

# HINDUISM



## *Contextual Ministry Among Hindu People*

### SCRIPTURE FOCUS

*“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.”* 1 Corinthians 9:22



### QUOTES

“There is no such thing as Hinduism.”<sup>1</sup>

“The Hindu mind, by virtue of its historical background, easily hears in the claim for truth and exclusive revelation in Christ a contempt for other religions and a lack of modesty in the face of the great mystery of Ultimate Truth. Christians and missionaries almost as easily make the mistake of conveying the impression that they possess and dispense Ultimate Truth, which in this Indian atmosphere suggests coarse irreverence and vulgar mediocrity, and often is so.”<sup>2</sup>



### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As a result of the readings and discussion in this session, the candidate should be able to:

- Understand Hinduism as multiple religions and worldviews.
- Grasp and affirm the potential of Hindu people’s commitment to being a Jesus disciple.



### INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is now international, with high caste Hindus scattered in every major city in the world. In India, almost all cross-cultural Christian work is among low and outcaste Hindus.

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High caste Hindus have deep emotional objections to Christianity as a foreign religion with questionable motives.

The high caste Hindus turning up around the globe are thus far removed from Christ and the gospel. They are not interested in Christianity or church, but mostly remain believers in God and interested in spirituality. Contextual presentations of Christ and His way are respected, but Christian workers in this needy harvest field are desperately few. Every mission-minded person needs to ask why they should not get engaged in this neglected area of service.

Even those not called to Christian ministry to the Hindu world should study contextualization in the Hindu world. Principles of contextualization of the gospel are clearly seen in Hindu contexts and can be translated over to other contexts. Inspiring examples of pioneering work for Christ are also evident in the Hindu world.

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### CASE STUDY: TILAK AND JESUS

Narayan Vaman Tilak was born in 1861 in a Brahmin family in what is now the western Indian state of Maharashtra. He grew up in the bhakti (devotional) tradition of Hinduism, which in his Marathi language boasted a long line of esteemed poets. Tilak long sought peace of mind and life in devotional worship and renunciation and was involved in serious scholarly research into Sanskrit Hindu writings as well. His own poetic skills developed early and earned him a depth of esteem and affection from his Hindu countrymen that even his later conversion to Christianity could not extinguish.

Two “accidental” encounters during train rides mark transition points in Tilak’s life. On a brief train journey in the early 1890s, he happened to enter a compartment with a Christian missionary. Tilak by this time was disillusioned with popular Hinduism but had seen nothing attractive about Christianity. After friendly discussion with this missionary, he agreed to read the New Testament and his life began to change.

Subtle pressure to prevent his conversion began as it became clear to his wife and friends that Christ was gradually winning Tilak’s heart. When he converted to Christianity, a deep rupture divided the family. He was separated from his wife for years, became a meat-eater and often dressed in Western clothes. Some Christians urged him to remarry a Christian and even went so far as arranging marriages for him. He did not remarry. Eventually (after 4 1/2 years) his wife Lakshmibai joined him in professing Christ.

Tilak was a typical extraction convert, pulled from his culture and family to start a whole new life. Initially, Tilak could only have understood this as part and parcel of following Christ. He would no longer be a Brahmin, but a Christian. Like Ruth in the Old Testament, his baptism (at least implicitly) involved the profession to missionaries and Indian Christians that “your people are now my people,” and the Brahmins are no longer “my people.” But he was able to rebuild many of his relationships in Hindu society, largely due to his poetic gifts and continued ardent patriotism to his country, India.

For most of his Christian life, Tilak was employed by the American Marathi Mission, with teaching and evangelism being his main responsibilities. He is best remembered today for his pioneer efforts to make the church and Christianity more Indian in heart and appearance,

having broken into new areas by developing contextual communication techniques based on the Marathi bhakti tradition of poetry and song. His greatest contribution, however, does not lie in his contribution to the church but rather in the field known today as missiology. He is among the greatest of pioneer witnesses in the Hindu context, and one of the great pioneers of Protestant mission history.

Tilak was one of the most successful evangelists among Brahmins in the history of Indian Christianity. But he also experienced the typical frustration of the witness for Christ among Hindus. Many Hindus had genuine respect for Christ but an unwillingness to surrender in full commitment. Tilak knew situations where people came to full intellectual conviction of the truth of Christ and His gospel, and thereafter studiously avoided Tilak and the subject of Christ. Tilak could not rest with some successes when unnumbered failures challenged his faith. Clearly in most cases of “rejection of Christ,” theology was not the problem. The problem was the obvious fact that Christianity in India was a foreign religion, and that conversion necessitated the breaking of ties with Hindu culture and community. Was it really necessary to do what Tilak himself had done and abandon one’s people to follow a foreign and largely low-caste religion?

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Torn by such thoughts Tilak was primed for another life-changing revolution, again prompted by an encounter during a train journey. This time it was an old Hindu acquaintance who approached Tilak on a train and reminded him of the magnetic hold he had had over his Hindu people before becoming a Christian. He asked Tilak to see himself now, and how his great potential had not been realized.

Tilak was shattered, and before God, he came to the conviction that he had indeed failed to be what he should be—a fully Indian disciple of Jesus Christ. Tilak had gone far beyond most others in identifying with his nation, but he saw now how deeply compromised he still was with the foreignness of Christianity. He was still far short of the radical adaptation to the Hindu context that was necessary to bring Christ into Hindu cultures. Tilak now saw with final clarity that foreign methods and men could not win the Hindu heart, nor could hope be held out for the presently existing Indian church to vitally impact the Hindu world.

It took months before Tilak could take the momentous step he had resolved, and finally, only a vision of Christ enabled the break to be made. In late 1917, at 55 years of age, Tilak resigned from the American Marathi Mission and entered *sannyasa*, the last stage of life for a high caste Hindu man when all societal ties and worldly possessions are renounced in order to focus entirely on the spiritual and eternal world.

Tilak’s stated goal in his *sannyasa* service was to gather “a brotherhood of the baptized and unbaptized disciples of Christ.”<sup>3</sup> In this, he was not questioning the theology of baptism, but facing the reality that baptism in India meant rejection of the Hindu community and its culture. It meant being grafted into the Christian community and adopting Westernized Christian culture. Tilak stayed in close fellowship with the mission and churches, aiming at their transformation along Indian lines, but his primary thrust was evangelism among Hindus.

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He himself set a personal example of entering the Hindu context in order to bring Hindus to faith in Christ within their own culture, lifestyle, and communities.

In God's sovereign wisdom, Tilak was called to heaven within two years of the start of this great venture. The visible results in that time were only about forty disciples joining the brotherhood, most from Christian backgrounds. But Tilak saw and acted on the reality that contextualization involves more than just terms and forms, being most deeply an issue of IDENTITY. Maintaining with integrity a Hindu identity while following Jesus is the most basic reality of contextualization in the Hindu world.

### REFLECT #1

1. Was it necessary for Tilak to be so completely rejected by his wife and relatives when he turned to Christ?
2. What are some of the factors that caused Tilak to rethink discipleship to Jesus and develop a new paradigm for ministry?
3. Discuss the relative importance of contextual terminology, contextual rituals and forms, and contextual identity in planting the gospel in new cultures.

## HINDUISM: A RELIGION?

The concept of "religion" is complex indeed. The Roman Catholic Encyclopedia of Theology, *Sacramentum Mundi*, in its entry on "religion" states that "there is no generally accepted definition of religion". This helpful article spells out eight possible paradigms for "religion," with a ninth based on the etymological meaning of the Latin term *religio*, none of which are found fully acceptable. For the purposes of this session the minefield of defining "religion" will be sidestepped in favor of a simple comparison between Hinduism and Christianity.

This Hinduism/Christianity comparison is taken from Heinrich von Stietenron, who points out that within Hinduism there are diversities of ritual and theology and scripture and gods that dwarf the differences that exist between the three great Semitic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. So, he points out, "If we were to subsume all these [Semitic faiths] under one umbrella term as various 'sects' of one Near-Eastern religion, this would give us a proper equivalent to Hinduism."

But this would never be accepted by votaries of the Semitic faiths, whose convictions about their own religions are so deeply held. This means there is no proper way to equate Hinduism as a religion with the phenomena evident in the Semitic religions. Stietenron then shows how a proper equation can be developed:

If we accept Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as 'religions' and if, compelled by intellectual honesty, we want to apply the same term to comparable phenomena, we cannot avoid concluding that there are a number of different 'religions' existing side by side within 'Hinduism'.<sup>4</sup>

If it is granted, as it seems must be done if there is intellectual honesty and consistency in definitions of terms, that there are various "religions" within "Hinduism," then clearly "Hinduism" is not a religion. What term then should be used to describe the complex phenomena that we call "Hinduism"? Probably the best term for these expansive phenomena is to refer to Hinduism as a civilization. As European and Chinese civilizations span vast

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centuries and areas and religions and developments, so also does Hinduism, which is at least close to being a synonym for Indian civilization.

As nearly every basic introduction to Hinduism points out, the first uses of the term Hindu (later expanded to “Hinduism”) had geographical rather than religious connotations, so this understanding of Hinduism as a multi-faceted civilization is not by any means an entirely new construct. More significantly, the Supreme Court of India defined “Hinduism” in civilizational terms. In a 1977 definition, the Court stated:

“In principle, Hinduism incorporates all forms of belief and worship without necessitating the selection or elimination of any. The Hindu is inclined to revere the divine in every manifestation, whatever it may be, and is doctrinally tolerant, leaving others—including both Hindus and non-Hindus—whatever creed and worship practices suit them best. A Hindu may embrace a non-Hindu religion without ceasing to be a Hindu, and the Hindu is disposed to think synthetically and to regard other forms of worship, strange gods, and divergent doctrines as inadequate rather than objectionable. He tends to believe that the highest powers complement each other for the well-being of the world and mankind. Few religious ideas are considered to be finally irreconcilable. The core religion does not even depend on the existence or non-existence of God or on whether there is one God or many. Since religious truth is said to transcend all verbal definition, it is not conceived in dogmatic terms. Hinduism is, then, both a civilization and conglomerate of religions, with neither a beginning, a founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organization.”<sup>5</sup>

This definition clearly did not settle the issue of how to understand “Hinduism,” but that the highest court in India presented a picture so terribly at odds with standard Evangelical understanding is certainly noteworthy. The point most to be stressed is how radically the paradigm by which one views “Hinduism” determines the way one thinks about the contextualization of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If Hinduism is an alternate religion to Christianity, one naturally shrinks from suggestions that the gospel of Christ should be introduced within the Hindu religion. This is pretty much the working definition of syncretism (another slippery term). But if Hinduism is understood as a civilization, the picture is completely changed. Surely it is obvious that the gospel of Christ must be incarnated within every civilization. So, the duty of adaptation to Hindu civilization overwhelms the fear of confusion in relating to the Hindu “religion.”<sup>6</sup>

### REFLECT #2

1. What is the Christian religion? Define the term as used by believing Christians, and then also as used generally around the world.
2. What about “Hinduism” is confused when considered as “a religion”?
3. How does recognizing Hinduism as more than a religion impact questions of contextualization in the Hindu world?

## HINDU RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES

The most basic Hindu act is *puja* (worship) which is central to family life in the home and also secondarily manifest in the temple. This fact points to a theistic core to most Hindu faith and

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practice. It is a dynamic theism that consistently affirms that finally there is only one God, yet sees myriad manifestations of that God under various names and guises.

Most worship involves the lighting of lamps and incense, the offering of flowers and fruits and chanting and singing before images of various gods. Idolatry is thus also basic to most expressions of Hindu devotionalism, and along with caste is the most complicated aspect of presenting Christ in Hindu contexts.

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Participation in idolatrous worship is clearly unacceptable in a biblical worldview. Also, biblically unacceptable is a scornful dismissal of what others hold dear (even idolatry), particularly when held by parents and elders to whom respect is owed. Negotiating appropriately between these two extremes is no easy matter.

The spiritual attitude most highly sought and valued among Hindus is *bhakti* (devotion to God.) Ritualism and superstition are both prevalent in Hindu practice (as they are in other religious traditions as well), yet a heart of warm devotion towards God is the recognized ideal. It is true that some of the philosophical traditions highlight detachment above *bhakti*, and detachment from worldly concerns is a high value even in *bhakti* traditions. But *bhakti* and *puja* best define the religiosity of Hindu life, and spirituality is primarily a God-consciousness that feeds devotion and worship.

Both this devotional attitude and the diverse pluralism of Hindu traditions contribute to the high esteem for Jesus Christ among Hindus. Sadly, many varieties of Christianity are not seen to be focused on worship and devotion. The person of Christ is often peripheral in church debates, and spirituality too easily declines into attending church once a week. In what are still considered Christian countries, there seems to be no concern at all for the teachings of Jesus. It is no wonder that Hindus are not attracted to Christianity.

Too often the finished product of doctrinal and ecclesiastical Christianity has been imported to India, rather than planting the seed of the gospel among Hindu peoples to grow up in truly Indian ways and forms. Hindus often refer to *dharma* rather than the Western concept of religion; *dharma* is duty, law, righteousness, that which upholds society. The way of Jesus meshes with *dharma*, producing humble and productive members of families and society—once they see that Jesus has performed our *dharma* for us.<sup>7</sup>

### REFLECT #3

1. Define *puja*, *bhakti*, and *dharma*, with brief references to what the Bible says about each topic.
2. What are the two extreme errors when dealing with idolatry? Outline some guidelines for a Hindu who turns to Christ to navigate a middle path.
3. Why is a Hindu more likely to be drawn to devotion to Jesus than to Christianity?
4. Why is devotion to Jesus more biblical than Christianity?

## HINDU COMMUNITY AND DISCIPLESHIP TO JESUS

Hans Staffner, in his book *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community*<sup>8</sup>, articulates his basic premise

in two succinct statements. On the one hand, he argued that “Hinduism is a culture that has room for many religions”.<sup>9</sup> In other words, what most people have come to think of as the Hindu religion is, in reality, not singular in its expression at all. As such, it allows for a wide diversity of both what one believes (creed) and what one practices (form of worship). This theoretically opens the door for Hindus to choose to put their faith in Christ as their exclusive path to salvation and standard for all of life.

At the same time, there are social expectations within the various Hindu communities that are not purely at every individual’s discretion. Even though these are always changing and evolving, Hindu families and specific sub-castes (*jatis*) do ask certain things from their members (e.g., a range of occupational and educational choices, dietary norms, attendance at family and community celebrations, care for one’s parents and grandparents, etc.).

On the other hand, Staffner also asserted that “Christianity is a religion that can become incarnate in any culture.”<sup>10</sup> Whatever the social system, Christians have always been able to live out their discipleship to Christ. There is not one set of specific social obligations or one code of civil law that the Christian faith makes obligatory. For example, choices regarding occupation, education, diet, dress, etc. are in general much more open for followers of Christ than they are for Hindus. Neither do most believers have to adhere to one precise tradition for the succession of a family’s inheritance. There might be many acceptable ways of doing this.

In contrast, however, what Hindu civilization makes optional (religious creed and practice), Christianity makes very obligatory. In order to be a faithful follower of Christ, one must believe and worship within fairly narrow theological parameters. This is in stark contrast to the enormous amount of theological wiggle room that one finds among the various contemporary and historical forms of Hindu belief and practice.<sup>11</sup>

**REFLECT #4**

Study the historical debate between M. M. Thomas and Lesslie Newbigin, and the differences between H. L. Richard and Timothy C. Tennent, in “Community Dynamics in India and the Praxis of ‘Church’” by H. L. Richard (IJFM section 24:4, pp. 185-194 and pp. 195-197) and the ensuing discussion (<http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs/IJFM/24.4.PDFs/185Richard.pdf> and <http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs/IJFM/24.4.PDFs/195Tennent.pdf>)

1. Do you agree that Hinduism and Christianity can complement each other as neatly as asserted here? Why? Why not?
2. What does the Bible teach about the “church family” in relation to the “birth families” of its members?
3. What were the fundamental differences between M. M. Thomas and Lesslie Newbigin? Are the differences between Richard and Tennent of the same character, or different?

**BIBLICAL EXAMPLE**

The Book of Acts (chapter 10) says that Cornelius was born within a Roman family; he was a “Gentile,” a non-Jew. However, at some point in his life, undoubtedly through attending services at a Jewish synagogue, he had received exposure to the teachings of the Old Testament. In response to this influence from Judaism, Cornelius chose to lay aside any former allegiances to both the gods of the Imperial Roman army and the gods and goddesses of Roman and Greek mythology. He chose instead to worship the one and only Creator: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, Cornelius had only accepted the Jewish faith up to a point. He had never taken the step of literally becoming a “naturalized Jew.”

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Knowing that Cornelius was an authentically “devout man” (Acts 10:2), a “righteous and God-fearing man” (Acts 10:22) who prayed regularly, does it make sense that he would knowingly hold back in his commitment to God? What was it that was keeping him from going all the way and becoming a full proselyte to faith in the one true God? Why did such an earnest seeker as Cornelius, who had already been responding to all the spiritual light that he had received, have to ask Peter about the way of salvation for his household?

The answer appears to be fairly obvious: in the eyes of the Jews and even some of the Jewish believers in Christ, especially those who were Pharisees, Cornelius’ faith in God was simply not enough. If a non-Jew wanted to become part of God’s chosen people, he had to first literally become a Jew, circumcision and all. But this prospect of exchanging his social identity, becoming a Jew and thus leaving much, if not all, of his Roman heritage, was evidently more than Cornelius could accept. Of course, he wanted to be right with the Most High God; he desired to live a life pleasing to Him. Naturally, that meant obeying His moral standards, but why did it have to necessitate such a radical cultural change as well?

God demonstrated His divine brilliance in the way that He created just the right answer for Cornelius in the heart and mind of Peter. First, He gave Peter a very disturbing vision: a sheet filled with unclean animals and a heavenly command to kill and eat. Peter had no idea as to its meaning, since doing such a thing was unthinkable for him as a Jew.

Then God spoke to Peter a second time, instructing him to accompany a Roman soldier and household servants to the house of their commanding officer (Cornelius) in Caesarea, some forty kilometers away. Peter’s natural inclination would, of course, be to refuse both of these commands. After all, eating unclean animals (Acts 10:14) and even entering the house of a Gentile were violations of his Jewish faith (Acts 10:28). But Peter went ahead and obeyed what the Lord had told him, aided only by the Lord’s cryptic summary of the new truth that was being revealed: Acts 10:15 – “What God has cleansed no longer consider unholy.”<sup>12</sup>

### REFLECT #5

1. What are similarities between converting to Judaism in the first century and converting to Christianity today?
2. How did the Gentile movement churches in New Testament times relate to the church in Jerusalem? What lessons are present here for new church movements today?
3. Describe all the different responses you can identify from Jerusalem “Christians” to the new Gentile movements to Christ. Do you notice similar responses among Christians today (even yourself) to new Christ movements in the non-Western world?

## EXAMPLES TO FOLLOW

### Kali Charan Banurji (1847-1907)

Kali Charan Banurji (also spelled Kalicharen Banerjee) was a Bengali Brahmin who became a significant leader in the Christian community in India. He taught at the university level for fourteen years, and during that time felt a call to Christian ministry. He was given a scholarship for theological study and began preparing for the ministry while still teaching.

At this time the noted Bengali Lal Behari Day resigned from the pastorate due to the inability to care for his family on the meager salary offered. Day had previously been in conflict with the Scottish missionaries; he was one of three Bengalis ordained but not accepted as full members



of the mission in 1856. Under pressure, two others submitted. But Day refused to accept a lesser role and threatened to resign. A compromise was reached and Day worked in a leadership role in the mission for four years before leaving for a pastoral position.

Kali Charan Banurji was not given adequate assurances from the missionaries about his status and about the care of his family in case of his death, so he gave up looking towards the ministry and studied law instead, graduating in 1870. Despite never becoming a vocational Christian minister, he was always known among Hindus and Muslims as the Rev. Kali Charan Banurji.

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The lasting legacy of Kali Charan Banurji is his patriotism; he refused to accept that following Christ led to foreign ways. Yet Christianity in India was deeply marked by foreign patterns and doctrines, so in 1887 he withdrew from the church and started the Christo Samaj. The strength of institutional Christianity was too strong for the Samaj to overcome, however, and it died in 1895. Despite his effort to start a separate Indian church, Banurji was never of a narrow mind or spirit.

When the YMCA began in Calcutta with interdenominational evangelistic fervor, he quickly got involved and became one of the key leaders. When in 1905, seventeen key leaders from around the country met to inaugurate the National Missionary Society of India, Kali Charan was elected vice-president. At his death in 1907, Kali Charan was mourned by people of all communities as a humble and godly leader. He had failed to impact the Indian church with a proper regard for its cultural heritage, but his testimony of faithfulness to Christ and his cause as an Indian will continue to speak to all who learn of his life.

#### **Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907)**

B.U. was a Brahmin from Bengal, a nephew of Banurji. He began his pilgrimage in Christianity through a book by a Roman Catholic that he found by his father's deathbed and proceeded to study diligently. He was baptized a Christian by an Anglican clergyman in February of 1891 but later opted for the Roman Catholic Church, which had no ties with the British government and had a less cynical attitude to Hinduism.

In his first years as a Christian, he was not greatly different from a traditional convert; he grew from strength to strength and drew admiration from the church establishment through his apologetic writings, debates, and speeches in several parts of the country.

In December of 1894, he declared that henceforth he should be known as Brahmabandhab Upadhyay; Brahmabandhab is the Sanskrit rendering of his baptismal name Theophilus and Upadhyay stands for "teacher." He also switched to saffron clothes, walked barefooted, wore an ebony cross around his neck and called himself a "Hindu-Catholic."

In this stage of his Christian life, B.U. sought to draw intellectual Hindus to the Catholic faith by positing rational arguments for what he called "rationalist theism," superimposing revelatory truths of Scripture onto this natural theology. In these early years, BU followed the traditional Christian path of vehemently refuting Hindu philosophy. He repudiated the *advaitic* (non-dualist) philosophy of Sankara, decried the concepts of *maya* (rebirth) and *karma*,

and attacked polytheism. On *advaita*, he declared in his magazine in January 1895 that “our one great object in life is to banish Advaitavad from India.”

But gradually B.U.’s perception of many of these points changed. In contrast to the denunciations of Advaita Vedanta which characterize his early phase, he began to affirm advaitic philosophy and rehabilitated the concept of maya. This rehabilitation of Hindu philosophical concepts took place within a Thomistic framework, but BU now attempted to embellish Catholic doctrines in Hindu philosophical distinctives in the manner Aquinas operated on Greek philosophical distinctives. He claimed that the Vedantic philosophical system should be won over in the service of Christianity as Greek philosophy was won over in the Middle Ages.

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From suspicion over his moves toward more Hindu expressions of life and philosophy, a clearly confrontational course developed when B.U. set out to develop what he called a kashthika matha (Catholic monastery) in Jabalpur (in Madhya Pradesh). In an article “Are We Hindus?” in 1898 he wrote, “by birth, we are

Hindu and shall remain Hindu till death.”<sup>13</sup> “We are Hindus so far as our physical and mental constitution is concerned, but in regard to our immortal souls, we are Catholic. We are Hindu Catholic.”<sup>14</sup> These opinions might have been tolerated by the church, but his practical plan of action involving the development of a training center for Indian evangelists was not.

B.U. ended up in jail for writing against the British Empire, and died estranged from the Catholic Church. On the impact of his life and work Lipner remarks:

In modern times, in the context of interreligious relations, he did more by thought and deed than perhaps any other Indian Christian to raise key issues for debate. His very appearance . . . was a living challenge to the alienating modes of Christian behavior, practice, and teaching that had taken root in the land.<sup>15</sup>

### R. C. Das (1887-1976)

Rajendra Chandra Das was born in East Bengal in 1887 into a low caste but land-owning family. As an intelligent boy, he was sent for admission to the only reputed school in the area, only to be turned away by the Brahmins as unworthy of a place due to his caste.

Das was later sent to Dhaka to pursue his education, and there became a Christian. He was initially powerfully drawn to the Brahmo Samaj and rather disliked Christianity due to its foreign ways and missionary leadership. But one missionary, Rev. J. D. Morris, an Anglo-Indian who lived alone in a rented house among Hindus, was highly esteemed to the point of being called St. Morris by Hindus. Das attended his Bible studies and later referred to Morris as a spiritual father. For over a year Das tried to be a Brahmo Samaji, but he found it inadequate to his spiritual needs. In his own words, “I found that Brahmoism was largely Christianity divorced from the living personality of Jesus Christ....”

In 1908 at the age of 21 Das was baptized in Dhaka. He continued his studies in Kolkata and earned a Master’s Degree in philosophy. His teaching career began there also. During his

years in Kolkata, Das was involved with a number of pioneering steps towards contextual communication to Hindus and rubbed shoulders with many progressive thinkers and activists.

In 1922, Das responded to a call to become a full-time evangelist. He worked first with the CMS and later with an indigenous mission. When the Benares United City Mission was formed in 1929, Das was invited to work there in the holy city of Varanasi. From 1930 until his death in 1976, R. C. Das was in Varanasi engaging Hindus with the good news of Christ.

Das spent his life within the mainstream of mission and church history yet was a rather bitter critic of both church and mission. He lived for many years in hope that a new and deeply indigenous spiritual movement would develop from the disillusioned fringe of the Indian church, and was deeply dismayed to see that spiritual fringe drift off into the new evangelical movements, which were/are even more Western than the traditional church and mission set-up.

Yet the significance of R. C. Das does not lie in his biography so much as in his teaching:

Attacking Hinduism from outside is like beating the wind or the water. Christianity must leaven and transform Hinduism from the inside. Votaries of truth need neither be alarmed nor delighted that in the process a good deal of Hinduism will be surely destroyed. It is the conviction of the writer that eventually Hinduism as a system will die a slow natural death and live within the church as a force, inspiration, and mentality. Should Christianity or need Christianity suppress, supplant and uproot Hinduism or rather should Christianity transplant, transform, vitalize its ideas and institutions with Christian spirit, direction and motive? It is futile to attack Hinduism from without, however spiritual our weapons of warfare. A militant religion cannot destroy another religion that looks inwards for power and support.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Kalagara Subba Rao (1912-1981)**

K. Subba Rao was a Kamma from Andhra Pradesh. He grew up as a cynic against religion and led a rebellious life against religion and religious leaders. He managed to get an education and a job as a teacher, and married in 1937. His dissolute life broke his health, and in a period of convalescence in 1942, he had a vision of Christ that transformed his life.

Subba Rao wrote a striking song about Christ appearing to him, a fallen atheist after many churches had been built in his name. He was a reluctant disciple of Jesus at first; after all, he had a reputation as a mocker of religion. But he found that healings followed when he laid hands on people in Jesus' name, and soon his faith and works brought him to the attention of both Hindus and Christians.

Subba Rao's initial contacts with Christians were not good, and to the end of his life he refused to be baptized or to work under the "Christian" label. Due to his healing ministry, he developed a considerable following in Andhra and also Karnataka, but he was opposed to religion as such and never started anything resembling a religious organization. He highlighted the opposition of religious leaders to Jesus and suggested that the same situation continues today.

Among his writings is a biting tract entitled "Gurudev: Where Can I Get So Many Millstones?" where he says that there are so many Christian pastors putting burdens on the

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little sheep of Christ that it is hard to imagine where so many millstones can be found to put around their necks.

A considerable movement of disciples of Jesus gathered around Subba Rao, and after his death, an ashram hall was built on the outskirts of Vijayawada. The movement is in a major transition period now in the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century since both Subba Rao's widow and his successor as leader of the ministry have recently passed away.

The healing ministry of Subba Rao drew people, but they were held by the *bhakti* focused on Jesus that is the mark of their public meetings. Subba Rao wrote 34 songs that are constantly sung, and numerous songs used by Christians in Andhra Pradesh are also part of their hymnody. Despite disdain for organization and a refusal to accept the label of "Christian," the marks of a New Testament *ekklesia* (church) are present.

Subba Rao was not a deep Bible student and was loose and even reckless in his terminology and teaching. Yet he demonstrated that it is possible to follow Jesus Christ as a Hindu and gather other Hindus into a *bhakti sampradaya* with a focus on discipleship to Jesus. Thus, he presents a challenge and illuminates possibilities for other followers of Jesus from Hindu families.

### A NEW PARADIGM

This session has presented a new paradigm for thinking about Hinduism and suggests that the gospel will need to spread within Hindu society, within the thousands of people and caste groups of Hinduism. There is an urgent need for witnesses to engage the Hindu world as servants, seeking to be catalysts who spark movements to Christ. A new paradigm is needed here as well, however, as leadership needs to be overwhelmingly from Hindus in Christ, with outsiders aware of their limitations and their servant role. It is not envisaged that the outsider pretends to be Hindu; rather understand and communicate an acceptance of "Christian" as civilizational identity which is very much transcended by the more important identity of disciple (or bhakta, devotee) of Jesus.

God has raised numerous pioneers from Hindu families to show the way forward in insider movements in the Hindu world. There are many lessons to be learned from the successes and failures, the strengths and weaknesses, of these servants of Christ. The multiplying and empowering of such individuals is the need of the hour and is the most urgent prayer item in considering the unreached Hindu peoples.

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### SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

- The prime issue in contextualization in the Hindu world is the matter of identity within the Hindu family and community.
- The disciple of Christ maintaining a Hindu identity is still only part of the process, however. Contextual forms for devotion and discipleship need to be developed and lived out.
- The disciple of Christ should be recognized as a spiritually minded person, a true bhakta (devotee) of Jesus. She needs to be recognizably an upholder of dharma (duty

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that sustains the societal order with concern for the welfare of all). He needs to be faithful in puja (worship), as God is the supreme reality in life.

- Insider movements that develop will need input from servants who share the good news, teach the Bible in relevant and applicable ways, and befriend and faithfully pray with and for growing disciples of Jesus.
- The role of outside teacher and discipler will need to be in submission to mature Hindu disciples of Christ.
- The vast needs of the Hindu world demand that many more witnesses engage seriously the Hindu world, especially the millions of Hindus who now live outside India.

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## READ ABOUT

*International Journal for Frontier Missiology* (<http://ijfm.org/>), issues 18:4, 19:3, 24:3, 24:4.

MUCH information at the secure website of the Rethinking Forum; for access contact [info@rethinkingforum.com](mailto:info@rethinkingforum.com).

Basic overview of Hindu beliefs and practices (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism>).

### REFLECT #6

1. As a Christ follower, what else do you need to learn about Hindu beliefs and practices in order to be ready for relationship building and interpersonal communication?
2. Which of the four Hindu figures introduced impressed you most as a viable model for ministry among Hindus? Why?
3. Describe the role of an outside non-Hindu disciple in relation to an inside Hindu disciple of Christ.

## SELF-AWARENESS, SURVIVAL, AND SOLUTION

- The witness for Christ among Hindus must transcend a Christendom mindset and encourage Hindu discipleship to Jesus.
- Adopt and enjoy Indian culture, Indian food, Indian music (particularly spiritual music; bhajans), Indian films and Indian sports (mainly cricket!).
- Befriend Hindus now; they are all over the world. Listen and learn about their perspectives on life and spirituality.
- Get involved with others who are focused on or concerned about Christian ministry in the Hindu world. The Rethinking Forum network is a good place to start; [info@rethinkingforum.com](mailto:info@rethinkingforum.com).

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## SO WHAT?

Recommended activities for practicing the newly-learned principles now:

### Imagine

Imagine your identity from birth has been Hindu and as a young adult, you are asked to switch

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the markers of that identity to those that are foreign and strange. Could you imagine making such a shift? What would be the ramifications of such a shift?

### Lifestyle

If you intend to engage Hindus either in your home country or India, what lifestyle choices might you make that would help you develop an appreciation of the Indian/Hindu way of life? These choices might be dietary, authors to read, and films to view.

### Formation

How might you appropriate the story of Cornelius from Acts into your worldview and practice of faith? Knowing the 'truth' of Peter's encounter with Cornelius is good but falls short of appropriating this truth into life.

### Language

What might need to change in regards to our assumptions and talk about Hindus? The tendency to make gross and sweeping generalizations about a whole nation of people and their religious lives is unfair and unfortunate and can harm our witness to Jesus Christ.

### Life on Life

Seek to know and relate to the Hindus who live in your city or attend your school. While it is good to learn from books and articles about Hindus and Hinduism, it is equally good (and possibly better) to speak with a Hindu about Hinduism.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR *HINDUISM*

Richard, H. L. *Hinduism: A Brief Look at Theology, Scriptures, and Social System with comments on the Gospel in India*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2007.

A very brief introduction to practical Hinduism with excerpts from the various types of scripture that developed over Hindu history. With an extensive glossary.

*Rethinking Hindu Ministry: Papers from the Rethinking Forum*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2011.

Bharati, Dayanand. *Living Water and Indian Bowl: An Analysis of Christian Failings in Communicating Christ to Hindus, with Suggestions towards Improvement*.

A practitioner's account of the reasons for Hindu resistance to the biblical message, full of hope that the message of Christ will yet one day be embraced by Hindu peoples. Striking anecdotes intersperse and enliven the account of Christian insensitivity and Hindu resistance. Essential reading for those involved in biblical witness among Hindus.

Richard, H. L. *Following Jesus in the Hindu Context: The Intriguing Implications of N. V. Tilak's Life and Thought*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013.

A study of N. V. Tilak (1861-1919), the outstanding figure in Protestant history for contextual Christian witness among Hindus. Tilak developed a paradigm for contextual

biblical witness and remains a model of what it means to truly represent Christ in the Hindu world.

Hoefler, Herbert E. *Churchless Christianity*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002.

An account of Hindu attitudes toward Christ and Christianity with a focus on those who choose to truly follow Christ but without joining the organized church. Fascinating case studies and statistics are followed by profound theological reflections on what it means to follow Christ in the Hindu world.

Richard, H. L., Ed. *R.C. Das: Evangelical Prophet for Contextual Christianity*. Bangalore: CiSRS, 1995.

Das' prophetic analysis of church and mission in India is not easy reading, but he lived among and listened to Hindus for decades and is a voice of wisdom that must be heeded. This volume is a collection of his writings, full of creative ideas and stinging critiques.

Easwaran, Eknath, Trans. *The Bhagavad Gita. Tomales: Nilgiri Press, 2007.*

The Gita mingles both philosophical and devotional emphases and is one of the profound works of human history. There are many English editions and many commentaries as well. Most widely available is the Hare Krishna edition by Swami Prabhupada; this is an acceptable translation but feel free to read any translation that comes to hand.

Fakirbhai, Dhanjibhai. *Shri Khrist Gita: Song of the Lord Christ*. Wellington: Unity Books, 1973.

A collection of New Testament verses arranged into a dialog format like the Bhagavad Gita. The best book to introduce a Hindu to the message of Christ. Available in Gujarati (original) and in English and Hindi translations.

Bharati, Dayanand. *Understanding Hinduism*. Abm Komers, 2005.

A creative attempt to connect scholarly research with the daily life of Hindu devotees. It is a true introduction to the complexity of Hindu phenomena, discussing the basic meaning of "Hinduism" and surveying its origins, scriptures, rituals, doctrines and modern trends. Its author is deeply in touch with the issues and concerns of modern Hindus and as a reformer seeks to bridge the chasm between objective scholarship and Hindu practice. Though affirming diversity he is not afraid to censure or commend but does so in light of careful historical and sociological analysis. His focus is always on the practical life of devotees. Scholars will be alerted to practical Hindu concerns. Scholarly perspectives will stimulate and help the devotee.

Oddie, Geoffrey A. *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2006.

An outstanding introduction to missionary thinking on Hinduism, tracing the development of a better paradigm for thinking about Hinduism and why that paradigm remains underutilized.

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### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>McDermott, Gerald. *The Baker Pocket Guide to World Religions*, Baker, 2008, pg.17.

<sup>2</sup>Kraemer, H. *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1938, pg. 368.

<sup>3</sup>Richard, H. L. "Following Jesus in the Hindu Context," pg. 95 served as the source for this section, which is abbreviated from *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 18:4, Winter 2001, pp. 191-194.

<sup>4</sup>Kulke and Sontheimer, Ed. "Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term" in *Hinduism Reconsidered*. Delhi: Manohar 2001, pg. 41.

<sup>5</sup>From *Christian Theologies from an Indian Perspective*, Sumithra, Sunand, Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1990, pg. 33.

<sup>6</sup>Excerpted from Richard, H. L. "New Paradigms for Understanding Hinduism and Contextualization" in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 40:3, July 2004, pp. 308-315.

<sup>7</sup>Excerpted from an article written by H. L. Richard for the 4th edition of *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*.

<sup>8</sup>Staffner, Hans. *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community*. Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1988.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 101.

<sup>11</sup>Excerpted from Petersen, Brian K. "The Possibility of a 'Hindu Christ-Follower': Hans Staffner's Proposal for the Dual Identity of Disciples of Christ within High Caste Hindu Communities" in *IJFM* section 24:2, Apr. 2007, pp. 87-97.

<sup>12</sup>Excerpted from Petersen, Brian K. "Foreigners, Pharisees, and Foreskins: The Controversy Over Changing 'Community Identity' in the Book of Acts" in *IJFM* section 24:2 (<http://www.ijfm.org/archives.htm>)

<sup>13</sup>Lipner, Julius J. *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 386-87.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted from Richard, H. L. (ed.), "R.C. Das: Evangelical Prophet for Contextual Christianity" in *ISPCK*, 1995, pg. 77.



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