Hinze 895), even though recognising the usefulness of separate occupational groupings in Tamil society. (The hugely significant question of how cultural undergirding relates to more distinctively religious faith is one we can hardly

touch on in this paper: see my 'Religious Faith and the diversity of cultural life in India' in *Christian Faith and Multiform Culture in India*, ed. Somen Das, UTC 1987, pp.48-84.)

Then, 100 years after Ziegenbalg, Robert Noble (in spite of the same name, no relation of Robert de Nobili) came in 1839 as curate to the little village near Melton Mowbray which happens to be our place of retirement. Gripped with a passion to go as a missionary to the Telugu people in South India, in 1841 Noble was sent by the Church Missionary Society to Machilipatnam (Fish Town) on the east coast of Andhra Pradesh (then part of the British controlled Madras Presidency). His avowed aim throughout his 26 years there was to convert a sufficient number of Brahmins, in order that through them the lower castes would also all become Christian. To this end he set up a select school, that was to become Noble College (a decade later described by C E Trevelyan – notorious for his ruthless attitude towards those starving in the Irish famine – as 'the Cambridge of South India').

The curriculum in his new school included - unusual for his time - an extensive course on the Bhagavad Gita (which came to be seen, East and West, as 'the Gospel of Hinduism'). Noble also gave a key place to the systematic teaching of Sanskrit. There is, however, little evidence that he himself made much effort to grasp the Gita's message, let alone engage in empathetic dialogue with either it or other key Hindu writings. Though critical of caste, he accepted this system as a pragmatic necessity, and even thought Brahmins inherently superior, intellectually and morally. This meant his refusal to admit to the school any from what were then called the 'Paraiya' communities (now known as Dalits). In spite of these efforts at accommodation towards Hindu concerns, Noble's colleague, H.W.Fox, wrote of the great 'antagonism' of local people towards the missionaries and their schools. It seems the 'conversion' issue was a hot potato even then. And yet, it should not be forgotten that, through its 170-year history, Noble College was to prove an effective agent in lessening the barriers between India's many communities. (I am indebted to Geoff and Nola Oddie for pointing me to the biography of Robert Noble by his brother John, then vicar of a neighbouring village).

3. Geoff Oddie's outstanding account of 19th century missionary perceptions of Hinduism (*Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism 1793-1900*, Sage 2006) suggests that in spite of attempts by some Methodist missionaries, based on their field experience, to promote greater missionary understanding of Hindu religious life, in general the authorities at the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society were far from enthused by this idea. In 1828 Elijah Hoole returned from eight years of evangelistic work in the Madras Presidency. Back in Britain, for a short time he was able to introduce missionary candidates both to the Tamil language and to aspects of Indian religion and culture. Yet when, in 1843, Richmond College was set up as an institution specifically for missionary candidates, and funds were provided for purchasing missionary biographies and suchlike writings, 'no provision was made in the syllabus for instruction in subjects with a specifically missionary orientation, such as indigenous languages and the customs and beliefs of

native people' (118). Oddie actually sees, in the course of the 19th century, even a lessening of concern by the Methodist sending body to prepare missionaries for the cultural differences or for any other facet of the Indian context.

This became, however, an issue 'of deep concern to missionaries in India', as was made clear in a missionary meeting in Bombay in 1893. The following year (1894) two returned Methodist missionaries, writing separately in the *Harvest Field*, bemoaned the lack of training as a reason for the lack of missionaries' 'capacity to understand and debate the basic issues and problems in ...the Hindu-Christian encounter'. One of the writers, the Revd J Hudson, argued forcefully that

Hinduism has never made upon [Wesleyan missionaries] the impression which so great a system ought to have made. They have not understood its attractions, they have not weighed its reasons....looked at all it has to say against Christianity and for its own superiority. (Quoted in Oddie, 121)

The Church Missionary Society was little better in this regard, and one of its 'more influential' supporters wrote of the situation as 'outrageous ... Missionaries go to India ignorant of the history of the country, ignorant of the language, ignorant of the systems of religion they have to refute, and ignorant of the habits and customs of the races they go to evangelise' (119-20). 'On the other hand, the SPG, LMS and a few of the new women's missionary organisations proved to be more adaptable, introducing changes which included a greater opportunity for the study of Hinduism' (119). Significantly, a key teacher of Hinduism among SPG missionaries, especially at St Augustine's Missionary Institution, Canterbury, was the Revd P Percival, formerly a Methodist missionary in India, but who, on return, asked for Anglican ordination (his lectures were later published as *The Land of the Veda* 1854).

On to the mid-20th century and my own experience seems to have been little different from those much earlier of would-be Methodist missionaries. True, by then it was generally assumed that institutions such as the missionary college at Selly Oak would provide a term's training for candidates for service overseas. That pre-field preparation for Indian life was not taken with great seriousness by MMS is confirmed by my having been given only one specific requirement, before being plunged into the confusing realities of that bewilderingly complex socio-cultural world: I was to read John Wesley's sermons! With the right guidance, though, maybe key strands in Wesley's position could indeed have prepared me more effectively than much explicitly missionary writing?

There was also a gentle suggestion, again both laughable and laudable, that I might read *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, written by Abbé Dubois, a French Catholic born in 1770, who served for 31 years in the Mysore region with the Missions Étrangères. As it happens Abbé Dubois was one of those whose fascination with Hindu life led him to write in places remarkably useful descriptions of popular Hindu practice, though this is all filtered through a view of Hinduism clearly dominated by the usual European sense of outrage at the 'moral repugnance' and 'gross superstition' found in much that Hindus did.

Later, the Missionary Society very generously on two occasions supported me for a year's research in Hindu religious thought. However, like a number of other returned missionaries, I found on retirement later, with many years of intense cross-cultural engagement that was presumably pertinent to life in Britain, there seemed to be no Methodist institutional recognition of this. Harry Parkin, also returned from South Asia and similarly having immersed himself in the Indic faith-traditions, felt the consequent painful sense of dis-engagement and loss of selfhood was like being 'thrown on the rubbish heap' - an outburst that caused the then President of the Conference to stalk out of the room in anger.

Another example of the institution being out of tune with the experience of the missionary is from the life and death of a Methodist missionary to Tamilnadu, J.S.M Hooper. Hooper's 1929 translation from many centuries' old Tamil (for the YMCA Heritage of India series) of selections of the Hymns of the Alvars, songs inexpressibly sacred to Vaishnavas, was extraordinarily important. It became the standard English text those seeking an initial entry into the wonderful world of South Indian bhakti.

A later scholar (Fred Hardy - in his monumental work on the passion and ecstasy of the 'viraha' experience of 'separation' or 'desolation' in such devotion) found it necessary to offer, 50 years later, a lengthy criticism of Hooper's work (a 'paralysing effect on subsequent scholarship') for being biased in the selection made, and especially in leaving out the passionate sexual allusions, as a good Methodist would in the 1920s. (This lengthy critique, though, only accentuates just how important a piece of pioneering work Hooper's was. And it confirms my point that missionaries – for better or worse – helped shape changes in religious perceptions. Yet, in the official Methodist obituary to J.S.M.Hooper in 1974 there is no mention at all of this seminal interpretive contribution of his to the field of Hindu devotion or any other word about his engagement with Hindu religious life. Having met Hooper, in 1958 when he was in his 90s, I believe he would not have been happy with this blinkered view of his life's work, even if the major part of it was taken up with educational work, the Bible Society, and important administrative work during the final period towards Union.)

4. At this point I want to refer to the interpretation of the Methodist theological tradition by an outstanding Methodist missiologist and theologian of religion, Kenneth Cracknell. In his *Introduction to World Methodism* (written jointly with Susan White) Cracknell asks the question: 'What impulses within the Wesleyan tradition have shaped the theology and spirituality of Methodist interreligious understanding?' His answer points to 'the repudiation of doctrines of election, the absorption of Enlightenment thinking, the emphasis on pragmatic common sense, the priority given to faith and experience over assent to propositional doctrines, and above all the constant plea for the pre-eminence of love in human relationships' (259-60). Earlier he argued that Methodists have generally been able 'to recognise and value the spiritual paths chosen by others whose lives centred on God's love' (150). Recognition of just such Methodist responsiveness to 'spiritual paths centred on God's love' lies

behind my title for an essay contributing to a *Festschrift* to Kenneth, 'All Loves Excelling: A Methodist Looks at Hindu Faith'. Obviously, considerable nuancing is needed in making this point, for there are some serious anomalies in Methodist history, as also in that of most other faith communities.

In the evangelical movements of the 18th century, with their striking effects in the 19th, including remarkable social and cultural changes, the Wesleys' and therefore Methodist influence was clearly crucial. The most usual view of evangelical commitment is that the more intensely Gospel-centred a person, the more fierce the demonising of the faith of others. Evangelical springs, however, any more than other streams within the hidden consciousness of a community, do not run as uniformly pure as is often argued by either proponents or opponents. The passion for divine love *can* lead to responsive empathy (such as in some of John Wesley's teaching), as well as to fiercely exclusive claims for the mediating source of that love. And even the Hindu devotional movements we refer to in a moment we see both affirmations of all-embracing Love, along with denunciations against those not sharing the path to their own Loved One.

The outcome seems to lie in a number of factors, issues that for the moment I do no more than list without further elucidation.

(a) There is the obvious fact that *theological interpretations* of a given tradition are crucial. Cracknell sees a sharp divide between the exclusivism of a Calvinist doctrine of 'election' and the Arminian inclusiveness that was so central to the Wesleys' teaching. The latter at least opens up the possibility of believing that all the world's peoples can share in divine grace, perhaps even when they are not fully conscious of that grace.

Then, *non-theological theories* with which theologies became linked are also pertinent – though this raises critical questions regarding theological openness to such extra-theological sources. The immensely influential Continental theological movement led by Barth, Brunner and others made an impact on missionary attitudes. This is seen especially in the writings of Henrik Kraemer, who wrote the key document for the missionary conference at Tambaram, South India, in 1938. (Secular ideologies and philosophies as demonic. Dialogue with such was akin to 'howling with the wolves' – Barth's phrase for Christians who saw continuities between Christian Gospel and other faiths. *Discontinuity* is the name of the game). Kraemer may have criticised Barth for being too negative, yet he too shows little positive engagement with the *inner life* of the faith of others, the Hindu tradition in particular.

Other theologians, however, came to believe it to be imperative to engage in dialogue with other ideational sources. (Thus, by the end of the 19th century, belief in an evolutionary process in which the earth's races move towards perfection, came to include the conviction that religions – from 'Primitive Animism' to the sophistication of Hindu religious – all find their perfect fulfilment in the Gospel. J.N.Farquhar's very influential *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913) is essentially based on such

evolutionary assumptions and became a widely accepted way of understanding the history of our religious traditions. Earlier glimpses become a glorious vision of the Truth in Christianity).

A more sophisticated theological reworking of belief in an evolutionary development is *Process* Theology, particularly beloved by American Methodist theologians. That a number of Process Theologians (especially John Cobb) have taken a lead in developing a positive role for Interfaith Theology is of special interest in relation to the concerns of this paper. The connection is strengthened by the Process view of the universe as '*pan-en-theistic*' (i.e. that everything that *is* somehow exists within the being of God, without limitation to the transcendent glory of God) is immediately pertinent to Interfaith thinking in a Hindu context, as I have attempted in my own frequent engagement with Hindu theologians.

At the other end of the spectrum of inter-ideational theological development is 20th century's all-important link with *Marxist* thought – in Latin-American Liberation theology, and in India especially in the Christian-Marxist linkage in the political and ecclesiastical life of Kerala. (We note the great influence of Indian theologians such as M.M.Thomas for example, on western as much as on Indian perceptions of the missionary task in India.)

(b) More obviously pertinent are *institutional pressures*, sometimes as crude as the need to preserve authority. Missionary Societies too felt the need also to emphasise the great difference both between the Gospel and all other faiths, and between the social outworkings of those variant faith-positions. The greater the difference, the clearer the appeal of Missions and the likelihood of good financial support. Missionaries themselves were undoubtedly tempted to over-emphasise the immediate beneficial results of accepting the Gospel – in Indian village life for example, naturally the 'before and after' contrasts depicted in vivid black and white.

One might assume that another kind of 'institutional pressure' would be the absolutising of the ritual and structural forms of the Sacred in one's own tradition (e.g. belief focussed sharply in the status of priests and the efficacy of the eucharist). Other factors, however, may well act as a balance to such 'absolutes'.

(c) There were, too, *inherited social attitudes* to reckon with. Assumptions of the superiority of one's race and civilisation (and therefore a more hardline view of the other's religion) would, we might think, have been more pronounced among Anglicans than among Methodists – the former being in general more closely linked to the Establishment and its greater sense of inherited superiority.

Strangely though, the dividing line on the mission field, ostensibly at least, was more between Catholics and non-Catholics. In general Catholics from the Continent had more relaxed attitudes to the social realities they encountered. Even the caste system was to be accepted (though elements of that social hierarchy would seem to be more in tune with 19th century rigidly hierarchical English attitudes to the different classes in

their society). We noted how De Nobili's mission to Brahmins in the temple town of Madurai allowed the caste hierarchies to remain intact. Yet, De Nobili's attempts at inculturation were viciously condemned by Catholic colleagues and authorities, especially the Portuguese.

In the case of Methodists in mission, should we not also reckon with the inbuilt Methodist social conscience that has often led to public outspokenness on social issues, again innate to John Wesley's teaching. In the cities of Britain in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, centres of mission (our Central Halls) that were oriented as much to social need as to evangelical enterprise, were the most visible face of Methodism. Methodist concern for the underdogs of India, especially Dalit people – a concern that in some ways has to be at variance with interfaith goals – no doubt springs in part from this. While responses to Dalit issues obviously come first to mind, we could also reckon with the fact that a Methodist missionary, (now Canon) Kenyon Wright, was the pioneer of ministry among the working classes within industry in India.

(d) *Political factors* too had their place. In the case of the Italian Jesuit De Nobili and the fierce opposition to his inclusive attitude by the Portuguese, political factors are obvious – as they are too in the inhumanly intolerant attitude of the Portuguese, who demanded that everyone under their jurisdiction (based in Goa) become Christian under threat of expulsion or death.

The issue of the extent to which the missionary movement was irrevocably linked with European imperialist expansion is one that properly calls for several papers on its own. Here I merely note that there were few missionaries in the 19th century who did not believe that the empire was a providential force for good in the world, even guided by God to ensure the civilising of the nations (perhaps even seeing missionary work as the completing of this process).

5. With regard to Cracknell's thesis about the interfaith potential of the Wesleys' theology the empirical outworking is not straightforward. When, in his major *opus* (*Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions 1846-1914*, Epworth 1995) Cracknell lists those seen as missionary heroes of a dialogical approach to Asian religious life, of his primary eight figures not one is Methodist. (That five are Congregationalist perhaps merits further analysis?).

However, from the 20th century's third decade onwards Cracknell's argument is strikingly confirmed by a 'disproportionate' surge of Methodist missionaries to be seen engaging in some form of close study of an aspect of the religious life of the Sub-continent. There is in fact a much longer list (some not formally missionaries) than the few of us Kenneth names: J.S.M Hooper, Stanley Jones, Geoffrey Parrinder (though his missionary service was in Africa), Henry Pressler, Norman Sargent, Larry Shinn, Frank Whaling, Eric Lott, David Scott, Roy Pape, Diana Eck, Harry Parkin, J.Garrett Jones, R.Blake Michael, John Cobb, Peter Bishop, Elizabeth Harris, Martin Forward.

Most, along with Cracknell, as well as 'missionaries to the West' such as Herbert Jai Singh, Wesley Ariarajah, Inderjit Bhogal, M.Romesh, David Emmanuel Singh, and others nurtured by a Methodist tradition, saw the search for increased inter-faith understanding and rapprochement as essential to their ministry.

For many in this long list such 'understanding' involved not merely an intellectual grasp sufficient to make sense of the faith of the other, but also an *inner engagement in which one's own faith too is in some way enlarged, enhanced, re-visioned*. Missing in my list, yet obviously capable of just that 'inner engagement', are those whose personal friendships with Hindus by missionaries were relationships of significant engagement (perhaps women missionaries especially?), even if never on an intellectual level, and seldom written about. It could be, though, that archived missionary letters may yet yield up such accounts of significant personal Christian-Hindu and other forms of rapprochement.

Cracknell's thesis is further confirmed by how many of the above have seen the most fruitful dialogical convergence of faith for Christians and Hindus in the powerful *bhakti* strand within Hindu tradition, those surges of God-passion, traceable back to somewhere around the time of Christ, that swept in waves right through India even up to the 18th century (*Bhakti*, from the root *bhaj*, 'to share', e.g. a meal, sex, etc. is usually translated 'devotion', meaning 'to be intensely and dependently devoted to', especially the devotion of the loved one). This is devotion to God in passionately personal, sometimes sensual, terms in which divine love is exuberantly celebrated, often to the exclusion of all else. Hindu *Bhakti* in other words is a religious experience that resonates with prominent themes in the Wesleys' hymns.

Let me list those who confirm this link: Geoffrey Parrinder, sometimes referred to as the 'father' of the Methodist interfaith connection, was originally a missionary in Africa, and (influenced by fellow-Methodist missionary Edwin Smith) was to become an 'immensely influential' (Cracknell 258) professor of and writer on Comparative Religion at King's College, London. It is significant, though, that of his half dozen books specifically about Indian religion, the most important (the Wilde lectures at Oxford) is a study of *Avatar and Incarnation* (1970), and another is a translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. J.S.M Hooper, missionary to South India, in 1929 translated the love-drowned *Hymns of the Alvars* from Tamil for the first time. Norman Sargent (while bishop in a Karnataka CSI Diocese), and later the American R.Blake Michael, wrote on the remarkably counter-cultural Siva-bhakti movement, the Lingayatas, in the Karnataka region of South India. The initial and very important works of Frank Whaling and David Scott were studies of the Vishnu-avatar Rama and the radical *bhakti* poet, Kabir, whose God-focussed stance led him to deny the identity given him by others and to claim he was 'neither Muslim nor Hindu'. Larry Shinn's main work has been on the Bhagavata tradition, which - in the North probably - incorporated so much of the faith-life of the Tamil 'drowned-ones'. My own concern has primarily been with the theologian of Vaishnava *bhakti*, Ramanuja. Diana Eck has written brilliantly about *darsana*, the 'vision' of God especially central in bhakti-experience, often related to a particular place or image. Elizabeth Harris' writings may have been

mainly about that transtheistic figure Gautama Buddha, but also highlights the loving single-minded devotion to that Focal figure. And there have been other significant *bhakti*-related contributions by Methodists.

Before leaving this striking 'meeting-point', we should at least take note of a typical Marxist critique of all such religiosity of the heart. D.D.Kosambi, for example, castigates the *bhakti* movements as little more than a Brahmanic ruse to keep the lower castes happy, while further strengthening the role of *dharma* (the all-inclusive ordering of things with a central place for the caste system). In reality the springs of *bhakti* were probably indigenous to non-Brahmanic cultures (as Stephen Neill argued). The ignoring of issues of purity and pollution, the unconditioned acceptance of anyone with faith in the divine love, the unrestrained religious exuberance, the singing and dancing, and especially the sensual imagery, are so obviously at variance with the requirements of dharmic rule. Indeed, within Hinduism the tension between *dharma* and *bhakti*, as between *dharma* and the path of renunciation, is often apparent. In this too we can see how a *bhakti*-focussed religious stance was also often *counter*-cultural.

I wonder if, instead of Wesleyans, with their greater attachment to institutional authority, concern for social status and greater cultural conformity, being the 19th century missionary presence in India, either my Bible Christian forbears, or perhaps Primitive Methodists, both with a markedly more non-conformist counter-cultural attitude, had been there in India, there would have been earlier recognition of a kind of spiritual kinship between these two kinds of God-lovers – disciples of Christ and of Krishna and suchlike divine Avatars? Probably not, though within Britain at least, their markedly different attitudes towards the ministerial role of women is striking.

6. A view more radical than anything touched on so far is to see the missionary as an *enabling participator*. This means not only enabling Indian Christians to engage with others positively, but being an enabler even within other faith-communities. It was Wilfred Cantwell Smith who articulated this perception of the missionary's role, when in 1968 addressing the Division of Overseas Ministries of the National Council of Churches in America ('Participation: The Changing Christian Role', in *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, edited W.G.Oxtoby, Harper & Row 1976). Clearly this would have been anathema to those 18th and 19th century mission bodies who rebuked their missionaries even for providing critical descriptions of the faith of others. W.C.Smith was greatly influenced by a Methodist mother, and his personal devotional life – especially towards the end – was characterised by a simple and quite emotional Methodistic, even Salvation Army piety. Later becoming Director of the Harvard Centre for Studies in World Religions, Smith has been a formative influence on theological thinking about the religious life of others as well as on the formal study of Religions. (Kenneth Cracknell among others owns Smith as his mentor: see his *W C Smith Reader*). It is the constantly changing flux that characterises the life of all our traditions that was central to his understanding as a scholar in religions. Missionaries, therefore, were to become *co-participants in the process of change within the religious life of India*. Their work is to enhance the inner life of Hindus. I have no doubt that much of the writing and lecturing of those

Methodist missionaries listed a moment ago who focussed on one or other Hindu faith-figure were engaged (consciously or not) in just such an *enabling* ministry – enabling Hindus to understand their faith in new ways, and enabling Christians to relate more meaningfully to their Hindu neighbours.

In response to any who would accuse such western Christian interpretation of Hindu faith as being misconceived, hegemonic ‘missionary orientalism’, I would say – just enquire of the Hindus concerned whether or not their vision of their tradition has been enhanced. (On one occasion following a lecture at an all-India gathering of Sri Vaishnavas – a lecture on the teaching of their own Acharya, or authoritative source of Truth, given in the precincts one of their temples – the question put to me was, ‘But are you not a Christian?’ Answering for me, one of the Hindu Pandits responded with, ‘Whatever he is now, in a previous birth he was certainly a Sri Vaishnava devotee’. At the end of that meeting 12 Vaishnava Pandits invited me to share my suggestions on ways of enabling their young people to be more engaged with their religious tradition.

And to those Christians who would accuse such ‘enablers’ of being unfaithful to the Gospel of Christ, I would say, rather like J.B. Philips long ago, ‘Your Christ is too small. He is the world’s Light’, and our beloved Fred Pratt Green was wrong when, beginning a hymn with just that proclamation, he made us go on to sing, ‘He and none other’, for as John puts it: He is ‘the Light illumining everyone coming into the world’. No doubt interpretation (even how we translate biblical texts) is the key to sharing the Evangelist’s vision; but inclusiveness of some kind is clear.

In general, attempts to work out a theology of inclusivism and of a universal Christ, expressed in the terms of Indian religious life, show a divide between those who have seen the basis for such inclusivism in a non-dualist theology and spirituality (seeing Christ as an ideal Yogi suggests just this), and those who turned to the *bhakti*-tradition that I’ve been claiming as strangely and strikingly overlapping with a Methodist religious stance. A majority of Indian Catholic theologians from the 1940s onwards (also K.P.Eleaz, from an Orthodox background), have turned to Non-dualism. More specifically, it is the *Advaita* (non-duality) of the 9th century Hindu theologian, Sankara, that has been seen as providing an appropriate undergirding framework to working out an authentic Indian-Christian theology and spirituality. Sankara and Thomas Aquinas are seen as theological soul-mates.

There are, of course, exceptions: Even so, the most serious Catholic attempts (among Jesuits especially, and R.V. De Smet at Poone in particular) at finding points of Christian-Hindu convergence – basing their search both on Thomist and on the dominant Hindu assumptions of the 20th century – have looked to the transcendentalist non-dualism of Sankara rather than to one of the *bhakti*-based Hindu theists.

Those seeking to form serious spirituality within the life of an *Ashram* too, more often than not have assumed that transcendental interiority has to be the basis for any authentic Indian Christianity. Outstanding in the Christian ashram movement were Swami Abhishiktananda (French), and Bede Griffiths, a British Benedictine. They set

up what was to become Shantivanam, 'Grove of Peace', on the River Kaveri in Tamilnadu. Discovering Christ in 'the cave of the heart', as inner Self was, they felt, the highest path for Indian Christianity. There, the 'Hidden Christ of Hinduism' could be found, to use Raymond Panikkar's language. And that Christ was the ambiguous 'Lord' of Advaitic theology. For these contemplatives, with inner experience of transcendence, increasingly purified interiority, the status, the reality of all other social relationships, including commitment to social justice, is necessarily called into question.

Even within Indian Catholicism, though, in recent years ashramic spirituality has also been fiercely criticised, perceived as being too other-worldly, indifferent to social issues, and interiorising Christian spirituality in ways far removed from the harsh realities great numbers of Indian's peoples. Some even see ashrams as now primarily geared to western seekers disenamoured with their own secularised and consumerist society.

There are, however, other forms of Ashramic life – especially as worked out by non-Catholics. The Anglicans C.F.Andrews, Jack Winslow and Murray Rogers, as well as the Methodist Stanley Jones, were examples of this. C.F.Andrews, close friend of Gandhi, was part of the Cambridge-derived Delhi Brotherhood, that has been deeply involved in social work too, as well as in part responsible for administering the Teape lectures, set up to reflect on ways in which 'Catholic' faith relates to Indian spiritual (especially Vedantic) tradition. And we should note too the more popular influence of Stanley Jones' *Christ of the Indian Road*. His ashram in the Himalayas too was intended to enable sojourners in faith to find more clear direction, a more stable Centre for action in the world –and this has probably been more typical of the non-Catholic ashrams.

My own sojourn in India began, at my Bishop's instruction, under the guidance of his friend the Revd Kasala Ratnam, a graciously simple rural Presbyterian born and nurtured in the Methodist Christianity of Posnett's Medak District. Ratnam was already a Sadhu in life-style when we met, and was just setting up his own Ashram on a river-bank not far from Medak. Ratnam was not greatly concerned with Vedantic metaphysics. He merely wanted to live the gospel in as simple and uncluttered an Indian way as possible, and offer that faith to any – from whatever Hindu or Christian community - who felt moved to come to him in his little Ashram. And Kasala Ratnam was from one of the Dalit communities, but this anticipates my final section.

7. And what of wider *liturgical* practice in the Indian church? The 1950 Church of South India Liturgy was consciously intended to be more 'Eastern'. It was certainly received almost universally as a great ecumenical step forward, being a liturgy acceptable to a wide range of traditions. My own teacher in London, Marcus Ward, earlier at UTC, Bangalore for many years, wrote of this CSI Liturgy – as have others – that it is 'markedly Indian in character'. In my judgement, I fear this indicates just how 'culture-bound' missionary expectations have been, even of those relatively open to the Indianisation of Christians.

One of two respondents who were critical of the lack of indigenous elements the CSI Liturgy of 1950 was reformed theologian Marcus Barth. 'I have not found anything reminiscent of India....The Liturgy seems cut out for Europeans who want to be reminded of home'. His concern for indigeneity is unexpected, in that it was the Reformed Church as represented by the Basle Mission in Karnataka that until quite late in the 20th century did not even allow indigenous Christian lyrics to be sung in services, only translations of approved German hymns. The other critic of the Liturgy Committee's primary concern to be ecumenically acceptable was ex-Methodist Indian minister, E.L.Anantarao of Medak, who wrote with some passion against the way the committee had bothered itself unduly with specifically European eucharistic arguments.

When, in 1987, the CSI Synod meeting in Mysore celebrated for the first time the new 'CSI Alternative Liturgy' – a Liturgy that, at the request of the CSI Liturgy Committee, Christopher Duraisingh and I had drafted, a liturgy that was far more indigenously contextual than the 1950 liturgy – it was the indigenously exuberant style of presiding by a Bishop brought up in an explicitly Methodist ambience, Victor Premasagar, that ensured the lively participation of the whole Synodical congregation (the transporting 'highlight of the Synod' according to the British Methodist delegation). I might add that I was roundly criticised by the convener of the earlier CSI Liturgy Committee, Bishop Leslie Brown, for taking, as a non-Indian, any kind of formative role in preparing the 'Alternative Liturgy'.

It was, too, in that largely ex-Methodist Medak diocese that the 1950 liturgy was soon to be celebrated at least musically in fine indigenous style – congregational parts being transposed into grand Telugu lyrical form, even though far too classical in style to become a genuinely indigenous expression of the worship of that rural congregation. Yet, this was within the massive neo-Gothic cathedral of Methodist missionary Charles Posnett, surely another Missionary 'hero-figure' of larger-than-life proportions. It is interesting that Methodists were to the fore in using vernacular music and poetic song, invariably and inevitably replete with indigenous, Hindu-like, imagery – and even encouraged mass pilgrimage, or *jatra*, to a sacred centre (cf Ch Vasantharao's study).

Ex-Methodists in CSI may have wanted at least to make the style of their new liturgy more indigenous, but at least they embraced it willingly. Further South, even thirty years after its acceptance by the CSI Synod, very few ex-Anglican dioceses had been willing to leave their Anglican tradition for this ostensibly more Indian liturgy. On the other hand, it was the thoroughly Anglican Michael Hollis, first Moderator of CSI, who wrote courageously of the need to break with the patronising influences of western missionaries and the 'Latin captivity' of the Indian church.

8. Perhaps it is inexcusable to take up the Dalit issue as my final point. In reality it calls for a paper, even a large tome, on its own. In the working out of more authentic

indigenous ways of theology and of worship, in issues of ecclesial government and exercise of power, and especially in relations between Christians and Hindus, few issues can be more crucial to the Christian presence in India. In particular, talk of a 'counter-cultural' Indian Christianity, as well as a less '*dharmic*' life-basis, more exuberant and passionate religiosity, with drumming and dancing, takes us immediately to the traditions of the 'lower' caste, and more 'primal' communities.

It is worth noting that Methodist missionary commitment to work among Dalit communities was second to none. In one or two regions in fact it was the Methodists who in the last quarter of the 19th century specifically accepted the task of responding to the needs of those once called 'untouchables' (the Paraiya community of Tamilnadu for example).

That some larger-than-life missionaries stood, in myth and in reality, as hero-figures to oppressed landless people, especially to those converted to Christianity, should clearly not be limited to Methodists – though they happen to be those about whom I've heard more stories. In my first station at Jagtial in the Telangana region of Andhra – where I was soon quite ludicrously put in pastoral charge of 16 villages – we heard numerous legendary stories of the mighty Vickers Doragaru, preceding us by a mere 15 years or so. One story (the witness of two bishops who had been in the boarding school at Jagtial) had it that one day Vickers met the all-powerful Velama Dora, local lord over three villages and many thousands of acres, whose caste was synonymous with absolute authority in that part of Andhra Pradesh. He was riding in his horse-drawn chariot, with Dalit servants running before and behind. Our missionary hero stopped the chariot, forced this man of enormous status and wealth, probably of girth too, to descend and ignominiously to run ahead of his own chariot, with the missionary seated above and cracking his whip to hasten his running and make his humiliation absolute. That O.Lionel Vickers was not done away with is testament I presume to the greater power of the British Raj – though Telangana was then still ruled ostensibly by the Muslim Nizam. An issue of enormous consequence in both this story and much of the material preceding it, is the role of power, our understanding of power – in relation to religion as much as to social life and its structures.

To move to the Interfaith front - on the issue of indigenous theology and worship, hugely important questions arise, not unconnected with the story I've just told. In some ways we come full-circle back to the more negative position with which we began. Fiercely felt tensions relating to what may be called the Dalit-Brahmin divide spill over into attitudes towards Hindu culture generally and therefore towards indigenous ways of theologising and worshipping. Brahmanic dharma is seen as irredeemably oppressive, inescapably based on caste and its purity-pollution structures. Brahmanic dharma is seen as intrinsic to being Hindu, for the Brahmanic system is essentially hegemonic, its tentacles draw in everything within its grasp. Even Indian Christian ecclesial life is seen as anti-Dalit in so many ways. Remember, perhaps two thirds of Indian Christians came from or belong to Dalit communities, and to dismiss Dalitism by saying that all now belong to the one casteless Christian community, is to be blind to social realities.

The twin issues of Indian Christian Theology and Inter-cultural worship are examples of this blindness. Presbyterian missionary Robin Boyd's classic 1969 (revised 1975) work on Indian Christian theology, refers almost exclusively to the thought of caste converts, with not a single reference to any Dalit Christian's way of faith-articulation. Robin came to regret this, but in his defence we can say, in the first place, that he was expressing a generally held understanding of what 'Indian Christian' theology meant. It was the caste convert who was believed, by missionaries, to be able to formulate faith in authentic Indian ways. Sometimes this also entailed a process of being purified by sufficient exposure to true Christian belief. But several of the most articulate exponents of what, to the concerned interpreter, seemed a more authentic Indian vision of Christian faith, were thoroughly independent in their theologies. A few even claimed no contact at all with westerners. To some extent it was of course their more elevated caste status that gave these Indian Christians the self-confidence to articulate their beliefs independently. Moreover, while great numbers of Dalit preachers, song-writers, and story-tellers spoke and sang for several generations in genuinely indigenous ways, ferreting out these sources would have been a far more difficult task. (Historians to the rescue please!) It was not until the late 1970s that open challenges to this caste-loaded view of being 'Indian Christian' emerged, and then with ever-increasing vigour.

I have to confess that, in spite of close friendships with large numbers of Telugu Dalit Christians, for the first twenty years or so of my missionary life I too assumed that indigenous Christianity should – in worship, theology, and even in life-style – aspire to incorporate aspects of classical Indian cultural traditions. In the 'inter-cultural' worship that I had been asked in 1978 to co-ordinate at UTC, Bangalore, at first we were perhaps too impressed by the 'Indian Mass' developed at the Catholic (NBCL) Centre nearby (then led by Fr D.S. Amalorpavadas). Only from about 1980 did we begin to recognise both the claims of folk culture (in dance and song for instance) as well as the ferment of change in the cultural life of modern India. Classical, and therefore Brahmin-dominated, cultural forms were beginning to lose their seductive attractions, and we looked for more 'primal' imagery, themes and worship-styles, and for greater cultural inclusiveness, pluralistic inclusiveness (cf *Worship in an Indian Context*; but see also my *Services for All Seasons*, ACTC 1973).

This move to a more fully local cultic style was far more marked at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, Madurai, where folk forms of worship were regularly introduced, and were of a piece with the anti-Brahmanic movements effective within Tamilnadu from mid-20th century. In its activist and very practical commitment to social and cultural liberation, TTS was far more quick off the mark and more radical than any other theological college, including my previous vernacular college, ACTC, from 1973 located at Hyderabad. With Dalit concerns as central in its curriculum and worship for a generation now, it has to be recognised, though, that some of the liturgical material I have seen from TTS sometimes seems very close to the polemic and tactics of a Dalit ideological programme.

It has been in terms of theological articulation that Dalits have made the most decisive break with the earlier missionary assumptions about the innate superiority of the more classical Indian world of discourse. However, any stark polarising of ‘folk’ and ‘classical’, ‘Dalit’ and ‘Sanskrit’, what is ‘priestly’ and what is of ‘the people’, I do not believe will actually be beneficial even to Dalit people. Equally questionable is the polemical ideology that rejects any claims for value or insight in any aspect of Hinduism. Then Hindu religion and culture are evil *per se* – thus accepting the denunciations of earlier generations of missionaries. Even to talk of ‘Indian Christian’ theology with its search for continuities, may well be anathema. Fully appreciative of the Dalit concern for a new self-identity that is thoroughly liberated from the stranglehold of that past cultural bondage imposed by Brahmanic *dharma*, with its deeply embedded structures of purity/pollution, I believe it necessary still to question some of the self-limiting assumptions often dominant in Dalit polemic.

However, much Dalit polemic is undeniable. As always, Christological expression is at the centre. Efforts to depict Christ in terms of the ideal Yogi, the Guru within, the hidden Light, the Avatar, the inner Self of all and suchlike are now rare. Far more frequent are assertions of Christ as Liberator in general, but specifically as able to liberate because he himself is a Dalit, at one with all those who have suffered as Dalits. Arvind Nirmal’s inauguration lecture as Professor of Dalit Studies at Gurukul Lutheran Theological Seminary, Chennai, in the early 1990s, took ‘pathos’ – as against any form of triumphalism – to be the starting-point for authentic Dalit theology, basing this both on the biblical stress on the suffering of God’s people, culminating in Jesus the Dalit, and the daily traumatising that Dalits have long experienced in India.

Others have looked to more obviously positive elements of Dalit and ‘primal’ cultural tradition. Christ as Dancer is a theme frequently portrayed in the art of Jyoti Sahi – dance being central in tribal, village and classical life. (It is also the focus of my Teape lectures at Cambridge in 1998, ‘Set Free by a Dancing God’). Here, though, because of its crucial bhakti-strand, Siva and Krishna have a central role within Hindu traditions as liberating divine dancers. Does this fact perhaps cloud the role of this image in Dalit Christian consciousness, though increasingly in attempts by Dalits and others to worship in more indigenous ways, rural and folk forms of dance are now not uncommon.

There is what one might think is an unexpected link in India between Methodists and religious imagery, in particular the role of Indian Christian art. Until recently, three of four publications on this subject were by Methodists (John Butler, Richard Taylor and Eric Lott). The leading light in the Indian Christian Art Association is an American Methodist: Jyoti Sahi, about whom I wrote, delights in claiming some Methodist antecedents in his family, and finds himself well patronised by the Methodist Church in this country. Perhaps Methodists sometimes find it difficult to decide whether they are Protestant or Catholic. The recent monumental collection of photographs of Indian art on Christian themes – some by Hindus and Muslims – by Gudrun Loewmehrer has eclipsed all previous publications, at least in range and brilliance of visual

presentation.

Linked to dance is the role of the drum. Sathi Clarke, for example, has provided an outstanding analysis of the role of the drum in the history of the Paraiyar people. The very term, Paraiya, means 'drum' (also meaning the 'awakener', points out Duraisingh). Stigmatised as the most polluted and lowest of the low, this community's very has been identity defined by the drums (whose skins pollute) they are to play for the great ritual occasions of those called the 'higher' castes (including death-related, and so further polluting ceremonies). Clarke imaginatively describes Christ as the great Drummer for the Paraiyar people, enabling both resistance and reconciliation. Reception of Clarke's work by Dalit ideologues has been very mixed, few seeming to take it as a model for their task.

It may well be from the North-Eastern 'tribal belt' (where caste distinctions are unknown) that the most pressing claims for the role of both dance and drum in Christian worship, even as images of Christ, may yet come. Missionaries to the Mizo people, for instance, Welsh Calvinist Presbyterians (with Wesleyan connections), banned drum and dance altogether for the Mizo converts in the late 19th century. The Spirit seems to have had other ideas however. When ecstatic revival swept the North-East – very much akin to the Welsh revival movements – there was a spontaneous outburst of dance and indigenous style song, soon accompanied by the great Mizo drum. In a quandary for some years, eventually the missionaries had to concede that here was the Spirit at work. Dance still tends to be part only of 'cultural' occasions, rather than in formal worship. I suspect this will yet change in time. Already, in theological formulations by a number of Mizo and Naga writers (e.g. K.Thanzauva, W.Longchar) traditional tribal themes and imagery are an essential part of their re-visioning of a Christian worldview.

Conclusion

The role of the missionary – in various ways Methodists in particular – both in engaging with Indian religious life and in shaping Indian Christian identities, has been significant. This fact alone, given the negativities and ambiguities of earlier centuries, surely left missionaries of the 20th and now 21st century with a responsibility to be part of the re-shaping of those identities. That, at least, is how I interpreted my own role, ambiguous though this may sometimes have been. Faithful Christian discipleship does need to include counter-cultural compulsions, and no servant of Christ can fail to give whatever support possible to the Dalit movement aimed at creating a new Dalit consciousness. Yet, the future of that community will not be enhanced by a blanket negativity towards all Hindu faith and culture. In any case, the paths of faithful discipleship, of enabling participation, and of authentic indigeneity, will be pluralist. Uniformity provides a very spurious strength.

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