

TRADITIONAL HINDU VIEWS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD CHRISTIANITY

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Hindu views and attitudes toward Christianity form an extremely important but largely neglected area of study. Often, efforts have been made to find out how the Christians have approached or should approach Hindus with the gospel. Rarely is any effort undertaken to understand the Hindu point of view.

The modern missionary era began with the arrival of William Carey in 1793. It took a few decades before the Christian missionaries began their work in different parts of India. A number of prominent Indian leaders reacted and responded to the Christian missionary work and the influence of Western thought. In the process, there arose a number of socio-religious reform movements whose Hindu leaders attempted to interact with Christianity. These interactions are important, for through them we are able to get some glimpses of Hindu attitudes toward Christianity.

The Hindu Renaissance leaders exerted a great amount of influence on the masses. Their speeches, writings and socio-religious movements exemplified certain attitudes toward Christianity. These attitudes, to a large extent, were inherited by the common Hindus. Studying these leaders will yield insights into Hindu attitudes toward Christianity.

Hindu Misconceptions About Christianity

Christianity never had smooth sailing in India. It often faced opposition from different segments of the Hindu community. Oppositions from the Hindus were frequently based on some partial truth, or no truth at all. Whatever their objections, the Hindus found it difficult to understand and accept Christianity as a foreign missionary religion. Numerous misconceptions about Christianity still exist in the minds of the Hindus today.

Christianity: A Western Religion

One of the most often discussed and debated objections to Christianity is that it was introduced to India by Western tradesmen and missionaries. "It flourished under the pelf and patronage of foreign rulers" (Sunder Raj 1986:2). To support this argument, many point out that Portuguese and British rulers were instrumental in spreading Christianity in India. The gospel came to India--so most Hindus think--basically through the Western, white colonialists; therefore it has been fiercely opposed by the Hindus as the religion of the imperialists.

Further, Hindus believe that the Portuguese and the British rulers, at least to some extent, were sympathetic toward the Christianization of India. This led to a confirmation of their suspicion that these foreign rulers had been using Christian missionaries for spreading their own religion in India. This confusion is well stated by Devanandan:

Hindu leaders attributed the rapid spread of Christianity through mass movement conversions, resulting in the growth of a strong Christian section of the Indian population numbering nearly ten million after a century of missionary activity, to the friendly support given unofficially by the government to Christian missions (1957:67).

In the minds of the Hindus, Christianity and Western rule went hand in hand. Therefore, to them, becoming Christian meant strengthening the hands of the British in India. This led the Hindus to develop a negative attitude toward Christianity.

Hindus feel that Christianity is meant for Westerners and that Hindus should not be converted to it, for Christianity is a foreign religion. Staffner brings this in to perspective when he states:

The basic understating of many Hindus is still that each country has its own religion or forms of religion. Hinduism is the religion of the people of India, Christianity is the religion of Europe and America. They regard Christianity as a religion which has been imported from outside, and is nurtured and dominated from outside” (1978:144).

Therefore, on the sole ground that Christianity is a foreign and Western religion, Hindus tend to reject it.

Christianity Denationalizes People

A related objection to the above is that Christianity westernizes the Indians--hence it is denationalizing and deculturizing the Hindus. In most cases, Christianity appears to the Hindu as something Western. They normally point to the fact that much missionary work is being doing with the support of the Western people. Western religion is understood as an attempt to wipe out the Indian culture and replace it with Western culture. Therefore, “The objection is raised that the adoption of Christianity means the denationalization and westernization of the converts, and that therefore it ought to be opposed in the interest of the new national movement which is so important for the future of India “ (Greaves 1910:43).

This misunderstanding has been strengthened by the fact that most of those who become Christians have adopted the lifestyle and culture of the West. The fact that the small Christian community in India is comparatively more westernized is sufficient to prove the point.

Many causes can be attributed to the Westernization of Christians in India. Most converts from Hinduism were ostracized by their own kith and kin, and the missionaries had to provide them with shelter and means of livelihood. Naturally, having lived so closely with the Western

missionaries, most Indian converts were influenced by the missionaries' lifestyle. Most converts were gained from the lower and outcastes, and they had very little cultural heritage which they could carry into their new life. As a matter of fact, they wanted to forget and leave behind anything that reminded them of their past. They were eager to adopt a new lifestyle. No wonder, then, that they adopted the Western lifestyles of the missionaries who were instrumental in bringing them to Christianity. "It is a fact that Christianity still presents itself now in India with all the prestige of western nations and cultures..." (Greaves 1910:43).

Western missionaries and their converts have played a major role in the Westernization of India. This is partly because most missionaries were the product of their time and were of the opinion that Western culture was superior to that of the Indian or any other culture. In reality, the Christians in India gave the "impression to the Hindus that Christianity is a foreign religion, and conversion to the Christian faith involves vital abandonment of Indian culture and heritage" (Daniel 1984:91). By introducing Western culture along with Christianity, most missionaries thought that they were granting a great favor to the Indian people. This is seen in missionaries' attempt to introduce Western education and technology to the people of India.

Hindus often point out that the Indian Christian converts, in most cases, have not wholeheartedly participated in the freedom movement of India. This objection again reflects a general Hindu opinion about Indian Christians. Hindus point out that the Western missionaries in general were supportive of British rule. In some cases, they perceived the "British Raj" as a God-given rule which allowed them to spread the gospel in India. Most Indian Christians, being the product of Western missionaries' work, were directly or indirectly prevented from getting involved in the freedom movement that opposed the British rule. What Devanandan says is right: "In the days of the nationalist struggle for independence, non-Hindu religious minorities did not

lend adequate support. Indian Christians, in particular, gave room for suspicion about their loyalty to the Indian National Congress” (1957:67). Non-involvement in the freedom movement was considered to be anti-national, and national Christians were often criticized as non-patriotic. Sharpe, reflecting on this issue says:

Nationally aware Hindus were incensed-and grew more so- at the thought of missionaries, apparently hand-in-glove with the colonial administrators, requiring Indian converts to renounce caste, and therefore nationality, as a condition of Christian discipleship. Every Christian baptized, as they put it, was an Indian lost to the Indian national movement (1970:222).

Even after the independence of India, the Christians are still blamed for their non-involvement in the mainstream life of the people of India. Christians, in the opinion of some Hindu leaders, have become aliens in the land of their own forefathers.

Christianity Disintegrates Society

Hindus society has never felt comfortable with the idea of religious conversion. Serious objections have been raised to it. Conversion is difficult for a Hindu to comprehend.

From the standpoint of Hindu religious orthodoxy, it is pointed out that religious conversion is not always genuine and lasting; in any case, it is unnecessary and futile. It is not genuine because the Hindu hold that there can be no such radical change in religious convictions as to compel a convert to change over from one religion to another. The Hindu may not question the validity of conversion experience, but he seriously doubts whether every convert from Hinduism to Christianity experiences such a total and conscious change of convictions as to take this decisive step of breaking completely away from his ancestral faith-especially because such a migration is unnecessary, according to him (Devanandan 1957:68).

Hindus firmly believe that their religion is eternal, and that technically it cannot be changed. Since Hinduism offers a vast variety of options to its adherents, changing from one sect to another is acceptable, but changing one's religion is not. The strength of Hinduism lies in its ability to "accommodate within its vast fold, people who accept all sorts of religious beliefs and practices, however contradictory or inconsistent" (1957:68).

One can continue to be a Hindu while believing in other religions; hence there is no need to change religions. Many Hindus admire Jesus as a great teacher, saint and even god, but as one of many gods. To a Hindu "the essential nature of Ultimate Reality is unknowable. It can only be partially apprehended in human experience. Therefore no absolute claims for Truth can be made by any religious community" (Devanandan 1961:7). For the Hindus to acknowledge Jesus as the God and the Savior is to nullify the divinity of the other gods and goddesses of Hindu-fold. Therefore, "To claim one's own way as the only right way is seen as spiritual arrogance of the highest order" (Malony and Southard 1992:13). Change of religion also amounts to looking down on one's traditional religion, society, caste and family. By doing so, many have caused divisions in society. By encouraging such conversions, the Hindus feel that the Christian missionaries have sown the seed of division in Hindu society.

Christians Convert by Unfair Means

Since the Hindus hold that there can be no genuine conversion from one religion to another, the only possible explanation for conversion to Christianity is the unfair means of coercion and persuasion. It is often said that the poor and the needy were main targets of Christian missionaries, and that these people responded to the welfare programs provided to them. The large percentage of those who became Christians were from the lower or the lowest

strata of the society; therefore they are frequently said to have become Christian for material reasons. They are often referred as “Rice Christians.”

Historically, it can be proven that some Western powers of the eighteenth century were included to encourage conversions of Hindu subjects by force. Hindu leaders attribute the rapid growth of Christianity in India to the British rule in India. In their opinion, the friendly support given by the British government officers to the missionaries enhanced the spread of Christianity. Hindus hold that undue pressure, bribes, force and other unfair means are part of the conversion strategy of the Christian missionaries. So, in the opinion of most Hindus, what Christendom has to offer is only a new materialistic way of earthly living, with added formalities, platitudes, ostentation and pretension (Pillai 1979:167). It is generally believed by Hindus that conversions have been forced or induced by material gifts by the Christian missionaries, who are often blamed for taking advantage of man’s infirmities, his material needs and suffering in their propaganda for a change to Christianity. Such conversions, Hindus hold, are not ethical or appropriate. They demand that such efforts to convert people to Christianity be banned.

Christianity: A Religion that Defiles

To a Hindu, his religion is pure, and holy and admirable. Defecting from it, one becomes impure, polluted¹ and defiled. Hindus perceive Christianity as a religion of lower moral and ethical standards. For them, to become Christian means coming down from a higher to a lower moral standard. Therefore, they not only resist conversion but oppose it.

There are historical reasons for this perception. Saldanha, in his article, *Hindu Sensitivities Towards Conversion* says, “The roots of this opposition to conversion reach back

¹ A person who leaves the Hindu fold, and joins other religion, is considered an outcaste. Thus is considered to be

into the mission history of the colonial era and have to do with the manner in which Christianity was introduced in India. The missionaries were identified with the beef-eating, alcohol-drinking foreigners” (1981:4-5). These foreigners, largely the Portuguese and the British, were in India basically for purposes of trade. Their lifestyle was rarely up to Christian standards. When the Hindus found that these white traders call themselves Christians, they perceived all Christians in the same manner. “It is not surprising that the missionaries and their converts soon came to be called Firangis and Mlenchhas, contemptuous terms connoting barbarians and irreligious persons” (Saldanha 1981:5). Such terms exhibited a certain attitude toward Christianity. “Honestly speaking, the religions of India consider proselytization to be meaningless and absurd, rather a vulgarity of the hollow men of empty consciences” (Pillai 1979:167). This is how most Hindus perceive Christian converts. Thus, Hindus normally keep themselves aloof from such a religion.

Christianity: A Threat to National Integrity

It is difficult for Hindus to perceive a non-Hindu, particularly a Moslem or a Christian, as patriotic. The fact that separatist tendencies increase in the areas where non-Hindus dominate is often pointed out in support of this argument. The creation of Pakistan on the basis of religion is often cited as an example. Similarly, the so-called “Christian states” of Nagaland and Mizoram have had a resurgence of separatist movements in the past decades. The recent Zarkhand movement in Bihar and Orissa, where a large percentage of tribal Christians have been demanding a separate state, is another cause for the Hindus to oppose conversions. The root cause for such separatist activities, in the view of most Hindus, is religious affiliation. They

believe that those who embrace religion of the foreign people also lose their allegiance and commitment to their homeland.

Historically, conversions to Christianity, especially in central and northern India, brought divisions among Hindu society, castes and families. By becoming Christian, people sever relationships with their family, caste, and society. They cut themselves off from their own people and relatives. This uprooting from convert's social, cultural and religious traditions is strongly objected to by the Hindus. This allegiance to another social group is perceived to be a threat to national integrity. Staffner is right when he observes that conversion to Christianity is often looked down upon as a social act rather than a spiritual act. It signifies "the change over from one social community to another" (1987:63). When Christianity is perceived to be a dividing factor in the society, it is no wonder that most Hindus shun it.

Under such circumstances, if anybody becomes a Christian, that person is ostracized from the caste and all of his/her relationships are severed. That person is declared to be an outcaste. Being declared an outcaste, especially for the Hindu, is perceived to be a great punishment. "For a Hindu, expulsion from caste was worse than death itself... A Hindu shudders at the thought of losing his caste membership, for it confers on him social rank and is the natural environment in which to preserve his cultural heritage" (Saldanha 1981:9). Such expulsions are considered to be a big social stigma; therefore, rarely does a Hindu take any step that will disassociate him/her from his/her own caste associations. Such person, in the eyes of the Hindus, has alienated himself/herself from society, consequently from the nation. By giving allegiance to a foreign religion like Christianity, a person is perceived to have become a threat to national integrity.

Christianity: An Arm of Western Churchianity

For the Hindus, the Christian religion appears to be strongly organized, having its links with the colonial West. “In India, the type of situation has arisen repeated in which Hindu individual or group has professed faith in Christ, while expressly repudiating every Christian insistence on baptism and conversion as ‘churchianity’” (Sharpe 1970:224). Both baptism and membership in the church have cultural and social connotations for the Hindus. Conversion by taking baptism and membership into the church is understood as changing socio-religious and political loyalties. “From this point of view, missionary activity appears to Hindus a mode of communal aggression, a threat to the very existence of the Hindu community” observes Saldanha. “Conversion, (for the Hindus) therefore”, continues Saldanha, “implies a change of one’s social community, with far reaching legal consequences” (1981:13). In the eyes of Hindus, baptism is not so much a spiritual as a social and civil act. It signifies the change over from one social community to another. Because of social and cultural reasons and pressures, people reject baptism and membership in the institutionalized church (Daniel 1984:91).

Rarely is a Hindu motivated to do that; rather, he/she prefers to remain in his/her own caste and family and, if possible, worship Jesus from there. Staffner, elaborating on this point, says: “The convert is not abhorred and detested for what he embraces, but for what he renounces” (1978:64). There is no blame attached to a Hindu who believes in Christ. But receiving baptism is regarded as an unspeakable disgrace and disaster. The Hindu looks at a traditional Christianity as nothing but another organized religion, which is often referred to as “churchianity”. In the eyes of Hindus, this so-called “churchianity” is imposed by the western Christianity with the intention of spreading imperialism. Thus, Hindus tend to differentiate between the core of Jesus’

teachings, which they revere and are open to follow, and Western “churchianity, which they vehemently oppose.

Most of these misunderstandings, though carried on for decades, were formulated during the early interactions between the Hindus and Christians. These misconceptions, further, were developed by the urban, educated Hindus. These Hindus were primarily the leaders of the Hindu Renaissance of the 19th and 20th centuries. They were responsible for formulating and spreading their opinions about Christianity.

Therefore, to understand modern Hindu attitudes toward Christianity, we have to go back to those early formative years, when the Hindu leaders began interacting with Christianity. Out of this interaction, some positive and negative attitudes were developed. These attitudes, to an extent, reflect the Hindu perceptions of Christianity. We shall attempt to understand some of the prominent Hindu leaders and their attitudes toward Christianity.

Importance of Studying Attitudes

Studying and understanding attitudes are important, for they are significant determinants of social or religious behavior. “Attitudes are literally mental postures, guides for conduct to which each new experience referred before a response is made” (Morgan 1934:47). One can determine a person’s or group’s response by studying attitudes. Because attitudes influence behavior that is favorable or unfavorable, understanding them is crucial. Craig Ellison, in his article “Attitudes and Urban Transition,” says, “An attitude is the way we think, feel and act toward something.” Illustrating this further, he comments, “Attitudes are psychic eyeglasses which affect the way we see things, and the way we respond emotionally and behaviorally to those things” (1985:14). Understanding attitudes, therefore, is important, because through them

we can understand and predict the way people will respond towards things, other people, or situations.

Several factors are responsible for the formation of attitude. Ellison asserts that our attitudes are formed as a result of the accumulation of direct information, experience and values (1985:14-15). Elaborating, Ellison says that attitudes are developed “in response to personal interaction with another individual, an institution or other attitude objects” (1985:14). Ellison further states, “Some attitudes are developed because we identify with someone, putting ourselves in their place, and adapt a set of feeling and judgments toward something which affects them” (1985:14). In such cases, attitudes are formed on the basis of indirect information which may or may not be true.

Observing and understanding attitudes is a complex matter, for attitudes cannot be directly observed, but must be inferred from observable behavior such as verbal statements of opinion, or overt acts in relation to object. In understanding early Hindu attitudes toward Christianity, we may not be able to observe their behavior, but at least we have their writings, which gives us some glimpse of their opinion.

Need for Studying Hindu Attitudes

Samartha has observed that Hindu attitudes “[range] from aggressive rejection to warm welcome, from uncritical appreciation to thoughtful understanding and from vague admiration to partial commitment” (1974:15). Therefore, we should take into consideration the complexity and variation of Hindu responses to Christianity.

To understand the traditional Hindu attitude toward Christianity, we must go back to the nineteenth century. The coming of the Western Christian missionaries officially began in 1813,² when the English Parliament renewed “The Company Charter,” which allowed missionaries to start the Christian work in India. It was during the later part of the nineteenth century that the Hindus felt the need of responding to the Christian missionary’s activities. As a result, during the later part of the 19th century, the “Hindu Renaissance” took place. During that time, continuous interaction between Hinduism and Christianity occurred. A number of prominent Hindu thinkers came forward either in defense of Hinduism or to reform it. In the process, they also expressed their opinion about Christianity. They, were, so to say, the pioneers in developing certain attitudes towards Christianity. Therefore, studying them, their perceptions and attitudes towards Christianity is vitally important. The so-called “Hindu Renaissance” was basically a response to the Christian presence and activities in India. While setting their own house in order, these Renaissance leaders commented on compared, and contrasted Christianity with Hinduism. In the process of doing this, their attitude towards Christianity was reflected.

The attitudes and views of these Hindu leaders are considered to be quite representative, especially of the educated urban Hindus. It must be also noted that almost all of these leaders were urban dwellers. Their socio-religious movements were initiated in the cities of India and have made their way mostly among the urban Hindu people. Understanding their views and attitudes will establish a framework for us to study.

² Although there were Protestant missionaries already working in Serampore, near Calcutta and in Tranquebar near Madras prior to 1813.

Attitudes of the Hindu Renaissance

In the early part of the nineteenth century, Hindu thinkers began to grapple with their awareness of the deplorable living conditions in India. This awareness, which led to an awakening in Hinduism, was caused by several factors. According to Soman Das, “They were the various missionary movements, British colonialism, English education and the inherent vitality of Hinduism” (1983:22). According to Radhakrishnan, “The Hindu religious revival is partly the result of Western research, partly reaction against Western dominance and partly the revolt against Christian missionary propaganda” (1956:108). In the words of S. Natarajan, “Fear of Christianity has been the beginning of much social wisdom in India” (1962:8). Scholars agree that the impact of the Christian missionary activities was at the root of the socio-religious reforms in India. Most reform leaders during the Hindu Renaissance period either were educated in Christian institutions or influenced by Christian missionaries or their institutions.

As Hindu society came into constant contact with the Christian missionaries and their institutions, changes were bound to occur. K. M. Panikkar observes that, “The first result of the Christian attack on Hinduism was a movement among educated Hindus in favor of a social reform of religion” (1955:320). While reforming their own religion and society, they also began interacting with Christianity as a religion and Christ as its founder. This interaction and particularly demonstrated Hindu attitude toward Christianity.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833)

Roy is the prophet of Indian nationalism and the pioneer of liberal reform in Hindu religion and society (Thomas 1976:1). Soman Das calls him the Father of the Indian Renaissance (1983:25). Roy, being highly educated and closely associated with the “Serampore Trio” of

Carey, Marshman and Ward, had a first-hand knowledge of the Bible. He was well versed in several languages, including, Hebrew and Greek. He is said to be the “first Indian to have written seriously and extensively on Christian theological themes” (Boyd 1979:19).

Roy was a great admirer of Jesus and his teachings on morality and ethics. Perplexed by the writings of Christians and conversations he held with various missionaries, he was astounded by the ethical teachings of Jesus, and therefore decided to extract them from the Bible. An outcome of this was a publication of The Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happiness. He hoped that these”moral precepts will be more likely to produce the desirable effect of improving the hearts and minds of men of different persuasions and degrees of understandings” (Nag and Burman 1946:4). This indicates his attitude toward Christ and his concern to share his teachings, especially moral teachings, with his own countrymen.

He was not interested in the historical Jesus or his miracles. What attracted him to Jesus was his ethical teachings, and he did not hesitate to extract them from the New Testament. He was one of the first Hindu thinkers to separate the “teachings of Jesus from the historical events of his life, death and resurrection and their biblical interpretation” (Thomas 1976:10). Granted that he did not care to focus on the miracles of Jesus and his saving work on the cross of Calvary, Roy found a great solace and comfort in the teachings of Jesus, although he found it difficult to accept Jesus’ death on behalf of sinful mankind. He felt that it would be inconsistent with the common notion of justice to afflict an innocent man with death for sins committed by others. Therefore, he could not believe in the atoning work of Jesus.

He further refused to recognize the traditional established Christian church as the custodian of the truth. He declared that “the Scriptures are the only test of the truth of traditions in the Church, which may be considered as of little value when we have the Scriptures

themselves” (Thomas 1976:6). When he was criticized for being selective in his to the teachings of Jesus, he clearly pointed out that the Christian churches were guilty of a similar crime--if being selective is considered to be a crime. He did not hesitate to point out to his Christian critics that the church and its dogma have contributed to much of the strife and division in the Christian West. In India, he showed how Christian missionaries have completely counteracted their own benevolent labors by preaching dogmas and denominational doctrines which confused the minds of the Hindus.

While being appreciative of what the missionaries were doing for the welfare of the Hindu society, he was opposed to Hindus renouncing Hinduism and joining the Christian fold and eventually the Christian church.

Keshub Chander Sen (1838-1884)

Another influential figure of the Hindu Renaissance of the nineteenth century was Keshub Chander Sen. He is believed to have a closer understanding of the gospel and Christ than Roy. He was attracted to the charisma of Christ “ and responded to the love and self-sacrifice of Christ, rejoicing that Christ was Asian and not the kind of European figure whom the missionaries seem to portray” (Boyd 1974:8). Sen was known for his eloquence. Most of his lectures eventually were published. “The first lecture was given in 1866 and the title was Jesus Christ, Europe and Asia. In it Keshub dwelt on the moral “excellence” of Jesus-on the ‘character of Jesus and the lofty ideal of moral truth which he taught and lived” (Thomas 1976:57). He often described Jesus admiringly in his lectures and discourses, so much so that he said at one time, “Was not he who by his wisdom illuminated, and by his power saved a dark and wicked

world?” (Mozoomdar 1887:22). He was convinced that in the self-sacrifice of Christ, India would be regenerated.

For him, Christ was divine and God--but in a slightly different way. He emphasized the essential humanity of Christ. According to Sen, Jesus had a perfect human nature, because it was united with the Divine nature. Jesus emptied himself so completely that “he became the transparent medium in which God indwells and through which men can see God and know him” (Thomas 1976:59). Sen is peculiarly Hindu when he interprets the presence of Christ among the Indian people. “For instance, he takes the traditional Vedantic idea of mystic union and pantheism and transforms it into an active unity of will and communion through obedience to God and his righteousness” (1976:61). While doing this, he is not hesitant to justify his position. He argues that India has a right to interpret Christ in an Indian way of thought and life. Commenting on his attitude, Neufeldt says: “On the one hand, like Rammohun Roy, he was not drawn to Christological formulations. On the other hand, he was quite willing to utilize, in a Hindu sense, the symbolism surrounding the birth and death of Jesus” (1990b:163). However, he has been consistent in affirming that Jesus is a great man among other great men.

As is true with most Hindu thinkers, Sen was not sympathetic to the traditional Christian church. He criticized the church for preaching Jesus Christ as the Father appearing on earth in human shape like the avatar of Hinduism; he called this idolatry and heresy, contrary to the early Fathers, Holy Writ and Christ (Neufeldt 1990b:67). He often said that Christ is not Christianity. He disclaimed the Christian name and never identified with the Christian church. While strongly reacting against the Western image of the Christian church, he advocated the indigenous church. This he called the Church of New Dispensation. While keeping it more national and indigenous, he went back to the traditional Hindu way of looking at religions.

He affirmed that all religions of the world are true and equally valid. He perceived the mission of the Church of New Dispensation as harmonizing all of these religions and revelations. In his response to Christianity and particularly to Christ, Sen gave his own original Indian-Hindu interpretation.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1833-1886)

Having noted two outstanding thinkers of Hindu Renaissance, we now come to another well-known figure: Ramakrishna. Like Roy and Sen, Ramakrishna was from the province of Bengal. Out of the desire to know God, he went through immense efforts and difficulties. In line with his temperament, he went through various spiritual disciplines under numerous gurus and sages. He emerged as one of a few Hindus who have tried to gain personal experience of other religions, especially Islam and Christianity. He was so immersed in the thought of God-realization that along with his Hindu Sadhana³, he exercised Muslim and Christian Sadhana. His main emphasis was on Anubhav-self -experience.

It was in 1874 that he began to be open to the teachings of Jesus. However, he did not come into contact with any Christian missionaries or Christian leaders. Out of his curiosity to know the gospel, he requested one of his Hindu friends to read from the Bible to him. “Fascinated with the life of Jesus, he was resting in the parlour of another friend, Jadunath Mallick, when his eyes lit upon a picture of the child Jesus in his mother’s lap” (French 1988a:68). He experienced the picture coming to life and for three days he forgot all other things, including the worship of Kali, and his “meditation became exclusively focused on Jesus” (French 1988a:68).

Ramakrishna came to the realization that Jesus is definitely an incarnation of God. However, he continued to believe that such divine appearances are often needed in this world for the salvation of its people. This was in line with popular Vedantic thinking, which emphasizes the repetitive and reinforcing character of divine appearances. The Hindu teachings concerning

the incarnation and Ramakrishna's understanding of Christ clearly fit this interpretation (French 69). In line with Vedantic thinking, Ramakrishna also believed that all religions are true and different paths leading to the same one God.

Although he recognized Jesus' sacrifice to deliver mankind from sorrow and misery, he rejected the Christian idea of the sinfulness of man and his need of salvation (Thomas 1976:117). While being appreciative of Christ and his teachings, Ramakrishna continued to be devoted to Kali and other Hindu gods and goddesses. He was a forefront proponent of the Hindu view that religion is essentially an individual experience with God. However, he continued to consider Jesus as one of the ways to reach God.

Since Ramakrishna was never exposed to real traditional Christianity and Christian people, we don't see him commenting on them. He was, however, of the opinion that all religions are equally valid as a way to God. Probably he considered Christianity equal with Hinduism. The very fact that he attempted to have a Christian sadhana experience shows that he did not have any negative feelings or attitude toward Christianity.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1903)

Narendranath Datta, later known as Swami Vivekananda, became a disciple of Ramakrishna and developed "Sri Ramakrishna's idea of spiritual realization into a total philosophy, and made it the basis of the Ramakrishna Order, Mission and Movement" (Thomas 1976:118). It was Vivekananda who is considered by some to be the first Hindu missionary to the West, propagating Vedantic philosophy.

³ Sadhana means disciplined spiritual practice

Following the same path of Ramakrishna, his guru, Vivekananda preached the harmony of all religions. He preached that the goal of all religions is union with God, affirming all religions to be equally viable roads to reaching God. “This view has become almost universal among educated Hindus, and has been given virtually official sanction with Mahatma Gandhi” (Boyd 1979: 9). At the bottom of this thinking lies a concept of Hindu tolerance which assumes the equality of all religions and the superiority of none. His view promotes a dialogue with other religions, with the hope of assimilating the best teachings from each.

Vivekananda emerged as a great advocate of Hindu philosophy, particularly the Vedantic, to the Christian West. While disapproving of the claim that Christianity is the only universal religion, he argued that it is Vedanta,¹⁴ and the Vedanta alone, that can become the universal religion of man’, as it alone is based on the solid rock of an eternal principle in contrast to the shifting sands of the historicity of personality “ (Thomas 1976:119). He took pride in saying that the Hinduism and Vedantic philosophy were not built on any one founder, but rather on a principle. He was in a sense opposed to traditional religions. His approach to religions, including Christianity, was in the framework of the principles of the Vedanta. In fact, he firmly believed that the New Testament and Jesus Christ could not be fully understood unless and until they were interpreted within the framework of Vedanta.

Vivekananda’s toward Christ was one of great respect. He considered Christ to be a great Yogi, an ascetic, who had attained his divine status by the way of sadhana--a spiritual discipline. He continued to emphasize that as Jesus attained his status over many years of discipline and

⁴ Advaita Vedanta philosophy is quite dominant among the majority of the Hindus. They believe that the only reality is pure spirit or consciousness, that the physical world is an illusion (created by maya negative consciousness), and that man’s soul is a part of God, temporarily separated from God by its embodiment in the illusory mask of the body... According to the Vedantists neither good nor evil could exist at all because God was the only true reality, and the world, and the world, where good and evil seemed to exist, and seek union with God (Heimsath 1964:117).

concluded that it is possible for all of us to be Christs. Thus, according to him, “Christ” represents a status that can be achieved by anyone through many years of discipline. Jesus is worthy of worship, since he has attained the most perfect manifestation of the eternal.

To him, the greatness of Christ was not found in providing salvation for mankind but in pointing beyond himself to that which lies within. This was in line with his Vedantic thinking that every person is in essence a god and that with the sadhana-self discipline, he/she can attain self-realization.

His understanding of sin also was in line with Vedantic thinking. He considered sin as Maya-ignorance. He strongly rejected the idea of man as a sinner in need of grace. Vedanta admits avidya - ignorance and error - but not sin. Sin suggests a corruption of nature, a violation of one’s relation to God (Thomas 1976:124). He often ridiculed the idea of being saved through the blood of Jesus. Once he said, “ There is one thing which is very dissimilar between us and Christians, something we [are] never taught. That is the idea of salvation through Jesus’ blood, or cleansing by any man’s blood” (1955a: 209). Taking this point further, he commented, “ If any would come and say, “Be saved by my blood,” I would say to him, “My brother, go away; I will go to hell; I am not a coward to take innocent blood to go to heaven; I am ready for hell” (1955a:209). Hence, he could never accept Christ’s atoning work through death on the cross.

In his attitude toward traditional Christianity, we see him being critical and negative. As an organized religion of the Western people, there were things about Christianity which he did not appreciate. In his lecture entitled “Hindus and Christians,” we note his attitude:

One thing I would tell you, and I do not mean any unkind criticism. You train and educate and clothe and pay men to do what? To come over to my country to curse and abuse all my forefathers, my religion, and everything. They walk near a temple and say, “You idolaters, you will go to hell.” But they dare not say that to the Mohammedans of

India; the sword would be out. But the Hindu is too mild; he smiles and passes on, and says, "Let the fools talk." That is the attitude (1955b:211-212).

Vivekananda spared no effort in pointing to the bloodshed caused by the Christian West. He asked, "With all your brags and boasting, where has your Christianity succeeded without the sword? ... Such things tumble down; it is built upon sand; it cannot remain long" (Vivekananda 1955a:212-213). He was of the opinion that the Christians have departed from the pure teachings of Christ. While addressing the Americans, he said: "Go back to Christ. Go back to him who had nowhere to lay his head. "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Yours is religion preached in the name of luxury. What an irony of fate! Reverse this if you want to live; revise this" (Vivekananda 1955b:213).

He often blamed the Western Christians for making Christ look like a Western God. He pointed out that his view of the great Prophet of Nazareth would be from the standpoint of the Orient. He urged the missionaries to preach the oriental Christ. What he wanted was to remove the Western forms and influence from Christianity and present the pure oriental Christ to India. This he probably did as a reaction to the Western image of Christ portrayed by missionaries. Essentially, he was attempting to show that Christianity has westernized Christ, whereas in reality, he was an Oriental.

Swami Dayanand Sarasvati (1824-1883)

Mula Shankar, later known as Swami Dayanand Sarasvati, is considered instrumental in arousing interest in the past heritage of true Hinduism. He, being a Sanyaseen, who had renounced everything in pursuit of spirituality, was determined to reform Hinduism and oppose conversion of the Hindus to other religions, particularly to Christianity and Islam. He was one of the few Hindu reformers who, along with insisting on going back to the Vedas, attempted to

make Hinduism a missionary religion. He introduced a concept of Shuddhi, by which he advocated that the Hindus who were converted to other religion may be accepted back into the Hindu fold.

He was the one who aggressively propagated the religion of the Vedas, and condemned every other religion, including traditional Hinduism. His major contribution is seen in the formation of Arya Samaj-A Society of the Aryans or the nobles. He attempted to inculcate the spirit of religious nationalism in the heart of the Indian people. “An interesting feature of this religious nationalism is a belief that India is essentially spiritual and Europe is materialistic in attitude. This formula had a magical appeal to the patriotic Indians...” (Das 1974:130). He developed two slogans and popularized them among the masses. They were: “Back to the Vedas” and “India for Indians.” (Zachariah 1992:69). He quite subtly wove Hindu militancy with Indian nationalism, managing to find support for both in the Vedas.

Dayanand and his Arya Samaj had a definite negative attitude toward Christianity. Interestingly, Dayanand never undertook any systematic study of the Bible, nor was he a systematic thinker. He was an ardent Hindu, committed to revitalizing the authentic religion of the Vedas. When he went to Calcutta, he was powerfully exposed to the claims of Christianity among the Bengali intelligentsia. However, it was in Punjab where “the Swami was confronted for the first time in his life with an intensive and aggressive missionary propaganda activity that in fact had engendered in the minds of many Punjabis the fear of a Christian threat” (Jordens 1988:120). Probably it was here he decided to exterminate Christianity in India.

He perceived Christianity to be a foreign religion and thus a threat to the land and people of India. His attacks on Christianity and missionary activities were deliberate and strongly biased. His interpretations of Christianity were so negative that he did not want to acknowledge anything

good in it. His short encounters with Christian missionaries and a superficial study of Christianity formulated his opinions and attitudes. Right from the beginning, he was interested in attacking Christianity rather than understanding it. It is clear that his whole approach was “reactionary”. Perhaps Jordens’ observation will help us to understand Dayanand’s reactionary attitudes towards Christianity:

Another important consideration in judging Dayananda’s commentary is the fact that at that time many missionaries treated the Hindu scriptures with the same superficial literalness as he treated the Bible. The latter is not surprising since the dominant attitude of those missionaries toward Hinduism was one of complete condemnation: Hinduism was seen as part of the corrupt world of ‘heathen’, it was a false religion, the work of the prince of this world, not of God (Jordens 1988:129).

Dayanand took such attitudes of Christian missionaries seriously and developed a counter-attack. The formation of Arya Samaj was part of that attack. Through the establishment of the Arya Samaj, he tried to respond to the Christian missionary assault on Hinduism and provide a substitute and a missionary arm for defending true Hinduism.

He considered the Bible to be the work of men, men without any wisdom who were nothing more than “barbarian” hill dwellers (Sarasvati 1970:732-33). He repeatedly criticized the concept of God portrayed in the Bible and concluded that the God of the Bible was totally devoid of the essential qualities of the divine nature (Jordens 1988:127). He deliberately made efforts to destroy the validity and truthfulness of the Bible and the Biblical God, so that the very heart of the missionary effort could be nullified. “This type of criticism constituted a deliberate frontal attack on one of the principal missionary contentions that the Bible presented a consistent system of truth and morality” (Jordens 1988:128).

Dayanand, in his discussions with missionaries, often talked about Christ and his redeeming work. However, “He argued that the idea of incarnation could not be reconciled with

God's essential quality of omnipotence, and had, therefore, to be rejected" (Jordens 1988:137). He could not understand why an omnipotent God would assume the body of man in incarnation.

He could not accept the Christian doctrine of salvation through faith in Jesus, because of his conviction that salvation can only be achieved by works of dharma. He compared the Christian way of gaining salvation through faith with the Hindu way of achieving salvation through pilgrimages and image worship. He thought that the Christian way of gaining salvation was too easy and that it encouraged people to remain in their sins. Nor could he accept the divinity of Christ; to him, men could never be saved through faith in Jesus Christ. Such an incomplete understanding of Christ's atoning work was partly due to the fact that Dayananda had approached the issue with a pre-conceived mindset, namely his own understanding of the concept of karma and retribution. "To him the principle [of karma] was absolute that every deed must find its proper individual retribution, and, therefore, forgiveness of sins or vicarious atonement were considered as fundamentally contradictory with the justice of God" (Jordens 1988:141).

Dayanand and the Arya Samaj demonstrate a kind of attitude toward Christianity that is representative of a section of Hindu extremists. Such an attitude is almost exclusively one of condemnation and non-sympathy. It seeks to attack, expose and condemn Christianity. It is rather unusual to find such an attitude among the Hindus. But Dayanand verbalized it to show that such a reactionary attitude is possible. Heimsath's comments are worth noting in this context. He observed that the "Arya Samaj went forth consciously to compete with missionaries in reform and educational activities in order to cut down what it considered a dangerous rate of conversions to Christianity" (1964:53). Dayanand's opposition to Christianity was uncompromisingly one of condemnation.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948)

Mohandas Gandhi, who eventually was called Mahatma Gandhi, brought the Hindu Renaissance to its zenith. Like Dayanand, he came from the western state of Gujarat. He influenced the whole of India with his nonviolent approach. Not a systematic philosopher or even a traditional religious thinker, Gandhi “was primarily a man of political and social action, inspired by a religious interpretation of human existence” (Thomas 1967:195). While overwhelmingly sympathetic to Christianity, he adamantly insisted on remaining a Hindu. There is no doubt that there was a great Christian influence on his life and work.

His first impression of Christianity was a negative one, and it remained with him to the end. However, as he came in contact with some noble Christians and read the New Testament, his resentment toward Christianity gradually changed to appreciation and admiration. He recalls the incident which affected him as a child:

In those days Christian missionaries used to stand in a corner near the high school and hold forth, pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods. I could not endure this. I must have stood there to hear them once only, but that was enough to dissuade me from repeating the experiment. About the same time, I heard of a well-known Hindu having been converted to Christianity. It was the talk of the town that, when he was baptized, he had to eat beef, and drink liquor, that he also had to change his clothes, and that thenceforth he began to go about in European costume including a hat. These things got on my nerves. Surely, thought I, a religion that compelled one to eat beef, drink liquor, and change one’s own clothes did not deserve the name. I also heard that the new convert had already begun abusing the religion of his ancestors, their customs and their country. All these things created in me a dislike for Christianity (Gandhi 1960:49-50).

What Gandhi describes here was in line with a typical Hindu conception (or misconception) of Christianity. However, the above-mentioned incident definitely influenced his life. Devanesen observed, “He never truly rose above some aspects of his early emotional reaction to missionary activities in Rajkot; it continued to colour his attitudes to Christians and

Christianity for the rest of his life” (1969:46-47). Though this was unfortunate, it clearly shows a kind of impression Christianity had created in the minds of Hindu people in India at that time.

Gandhi was critical of traditional Christianity, particularly as practiced in the West. He felt that Western Christianity had “departed from the simple teachings of Jesus” (Rao 1988:145). He was of the opinion that Western Christians failed to live according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. He criticized Western Christian thinkers for emphasizing doctrine or belief, rather than conduct or practice (Minz 1970:41). He could never perceive Christ’s gentle message of love and in the colonial expansion of the so-called Christian West. He was of the opinion that the church distorted Christianity when it became the religion of the Emperor. Realizing that Gandhi was fighting against the imperialistic British government, we can understand his criticism. “This was the basic reason why Gandhi did not call himself a Christian; he did not accept the Western system based on might” (Minz 1970:44).

While being critical of Western Christianity, Gandhi continued to hold the view that one can accept Christ and reject “organized Christianity and its packaging of Western culture” (Devanesen 1969:59). He often was disturbed by and expressed his dissatisfaction with the exclusive claims of Christianity. He felt that Christianity’s unique claims to be the only true religion, with the Bible the only inspired book and Jesus the only savior of the world, could not be accepted. Gandhi’s objections to Christianity were not intellectual, but related to current events. “He reflected the mass-mind rather than the outlook of Hindu intellectuals like Sir Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan” (Devanesen 1969:60).

Gandhi’s admiration of Jesus is well-known. Jesus’ gentle, patient, kind, forgiving, and patient figure attracted him. He often talked highly of Jesus’ teachings, and particularly of his sermon on the mount. Jesus’ teachings on humility, forgiveness, non-resistance and non-

retaliation were at the heart of Gandhi's life and practice. He upheld Jesus as one of the most powerful teachers that the world has ever had.

But when it came to believing in Jesus as the savior, Gandhi drastically differed from the Biblical Christian view. He never acknowledged Jesus as the only begotten Son of God. "If he is the Son of God, then all men are equally sons of God. He is as divine as Krishna, Rama, or Mohammed" (Minz 1970:39). His Hindu mind could never conceive Christ as the monopoly of the Christians. Rao aptly observed this when he stated:

Gandhi maintained that people of all religions have a deep interest in Christ. Hindus hail the claims of Jesus that "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). Some Buddhists have spoken of him as the Buddha of the West. The Koran speaks of Jesus as the Messiah, as a prophet and messenger of God. All this should provide a basis for a spiritual fellowship between Christianity and other great religions (1988:154).

He held the view of the perfection of human nature and believed that Jesus came as near to perfection as possible. He regarded Jesus as the teacher, who had gained human perfection.

Gandhi also had difficulty in accepting Jesus' atoning work on the cross. "He often testified to the importance of Jesus' suffering as a factor in his undying faith in nonviolence" (Douglas 1991:102). He looked at Christ's suffering on the cross as a principle of non-violence. The example of Jesus' suffering was at the heart of his non-violent principle. He looked at Christ as a perfect man who demonstrated what love is through his own sufferings. For Gandhi, "The logic of nonviolence is the logic of crucifixion and leads the person of nonviolence into the heart of the suffering Christ" (Douglas 1991:106). Instead of seeing a redemptive meaning in the crucifixion of Christ, Gandhi saw a principle of non-violence in it. "For Gandhi, the universality of Jesus' message was due to the power of his [Jesus'] death, which had confirmed his own word" (Jesudasen 1991: 96). He could not conceive the idea of divine atonement and forgiveness through the death of Jesus on the cross. He refused to accept that there is anything mysterious or

miraculous in Jesus' death on the cross. In fact, "He saw in the Cross an explication of the Hindu concept of ahimsa" (Rao 1988:150). Such an attitude towards Jesus' suffering is typically adhered to by Gandhi and his followers.

Regarding conversion to Christianity, Gandhi remained true to his Hindu upbringing and vehemently denounced conversion. He honestly felt that all people should be encouraged to remain in their respective religions, while being open to other religious ideas. He advocated the principle of tolerance. He himself attempted to demonstrate the principle in his life. He replied to many of his missionary friends who insisted on his conversion, "To be a good Hindu also meant that I would be a good Christian. There was no need for me to join your crowd to be a believer in the beauty of the teaching of Jesus or try to follow his example" (Gandhi 1963:24). He held that the religion of a person is part of his culture, and such heritage cannot be renounced.

"Gandhi believes that revelation is not the monopoly of any one nation or tribe, but that all the "clean Scriptures" are revealed; and what is required is 'mutual respect and toleration of the devotees of the different religions'" (Thomas 1979:204).

His main objection to the proselytizing efforts of the Christian missionaries was that it denationalized people, divided families and broke society. He found no rationale in attempting to remove a person from his natural surrounding through conversion. Most of all, he was against missionaries' so-called efforts to convert the lower castes people. "Gandhi made clear to the missionaries that a change of label, or conversion to Christianity, did not help solve the problems of Harijans" (Minz 1970:45). He opposed not only individual conversions but also the mass conversions.

For him conversion was the matter of heart and reason, and he maintained that "An appeal to heart and reason can be made effective only through conduct..." (1970:54). He further

“ maintained that conversion, in the sense of self-purification and self-realization, was vital for every member in every religious community” (Rao 1988:147). He encouraged Hindus to remain Hindus, while appreciating the good elements of other religions. He invited the missionaries to share their experiences of truth with others. Hence, his well-known saying is worth reviewing: “If I had the power and could legislate, I should certainly stop all proselytizing. It is the cause of much avoidable conflict between classes and unnecessary heart-burning among missionaries” (quoted by Devanandan 1956:1).

Gandhi demonstrated a typical Hindu attitude to Christ and Christianity. While being attracted to Christ and his teachings, he rejected traditional Christianity and all its claims. His attitude toward conversion reflects again the typical Hindu attitude, since it has political implications. Respect for the people of other faiths in journeying toward the Truth is encouraged.

Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950)

Aurobindo stands out distinctly among the Hindu Renaissance leaders for his unique Western upbringing. Having been brought up in England and influenced by Christianity, Aurobindo’s life and writings reflected much of that influence. Though he did not write specifically on Christianity or Christ, one could catch a glimpse of his thoughts on Christianity. He did not feel attracted to it because he “got disgusted with the dryness and deadness of Christianity in England . . .” (Aurobindo 1972:137). He further adds, “and partly because the Christ of the gospels (apart from a few pregnant episodes) is luminous, no doubt, but somewhat a shadowy and imperfectly constructed luminosity: there is more of the ethical put forward than the spiritual or divine (Aurobindo 1972:137). He felt that in the West the ethical character of God is more emphasized.

As he grew up in the so called “Christian West,” he was definitely exposed to the Christian culture. In comparing Christianity with Hinduism, he contended that Christianity is more ethical than spiritual. He observed that the main appeal of Christianity is moral; therefore, its effects are particularly seen in the social and political spheres (Basu 1991:200). He pointed to the fact that modern Europe is Christian only in name and said:

Their humanitarianism is the translation into the ethical and social sphere; and the aspiration to liberty, equality and fraternity the translation into the social and political sphere of the spiritual truths of Christianity, the latter especially being affected by men who aggressively rejected the Christian religion and spiritual discipline and by an age which in its intellectual effort of emancipation tried to get rid of Christianity as a creed (Aurobindo 1972: 162).

While being appreciative of Christianity, he continued to contrast it with Hinduism. He believed that Hinduism emphasized an inner spiritual freedom, while Christianity emphasized an external freedom. He admired the Christian emphasis on equality and love, and stated that because of such an emphasis, Christianity rapidly spread in India. But he also felt that Christianity failed to present the true message of Christ; rather, it spread sectarian “churchianity”. “To make the Church more powerful as an institution becomes more important than keeping the springs of life-giving waters of spiritual faith and knowledge flowing” (Basu 1991:205). He felt that Christianity had rejected the message of Christ and retained churchianity.

His view about Jesus Christ was quite positive, but entirely different from that of the traditional Christian interpretation. He had no problem in accepting Jesus as an Avatar so to show the path to man to become God. He often put Jesus together with Krishna and Buddha. It is not surprising, therefore, to note his belief that the primary purpose of God’s becoming man is to show man how to become God (1991:187).

Aurobindo was of the opinion that there is one supreme God as stated in the Vedas, but one who is called by many names. He believed in Superman and contended that man must become a Superman (Zachariah 1992:138). Referring to several verses from the Bible, he advocated that, “the purpose of the coming of the Son of God from heaven [was] to transform

humanity and make it Christ like in character and conduct” (Zachariah 1992:138). In his opinion, Christ was inferior to God, who “is the begetter in Christian terms, the other the begotten; one of manifested, the other manifestation, according to Indian ways of expressing the same idea” (Basu 1991:189). Further, in line with the Hindu interpretation, he did not care about the historicity of Christ, for it is Christ’s spiritual message that mattered to him.

He called Christ vibhuti. Vibhutis are men who are truly self-evidently superhuman, great spirits who are only using the human body. Above morality and generality without conscience, they act according to their own nature (Basu 1991:192). Such interpretation often assumes Vibhuti’s humanity, which eventually gets elevated to divinity. His opinion of Christ’s mission was that it was to purify, not to fulfill.

Aurobindo felt that Christ was a failure in accomplishing his mission, for he was aware of the necessity of his return with the sword of God into a world that had rejected him (Aurobindo 1972: 99-100). This kind of interpretation of Christ seems deliberately biased and one-sided.

Aurobindo was mainly positive toward Christ and his teachings, while being critical and condemnatory toward Christianity. His interpretations of Christ and his teachings were in line with other Hindu thinkers. He denounced the traditional Western interpretation of Christ and his teaching, for he felt that the West emphasized the ethical aspects only.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975)

Radhakrishnan is considered to be the most brilliant exponent of Vedantic philosophy. He took upon himself the task of defending Hinduism and evaluating Christianity in the light of Vedanta philosophy. According to Thomas, he did this for two reasons: “Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has spoken of the national pride which Vivekananda awoke in him with regard to Hinduism, and

of the hurt to it by the attitude of his missionary teachers toward Hinduism” (1976:153).

Therefore, “In his treatment of Christianity, one hears an echo of a general Hindu approach to other religions...” (Harris 1988:156).

Often he appeared to be overly critical and negative toward Christianity and Christian approaches to the Hindus. Probably, in expressing his views about Christianity, he was reacting to his own encounters with Christianity and Christian missionaries. In a sense, his writings reflected an educated-intellectual reaction to Christianity. He is considered to be one of the few intellectual Hindus who gave scholarly attention to the study of Christianity.

Although Radhakrishnan’s view of Christianity was not much different from those other leaders’ of the Hindu Renaissance, he verbalized them more sharply and subtly. Having studied in Christian institutions, and having had many firsthand encounters with Christian missionaries, he formulated his opinion. “He claimed that Christianity was dogmatic in its theological assertions, intolerant of others beliefs, and exclusive in its treatment of other religions” (Harris 1988:158). Being a true Vedantian, he regarded Christianity as one of many religions that were equally valid ways to God.

He rejected any claims of Christianity to be exclusive and unique. He took liberty in interpreting Christianity in the light of Vedanta. However, as observed by Harris, “in his treatment of the Christian faith, his writings show that he moved from a hostile position to a moderate criticism and even appreciation of the Christian faith” (Harris 1988:158). That does not mean that he was appreciative of the whole of Christianity, but, as it is with other Hindus, he was selective in appreciating certain elements of Christianity.

He could never conceive Christianity to be superior to Hinduism. For him, the moment any religion claims to be exclusive and superior, it assumes the inferiority of other religions. He

condemned such “religious imperialism” of Christianity and appealed to the Christian missionaries not to proselyte the Hindus, but rather to advocate religious harmony. He wanted them to join hands in a synthesis of all religions, and became rather uneasy with their unwillingness to do so.

While accepting spirituality in Christianity, he rejected its institutional nature. He felt that the Christian church is a later development which made Christianity a religion of authority. This, he felt, was not part of true Christianity. He proposed the universal religion, inviting Christianity to renounce its exclusive claims and join.

We are slowly realizing that believers with different opinions and convictions are necessary to each other to work out the larger synthesis which alone can give the spiritual basis to a world brought together into intimate oneness by man’s mechanical ingenuity (Radhakrishnan 1993: 348).

He was of the opinion that Christianity need not treat other religions as rivals, but fellow-laborers, seeking to achieve the same goal. He advocated the universal religion. According to him, “The ‘unchanging substance’ of all religions is the evolution of man to the spiritual illumination in which the soul realizes itself “ (Thomas 1976:164). No wonder, being a Hindu and a true Vedantian, the focus of his universal religion remained on man rather than God. This explains why he was critical of Christianity when it portrayed man as a sinner.

Radhakrishnan apparently reflected a lot on Christ. As a true Hindu, he had room for Jesus in his life. “Although he appreciates Jesus for his life and teachings, he thinks it is important to show that Jesus is not an exclusive property of Christianity” (Harris 1988:157). He distinguished the religion of Jesus from the religion about Jesus. Through this analysis, he tried to prove that Jesus was more Eastern in orientation than the West is willing to accept (Harris

1988:157). His intention, however, was to show that if Christianity is Eastern, then other religions of the East, like Hinduism and Buddhism, are equally true.

He also wanted to emphasize how some of the central teachings of Jesus were influenced by Hinduism. “Radhakrishnan uses this framework of Neo-Advaita Vedantism, with its ladder of reality oriented to mystic experience as the ultimate criterion and goal of spirituality, to interpret Christ and the truths of Christianity” (Thomas 1976:154). He attempted to prove that Jesus was an Eastern thinker, influenced by Hindu thought and therefore closer to Hinduism than to Christianity. He could see no reason for Christ and Christianity to be superior to Hinduism or Buddhism.

Radhakrishnan accepted Jesus’ divinity but also stated that Jesus is an example for us to be divine like Him. He further said, “Jesus was the son of man and the Son of God. He was in contact with both levels of being, earthly and heavenly” (1956:72). He interpreted the meaning of following Jesus in similar way: “We are called upon to walk in His ways, confess Him, and become personal followers of Him, and if we succeed each one of us can be the Son of Man...” (1993:162). While interpreting some of Jesus’ teachings in the Advaita Vedantic framework, he implies that we all are to follow Jesus’ example and become Christs. To the question: “What do you think of Christ?” he answered:

To an educated Hindu, Jesus is a supreme illustration of the growth from human origins to divine destiny. As a mystic who believes in the inner light, Jesus ignores ritual and indifference to legalistic piety...He is the great hero who exemplified the noblest characteristics of manhood, the reveler of the profoundest depths in ourselves, one who brings home to us the ideal of human perfection by embodying it visibly in itself (Schilpp 1952:807).

All such interpretations of Jesus and his teachings affirmed Radhakrishnan's subtle view: "that Jesus grew up in an environment where Indian religious ideas must have been circulating" (Harris 1988:161).

Analysis of Hindu Attitudes

One cannot study the attitudes of the neo-Hindus of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without understanding a few crucial factors that shaped their attitudes. The impact of the West, particularly through the British rulers and Christian missionaries, triggered a Hindu Renaissance and nationalistic movement. Since the Christian missionaries were perceived to be the agents of Western colonialism and expansion, the Hindu Renaissance reacted against both of them with equal vigor and opposition.

Interestingly, the intellectual Hindus who had been exposed to Christianity and Western education took the initiative in responding to the challenges of their time. They were the first ones to understand and analyze the situation in India and bring about reforms. It was clear that the Christian missions and missionaries appeared to go hand-in-hand with Western thought and education. Thomas rightly observes that, "The Christian missions corresponded with the period and spirit of Western imperial expansion in India; ..." (1976:241). Those who were oriented to Western education and had studied at the Christian institutions became the leaders of India's religious and national awakening. Devanandan comments: "The religious resurgence finds manifest expression in reform movements, renewed exposition of Scriptures, restatement of fundamental beliefs, and the apologetic defense of faith" (1958:42).

For most Hindu leaders, the historicity of Christ did not mean much. What attracted them most were the ethical teachings of Jesus. They admired his simple life-style, renunciation and

self-sacrifice much more than his historicity. They deliberately interpreted Christ in the framework of the Hindu Advaita Vedanta system and attempted to separate Christ from Western Christianity. Most of them rejected a systematic understanding of the Bible. Rather, they were ruthlessly selective in their use of the Bible. Noticeably, they showed no interest in the Old Testament and Pauline letters. Moreover, their insistence on self-experience (Anubhav) led them to neglect the centrality of the Bible.

Most Hindu Renaissance leaders started with the assumption that all religions are different paths leading to the same God. Hence, they regarded religions as equally valid. They advocated tolerance toward people of other faiths. Yet they affirmed that, since all religions are created by men, they are imperfect. Hence they vehemently opposed and rejected the Christian claims of supremacy. They felt that it was not ethically right on the part of the Christian missionaries to expose only the ills of the Hindu society and religion. They appealed to the Christian missionaries to be more sympathetic at least to some aspects of Hinduism.

As a reaction to the negative missionary attitude and attack on their religion, a number of Hindu reformers exposed the ills of Christianity. This is particularly seen in Dayanand Sarasvati's open attacks on Christianity. He clearly represented an extreme reaction to the missionaries' attacks on Hinduism. However, most other reformers, at least to a certain extent, were aware of the contribution of Christianity. Often they expressed their debt to Christian missionaries.

But partly because of the missionaries' continuous attacks on Hindu society, they were, so to say, compelled to react negatively and expose the evils of Christianity. They felt that such attacks and criticism on the part of the Christian missionaries were not in line with the teachings

of Christ. They concluded that such an attitude reflected cultural and religious imperialism and they denounced it.

Organized Christianity with its practices was rejected by most of these Hindu thinkers. To them, it was an arm of the Western power. It was obvious to the Hindus that there was some relationship between Protestantism and the British Government in India. It was not difficult to link the Protestant Christian missionaries with the British rulers, since the Queen of England was seen as the defender of (Protestant Christian) faith, and the British chaplains were assigned to conduct religious ceremonies for the British troops in India. Hindus could not separate Christianity from Western colonial rule and opposed both equally. To accept Christianity was to strengthen the hands of the British.

Related to this was their attempt to synthesize Christianity with Hinduism. They often advocated an assimilation of Christianity into their Sanatana Dharma-eternal religion. Hinduism is considered open to all good ideas, ideals and doctrines; consequently, much of what is considered to be good in Christianity, was appreciated and accommodated into its fold. In their opinion, different religions should not be considered to be rivals but friends. Roy, Sen, Vivekananda and Gandhi were those who openly appreciated many good aspects of Christianity and practiced them in their lives. Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Math and Mission began worshipping Jesus and celebrating Christmas. And, of course, Gandhi strongly followed many Christian principles in his own life, work and Ashrams. Accepting what is good in Christianity did not pose any problem to most of these Hindu leaders. While continuing to be Hindus, they accepted certain good principles in Christianity.

By rejecting the traditional Western interpretations, many of these thinkers began giving Eastern meaning to Christianity. Many felt that the West emphasized the ethical and secular

aspect of Christianity without understanding the spiritual aspect, and so failed to put its spiritual message into practice. Therefore, many Hindu intellectuals who were well-versed in Hindu scriptures began developing a Hindu framework for interpreting Christianity.

In rejecting traditional Western interpretations of Christianity and providing their own, they demonstrated a typical Hindu attitude of assimilation and synthesis. They began accepting of best of Christianity and adopting it into the Hindu fold. This shows that they were not willing to accept the view that Christianity and interpretations of Christian scripture as the monopoly of the Western theologians. In their view, if Christianity had certain good teachings and doctrines, then it should not become the monopoly of the Christians only.

Interestingly, while condemning certain aspects of traditional Christianity, these Hindu reformers accepted other aspects of it. This is shown by the very fact that several Renaissance leaders ended up starting different societies based on the Christian church structure, and began functioning on the same line as the traditional Christian church. Roy started the Brahma Samaj, Sen formed “The Church of the New Dispensation”; and Vivekananda started Ramakrishna Mission. All of these organizations functioned the same way as the traditional Christian church and institutions, with much focus on indigenizing. Dayananda started the Arya Samaj and adopted the Christian practice of conversion, or re-conversion. Though this practice seems to be alien to Hinduism, he copied it from traditional Christianity and used it effectively. Most of these leaders also began getting involved in social, educational, and charitable work. This too was borrowed from Christianity. Hinduism, as such, does not have a social conscience. It was only after the Christian missionaries’ effort to uplift the downtrodden people that the social conscience of the Hindu Renaissance was awakened. They were certainly influenced by the

Christian values of equality, freedom, and love, which triggered much social and religious reforms.

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