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# Religious Conversion in Hindu India: The Complicated Case of Manilal C. Parekh

by Parimal Roy

Editor's Note: A version of this paper was originally presented by Parimal Roy at the 2009 Orlando meeting of the International Society for Frontier Missiology, September 17, 2009.

H. L. Richard (president of the Rethinking Forum and researcher on South Asian culture and religion) gave the response (pp. 171-73), which was followed by a question and answer session (pp. 173-74) during which both Roy and Richard took part.

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## Introduction

**H**indu seekers in India who are attracted by Christ question the need for conversion to become Christians. The nuance here has little to do with "turning" to Christ and much to do with what conversion means. There is something about conversion that causes Hindus, particularly upper caste Hindus, to maintain a safe distance from Christianity. Certainly there are already upper caste adherents to Christ in the Indian context who have tasted God's power to heal and perform miracles in their lives in the name of Jesus Christ and who, for various reasons, do not wish to associate with Christian churches. One such Hindu was Manilal C. Parekh (1885-1967). We will briefly consider his life in the pages that follow.

## Parekh's Brief Biography

Manilal Parekh has left us an account of his life both in English and in Gujarati. The English language autobiography is a brief sketch while the Gujarati account is fairly comprehensive.<sup>1</sup> He was born in 1885, in Rajkot, Gujarat. His family religion was Jainism but his father had adopted Vaishnavism. It is interesting to note that an atheistic Jainism and a personalist, theistic Vaishnavite tradition not only coexisted but remained part of their family religiosity. Their upbringing was in more of an eclectic popular religiosity.

Early influences on his life included his reading of *The Use of Life* by Lord Avebury and *The Imitation of Christ* when he was fifteen. The former awakened his moral hunger and the latter, his spiritual hunger. He was introduced to K. C. Sen through Sen's writings. Sen influenced Parekh significantly. Sen was a reformer and a renowned leader of the Brahma Samaj, who "made it the mission of his life to harmonise all the religions of the world, and he made this synthesis Christo-centric."<sup>2</sup> Parekh was widely read. Reading Cardinal Newman, he felt the need for "certitude in my faith. The Brahma Samaj was too subjective in its faith and belief."<sup>3</sup>

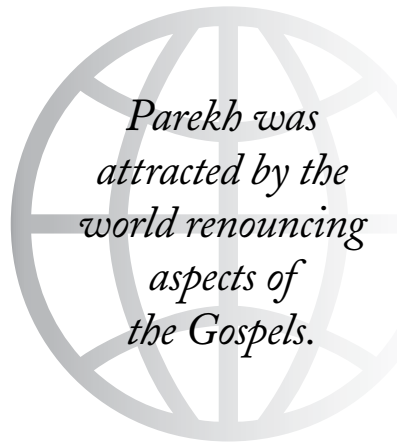
Parekh did not enjoy good health. But these bouts of illness became times for drawing closer to God. During one such bout, he read the entire Bible. He also read a book in Gujarati about Swami Narayana (1781-1830),<sup>4</sup> a great exponent

of Vaishnavism. Both readings converged on the truth of incarnation for the redemption of humanity, something that Brahma Samaj did not teach.

Parekh, an original thinker and a maverick spiritual seeker, was enthused not so much with the political side of nationalistic fervor as with the deep spiritual thirst for lasting peace of heart within oriental religious traditions. His spiritual journey led him from atheistic religion to personal theism, on to incarnational theism and ultimately to *samanvaya* (a spiritual harmony) of theistic religions. Parekh knew Mahatma Gandhi but parted from many of his ways. Like Gandhi, Parekh mulled over the idea of *swadharmagraha* (“insistence on the religion of one’s birth”). He called it *Hindu swadharmagraha* and differed from Gandhi in that he sought to create a kind of eclectic religion. “In my ‘Hindu swadharmagraha’ a large place was given to Christ, and to ‘prophets’ from outside India—not, however, as the prophets of foreign religions, but as God’s own messengers.”<sup>5</sup> While Gandhi directed his apologetic against claims made for Christianity as a morally superior religion that could help improve national life (he was interested in keeping Christianity away), Parekh was actually bringing together the spiritual wealth of Christianity and other such theistic religions together while insisting on remaining a Hindu. He retreated from politics and did not use religion for political or material ends. He desired spiritual meaning in life and in his spiritual thirst explored various religions but did not think them to be *sambhava* (of equal value or worthy of equal respect). He rejected atheistic and monistic religions and sought *samanvaya* (a spiritual harmony) of theistic religions. Finally, he got baptized and declared himself a disciple of Jesus Christ. He did not leave cultural Hinduism and transcended culture and society in his spiritual quest to address deeper issues of life. In his spiritual wanderings he tasted water from many rivers.

### *Discipleship to Christ and Christocentric Theism*

In 1918 he embraced Christianity and was baptized in an Anglican Church in Bombay. For about a year he remained an active member but soon began to be disillusioned by the westernized and materialistic attitude of the church. He severed all ties with the churches and missions, but remained committed to Jesus Christ. He called himself a “Hindu disciple of Christ” and desired to establish a “Hindu Church of Christ.” He gave his home in Rajkot a new name: “Oriental Christ House.”<sup>6</sup>



Parekh was attracted by the world renouncing elements in the Gospels, that discipleship to Christ is a path of renunciation and selflessness in the service of others. Christian discipleship is not so much performing rituals as following Christ. This emphasis on Christ led him eventually to reject historical Christianity, the local church, and western lifestyles that were associated with becoming a Christian. He saw no need to separate himself from Hindu society. He remained a Hindu and worked for the uplift of the depressed classes. He was perhaps one of the few to interact with the *Harijan* (literally, people of god, a name Gandhi gave to the depressed class people), even eating with them and worshiping with them, while believing the preservation of caste differences.<sup>7</sup> For Parekh, the term “Hindu” denoted more than a religious affiliation. A “Hindu” was anyone who subscribed to Indian cultural heritage. In this, he candidly

critiqued Keshub Chunder Sen, whom he highly respected, because Sen opted out of “Hinduism” as a religion when the Brahma Samaj Marriage Act was enacted in 1872.<sup>8</sup> He preferred the disciples of Christ to remain in their own community and witness while totally rejecting mass conversion as proselytism.<sup>9</sup> Even as a Christian, he believed that Christianity should remain *moksh dharma* (a salvific and a spiritual religion) rather than *samaj dharma* (a social religion). He advocated caste separation and approved of the social segregation of races in the U.S. that he had seen during his visit.<sup>10</sup>

### *Baptism as Discipleship*

In 1924, Parekh wrote an article in which he discussed the spiritual significance and value of baptism. He had severe criticism for the church. He believed that the church of his times had become Westernized and materialistic. It had become a communal body that was more political and social than spiritual. Culturally it was anti-national. The church had lost its identity as “Christian.” In fact, he expressed his desire to start a Hindu Church of Christ, but refrained when he learned that some Christians were attempting to do just that and decided instead to become a part of it.<sup>11</sup>

He applied the term “Christendom” to describe the characteristics of the Christian community and the church (which for him are one and the same), which were then expanding all over the world. The “Christendom mentality” fueled the superiority of Christianity (in its Western form) over everything native in the Indian context. It despised the religious, socio-cultural, and political arrangements within India. In Parekh’s words,

It has come to mean absolute severance from one’s own community, from one’s own birth and kin, from one’s national, cultural and even spiritual heritage, all of which are very often nearer to the Spirit of Christ than the so-called Christendom of the Christian community in India.<sup>12</sup>

He thought that Christianity had mixed with “absolutely unessential and even anti-Christian elements.” He identified them as “western civilization, European culture and foreign imperialism.”<sup>13</sup> The church in India at the time of Parekh, the church that Parekh knew, stood condemned in his eyes and in the eyes of some of his contemporaries as a compromised entity. The church wore Western garb. Like an alien potted plant, it had been planted in Indian soil. It had compromised with Western culture and remained a stumbling block for many high caste Hindus. The church would need to change before Hindu disciples would agree to come in or before the church could ask them to come in. The result was that some Hindu disciples of Christ hesitated to enter the church or become a member and therefore hesitated to take baptism. Some Indian Christian leaders argued that baptism should not be required of these Hindu disciples, while others thought that baptism should be done away with altogether.

What would it have looked like had the church or Christian faith directly come from Jerusalem to India without going the route of the West? How would it have felt if India had experienced God directly, without God being channeled through Western conceptual conduits? Of course, India did receive Christianity from the beginning of the Christian faith, but the community that grew from that time on continued to thrive without noticeably making any further disciples. It is believed that St. Thomas evangelized the people who eventually came to recognize the Syrian Patriarchate and called themselves Syrian Christians. The growth of that community down through the centuries was more biological and nuptial than spiritual. It lacked zeal in spreading the gospel. By accommodating caste practices, the Christian community in India in the early centuries of the common era could remain a close-knit community within a closed and bounded set of relationships. Eventually, it survived centuries

**H**e felt that baptism was needed, but the practice needed to be clipped of its unnecessary ritual accumulations.

of pressure from the dominant Hindu community by accommodating to its socio-cultural surroundings without giving up the faith.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Buddhism in India, which eventually would become an expanding missionary religion throughout much of the Far East, the church in India during those first fifteen centuries failed to spread the gospel beyond its own insular community, caste providing a cohesive and cementing force. Could evangelism have scattered Christians by attracting persecution? Could persecution have been an acceptable option for the insulated minority Christian community in southern India? By taming the gospel under caste practice (which held powerful sway in social relations with cultural and religious significance), did that early Christian community in India succumb to some form of Christendom mentality?

### *Baptism as Confession*

Parekh suggested that baptism was vital to Christian faith, for Christ commanded it. It is a sign of a public testimony and therefore integral to spiritual life. “Baptism is the most unequivocal and open confession of the discipleship of Christ, if nothing more on the spiritual side be granted on its behalf.”<sup>15</sup>

Parekh’s own spiritual experience at the time of his baptism is worth recalling here. He said that he was given, as if by “a flash of revelation from God” the *adbikar* (“authority,” “power,” “credential,” “privilege”) to reveal, to preach, to confess the name of Christ, and to make prophetic pronouncement by the authority of Christ “only an hour after his baptism.”<sup>16</sup> He continued, “Hence true baptism makes the disciple of Christ at once a *shishya* (a disciple), an *acharya* (a priest, a teacher) and a prophet.”<sup>17</sup> Baptism is an authority from Christ to confess the name of Christ

and a privilege from Christ to reveal the name of Christ. In this respect, he felt that baptism itself was needed, but the practice needed to be clipped of the unnecessary ritual accumulations.

### *Baptism and Christendom Mentality*

What connection did he see between imperialism and the Hindu disciples not desiring baptism in the Christian church? Parekh thought the answer laid in the development of what would be called a Christendom mindset. In the West, Christendom gave rise to cultural Christianity, a form of Christianity where to be a Westerner and European meant to be a Christian. Church membership was taken for granted. In such a situation baptism was reduced to a ceremony of naming, and had little spiritual significance. The important thing was to bring people into the circle of faith, by faith or by force. Bosch identifies this kind of mindset in the medieval paradigm of missionary practice, where the operative scriptural text was Luke 14:23, “and compel them to come in.”<sup>18</sup>

Speaking in his own times and situation, Parekh opined that, “Already European and American Christendom has discredited Christianity with its mutual wranglings, economic and imperial expansions and exploitation, and wars on a world wide scale.”<sup>19</sup> Could Parekh’s perception be wrong? Generally speaking, the perception Parekh held is a representative Hindu perception.

### *True Discipleship*

Disciples of Christ should remain in their own community, professing Christ and accepting persecution in the name of Christ, if that were their lot. Such steadfastness, Parekh calls true *Satyagrahi* (in the nationalist movement *satyagraha* had the connotation

of “protest,” but in its literal sense it means the demand for truth to prevail). This would bring credibility to faith in Christ. Given sufficient time, such opposition might cease and Hindus would be positively impacted. Even though no one else in his family was baptized, Parekh himself continued and practiced discipleship to Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Parekh criticized the practice of extracting converts into a distinct community, as that seemed to create a new caste. He felt that even if the community was not willing to retain converts, they should not close doors of relationship from their side. Converts, as disciples, should act out of love for Christ toward the community to which they belonged. Converts who cross over to Christianity and adopt a Western lifestyle, create prejudice against Christianity in the minds of Hindus. He did not mind if converts did not worship idols or keep caste, but they should be culturally sensitive to Hindus.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Resentment against Conversion and Church: The Menace of Proselytism***

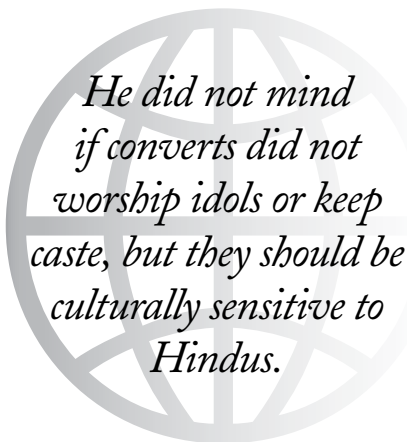
Are conversion and proselytism the same? Parekh gives a useful distinction between the two. He says,

whereas the former (proselytism) leads to the growth and development of a distinct social and political community, the latter (conversion) emphasizes chiefly the spiritual aspects of life and helps in establishing the Kingdom of Heaven which does not lie in eating, drinking and marrying but in Christ-like life, love and service.<sup>22</sup>

Parekh rejected proselytism as a means for Christianity to grow in India. In fact, he termed it “a great and growing menace.” Parekh saw every conversion involving material benefit to the convert as an act of proselytism. He saw the mass movement to Christianity as proselytism. Mass movements simply gave numerical growth to Christianity. Parekh made his intentions clear at the time of his baptism. Baptism for him was

not a rite of entering into the church. It reflected in the fact that his association with the church did not last long. His critical attitude kept him away from the church for a long time. He was thus deprived of Christian fellowship. The cause of his negative attitude toward the missionary work of conversion made him a controversial figure among missionaries and the Indian Christians,<sup>23</sup> yet he remained a significant thinker in the Christian community.

Parekh’s significant departure from the church raised the issue of the neces-



sity of the local church for conversion to Christ. Parekh realized the need for spiritual fellowship and desired a Hindu church of Christ, culturally accommodating to Hindu culture. The established church was unable to offer that even though it may have experimented with accommodating aspects of Christian faith to Hindu culture here and there. The failure of the established church to provide cultural continuity has led many converts today to refuse to join a local church because it does not witness to Christ in their language. For them conversion means commitment to Christ and not to a visible church.

### ***Formation of Harmony of All Religions: The Bhagwat Dharma***

His spiritual journey took a new turn with his study of Zoroastrianism. That study sowed the seeds of what he came to call the *Bhagavata Dharma* “a

religion of personal theism” or “a religion of mystical devotion.” Christianity was simply a part of this new spiritual harmony or synthesis—part of *samanvaya*, a harmony of all theistic religions. He once again changed the name of his house to “House of Harmony.” Harmony for him did not mean equality of all religions. He believed that truth matters and it is found in his *Bhagavata Dharma*.<sup>24</sup>

His new religion was organized around a personalist strand of religious beliefs. It had Christian flavor but was not exclusively or even largely centered on Christ. Attracted to the Swami Narayana sect, he found in their *satsang* (fellowship, communal worship) a meeting point of people of different cultic and religious convictions that did not violate their caste affiliations, or require them to give up their social ties.<sup>25</sup>

He recognized that the *bhakti* (devotion) movement on the Indian subcontinent had had a mellowing effect on that region’s rigid socio-religious sphere. The *Bhakti* strand of Hindu religion was based on *Vishishtadvaitavad* (a philosophy of qualified/modified non-duality), one of the highest Indian philosophical systems. This highest of religious streams watered the parched souls of the lowliest of the lowly. The *Bhakti* movement was in some sense a protest against discrimination and the hierarchy of the caste structure. It sought to level people of all castes and classes and bind everyone into one common human fraternity.<sup>26</sup> *Bhakti* in some ways bridged Christian mysticism and Vaishnavism, but his earlier experience with rejecting Brahma Samaj and leaving historical Christianity led him to conclude that conversion to Christianity is unnecessary since it entails “exclusiveness and communalism.”<sup>27</sup>

### ***Must Conversion Involve Severing Relations?***

In the Indian context it is customary to hear of conversion stories in which converts either choose to leave the community they belong to and sever their ties

with their communities or the community excommunicates the person who has left them. But when a caste group converted there was more support for the converts. Caste provided social cohesiveness among caste groups that was seen as helpful to Christian faith. As Forrester reports “caste keeps the converts in the church.”<sup>28</sup> Three advantages can be noted. One, caste saves a convert from “social dislocation.” Two, it provides a more “compelling testimony.” Three, it preserves indigenous practices rather than “denationalize” a convert. Its absence is felt as an impediment to the higher caste groups embracing Christianity. Conversion may easily proceed if the whole caste were to accept the new faith.<sup>29</sup> It was the experience of the church and the missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that many more Indians were attracted to Christianity than were actually converted. What potential converts feared most was excommunication from their caste.<sup>30</sup> In other words, this means the fear of caste can keep converts away from Christianity.

Why is there resistance to conversion in India from high caste Hindus? Why are there so few conversions from high caste or upper caste Hindus in India? The answer could be manifold. Culturally, they wish to cling on to traditional customs and mores of the Hindu culture. They do not wish to leave the way of living, thinking, and relating as was practiced by their ancestors. Such sentiments are noble, when it has to offer the highest in humankind. But culture cannot be made absolute. Each culture has its own flaws. Cultural practices that are less than humane, if not inhumane, must be given up for more humanitarian concerns. Child marriage and the plight of widows, including the immolation of a deceased’s wife on the funeral pyre, were some major concerns that would be culturally addressed in the light of Christian faith. However, there was fear that conversion would entail day-to-day practices that were alien to the Indian

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mind. Even food habits would be affected, let alone the dressing and grooming, and the rest.

Conversion in the Indian context has raised the question of what converts bring of their former religious-cultural affiliation to Christianity. The danger of syncretism exists but it should not be overstated. If Hindu converts find it meaningful to speak of Christ and to articulate their faith in familiar language and terminology, and to practice their devotion with familiar forms and gestures, then Christian praxis must make that accommodation on grounds not just practical but theological. Incarnation is a strong paradigm to consider in favor of accommodation.

It is interesting to note that, when Parekh embarked on his spiritual journey and his path took him away from the roots in his own religion, he was neither excommunicated from his caste or religion nor did he choose to sever ties with his birth community. Parekh was highly sensitive to Indian culture and the riches it had to offer to Christian faith. He enjoyed the support of his community throughout his spiritual journey, as he moved from one religious group to another. He recognized that *dharmantar* (change of religion) was after all unnecessary, and the reasons he pointed to were its exclusiveness and communalism. Thus while he favored spiritual conversion, he wanted social and religious ties left undisturbed. In the Indian context it meant not upsetting caste organization. By articulating his praxis of baptism as discipleship to Christ, he showed that baptism might not involve a change of religion, a severing of social ties, or neglect of cultural mores. Hindus can be better Hindus by following Christ in their cultural environment. The plurality of Hindu tradition would be able to absorb Christ followers with their distinct patterns of worship, especially

when it involves non-idol worship and not sacrificing to idols.

It seems that Parekh was moving in the direction of emphasizing the spiritual benefits of following Christ as opposed to the materialism of Christendom and the communalism of Hindu people. He wanted to lose himself in the spiritual *bhakti* (ecstatic devotion) of Christ in the early years of conversion, but slowly veered off toward a theistic eclecticism of his *Bhagwat dharma*.

### Conclusion

The case study on the life of Parekh has shown us many valuable insights into the church’s evangelistic and missionary work. His venture into Christianity was due to his attraction to Christ. Charges of “forced conversion,” “disloyalty,” “lack of patriotism,” and “de-nationalization” are not brought up in reference to Parekh. Positively, there is much for a convert to gain in remaining connected with his own community. So long as his life was centered on Christ, he generated a fascinating confluence of Hindu and Christian strands attractive to Hindus and Christians alike, and in this he stood within the tradition of Hindu-Christianity. It is to the credit of Christian leaders and missionaries that they supported Parekh in this venture and journeyed with him in his discipleship to the Lord Jesus Christ. Sadly, his leaning away from the centrality of Christ (a judgment that is made here hesitantly) and his isolation from the Christian community contributed to his being neglected by the Christians of his time. The pastoral care of those who are turning to Christ is of utmost importance in Christian nurture.

Parekh was a man of free spirit and did not find it easy to be confined within a particular framework, be it

denominational churches, Western Christianity, or other religious traditions. He broke free from all that asphyxiated his spirit. He was not afraid to examine the spiritual sources that might feed his soul or to experiment with spiritual eclecticism.

Parekh's interpretation of his baptism as discipleship to Christ may pave the way for understanding and responding to conversion from Hinduism to Christianity in our time. "Discipleship to Christ" transcends cultural and legal bindings that attach to terms like "conversion" and "becoming a Christian" in an environment that is charged with hostility towards certain forms of Christianity. It is hoped that a deeper study into the life of Parekh would bring out much that is relevant in learning about how best to minister to Hindu disciples of Christ.

Parekh has pointed to the need for cultural continuity in the church along the lines of a national Hindu church. How it would be received in times like ours when identities are more set than before remains to be seen. Perhaps Hindu disciples of Christ would create new forms of being the church and in that the established churches would have to be more open, receptive and supportive. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> M. C. Parekh, "An Autobiographical Sketch," in Robin H. S. Boyd, (ed.) *Manilal C. Parekh 1885-1967 and Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai 1895-1967* (Bangalore: The Christian Literature Society for the Department of Research and Post-Graduate Studies, United Theological College, 1974), 22-31. As well as, M. C. Parekh *Ek Bhagwatni Atmakatha: Bhagwatkrupana Samsmarano (Autobiography of a Bhagavata: Reminiscence of God's Grace)*. Shri Bhagwatdharma Mission Series (Rajkot: Bhagwatdharma Mission House, 1963). iv + 472. Hereafter, Parekh, *Autobiography*.

<sup>2</sup> Parekh, "An Autobiographical Sketch," 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Parekh wrote a very favorable biography of Sri Swami Narayana in English and subtitled it *A Gospel of Bhagwat Dharma*. One can see the spiritual affinity that flows

here between Parekh's spiritual vision of the *Bhagwat dharma* and the life and teachings of Swami Narayana. *Sri Swami Narayana (A Gospel of Bhagwat Dharma or God in Redemptive Action)* (Rajkot, Sri Bhagwat Dharma Mission House [Harmony House], 1936) xvii+350pp+index

<sup>5</sup> Parekh, *Autobiography*, 201.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 393-395.

<sup>8</sup> M. C. Parekh, *The Brahma Samaj: A Short History* (Rajkot: The Author, Oriental Christ House, 1929), 109-111.

<sup>9</sup> Parekh, *Autobiography*, 452f.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Parekh, "An Autobiographical Sketch," 26.

<sup>12</sup> Parekh, "The spiritual significance and value of baptism," *National Christian Council Review*, (September 1924), 324-329 in Robin H. S. Boyd, (ed.) *Manilal C. Parekh 1885-1967 and Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai 1895-1967* (Bangalore: The Christian Literature Society for the Department of Research and Post-Graduate Studies, United Theological College, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> Parekh, "The spiritual significance," 57.

<sup>14</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India* (London: Curzon Press, 1979), 12, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Parekh, "The spiritual significance," 57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 58

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. American Society of Missiology Series, No.16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 236.

<sup>19</sup> Parekh, "The spiritual significance," 59.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>23</sup> M. C. Parekh, *Christian Proselytism in India—A Great and Growing Menace* (Rajkot: The Author, Harmony House, 1947).

<sup>24</sup> Boyd, Introduction, 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 and 14.

<sup>26</sup> Milton Stauffer, ed., *The Indian Approach to India* (London: SCM, 1928).

<sup>27</sup> Boyd, Introduction, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, 16

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> Antony Copley, *Religions in Conflict: Ideology, Cultural Contact and Conversion in Late Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, 54.

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H. L. Richard's Response to Parimal Roy's  
*Religious Conversion in Hindu India:  
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Some of you are probably thinking, "This doesn't seem to be adding up. This is supposed to be about best practices, so what was the best practice in that presentation?" And the answer to that is, we don't really have any "best practices" in the Hindu world. I think about what Brad shared in introducing last night, that 30 or 40 years ago there were ideas, and probings and dreams, but

her father, she said "No, no. That is simply not true." So these are sad stories and bad stories. Parimal mentioned Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (which is an almost unpronounceable name for Americans), another absolutely fascinating story. I don't know if Rick Brown is still here, he made some of those linguistics things sound so easy the other day. This guy wrote a song to Christ which is "*Jaya deva jaya deva narahari*." *Jaya* is praise, *deva* is 'god', *nara* is 'man', *hari* is 'god'. "Praise to god, the man-god." That's very nice in that translation. The only problem is, the word he is using for God is *hari*. If you ask any Hindu what is

*What are we going to do about these things? This is not an isolated study of one man who went through this kind of struggle. It's a terrible, tragic story.*

there was no data in the Islamic world. Now there is data, now there are movements, now there are best practices studies. That does not exist in the Hindu world. One of the things that has struck me in my fringe contact with the discussions and debates in the Islamic world is that we now have Muslim-friendly Bible translations, and more-Muslim-friendly Bible translations, and some hot feelings between those two camps. How many Hindu friendly Bible translations are there in the world? Zero. How many are in process? Only one that I know of.

To me that is the response to Manilal Parekh. What are we going to do about these things? This is not an isolated study of one man who went through this kind of struggle. It's a terrible, tragic story. I went out over a decade ago to Rajkot, to his home place, to try to find his descendants, and found two granddaughters (and their mother, who was very aged and didn't know any English, so I didn't relate to her). And probing what they remembered, when I told them the story of how their grandfather was baptized and was a significant Christian leader for some decades, they said, "No, no, no, that is not true, you don't understand." And there was no way for me to correct them; they understood their side of the story and didn't understand the truth. A terrible tragedy as far as I am concerned.

That was not even the first time I had met that kind of situation. I once located the sister-in-law of the famous sitarist Sri Ravi Shankar. Her husband, Uday Shankar, was a famous classical dance artist in India, for some time more famous than his younger brother Ravi Shankar. This woman's father was a disciple of Jesus, and not a semi-backslidden one the way Manilal Parekh was. He became more bold in his profession of Christ in his later years. But when I tried to tell her the story about the baptism of

the meaning of the word *hari*, it is 'god', but if you ask who is *hari*, it is Vishnu or Krishna. That term is so overwhelmingly associated with Vishnu/Krishna. This guy had the linguistic boldness to apply that name and other names of Krishna to Christ. That song is sung on the latest album of Aradhna. If any of you are into contextual music I'm sure you are familiar with Aradhna. It's the main song on this album and the words and translation are in this package [held up on display] if you are interested in these kinds of things. They went to the India Missions Association and said "We are afraid of the response from Indian Christians if we sing *Jaya deva narahari*. Will you give us permission, give us your blessing?" And they said, "Yes, you have our blessing, you can sing that song." These things are complicated and difficult. This man, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, died as a Hindu and was cremated as a Hindu. He was Roman Catholic, and he later was re-evaluated by Roman Catholics, why he went through the kinds of things that Manilal Parekh also went through.

Subba Rao, who just died in 1982 in Andhra Pradesh, was anti-Christian, anti-church, anti-baptism, anti-priests and pastors in particular, and he was a lover of Christ. That sounds impossible. You read the book; there are so many contradictions in this guy's life and thoughts that by the end you will marvel how it would be possible for such a strange guy to have lived. But he influenced hundreds and thousands; I think probably the most effective evangelist among "clean" caste Hindus in the 20th century was this guy. He would not organize any church or institute any sacraments, he had a very low view of the Bible. He was challenged, "Why don't you read the Bible more?" He said, "I went to college, I read those books. I don't keep reading those books over and over again." Sometimes when he "quoted" the Bible his "quotes" were really off base. So this

is a big problem, not something that I am recommending. But why do we have these problems?

Let me get away from the unorthodox guys and quote N. V. Tilak instead. N. V. Tilak, who died in 1919, wrote this (marked “most confidential”) to a close friend.

I am really tired of missions and missionaries. These with their agents form an institution which is day by day degenerating. They are guided by selfish motives, they are slaves to self-sufficiency, pride and the world. Excepting those who join the flock and live in and for worldly motives, no other person can do anything for their country as long as they depend on these

and Buddhist worlds and there’s not a cloud in the sky. Which is where we were in the Muslim world 40, 50 years ago. There was not a cloud in the sky. Considering the Hindu world, if you get to the right place and you look far enough out you can see a cloud the size of a man’s hand. Does that mean that the showers are going to come in the Hindu and Buddhist worlds? I don’t know; surely only with a massive amount of energy. You look at what has happened in the Muslim world the last 30 years, the people, the time, the energy, the lives laid down. Dare we think something can happen

*If you get to the right place and you look far enough out you can see a cloud the size of a man’s hand. Does that mean that the showers are going to come . . . ?*

petty lords and their satellites. There is no end to their under-hand dealings, there is no end to their dependence on their flatterers. I am educating my wife so that I may one day be free of this missionary-Christianity, missionary injustice, and serve my country and lead her to Jesus just as he guides me.

And here’s the punch line to me: “Missionaries and mission agents can never do more than what money can do.”<sup>1</sup> Money can do a lot, and money can do a lot of good. But I think the kingdom of God really begins where the power of the dollar ends.

So what do we do in the Hindu world? I think John Ridgway has given suggestions, and Manilal has given suggestions, and I think we need to far more radically critique historic Christianity, colonial Christianity, as it was taken into India. We need to far more radically think what it means to be Hindu. Some of you I hope have noticed the book back there on the table in the corner, *Imagined Hinduism*. That is basically what we are dealing with. Those of you who have studied Hinduism in secular institutions, you have studied about this imagined Hinduism; in the evangelical world we still have not caught up to the illusion and we continue to promote and react to the imaginary. From the academic world comes this expression, by an Australian scholar, a brilliant exposé. His book title is *Imagined Hinduism*, describing the process by which “Hinduism as a single world religion” was concocted in the colonial era.<sup>2</sup>

I want to mix two analogies for you, two familiar phrases, and compare the Muslim world and the Hindu/Buddhist world. The Muslim world I think is exciting. We have case studies, we have data, we have movements. We can say it’s raining, it’s drops of rain. “Mercy drops” are falling, yet “for the showers we plead.” You come to the Hindu

in the Hindu and Buddhist worlds without that kind of commitment? I think it’s just as likely that that cloud is going to dissipate as any likelihood that it’s a sign that the showers are going to fall in the Hindu and Buddhist worlds. I just appeal to you that we have to start to deal with these issues and wrestle with these issues.

I’m sure that all of you are committed and engaged people, but as you meet new people coming up looking for a challenge, where is the challenge? There are still a thousand challenges in the Muslim world, there’s no way to downplay that, and in the tribal world, and in the Christian world. In this country there are so many challenges. But we have got to see a new focus, a new effort at the Hindu and Buddhist worlds or we are just going to continue to tell these stories of a few brilliant individuals who go through massive frustrations. By far my largest learning in twenty plus years trying to engage seriously with Hindu issues is from the Hindu converts, just listening to their stories. I was listening to another one just a few days ago, and there is never a happy story of a Hindu convert. They might be happy in the church, or they might be happy in their home, but you cannot be happy in both. It’s not possible, because the forms of Christianity and the structures of Christianity do not allow it. Which is what John Ridgway has been emphasizing for us. Stay out of those forms of Christianity, stay out of those forms of church, stay with your people and the church has got to grow up within there. The movement for Christ has got to grow up within “Hinduism,” the kingdom of God has got to grow up within “Hinduism.” As we are seeing in exciting ways, this is at least beginning to happen in parts in the Muslim world.



So that is my response to the story of Manilal. To me it is a powerful rebuke to us, because we could bring people here today to tell the same kind of story, going through the same kinds of issues, the same kinds of struggles that that man went through 80 and 100 years ago. Why does that still go on? And of course there are a lot of reasons for that, a lot of complications for that, but we've got to find a better way forward. Thank you for listening to that.

Oh, I need to say this. Preparing to share here I kept rebuking myself and reminding myself to say something positive. So here's something positive. You know the old

hoped they could be energized, and be more active in their profession of Christ. It's only a few that I met, and they tended to have found a place, a comfort zone in between Christianity and Hinduism where everyone saw them as a freak. They really didn't want to rock the boat again. They'd already rocked it and it had started to calm down. Again, this is very few cases that I ran into. That is your classic secret believer. They're all over India. They're very hard to discern, because you never know when you are dealing with a secret believer and when you are dealing with a lover of Christ who is just a syncretist, because

*The tragedy of conversion is that the yeast is pulled out of the lump, and there's no leaven, no influence in Hindu society. We create this holy huddle . . . a new caste . . .*

saying, "Sell your shirt to buy that book"? You don't even have to buy the book, Rory has already given it to you for free. It's right in your packet, right in your IJFM. "Impacting the Hindu Diaspora in North America" by Timothy Paul.<sup>3</sup> Read Rory's editorial forward where he warns you that you are going to be shocked when you read that paper. It dismantles our entire way of thinking about evangelism. And if you want to impact Hindus you have to just forget about all of the evangelism packages you have ever heard. Forget them all. Study this, and then talk with Hindus and see if this is not the way that we should be sharing the gospel with these people. This is a gem, this is a gold nugget, and I urge you to read that.

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### *Questions from the Floor*

#### Floor

*Brother, I like the way you responded to these things. I heard what sounded to me something like a cloud the size of a small hand in the distance. It was the study in South India of the churches that Ralph Winter, bless his memory and soul, extrapolated to a million or thirty million, I don't know which it was, Hindus in south India that were churchless Christians, that were authentic sincere followers of Christ that had not been baptized, did not go to church. What about that? Is that a small hand or a hoax?*

#### H. L. Richard

That is not a hoax, but that's a complex subject. I moved to Chennai and lived there for five years mainly to try to follow up on that study of Herb Hoefler, and I did seminars with Herb there and tried to get others involved.<sup>4</sup> And I certainly met people who fit that description. They were complicated cases who did not respond to what I was sharing with them in the way that I had hoped. I

they are all over the place. You'd have to do the kind of research that Hoefler did to sort them out. And that study was from the late '70s and early '80s.

#### Floor

*What would you say is the difference in Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai? It seemed like he was consistently a Christian and managed to keep his Hindu identity.*

#### Parimal Roy

He actually became a member of the church and in that respect he openly shared his faith. What is interesting about him is that he also shared that faith with his Hindu friends and in the language that his Hindu friends would be able to understand. We have two books here written by him, *Shri Krist Gita* and *Hriday Gita*. Both of them are poems that he wrote based on the life of Christ, in the format that the Hindus have their *Gita*, their sacred scripture. He was openly fellowshiping with Hindus. And I found that probably that was one way you could reach to a Hindu friend with the gospel.

#### H. L. Richard

His descendants are all Christians and all in the church. There's a study in an earlier IJFM, it's on my table back there, of 50 converts in South India, mostly in Tamilnadu, studying their relations.<sup>5</sup> The children of the convert are almost completely isolated from the Hindu world. The grandchildren are completely isolated from the Hindu world. And that is the tragedy of conversion. The tragedy of conversion is the yeast is pulled out of the lump, and there's no leaven, there's no influence in Hindu society. We create this holy huddle, which in Hindu society is nothing more than a new caste within one or two generations. So that was Dhanjibhai, he was a good convert and

a good churchman and a wonderful man, and he wrote these books, but he didn't let the Christians publish them in Gujarat, he got that done in the secular market. Then he set up a trust of three Christians and three Hindus to try to carry on that literary legacy. So he was trying to transcend the communalized Christianity, the ghettoized, compartmentalized Christianity. But that's almost impossible to transcend.

### Floor

*I also heard it said that Parekh thought that the caste system was a valid part of Hindu culture. What about idolatry, what about widow burning? Was there no appreciation for the thought that widow burning might have continued on much longer than it did had it not been for people like William Carey? It sounds like they are [unwilling to give] any credit at all [to] the Christian influence.*

### H. L. Richard

You get an action–reaction kind of thing here. So if you come in and say how great the missionaries were, you're going to get a reaction. But even the most fanatic anti-Christian Hindus will acknowledge that Christian education and Christian hospitals have done a great service to the country. One of the tragedies is that this is the strength of Christianity. What is the strength of Christianity? It is institutions. Is that the strength of Christianity? Is that what we consider true Christianity? Isn't it spirituality? If you say that to a Hindu he will burst out laughing. That is a joke. Christianity's strength is institutions. We just have a massive job to undo some things and get the real message out there.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> N. V. Tilak, quoted from H. L. Richard, *Following Jesus in the Hindu Context*. William Carey Library, Pasadena, 1998, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900*. Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Paul, "Impacting the Hindu Diaspora in North America," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26:3, July-Sept. 2009, pp. 129-133.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert E. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity*. William Carey Library, Pasadena, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> P. and S. Kannan, "A Survey of Disciples of Christ from Non-Dalit Hindu Homes," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 18:4, Winter 2001, pp. 165-169.

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\* Dates for Journey to India trips are subject to slight modification.