



Gospel Ferment in India among both Hindus and Christians Rethinking “Rethinking”

by *H. L. Richard*

In the early and middle decades of the twentieth century there was something of a “Rethinking Movement” in Indian Christianity. From the discussions stirred up by the remarkable leaders of that movement, “Rethinking” in the context of Indian church history refers to concerns to develop deeply Indian (contextual, in today’s terminology) expressions of biblical life and faith as against traditional patterns of Christian discipleship which were introduced to India from abroad.

The most noted expression of the Rethinking Movement, which gave it its name, was the book *Rethinking Christianity in India*. This Rethinking book was prepared in anticipation of the Tambaram International Missionary Conference held just outside Madras in 1939. The Rethinking Group (as the contributors to that volume and some of their friends are commonly known) objected severely to numerous aspects of the agenda of church and mission leadership both internationally and especially in India.

More explanation of the Rethinking Group and their concerns will be presented later in this paper. The paper seeks to outline a broad history of Rethinking, considering both forerunners and descendents of the Rethinking Group as well as that group itself. The topic is vast and so a focus is placed on conferences and organizations specifically concerned with analysis of the work of Christ in India. The point of the paper is to rethink the Rethinking agenda and analyze its continued relevance at the present time.¹

Three different types of “Rethinking conferences” will be considered, with examples from each being introduced at some length. There have been numerous conferences over the decades that were called for broad and comprehensive discussions of church and mission policy and practice. These broad conferences are the first type to be considered. It is tempting to leave such conferences out of the survey as not being particularly focused on “Rethinking.” But clearly a great deal of Rethinking went on in these gatherings, and to ignore them would be to distort the overall picture. The second type are highly activist groups that met not merely to rethink issues of the gospel but immediately organised themselves as new churches intending

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to do things right rather than merely talking about what previously was wrong. The third type can be considered as properly and fully Rethinking groups since their one agenda was creative rethinking of the meaning and expressions of Christianity in India. These groups met specifically with serious objections to existing Christianity and sought alternate models and methods, but without immediately forming themselves as new church groups. The paper will close with thoughts on Rethinking today.

Comprehensive Discussions

Four examples will be given of conferences called for broad discussions about church and mission in India wherein the Rethinking agenda (concern to develop deeply Indian expressions of biblical discipleship) had a part. The decennial missionary conferences of the late 19th century will first be noted, followed by the successor to these gatherings, conferences associated with the National Council of Churches in India. Stanley Jones' Rethinking agenda at Sat Tal ashram will be briefly noted before recent Roman Catholic Rethinking conferences are introduced.

The Decennial Missionary Conferences

There is room for a great deal of criticism of missionary policy and work in India (and the rest of the world), and critical historical study is vitally necessary so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated again in each succeeding generation. But it is fitting to begin on a note of high commendation for one aspect of past missionary endeavor. That is, critical reflection and meetings to analyze and even minutely dissect all aspects of the ministry of the gospel.

Interdenominational cooperation is one of the striking features of the Protestant missionary movement and is nowhere seen more clearly than in India. Protestant missions began with a Danish king sending German missionaries (all Lutherans) into a mission later funded by British Anglicans. Baptist William Carey was an evangelical ecumenist who welcomed and encouraged the

Anglican Henry Martyn and the Presbyterian Alexander Duff, while also assisting in the conversion from Congregationalist to Baptist of the great Adoniram Judson!

Early missionaries were aware of their pioneering situation and of the facts that they had much to learn and were certainly making mistakes along the way. Carey is famous as a Bible translator but also translated the Ramayana so that other missionaries could learn about Hinduism more easily than he and his colleagues had learned. This sense of missionary cooperation soon led to conferences to discuss aspects of mission work. As Calcutta was the first great center of Indian Protestant missions it is no surprise to find the first large conference there in 1855, with 55 members from 6 missions attending. In 1857 workers from 7 societies met in Banaras. In 1858 in Ooty 32 missionaries from 8 societies in South India and Ceylon gathered (Latourette 1978 [1944]:129f).

These and similar meetings paved the way for the four great decennial missionary conferences held in Allahabad in 1872, in Calcutta in 1882, in Bombay in 1892, and in Madras in 1902. There was never a fifth gathering as the great international gathering at Edinburgh met in 1910 with strong Indian involvement and in the follow-up gatherings after Edinburgh the National Christian Council of India (originally the National Missionary Council of India and later the National Council of Churches in India) was born as a permanent body to discuss and deal with mission and church issues.

Reports from the four great decennial missionary gatherings were published and are available in the best theological libraries. A mere glance at the contents pages is enough to show that the intent was comprehensive discussion of every important area of mission life. Evangelistic, educational, and medical work were always discussed; "the native church" was always a topic, except in the second gathering in Calcutta where a similar subject was instead termed "native agency." In all of these reports there

are references to what later became the Rethinking agenda. In fact, some of the radical Rethinkers to be mentioned below addressed the Calcutta 1882 and Bombay 1892 gatherings.

In Bombay in 1892 the early Rethinkers were given a platform to present their position. Kali Charan Banurji and J. G. Shome, both Bengalis about whom more will be said below under "new church attempts," spoke for a radical change in the way Christianity functioned in India. Banurji presented a major paper on the topic "The Native Church—Its Organization and Self-Support," while Shome's comments in the discussion were reported in the printed volume from the gathering. Banurji's optimism in light of his being given such a platform is perhaps understandable:

That the missionaries of India, the majority of whom represent foreign missions, should, in conference assembled, embody, in their programme, the conception of 'The Native Church', is an indication of momentous significance. It signifies, on their part, a readiness to recognize the ideal that the Native Church in India should be *one*, not divided; *native*, not foreign. Nay, it conveys the promise that, henceforth, they shall not impose by rule, upon the converts they are privileged to gather, the accidents of denominational Christianity, at once divisive and exotic, with which they themselves happen to be identified. (Banurji 1893a: 121-122, italics in original).

Shome commented on his own optimism and enthusiasm, but also on how he was brought down to earth:

When I came into this hall and the Scripture was read to us, my heart leaped for joy, but I was very much disappointed when I heard that we were not to discuss whether there should and could be one Church organization, the Indian Church, but only how to best adapt the various existing Church organizations to the wants and circumstances of the country. I must say the subject of the discussion for this session as worded did not convey to my mind this idea—the subject was not 'Native Churches and their organizations' but 'The Native Church and its organization'—clearly pointing out for our consideration, as to

whether the Indian Christians were to remain divided into so many sects, or whether it was desirable and possible for them to organize themselves into one Church. (Shome 1893:157-159)

Banurji concurred with similar disappointment and an explanation that much opposition was based on misunderstanding:

The announcement by the Chairman [W. Beatty of the Irish Presbyterian Mission, Surat] that the subject for consideration was, how Mission Churches should be organised by their respective societies had disappointed him.... The object was not to blot out denominations, but to include them all in one organization. (Banurji 1893b: 171)

But traditionalist missionary sentiments carried the day. Rev. V. Ireland Jones of the Church Missionary Society in Calcutta spoke for the majority when he disapproved of Banurji's presentation:

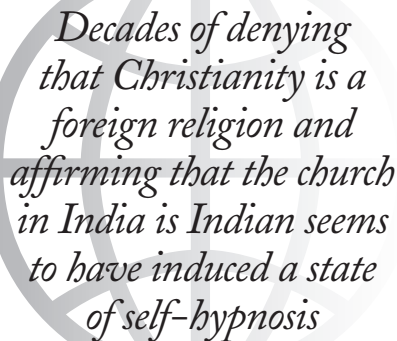
His object is a noble one, but his method is undesirable.... Unity will never be advanced by multiplying our denominations.... We are not prepared to unlearn the lessons of 18 centuries of the history of the Church of Christ, and to start afresh, *ab initio*, in some new enterprise.... all the lessons of the past have taught us to prefer experience to experiments. (Jones 1893: 161)

Similar issues were under discussion half a century later and remain relevant to the present time. Church union schemes have a dominant place in the history of Christianity in India in the first half of the twentieth century, and three of the most insightful chapters of *Rethinking Christianity in India* were devoted to this topic. P. Chenchiah dived the romantic irrelevance of those who still stood for the "experience" of the church in the West above new "experiments" in India:

It appears to a convert indescribably funny that anybody should entertain the idea that by knocking together the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, Swedish and Lutheran and American churches, an Indian Church would be produced. But for the fact that the religious man rarely has any sense of humour, the scheme would never have survived

the mirth it provokes. It is a capital joke. (Chenchiah 1938:188)

Yet decades of denying that Christianity is a foreign religion and affirming that the church in India is Indian seem to have induced a state of self-hypnosis, and certainly no one today dares laugh at the Church of South India and similar denominations and their institutions. Rethinkers who try to point out that "the emperor has no clothes" (let alone those with the courage, like Chenchiah, to mock) are ignored or caricatured. But the



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Rethinking agenda will never die, and western Christianity will never deeply impact India.

Another striking voice from the decennial missionary conferences must be heard before closing this section. Rev. H. Haigh of the Wesleyan Missionary Society working in Mysore City in south India suggested that a revolution was needed in Indian Christian literature, which might by God's grace lead to a revolution in Indian Christianity:

The principle I contend for, then, is this: *that the books which we publish should be carefully related to Hindu thought, expressed in its terms, done in its style, adopting where it can its positions, and leading on, still in Hindu fashion and in its terminology, from points of agreement to essential points of difference.* In this way we may, perhaps, be able to furnish an effectual exhibition of legitimately "Hinduized Christianity." (Haigh 1893: 667, italics in original)

That nothing even vaguely approximating to this has ever been accepted

as the basic approach to Christian communication in India is obvious to all observers. But it illustrates the lineage of the Rethinking movement while reminding that frustrating failure was the lot of early Rethinkers, and there is no human reason to hope for better at the present time.

One can only highly esteem mission leaders for meeting regularly to consult and reflect and seek to learn and improve. Yet in looking back on the decennial conferences it is evident that the agenda was too dominated by western traditions and institutions. That so many weaknesses and errors are evident in the 19th century mission agenda despite such costly commitment to meet and discuss and learn only indicates that today also it is desperately necessary to critically reflect and rethink.

NCCI Gatherings

As noted above, the decennial missionary conferences merged into the National Council of Churches in India. Kaj Baago has written the history of the NCCI, and his study indicates clearly enough that this was generally a very conservative body that did not take up the controversial issues that define the Rethinking agenda.² One exception to this is a spirited discussion in the mid-twenties on evangelism, baptism and church membership. The first meeting of the National Christian Council (named changed from National Missionary Council in 1923) in 1924 gave a full day to discussing these topics; but

at the end of the discussion, the Council agreed on a wordy resolution, the vagueness of which no doubt aimed at reconciling the differences of opinion within the Council itself (Baago 1965:42).

The Madras Christian Council which had contributed greatly to this discussion followed up with a conference in 1926 led by Stanley Jones and Kandaswamy Chetty, an avowed Hindu disciple of Jesus.³ But again there was no agreement and the discussion soon died out, with social concerns and mass movements coming to the forefront of NCCI discussions.

One NCCI gathering (which post-dates Baago's 1965 study) must be mentioned as definitely involving a Rethinking agenda. That is the 1966 National Consultation on the Mission of the Church in Contemporary India held in Nasrapur (and so commonly referred to as the Nasrapur Consultation). A book was rushed into print in 1967 in time for the 16th triennial assembly of the NCCI, and reprinted in an expanded form in 1968 including the entire text of the Nasrapur Report (Lyon and Manuel 1968). This gathering is mentioned here under conferences for broad and comprehensive discussions since papers were presented on church unity, approaches to men of other faiths, Christian higher education, healing ministry, theological education, the church in industrial India, etc.

But the conference is especially remembered for its discussion of baptism and the existence of disciples of Jesus outside the Christian churches. Two important sections of the statement are worth quoting as representative of the Rethinking position.

The new converts should, therefore, be recognisable as the first fruit for Christ of the society to which they belong, bringing their specific gifts into the fellowship. This means that the Church must not seek to impose its whole traditional style of life upon the new convert. We have to confess that because this has often been done in the past, baptism has been made to appear as an act by which a person repudiates his ancient cultural heritage and accepts an alien culture. So long as this is so we cannot judge those who while confessing faith in Jesus, are unwilling to be baptised.... In the perspective of the Bible, conversion is "turning from idols to serve a living and true God" and not moving from one culture to another, or from one community to another community as it is understood in the communal sense in India today. (Lyon and Manuel 1968:220)

...In India as in many other Asian countries the Church to a very large extent took over the foreign patterns of institution, liturgy and theology, incorporating only in a very small degree indigenous cultural values. This foreignness of the Indian Church is a serious stumbling

block to many men of other faiths, and a hindrance to the growth and the deepening of the experience of the Indian Church. We also believe that many converts, particularly from Hinduism, find it difficult to adjust to the Church in its present form. (Lyon and Manuel 1968: 233)

Discussion of these matters continued for some time, M. M. Thomas especially stirring up interaction.⁴ But the discussions, still occasionally referred to today, have produced precious little change, and the problems described in the Nasrapur Report remain as strikingly offensive now as they were then.

Numerous other conferences with a focus on specific aspects of Christian life and ministry were sponsored by the NCCI and also, after its founding in 1957, by the NCCI-sponsored Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS). These are considered outside the scope of this paper, although without question at times vital Rethinking about the church and its ministry occurred in some of these gatherings.⁵

Sat Tal Ashram Gatherings

A third example of broad conferences discussing numerous aspects of life and work for Christ in India with a definite Rethinking agenda is the Sat Tal Ashram program of E. Stanley Jones. These gatherings could easily be defined outside the area of this paper, or on the other hand could be counted as fully "Rethinking conferences" rather than as broad and comprehensive discussions. From 1931 there were special summer ashram sessions and a diversity of topics was covered over many years.

Volumes were published after the Sat Tal gatherings in 1931 and 1932. In his introduction to the 1931 volume Stanley Jones wrote that

We feel very definitely that unless Christianity becomes more truly Indian and more truly Christian it will not make much headway into the soul of India. In the Ashram we try to produce the Indian spirit, or rather to let it have full play. Westernism has made so much of our Christianity in the East unnatural and copyist. The Christianity we have produced, for the most part, is not the flowering of a national

genius touched and controlled by the spirit of Christ, so much as it is the blossom of an unnatural copying. [Jones 1932:2]

These are Rethinking words if ever any were written, but the papers presented at this and other Sat Tal gatherings were so broad and comprehensive that it seems best to list these under the latter category. At that 1931 gathering there was a series of 20 lectures on "The History of Indian Culture", another lecture series on Islam (these series were not published), a paper on "The Christian Message on Sex" and another on "Science and Religion". The 1932 gathering attempted to keep to one subject, but the chosen subject was hardly narrow and focused; it was "The Kingdom of God"!

About 25 leading lights of church and mission, often including bishops, were invited to these gatherings, and others could join the sessions as well. Jones was a Rethinking advocate and involved other such in the programme; but others who participated were hardly committed to rethink or reform church and mission in India. In theory these meetings still go on every summer; clearly for a time under Stanley Jones there was a dynamic in these meetings that excited participants; clearly today the meetings are a hollow shell. When, why and how the decline set in and how rapidly the reality evaporated would make for an instructive historical study.

Roman Catholic Conferences

Two of the greatest of activist Rethinkers were the Roman Catholic missionary Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) and the remarkable Hindu-Christian Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907). But no Rethinking conferences or movements are related to these men, although a Calcutta School in the 1930s, which traced its roots to Upadhyay, deserves mention. (See Mattam 1974, 1975 on the Calcutta School.)

Vatican II (1962-1965 in Rome) brought fresh breezes to Roman Catholics across the world, and brought Rethinking to the center of the Roman Catholic agenda in India. A special All India Seminar on the

Church in India Today was held in Bangalore in 1969 specifically to address the impact of Vatican II discussions on Indian church and mission realities. All aspects of church life were considered, but relating more deeply to Indian cultures was one of the central thrusts of the entire proceedings. Fr. Jerome D'Souza went so far as to consider the seminar "The Return of de Nobili" (D'Souza 1969:551).

But de Nobili is more easily honoured in theory than in practice. A recent book studies the changes in Indian Catholicism that followed from the 1969 all India seminar. Augustine Kanjamala advocates the Rethinking position of a life in Christ that is deeply related to Indian realities ("inculturated", the word favoured by Roman Catholics rather than "contextual"). This means moving beyond the traditional transplanting of "Christian" institutions and practices from abroad. But Kanjamala laments (in accord with other contributors to this volume) the lack of progress despite resolutions from Vatican II and the all India seminar: "the shift from the transplantation model to the inculturation model of the Church seems to be very slow as well as painful." (2000:27)

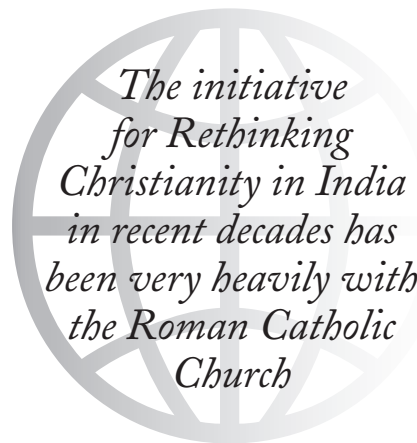
Also in the ferment stirred by Vatican II, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India instituted the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (only finally in this form in Bangalore in 1971). From and at this centre Rethinking processes both mightily impressive and stunningly progressive have emanated. The initiative for Rethinking Christianity in India in recent decades has been very heavily with the Roman Catholic Church and only nominally with Protestants. There is a great deal to be learned from the voluminous Catholic writings on Rethinking lines that continue to flow from the presses; but the majority of this literature is clearly written with modernist or liberal presuppositions and either ignores or distorts or openly disagrees with the Bible. Further discussion of this subject must sadly be curtailed due to constraints of space.

New Church Attempts

The second broad category of Rethinking groups and gatherings are the radical activists who were not content with thinking but took immediate action to create new church groups that carried out the Rethinking ideals. Three such new church movements will be briefly introduced.

The Calcutta Christo Samaj

The Christo Samaj of Calcutta was one of a number of striking developments from the stirrings among



19th century Hindus caused by the introduction of western Christianity to Bengal. Sisir Kumar Das (1974) has written an excellent survey of the period with a focus on the Brahma Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission, which were the most significant developments. He neglects to mention the Christo Samaj, which never had any great influence. The first issue of the *Indian Church History Review* in June 1967 ran an article discussing the Christo Samaj entitled "The First Independence Movement among Indian Christians," by the esteemed church historian Kaj Baago.

The antecedents of the Christo Samaj are interesting indeed. In 1868 a number of educated Bengali Christians formed an association called "The Bengal Christian Association for the Promotion of Christian Truth and Godliness, and the Protection of the Rights of Indian Christians." Krishna Mohun Banerjea was the first president and Baago suggests that the missionaries would have been relieved by this as Banerjea

was more moderate than a number of others who were involved.

Kali Charan Banurji (also spelled as "Banerjea" by Baago) was the central figure in the Christo Samaj and is one of the most esteemed of Indian Rethinkers. In 1870 as a qualified lawyer yet only 25 years of age he started a newspaper called *The Bengal Christian Herald*, later changed to *The Indian Christian Herald*. The first issue of this paper stated that

In having become Christians, we have not ceased to be Hindus. We are Hindu Christians, as thoroughly Hindu as Christian. We have embraced Christianity, but we have not discarded our nationality. We are as intensely national as any of our brethren of the native press can be. (Baago 1967: 67)

Baago summarises the next stage of development in this way:

In 1877 K. C. Banerjea and J. G. Shome went on to organize the Bengali Christian Conference creating thereby a forum where they could present their programme. They criticised the missionaries of denationalizing the Indian Christians, making them into compound converts, but first and foremost of transferring the theological and ecclesiastical differences of the West to India, thereby dividing the Indian Christians into numerous denominations. At the same time they demanded indigenous forms of worship. (1967: 68)

Banurji and Shome participated in the 1882 Calcutta decennial missionary conference as well as the 1992 Bombay conference, as already noted above. By 1887 Banurji and Shome took action and left their churches to form the Calcutta Christo Samaj, which affirmed only the Apostles Creed and had no clergy. So the broad organisation of 1868 became a Rethinking group in 1877 and then a new church movement in 1887. But this Christo Samaj survived for only a few years. Banurji's biographer, B. R. Barber, summarises that

for eight years these pioneers of unity struggled onward seeking to found the church of India; but denominationalism proved far too strong for them. The Somaj never

grew to any proportions, and finally died out in 1895. (1912:49)

It is easy with the clarity of hindsight to say that Banurji should have foreseen that there was no hope for his new non-denominational Indian church to overtake the already long established mission churches with all their resources. What practical steps he might have wisely taken in his time are not easily discerned even from the perspective of more than a century later, so it is best to honour his faith and vision and seek ways to be faithful to his insights in the present time.

The National Church of India (Madras)

Baago (1967:71f) suggests that Parani (or Pulney) Andy who founded the National Church of India in Madras was influenced by Calcutta stirrings even though his new church movement was formed in 1886, i.e. before the Calcutta Christo Samaj. Baago points out that there were also definite influences from liberal theological thought in England. Here also the point was anti-western denominations, anti-western creeds, and anti-western leadership.

Graham Houghton outlines the story of Andy and his National Church in his study of the Protestant Church in Madras (1983). He notes that Andy was born in a Hindu home in 1831, was baptised in 1863, studied in London from 1859 to 1862, becoming a member of the Royal College of Surgeons (1983:184); he does not mention the date of Andy's death. At the birth of the National Church of India in 1886 Andy spoke on the need for self-support and self-governance for Indian Christians. Quoting Houghton, "he concluded by predicting that unless Christianity was adapted 'to suit the tastes of the Eastern nations, it will continue to make little or no progress'" (1983:185).

Some few missionaries and many Indian Christians sympathized with Andy's agenda, but he had some strange ideas that militated against wide acceptance of his attempt. In his book *Are Not Hindus Christians?* Andy suggests that Adam and Eve with their children Cain and Abel are

seen in Hinduism as Parmeshwar and Parvati and their children Subramanya and Ganpati (Andy 1894:3). Indian temples are copies of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, built by ancient members of the Masonic Order (1894:5; cf. "As far as my researches go, I am convinced that Primitive Hinduism is pure Masonry" (1894:42)).

Yet Houghton's concluding analysis of why Andy and other Rethinking pioneers failed to make a lasting impact is striking indeed:

Missionaries seemed unwilling to divest themselves of their authority in the overall interests of the development of the Indian Church. The frustrations of Pulney Andy in his attempt to establish the National Church of India, make this very clear. The pathetic presuppositions held by many missionaries, fashioned in large measure by Englishmen in the service of the British Raj, was that their Indian workers were an inferior order of beings, not fit for positions of trust and responsibility. As a result, missionaries tended to justify their presence and leadership roles; and gathered around themselves in a state of dependency, the type of agents that only fulfilled their expectations. (Houghton 1983: 246)

No continuing church movement developed from Parani Andy's efforts.

The Azad Hind Church and the All Indian Federation of National Churches

More than a generation after the two new church attempts mentioned above this movement was born. R. C. Das knew the leaders and is my source for most information.⁶ The Azad Hind church started in Bombay as a congregation that sought to leave the Anglican communion in order to be Indian. It was taken to court where it was vindicated and allowed to leave. J. S. Williams (1907-?), who led the Azad Hind church rebellion against the Anglicans, was general secretary and later archbishop of the All Indian Federation of National Churches. Williams was a lay reader in St. Paul's Anglican church in Bombay when he "took charge" in 1947 (Singh n.d.:6). In 1950 the church declared freedom from all foreign control, and the Anglicans responded by withholding

all assistance, including Eucharistic celebration. In 1954 Williams broke the deadlock by administering the Lord's Supper himself; a year later he was accepted as a deacon and by 1966 Exarch of India and All Asia in the Syro-Byzantine tradition of the Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Primitive Church of Antioch (Singh n.d.:7).

Ramkrishna Modak (1891-1969) was the founder of the AIFNC in 1953. He was from a famous Maratha Christian family, married an American, and (like Williams but before him) was made a bishop by the Antiochene Orthodox Church (his Orthodox ordination took place in the USA around 1950; see Modak 1970: 219f). There seems to have been a core of valid concern in these men for what we now call contextual expressions of faith, but the controversial and combative nature of much of their program militated against that valid core developing into vital faithful movements. For whatever reasons, no lasting impact was made. Numerous other such small and ineffective new church movements could be mentioned. And of course many other new church movements thrived, including many of Pentecostal persuasion; but these generally had no element of Rethinking in their program and so are not mentioned here at all.

Rethinking Groups

Three examples of full and proper Rethinking groups will now be considered. These are all rather loosely structured groups/gatherings, lacking organizational cohesion but with a clear agenda for Rethinking and reforming Christianity in India.

A. R. C. Das' Retreat Conferences

R. C. Das gives his own description of his "retreat conferences":

Since the year 1911 there has been at various centres in N.E. and N. India a retreat conference in which a serious attempt has been made to indigenise as fully under the circumstances as possible the mode of Christian worship, social life and intellectual processes in interpreting the Bible in an eastern way both for ourselves, Christians, for the enrichment of our life and for Hindus so that the beauty and power of the

personality of Jesus Christ may be intelligibly presented and naturally understood and accepted....[Das 1957:15]

Both Indians and foreign missionaries joined in these gatherings which received a travel subsidy from the National Council of Churches. Generally 15 to 20 people would gather for about 2 weeks. That this was a rethinking group is apparent from the above and also from these further explanations by Das:

This purposeful creative retreat has been held for over half a century often more than once a year.... Over this long period we received certain insights from an unbiased study of the Bible and felt the need of an indigenous self supporting and independent (non-attached to western church-mission system) church in India if Hindus were to be attracted to Christ's Fellowship. While holding water-baptism as important for fellowship and not necessarily for salvation, we worked out an indigenous constitution suitable for the spiritual culture of India and declared the "Bharat Khrist Sangh" in 1955 by having a dozen men and women ordained representatively as original leaders and spearheads for the indigenous movement. Church congregations, Ashrams, schools, hospitals, individuals and small groups are its constituents in fellowship.... [Richard 1995:215-216]

Our methods are revolutionary but constructive. We want for the church in India an indigenous polity and form of worship, unfettered and creative theological thinking, administrative and financial freedom, in fact, a true pattern of the church of the apostles in India. We encourage simple living, sacrifice, ventures of faith, new experiments and creative efforts on the part of all workers for the kingdom of God. We have also been encouraging ashram, sanyasi and sadhu life as the natural expressions of New Testament ideals in Indian environment and as suitable approaches to Hinduism. We have also tried to foster the study of Hinduism especially its practical and popular aspects. [Richard 1995:222]

You will notice a line perhaps being crossed here as the Rethinking group organised itself and even began ordaining leaders. Note Das' further explanation on this point:

In order to advance our cause and integrate our purposes we have recently had a service of ordination of some servants of God. These have justified their calling by their life of witness and service in various ways and fields. We believe that true and authoritative ordination and appointment come only from God and man must recognise it. Most of these have never been and would never have been, recognised by the existing denominations because of sectarian bias which the fellowship discards. The understanding of the qualifications for the ministry in the churches is so far removed from those found in Scripture that many true servants of God have no chance of any recognition. Realising this sad fact the fellowship took this step of consecrating these different and independent workers for God and man. They are all unsalaried and free. All of them belong to some church or other. The fellowship is not primarily a church but in certain circumstances and in some places it has to act as a church. [Richard 1995:222-223]

I have never been able to find anyone who was associated with the Bharat Khrist Sangh. I suspect it did not survive long and never grew to any vitality. The mixed nature of the fellowship as partly a Rethinking group and partly a new church movement seems to me to have commendable features; it is in fact a rather Hindu-type loose affiliation that avoided the meticulous organisational standards of the west.

The Madras Christo Samaj

The Madras Christo Samaj is one of the organizational expressions of the striking group of south Indian Christians who have become generally known as "the Rethinking Group." P. Chenchiah and V. Chakkarai were the leading figures, and the son of the latter and nephew of the former, V. C. Rajasekaran, has outlined the development of this striking association of thinkers. Rajasekaran [1993:116-117] lists only 10 men as constituting the group, but it seems certain this is a list of only the leading lights and there must have been many others associated with the ideas and ideals that were propagated.

This Rethinking group started as the Young Liberal's Club in Bangalore,

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apparently in the teens of this century. They developed a habit of meeting annually in May for two weeks, and these meetings became known as the Bangalore Conference Continuation (i.e. the continuation of the conferences initiated by the Young Liberal's Club). At these annual meetings papers were read, in the words of Rajasekaran,

on various topics relating to the Christian Church and the Indian Christian community and these were discussed frankly and consensus arrived at on important issues. [1993:117]

Sadhu Sundar Singh met with members of this group on his south India tour in 1918, and following that the Christo Samaj was organised in Madras. According to Rajasekaran, there was a distinctly evangelistic motive and

many non-Christians used to attend the weekly prayer meetings held in the residence of V. Chakkarai and took part in the common worship and heard the Christian message. [1993:117]

But primarily the Rethinking Group proclaimed a prophetic message to the body of Christ in India. They started a weekly journal called *The Christian Patriot* that ran for ten years; the nationalistic flavour of the title gives enough indication of the contents. Later they took over the publication of *The Guardian*, another Christian weekly. They formed the Indian Christian Book Club which published their best known and most striking work, *Rethinking Christianity in India*, and also *Asramas Past and Present*, which is available now again in a recent reprint. Chenchiah took over editorship of *Pilgrim* magazine, responding to an appeal from R. C.

Das. The final form under which this striking group of men met was as The Verandah Club, known as such since they met on Chenchiah's verandah in Egmore, Madras. This really was a dialogue group of Christians and Hindus who discussed together and prayed together over various concerns. [Chenchiah had earlier been forced to resign as editor of *Pilgrim* due to his advocating praying together of Christians and Hindus.]

These remarkable men and their message continue to be discussed wherever there is any serious discussion of indigenous Christianity in India. They remained loyal to the church and dreamed of impacting the church towards contextual faith and life. Yet today they are honored only in name (if at all) and their impact has been negligible. A few years ago in reviewing the a new collection of the shorter writings of V. Chakkarai I wrote that

It must be counted one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century Indian church that the prophetic mantle of Chakkarai and Chenchiah fell to the ground unclaimed (or, arguably, was removed from the earth by God). [Richard 1994:9]

D. A. Thangasamy quotes a striking word picture from Chakkarai that summarises the aim of the Madras Rethinking group: Christianity in India should become "a river filled from the rains from heaven' and not remain 'a lake fed by the still and stagnating waters from the Western Churches.'" [Thangasamy 1966:3]

The Indian Christian Theological Conference

The Indian Christian Theological Conference first met in 1942 in Pune and twice subsequently. The Bulletin published after the discussions shows the depth of interaction and desire to rethink. R. B. Manikam wrote on the origin of the meetings that

In recent year Christians in India, both national and foreign, have begun to rethink the Christian message in the context of the rapid changes of the modern nation. [Manikam 1950:2]

R. C. Das reflecting on these conferences pointed out that

Missionaries were in the vanguard of this new line. One should understand the reason for this. They come from independent, prosperous and contented countries and had been brought up and trained in a free atmosphere, their minds were liberal and unafraid to think and judge. [Das 1975:215]

The second gathering was at Serampore in 1946. P. Chenchiah's rather biting comments on this conference deserve a careful hearing. He wrote that

As you heard the papers and followed the debates, you felt that everything was proceeding on safe, ordained text book lines, and that the dangers of deviation from the main road, even out of curiosity did not exist. "Revelation" was the subject. The good old things were said about it in the good old manner.... The perturbation caused by the suggestion before and after Tambaram that the Old Testament should not be regarded as integral to Christian Scriptures has not evidently died out. Arguments not altogether convincing rallied to the support of Judaism in the name of Jesus who did more to over-rule than consummate it. It was equally significant that Sankara should prove a red-tag to Indian theologians and it was left to a Catholic Father to defend him.

This Sankara business is rather amusing. The Western theology of the Roman Catholic type derives its philosophical and theological support from two pagans, Plato and Aristotle, who remain the Gurus of Western theology and philosophy, even as they are parents of its culture. German philosophy, generally anti-Christian, was always absorbed by Christian theology. Existentialism as pure philosophy was not only pessimistic but also non-Christian. In the latest literary developments in France "existence" is regarded as essentially irrational. These philosophers however are woven into the texture of Christian theology by the magician Barth without any offence to the sensitive Christian conscience. Was it not a fashion till yesterday to swear by Barth, in the theological colleges? Some of the papers at the Conference did not get rid of the Barthian neurosis.

Yet the theologians showed and manifested all the symptoms of

dengue at the mention of Sankara. Why? Is it prejudice or panic? The point to be noted is that the papers kept to Barth and did not pay homage to Sankara. So all should be well. [Chenchiah 1950:6-7]

Chenchiah still managed to end his analysis of the Serampore gathering on a positive note:

Not by design, but by accident a layman and a non-theologian presided over the Serampore Conference. If Indian Christian theology is to be founded by laymen who have the vision of laymen's Christianity—have we not already indicated to the world that we are going to rescue theology from ecclesiasticism? In Hinduism theologians were all laymen. Another straw to indicate how the wind is blowing. [1950:9]

But the wind in fact was blowing another direction, and after the third conference in Jubbalpore in 1950 the meetings ceased. The *Indian Journal of Theology* was begun, allegedly with the purpose of furthering the aims of these gatherings. R. C. Das' analysis of these developments is controversial indeed, but needs to be considered. He wrote that

Probably, dismayed by the influence of Indian thought unfettered by western control, and concerned for the preservation of the purity of authoritarian theology, the N.C.C. together with leaders of theological education thought it wise to discontinue its original conference and its somewhat radical publications. After some hibernation and cogitation they have now brought forth a child of fear and caution. [Richard 1995:266]

Judging motives is dangerous, and Das at least qualifies his judgement above with a "probably". On the journal itself, however, and its very name, it is impossible to disagree with R. C. Das:

We do not want an Indian journal (paper, ink and get up), we want Indian Christian theology. But the Indian disciples of western theological gurus are so grateful, docile and obedient that they have no mind of their own. So far the literature produced by these faithful followers are a clear echo of foreign masters—a veritable His Master's Voice. India has a mind. She need not borrow from others though she would not despise others. Second hand thoughts, however true and clever,

will never effectively communicate the Christian message to the Indian heart and soul. [Richard 1995:265]

The strength of western ecclesiasticism destroyed the budding effort at rethinking theology that the three Indian Theological Conferences to some extent evidenced. There is little sign of any original biblical Rethinking emanating from any of the theological seminaries of India which are a western training model that continue as strongholds of Westernism in Indian Christianity.

Summary Reflections

Looking over the men and movements discussed above some striking trends are apparent. Few missionaries played any significant role in Rethinking Christianity, although there were notable exceptions like E. Stanley Jones. There were also few Indians from Christian families involved. Rethinking has largely been dominated by converts to Christianity from Hindu homes, and by those striking individuals who refused to convert but affirmed themselves as Hindu disciples of Jesus Christ.

It is also striking that a wide range of theological perspectives are evident in those who shared the common ground of concern for deeply relating discipleship to Jesus with classical Indian cultures. Roman Catholic, mainstream Protestant, and independent Indian positions are apparent. It is striking that evangelicalism hardly seems to have noticed the Rethinking agenda. But an evangelical group that approximates to a Rethinking Group should perhaps be noted.

The TRACI (Theological Research and Communication Institute) community that continues to function in Delhi had potential to develop as a vital evangelical rethinking group, and to a certain extent it was this for a time. In 1975 there were 5 members of the community; by 1980 there were 20. Their original purpose statement said that "the members are committed to research and writing for the task of communicating the gospel in modern India." [TRACI 1975: unpaginated]. By 1981 this was adapted to read

The members are committed to research into the application of

the Christian faith to the whole spectrum of Indian life and culture, and to develop indigenous patterns of Christian worship, witness, and work. [TRACI 1981: unpaginated]

But it is doubtful that this should be considered a rethinking group on the lines of those of Das and Chenchiah. In the second issue of the *TRACI Journal* (May 1975) Vishal Mangalwadi wrote that

We in TRACI are seeking to thrash out a comprehensive biblical philosophy of life for India and the manner and means of communicating it. At the moment the purpose of my articles is to stimulate the Church and reassure it that it alone has the ultimate answers to the challenges that are before the country. [Mangalwadi 1975:42]

The guiding force of TRACI was Dr. Bruce Nicholls, who after a consultation on the nature and mission of the church in 1983 himself entered the mainstream of the church by becoming a CNI pastor. It seems that evangelicals in India are blind to the radical implications of their "Bible as sole authority" theology, as they blindly promote traditional western church methods and theologies as adamantly as high church Protestant and traditional Roman Catholic teachers. While Das and Chenchiah and Banurji before them also had a theology of the church, as everyone conversant with the New Testament must, it does seem that TRACI was too deeply committed to the presently existing church to properly qualify as a Rethinking group.

Conclusion

Surveying the present scene it seems fair to conclude that Rethinking has had a meager impact on Christianity in India. Stimulating movements with multiple publications are apparent from those advocating Dalit theology and from those pressing for a pluralistic theology of religions. But the classic Rethinking agenda is largely forgotten. Token discussions in seminaries and isolated individuals who live and minister in line with Rethinking (acharya Daya Prakash Titus is a noteworthy example) are all that can be found.

A very strong case could be made that a new Rethinking Group and Movement is the need of the hour, but in light of the failure of previous Rethinking efforts this is highly suspect. Institutional Christianity in India has shown that it is easily able to resist and outlast Rethinking efforts at reform. A new Rethinking effort aimed at changing the churches will almost surely fail as its predecessors has. (Might the dynamic Rethinkers in present day Catholicism actually succeed in changing that church? It seems unlikely.)

One of the lessons of the history above seems clearly to be that deeply Indian Christianity will not arise from the existing Christian churches. Herbert E. Hoefler pointed this out in his fascinating study of *Churchless Christianity*:

Can Christianity really be absorbed into this totally different religio-cultural environment? Certainly, it cannot be done by the church, but it has already begun among the non-baptised believers as we have seen in our survey.... I disagree therefore, with those who hold the church to blame for lack of progress in developing indigenous church forms....The real move toward an indigenous Christian faith can never come from the Christian community. It must grow out of the 'Churchless Christianity', with the help and encouragement of the church. (Hoefler 1991:207-209)

"Churchless Christianity" is not a happy terminological innovation; Hindu disciples of Jesus who stay out of the church are also staying out of the Christian religion, and to suggest that they are somehow still within "Christianity" seems false and in some cases is offensive. But Hoefler's point is clear: contextual discipleship to Jesus will not develop from existing Christian churches, and Rethinking within (or even on the edges of) Indian Christianity and its institutions is an exercise in futility.

This insight no doubt lies behind some of the "new church" Rethinking efforts discussed above. But these invariably were reacting against existing churches and provoked strong reactions from those churches as well. A reactionary atmosphere is hardly

suitable for building sound contextual patterns of discipleship to Jesus. And most such movements still remain within the ambit of what Hoefer condemned as inadequate; there was already too much "Christianity" imbibed and influences from the Christian community will invariably taint efforts towards deeply contextual life in Christ.

If the Rethinking goal of deeply contextual discipleship to Jesus in Hindu contexts is to be realized it will surely only be through new movements that are born in Hindu society. The way to contextual discipleship to Jesus in the Hindu world must be through the birthing of Christ centered movements within Indian cultures and communities. Suspicion from Hindus towards efforts in this direction (that this is a new face (or new spin) for the same old Christian agenda) are understandable and must be respected; and in time it must be shown that this is indeed something strikingly different.

This is hardly a new idea; it is as old as the Gentile mission of the New Testament. Jerusalem "Christianity" had remarkably slight impact on the Gentile mission that eventuated in the Christian religion of the Roman Empire. The apostle Paul who from early times led that diversified movement never sought co-workers from the Jerusalem churches, but appointed them from within his own network. And what resulted from his efforts was strikingly different from anything Jerusalem orthodoxy could have conceived (or desired). Likewise, orthodox Christianity will no doubt be shocked and offended by new movements that arise for Christ in the Hindu world; the corollary that Hindus will be pleased with such developments rather than offended as by traditional Christianity can also be expected to prove true.

Concern and efforts towards contextual movements of discipleship to Jesus within Hindu communities thus seems *a*, if not *the*, legitimate succession from the Rethinking movements of the past. Will a new generation of Rethinking activists arise? **IJFM**

Notes

1. I am indebted to Dr. Siga Arles of the Center for Indian Missiological Education for coining the title for this paper.

2. For example, Baago is deeply critical of the National Missionary Council (the first name of what later became the NCCI) position on the Indian independence movement, saying that its "statements were so vague, woolly and cautious in their choice of words, that they could be interpreted both ways.... One cannot but deplore its lack of courage. Had the National Council taken a positive stand for political independence it might have encouraged many more Indian Christians to active participation in the struggle for freedom" (1965:28-29). In his epilogue Baago has a question: "One wonders why the N.C.C. in the past fifty years contributed so little to the *indigenisation* of the Church in India." (1965:85, emphasis in original)

3. See Chetty's brilliant paper "Why I am Not a Christian: A Personal Statement" in Baago 1969.

4. See my discussion of some of Thomas' later writings on this subject in my study that rethinks community (Richard 2000).

5. A list of CISRS sponsored consultations can be found in CISRS 1987: 139-140, which includes such topics as the gospel to the Indian intellectual, the meaning of baptism and conversion in the context of Indian culture, the authority of the Bible for Christian action in India today, etc.

6. None of Das' references to these movements appear in my collection of Das' writings. See pp 91ff in chapter 8 of his unpublished autobiography (Das 1975).

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