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CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO INDIAN RELIGIONS

Christianity in India is as old as Christianity itself. The first seeds of faith seem to have been sowed by no less a person than one of the Apostles of Jesus Christ himself. And the faith has been growing so indigenously that it was integrated with the over-all culture of the place. However later, modern missionary enterprises, dating from the advent of the Portuguese at the commencement of the 16th century, planted a Christianity which was completely western in style. This plant has not taken deep roots in the soil. Yet, it has been instrumental in bringing about a transformation of the native religions of the country. Now during the forty years period of the Independent India a new form of Christianity has been emerging which is "fully Indian and authentically Christian".

These variations, according to me, are not certain accidental changes that happened on account of merely contingent reasons or out of expediency. But rather they are the outcome of a dynamic growth which is mature and in tune with the incarnational approach of the Master himself. These changes are made possible because the Christian faith is able to make a creative encounter with the religions of the soil.

My contention is based on a historical survey, already made with reference to cultural contact of Christian faith with India.¹ But the Indian culture itself is so deeply religious that the different stages of the cultural contact of the Christian faith with India can also be aptly be described as the religious contact too. Accordingly then one may identify seven stages of Christianity's encounter with Indian religions, giving rise to seven types of responses too.

1. The Integrative Response of St. Thomas Christianity
2. The Conquest-Mission of Portuguese Christianity

1. Cf. A. Pushparajan, "The Christian Encounter with Indian Culture", in *Indian Missiological Review*, January, 1987, pp. 8-23.

3. The Adaptive Response of individual Missionaries of the Portugese Period
4. The Negative-yet-Reformative Response of the Anglo-American Christianity
5. The Dialogueal Response of the Post-Conciliar Christianity
6. An Emerging Response of Complementarity by the Indian Christianity
7. The Present-day Tension in the Indian Christianity

The present paper is first and foremost an attempt to explain the seven types of responses Christianity has given to Indian religions in general and the Hindu religions in particular. In the light of it all, finally, an attempt will also be made to offer some suggestions for the Indian Christianity to give a sound response to the fact of religious plurality which is characterisic of India.

Part I

The Integrative Response of the St. Thomas Christianity

Though the traditions concerning the apostolate of St. Thomas were sometimes questioned by certain critics yet the latest scholarship is strongly inclined to accept their veracity.² In certain Malayalam sources it is said that St. Thomas came in 52 A.D. in a merchant ship landed in Kodungalloor port, and propogated the Christian religion for the first time in India.³ It was only afterwards at several times that numerous Christians from Syria immigrated into Malabar and converted local inhabitants and enlarged the Christian community.⁴ It is of interest to note that the following observation has been made by an unbiased researcher from among Hindus themselves:

The traditions of Christianity in India date back to the second or third century after Christ and allowing a century for the

2. John B. Chethimattam, *Dialogue in Indian Tradition* Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 1969, p. 132.

3. Translated by O.M. Thomas in his book *Biography of Bishop Servin*, as quoted by Ka Naa Subramanyam, *The Catholic Community in India*, Macmillan, Madras, 1970, p. 2.

4. *Ibid.*

tradition to crystallize, we will not be far wrong if we infer that Christianity was in some shape practised in India immediately after the start of the evangelising work of the Apostles. There is no reason why we should deny the historicity of the apostolate of St. Thomas in India⁵

What is of greater relevance to us for our study at present is the information that a few Brahmin families were the first to be converted by St. Thomas and that those Christians had retained the social and cultural practices according to their ancient Hindu traditions without any prejudice to their new faith. So much so that they were considered equals and brothers in arms with the Nairs.⁶ Much less did they pose any problem to the Hindu community. On the contrary they were accepted into the caste structure of the community with a position close to that of Brhamins.

No doubt, the Christians of St. Thomas in the Malabar Coast were depending upon the Chaldean Church juridically and hierarchically. For, they clearly acknowledged the Pontiff of the Chaldean Church as their head in spiritual matters and obtained from him their prelates. When at times the Church at Chaldea was not able to send prelates to India, the Indian Christians themselves had taken the initiative to procure prelates from there by sending delegations to the Patriarch and bringing down prelates from there. Even after the arrival of the Western Christianity to India, during the Portuguese period, they appeared to have been preoccupied with the idea of getting their prelates from the Chaldean Church.⁷ Such was their dependence on the foreign Church in spiritual matters.

Their spiritual dependence on the foreign Church in spiritual matters did not at all affect their life of integration in their social and cultural realms. Not only did they keep the social customs and practices according to their ancient Hindu tradition but also absorbed a number of their traditional observances into the sacraments of Baptism

5. Ka Naa Subramanyam, *op. cit.* p.i.

6. John B. Chethimattam, *op. cit.* p. 133.

7. A. Mathias Mundadan, *The Arrival of the Portuguese in India and the Thomas Christians under Mar Jacob, 1498-1552*, Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 1967, pp. 57, 27-28.

and Marriage, and many other para-liturgical acts like funeral celebration.⁸ Moreover, there was a close cooperation between the Church and the Temple on the popular level in the observance of local festivals.⁹ Such practices as going to the Church only after a bath, washing their feet in a well at the entrance of the Church, making a profound inclination of their head on entering into the Church, and touching the floor towards the cross may be mentioned as illustrations of their integrative response to their ancient religion.

Their integration was so spontaneous and real that the Portuguese Christians could not reconcile with the practices of the local Christians of India. They were even puzzled by the particular pattern of Christian life of the Malabar Christians. Their social, ecclesiastical and liturgical customs and practices were so different from the Latin ways that they all appeared to them as 'abuses' and 'errors'. Some of them were considered to be heretical and superstitious.¹⁰ Little does it surprise us to know that the Portuguese Christians tried to make the Malabar Christians conform to their own manners and modes, and bring them to Latin rites and jurisdiction. They did succeed in their effort in course of time. But it was not at all in the same degree and the speed as they had expected.¹¹ So integral was the inculturation of St. Thomas Christians that they could not completely give up their original, indigenous practices and original customs.

Yet, they remained as Christians so firmly that they retained their faith intact for nearly 14 centuries. So much so that a Portuguese priest, Melchior Nunes Barreto wrote in 1563 thus:

....how much I am consoled in the Lord when I see and speak with these Christians . . . they have always preserved the veneration, obedience and faith of the Holy Cross and the memory of the mysteries of the Catholic faith. And on all days before sunset they assemble in the Church to recite the psalms and the lessons in Chaldean, and in the morning they do the same.¹²

8. A. M. Mundadan, *Sixteenth Century Traditions of the St. Thomas Christians*, Dharmaram College, Bangalore, 1970, pp. 156-179.

9. John B. Chethimattam, *op. cit.* p. 135.

10. A. M. Mundadan, *op. cit.* 1970, p. 180.

11. *Ibid.*

12. As quoted by *Ibid.* p. 157.

Thus it is clear that the earliest Christian community in India was able to retain the distinct identity of Christianity and yet to integrate itself with the Indian society socially and culturally. Even some of the so-called religious practices of the local religion were ingeniously and spontaneously integrated with the new faith without any difficulty and without any prejudice to either. However, it became different story in the subsequent period. How, it will be made clear in the next section.

Part II

Conquest - Mission of the Portuguese Christians

With the discovery of India by Vasco De Gama (1496) the Portuguese were the first to colonize India. They were also interested in the evangelization of the country. The King of Portugal had been granted by the Holy see the "*Padroado Real*" Royal Patronage over all the lands discovered or to be discovered by the Portugal fleet in the East. Accordingly that the King had the rights of supervising the Church, of presenting to Pope fit candidates to the bishopric and other dignities and benefices of the Church. In turn he had the duty of converting the natives to Christianity, of erecting and maintaining churches and providing them with sufficient number of missionaries.¹³ Naturally therefore the King of Portugal took keen interest in the spreading of the Christian Faith. Periodically he sent groups of missionaries with a view not only to look after the spiritual need of the Portuguese themselves but also to enhance the work of converting the 'pagans'.

It was not merely the political reasons which were the cause of the modern missionary enterprises. There were also genuinely religious reasons for it. We must remember that the propositional view of Revelation was uppermost in the mind of those Christians. Accordingly the Bible was supposed to contain truths about the world including other religions and cultures. Again that was the age which permitted none but the most straightforward interpretation

13. Cf. The Bull '*Romanus Pontifex*' dated Jan. 8, 1455, by Pope Nicholas V and also the Bull '*Aequum Reputamus*' of 1534 by Pope Paul III.

of the Scripture. On the one hand it denounced idolatry¹⁴ and on the other it proclaimed that there is no salvation except in Jesus Christ¹⁵ and that they should go throughout the world and preach the Gospel to all her mankind.¹⁶ With this background when they were brought into contact with the public manifestations of the Hindu belief, tradition of which they knew nothing previously, they could not but brand them all pure idolatry and superstition. They sincerely believed that the local people were all under spiritually perishing and were under the powers of darkness. They thought that the aim of their mission was to convert them and to raise them to light from darkness, to eternal life from death, to knowledge from ignorance. In this context, then, it was no wonder that they employed all measures to convert the Hindus to Christianity.

Besides, there were certain saints of spiritual heights who inspired the conversion of the masses from Hinduism to Christianity. The notable example is that of St. Francis Xavier, the Apostle of the East. Having left a brilliant scholaristic career in the University of Paris, he came to India burning with love of God and man; leading a simple and austere life he went from place to place preaching, catechising children, and above all ever wrestling with himself to become more and more perfect and to be transformed into Spirit-filled man.¹⁷ As a well-known Hindu writer rightly observes; "no human being could be totally free from influence by a pious and deeply courageous example set before him".¹⁸ The ordinary folk who could not have been up in theology or the finer points of philosophy. They could not have listened to persuasive words or eloquence, for he rarely, if ever, spoke more than half a dozen words in the languages of the regions in which he stayed. But still so many of them got themselves converted to him and to his faith, mainly inspired by the example and zeal of the Saint in the flesh and his faith in God.

14. Some of the most important texts are: Exo. 20, 3-5; Deut. 4,12; 15-19. Deut. 17, 2-5. Ps. 115, 4-8. Amos. 2, 4. Hosea 3, 4; 4, 12-13; Jer. 3, 16; Eze. 14, 4-6; 20, 16-24.

15. Acts. 4, 12; Jn. 3, 10, Col. 120.

16. Mk. 16, 15-16; Mt. 28, 19.

17. Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Saint Francis Xavier: The Mystical Progress of the Apostle*, Td., Henry Pascal Oiz., St. Paul Publication, Bombay, 1976. p. 22-25.

18. Ka. Naa Subramanyam, *op. cit.* p. 15.

Whatever be the reasons for conversion (be it political, or religious or spiritual) the net result was that Hindu religion stood condemned in the eyes of Portuguese Christians. So much so that the new converts were asked to renounce all their distinctive Indian customs and to become Portuguese in every way as far as possible. They were given portuguese names. They were compelled to adopt European habits of food and clothing. They were initiated into form of religion liturgy, theology and devotional customs which were rigidly western in its pattern. Even the external forms of religion such as churches, statues, paintings and music were faithful copies of western models. Perhaps the missionaries thought that a thorough break with one's cultural past was often the best guarantee for the sincerity and firmness of conversion. So by westernizing the new converts, they were really made 'outcastes' to the Hindus.

With such a condemnatory approach, to the Indian religions it is no wonder that the Portuguese Christians tried to involve themselves totally in the conquest mission. For those Hindus who lived in their territory, listening to the preaching of the Gospel was made compulsory. Performance of the Hindu rites of marriage was made punishable offence. Public worship other than Christian was banned. Hundreds of Hindu temples were destroyed. Temple funds were confiscated to support churches and newly converted Christians. The Inquisition, the Tribunal of the Holy see, set up to check the Cochin Jews who were trying to dissuade their king from accepting christ was also directed to the christians also, with a view to preventing them from relapsing into their old faiths.

In those territories where the Portugues but obly/wielded influence, did not have direct control, they were more flexible in their approach. Thus for instance, when the fishermen community of the East Coast became Christians their traditional way of living was not interfered with except that fishing was forbidden on Sundays. However, their flexibility in approach was more out of practical diplomacy than a genuine appreciation of the practices of the traditional religions in India. For, they were continuing to show to the Christians of Malabar their oriental form of Christianity was inferior and imperfect. They even made efforts to convene the Synod of Diamper in 1599 to bring the Church of St. Thomas Christians more or less forcibly into the Church of Rome. It was only after a lot of resentment

and misgiving the Portuguese were compelled to recognize the loyalty of the local Christians to their ancient tradition and culture. From this one may clearly infer that basic conviction regarding Christianity was that their western form of Christians was the only perfect religion. It was this basic conviction of the Portuguese Christians that coloured their response to Indian religions as well as the Indian Christians.

The basic conviction of the Portuguese as well as their missionary approach may seem abominable to many of us today. But they should not be judged from the view-points of today. We must try to understand them in the light of their contemporary history. They had come from a world where Christianity was the only religion. For centuries they had believed that the whole world was European and that the only religion that existed in the world was Christian except the 'infidel' Muslims who lived on the other edge of their world. So, as the explorers were discovering newer and newer world the missionaries in all simplicity hoped to sweep over the whole world with waving flags and to conquer it, cross in hand, for Christ. Again, their sincerity of purpose was total and unquestionable. The discovery of the 'new world' was a surprise to them. But, the religion which they happened to see in was a shock to them. Therefore their sole motto was: "Either those pagans must be baptized immediately, or themselves must suffer martyrdom as a last proof of their sincerity". And they did go to any extent in achieving this motto of life.

Further one might say that on the part of the Indian religions themselves there were compelling reasons for the Portuguese to adopt the missionary method they adopted. The primitive and popular forms of worship like the Phallic cult of *linga* worship, the grotesqueness of *Kali Matha*, or a *Durga Devi* or *Aiyyanar*, or the cult of certain animals and so on are things that unnerve some of us even today, when we come to know the symbolic character of these cults. But in those days when a serious study of the myths or the *Puranas* were not available, and when they had not even known the language of the people to converse or to get to know the meanings of their cultic practices it was quite understandable that their first encounter with the popular practices of Hinduism was something of a shock. Naturally they thought that the people who were practising these religious cults

were under Satanic influence who must be redeemed some how. Even by force, they thought, the natives must be converted.

Part III

The Appreciative and Adaptive Response of the individual Missionaries

In spite of the general trend of the Portuguese Christians it is remarkable to note that there were some individual missionaries who developed an appreciative response to Indian religions. One of the most notable of these exceptions was Robert de Nobili, an Italian Jesuit (1577-1656). After a long and careful preparation in the customs of Hindu priests, he proclaimed himself the teacher of a new way to Salvation. He adopted a separate kind of life-style and lived separately. He adopted the saffron dress and wooden clogs. He abstained from meat, fish, eggs and wine. He ate only vegetarian food. He marked his brow with sandal paste, wore the sacred thread across his breast.¹⁹ He was exactly like a Hindu priest in all outward appearance.

He pointed out to his superiors that the core of Christian faith should not be confused with 'civil' customs of Europeans. To be Christian did not mean eating beef, drinking wine, wearing shoes made out of leather. Likewise, for the natives of India to become Christians did not mean giving up their native dress and food habits etc. So he allowed his converts to retain their cultural mode of living such as having a *tilakam*, growing a tuft of hair on head, having the ceremonial ablutions etc.²⁰ Although people knew him as a European, they accepted him. He finally succeeded in gathering a small band of converts from the high castes of Madurai

He later introduced a number of his fellow-Jesuit to his way of life. From these small beginnings there arose what was later called the Madurai Mission. Thirty years after the death of Fr. Robert de Nobili in 1676, it numbered 50,000 Christians.²¹ When compared with the limited number of missionaries at work in the field this

19. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967, Vol. X, pp. 477-79.

20. S. Rajamanickam, *The First Oriental Scholar*, Thirunelveli, 1972

21. Felix Alfred Platiner, *The Catholic Church in India, Yesterday And Today*, St. Paul Publications 1964, Alahabad p. 22.

was a spectacular success. The young church was constantly exposed to the political chicanery of intolerant Hindu groups. The petty kings of the region were even giving troubles to the missionaries. For example in 1693, St. John de Britto was put to death at Oriyur. However Christians remained firm in their faith and majority of the Hindus respected the Christians according to their castes.

There were many oppositions to Fr. Robert de Nobili even within ecclesiastical circles. His adaptation techniques were looked on as contemptible Jesuit tricks. His method of evangelization was described as compromise with paganism. It was even dubbed as a substantial betrayal of the Christian faith. However de Nobili clearly established that it was not a matter of expediency. He even learned Sanskrit, the Vedas and the Vedanta in their originals from a notable Pandit of Madurai. He also learned the Church history very well. So he prepared a document for the Goa Conference.²² In it he had clearly established that his appreciative and adaptive response to local religion was indeed a matter of policy born out of his devotion to the mind and tradition of the Church. His document clearly explains that the consistent policy of the Church was to respect the social and civil customs of the different peoples it converted and even to assimilate them into its worship. He showed that the Church had even assumed *rites* and *ceremonies* of other religions into its practices.²³ It is interesting to note that the same point was elaborately developed by Cardinal Newman²⁴ three centuries after Nobili.

De Nobili was not the lone example in the field of appreciative adaptation of the local religious customs. Fr. Joseph Constatine Beschi (1711-1742), St. John de Britto were among many others who had developed the same taste for giving the appreciative and

22. Ignatius Hirudayam, *Christianity and Tamil Culture*, University of Madras, 1977. pp. 19-20.

23. The document is in Latin and is entitled as *Narratio Fundamentorum Quibus Madurensis Missionis Institutum Conceptum Est Hujusque Constit.* Its English equivalent will be: An Exposition of the basic Principles which inspired the Founding of Madurai Mission and still continue to guide it. For a short exposition, see I. Hirudayam, *op. cit.* pp. 16-18.

24. Card. J. H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* Christian Classics, Westminster, 1968, Ch. V and Ch. VIII.

adaptive response to Indian religions. It is as a result of the consistent tradition built up by these luminaries that Christians of Madurai Mission were known for their inculturated way of life. Even today Christians of Madurai region are so inculturated in their life style that they cannot be distinguished from the people of Hinduism just from their outward appearance and behavioural pattern. They are Christians to the core. They have numerous vocations both for priesthood and religious life. Yet, in their cultural life they are perfectly in unison with their compatriots, who belong to Hindu religions. If such a synthesis of faith and culture has been brought about in the life of Madurai Christians, it is only because the appreciative and adaptive response of great pioneers like Robert de Nobili had already sown the seeds from centuries ago.

Part IV

Reformative Response of the British Christianity

The Portuguese power did not last long in India. Nor did it cover a large area. Already in the middle of the 17th century the Portuguese were to evacuate India except for a few pockets like Goa, Diu and Daman. The British succeeded in subduing the whole of India in a span of about fifty years. The East India Company was not at all interested in winning India over to Christianity. They were very cautious in matters of religion. They even felt that "any interference with the religion of the natives would eventually insure the total destruction of the British power".²⁵ They were bent on avoiding anything that might cause unrest among the Indians lest their profits be endangered. They even showed a positive attitude to Hinduism. They even undertook the financing and management of the Hindu shrines like the Temple of Jeganath.²⁶ It is even said that

At first they were willing to go to almost incredible extremes. After annexing newly conquered territories the Company took over all temple property, paid priests and temple prostitutes, encouraged temple worship and pilgrimages, which

25. This is the unanimous opinion of a Committee of the Commons in 1781. Cf. *The Cambridge History of India* Vol VI, CUP, 1932, p. 124.

26. *America Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, First Ten Annual Reports*, Boston, Crocker & Brewster, 1834, p. 59.

netted them huge profits in pilgrim taxes. They even went to the extent of restoring pagan temples.²⁷

The business-minded people were not at all interested in Christianity. In the South, they were indifferent to it since Christianity had already taken deep roots and that too in the indigenous form. In the North they raised every possible excuse against missionary activity because they were afraid of causing discontent among the natives which in turn, they thought, would affect their business.

However some of the 'good' Christians, who were in the battalions and their chaplains were horrified by the decadent forms of idol worship, and by the different religious evils such as ritual prostitution at temple, human sacrifices, ritual dacoity (*tuggee*). They thought sincerely that the only remedy was introduction of light into darkness and conversion of the natives into the true religion of Christianity. They wrote to their Evangelical counterparts in England to send missionaries and school masters for India. In fact Wilberforce was an ardent advocate of missionary clause to be included in the Charter Act itself. In 1792 when he argued for it, his place were turned down by the Board of Directors of the East India Company. Their cautious attitude was pronouncedly clear from a despatch sent to Governor-in-Council, Madras in 1807:

In the whole course of our administration of our Indian territories, it has been our known and declared principle to maintain a perfect toleration of the various religious systems which prevailed in it, to protect the followers of each in the undisturbed enjoyment of their several opinions and usages and neither to interfere with them ourselves nor suffer them to be molested by others.²⁸

However, the Evangelicals made a systematic effort to insist upon their stand. Charles Grant published a treatise entitled as *Observations on the State of Society Among the Asiatic Subjects of Great*

27. Quoted from A Vath *Die Inder*, Freiberg, 1934 p. 213. by F. A. Platiner, *op. cit.* p. 24.

28. Quoted by B. B. Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes*, OUP, London, 1820, p. 195.

Britain, Particularly with Respect to Morals, and the Means of Improving It (1792) in order to establish his thesis that Hindus were degenerated because of the nature of their religion itself.²⁹ Claudius Buchanan published a pamphlet *A Memoir of the Expediency of an Ecclesiastical Establishment in India* (1805) to present a fearsome account of the ceremonies performed at Jeganath and of the behaviour of the priests and pilgrims and declare that the Hindu religion was the main cause for the moral degeneration of the Hindus.

The contention of the Evangelicals was that the situation in India could be improved only by introducing Christianity in India and communicating the Christian principles to Indians. To quote the words of Grant:

The true cure of darkness is the introduction of light. The Hindus err because they are ignorant and their errors have never fairly been laid before them. The communication of our light and knowledge to them would prove the best remedy for their disorders.³⁰

Not only this thesis of the Evangelicals was given wide publicity throughout Britain, but also a newspaper was started just to give an account of the evils of Hinduism and of the triumph of the missionaries: *The Missionary Register*. Moreover, a massive campaign was organized during the year 1813, when the Company's Charter Act was due for renewal, just in order to call for petitions to the Parliament for unrestricted despatch of missionaries to India. The response of the public was so positive that numerous petitions were sent to the Government of Britain to introduce the Missionary Clause in the Charter Act of 1813. Thus the Government was forced to insert the missionary clause in the Charter Bill. When the Parliament took the issue for debate, Wilberforce, the leader of the Evangelicals, gave such eloquent speeches bringing out the contrast between Christianity and Hinduism that the House was easily convinced of need for introduction of the Missionary Clause in the Charter Act of 1813.

29. It is contained in *Parliament Papers East India*, Vol. X, Part IV 1812-13, pp. 5-112.

30. Quoted by Bruce T. Mc Cully, *English Education and the Origins of Indian Nationalism*, Columbia University Press, New York. 1940, p. 11.

Just an excerpt of Wilberforce, given herebelow, will bring out the force of the negative response the Evangelicals gave to Indian religions:

Both their civil and religious systems are radically and essentially the opposites of our own. Our religion is sublime, pure and beneficent. Theirs is mean, licentious and cruel. Of our civil principles and condition, the common right of all ranks and classes to be governed, protected, and punished by equal laws is the fundamental principle . . . Of theirs the essential and universal pervading character is inequality; despotism in the higher classes, degeneration and oppression in the lower.³¹

Thus the insistence of the Evangelicals' thesis eventually won the day. And the Charter Act of 1813 finally included the Missionary Clause. This indeed marked the beginning of the influx of missionaries to India not only from Britain but also from America. Even then it must be remembered that the East India Company Government in India was very reluctant to promote conversions to Christianity. When Prabhu Din Naick, a sepoy in a Brahmin regiment of the Bengal army, was baptized in 1819, by a Company Chaplain called Fisher, both were severely taken to task, though baptism followed the earnest entreaties of the convert after nine years of acquaintance with Christianity in the face of threats and bribes from his companions. The sepoy was suspended and subsequently retired on full pay.³²

It was the proclamation of Queen Victoria in 1858 that introduced a new period. It was in no way a pro-Christian manifesto. But it was indeed a Charter of freedom of worship and equal civil toleration for all religions. "Firmly relying on the truth of Christianity and acknowledging with gratitude the solace of religion", the Queen declared "the right and desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects".³³ Since then some encouragement was given to Christianity. Perhaps the most correct indication of the British policy regarding conversion to Christianity is found in the statement of Sir

31. *Parliamentary Debates, First Series* Vol. XXVI T. C. Hansard, 1813, p. 865.

32. As quoted by Bishop P. Thomas "The Advancement of Christianity in India" *The Clergy Monthly*, Vol. 12, No. 1 Jan-Feb. 1948, p. 5.

33. *Ibid.* p. 6.

Henry Maine, who in introducing a Bill in 1866 regulating the remarriage of converts to Christianity declared the following:

We will not force any man to be a Christian; we will not even tempt him to become one. But if he chooses to be a Christian we will protect him in the rights of conscience which we have been the first to introduce into this country and will apply to him these principles of equal dealing between man and man of which we are in India the sole depositaries.³⁴

Since the Crown's Rule in India, then, there was a great influx of missionaries and correspondingly a massive expansion of Christianity in India. But the main missionary method of the Christians during the British reign consisted of education. The missionaries learned Sanskrit only with a view to showing the inadequacies of the Hindu scriptures. They tried to translate into English those objectionable passages from the Shastras in order to bring the literati into awareness of those filthy portions in what they called holy scriptures. Thereby the missionaries wanted to show that the native religious traditions were inherently wrong. The missionaries also opened many educational institutions with the hope of teaching the Truth to the educated. And they thought that the literati would in turn champion the cause of spreading the true religion as against the falsehood of their own native religion.

However, the result was quite different from the expected one. A number of factors may be adduced as the cause of the changed results. One important reason is the keen interest of the Oriental scholars, like Paul Deussen, Lionel David, Barnett, and Max Muller. They with a strictly scientific method made a deep and thorough study of the Hindu scriptures, and thus brought out the real "Treasures of the East" as opposed to the 'filthy' portions translated by the missionaries. Besides, the linguistic scholar like Botlingh, Whitney, Mornier William, Launmann and Louis Renou made authentic translations of the Indian original sources thanks to which the western-world was thrown open to the bright side of the Indian religions. In addition to the study of the Orientalists, there was also the rise and development of a new discipline called the History of Religions, or the Science

34. *Ibid.*

of Religion or Comparative Religion, which began to create a climate of sympathy and brotherliness among the followers of different religions, including the so called Primitive Religion of the Tribals. There was another trend growing within the liberal wing of the Protestant Christians, namely the tendency to question the authority of the Bible in all its details.³⁵ All these three factors on the part of the Christian world began to exert a decisive influence on the missionary approach to the Indian religions. At least there were some Christians who could not go the whole hog with the Evangelical in giving a negative response to the Indian religions.

Just at the same time there were certain developments happening in the Indian situation which also equally contributed to the change. The most important of the developments in India was the emergence of a native kind of leadership, interested in the social as well as spiritual reform of the Indian society. The most eminent of such leaders was Raja Rammohan Roy. He was very much interested in making reforms in administration, education and social affairs. He was no less competent in bringing about a religious reformation. He waged a stout and stiff campaign against the socio-religious evils like *Satee*, polygamy, temple prostitution, and also against idolatry, human sacrifices etc. He readily agreed with the missionaries and other westerners that there were evils in the Indian society as well as in religions. But unlike the missionaries, he put forward the remedies for those evils from among the Hindu scriptures themselves. He attacked the missionaries that they were biased and onesided in their approach to interpretation of Hindu scriptures.³⁶ So he offered his own translations of the Scriptures and attacked on the evils of Indian religions based on the strength of the Hindu concepts themselves. He only wanted to restore Hinduism to its pristine purity.³⁷ Likewise, Swami Dayananda Saraswati made a clarion call to get back to the *Vedas*³⁸ and thereby to purify the decadent forms of Hindu practices in society.

35. Cf. Eric J. Sharp *Faith Meets Faith*, SCM Press London, 1977.

36. For an illustration see A. Pushparajan, *From Conversion to Fellowship, The Hindu Christian Encounter in the Gandhian Perspective*, Dialogue Series, 6, 1990, pp. 100-103.

37. Many Upanishads were translated by himself with solid introduction to each.

38. *Satyartha Prakash*

Still another great religious leader who contributed to the change of the Christian response to Hinduism was Swami Vivekananda. His defence of the Hindu heritage in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 was so impressive that the American Press came out with open acknowledgement: "After hearing from him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation".³⁹ His second visit to Detroit provided him with still one more occasion to defend the Indian cultural heritage and pooh-pooh the negative propaganda in which the missionaries had hitherto indulged. Perhaps the most powerful leadership was provided by Mahatma Gandhi⁴⁰ who not only defended Hinduism against the criticisms of the western missionaries but also the counter challenges to the missionaries themselves by raising valid questions about their understanding of mission of God, Christ and Church. Further he was also interested in actual reforms of the age-old practices of Hinduism, reformulating and re-interpreting some of the traditional truths in an entirely new light. Thus he brought to fulfillment even some of the things which would apparently be unacceptable. Thus, thanks to various forces at work, Hinduism was so reformed during last part of the 19th century that Christianity had to change her response from a negative type to a more positive one. What is it will be clear from the next part of the paper.

Part V

The Dialogical Response of Today's Christianity

The reformative turn of Indian religions that took place at the end of the 19th century certainly paved a way for a definite change in the outlook of Christianity on other religions. Besides, during this century, especially after the Independence of the country, India was able to assert itself not only politically as a strong power but also in the spiritual realm it was able to present itself as an alternative to the Western society which was rapidly becoming a vacuum in its religious and spiritual realms. The Guru-cult that was fast spreading in the western countries was easily re-inforced by the many *yogins* and *gurus* who went abroad and spread the Indian techniques for establishing peace with oneself and with others.

39. As quoted by Romai Rolland, *Prophets of the New India*, Albert & Charlie Boni, New York, 1930. p. 323.

40. For illustration, Pushparajan, op. cit. pp. 174-77.

Besides, a more rapid unification of the world today and the consequent awareness of religious pluralism and the urge of the present day theologians to tackle some of the problems of their own existence in a multireligious society, all this made a theology of religion become an urgent task for theological reflection. Fortunately there was also a very favourable change in the leadership of the Church which boosted up the growth of Theology of Religion. The net result of all these factors in this century has given rise to a definite change in the Christianity's response to other religions in general and the Indian religions in particular. That is what is called the Dialogual response.

Ever since Pope John XXIII assumed office, there has been a marked change in the attitude of the Catholic Church towards other religions. The "new openness" with which the "good Pope" convened the Ecumenical Council at Vatican was sustained by his successor, Pope Paul VI. Not only did he reconvene it with the same spirit of openness but also in his opening address he articulated the various areas in which the spirit of openness could be shown. No wonder that the spirit of openness of the two conciliar popes was amply reflected in the principal documents of the Council.

The Council acknowledged that the various religions are men's searches for "an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence".⁴¹ It unambiguously stated that the Church "has high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrine which, although different in many ways from her own teaching nevertheless often reflect a ray of hope of that truth which enlightens all men".⁴² It expressed her readiness to preserve, purify, and perfect whatever good is found in the minds and hearts of men, in the rites and customs of peoples.⁴³ It enjoined the Christians to establish relationship of respect and love with the members of the group in which they live, and to share in their social and cultural life.⁴⁴ "They should know and converse with those among whom they live, that through sincere and patient dialogue these men might learn of the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations."⁴⁵

41. Cf. *Vidyajyoti*, Ap. 1990, p. 194.

42. *Nostra Aetate* Art. 1.

43. *Ibid.* Art. 2.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Lumen Gentium* Art. 17 Also, *Ad Gentes* Art. 9.

While the council encourages the Christians to develop a positive attitude towards other religions it also prohibits any action which seems to suggest coercion or dishonest persuasion in spreading the beliefs of Christianity.

The Declaration on Religious Freedom, established in clear cut terms the freedom of every human being to practise his or her own religion. It affirms unambiguously that

all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters of religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is any one to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.⁴⁶

Further, with a specific reference to the propagation of religious truths, the Document says:

in spreading religious faith and in introducing religious practices, everyone ought at all times to refrain from any manner of action which might seem to carry a hint of coercion or of a kind of persuasion that would be dishonourable or unworthy especially when dealing with poor or uneducated people. Such a manner of action would have to be considered an abuse of one's own right and a violation of the right of others.⁴⁷

The changed attitude of the Church was not to remain at the level of statements only. The principles enunciated in the Council Documents have to be translated into action. With this end in view Pope Paul VI instituted the papal secretariate for non-Christians in 1964. It has been assiduously promoting the cause of dialogue through various activities.⁴⁸ The present Pope John Paul II has also reiterated the official stand of the Church regarding the activities of

46. *Humanae Dignitatis* Art. 2.

47. *Ibid.* Art. 4.

48. For a brief expose, see A. Pushparajan, *op. cit.* pp. 35.

the secretariate. "The Catholic Church is endeavouring to engage in friendly dialogue with all the great religions that have guided mankind throughout history,"⁴⁹ he said. He has also through various deeds has shown the positive attitude towards other religions.

The non-Catholic Churches also have made numerous efforts of establish dialogue with other religions. Already at the turn of this century the World Council of Churches began interfaith studies. Then in 1971 it formed a unit on faith and witness, with a subunit called "Dialogue with people of living faith and ideologies".⁵⁰ This wing has also been taking variety of initiatives aimed at promoting a genuine Dialogue between people of living faiths and ideologies. In 1977 it prepared "Guidelines on Dialogue", which was accepted by the central committee in 1979. A number of dialogue meetings have been organized both at the international and regional levels. Many consultation meetings also have been organized by subunit with a view to understanding and appreciating the world views of the world religions. In the Catholic Church itself the secretariate for non-Christian religions has been re-named recently as Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue. The very change of name has definitely put the theme of dialogue on a much more positive platform in the Catholic Church. Thus it is beyond dispute that dialogue has come to stay.

Part VI

The Emerging Attitude of the Indian Church to Complementarity

Inspired and encouraged by various initiatives of the official Churches both at Rome and Geneva the Indian Christian Community has been making many strides in establishing dialogical relationship with the Indian Religions. These in turn have given rise to emergence of a new trend to establish complementarity between religions. This has been experimented upon by certain individuals in the Church. Besides the whole of the collective thinking of the Indian Church has been consistently giving a clear direction for establishing the relation of complementarity with the local religions of India.

49. *Bulletin*, 1985, XX/2, No 59. p. 117.

50. For a brief expose, see A. Pushparajan, *op. cit.* pp. 38-39

a) *At the individual and institutional levels* we may cite many of the experiments conducted by theologians of repute to establish a relation of complementarity with other religions. Just to mention a few:

1) Fr. Amalorpavadas, the founder director of the National Centre for Biblical, Catechetical, and Liturgical Commission of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India in Bangalore did a lot of experiments in introducing an Indian style of art and architecture, worship and music in the Centre, making use of the Indian symbols, figures, tablas and other Indian musical instruments.⁵¹ He had also continued and perfected his experiments at Anjali Ashram in Mysore.

2) Fr. Ignatius Hirudayam has gone a long way in making similar experiments in relation to establishing dialogue with the Saivites at Madras. Being himself a specialist in Saiva Siddhanta, and having mastered Saivism, he is able to steer an effective dialogue with the local people belonging to Saivism. He too has founded a research and dialogue centre called Aikya Alayam in Madras. He has also created a special Christian Pooja in the cultural mould of the Tamilians. His experiments in the architecture of the place of worship are specially noteworthy in the same centre. He has been beneficial in creating a Tamil Christian Theology⁵² which itself will pave a long way towards complementarity of religions even at the theological level.

3) Fr. Bede Griffiths is another eminent figure who experimented with the relation of complementarity between Christianity and other religions. Impressed by the Indian monastic and contemplative life, to integrate the advaitic experience into Christian life. His Ashram, at Santivanam near Tiruchirapalli centring around the temple called Sat Chit Ananda, the simple life in small huts with purely vegetarian diet, practicing and teaching of yoga are some of the illustrations of the complementarity which he has been able to bring about in his ashram. He also has emphasized the complementarity of religious world views in making a new vision of the reality.⁵³

51. See J.A.G. Gerwin Van Leeuwen, *Fully Indian-Authentically Christian*, Kampen, 1990.

52. Ignatius Hirudayam, *Jnana Vazhvu* (Tamil) Three volumes.

53. Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*.

4) There are many others who have mastered the Indian Cultural aspects of religions in order to convey the message of Christianity. For example Sr. Genevieve has successfully made use of the Indian Style of painting and art in depicting Jesus and other figures of Christianity. Fr. Barboza SVD has fruitfully learned the art of *Bharatanatyam* dance to stage the Christian theme of salvation. Fr. Ama Samy has blended Zen Buddhism with Christian Meditation. Fr. Britto SDB has made a successful attempt in conveying the message of Christian liberation through Theru Koothu (the street theatre techniques). All this clearly establish the keen interest found among Indian Christians/Theologians to bring about a relation of complementarity between Christianity and Indian religions.

That there has been a consistent effort to move towards the line of complementarity even at the collective level is proved by the fact that many seminars right from the middle of the Sixties until now have been giving clear-cut direction in this line. Just to mention a few:

- 1) The Bombay Theological Seminar (1964)
- 2) The All India Seminar on Church in India Today (1969)
- 3) The International Theological Seminar on Evangelization and Dialogue in India (1971)
- 4) The Patna Consultation (1973)
- 5) The Research Seminar on Inspiration in Non-Biblical Scriptures (1974)
- 6) The Research Seminar on the Struggle of the Indian Church for a New Society (1981)
- 7) The Research Seminar on Sharing Worship Communication in Sacris (1988)

The Seminar last mentioned was indeed a bold attempt to face the challenge arising out of the existential situation of the Indian Christian community. On the one hand the traditional understanding of Christian identity forbids the Christians from participating the religious functions of other followers. But on the other, the Church, realising her mission as that of contributing towards the formation of the human community of love and of perfect community which Jesus Christ called Kingdom of God, tries to fulfil this mission by striving to enter into serious

dialogue with persons of all faiths. Thus there is a real, concrete and existential tension between the tradition and the real mission.

This tension was finally tried to be solved in that Seminar in terms of re-thinking and re-formulating the traditional thought categories and re-discovering the freshness of the origins and mission of the Church as the beginning of that universal fellowship, unity and solidarity with the whole of humankind.

Part VII

The Present-day Tension

The foregoing account clearly depicts the emerging trend of complementarity that is given importance by theologians and thinkers of Christianity in its encounter with Hindu religions. However it must be admitted that the path is not very smooth for them. There is a group of people who find it difficult to divest themselves of the impact of the imperialistic Christianity of the colonial period. They seem to be convinced that the western form of worship, spirituality, art, architecture and other structures of organization and administration are the constitutive features of Christian faith. So any attempt to change any of those features would mean loss of identity. If one were to think of getting enriched by another religion then they seem to be afraid of the danger of syncretism also. The majority of the mass and some of the hierarchy would be said to be on this side.

However, on the other side there are the committed Christians, serious thinkers and theologians who are clearly convinced of the fact that the western form of Christianity is just an aberration. It belongs to an ambiguous tradition and is of recent origin. But the original and venerable tradition of the early Church is never imperialistic. But rather it is of total service to humankind and is always ready to integrate with the environment in which the faith is implanted. They base their position on the very incarnational approach of the Word, and also the ancient tradition of the Church.

Thus there is a whole controversy going on between the two groups within the Indian Christian community. This therefore has brought about a tension in the Church in India. Perhaps it is at this phase that Indian Christianity may be said to remain at present.

Concluding Remarks

The whole survey of the Christian encounter with Indian religions has clearly established that the encounter has given rise to a variety of responses ranging from negative and aggressive at one extreme to the positive and even complementary ones at the other extreme.

In the very beginning of its entry into India Christianity had expressed an integrative response to the local religion of the place. Though there was no theological treatise on the positive response it gave to Hindu religion, yet it was very much in the life of the Christians. The integrative response was so healthy and deep-rooted that the first encounter of Christianity with Hinduism did not do any injury to the rights of either. People belonging to both the faiths were able to live amicably and friendly, effecting mutual enrichment. The bonds of relationship were so thick that it lasted for 16 centuries unaffected. And when some threats came from others the identity of the first response could be easily safeguarded withstanding all those hardships and threats.

However, the encounter of Christianity with Indian religions during the Colonial period, gave rise to condemnatory and negative response, though there were indeed a few notable exceptions to this general trend.

Today, it is a reverse trend. Both the official Churches and Christians at large are convinced that the past encounter was a matter of regret, and that it should never be repeated in the future. There are clear signs of a deepened theological consciousness among the Indian Christians regarding their faith as well as their mission. It has been a consistent theological reflection since the Second Vatican Council to hold that the Christian faith itself could not be appreciated much less followed in isolation. Effort must be made to rediscover our faith in the context of other faiths and also against the background of the socio-political situation of the people. Likewise, the consistent reflection of the Indian Christians on their mission has been to see how they could witness Christ's liberative mission by involving themselves into the liberation of humankind irrespective of their religion, ideology and political allegiance.

Today the focus of the Indian Christian theological thinking, both at the individual and the collective levels, has been to establish the Kingdom of God rather than merely to extend the boundaries of the Church. There is also a trend to get themselves involved in cooperative ventures with their compatriots belonging to other religions. In the process they would like to be enriched by the religious encounter they have with other religions as well as enriching other religions by their own faith. By encouraging such a relation of complementarity, they would like to promote, preserve and bring to perfection the positive aspects every religion already has.

It is in this context of complementarity that dialogue between Christians and followers of other Indian religions is seen today. In the eyes of these committed Christians, dialogue does not dilute their faith. Rather, it intensifies the integrity of their faith in the process of interaction with the faith of other people who are involved in the common mission of liberation. Commitment to faith of one's own religion and openness to that of others will certainly lead us to an ongoing reflection and re-formulation of our faith and our practice.

In one word, then, it will be a sound response of the Christian encounter with other religions in India if it forsters a re-capturing of the original spirit of the Founder and helps one to work on a structural change towards a more human and just society, and thereby establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. The signs are already there. Let every one concerned hasten the process.