

# ASIAN/INDIAN CHRISTIANITY

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## **Introductory remarks:**

I wish to thank you for your invitation to address you this evening. My background has been as a surgeon became involved on a regular basis in Global Medicine — predominantly in South Asia at Raxaul on the Nepal border in the state of Bihar. This enculturation engendered an interest in India, Hinduism, Liberation Theology and interest in Indian Christianities (plural). Involvement with Karen refugees on the Thai/Burma border has been studied together with involvement with various Nepali organizations.

## **The Scope of this subject:**

This is a complex area of study and I will attempt to summarise major arguments and attempt to avoid unnecessary complexities and ambiguities.

## **Demographics**

Apart from the Philippines and Korea Christianity is by far a minority religion in Asia. In the Philippines there are 86.8 million Christians (93% of the population).

China is on track to become the most Christian Asian country (>11% of the population). Nepal was previously closed to all Christian missionaries but has become the fastest increase in Christian adherents, which now represents >11% of the population.

India has a population of 1.28 billion of which a recent census revealed three percent were Christian —in reality this figure is more likely to be in the order of 6.15 percent due to the presence of crypto-Christians and 'dual-belongers'. This would indicate that there are at very least 38 million Christians in India alone (or perhaps twice this figure). Numerically Australian Christians are dwarfed in comparison!

## Minjung

Korea was the first country in Asia to sow the seeds of an Asian theology of Liberation. From the inception Korea has been politicized faith and this has played a significant role in the national liberation struggle — unlike other Asian countries (like India) where it was the non-Christian religions that provoked nationalist sentiments against Western colonizers.

In the Minjung Theology of Korea the Asian Christ appears with a “*han*-ridden body”. *Han* is a mixture of many things: a sense of *resignation* to inevitable oppression, *indignation* at the oppressors’ inhumanity, *and anger* at oneself at being caught-up in the situation of hopelessness. The Minjung’s unconcealed aspiration is for freedom.

## Theology of the Pain of God

Christian theology after Hiroshima and the humiliation of Japanese defeat led Kazoh Kitamori and others to reinterpret Christianity in a similar way that Jürgen Moltmann did in post-war Germany. This is the ‘theology of the Cross’ in which pain is the essence of God. Christ is a part of our suffering because He suffers with us.

As Ashok Mehta wrote in 1974: ‘It is the claim of the Christians even to this day they feel the agony of Christ on the cross whenever humanity suffers, it has to be proved in action not merely by words.’

## Asian Perception of Christians

- (1) Seen as some kind of religion of foreigners — Christ the ‘king’, an invader or like some Julius Caesar. This was sensed as a threat to traditional faith and the nations social fabric. In response the old faith was reaffirmed and defended in every way.
- (2) Some welcomed Christ as in the *Sermon on the Mount*. The “Golden Rule” exists in all world religions. This was the ethical Christ in contradistinction to metaphysical dogmas and mystical obfuscations.
- (3) Some recognized Christ as being authentically Asian and felt close to him, being felt to be different to European Christ of missionaries with their warring denominations.

- (4) Christ as THE incarnation was generally unacceptable to Hindus, however devotees of Vishnu welcomed Christ as AN incarnation. Western Christianity found this incarnational aspect unacceptable.
- (5) Some worshipped Christ as Saviour, Son of God and God-Man this being understood differently from traditional Western Christianity. Christ was seen as the centre of a new dispensation — a universal church harmonizing regions of the world
- (6) Those who looked upon Christ as liberator from social and religious oppression.

### **Caution for the Missionary**

The Christian who wishes to dialogue with other faiths must resolutely put away every thought of intellectual, religious or cultural superiority regarding dialogue as one-way traffic whereby the communication of 'truth' could only flow in the one direction. Such a relic of the old Western superiority complex makes dialogue impossible both in terms of equality and of mutual understanding.

The Christian must put away firmly the idea that it is his business to 'bring Christ' to the non-Christian. It is part of Christian belief that God has reconciled the whole world to himself in Christ, and that since the resurrection Christ is everywhere present in the world that he has redeemed. The non-Christian is part of this redeemed world.

Therefore Christ is already present in the other whom we meet. The Christian comes not to bring Christ but to find Him.

The Christian must approach the interlocutor in the hope that he will gain more than he has to give. He should go in the expectation that the other has more of God than he alone possesses, and in the end his encounter and awareness of God is amplified and enriched.

There ought not be a question of conversion from one faith to another. Each person must be encouraged to go forward to the highest level of attainment possible on the path in which he has already embarked. Conversion is undesirable in terms of social and emotional disruption and this is likely to be harmful rather than helpful in the development of a true spiritual life.

## What is a Christian?

It can be a grave assumption to declare that an individual is non-Christian. How can one ever know? The basic *credo* could perhaps equate to the first Century expression of *Kristos Kurios* (Christ is Lord) — in this light all else pales into insignificance —including baptism.

- (1) Christians do not have a monopoly of **goodness**, either on the so-called natural or supernatural level. History in general reveals that ‘evil’ is present everywhere however goodness also flourishes throughout the world.
- (2) Christians do not have a monopoly on **truth**. The Christian Church claims to be the custodian of divine revelation however this does not mean that the Christian missionary has exhausted God’s disclosure of himself to mankind. There is no proof to this claim of exclusiveness.
- (3) The Christian has no monopoly of **salvation**, which is offered to every person who entering this world (Titus 2:11) — *Apokatastasis*. Therefore it seems improper trying to justify Christian missionary activity as merely ‘saving souls’.

In India many people adapt by becoming ‘crypto-Christians’ — whereby baptism is avoided or postponed. The reason for this is the serious ostracism and loss of patrimony within the family group as a result of an individual becoming baptised. There also arises a situation of ‘dual belonging’ often where children are nurtured in an atmosphere where one parent is perhaps Hindu and the other Christian (i.e. Raimundo Panikkar).

## A Different Asian World-View — *Weltanschauung*

The Yin/Yang thinking is inclusive and dialectical embracing the possibility of ‘either/or’ thinking. It can underpin many unresolved issues that have plagued Western Christian thought; such as the nature of transcendence and immanence, the idea of God as personal, Jesus as human and divine, and the person as being body and spirit.

Asian Christians, with deep affinity with land and place, spoke not of a ‘systematic’ or ‘dogmatic’ theology but rather a more an apposite ‘*Water Buffalo Theology*’ of Kosuke Koyama or Choan-Seng Song’s ‘*Third Eye Theology*’. Song reflects on the pain-love of God in view of human suffering and the threat of evil forces. He takes the reality of suffering

seriously so that meaning can be found and hope can be articulated enabling involvement with struggle. Traditionally Buddhism may seek ways out of suffering by reaching *nirvana*. For Song storytelling is important — in the same manner as the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* (which includes the *Bhagavad Gita*) the length of which is more than twice that of the Christian bible.

Just as important is the concept of God and ‘time’— Is God ‘in time’ or ‘outside time’? The strictly ‘linear’ (time lines) characteristic of Western historiography contrasts with a ‘circular’ ideology manifest in Asian cultures. The cycles of nature seem self evident — not only manifest in the cycles of birth aging and death, the seasons and crops, the planets, our bodily functions but also the rise and fall of the fortunes of people.

TS Eliot wrote in *Burnt Norton*:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future.  
Time future is contained in time past...

There appears to be some affinity between an Asian belief system and contemporary Process Theology — through *time* we all change as does humanity, the universe, the planet and even the presence/awareness and the essence of God. Everything is in a process of evolution.

‘I am making all things new’ (Rev 32:5).

Hermann Hesse wrote in *Siddhartha*:

He saw the water [in the river] continually flowed and flowed and  
yet it was always there;  
it was always the same and yet every moment it was new.

### **Christianity is Asian, not European**

Asian Christian writings and art has been found dated from as early as the second Century and these are extensive in the South, West and East Asia. These findings have been long neglected. In south India extensive research by Indian scholars have found remains of early churches dating to the fourth Century. Artefacts include inscriptions and

crosses, copper plates, ancient songs and annals, liturgies, hymns, letters and commentaries, architectural and art, and many oral traditions. The languages used are Syriac and later Malayalam. In Central Asia the ancient trade routes between Persia and China have yielded much information and emphasize Christian beliefs of incarnation and resurrection together with a disdain for idolatry. A Nestorian stele (discovered in 1623 at Sian Fu, China) written in Persian with two thousand Chinese characters and seventy words in Syriac outlined the biblical teaching of creation, the fall and the birth of Jesus.

The main inscription has been translated as:

The hungry came and were fed.

The cold came and they were clothed

The sick were healed and raised up,

The dead were buried and laid to rest.

### **Nestorius**

Nestorius (381CE-451CE) Syrian monk was Bishop of Constantinople who at the Council of Ephesus was terrorized by a mob and in absentia was expelled by his political opponent Cyril of Alexandria. Until the late nineteenth Century opinion favoured Cyril in this dispute although it was later proved that Nestorius had been orthodox in his views. Nevertheless he 'lacked the numbers'. The dispute, that I will not explain here, revolved around an imponderable question whether Jesus's birth (by a 'human') questioned the divinity of the Virgin Mary (*Theotokos*). Following the Council of Ephesus the Christian church not only moved West (as we know) but also spread East to Mesopotamia, Armenia, Persia, Ethiopia, Syria, Iraq, China and India. Subsequently there has long been a tradition of Nestorian churches and state servants in Iran, Mongolia, Egypt and India.

Alexander the Great (356BCE-323BCE) reached Bactria on the border of Afghanistan/Tajikistan where a Greek colony was established and has survived. Bactria was an extensive and extremely wealthy Zoroastrian community of Northern Persia.

Christianity has a two thousand year history in India. Christianity was brought to India in the person of the Apostle Thomas — according to a widely accepted tradition among scholars.

### **Subsequent South Asian Christian History**

The Christians who trace their origins to Saint Thomas call themselves Thomas Christians. They were in contact with East-Syrian Christians in the fourth or fifth Centuries and from that time adopted the East-Syrian liturgy. They were described as: 'Hindu in culture, Christian in religion and Oriental in worship'. Many of their ceremonies derived from local praxis. They lived impeccable incarnational lives that would be a model and inspiration for us today.

### **The Padroado**

The Portuguese were given papal patronage over all conquests until 1493 when rivalry between Spain and Portugal arose. Various popes arbitrarily drew lines on maps of the Atlantic Ocean allotting territories to Spain or Portugal. Considerable hegemony arose in 1830 when Portugal severed diplomatic relationships with the Vatican. India was under the ambit of the Portuguese but by the mid-seventeenth Century the Portuguese empire in the East was in fatal decline and this necessitated papal establishment of Vicars Apostolic.

The 'Latin Rite Christians' at the Synod of Diamper condemned the Thomas Christians in 1599 after which time the 'Latin rite' was imposed. This led to fragmentation of the Thomas Christians, over the next four centuries into a dozen churches of East-Syrian origin — one of these became allied to Rome and another to Anglicanism (*Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar*).

Up until now many thousands of missionaries — not only from all over the world but predominantly Indians — have influenced Christianity in India.

### **Roberto De Nobili (1577-1656)**

This remarkable Jesuit went to Madurai in 1606. De Nobili believed that there was no necessity to cease being Indian when becoming a Christian. He lived as a *sannyasi* learning Sanskrit, Tamil and Telegu languages. He studied the *Vedas*, *Upanisads* and the philosophy of the various schools of Hinduism. He encouraged Christians to remain culturally Indian i.e. to wear the sacred thread and to keep the tuft of hair (*śikbā*). De Nobili accepted the caste system that he correctly considered as deeply cultural. His unorthodox methods led to the *Malabar Rites Controversy*. Gregory XV surprisingly gave his support for De Nobili's methods. Acclaimed as the first Oriental scholar and father of Tamil prose De Nobili wrote more than fifty works mostly in Tamil but also Sanskrit and Telegu. He firmly believed that much contained in the *Vedas* was compatible with Christianity.

### **Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929)**

Probably the most famous Indian Christian. He converted to Christianity from Sikhism in 1904. Eric Sharp asserts that 'no Indian Christian has exerted an influence even remotely comparable to Sundar Singh'. He experienced many visions in addition to overseeing miracles and healing that were apparently commonplace. He was firmly rooted in his culture and his writings drew on commonplace Indian life experience. He envisioned the *Logos* everywhere — even in non-Christian cultures and scriptures.

He said:

Indians do need the water of life but not in the European cup.

### **The Laity**

Community-centred worship, rather than confessional or hierarchical, is common in India— in a similar manner to that of the early church. There are said to be thousands of 'new churches' that have spontaneously arisen under the Holy Spirit. Charismatic worship is very common and is expanding quickly.

In India there are similarities to 'base communities' (CEB's) whereby faith and praxis are intimately and necessarily linked — a pattern that was documented in Brazil in the early

1960's. CEB's are small neighbourhood or village groups of lay people who study the Bible and exchange their experiences. They function as parallel churches that are independent of hierarchy whilst serving to empower the poor the victimised.

The conversion rate to Christianity among the 'lower-castes' is commoner — although Ambedkar encouraged lower-caste Hindus to adopt Buddhism.

### **Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907)**

This polymath — a Hindu/Catholic 'dual-belonger' lived at a *Kairos* in history. He was certainly a Hindu patriot who died during his trial for sedition being 'too Indian' for the English — and especially the Catholic Church — to tolerate and was also 'too English' for many caste Hindus to accept. He fell between two stools! Undoubtedly the dramatic increase in Christian adherence in India can be attributed to Upadhyay.

Upadhyay became a member of Ramakrishna's ashram and later became a *sannyasi*. Ramakrishna accepted Christianity together with all other religions. It was during his ashram experience that he befriended Vivekananda. His other great mentor was Keshub Chunder Sen — Robin Boyd states that Upadhyay became his 'true spiritual legacy'.

One of the many major contributions Upadhyay made was in establishing Christian ashrams being organized in the strict code of Ramakrishna. He was fifty years ahead of others in this regard. Monchanin came to India, in 1939, as a result of Upadhyay's writings when he established his ashram. Many others have followed his example, namely Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) and Bede Griffiths. Ashrams are now considered to be of integral Christian significance —there being more than fifty Christian ashrams in India today.

Upadhyay wrote:

There should not be the least trace of Europeanism in the mode of life of the Hindu/Catholic monk. The itinerants should be well versed in the philosophy of *Vedanta* as well as the philosophy of Aquinas.

Adaptation, in the ashram context, must involve more than just mere societal trappings— i.e. the adoption of certain Indian customs such as sitting on the floor or in constructing churches in an Indian style.

An Indian Church may adopt these changes but still remain ‘foreign’. Indigenization does not mean simply introducing certain Sanskrit terms in Bible translations or sermons — indigenization means to cross the borderline.

It means leaving, if not bodily at least spiritually, Western Christianity and the Westernized Christian Church in India, and moving into another religion, another culture, taking only Christ with oneself. Indigenization is planting the gospel inside another culture, another philosophy and another religion.

## **Conclusion**

I hope that I have shown to you a little part of the amazing diversity of Indian and Asian Christianities.

You will see I hope that Christianity is of Asia and the world — not just a captive of our Western egos.

Because of the gross numerical disparity of Christians between the Northern and Southern hemispheres there is talk (perhaps tongue in cheek) of “reverse” missions whereby the West may become re-evangelized as suggested by Nigerian Professor Lamin Sannah of Yale University

Indian academic theologians that I have met have been of the very finest calibre.

I grew-up in Malaya being exposed to multi-cultural and multi-religious influences.

It was serendipity that facilitated my first trip to India and Nepal as an ophthalmic surgeon — following this there was no looking back.

Meeting Bede Griffiths in Australia prior to his death in 1993. — that charismatic English Benedictine Monk who had his ashram in South India — inspired me to know more.

I feel my own understanding of Christianity has become considerably deepened not only by studying Hinduism and Indian Christianities but through a meaningful contact with South Asian people

As I have already said my thesis concentrated on the writings and the tragic life of my luminary Brahmabandhab Upadhyay.

Regrettably time has restricted me to these few sketchy thoughts that I leave with you — there are so many more insights that I would have wished to have included.

Again, may I thank you for your attention.