

Between September 11 and November 4

by H. L. Richard

Christians in the post-September 11 world must learn to think and communicate with great care. It is gratifying that political leaders have been careful to insist that there can be no holy war between Islamic and Christian nations. Political motivations have at times caused statements hazy on truth, but greater damage is being done by xenophobic forces and one wishes that the Christian churches would everywhere be in the front line of support for internationals resident in the US.

Triumphalistic statements about the superiority of Christianity over other faiths, and of the West over other societies, are both irresponsible and unconvincing. One of the first lessons in missionary training is against ethnocentrism, the placing of one's own culture and heritage in the central position and viewing all of life from that center. Peoples around the world have a rightful pride in their cultures and heritage; thankfully many are very appreciative of the USA and its achievements, but most are flabbergasted by US murder statistics (particularly school children shooting deaths), the extremes of consumerism, and the output from Hollywood that circles the globe. Certainly internationals in Christ do not want their nations to follow the path of America.

In India perhaps one sees most clearly the damaging effects of confusing the City of God and the City of Man, and lessons from this history need to impact analyses of the striking events spoken about from India in these days. Triumphalistic arrogance towards Hinduism is one of the marks of Christian mission among Hindus. Alexander Duff, one of the greatest of missionaries to India, explicitly sought the destruction of Hinduism, and many Christians today continue to think and speak in a similar way.

But a desire to supplant Hinduism reveals a failure to think clearly. Biblical reflection on mission among Hindus must begin with careful analysis of the complex phenomena labeled as "Hinduism". The assumption that "Hinduism" is a religion like Christianity leads to serious distortions. All students of "Hinduism" know that it has no creed that is broadly accepted. (Many *sampradayas* have definite creedal positions, leading some scholars to suggest that these differing "schools" or "sects" of Hinduism are the Hindu phenomena that match the criteria for "religion", so that "Hinduism" contains a number of different "religions" under its vast umbrella.) Since "Hinduism" is not primarily

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theological, it is very hard to think of it primarily in “religious” terms. It is a truism that “Hinduism” is holistic, touching into every area of life. This provides the clue that it is better to think of “Hinduism” as a multi-faceted civilization rather than as a religion.

To change the broad outlook on Hinduism in this way leads to important transformations. It is manifestly obvious that the biblical mandate for mission is to plant gospel seeds within civilizations, and certainly is not to supplant civilizations. The transformation rather than destruction of Hindu civilization is the only appropriate biblical agenda.

One of many specific areas where this change of outlook has radical ramifications is in consideration of caste. “Hinduism” is an evolved and evolving faith (if it should be considered “a faith” as opposed to a conglomeration of faiths as suggested above), and nowhere is change more evident in the present day than in the area of caste. When dealing with a non-creedal, evolving “religion” one must be constantly alert to the fact that “truths” of the past cannot be assumed to be “truths” for the present generation of Hindus.

Modern Hindu Indians do not defend their history of caste oppression and are deeply disturbed by the continuance of serious problems related to caste in Indian society. To suggest that statements from ancient books about caste define current Hindu views and practices is unfair, untrue, and certainly un-Christian. Yes, India has serious problems in this area. So do Indian churches, as caste continues to play a massive role in church politics and lies

behind innumerable problems in Indian Christian circles. India, and its caste system, is changing rapidly. But the collapse of caste or of Indian civilization is unimaginable, and it is no part of a biblical world-view to wish for such a thing.

It is striking to note that the great Dr. Ambedkar, who initiated the first mass conversions from outcaste Hinduism to Buddhism, shared this basic perspective, and it is one of the main reasons he chose to convert to Buddhism rather than to Christianity. He wrote that “if the Depressed classes join Islam or Christianity, they not only go out of the Hindu religion, but they also go out of the Hindu culture. What the consequences of conversion will do to the country as a whole ... is well worth bearing in mind” (quoted from M. E. Prabhakar, “Dr. Ambedkar and Indian Christianity” in *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: A Centenary Tribute*, A. P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam (eds.), Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991, pg. 80-81). Perhaps rather than talking of “Hindu culture,” the point that Dr. Ambedkar is making is more clear in terms of “Hindu civilization.”

The heart and glory (as well as the stumbling block) of biblical faith lies in the concept of incarnation. God became a man and lived among us, then left his followers with a mandate to go and do likewise among the complex cultures of the world. In the colonial era (when historic missions made a massive impact), it was impossible to avoid some association of the gospel of Christ with colonial power. However much many missionaries lamented this fact (and

more than a few saw how the message of incarnation was distorted by the reality of “Christian” colonialism), it impacted their work and remains of crucial importance in the churches and societies of the non-western world. No greater challenge lies before the churches of the world and the western missionary force than that of transcending the colonial legacy and demonstrating the true gospel of incarnation in all the civilizations, societies, and cultures of the world; which certainly includes the complex of cultures and religions and castes that make up the Dalit population of India. **IJFM**