

CONVERGENCE NOT CONVERSION: RELIGIOUS UNITY IN INDIA

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It appears that most of India's 24 million Christians do not want American Baptists to pray for the conversion of their Hindu compatriots. Christian leaders here in India are dismayed about the publication of a pamphlet by the Southern Baptist Convention calling on their members to pray that Hindus "realize the darkness of their souls."

Nimrod Christian, head of India's Methodists, declared that "the pamphlet's language is objectionable and unfair. One cannot preach by annoying others." Valson Thampu, chairman of the Christian Theological Institute, said: "I particularly object to the insensitive language of the pamphlet."

The Southern Baptists have chosen the upcoming Indian festival of Diwali as the focus of their prayer campaign. Doubtless they were unaware of the fact that Indians of all faiths celebrate this "festival of lights," yet another symbol of the cultural unity of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains speaking 14 different major languages.

Christians have lived in India at least since the third century, with some claiming that their ancestors were converted by a wandering St. Thomas in A.D. 54. India's Jews came even earlier but probably not as early as the traditional date of 587 B.C. Hindus welcomed Jews and Christians with open arms, gave them trading rights, land to settle on, and recognized their kings.

The first major religious persecutions came with the Muslim invasions beginning in the 11th Century. When the Portuguese came to India 400 years later they brought the Inquisition with them. Indian Christian priests were forced to perform the Roman liturgy and had to divorce their wives. Those who resisted were put to the sword. Hindus and Jews fared much worse: their prosperous cities were burned and thousands were killed.

Most Hindus and Indian Christians have put all of this dark history far behind them, but some Hindu fundamentalists have used the Baptist pamphlet as yet another reason to stir up anti-Christian sentiment. Although no Hindu group has taken responsibility for it, the recent murder of the Australian missionary Graham Straines is a grisly reminder of the religious fanaticism on the other side of this religious equation.

The fact that Hindu fundamentalist parties are partners in Prime Minister Vajpayee's new center-right coalition government [soundly defeated in 2004] has put Vajpayee in a tight spot with regard to the Pope's visit in early November. His own Religious Right wants him to tell the Pope to stop the conversion of Hindus and also apologize for the atrocities of the Inquisition. Vajpayee has decided to ignore his right wing on this issue.

The fact is that very little conversion is taking place. The only really successful mission has been in the Northeast, where non-Hindu tribes have flocked to the Christian faith. On my 1992 sabbatical I met a young charismatic priest in Bangalore who claimed to have baptized over 10,000 in those distant provinces. His main complaint was about the American Pentecostals who came in behind him preaching that his baptisms were not valid.

In terms of numbers converted the Christian mission to Asia has been great failure. Only Korea and the Philippines have substantial Christian populations. My own experience in India, however, has led me to believe that the Christian mission here has been a great blessing. Millions of Hindu children get first-class educations in Catholic schools. (Hindu parents trust these Christian teachers because they never talk about "dark souls.") Many Hindus are also healed and cared for in Christian hospitals and orphanages. Graham Straines' widow is now raising funds to finish the 40-bed leprosy hospital that had been his dream.

The very idea of conversion is alien to most Hindus. Followers of Shiva or Vishnu do not convert to their "denominations." Their families have been Shaivites and Vaishnavas for centuries and they would not think of changing such a time-honored and meaningful tradition. Family, caste, and religion are inextricably linked in Hindu India.

Furthermore, both the Buddha and Christ are recognized as incarnations of Vishnu and millions of Hindus celebrate Christmas and Easter. In the Punjab in 1995 I had the privilege of joining thousands of Hindus and Sikhs at a birthday celebration of a great Sikh saint. Indian children are taught to respect all holy men and women.

It is convergence, not conversion, that we should learn from the Asians. Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, Confucians, and Daoists have never had religious wars because all of them believe that their faiths meet in the same divine unity, and that all souls have sparks of the divine light in them--not Baptist darkness.