

EVANGELISM
among
HINDUS

by

PAUL SUDHAKAR

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"The risen and living Christ answers the need of
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EVANGELISM AMONG HINDUS

Paul Sudhaker 001466

Hindus form the great majority of India's population. The task of the Church in India to evangelise must therefore be directed to them. A knowledge of their religious beliefs will be a help in preaching in a way they can understand, thereby making the task of communication of the Gospel easier.

Hinduism is difficult to define. Not traceable to a particular time in history, and not being built on the teaching of a single founder, it is a strange conglomeration of ideas, ideologies, assumptions, assertions, philosophic concepts and religious realities. Their scriptures include the Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita, but the masses delight in the epics of Mahabharatha and Ramayana which is a mixture of history, legend, mythology and allegory. Polytheism, Pantheism, Monotheism and even Atheism co-exist in Hinduism. There is also a view that man is God, held by a few intellectuals.

The Advaita School, the mystical school, the contemplative and meditative school, the yoga school, and the ritualistic school all find a place in Hinduism. The religion of the masses is centred on the puranas, temples, rituals and festivals.

Being wide and varied, absorbing and receiving, Hinduism has retained an assumption that there are many ways to truth and many bridges to God. This is the philosophy behind Hindu tolerance. A Hindu therefore thinks there is no need to embrace another religion as his religion is wide enough to contain everything.

Evangelism among Hindus is challenging, as well as exacting. There are difficulties to be overcome, misunderstandings to be cleared, prejudices to be removed, and suspicions to be allayed.

The call for separation

A common difficulty for Hindus is the call for separation on becoming a Christian. Since Hinduism has not defined its dogma and since there is no way to determine its boundary, it is difficult for a Hindu to understand what it means to leave his religion. If the Biblical stand on separation is clearly presented to him, then he will know what he has to forsake on coming to Christ. In preaching, the emphasis must be on the acceptance of Christ, and the rejection asked for need not be Hinduism, but the things in it that do not go along with Christian teachings.

The meaning of history

Another difficulty in evangelism is to make Hindus understand the meaning of history. Having been brought up in a strange atmosphere of religious literature that includes history, legend, mythology, allegory and philosophy, it is difficult for them to grasp the Christian affirmation that God is a God of history and a God in history. The preaching of Christ as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies and the declaration that Jesus is God who became man are difficult for a Hindu to understand. They treat Jesus as one of the many incarnations of God, without verifying the historicity of the incarnations in Hinduism. So in evangelism, they must be carefully and patiently led to realise the centrality of the historical facts of the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection for the salvation of man.

The dangers of contrasting

A third difficulty that arises in evangelism is when Christ is set against Hindu gods, and the Bible is set against the Hindu Scriptures. However

useful it is to compare and contrast Hindu and Christian Scriptures in discussion, this method, if used in evangelism will only alienate instead of drawing Hindus to Christ. They resent the idea of contrast. Religions do have certain things in common and certain things different from one another. To ignore the differences and assert that all religions are the same is not fair, but to over-emphasise the differences and minimise or ignore the similarities is also not fair. The similarities between Hinduism and Christianity can be planks from which we can get a sympathetic hearing and the Christian message, which is unique, can be developed from there. The distinctiveness or the difference of the Christian message will then dawn on the Hindu mind without our saying so.

Hindus will also be resentful if we present Christianity as superior to Hinduism. The terms of reference and the tools of evaluation of Hinduism and Christianity concerning religious truths being different, it is futile to talk of superiority or inferiority of one religion over another. There is a strange silence of Jesus over the major religions of the world other than Judaism.

The need for humility

The appeal of the Evangel is not on the intellect but on the heart. Men of intellectual eminence like Paul and Augustine and Luther came to Christ out of their sense of need and not by an intellectual discovery of the superiority of Christianity over other religions. So while preaching to Hindus, it is wise to confine ourselves to the need of a saviour, rather than to argue about the superiority of Christianity over Hinduism. The emptiness of the human soul, the lack of purpose and direction of man, the hunger for union with God, the search for a meaning for existence, the longing for peace and the unceasing search for spiritual life are some of things that occupy the

Hindu mind, and it will make a better impression if Christ can be preached with this background. Our approach therefore should not be that of paternalism but one of humility and of love. If Paul, the righteous and blameless Pharisee could say that he was the chiefest of sinners Christ came to save, how much more should we be humble in telling Hindus about Christ.

The only Saviour

A further difficulty in evangelism arises when Christ is presented as the only Saviour and Lord. Hindus are like the Greeks of Paul's day who built altars to every known god and even to an unknown god. But their tolerance breaks before Jesus Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. They are admirers of Christ, but they should be persuaded beyond admiration to allegiance to Christ. They will accept Christ as one of the incarnations of God, as one of the Saviours of the world, and as one of the Lords. They accuse Christians of bigotry, narrow-mindedness and intellectual arrogance when Christ is proclaimed as the only Lord. But these statements on the uniqueness of Christ, and the fact of His being the only Saviour, are to be conclusions and convictions to which the teaching will gradually lead and not propositions to be blindly accepted or challenges to be thrown at a Hindu.

The fact of sin

Another major difficulty of confronting a Hindu with the Gospel is to convince him of the fact of sin in the Biblical sense.

It will be unwise to call a Hindu audience "sinners". Jesus said that only those who were sick would need a physician. He described the nature of Sin as weary, heavy-laden, wandering, lostness and sickness of the soul and rebellion. Through the parables and stories, He described the state of the sinner and his need for salvation.

No doubt there were occasions when our Lord bluntly called men sinners. The average Hindu will understand when he is told that he is a sinner, but it is hard to convince a philosophic Hindu of the fact of sin.

All religions of the world, including Hinduism have doctrines of sin, but true Biblical proclamation of the Saviour will not be effective without the Biblical doctrine of sin. The Christian who tells a Hindu that he is a sinner must make sure that the Biblical meaning of sin is made clear.

Much confusion and argument have followed the preaching of sin without explaining what is meant.

The Hindu view of sin and Karma

The majority of Hindus think of sin as breaking the rules laid down in the Scriptures and very rarely realise it as disobedience to God. The doctrine that sin came to the world through the disobedience of one man, is difficult for them to understand.

The Hindu doctrine of sin is largely influenced by the doctrine of Karma, by which a man is punished for his sin. In Hinduism salvation is not here and now, but hereafter; Hindus believe that the consequence of sin will be reaped either in the present life or in another life when the soul is reborn in another body. They look on salvation as deliverance from the endless cycle of births and deaths. They also believe that they can merit salvation by good works.

The Advaita School of Hinduism explains away sin as an illusion or an unreality which disappears when true knowledge appears.

Against these backgrounds Christ has to be preached as the Saviour of sinners. It is important that Hindus are given a correct understanding of Sin and Salvation before they are told to accept Christ. The doctrine of Karma has taken so strong

a hold on their minds, that the doctrine of Atonement, by which Jesus died for the sins of the world as the sinners' substitute bringing salvation to men as a free gift, is hardly understood by them. It is here that the evangelist must exercise much patience, in opening their eyes to the wondrous truths of atonement, redemption and grace.

The danger of arguments

A difficulty that will arise when presenting the Gospel to Hindus is when they drag the preacher into arguments. A Hindu cannot be argued into Christianity. The Upanishads, the Hindu scriptures, are full of discussions and it is futile to enter into debate with them. It is safer to remember that evangelization is the proclamation of good news. Our Lord refused to argue with the Samaritan woman, when she asked Him if He was greater than Jacob, but told her that He would give her a life that would be eternally satisfying thereby implying His supremacy. In dealings with Hindus, such methods will richly repay, whereas debates will bring much confusion and bitterness.

Hinduism itself has witnessed debates in the past, like the one between the Sankara School and the Ramanuja School. Yet both these schools have survived to this day.

Because of the absence of dogma, there are no heretics in Hinduism. This attitude of treating all ideas alike makes it all the more difficult to argue with them.

Group conversions and the caste system

Another difficulty in evangelism arises out of the fact that Christianity in India is largely the result of group conversions that followed a caste pattern. Except for the Syrian Christians of Kerala the great majority of Indian Christians came from castes whom Hindu society termed as low. These mass movements to Christianity have brought in social

social emancipation. This, in turn, encouraged groups of people to embrace Christianity without the necessary implications involved in a change of religion. Mass movements and caste conversions have their advantages, but it is a fact that a distorted image of Christianity has been projected before the Hindus by such conversions.

Caste still continues in the Church and poses a serious problem for evangelisation. High caste Hindus stand aloof from the body of Christians and view Christianity in caste context. Within the Church itself, Christians, still with the caste complex are not eager to win those who do not belong to their caste for Christ. The Church has no effective message of the Gospel if it cannot be a casteless society.

The divided church

A difficulty in evangelism is that created by a divided Church. Denominationalism poses a serious difficulty in the proclamation of the Gospel to Hindus. A Hindu convert finds denominational walls barring him from the fellowship of Christians. It is also not uncommon to find one denomination telling a Hindu convert that his conversion is not true, because it did not take place in that particular denomination. Sometimes converts are asked to leave a church because of certain doctrines of that church. A divided Church hinders the work of evangelism.

Nominal Christianity is the biggest barrier to evangelism in India. The type of Christianity that Hindus see in India is a powerful instrument of evangelism. While it is true that revival does bring in evangelism, it is also true that evangelism of the dedicated few has brought in revival. The ideal should be for revival and evangelism to go together.

The difficulty of the Old Testament

A difficulty in evangelism to Hindus is due

to the fact that they will find it hard to understand all the doctrines of the Bible, especially those of the Old Testament. Preaching may be limited to the facts of the Gospel, namely, the incarnation, the death and the resurrection of the Lord.

The prejudice of politics and nationalism

Concerning the prejudices of the Hindus that have to be removed, the political colouring that is given to Christianity is a common prejudice. There is no use brushing aside this fact as unimportant. Though our Lord said that His kingdom was not of this world, yet He was crucified on a political charge by a religious people. Paul was condemned to a Roman prison in Philippi on a political charge. Early Christians in the Roman Empire met various degrees of punishment on political charges because they refused to call Caesar 'Lord'.

Except for the Syrian Christians of Kerala Christianity in India is the result of preaching by western missionaries, who came to India during the days of European imperialism. Hindus therefore equate Christianity with foreign political domination, and view it as a foreign religion. They do not realise that missionaries have not preached foreign politics, but have laboured under difficult situations to make Christ known. But the missionaries are viewed with suspicion not only by Hindus, but also by the Indian government. For effective evangelism to Hindus, the Church must win their confidence, and dispel the doubt that her political sympathies are outside the country. Our Lord kept the Church as the servant of the people, and the Church must not only be interested in evangelising India, but also to serve the country and the world.

There are movements in India like the Arya Samaj and the Rashtriya Swayam Seva Sangh which equate Hinduism with Indian nationalism. Unless the Church proves by her life that she is not

lagging behind any Hindu in her love for the country, evangelism will become more and more difficult. The content and core of the Gospel is universal and international, but Church history has demonstrated that the Church in every land had become indigenous without losing its character.

Western culture misunderstood

Many Hindus mistake western culture for Christianity. We Christians are partly responsible for this. Indian Christianity is viewed by them as an alien religion with nothing in common with Indian culture.

Christians are viewed with suspicion, as those who are trying to impose a foreign culture. The dress they wear, the songs they sing, the way they worship, the manner in which they imitate western ways of preaching, the psychological mass media in evangelistic meetings used by some, the undue anxiety of some to increase the number of converts without caring for quality of disciples, the architectural designs of church buildings, and the intellectual dependence of the Church in India on western theology, are cited by the Hindus as proofs in support of their argument that Christianity will uproot them from their cultural heritage. Unless the Indian Church is truly Indian in culture, without losing its universal character, she will find it difficult to reach the Hindus with the Gospel. Indian Christians must take care not to appear before the Hindus as defenders of the western values of life.

Hindus do not realise that the Church in the west is different from the people of the west and that the Church has stood as the conscience convicting and condemning the western world. When Hindus point out the long list of wars of the west, the Negro problem in the USA and the South African Apartheid, they betray their ignorance of the fact that true followers of Christ have condemned all these. In evangelism among Hindus it is important

to clear away these misunderstandings.

While preaching to Hindus we must be careful to preach the Christ of the Bible, supported by the experience of the living Christ, and not Christianity and western culture. Hindus are always attracted towards Christ, but not to western Christianity.

Dangers of 'decisions'

In evangelism, among Hindus, it is necessary to allay their suspicions. When they are pressed in public meetings to raise their hands, stand up or sign decision cards, they react with suspicion thinking these are pressure tactics to force them into Christianity. By themselves these methods are not wrong, but in places where these methods are used, it is necessary to allay their suspicions by explaining why they are used. It is, however, better to leave a Hindu to decide for himself.

Being influenced with the teaching of Nishkama Karma by which the motive of any action should be duty and not the fruit of action, the Hindu naturally suspects evangelistic methods that are dominated by success mentality and commercial propaganda.

The use of testimonies

The use of testimonies of Hindu converts to Christianity must be done with much care, as otherwise it will be viewed by the Hindus with suspicion. They will accuse the Church of making use of a convert as a piece of propaganda.

The nature of Hinduism is such that no Hindu can truly be representative of Hinduism. A convert's view of Hinduism is therefore partial. So on the basis of a Hindu embracing Christianity, it will not prove that his testimony of conversion can be used to attract Hindus to Christ. Hindus will object if the Church or the convert were to pose as the sole interpreters of Hinduism. Testimonies therefore should be given in humility and love.

Choice of terms

It will be useful to remember that words like 'heathen' and 'gentile' are not liked by the Hindus. These words have developed associations and meanings, different from their Biblical meanings, and it is better to avoid those words.

Also it is better to avoid calling anyone a 'non-Christian'. A Hindu should be addressed as a Hindu and not as non-Christian. A man is won not by calling him by what he is not, but by what he is.

Dialogues are useful in personal evangelism. In dialogue, no party compromises, but are willing to listen to each other in love. Confidence is thus built up, and while we are willing to listen to the Hindu, he is willing to listen to us. But dialogues have dangers. Evangelisation is not mutual listening but direct proclamation of the good news. The positive presentation of the Gospel should not, therefore, be lost sight of.

Mysticism is common in all religions, and Hinduism has many mystics who emphasise spiritual communion between God and man. Hindus therefore have a special attraction for John's Gospel because of its emphasis on spiritual communion. Preaching from John's Gospel will always be heard eagerly by the Hindus.

Renunciation and sacrifice are held high in Hinduism, and Hindus are therefore attracted towards Christ, who is the embodiment of these virtues. It is therefore, important that the lives of the Christians be consistent with their professions of discipleship to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian who lives a sacrificial life will be able to win more Hindus to Christ than the Christian living in ease and comfort.

Christian Ashrams have also made an impact on Hindu minds, due to the life of simplicity, sacrifice and fellowship found there. But if these

centres of seclusion for meditation and fellowship can be used for aggressive New Testament type evangelism, many Hindus can be won for Christ.

One of the methods that is rarely used and is looked upon with suspicion by the Indian Church is the use of Hindu scriptures in Christian preaching. This method has advantages as well as dangers. The advantages are the willingness of the Hindus to hear truth from their own scriptures and their friendliness to the Christian message. The dangers are the tendency to undermine the urgency of the Gospel and an emergence of compromise. It is compromise that produces universalism and syncretism which destroys the Gospel altogether. Respect for Hindu scriptures and acceptance of truth in them cannot be at the expense of the Bible, which is the fully and uniquely inspired word of God, the only infallible sufficient, and authoritative rule of faith and conduct. If we are confused on the doctrines of revelation and inspiration we will be confused on the approach to the Hindus. Christian approach to Hinduism is therefore linked with the Christian approach to Hindu scriptures.

It is not possible to accept that Hindu scriptures are all truth, since there is no consensus among Hindu scholars on what constitutes the Hindu canon. Hindu scriptures also contain suppositions and speculative thinking. It is also common to find some Hindus accepting extra-sensory experiences as authoritative without verifying whether such experiences are valid according to the scriptures. The problem whether the essence of religion is the experience of reality or reality of experience still remains in Hinduism, because of the difficulty of locating the final authority on truth.

In Acts 17:22-31, we find Paul preaching to the Athenians, who are in some ways similar to the educated Hindus of today. There he preached

a sermon without quotations from the Old Testament, and he quoted some Greek poets. Paul also works up from the concept of the unknown God, and makes known the true and living God, proclaiming the Resurrection of Christ and the future judgement. He ended his sermon with a call for repentance.

In the Hindu philosophy there are three systems known as Jnana, Bhakti and Karma, which are ways to God. It is possible to show forth Christ as the only teacher of Jnana Marga the only God of Bhakti Marga, and the one supreme and final sacrifice in Karma Marga. The Hindu hope of Mukti, which is deliverance, and Amrita, which is immortality, can be shown as fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Yoga means union and every chapter of Gita is called a Yoga. Christ can be shown as Yogeswara, who has brought reconciliation and union between God and man, man and man, and man and nature. Our Lord can be shown to satisfy the deep longings of the Hindu for inward peace. The risen and living Christ answers the need of the Hindu for a reality of God.

Hindu scriptures contain ideas which can be used to show that Jesus Christ alone can satisfy the deep longings, the hopes, the aspirations, and the search for reality of any Hindu. Such a presentation of Christ in an Indian setting will also help the Hindus to realise that Christianity is not a foreign religion and that Jesus Christ is the world's only Saviour and Lord.

The majority of Hindus do not know their own scriptures. The life of Christ appeals to them. No word of condemnation of their religious beliefs or practices should be uttered, as these deeply religious people will not like to hear a Christian who criticises his religion. On the other hand, they are spontaneously drawn by the love of Christ especially at the Cross.

The opportunities and challenges for evangelisation of Hindus who form the bulk of India's

population are before the Indian Church. May God grant her power, wisdom and love to show India that Christ is the only way.

Mr. Paul Sudhaker, a member of the Executive Committee of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, is one of India's best known converts since independence and is a leading member of the Church of South India.

