

Community Dynamics in India and the Praxis of “Church”

by *H. L. Richard*

Introduction

This paper is a reworking of a paper prepared 7 years ago for a Rethinking Forum gathering in south India and published in *Dharma Deepika*. In the original paper I referenced the work of M. M. Thomas, mentioning his debate with Lesslie Newbigin, and Hans Staffner. The Newbigin–Thomas discussion was referenced recently (2005) by Timothy Tennent. Studying more deeply into that discussion, I decided to do a new analysis of their interaction for this gathering, and leave out the last sections of my previous paper.

Questions of community must be central whenever Indian cultural and social contexts are considered. The gospel of Christ was first proclaimed in the Greco-Roman world with its strong Jew–Gentile division; in India the gospel enters a society with a distinctive, in fact unique, amalgam of communities.

“Community” has not been a popular topic for study or reflection in the history of Indian church and mission. One obvious reason for this is that community dynamics as seen in India today are of relatively recent origin.¹ But a number of scholars have sought (again quite recently) to bring this issue to the forefront of attention, as will be noted below. And traditional Christian action has either assumed a position on community questions or perhaps rather stumbled without intent into such a position, and this assumption/position needs to be identified and analyzed.

The topic to be addressed is vast enough that some basic parameters for the paper that follows need to be outlined. Despite the importance of the history of the development of Indian communities, historical questions will only be touched very secondarily. Christian responses to Indian communitarianism must be based on careful biblical study, but this paper will again only briefly touch upon important questions regarding the exegesis of relevant biblical texts.² Rather, this paper will seek to define the present state of Christianity in India in relation to community-based Indian society, followed by reflection

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on new patterns of "church" in line with what is currently being referred to as "insider movements." Different expressions of Christians in community will be described from the invaluable information available from the Anthropological Survey of India, with questions raised about the various models presently in existence. The "insider" approach will then be considered by reevaluating the dialog on this topic (not in this terminology) between Lesslie Newbigin and M. M. Thomas.

The Work of the Anthropological Survey of India

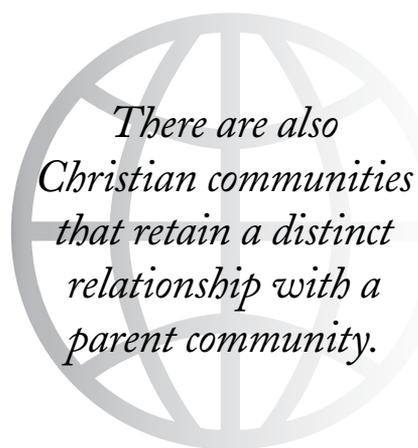
In 1985 the People of India (POI) project was begun by the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI). From that time up to March of 1992, 4635 (2nd ed. 4693) communities were identified, located and studied by some 500 scholars with nearly 3000 scholars involved in related workshops and discussions. These 4635 (2nd ed. 4693) communities in fact are just 2209 (2nd ed. 2205) major communities; 586 (2nd ed. 589) significant segments of these communities are also counted separately, and another 1840 (2nd ed. 1899) communities are dispersed subgroups of the major communities located in different geographical areas.

The first major publication of the POI project was *People of India: An Introduction*, ed. K. S. Singh, released in 1992. The introductory volume and the 3 volumes summarizing the findings on all communities (*India's Communities*, vols. 4–6) have been utilized in the following analysis. Multiple volumes focused on many of the states of India have been published in the past decade and the publication process still continues.

An important discussion of the concept of "community" is contained in the introductory volume. K. S. Singh discusses

the definition of this type of community in an all-India framework. It required a level of conceptualization that could subsume caste, non-caste structures, the minorities and those who stood outside the *varna-jati* framework...While caste or caste-

like structures are shared by a large number of communities, there are a few communities which both ideologically and in practice deny following caste norms. Caste has weakened to some extent in recent years in terms of its adherence to hereditary occupation and norms of purity and pollution. It has also acquired new strength in a political sense as a constituency and as a vote bank. In fact it is acquiring the characteristics of a community as it sheds some of its traditional features. Therefore the word community or samudaya (as it is called in some states like Kerala) could be a more appropri-



ate concept for an all-India reference than caste with its various local names (Singh 1992: 23–24).

Thus communities rather than castes became the focal point of the study. The importance of religious affiliation in identifying communities is evident by this being noted for every community studied. The massive facts accumulated and information summarized can certainly never be thought to be error free; in fact the ASI recognizes and clearly states that

the identification of a community has always been problematic except in regard to the topmost and the bottommost categories (Singh 1992:39).

Examples of Christians among India's Communities

A quick look for Christians in the listings of all communities immediately reveals three distinct types of Christian presence within India's communities. This is apparent in the reproduction

(see *Figure 1* on the following page) of communities numbered 1080 to 1093 in the alphabetical listing found in appendix G of *People of India: An Introduction* (Singh 1992:170).

Community 1080, the Koliyan, are a scheduled caste (SC) of Hindus (H) located in Tamil Nadu. But there is one significant segment of this group, which in segment number 245 of the 586 segments lists as distinct communities in the POI project. This is the Christian Koliyan community, which is an Other Backward Caste (OBC) also located in Tamil Nadu.

Community 1081, the Kolla or Kollan, are a Hindu community that has a distinct identity in two different locations, being found in Kerala and as an Other Backward Caste in Karnataka.

Community 1083, the Kom of Manipur, are a scheduled tribe (ST) that is Christian (C).

Number 1093, the Kondhs, is one of many rather complex communities. The Kondhs are a scheduled tribe in Orissa which contains Hindus and Christians and tribals. In Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh they are a Hindu tribe. In Orissa there are three tribes of different names that are in fact segments of the Kondh community, and all three contain both Hindus and tribals.

This section of the list was reproduced because in the space of 14 communities the three distinct types of Christian listing are found. There are Christian communities that are fully Christian, like the Kom who have only a (C) after their name. But there are also Christian communities that retain a distinct relationship with a parent community, and are listed as segments of that larger community, as with the Koliyan Christians above. The third type of Christian presence in the ASI listing is where Christians are integrated with people of other religious faiths in one community, as with the Kondhs of Orissa above. Here there is a single community identity despite the fact that some community members

Figure 1: Communities 1080–1093 from Appendix G in *People of India: An Introduction* (Singh 1992:170)

Community Number	Name of Community	Location
1080	Koliyan (SC) (H) 1. Koliyan Christian (C) 245.	Tamil Nadu (OBC) Tamil Nadu
1081	Kolla/Kollan (H)	(OBC) Karnataka; Kerala
1082	Kolta/Kulta (H)	Orissa
1083	Kom (ST) (C)	Manipur
1084	Komara Panta/Komar Pant (H)	(OBC) Karnataka; Goa
1085	Kommu Dasari (H)	(OBC) Andhra Pradesh
1086	Kommula (H)	Andhra Pradesh
1087	Konai (SC) (H)	West Bengal
1088	Konda Dora (ST) (H)	Andhra Pradesh; Orissa
1089	Konda Kammara (ST) (H)	Andhra Pradesh
1090	Konda Kapu (ST) (H)	Andhra Pradesh
1091	Konda Reddi (ST) (H)	Andhra Pradesh; Tamil Nadu
1092	Kondara/Kandara/Kandra (SC) (H) Kondara/Kandara/Kandra (NON SC) (H)	Orissa; West Bengal (OBC) Andhra Pradesh
1093	Kondh (ST) (H, C & T) Kondh (ST) (H) 1. Dongria (ST) (H & T) 246. 2. Kuvi (ST) (H & T) 247. 3. Sitha Kandha (ST) (H & T) 248.	Orissa Andhra Pradesh; Madhya Pradesh Orissa Orissa Orissa

Key: SC—Scheduled Caste; H—Hindu; C—Christian; ST—Scheduled Tribe; OBC—Other Backward Caste; T—Tribal

are Hindu, some are Christian and some are tribals.

Exclusively Christian Communities

“Three hundred and thirty-nine Christian communities have been studied in the states of which 29 are exclusively Christian communities,” summarizes K. S. Singh (1998:703). Of the 29 communities identified as exclusively Christian there are four distinct types. One, of least interest in this paper, is small communities of foreign Christians like the Armenians and Portuguese. A second type is the Anglo-Indian community which has partially foreign origins and is located in 11 states across the nation. The third type of exclusively Christian community is where by conversion an entire tribe has turned to the Christian faith. Forty-four per cent of the identified Christian communities are from the scheduled tribe category (Singh 1998:705), and quite a few are entirely

Christian (as the Kom used in the illustration above).

The fourth type of exclusively Christian community includes both ancient Syrian communities and more modern communities resulting primarily from European mission work. These are new communities that have been formed by the conversion of individuals out of other Indian communities.³ There is room to question and discuss some of the ASI findings and categorizations. They list a Catholic community (number 360) which has five sub-groups; but all of them are in Goa only. The generic Christian community is listed as number 450 and is identified in 15 geographical locations. But a distinct Church of South India OBC community is identified in Tamil Nadu, listed at number 458. The Syrian Christians are number 2005 and are located only in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan.⁴

Christian Sub-communities

By my own count there are 48 Christian communities that are listed among the 586 segments of major communities. In one case, that of the Vellalas (community number 2160), there are two different Christian sub-groups, the Vellalar Christian and the Agahmudian/Agamudiyar Christian. Generally these communities are simply named for their major group with the Christian title affixed, as in Vellalar Christian here and Koliyan Christian in the segment of the ASI listing reproduced above.

Christians Integrated in Other Communities

“Two hundred and twenty-seven communities have been studied, of which the Christian form an important segment along with the Hindu (116), followers of tribal religion (94), Muslim (9), Sikh (1) and Buddhist (7), etc” (Singh 1998:704).⁵

This point leaves us with a striking fact that calls for reflection and analysis. In communitarian India, the majority means of expressing Christian discipleship is in fact non-communitarian. It must immediately be noted that the work of the ASI so far published has not dealt with population figures, so it would not be true to say that a majority of individual Christians have a non-communitarian expression of their discipleship. One suspects the opposite to be true. But that there are less than 50 exclusively Christian communities, and less than 100 cases of distinctly Christian sub-communities, yet over 200 cases of Christians integrated within existing communities is striking indeed.

Three patterns of Christianity in relation to other Indian communities thus appear, and vital questions arise in relation to the historical developments behind these phenomena and regarding Biblical teaching on this subject. Should disciples of Christ assume a new community identity or retain the identity of their birth community? Or should a middle road be sought as is evidenced in some communities of Christians? Is this a question that can be decided after discussion or is there an inevitable practical momentum that will be evident despite theoretical options and goals?

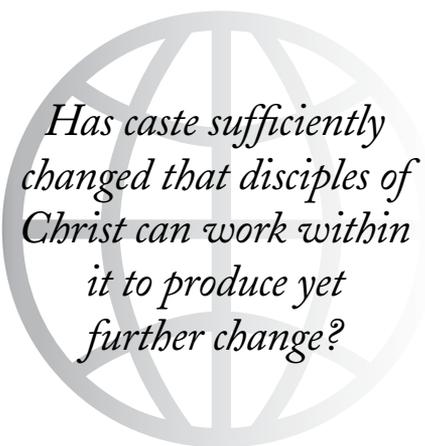
Christianity and India's Communities in Historical Perspective

Gauri Viswanathan in a study of conversion in India traces out the development of communitarian Christianity under the foibles of British law. She gives a succinct statement of the widely recognized general attitude of the British to law in India in referring to the "administrators' determined resolve to leave untouched the classical laws of the country" (Viswanathan 1998:78). Conversions to Christianity challenged this neutrality as traditional law suggested a state of civil death for the convert, while British tradition with its esteem for the individual could not countenance such a radical rejection of the convert. Fascinatingly, the initial

British treatment was to rule that despite conversion the new Christians were still Hindus:

however divergent their doctrinal inclinations from the original faith, converts to Christianity could still remain Hindus for purposes of law (1998:80).

The inadequacy of such a position in that historical context was immediately apparent, and Viswanathan shows how in fact it undermined both religion and individual choice.⁶ In 1865 the Indian Succession Act was passed, and this provided for Indian Christians to live under British law as opposed to



Hindu or Muslim law. The category of Christian Personal Law in effect in India today is directly descended from this Indian Succession Act of 1865.⁷

The fact that Christians have historically developed a separate community identity is surely due to factors present in both Hindu and Christian thought of past centuries. Missionary antagonism to "Hinduism" and a general failure to adequately adapt to traditional cultures are widely recognized phenomena. This encouraged Hindu xenophobia, and indeed Hindu reactions to conversion were often extreme, as noted in citing the "civil death" classification above. With converts disowned by their home community and absorbed into a generally anti-Hindu society, the existence of separate Christian communities naturally developed. The inevitability of this is most obvious in light of Christian antagonism to caste and the fact that caste was an impregnable stronghold

throughout the 19th century when Christian churches were established across India.

Are the current over 200 cases of Christians integrated in community with people of other faiths indicative of a change, or are these cases where the development of separate Christian communities is in an infant stage? Should integration in community with people of other faiths be encouraged, or is a distinct community identity to be expected to evolve where faith in Christ is professed? Is caste forever untouchable to Christians, or has caste sufficiently changed that disciples of Christ can work within it to produce yet further change? This is just a sampling of important questions worthy of reflection and resolution.

Christians as a Community in Biblical Perspective

In a striking paper in a collection of studies on communalism George Soares-Prabhu suggests that traditional Christianity is inherently communal in that it holds to an exclusivist theology. He points out, however, that

in spite of its frightening history of religious intolerance, Christianity has not been conspicuously communal in post-independent India (1991:144).

This amounts to a serious dilemma

because it proclaims a God who is the father of all humankind, Christianity claims to be radically anti-communal... But to the extent that it clings to its conviction that it mediates a unique revelation of God and is an altogether privileged way of salvation... it is necessarily aggressively communal (Soares-Prabhu 1991:159).

Soares-Prabhu pleads for a theological redefinition so that the Christian abandons exclusivism so as to

at last overcome the Christian dilemma and be healed of his Christian pathology, by learning that radical tolerance which is the death of all communalism (1991:162).

This radical agenda cannot be embraced by those who hold to historic

Christian teaching, but it shows how a cogent and creative mind is wrestling with communitarian Christianity in modern India. From a traditional Protestant perspective James P. Alter and Herbert Jai Singh have also shown how communitarianism distorts the basic nature of the church. Their analysis of the church in Delhi is worthy of quoting at length:

The Church in Delhi came to birth through a process of radical separation from traditional Indian society. Individual converts were driven from their homes and communities and groups of Chamar converts were compelled to break their old *baraadari* ties. This separation had a profound effect on the attitudes of Indian Christians. They now thought of themselves as a distinct *qaum* (people), sharply distinguished by religion from the Hindu and Muslim *qaums*. In their enforced isolation from much of Indian life they turned naturally to the missionaries for leadership and assistance. Many adopted Western forms of dress and behaviour, acquired English or biblical names and in general regarded themselves as having a distinct culture. This isolation also helped to produce an attitude of exclusiveness. Inquirers and new converts were looked upon with some suspicion as representing a potential threat to established practices and as competitors for the educational and economic advantages secured by second- and third-generation Christians.

In developing these attitudes and practices, the Church reflected the environment in which it lived. Indian society was composed of several distinct *qaums*, each with its own religion and culture and each carefully guarding its own social and economic privileges. By acquiring the characteristics of a *qaum* the Church was in one important respect becoming thoroughly indigenous. This was probably inevitable and no doubt gave the Christian minority an inner cohesion and strength it would not otherwise have had. But it also meant, again in keeping with the genius of Indian society, that the Church was being effectively contained in isolation.

But what needs to be noticed about the debate is that Newbigin himself considered that Thomas was talking about two different things.

It was free to develop its own inner life in accordance with its beliefs and values, but it could not with impunity offer its faith or open its doors to those outside (Alter 1966:42).

Alter and Jai Singh later point out three ways in which the Christian *qaum* (community) differs from the New Testament church. The *qaum* is an ethnic community entered primarily by birth; the church is defined by response to God's act in Christ and is based on new spiritual birth. The *qaum* is an ingrown community distinct from other communities; the church is universal, transcending all barriers of race and culture, and exists for others rather than for itself. The Christian *qaum* is a community among communities and acceptance of the *qaum* implicitly involves acceptance of many peoples and many faiths all leading to God. Noting these vital distinctions between the church and the Christian *qaum*, Alter and Jai Singh yet point out that

in practice it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish clearly between the Church and the Christian community.... The *qaum* mentality pervades the life of the churches and cannot be excluded by legislation or the enforcement of strict church discipline (Alter 1966:130–131).

New Models of Discipleship in Communitarian India

The proper response to this situation was already outlined at last year's ISFM gathering and is published in the current issue of *IJFM* (Petersen 2007). Hans Staffner understood that disciples of Christ have to live within their Hindu communities and not "convert" to the "Christian" community. This position was also put forward by the noted ecumenical theologian M. M. Thomas, who was publicly opposed by Lesslie Newbigin. The Newbigin–Thomas debate is

worthy of more careful consideration than it has yet seen.

In the previous version of this paper I supported Thomas and attempted to show the inadequacy of Newbigin's objections. Timothy Tennent, following Hunsberger 1988, supported Newbigin against Thomas. But what needs to be noticed about the debate is that Newbigin himself considered that Thomas was talking about two different things. Let me try to frame the debate a bit and then define Newbigin's perspective on the dual nature of the problem related to Thomas.

Hunsberger outlines some background to the Newbigin–Thomas debate, primarily in the radical position of Kaj Baago. It is very relevant to this gathering to quote at length from Baago, and then from Newbigin's response to him. Baago wrote on "The Post-Colonial Crisis in Missions" in the *International Review of Missions* in 1966. His central point was answering a radical question:

Must Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims become Christians in order to belong to Christ? Do they have to be incorporated into church organizations which are utterly alien to their religious traditions? Do they have to call themselves Christians—a word which to them signifies a follower of the Western religion? Should they necessarily adopt the Christian traditions, customs, and rites which often have their root in Western culture more than in the Gospel? Are all these things conditions for belonging to Christ?

The answer is obviously "No." The Christian religion, to a large extent a product of the West, cannot and shall not become the religion of all nations and races. The resurgence and revival of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam has made that clear. The missionary task of today cannot, therefore, be to draw men out of their religions into another religion, but rather to leave Christianity

(the organized religion) and go inside Hinduism and Buddhism, accepting these religions as one's own, in so far as they do not conflict with Christ, and regarding them as the presupposition, the background and the framework of the Christian gospel in Asia. Such a mission will not lead to the progress of Christianity or the organized Church, but it might lead to the creation of Hindu Christianity or Buddhist Christianity (Baago 1966:331–332).⁸

Newbigin's Understanding of "Christian"

Many questions can and should be asked about that statement, and hopefully some of them will be addressed as the further dialog is outlined. Newbigin took exception to this statement, as is clear from his paper on "Conversion" at the 1966 Nasrapur Consultation on the Mission of the Church in Contemporary India. Newbigin's is a nuanced position, opposed to colonial imposition of foreign religion and equally to disorderly independence.

There is therefore [in conversion] both a discontinuity and a continuity. On the one hand every true conversion is a fresh work of the Holy Spirit and we cannot too much emphasise that fact. It is a new birth from above, and in that sense there is discontinuity—if the conversion of another is an act of my religious imperialism, it is not true conversion. There is a radical discontinuity and therefore the possibility of a certain radical independence of the newly converted over against the old, an independence as radical as the independence that is demanded for the gentile churches vis-à-vis those of Jerusalem. But, the NT knows nothing of a relationship to Christ which is a purely mental relationship and involved no visible solidarity with those who share that relationship.

When Dr. Baago puts the question, "Must Hindus become Christians in order to belong to Christ?" and answers, "No," he reaches his answer by loading the word "Christian" with all the colonial and cultural baggage that he can get into it. If the word "Christian" includes everything that has been perpetuated during the past

2000 years by people professing to be Christian, then we certainly do not wish Hindus to become Christians. But if we put the question the other way round and say, "Can a Hindu who has died and been born again in Christ be content to remain without any visible solidarity with his fellow believers?" the answer is "No." The real question is: what are the elements of continuity and what are the elements of discontinuity (Newbigin 1968:42–43)?

Newbigin proceeds to an important discussion of exactly that point, rooted in the work of Roland Allen. Then he states his own conclusion:



The word "Christian" properly means one who is baptized, who regularly shares in the Lord's Supper, and who abides in the teaching of the Apostles through faithful study of Scripture and the fellowship of other Christians through a common life of prayer and service. If that is what the word Christian means, I would say that a Hindu who wishes to belong to Christ should become a Christian.

We are confused about the answer to the question "Should we try to make Hindus Christian" because we have loaded the word "Christian" with wrong meanings. At this moment I am thinking of two groups of villagers whom I met the other day. The Holy Spirit has been doing a marvelous work among them and they want to become Christians. I cannot say to them: continue to live and worship as Hindus. Nor, on the other hand, do I want to take them into our ecclesiastical structure in such a way that they are simply molded into replicas of ourselves (1968:44–45).

"Church beyond the Church"

Newbigin's comments are as loaded and as needful of analysis as Baago's, but the dialog continued to develop. M. M. Thomas comes in with his publication of *Salvation and Humanisation* in 1971, which Newbigin reviewed at length in *Religion and Society*. The key points in terms of this paper are well summarized by Newbigin, so I will not quote directly from Thomas but from Newbigin's review.

Repeatedly MM's thought takes him to the idea of some kind of "church beyond the church," a "Christ-centred secular fellowship outside the Church" (p. 13), "the transcendence of the Church over religious communities" (p. 38), "a Christ-centred fellowship of faith and ethics in the Hindu religious community" (p. 40), "*koinonia* in the New Testament does not refer primarily to the Church...but is the manifestation of the new reality of the Kingdom at work in the world of men in world history" (p. 19). At one point, MM says that he cannot see any difference between what he is trying to describe and "the accepted missionary goal of a Christian Church expressing Christ in terms of contemporary Hindu thought" (p. 40). But I do not think there is any doubt that there is need for much more explanation and clarification of this idea (Newbigin 1971:72).

In discussing this "church beyond the church" it becomes clear that Newbigin recognizes that two different phenomena are in play here. It is important to note that Newbigin holds a clear distinction between the church and the Christian community which was discussed earlier in this paper, although he seems to assume that there can be a legal/sociological distinction between these two as well.

The Church must be a constant source of criticism within the "Christian community." The question raised by MM is whether the Church could not equally be a source of criticism and renewal within the Hindu religious community (p. 40). I do not think this question can be answered until the terms are clarified. I would refer to such an action as

the celebrated mission of De Nobili in Madurai at the beginning of the 17th century. De Nobili separated himself physically from the Portuguese mission compound and went to live in the middle of the Temple area. There “within Hinduism” he brought into being a fellowship which *through Word and Sacraments* was linked explicitly and decisively with Jesus, but remained sociologically part of the surrounding Hindu community, continuing to observe caste, to wear the thread and to carry on many traditional practices.

If that is what MM means, then I am with him, and I believe that this is what the Nasrapur findings which he quotes were seeking to indicate. But if he means (as some other parts of the text suggest) that the presence of men and women among the Hindus who have accepted the Christian Principle without accepting the Person is a proper substitute for the Church as we know it, then I am not. I do not think this is his meaning. He says, for example, “In most cases the question is not that of the Church or of baptism as a sacrament; it is with regard to the form of the Church” (p. 38).

I am in total agreement that radical questions need to be asked regarding the form of the Church. I also believe that the Church must give birth in all ages to missionary experiments like that of De Nobili which will in turn challenge the institutional forms of the Church and create a demand for reform. But such experiments must necessarily have institutional characteristics and—as the Nasrapur Conference said—these must include certain given elements such as Scriptures and Sacraments which “belong to the proper character of the Church at all times and in all places” (Newbiggin 1971:75–76; italics original).

I have to break into the dialog here and say that if Newbiggin means what he says here (there is reason to question this; see below) then he is clearly on the side of the “insider movement” phenomena. If insider movements mean

remaining sociologically part of the surrounding Hindu community, continuing to observe caste, to wear the thread and to carry on many traditional practices,

A great deal of Newbiggin’s writing is against this concept. Clearly this is not what is proposed in Herb Hoefler’s study of *Churchless Christianity*.

(which is a stronger definition, at least in relation to caste, than most insider advocates would suggest), then Lesslie Newbiggin says, “I am with you. I am totally in agreement that radical questions need to be asked regarding the form of the Church.”

Varieties of “Church beyond the Church”

But M. M. Thomas was not particularly happy with this. He had a wider agenda. So in October of 1971 he wrote a letter to Newbiggin which (along with Newbiggin’s reply) was later published in *Religion and Society* and in his book *Some Theological Dialogues*.⁹ For the sake of brevity I am again going to refrain from quoting Thomas and will jump right to Newbiggin’s analysis that there are two different phenomena in play.

I think that much of the difficulty of our debate arises from the fact that this phrase [the new humanity] is being used in a number of different ways. You have defined it as “the humanity which responds in faith and receives the liberation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.” But I would regard that as almost a definition of the Church. I have the same problem with your other phrase—“a Christ-centred fellowship of faith.” The problem is that I am not able to assess the meaning of the phrase “Christ-centred” in relation to the concrete examples you give to illustrate what you mean. In your letter you give two illustrations.

(a). The struggles of society for a secular human fellowship. You speak of situations where the men involved have broken through a merely law-and-ideology approach so that they “open themselves up to the reality of transcendent forgiveness in the secular reality of mutual forgiveness.” But your development of this idea is less precise than it needs to be...

(b). Your second example is taken from groups of adherents of other

religions who have accepted Jesus as “decisive for their existence” but consider that conversion to Christ does not necessarily imply conversion to the Christian community. Here we are dealing with a totally different type of phenomenon. There are two things to be distinguished—an individual like Kandasamy Chetty, and an organized body like Chander Sen’s Church of the New Dispensation or Subba Rao’s movement. Since you and I completely agree that some kind of organized fellowship is necessary to the being of the Church, let us concentrate on the second—“the Christ-centred fellowship of faith emerging outside the Church.” Here again there is a difficult imprecision about your language. You speak of the “new humanity in Christ” as *present* in these bodies, and of the Church as being only a *sign* of this reality, but in the next sentence you speak of “a form of the Church (partial no doubt)” in these bodies.

I think it is clear that we are dealing here with something completely different from what we were considering in (a) above. Here we have a *religious* fellowship, culturally within the Hindu milieu but religiously separating itself decisively from Hinduism (rejection of idols, etc.), and giving a very explicit recognition of Jesus as Lord and Saviour (Thomas 1977:118–119; italics original).

Summary of Positions

Newbiggin here defines for us three types of “churchless Christianity” or “church beyond the church.” One is M. M. Thomas’ “new humanity,” Christ-influenced individuals who do not actually profess faith in Christ. This is rather similar, perhaps a sub-type of, the noted “anonymous Christianity” of Karl Rahner. A great deal of Newbiggin’s writing against Thomas is against this concept. Clearly this is not what is proposed in Herb Hoefler’s study of *Churchless Christianity*, as he is very careful to make clear that high

Christological views and commitments were definitive for his study (Hoefler 2001: 11, 111, etc.). Current advocates of "insider movements" are completely in line with Newbigin's criticisms of Thomas in this area.

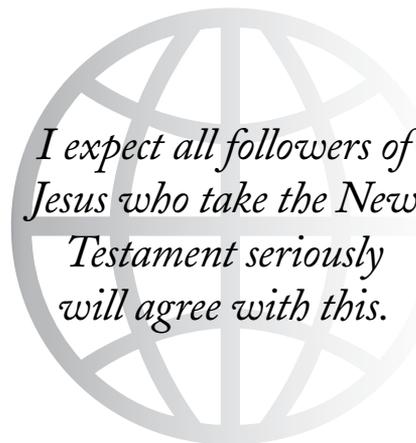
But then there is the "something completely different" due to the aspect of surrender to Christ. This might be individualistic (as Newbigin suggests in the case of Chetty, and in most of the cases in Hoefler's study) or corporate (as in the case of the Subba Rao people). Newbigin dismisses the concept of individualistic discipleship to Jesus within the Hindu community. I expect all followers of Jesus who take the New Testament seriously will agree with this. That there is a corporate aspect to discipleship is everywhere in the Bible. There may well be special considerations at times where this corporate aspect is not as clearly manifest as it should be, and such considerations (valid or not) were discussed in the Hoefler study of *Churchless Christianity*.¹⁰

That leaves the question of Christ-centered fellowships within the Hindu world. It is not easy to determine just where Newbigin stood on this matter. From his comments above on Nobili, it would seem he is accepting of this approach. But it is clearly not an altogether happy acceptance. Continuing on from the lengthy quotations above, Newbigin first changed the subject and commented in general on what he saw as a too negative judgment of the current church in India by Thomas. And he comes very close to the position attacked by Soares-Prabhu above, that Christianity is necessarily communal.

Presumably the acceptance of Jesus Christ as central and decisive creates *some* kind of solidarity among those who have this acceptance in common. If it did not do so, it would mean nothing. The question is, what is the nature of this solidarity? ... This question has been answered in different ways at different times and places... It is almost inevitable that some common cultural forms and

some common social bonds will develop among those who are united by a strong faith in Jesus...

You seem to want a kind of Church in which membership does not break any of the other solidarities which men have. You express the desire for forms of fellowship which are explicitly linked to Jesus Christ but remain "religiously, culturally and socially part of the Hindu community." I think this is quite unrealistic. A man who is religiously, culturally and socially part of the Hindu community is a Hindu. If, at the same time, his allegiance to Christ is accepted as *decisive*,



as—therefore—over-riding his obligations as a Hindu, this allegiance must take visible—that is social—forms. He must have *some* way of expressing the fact that he shares this ultimate allegiance with others—and these ways will have to have religious, social and cultural elements (Thomas 1977:121–122, italics original).

Faults in Newbigin's Case

This letter of Nov. 1971 certainly seems to take back with the left hand what was given with the right hand in the review of Thomas' book published earlier that same year. There, "remaining sociologically part of the surrounding Hindu community, continuing to observe caste, to wear the thread and to carry on many traditional practices" was affirmed; here it is denied. The difference, and perhaps this is what explains the change in Newbigin's attitude, lies with the word "religious." It must be noted that the problem of "Hinduism as religion"

underlies Newbigin's entire treatment of this issue.¹¹

Newbigin is aware of the tension, as he goes on to ask these questions:

Can acceptance of Jesus Christ, as we know him through the Bible, as the absolute Lord of all things, be combined with Hinduism as a *religion*? Is it not the case that such people as Chander Sen and Subba Rao have absolutely rejected many of the specifically religious elements in Hinduism? (Thomas 1977:122, italics original)

The answer to the second question is "of course Sen and Subba Rao rejected aspects of religious Hinduism." But so do virtually all Hindus! Is it even meaningful to speak of "Hinduism as a religion" when there is such incredible diversity of religious phenomena under the Hindu umbrella? Every Hindu in practice rejects some aspects of religious Hinduism, and many reject the vapid theology that all ways are good and true.

In fact, it is a case like Subba Rao which proves that Newbigin is the one missing the point. A Christ-centered fellowship did in fact develop that was/is truly Hindu; Christ was/is decisive; there was indeed the development of some new social (and religious) forms, yet all within the Hindu community. So far from being "unrealistic," it happened and continues.

Wider Fellowship of Churches

But Newbigin still has a further issue, which is the wider fellowship of the church. He submits four points related to the church that he expects Thomas will affirm:

1. While we agree that wherever Christ is accepted as Lord, there the Church is present in some sense, nevertheless we would not be willing to relativise all our conceptions of the Church. We are bound to believe that some forms, structures, practices, beliefs are more congruous with the Lordship of Jesus Christ than others.

2. None of our existing churches embodies the plenitude of what the Church is intended to be.
3. There is a mutual obligation among those who accept Jesus as Lord to carry on a continuous process of mutual criticism and correction concerning our various imperfect and partial embodiments of “what-it-is-to-be-the-Church.”
4. This mutual obligation has to find some visible form. This is what I understand the WCC, NCC, etc., to be all about.

Newbigin goes on to object to sectarianism:

Jesus did not come to create a variety of unrelated groups each expressing some particular cultural ethos... surely history teaches us that these attempts to achieve reformation by disowning the existing churches and starting something wholly new, only end in new sectarianism (Thomas 1977:125).

It is important to note that despite these concerns, Newbigin was still willing to accept the Subba Rao movement as a church; the problem he foresaw was that they would not want to be part of the National Council of Churches (Thomas 1977:124). It seems to me at this point Newbigin's objections are only what one would expect from a committed ecumenical proponent of episcopal church government. His concerns are little different from his episcopal objections to Baptist or Pentecostal ecclesiology. As a non-Anglican, non-conciliar Christian, I appreciate Newbigin's concerns about sectarianism and also think that some sort of fellowship among denominations or church movements is needed. But Subba Rao had that as much as many Pentecostal groups do, so it seems to me the case should be closed that Newbigin is not opposed to “insider movements” that display the marks of the NT *ekklesia*.

Conclusion

The complex nature of “Hinduism,” the complex nature of Indian society, the variety of expressions of existing

The case should be closed that Newbigin is not opposed to “insider movements” that display the marks of the NT *ekklesia*.

“church” in India, and the nature of the New Testament *ekklesia* cannot be brought together in any simplistically agreed manner. Recognizing tensions in the teaching of Lesslie Newbigin related to these topics, I suggest that his published teaching in relation to the M. M. Thomas debate is not opposed to new patterns of corporate discipleship within Hindu cultures and communities.¹² Thus the standard postulate of a disagreement between Newbigin and Thomas in this area is not valid. (Clearly, they disagreed on Thomas' more radical proposal of “secular fellowships.”) Regardless of Newbigin's position, I urge this body and the individuals present here to affirm that “insider movements” of disciples of Jesus on the pattern of Nobili, Sen and Subba Rao need to be encouraged to develop within all the various communities of Hindu India; not, as Thomas also made clear (1977:116), to be static within those constantly changing communities, but to be the salt and yeast of the kingdom of God. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Cf. Sarkar 1999:84: “Three major changes, which began to take effect roughly from the latter part of the nineteenth century onwards, seem particularly relevant for understanding why conversions started becoming so much more controversial. The first was the tightening of community boundaries: there has come into being a broad consensus about this among historians, despite continuing differences regarding the extent of novelty involved here, or in the precise weighing-up of causes. Within the broader framework of developing politico-administrative, economic, and communicational integration, particularly important inputs probably came from colonial law, and from census operations.”

² The rather unwieldy term “communitarian[ism]” is often used in this paper due to the very negative connotations now associated with the term “communal,” and the desire to avoid such radically negative connotations.

³ It is granted that there is a measure of presumption and perhaps also an anachronism in describing the ancient Syrian Christian communities in this way; solid historical evidence about the development of these communities is scant, as is information on social norms in those times. These matters being beyond the scope of this paper, the popularly accepted conception of the development of these communities has been granted, placing them in the category presently discussed.

⁴ This paper is concerned with Christianity in communitarian India, not with analysing the work of the People of India project. Tensions and contradictions uncovered during the analysis between Singh 1992 and Singh 1994 are thus not being highlighted, nor are details of the categorization being critiqued. The broad sweep of the analysis and presentation of Christianity among India's communities rings true and provides valid data for the reflection this paper intends to stimulate.

⁵ Mathematically inclined readers will have observed that the numbers above do not consistently add up. Note that the line between the Christian sub-community and Christians integrated within another community is rather hazy, so categorization is at times inexact. Also, in some cases ASI data is very far from clear. These problems do not impact the thrust of this paper so are neither addressed nor resolved.

⁶ Viswanathan's main point is that “the court decisions reveal with astonishing clarity how not only Hindus and Muslims but also their colonial rulers regarded conversion as a disruptive act, complicating the smooth functioning of compartmentalized laws in Indian society” (1998:81).

⁷ The colonial, Orientalist definition of “Hinduism” as “a religion” has been exploded in recent post-colonial scholarship, yet the residue of that false definition is still very much present. “Conversion” in the Hindu context cannot be understood in its biblical meaning when “Hinduism” is falsely understood in Orientalist terms. This is very much the focus of Hans Staffner's work, outlined in the first edition of this paper and referenced below.

⁸ Baago's position here sounds very much like what is currently under discussion as “insider movements.” But Baago worked from different presuppositions and

was criticized by both Thomas and Newbigin. (Cf. Thomas: "I criticised Dr. Baago for confusing and mixing the liberal arguments against the Church with the post-liberal arguments against the form of the Church. He did it to get post-liberal support for his liberal opposition to the idea of the Church in any form" [Thomas 1977:112].)

⁹ Hunsberger's appendix on the literature of the Thomas–Newbigin debate inexplicably fails to list this publication, which includes #7 in Hunsberger's list of published materials and what seem to be #s 8 and 10 in Hunsberger's list of unpublished materials from the debate, along with a closing brief comment from MMT.

¹⁰ Hoefler's study is emphatically descriptive and not prescriptive; the first sentence of the introduction defines its purpose as "to describe a fact and to reflect upon it theologically" (2001:xv), and again in that same paragraph "describe" is used a second time as definitive for the first two sections of the book. One might suggest that Hoefler should have made a strong point somewhere about the need for a corporate expression of discipleship, but the purpose of his book was awakening Christians to learn from the "fact" he described; he was not writing to critique or instruct the "churchless Christians" he described.

¹¹ Note Newbigin's comment on "religion," which is a slippery word" (Thomas 1977:123).

¹² In saying this I clearly differ from the interpretation of Hunsberger (1998), who in my opinion is not sufficiently careful to note the different aspects of Thomas' position and Newbigin's nuanced references to each.

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