

Gospel Ferment in India among both Hindus and Christians

## Jesus, My Master:

### "Jesu Bhakta" Hindu Christian Theology

by *Herbert Hoefler*

**O**n my last trip to India, Professor Ravi Tiwari of Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Chennai kindly gave me a copy of his biography of his father, a Brahmin convert and theological professor: *Yisu Das: Witness of a Convert* (ISPCK, Delhi, 2000), Dr. Yisu Das, of course, was a member of the church, though—as with most non-dalit converts—he did not fit in. As I mused on the elements of Dr. Das' theology, I started pulling together other experiences of theological thinking that I had found among "Christian Bhaktis" (as Dr. Das called himself), particularly among the non-baptized believers in Christ.

At the start of Professor Tiwari's stimulating biography, he provides the summary of his father's faith, as he had presented it to a conference in 1963. Listen to "The elements of the Christian Faith, which have appealed to me" (p. 5):

1. The presence of the living Christ. He quotes the Christian mystic Thomas a Kempis: "That man only is rich with whom Jesus delights to dwell."
2. A person worthy of our devotion. In contrast, Dr. Das speaks of the Hindu Bhakti tradition in which "the devotees have a nobler character than the gods they worship." I am reminded of the anthropological axiom: People become like the gods they worship.
3. Jesus' teaching of God as our personal Father. "This teaching has given to Christian prayer simplicity, directness, dignity, which is seldom found elsewhere."
4. Christian tradition's emphasis on service. "A Christian Bhakta is ipso facto a servant of humanity."

#### *A Christ-ized Hinduism*

What struck me in this theology and in other of Dr. Das' reflections was the "Hindu" character of the theologizing. A major reason why Hinduism has lasted as a tradition far longer than any other religion has been its ability to absorb new thoughts and faiths. A Hindutva advocate would have no difficulty accepting Dr. Das' theology within the Hindu fold. Dr. Das also sees himself as part of the Hindu bhakti tradition, with Jesus as his "ishta." (p. 24) From my research among non-baptized believers in Christ (see reprint with additional chapters, *Churchless Christianity*, William Carey Library, 2001), I am convinced that the Christian faith will permeate India only as part of Hinduism, what I called "Christ-ized Hinduism." (pp. 200-06) What might such a "Christ-ized Hinduism" look like? What is it beginning to look like? Obviously, it is not for a conservative Lutheran pastor from the

---

*Herbert Hoefler is a former missionary to India, having served from 1968–1983 with the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. He is currently professor of theology at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon.*

USA to write that theology. It is for the theology to develop gradually over many decades from within the Jesu bhakta community of faith in India (see the writings of Dayananda Bharati as a recent example). We are only observers and cheerleaders. But we are also witnesses, and it is important that we share what we see developing.

The wider church deserves to know, both for their prayers and for their reflection. The wider church has a responsibility to help the whole Body remain within the orthodox tradition of the faith. The wider church needs to know, also for what they can learn and gain from this fresh approach to the faith. In fact, I can see this indigenous Christian theology of India providing an approach to the faith that will have a strong appeal to the post-modern youth of the West.

What is it like? Is it orthodox? Let us see. I propose below to utilize the traditional categories of Western systematic theology and share what I've heard from the Jesu bhaktas.

### *Doctrine of God*

The Hindu bhakti tradition emphasizes the grace and love of God. God is totally approachable and caring. The common symbol for this character is the mother, so female deities and gurus are common.

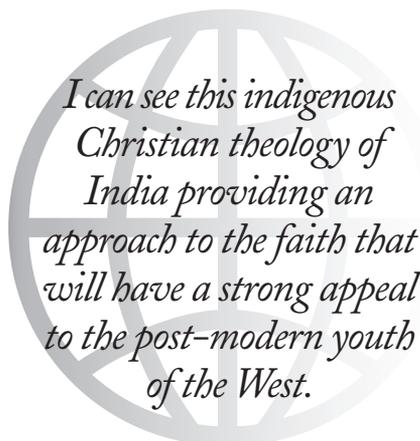
Among Jesu bhaktas as well, the overriding concept is that God is love. The righteous wrath of a holy God against sin is not spoken of. As illustrated above by Dr. Das, the common symbol for this character, however, is the biblical one of the heavenly Father. Though the symbol is different, the content seems to be quite similar to the Hindu tradition.

Jesu bhaktas have no problem affirming the Trinity. They respect the standard ecumenical creeds as the historical wisdom of the church. There are Hindu systems of logic, in fact, that can more easily accommodate a concept of Three-in-One than our Western Aristotelian system. Dispute on this great Mystery of God seems useless. They are part of the Hindu tradition that the nature of God is ultimately beyond human comprehen-

sion and description. We know God is love, and that is what is important.

### *Doctrine of Man*

Most Hindu philosophy sees the human as essentially spiritual in nature. This view is grounded in the doctrine of Brahman and the human as fundamentally part of the Great Soul of all Being. Among Jesu bhaktas, there is a similar sense of humans' essential spirituality. This understanding is not rooted in Hindu thought but in Hindu culture. In popular spirituality, to be truly human one must develop one's spiri-



tual nature. One who is unrealized spiritually is just an animal.

Therefore, Jesu bhaktas have no difficulty admiring and affirming spiritually realized people, no matter what religion they are in. Jesu bhaktas have found in Jesus the Master Who can lead and empower them to spiritual growth, to growth in character and in communion with God, to be fully human.

The fallenness of man is understood not so much as a rebellion and disobedience. Our fallenness is evident in our bent to lead a self-centered life rather than a God-centered life. Our fallen nature is expressed in our stupidity, in our foolish focus on the material instead of the spiritual. Man is not viewed primarily as a sinner. He is viewed as a fool. Jesu bhaktas are not averse to speaking of humans as sinful, but the emphasis is not on breaking of laws and commandments but on failure to be all that we were created to be.

### *Doctrine of Salvation*

In classic Western theology, soteriology focuses on the substitutionary atonement achieved for all humankind by the sinless sacrifice for sin provided by the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity. Once again, I have not seen Jesu bhaktas reject this theology, but I also have not seen that they used it to express their own sense of redemption. The juridical image used by St. Paul, where a judge declares the sinner righteous because the debt has been paid for him, is not an image drawn out of the Hindu cultural tradition.

Rather, the radical grace of God is understood as His relentless desire to bring us into communion with Him. Many high caste and Muslim converts, for example, have come to faith through a personal vision of Jesus. They experienced a direct encounter with God's gracious call in a mystical vision. They felt, "Who am I that you should come to me? I have no choice now but to follow."

Typically, these converts did not come to faith through an intellectual acceptance of Jesus as the Savior from sin. Jesus is not so much the gracious Savior as the gracious Master. He takes even me under his wing. I know his undeserved love. I receive Him into my heart. My sinfulness is not paid for. It is enveloped in His loving embrace.

### *Christology*

Hinduism has a strong tradition of God becoming incarnate. The tradition is more docetic than the Christian tradition. But it is an affirmation of the basic theology behind John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son..." The evidence of Jesus' incarnation is his sinless character. The proof that He is God incarnate is that He is totally love, for God is love. Jesus' sinlessness is a concept coherent with both Hindu and Muslim theology. Many Hindu philosophers have no difficulty affirming that Jesus was one of the incarnations of Vishnu. Orthodox Muslim theology affirms that all of the prophets were faultless examples of the revelation God called them to proclaim.

Jesus' sinlessness, however, is not related so much to soteriology (to be the unblemished "Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world"). It is related to His worthiness and right to be my Master. My goal in life now is simply to realize Christ, or better, to let Christ live in and through me in His grace. The relationship of the Jesu bhakta with his Lord Jesus is similar to that a Hindu bhakta has with his guru.

The Jesu bhakta affirms, however, as Dr. Das stated in the beginning of this article, that Jesus is far worthier of our obedience and trust. It is the living Christ that Dr. Das emphasized. It is the Master available right now to all. He was dead but He is alive. He is here. All you need to do is let him enter your heart. You will have the gracious, trusted Master for your soul. The Jesu bhakta strives to be in the same "guru-sishya" relationship as Jesus' first disciples.

Jesu bhakta theology certainly is Christo-centric. There is a danger that it becomes Christo-monistic. Bhakti mysticism runs into all the theological dangers that mysticism always has in the history of the church. Yet, it is a theology of the church. Is there a place for this Jesus mysticism of India?

### *Sanctification*

The Jesu bhakta's on-going spiritual relationship with Jesus his Master, his Guru, is the focus of his life. As Christ lives in and through him, he reaches out in the love of Christ to all around. The sinless Christ calls him to moral perfection.

The bhakta does not presume to judge others. He focuses on his own imperfections. He has no hesitation getting guidance and inspiration from wherever he can in his path of sanctification, certainly from Christian Scriptures and saints but also from other religious traditions. The Jesu bhakta affirms his caste and his culture and tries to live as a light of Christ among them. Even if s/he cannot freely proclaim Christ, everyone knows who his ishta deva is. They can see what one becomes worshipping this God.

The Holy Spirit is welcomed as the Spirit of Christ. The Holy Spirit wills to work in me the holiness and intimacy to which my Master calls me. I pray for the "fruit of the Spirit" in my life. I seek a heart of forgiveness and generosity and peace. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is my daily meditation. I want the Beatitudes to live in me: to be meek and pure in heart and merciful and a peacemaker. "O living Lord, dwell in me, through the Holy Spirit. Create in me a new heart."

### *Word and Sacraments*

In classical Christian theology, the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace: the Word and the Sacraments. He works faith in the heart and effects sanctification. At this point, it is common that the Jesu bhakta begins to part from the classical tradition. S/he is not averse to the Sacraments. Rather, I have found that they desire them fervently. However, the Sacraments are a ministry of the church. If you are not in the church, you do not usually have access to this blessing.

Furthermore, many of these converts have come to faith not through the church's regular ministry of Word and Sacraments but through personal experience. They prayed to Jesus for healing, and it happened miraculously. They had an unexpected vision and personal call. They attended a mass rally or heard a television evangelist or read a tract, followed the call to ask Jesus into the heart, and experienced a peace they had never known before. When Jesus can meet me so powerfully in this way, what do I need the church or the clergy or the Sacraments for?

The Jesu bhakta honors and uses the Holy Scriptures. Typically, however, he did not come to faith through reading the Bible. Nonetheless, he thirsts for the spiritual insight and guidance that these Scriptures can provide. His Master speaks to his heart in the Gospels. He spiritually partners with the saints of the past in the stories and truths the Bible provides. He is part of that great heritage of those who have known this same loving Master. S/he communes with them through God's Holy Word. Scriptures are not

primarily a source of doctrinal truths as a well-spring of spiritual truths, to be sought and treasured and absorbed.

The Bible is readily available. The Jesu bhakta does not have to enter a church to receive God's ministry through the Word. His Master can reach him at home or in a book or through a Bible correspondence course. However, the Sacraments are typically available only within the walls and rules of the organized church and its clergy.

### *Church and Ministry*

Our discussion of the Word and Sacraments leads us directly into the Jesu bhaktas' attitude toward the church. The difficulties of non-baptized believers in Christ with the organized church are well known and well documented. If s/he could receive these rites without joining the church and without alienating her/his community, he would readily receive this unmatched communion with the Master.

If the Jesu bhakta decides to take Holy Baptism, it is essentially an act of commitment to his Master. It is not a joining of another social community or a rejection of his caste. If s/he participates in Holy Communion, it is a spiritual communion with the Lord and a spiritual affirmation of the Christian fellowship. It is not participation or membership in an organization.

The fact of the matter is that the Jesu bhakta typically feels no particular need to participate in public worship. The Hindu tradition of bhakti worship takes place primarily in the home and in private. The church's rites seem like external shells. Why not get to the heart of it all directly and personally?

The words "church" and "Christian" are notorious among high caste Hindus and Muslims. Also in the West, we can find this same revulsion with what these words have come to stand for, especially in Europe and among post-modern Americans. Clergy still are welcomed and respected if they live up to their spiritual calling.

Even when the church and its clergy are accepted, they are just seen as options for those who need that kind of thing for their spiritual development. They are nice to access as and when needed, but they are so overbearing and demanding the moment you show any interest. It is better to just stay away.

The Master is not confined to the church. He is not controlled by the clergy. He comes whenever and wherever He is allowed. And that is the point anyway, isn't it?

### *Eschatology*

There are many Western Christians who profess belief in reincarnation. Significantly, I have not found that belief among any non-baptized believers in Christ in India, however. Probably they are more aware of the implications of the Hindu teaching than Westerners are. According to the Hindu concept of "samsara," reincarnation occurs eternally. We always were and we always will be relentlessly carried forward and back by the law of karma. The biblical understanding of heaven is a great comfort and release for converts from Hinduism.

A concept that Jesu bhaktas typically hold in common with their Hindu compatriots is the eternal nature of the soul. In fact, this concept fits more logically with the Hindu teachings of Brahma and samsara than with the biblical teaching of the bodily resurrection. Nonetheless, the doctrine of the eternal nature of the soul has its own long and illustrious tradition within the history of the church. The Jesu bhaktas' theology cannot be counted unorthodox on this count.

### *Inadequate or Heretical?*

We are brought, then, to the final question of this theology's authenticity. Is it heretical? Does it deny fundamental truths that endanger the essence of the faith? Or is it simply inadequate, undeveloped, and false at points?

Most of what has been presented above is to be found in the church's own history of theology. In every congregation are those who espouse one or the other of the unorthodox positions described above. However, if we put it all together as a single whole,

is it acceptable? Can we call these Jesu bhaktas as fellow believers? Even if we are not members in the same organized church body, are we fellow members of the Body of Christ?

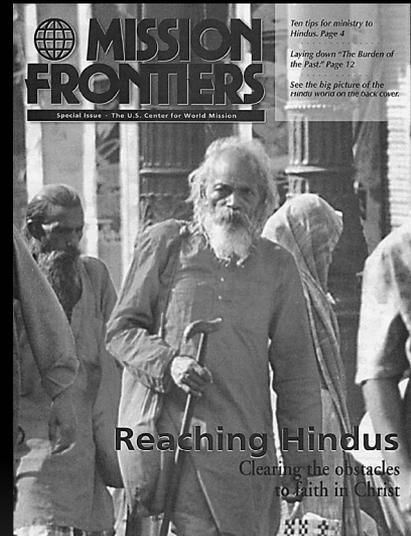
Secondly, is this theology an adequate basis for our evangelistic proclamation? If this is the formulation of the faith that makes sense to the vast majority of India, should this be how the Gospel is presented? Should Dr. Das' four elements of the Christian faith be the simple truths to which people are called? Along the way, we have recognized views that are inadequate, but maybe that is the only way some people can grasp the Gospel.

Next, can we accept that all human theologizing is inadequate? What was held as incontrovertible truth in one generation has been changed in the next. A theology that makes sense in one culture and in one way of thinking can prove totally inadequate in another. As we hear another theology coming from a totally different cultural context, we must listen with humility and openness. God's Spirit can also work in their hearts, and in new and significant ways. They may have something to teach us. They may have a theology that we need for sub-cultures of our own society.

Finally, are we comfortable that these members of the Body of Christ remain outside the fellowship of the church, outside our regular ministry of Word and Sacraments? Are there ways that we can help to nurture and guide this faith movement without imposing our traditions and categories and demands upon them? As I have indicated several times already, I anticipate that the church will need to relate to many believers in these non-institutional ways also in the West.

The church is not the Kingdom of God. The church is a servant of the Kingdom. God in Christ is the Kingdom. His Spirit "blows where it wills." We in the church are called to try to keep up with our missionary God. What is He doing among the Jesu bhaktas of India? **IJFM**

# reaching hindus:



## Clearing the Obstacles to

# faith in christ

To obtain a free copy  
of this special,  
24-page issue of  
*Mission Frontiers* with  
seven key articles, call  
1-626-398-2249

or write  
dan.eddy@uscwm.org.

 **MISSION  
FRONTIERS**

is a publication of the  
U.S. Center for World Mission.