

The Possibility of a “Hindu Christ-Follower”: Hans Staffner’s Proposal for the Dual Identity of Disciples of Christ within High Caste Hindu Communities

by *Brian K. Petersen*

Introduction

The discussion over “insider movements” is the latest in the longstanding debate over suitable contextualization in mission contexts. The key issue at hand is whether or not new followers of Christ should be allowed to develop as disciples within the context of their own birth communities, whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, etc., or rather be extracted out of this social setting into a more exclusively “Christian” sub-culture. The late Jesuit missionary scholar, Hans Staffner (d. 1997), proposed that such an approach is entirely appropriate within high caste Hindu communities in India. His thinking was best summarized in his seminal 1988 publication, *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community*.¹ This paper will discuss Staffner’s primary arguments in the light of the biblical case study centering around Cornelius (Acts 10-11, 15), a potential biblical paradigm for appropriate “insider movements.”

Contrary to what some might surmise from the author’s emphasis on movements that are largely outside traditional Indian expressions of Christianity, he is not unappreciative of the incalculable benefits to the nation of India made by individuals from those same church traditions. Many Indian Christians and their leaders have lived influentially for Christ at a great price to themselves and their families. However, a few of these leaders have also concluded that their witness for Christ might have been enhanced many fold, had they taken the step of staying within their own community as *Hindu Yesu Bhaktas* (i.e., devoted followers of Christ who remain within their Hindu family and social community). The conclusion of one such well-known Christian leader, the Rev. Dr. Yisu Das Tiwari, is very suggestive in this regard. His son, Ravi Tiwari, published a biography on his father and included the transcription of an interview he conducted toward the end of Dr. Tiwari’s life. Here follows the poignant answer to one of Ravi’s probing questions:

Ravi Tiwari: “You are 87, things happened when you were 23, a long 64 years of your experience with Christ and Christianity. If time can roll back, and you are again in 1933/34, would you still take the same course?”

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Yisu Das Tiwari: "Christ is my 'ishta,' he has never left me, I will never leave him, but I would not have joined the Christian community. I would have lived with my people and my community and been a witness to them."²

He would not have joined the Christian community? How could he say that? How could anyone refuse to have fellowship with other believers in Christ? But Dr. Tiwari was not merely referring to *koinonia* between disciples. The Indian "Christian community" is an altogether different type of social system. It is a legal entity in India that operates under its own civil law code, one derived from the British legal system of the 19th century. However, these concerns will not be specifically addressed until the second major section of this paper, which will analyze Staffner's specific contribution to missiology in the Hindu context.

Still considering Dr. Tiwari's amazing reflection about wishing he would have remained within the Hindu community, from where would such a seemingly strange, even bizarre conviction come? It appears that it had something to do with his passion for being a witness within his own Hindu community; anything beyond that would only be speculation, although Dr. Tiwari's regret at the loss of his Hindu birth community identity is certainly common for many high caste Indians who have followed Christ. The tension between full commitment to biblical faith and loyalty to one's family and community is certainly a theme that can be traced throughout mission history; indeed it forms the backdrop for the above-mentioned discussions regarding "insider movements." This very issue first came to prominence concerning the case of the Roman centurion named Cornelius in Acts 10-11 and 15.

Cornelius and the Retaining of Birth Community Identity

This is a familiar story and one that has been mined repeatedly for various missiological nuggets over the years. Hans Staffner himself made reference

to the significance of these chapters in Acts. He viewed them as a biblical basis for his contention that Hindus should be allowed to live out their discipleship to Christ within the context of their own socio-cultural settings.³ For the purposes of this paper, the author will raise several questions about Cornelius and his own possible tensions regarding the potential loss of Roman birth community identity.

1. God's Answer to the Prayer of Cornelius

Luke is clear to point out that God chose to answer the prayer of this

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Gentile military officer. The nature of that answer was restated in chapter eleven of Acts as follows: "He [Peter] will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved." (Acts 11:14) The natural question arises: what was it that Cornelius was requesting from God? It seems logical, based on the clear answer that God gave him, that he had been asking God to reveal to him how he might be saved, how he might be made righteous before God, fully accepted as one of his people. This would certainly be the most appropriate spiritual attitude that a truly devoted "God-fearer" could display in his spiritual journey toward the Most High. It's interesting to note that several chapters later Luke records the question of another military man, Paul's jailer in Philippi, who asked: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (16:30-31) That may coincidentally be an accurate echo of the divinely

implanted desire that likewise dwelled in the heart of Cornelius.

2. Contemporary Jewish Answers to this Question

During the Jerusalem Council, James made it clear that the law of Moses had continued to be faithfully preached in the synagogues throughout the Roman Empire, to Jews and whatever Gentiles would listen. (Acts 15:21) That message was the same as the one being affirmed by the PBBs (Pharisee Background Believers) who attended the Council and not by James, Peter, Paul and Barnabas. These PBBs argued forcefully that "the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." (15:5) It's not surprising that similar Jewish believers had previously been appalled when they first heard that Peter himself had not held to such essential Jewish standards during his visit to Cornelius. (11:1-3)

What was the specific message that Second Temple Judaism communicated to interested Gentiles? How did the synagogues explain to Gentiles that they could be truly saved? Jews of that day regarded one ritual observance as by far the most significant for a non-Jewish man like Cornelius to embrace. Circumcision. It was by this minor surgical procedure that they could transform their socio-religious identity to that of a member of God's special nation. Without it Gentiles like Cornelius would still be regarded by many Jews as merely one of the "uncircumcised," a synonym for a non-Jew or Gentile, a member of those pagan nations who were still outside of God's special concern. This despite whatever positive things he might have done on the Jews' behalf.

In addition to circumcision, the normal pattern for a Jewish proselyte was to next be baptized by immersion in a pool of flowing water, dressed in new clothes and finally allowed to enter the temple in Jerusalem for the first time in order to present a sacrifice

to the Lord. He was now a full-fledged member of God's chosen people. He had in essence changed his people group. In his highly regarded work on Jewish missionary activity in the second temple era, Scot McKnight notes the following regarding this socio-religious change:

...(Pharisaic) Jews were...especially concerned that the 'God-fearers' 'go the whole way,' that is, that they convert to Judaism through circumcision and so assume the yoke of the Torah.⁴

...a seeming majority of Jews...did not accept partial conversion as sufficient for full inclusion in society...Thus, it is not surprising that Jews demanded of their converts that they live according to the same laws and obey the same customs.⁵

When Paul asks, 'If I am still (*et*) preaching circumcision, why then (*et*) am I being persecuted?' he probably means that he previously did 'preach' circumcision in some sense, although he no longer does and consequently he is being persecuted (Gal. 6:12). Which is to say, there was a time in Paul's life when his zeal...was directed, as these Judaizers' is now, toward compelling (cf. Gal. 2:3) 'God-fearers' to complete their conversion by undergoing circumcision, or more sociologically, by joining the Jewish community. To sum up, Galatians shows that there were Judaizers, some of whom had become Christians, who spent their energies for the total conversion of Gentiles, Gentiles who had previously become associated either with Judaism or Judaism in its newer, Christian form.⁶

The question must then be asked: what might have been the attitude of a high-status person within Roman society, such as Cornelius, to these stringent demands that the Jews of his day required of Gentiles such as himself? Why was it that he had not yet moved past the seemingly inferior category of merely being a "God-fearer" on the relative periphery of Judaism (Acts 10:2) to that of being a full proselyte to the Jewish faith and nation?

Cornelius would be communicating unequivocally that he had made a sociological break with his community and comrades.

3. The Social Consequence of Circumcision

Circumcision has been with us at least since the third millennium before Christ in Egypt. It has been in and out of vogue ever since, depending on the particular cultural biases of specific peoples. How did Greeks and Romans view it in the first century?

The Greco-Roman perspective on the ritual removal of the foreskin is actually the exact opposite of the Jewish passion for this rite of socio-religious identification. The Romans, as the Greeks before them, regarded the human body as the epitome of perfection in its original form. Any alteration of its natural state or appearance was considered to be a form of bodily mutilation. Thus, it is not surprising that the Greeks categorized the condition of having circumcised male genitalia as belonging in volumes on pathology. The absence of the foreskin was regarded as akin to a type of disease. Fittingly there are various ancient medical texts that detail procedures for foreskin restoration; from their perspective, circumcision was obviously a condition that should be reversed, at least cosmetically.

One of the primary locations for social interaction between ancient Greek and Roman men was the complex of buildings called the *gymnasium*. Of course the exercise, athletic training, bathing, social discourse and business discussions that went on at these strictly male sites were essentially nudist in character (*gymnos*, naked). Whether or not a man was circumcised was then obvious to everyone present. However, Romans and Greeks were almost universally uncircumcised. Thus, in the context of a Greco-Roman *gymnasium*, to attend these functions with a 'naked' penis (i.e., one without the 'covering' of a foreskin) was quite literally considered to be lewd and socially repugnant

behavior. One might consider such inevitable exposure of the glans in a circumcised man as socially equivalent to the brazen entry of a nudist into any public setting today.⁷

4. Possible Social Impediments to Proselyte Conversion for Cornelius

What might have been some of the factors that kept Cornelius from 'going the whole way' in his relationship to the God and nation of Israel? What is it that may have prevented him from willingly laying aside his Gentile birth community identity in the exchange? First of all, it seems entirely logical that Cornelius would not have had any desire to receive circumcision. It certainly wouldn't have been a matter of the relatively short-lived discomfort involved in such a minor procedure; one can only assume that this centurion was a battle-hardened warrior of the Roman legions. However, it may very well have been extremely difficult for Cornelius to imagine himself continuing to meet the common Roman expectation of regular attendance in the gymnasiums and baths in a circumcised state. The sight of his 'uncovered' sexual organ would have elicited at least derision, more likely moral outrage. What would be even more certain is that Cornelius would be communicating unequivocally that he had made a sociological break with his community and comrades: he was now part of the nation of Israel, the sign of circumcision marking him as a naturalized Jew; he was no longer fully a Roman.

Additionally, if Cornelius were to have become a full Jewish convert, he would also have been expected to adhere to all of the contemporary Jewish norms of behavior. Most telling would have been the demand that he not enter the homes of Gentiles, much less enjoy meals with them (cf.

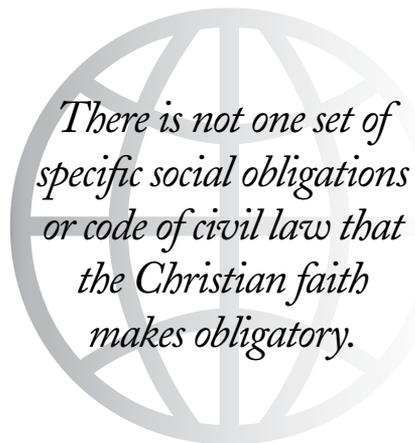
Acts 10:28; 11:2-3). Such a picture of potential social extraction must have been unimaginable for Cornelius. How could he bear to cut himself off from family, friends, and fellow soldiers, the Roman community in which he had been born and reared? Naturally no one can know exactly what things might have actually entered into Cornelius' possible turmoil over his spiritual and social status, but it's entirely possible that he might have been praying to God along these very lines:

Lord, do I really have to become a Jew in order to be saved? Can't I just follow you as a Roman? I know that there are some things in my culture that clearly go against the moral teachings of the Old Testament. I've already repented of my worship of the gods of Rome. But certainly not everything about our customs and our social relationships is evil! Please, God, answer me! And not just for my sake alone, but also for the sake of my whole household and all the other Romans I know as well, who likewise need to be saved as much as I do and yet do not want to completely forsake their people.

5. The Relevance of Cornelius' Experience for the Jerusalem Council

All speculative internal monologues aside, it is undeniable that the case study concerning Cornelius found in Acts 10-11 became the paradigmatic experience for the formulation of the primary decision of the Jerusalem Council in chapter fifteen. How did this come about? The ongoing debate regarding the necessity of a change in a Gentile's socio-cultural identity in addition to repentance and faith in Christ was stopped in its tracks when Peter spoke. He reminded all of those gathered of what God had communicated through his encounter with Cornelius. (15:7-11) No longer were Jews, including Jewish Christians, to require Gentile followers of Christ to comprehensively break off their relationships with their community; they could be a Greek or a Roman and still identify themselves as such.

However, the second part of the Council's decision concerns the ongoing spiritual growth of the new Gentile believers. These four prohibitions all have to do with their sanctification.⁸ Although they were free in Christ to continue living as salt and light within the context of their birth communities and did not therefore have to transfer into the Jewish socio-religious community, yet these Roman and Greek believers needed to make sure that their influence was backed by authentic godly living. Participation in idolatry



and sexual immorality were two glaring weaknesses of the Greco-Roman cultures of the day; thus, they must be careful not to compromise in these areas for the sake of their walk with Christ and witness within their societies. This would also help them to be more readily accepted by their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters, as the reality of idolatry and immorality were regarded as distinctive features of what it meant to be a "Gentile" in that world (and thus unacceptable to Jews).

Hans Staffner: An Advocate for High Caste Hindus to Retain Birth Community Identity

The insights that have been gleaned from chapters 10, 11 and 15 of Acts will now be related to the writings of Hans Staffner S.J. (1909-1997), especially his work *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community* (1988).

1. Overall Outline of Staffner's Contribution

Staffner articulated his basic premise in two succinct statements. On the one hand, he argued that "Hinduism is a culture that has room for many religions."⁹ In other words, what most people have come to think of as *the* Hindu religion is in reality not singular in its expression at all. As such, it allows for a wide diversity of both what one believes (creed) and what one practices (form of worship). This theoretically opens the door for Hindus to choose to put their faith in Christ as their exclusive path to salvation and standard for all of life. At the same time, there are social expectations within the various Hindu communities that are not purely at every individual's discretion. Even though these are always changing and evolving, Hindu families and specific sub-castes (*jatis*) do ask certain things from their members (e.g., a range of occupational and educational choices, dietary norms, attendance at family and community celebrations, care for one's parents and grandparents, etc.).

On the other hand, Staffner also asserted that "Christianity is a religion that can become incarnate in any culture."¹⁰ Whatever the social system, Christians have always been able to live out their discipleship to Christ. There is not one set of specific social obligations or code of civil law that the Christian faith makes obligatory. For example, choices regarding occupation, education, diet, dress, etc. are in general much more open for followers of Christ than they are for Hindus. Neither do believers of necessity have to adhere to one precise form for the succession of a family's inheritance. There might be many acceptable ways of doing this. In contrast, however, what Hindu civilization makes optional (religious creed and practice), Christianity makes very obligatory. In order to be a faithful follower of Christ, one must believe and worship within fairly narrow theological parameters. This is in stark contrast to the enor-

mous amount of theological wiggle that one finds among the various contemporary and historical forms of Hindu belief and practice.

2. Hinduism As a Civilization, Not a Singular Religion

Many scholars today would affirm that Hinduism is, at the very least, a huge family of religions, some more related to each other than are others.¹¹ While there may certainly be some 'mainstream' Hindu ideas and practices (e.g., karma and reincarnation; bhakti and yoga), it is this author's opinion that none of these make up an irreducible minimum of 'Hinduism.' The continuing existence of Hindu Marxists, especially those who disclaim any belief in or allegiance to any of the varied Hindu theological conceptualizations, makes the existence of an absolutely essential set of Hindu practices and beliefs highly unlikely. These Marxists are still legally regarded as "Hindus" and they are accountable to "Hindu" civil law.

David C. Scott, Emeritus Professor at United Theological College (Bangalore), has observed:

It is well known that in the Hindu tradition there is no fixed belief system or cult that is obligatory for all Hindus. Membership is primarily a matter of birth. Being a Hindu means being born into a social group which is recognized as belonging to the Hindu community and on avoiding everything that would lead to one's separation from the group into which one was born.¹²

It appears that Staffner based the core of his thinking on that of an Indian theologian and activist who lived and wrote extensively about 50 years before Staffner started writing on these issues in the mid-twentieth century. That influential figure was the Bengali Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. It was this same Upadhyay who first suggested the possibility of being a 'Hindu-Catholic,' maintaining a dual identity within his own Brahmin community.¹³ Staffner referred to Upadhyay's differentiation between *samaj* and *sadhana dharma* (in

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this instance, *dharma* is roughly equivalent to 'duty') to distinguish between what was essential and non-essential within Hindu civilization. He took a quotation from Upadhyay's biographer, B. Animananda, as follows:

Our dharma has two branches: *samaj dharma* and *sadhana dharma*. The former treats of life and living matters, customs, eating, dressing... While *sadhana dharma* is of the individual, its object is *sadhana* and *mukti*. A Hindu, as far as *sadhana* goes, can belong to any religion, provided he keeps intact his *samaj dharma* by submitting to the Social Code.¹⁴

Staffner went on to explain that Hindus could choose among any number of *margas* or means of salvation (or not to even believe in the possibility of salvation at all). This was one's *sadhana dharma* or chosen way of spirituality. Upadhyay and Staffner both argued that there's no authoritative religious body or book accepted by all Hindus that could ever definitively say that a person's *sadhana dharma* could never be following Christ alone as "the way, the truth, and the life." The only non-optional requirement for a Hindu was to maintain his social connections and expectations, those to his family and social group, whatever that might involve in any given sub-cultural Hindu context.

3. The Popular Understanding of Hinduism within the Indian Christian Community

There is a parallel between the attitude of first-century Jews to Gentile culture in general, the beliefs and practices of the "uncircumcised," and that of the Indian Christian community to Hindu culture.¹⁵ Jews could not conceive of an uncircumcised Gentile as ever being fully acceptable to God. By definition, to be a Gentile was to be outside the pale of being part of the divinely chosen nation. The only complete

remedy was to forsake one's birth community identity and literally become joined to the Jewish people. Likewise, many if not most Christians in India assume that to live and practice "Hinduism" in any form (including that of a 'Yesu Bhakt') is to still be a pagan person who cannot be saved. "Hindu" religion and culture must be completely and decisively rejected in order for a Hindu to become a Christian and thus be saved. Even well into the last century, this is why some churches in India required that converts be given a piece of beef to eat at the time of their baptism, believing that this would, practically speaking, provide a tangible means of rejecting their 'cow-worshipping' Hindu culture at the point of joining the Christian community.

4. The Essentially Communal Nature of Indian Civil Law Codes

Is there anything within Indian society that serves to validate this view that one must fully repudiate his/her Hindu birth community as a requisite part of becoming a Christian? Staffner tells us that the decision made by the Jerusalem Council, to affirm that a Gentile believer like Cornelius might maintain his/her social identity, was overturned in India by the British in the nineteenth century:

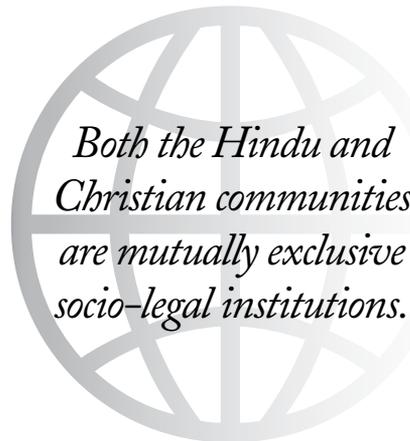
The very calamity from which the Council of Jerusalem saved the Christian religion over took the Christian religion in India on May 16, 1865. Just as the Pharisees had insisted that nobody could become a Christian unless he renounces his national civil law and accepts the Jewish law, thus in India since 1865 nobody can become a Christian unless he renounces the Indian civil law and accepts the English law which has become known as the Christian Personal Law.¹⁶

Before 1865, the British Privy Council had said argued that "since Jesus did not preach any civil law and Christians therefore can practice their faith under any system of civil law, there is no difficulty for a person who has renounced the Hindu religion (i.e., the worship of idols, etc.) to continue to live under the Hindu Civil Law."¹⁷ However, the British did feel the need to provide an adequate law regarding succession (i.e., the standard process by which an inheritance is passed on to the appropriate heirs) for those British who lived in India. This was done by means of the Indian Succession Acts of 1865. It was something that had no application for Indians themselves; it was intended exclusively for these particular foreigners who lived among them. Thus, it explicitly states that this British way of handing down an inheritance has no relevance for any Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains or Sikhs. However, as it finally was formulated, not all Indians were exempted from the provisions of this decidedly foreign-inspired legislation. It was written into the text of this law that its provisions would additionally be applied to every Indian convert to Christianity. Why was this done? According to Staffner, the observation of those who drafted this law was that Indian Christians followed "in everything the ways of the British resident."¹⁸ This included the use of English, dress, diet, customs, etc.

However, it was not the intention of the British rulers of India to insist that every Christian submit to these foreign cultural norms. They didn't really care if Indian believers continued to live under the types of laws governing succession that had long existed in India; thus, they made a provision for any group of Indian Christians who wanted to remain under Indian civil law. They could therefore apply for an exemption from this Indian Succession Act. Some did so and were granted permission to be governed by their own laws. However, most Christians in India have been quite satisfied to be placed under laws that were distinctly

"Christian" and foreign in their origin. Being further separated from anything "Hindu" is good; being more closely associated with what is western and thus "Christian" is also good.

After Independence in twentieth century, the Indian Supreme Court made it virtually impossible for Christians to live under the national civil law (labeled as "Hindu Personal Law," though applying to all Indians except Muslims, Christians, Jews and Parsis). Christians now were to be exclusively governed by a set of civil laws that were applicable only to their community,



based on those that had been originally created for British citizens of the second half of the nineteenth century. The Indian Succession Act of 1865, written for foreigners, evolved into a significant part of what is today known as "Christian Personal Law."

5. The Ramifications of a Separate "Christian Civil Law"

What happens legally when Hindus choose to become Christians, i.e., are baptized within any organized body of the Christian church in India? From the moment of their baptism, they are no longer legally regarded as a member of their birth community and thus of their own joint family, since that family is firmly located within the "Hindu community." Though keeping their own inheritance (as it would have been at the time of their conversion), their offspring are no longer eligible to receive any inheritance from their Hindu extended

family, since that community's civil laws no longer apply to them; they have moved legally and permanently into the Christian community and are under its distinctive civil code.

Thus, both the Hindu and Christian communities are mutually exclusive socio-legal institutions. Membership into either of these sociological realities within Indian society usually happens at birth (the norm for the vast majority of both communities); otherwise a change in belonging is created by formal conversion or reconversion. A selection from the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 (part of Hindu civil law) makes this clear:

The term 'Hindu' in this clause [the clause being "cease to be a Hindu by conversion"] must be understood in the wide sense...which includes all Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. So a person continues to be a Hindu [living under the application of all 'Hindu' civil laws] even though he may have converted from any one to any other of these religions [i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism] and his case will not be covered by this clause. Conversion in the present context implies that the person has voluntarily relinquished his religion and adopted another religion [i.e., Christianity or Islam are primarily in view here] after formal ceremonial conversion. [Author's emphasis] A Hindu does not cease to be a Hindu merely because he professes a theoretical allegiance to another faith, or is an ardent admirer and advocate of such religion and its practices. However, if he abdicates his religion by a clear act of renunciation and adopts the other religion by undergoing formal conversion, he would cease to be a Hindu within the meaning of this clause.¹⁹

Within the context of conversion to Christianity, what is the foremost marker of a decisive choice to follow Christ? Without question, it is the rite of baptism.

6. The Meaning of Christian Baptism in the Indian Context

In the initial section of this paper that discussed the 'Cornelius Event'

and its implications, it was noted that circumcision was regarded by the Jews of the second temple period as the clear sociological marker of a Gentile's entry into the socio-religious community of Israel. It signaled a rejection of one sociological identity for another. In the light of the communal nature of the various sets of civil laws that have evolved in Indian society, the act of Christian baptism can be regarded as roughly equivalent in significance. From the perspective of Hindu attitudes in general and that of Indian civil law, baptism, in whatever particular form it is practiced by the churches, primarily signifies birth community change. It is not merely the usually public profession of a believer in declaring his spiritual allegiance to Jesus Christ. It is indeed more socio-logical than merely spiritual.

Julian Saldanha is another Jesuit scholar who has spent considerable time investigating these matters. His Ph.D. dissertation, published in 1981, is a landmark work that carefully investigates all the intricacies of Indian civil laws and their relevance for missiology.²⁰ In one of his more recent journal articles, he asserted that "...in the Indian context, baptism is like circumcision in Old Testament times: the mark of transference of communal affiliation."²¹ He also refers to the well-known Jain convert Manilal Parekh as having affirmed that the act of baptism in India had come to mean "absolute severance from one's own community, from one's own birth and kin, from one's own national, cultural and even spiritual heritage..."²²

Thus, it seems that high caste Hindus in India who are attracted to the teaching and person of Jesus Christ, who want to respond to his invitation to follow him and no other, looking to him exclusively for their eternal salvation and as their ultimate authority in life, have only one option before them: to be legally and (often) actually extracted out of their birth community identity and culture. Their cultural

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heritage is subsequently to be rejected as 100% spiritually bankrupt, morally repugnant, and of no practical benefit whatsoever to their new life as a disciple of Yeshu.²³

This has naturally resulted in a widespread aversion to baptism as currently practiced and understood by Indian law and society, whether Christian or Hindu. Is there any way to obey the injunctions given so long ago in the decision of the Jerusalem Council: (Peter's appeal in Acts 15:10-11) "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are"; (James' conclusions in 15:19, 24) "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God... We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said."

7. Proposed Solutions to This Problem

Hans Staffner was not satisfied to merely point out the cultural misunderstandings and legal issues that appear to prevent more high caste Hindus from exclusively following Christ. He also wanted to put forward potential solutions to the impasse. Peter did this in his encounter with Cornelius by giving a gospel message that did not contain one reference to the abandonment of Gentile community identity or the assumption of a proselyte one. He gave the gospel by grace through faith. Here are three answers for Hindus that Staffner offered:

(a) Appeal for an Exception

Both Staffner and Saldanha sought to encourage groups of culturally homogeneous Hindu converts to Christianity

to ask the courts for an exception to their inclusion in the Indian Succession Acts (1865, 1925, 1956). This has happened in the past, though rarely; it is still theoretically possible.²⁴ However, in Staffner's opinion, it was unlikely that those who are already Christians would have sufficient motivation as a group to make such an appeal.

(b) Push for the Uniform Social Code

Staffner also suggested that Christians might join with others in India who desire to see the enactment of a one-size-fits-all set of civil laws in India. In other words, to bring Indian law into conformity with what is assumed to be the case among the rest of the world's nations. Then there would be no "community" barriers to cross. All would be a part of one Indian social community. Proponents argue for such a thing based on a desire for increased national integration.

There is an article in the Indian Constitution (Article 44) that directs the government to eventually seek and implement such a law code. However, Staffner observed that in 1995, the Supreme Court stated in one opinion that Indian government officials "are not in a mood to retrieve Article 44 from the cold storage where it is lying since 1949."²⁵ Even though there are many advocates for all Indians to live under the same civil code, the Christian community, as well as India's Muslims, seem content and committed to continuing to be distinct, operating at an arm's length legally from the majority of the nation's peoples.

(c) Affirm and Encourage Non-Baptized Believers

Only in his final article, published in 1997, did Staffner make reference to the existence of 'Yeshu Bhaktas,' Hindus whose spiritual allegiance and devotion is focused on the Lord Jesus Christ. His observation (and that of

Saldanha) is that he wishes that the Church would grant greater acknowledgement, freedom and support to them.²⁶ The legal and sociological realities of India are not the fault of Hindus who look to Jesus for their salvation. From the Catholic side, the present author's personal investigations have raised the possibility that there are genuinely some believers among these Yeshu Bhaktas that are related in some way to Catholic ministries. However, evidence is also there that syncretism is quite prevalent among some of them, comparable to the Cristo-paganism that has been so common in the history of Latin American and Filipino folk Christianity.

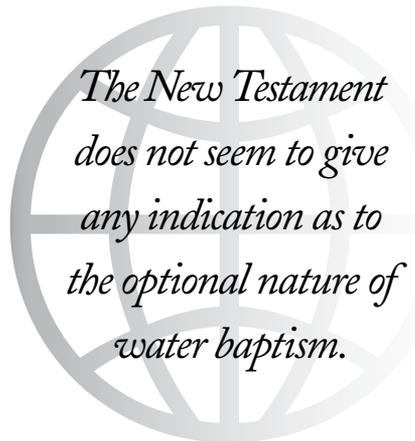
On the evangelical side, Herbert Hoefler's studies are well known concerning the phenomenon of NBBCs (non-baptized believers in Christ) in Chennai and Tamil Nadu.²⁷ The title *Churchless Christianity* is somewhat problematic for some, as it implies that followers of Christ may actually fulfill all of God's purposes without having a visible expression of *ekklesia* and *koinonia*, in whatever cultural expression might be most appropriate in their context. However, as Greg Parsons rightly points out, Hoefler was being descriptive rather than proscriptive and was primarily asking that the reality be recognized and addressed as an important priority for encouragement and whatever help might be deemed appropriate.²⁸

The present author realizes that this approach (NBBCs) is likely the one to allow the most number of high caste Hindus to make commitments to Christ. However, he is still disturbed about the lack of baptism. The New Testament does not seem to give any indication as to the optional nature of water baptism. Is there any possible solution to this dilemma?

(d) Affirm & Encourage Hindu Yeshu Bhakt Fellowships

There have been and continue to be groups of Yeshu Bhaktas, still living in

and identified with their Hindu birth communities, who meet together and also practice a contextualized form of baptism. They recognize the need to maintain social and cultural solidarity with their Hindu families and communities. However, they are committed to also remain true to the Bible as their rule for faith and practice. As such, they believe in and practice baptism. However, it is normally never referred to with western words or practiced in traditional modes. For example, these things are adapted: the word "baptism," dressing in the typi-



cal baptismal clothing used in many Indian churches, and immersing the new believer in a more Indian style of 'dipping' vs. lying the candidate back into the water, as normally happens in many Christian churches.

Two of the Hindi words that are being used by HYBs in North India are *jal sanskar* (water ritual or sacrament) and *guru diksha* (initiation into submitting to the absolute authority of a master and teacher). The present author is aware of many Hindus who have taken this form of *jal sanskar* (called *guru diksha*) by means of immersion in a nearby river. The possibilities of linking the biblical meanings to this event have appeared to be intact, in addition to the disassociation from the negative meaning of "community change" that is inherent in Christian baptism in India.²⁹

It might be noted that such options never appeared on the pages of the publications of Staffner, nor of those

of his Jesuit colleagues. This may very well be due to their working within the confines of a Christian tradition that practices a strong hierarchical form of church polity and has an extremely sacramental approach to the two church ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper). These have then become necessary from a salvific perspective. Any deviation is therefore unacceptable within the traditional Roman Catholic context.

Final Thoughts

This paper has sought to examine some insights and proposals about which Dr. Hans Staffner wrote over his entire publishing career (1955-1997). These were listed in relationship to the case study of appropriate contextualization concerning the Roman centurion. Here are several of the most salient points that have been made, together with some further comments.

1. Hinduism can more accurately be described as a civilization than a single religion.

There is no standard set of theological ideas that must be held; there are no common religious practices that are binding on all. In its diversity, Hinduism allows a broad number of creeds and forms of worship (*sadhana dharma*). Hindus exist who believe in many gods, others deny his existence, yet others worship only one personal God, and still others follow any number of philosophical expressions of Hindu religions (e.g., monism). There are also Hindus in contemporary India who have not limited themselves to those religious options that first originated in India. They are open followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, believing and submitting themselves to the teachings of the New Testament, practicing baptism and the Lord's Supper (though in non-traditional forms that communicate the same biblical meanings), and yet have found it both biblical and natural to stay within their own communities to live out their faith rather than join one of the traditional expressions of the church in their culture.

2. Hindus are usually more concerned with maintaining basic social solidarity within their families and communities.

This is the impetus behind these HYBs opting not to make decisions that would result in a change of birth community identity. They believe this to be their birth-right as those whom our sovereign God has chosen to be born in India. Like Cornelius, they know that some things within their Hindu culture are wrong and must be avoided; yet they believe that an absolute prohibition on everything within their cultural background would likewise be unbiblical, robbing them of means by which to redeem selected Indian cultural forms for the sake of the Kingdom.

3. British laws in India gradually created an intrinsically communal system of civil law.

This has made conversion to the Christian faith something to be equated with a rejection of one's own family and community in favor of that made up of primarily nominal Christians. (Evangelical Christians in India are a small minority within the overall Christian community.) It makes mandatory a life lived under laws originally drafted for foreigners living in India. It has taken some human rights (e.g., family inheritance) away from those who follow Christ.

4. Benefits from remaining in one's own community are more about witness than maintaining rights. Ultimately, following Christ is not about us. All disciples of Jesus are called to be salt and light within their own social contexts, within their own given network of relationships. These are the people who know us the best and can therefore truly judge concerning the presence of genuine change for the better. When encountering opposition, the best biblical course of action would normally be to stick it out and allow one's life to do the witnessing.³⁰

This is already producing fruit for the Kingdom among Hindus who likely would not have listened to traditional Christians in the same way.

5. However, realism suggests that some HYBs won't be able to stay in family/community, at least initially. While it is theoretically true that Hinduism 'ought' to allow for anyone to choose the God they worship, the Guru they obey, yet there are certainly families, indeed communities, that still require more than just not leaving for another community. The continual worship of false gods and idols is not optional. In the past some Hindus who follow Christ, even in culturally sensitive ways, have been told they're dead to their family and excluded from their community. This will undoubtedly continue to some degree in the future. However, it certainly is hoped that situations of irresolvable conflict within families will decrease with the increase of committed HYBs.

6. Seeking community change is any Indian's right.

Certainly any Gentile could follow the Torah after putting his/her faith in Christ. However, they needed to clearly understand that salvation had nothing to do with such community change and law-keeping. Today there continues to be a need among some *dalits* and *adivasis* (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) to change communities in formally converting to Christianity, thus helping them begin to escape an oppressive social system that has held them in bondage for centuries.

7. There may continue to be high caste HYBs who come to this new status by way of first becoming Christians.

Similar to Brahmabandhab Upadhyay over one hundred years ago, some of these new HYBs may feel compelled to ask to be received back into their Hindu community (*prayascitta*), perhaps due to the hurt they caused their

families in the way that they followed Christ and previously separated themselves completely.³¹ But this would only be done as they simultaneously affirm their exclusive allegiance to Christ. This has already begun to happen and is producing fruit for the Kingdom among Hindus who likely would not have listened to the witness of traditional Christians in the same way.³²

It is this author's heartfelt prayer and desire that HYBs will be encouraged and accepted by their traditional Christian brothers and sisters. May their tribe increase in India for the sake of the Kingdom of God! **IJFM**

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- ¹ Hans Staffner, *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community: Is a Synthesis Between Hinduism and Christianity Possible?* (Anand, Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1988). In order to appreciate the full development of Staffner's thinking, see also his following works: *The Open Door: A Christian Approach to the World Religions* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1978); and *The Significance of Jesus Christ in Asia* (Anand, Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1985). His first and last journal articles on this same issue would also be especially helpful: "Christian Hindus?" *The Clergy Monthly Missionary Supplement*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (March, 1955), pp. 174-185; and "We Can Neither Be Fully Christian Nor Truly Indian Unless We Get Rid of 'Christian Personal Law,'" *Legal News and Views*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (March 1997), pp. 18-20.
- ² Ravi Tiwari, *Yisu Das: Witness of a Convert* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 24.
- ³ This was evident in his first published article on the subject: "Christian Hindus?" *The Clergy Monthly Missionary Supplement*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (March, 1955), pp. 174-185. He also made reference to it in his last published article, which came out in the same year of Staffner's death: "We Can Neither Be Fully Christian Nor Truly Indian Unless We Get Rid of 'Christian Personal Law,'" *Legal News and Views*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (March 1997), pp. 18-20. The same biblical perspective can also be found within the previously mentioned book, *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community* (103-104).
- ⁴ Scot McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 107.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 104-105.
- ⁷ For a thorough discussion of these issues, see the following: Frederick M. Hodges, "The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to *Lipodermos*, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the *Kynodesme*," *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Fall 2001, Vol. 75: 375-405*; and Clinton E. Arnold, "Acts" in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Vol. II*, Clinton E. Arnold, general editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 355.
- ⁸ With regard to this perspective on the interpretation of the prohibitions, please see the following: Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 460-465; Robert W. Wall, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. X: the Act of the Apostles*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002: 220; and C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, Vol. II*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998. See also the following web-based sources: Michael Morrison, "Decree of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), Part 1: The Literary Flow," 1999 (www.wcg.org/lit/bible/acts/decree1.htm); and Michael Morrison, "Decree of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), Part 2: The Decree's Rules and Motivations," 1999 (www.angelfire.com/md/mdmorrison/nt/Decree2.html); and also Tim Hegg, "Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council: Did They Conclude that the Torah Was Not For Gentiles?" (www.torahresource.com/English%20Articles/Acts%2015.pdf). Timothy C. Tennent uses the same type of interpretation of Acts 15's prohibitions in "Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (July-September 2006), 105-106.
- ⁹ This section of Staffner's book is found on pages 83-99.
- ¹⁰ This topic is discussed on pages 103-118.
- ¹¹ Heinrich Von Stietencron has argued that Hinduism is not one, monolithic religious entity. However, he has also said that "what we call 'Hinduism' is a geographically defined group of distinct but related religions, that originated in the same region... and jointly contributed to Hindu culture." See his article, "Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term," in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer and Kermann Kultke, eds. (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989/2001), 46. Such thinking stands in great contrast to the various European "Orientalist" formulations of Hinduism of the 19th century. This perspective of 'comparative religion' seemingly felt compelled to squeeze Hinduism into a singular religious mold for the purposes of evaluating it along side of other "great" faiths. For a thorough survey of the principle scholars who have contributed to the gradual correcting of this 'Orientalist' position (though the debate is still ongoing), see the relevant section of R. L. Hivner's M.A. thesis, "Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ: the Life and Work of K. Subba Rao of Andhra Pradesh, South India with Special Reference to His Songs," (University of South Africa, 2004), 6-25.
- ¹² David C. Scott, "Baptism in the Indian Context—an Event of Separation or Human Solidarity?" *The Christian Century*, January 31, 1990, p. 105.

¹³ The short nature of this paper imposes limits on the important sub-topics that can be covered. Suffice it to note that the present author in no way endorses Roman Catholicism as a normative expression of evangelical faith. The reasons for Upadhyay's conversion to Catholicism, after first having made his commitment to Christ, have more to do with the historical antipathy that many Protestant missions of the time had toward Hindu (read "Indian") culture as a whole, rather than merely with theological considerations.

¹⁴ B. Animadnanda, *The Blade: The Life and Work of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay* (Calcutta: Roy and Son, n.d.), 200-201. This biography was most likely published in 1947. Staffner quotes this passage on p. 89 of his book under consideration.

¹⁵ The author's comments here are based primarily on his own experience within the evangelical branch of the Indian Christian community.

¹⁶ Staffner (1997), 18.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹⁹ Mulla, D. E., *Principles of Hindu Law, Vol. II*, 19th edition, S. A. Desai, ed. (New Delhi: Butterworths, 2005), 140-141. Note that the same reasoning is used with regard to other aspects of civil law issues. For example, see pp. 283-284 (Uniform Law of Succession) and pp. 573-574 (The Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Acts of 1956).

²⁰ The present author was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to discuss some of these issues with Dr. Saldanha. The title of his dissertation is *Conversion and Indian Civil Law* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1981).

²¹ See Julian Saldanha, "Unbaptized Disciples of Christ," *Third Millennium*, No. 3 (1998), 25. This is an idea that Saldanha attributes originally to well-known Indian Christian theologian, M. M. Thomas without documenting its precise source.

²² Quoted in Saldanha, *idid*.

²³ In other words, they are led to understand that there are no cultural forms within their Hindu upbringing that are 'redeemable' under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of his Word. This would include prayer postures, musical styles, appropriate dress, etc. The whole heritage, baby with the bathwater, is to be eliminated.

²⁴ The 1925 Reformed Indian Succession Act stated the following: "The State Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, either retrospectively from

the 10 May 1865 or prospectively, exempt from the operation of this Act the members of any race, sect or tribe to whom the State government considers it impossible or inexpedient to apply this Act or any of its provisions." Quoted in Staffner (1997), 20. See also Saldanha (1981) for another encouragement for groups of Christian believers to ask for an exemption, 140-141.

²⁵ Reported in JT 1995 (4) Supreme Court 331, quoted in Staffner (1997), 20.

²⁶ Staffner (1997), 19. See also Julian Saldanha (1998), 26-27.

²⁷ Herbert E. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001).

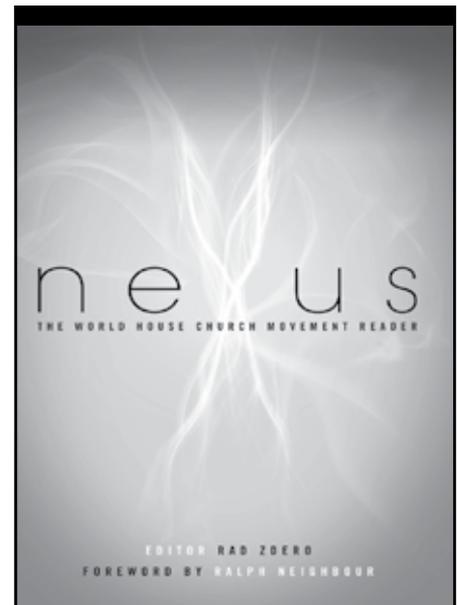
²⁸ Greg H. Parsons, "What is the Church?" *Mission Frontiers* (January-February 2006), 30. See also Timothy Tennent's comments on Hoefler's book: "The Challenge of Churchless Christianity: an Evangelical Assessment," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (10/1/2005).

²⁹ A friend of the author's took several individuals down to a river in north India. A nearby policeman got agitated and asked whether they were about to practice 'baptism' (i.e., in the mind of this Hindu policeman, this baptism would be sociological conversion, taking a person out of one socio-legal community and putting them into another). As soon as he was told that they were not doing so, that they were giving *jal sanskar/gurudiksba*, he was mollified and didn't bother them anymore. That was purely a demonstration of one's spiritual allegiance and way of salvation (*sadhana dharma*), something that most Hindus have the right to choose for themselves. Multiple examples of less extractive obedience to Jesus' command to baptize can be added to this.

³⁰ See I Corinthians 7 and I Peter 2-3 for a description of the impact that followers of Christ can have when encountering trials within the context of their own birth community. To leave and create some type of 'Christian ghetto' is not considered as a viable option.

³¹ For an understanding of this rite in the life of Upadhyay, see Timothy C. Tennent's excellent treatment in his *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations: The Legacy of Brahmabandhav Upadhyay* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 347-354.

³² The author personally knows one individual who took *prayascitta* and also *sanyaas* in recent years. His status now at a Hindu *swami* has given him innumerable opportunities for witness and ministry, now in an ashram.



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