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Relating Meaningfully to the Hindu Worldview

Hinduism presents a worldview completely alien to the basic premises of Christianity and also to Western thinking. It is rare for any Westerner to enter into this worldview well enough to meaningfully speak to it. Perhaps this is a major reason that Christian mission work has been successful primarily among the *dalits* (the untouchable caste) in India who do not share the Hindu worldview. To reach the vast majority of India, the efforts and thoughts of high caste “Jesu bhaktas” (“devotees of Jesus”) is crucial. This article will look first at the basic features of the Hindu worldview, noting where it frequently conflicts with typical presentations of the gospel message.

Hindu Worldview

As a religion, Hinduism stands by itself in its nature and origins. Notice the many worldview values and principles that set it apart as distinct and separate.

1. Hinduism is a primordial religion and is not an offspring or fulfillment of any other religion such as Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity are.
2. Hinduism also is peculiar in that it has no individual founder. Rather, it has been produced by a tradition of sages beginning in pre-historic times and continuing through time.
3. The seminal scriptures of Hinduism, the four books of “Vedas,” are a collection of recordings from the earliest sages. These had been passed down orally for millennia and were eventually produced in written form (Flood 1996:35).
4. Hinduism accepts—and expects—continual revelation through new sages. Some of these later writings have become widely authoritative as well, such as the Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita.
5. Hinduism has no creed. It is the mystical experience of the sages

that is normative. Therefore, widely varying beliefs and practices are embraced as long as they move people toward the experiences of the sages (Hume 1921:32-42).

6. Through countless previous births, each person has developed spiritual as well as physical aptitudes and characteristics (cf. *Mahabharata Santiparva*.279.15, 21; Upanishads Shantivana.279:15, 21; Bhagavadh Gita 2:12-28). Therefore, Hinduism provides a variety of spiritual practices to accommodate any person's level of spiritual maturity, from idols to mantras to gurus.

7. Because Hinduism accepts continual revelation through sages, many different spiritual traditions have been developed and are embraced. Some traditions have developed into named gods and goddesses, reaching the hundreds of thousands.

8. History is not crucial in Hinduism, spiritual truth and progress are. Hindus understand that Brahman (all Being) expands and contracts eternally. It is called "*lila*," the play or dance of Brahman, that is not linear but cyclical (Kane 1941:5:1487).

9. There is no hell or eternal judgment in Hinduism. Every soul eventually returns to Brahman and then evolves again in the next expansion of Brahman (cf. Upanishads Vanaparva vol. 2. ch. 208:316; Bhagavadh Gita 8:5-27, 15:7).

10. Every soul is a part of Brahman, and therefore essentially pure, held back from its reabsorption into Brahman by the karmic effects of the person's actions. Once this karma—both good and bad—is cleared, the soul reabsorbs (Kane 1941:2:1534; 2:1507-08; Bharati 2005:201-02).

11. Karma is determined by how faithfully one carries out "*dharma*," one's responsibilities in life, particularly in one's family and community. Self-control and non-violence are highly valued as moral virtues.

12. Since many paths may lead to spiritual fulfillment, Hinduism has not traditionally focused on converting others. Rather, it has absorbed new spiritual insights and traditions as additional possible way to enlightenment.

13. Hinduism emphasizes *dharma*, the proper way of life. The name devotees give to their religion is not Hinduism, but *sanatana dharma*, the "eternal way of life" (the term "Hindu" is actually derived from the Persian and Greek invaders who reached as far as the Sindhu River in north-west India and called everything beyond that river "Hindu").

14. What makes a person a good Hindu is the faithful fulfillment of the duties of life, one's *dharma*, not the beliefs one might hold about spiritual matters (Bhagavadh Gita 2:50, 72; 3:22, 25). Because of this broad view and emphasis on a lived culture, Hinduism is often called a civilization rather than a religion.

These are some of the core assumptions and values of the Hindu worldview. A very serious question is, How would a person with these worldview values react to an evangelistic pronouncement that says, “You are sinner on the path to hell. You can only be saved by faith in Jesus’ blood, shed for you”? Educated Hindus would see such a call as not only unnecessary and unenlightened but also as insulting.

Issues within the Hindu Worldview

In this next section I look at several issues that need to be dealt with by Christian mission when working within the Hindu worldview.

Idol Worship

Probably the practice of Hinduism that Christians find most appalling is “idol worship.” The fact is however, that Hindus do not worship idols. The more sophisticated Hindus understand that these statues and pictures represent divine forces that are active in the world and that are available to people for their spiritual and moral development. However, even at the village level, people do not worship trees or stones or rivers. They worship the spirits that they believe dwell in them.

I became aware of this when I read a newspaper report while I was a missionary in India. There were some ancient idols in a village temple near Bangalore. The museum authorities in Bangalore wanted to preserve them and display them. They negotiated with the villagers to take them and replace them with replicas. The villagers agreed, and a priest was brought in. He put a small pot of water in front of each idol, said the appropriate mantras, and transferred the spirits from the idols into the pots. Now the statues were simply pieces of stone and could be taken away. Once the replicas were brought in, the priest simply transferred the spirits back into the statues, and the worship could continue as before. Clearly, the villagers understood that it was the spirits, not the stones that they were worshipping.

It is also interesting to note that the Hindu scriptures themselves describe idol worship as something to be tolerated, but not encouraged. If a person has not grown to a higher level of spiritually they may still need such spiritual crutches—idols. However as their souls mature in subsequent rebirths, they will move on to a higher stage. The highest stage is “identity with the Supreme, . . . the stage of meditation is the next, lower still is the state of repeating hymns and mantras, and lowest of all is external worship (Visnu Sahasra-nama).

“The gods of ordinary men are in water, those of the knowing are in heaven, of the ignorant and of those of small intelligence are in wood

and clay (i.e., images), and of the yoga in his own self (or heart)" (Kane 1941:2:714-15).

Rejection of Faith

Another aspect of the Hindu worldview that Christians often do not appreciate is the emphasis on experience. In Hindu epistemology, there are three sources of truth: *sruti* (scriptures), *yukti* (reason), and *anubhava* (experience). The key is experience. Only if one experiences the divine will one know its reality (cf., Bhagavad Gita 18:51-57).

One can know all kinds of scripture and throw around all kinds of philosophical terminology, but if one has never experienced the divine, one really does not know anything about it. Hinduism provides several tried paths (*Raja Yoga*: meditation, *Gnana Yoga*: philosophy, *Karma Yoga*: work without attachment, and *Bhakti Yoga*: devotion to a deity) to reach the goal of transformative personal experience.

From this perspective, What does it mean to Hindus when they hear the declaration that they must "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved"? They wonder how belief in certain doctrines or a Person could possible change anything. How do they know if any of the teachings are true? The call to faith can seem like a call that leads nowhere. How does belief make a person more enlightened, transformed, or moral?

Discomfort with the Atonement

Earlier I mentioned the typical Christian call to "faith in Jesus' blood." Among educated Hindus, such a religion that relies on a blood sacrifice is of the lowest form and is similar to the animal sacrifices still carried on at the village level in some remote places. Such blood sacrifices are not only distasteful but retrograde.

Hindus do not have a concept of a personal God who judges sin. Instead they would say that the Ultimate Reality is bliss. When a person is absorbed into Brahman, he is absorbed into bliss. An Ultimate Reality that demands a blood sacrifice, even of His "only begotten Son," is viewed as unattractive, if not immoral.

When *dharma* calls people to lead a non-violent lifestyle, should not the divine also be non-violent? A devout Hindu will honor vegetarian animals such as elephants, monkeys, and cows and will avoid killing even a plant such as a carrot or a turnip. Can a Hindu worship a God who is presented as more violent than good people are? (cf., Young 1981:62).

Centrality of Karma

The law of karma is central in the Hindu worldview. It is the governing principle in the eternal cycle of reincarnation and in the temporal man-

dates of morality (Shastri 1970:692; cf., *Bhagavad Gita* IX.3, XII.7). Through this worldview Hindus claim that they can provide the only explanation for the inequalities of life (*Bhagavadh Gita* 3:33, 5:14, 18:59-60) such as why one person is born into poverty and another into privilege, why bad things happen to seemingly good people, why people have different natural abilities, why tragedies and accidents happen, and why some people have good luck.

There is certainly a human need to believe that life is not just meaningless chaos. If one does not have an understanding that history is in the hands of a Supreme Being, then the belief in karma provides mental and emotional solace. Even surveys among Christians in the West reveal that most people believe that “what goes around comes around,” even citing the biblical passage that “a man reaps what he sows” (Gal 6:7).

Among Hindus, it should be made clear that the consequences of karma are not inevitable. “Past karmas decide our present environment and we decide our future one” (Bharati 2005:213). Hinduism provides several avenues through which these bad karmic effects can be ameliorated (cf. *Matsya Puraana* 181.17-19; *Upaishads Vanaparva* vol. II ch. 207:314-15). For example, one can punish oneself through ascetic practices or pilgrimages, one can supplicate one’s guru or deity to take one’s karmic effects, one can perform good deeds or rituals, one can make amends and change, or one can read scriptures, meditate, and do devotions to purify one’s soul.

What does the Christian concept of sin mean in this worldview? What sense do Hindus make with the call to ask for God’s forgiveness? When consequences are immediate and defined, what is the meaning of divine accountability and a Judgment Day?

Conviction of Reincarnation

Reincarnation is another Hindu worldview concept that permeates Western spirituality. Reincarnation is supported by déjà vu experiences and New Age ideas, as well as ancient historic roots in Greek/Roman philosophy, Egyptian religion, and Wicca/Druids. Today in the West, when one has a general dissatisfaction with life, it’s appealing to think that one can learn from this life’s lessons and be happier the next time around.

However, in Hinduism the foundations for this understanding are much more profound. They originate in the experiences of the sages. From ancient times as recorded in the Vedas, these men have written about mystical awareness of the oneness of all things. They have described an essence of Being that permeates all things (*Brahmana Upanishad*.IV.4.5-7, cited by Kane 1941:1547; *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* VI.2.2, cited by Badrinath 2007:524).

As they reflected on this Being and these experiences, primarily in the

Upanishads, they perceived that it is a Reality that is not just temporal. It is eternal. If we are part of that Reality, then we also are eternal (cf., Bhagavadh Gita 17:23-28).

If the experience of that Reality is one of supreme bliss and joy and love and peace, then that must be our ultimate reality as well. Since we do not have that reality in our day-to-day life now, it must be attainable or available somewhere in the future. With the added evidence of past life recollections, the conviction is clear: Our soul transmigrates continually until it reaches the peace of Brahman.

This concept is very hopeful and positive. Along with the concept of karma, it puts one's fate in one's own hands. It gives assurance that eventually all will be well. It is comforting and energizing. It avoids judging anyone else or fearing for their eternal fate. I can accept anyone's path as theirs, and I can accept my path as mine.

Objection to Exclusivity

That brings us to the most offensive Christian claim among Hindus: that Jesus is the one and only way. From the Hindu worldview point of view, one should only say, "This is the way for me." Hindus can have very strong convictions about their particular deity and tradition. They may try to spread this practice to others. However, ultimately they will leave it to the individual. You have to do what works for you at this point. If you don't get it now, you will eventually; if not in this lifetime, then in a subsequent one.

With the idea of perpetual reincarnation and ultimate return to Brahman, there really is no reason to panic or compel. Everybody will eventually get it right and become right. Trying to convert others to your viewpoint is short-sighted and upsetting.

No doubt, this point of view is appealing on many levels—emotional, social, and moral. Hindus have prided themselves on developing a religion that enables people of very diverse views and practices to live together harmoniously for millennia. It is a "live and let live" philosophy that governments strive to inculcate among their citizens.

How can sincere Christians present their convictions about the centrality of Jesus in attaining salvation in this worldview? Even in the West, there is growing resentment and objection to such exclusivist claims. When one of our theology professors asked his freshman class what Bible passage they knew, by far the most common one cited was "Judge not" (Matt 7:1). The Christian exclusivist claims come across as arrogant and presumptuous.

Alternative Indian Worldview: Dalits

Before moving on to considering how to approach the Hindu worldview in a meaningful way, it should be stated that everything is quite different when witnessing among the dalits—the “Untouchables” and tribal peoples of India. For them, Hinduism has been the philosophical underpinnings of a highly oppressive social system for centuries. They are quite unaware and uninformed about all of the philosophy discussed above. They are very aware of the caste system which Hinduism has justified and promoted through its doctrines of karma and reincarnation.

Many dalits resonate with the views of the great dalit leader during the era of India’s Independence Movement, Dr. B. K. Ambedkar. He said, “I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu.” Eventually, Dr. Ambedkar decided to convert to Buddhism because it did not observe caste and because it was a religion of Indian origins. In the process, he led hundreds of thousands of his fellow outcaste members into this faith, and occasionally this same protest movement into Buddhism continues, primarily among members of that caste.

The mass movements to Christianity have this same protest as their impetus. When pursuing witness among this Indian population, the issue for them is primarily one of dignity and hope. They want self-respect and hope for a better life, at least for their children. For them, the awareness that they are valued children of God brings energy and confidence for life.

I recall one Indian pastor relating his experience with a blind boy. He had read the passage from Exodus 4:11, “The Lord said to him [Moses], ‘Who gave man his mouth? Who made him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? “Is it not I, the Lord?”’ For most of us, this passage is uncomfortable and disturbing. However, for the blind boy who heard it, it was good news. He exulted: “You mean it is God who made me this way? It’s not my bad karma from previous births?”

For dalits, the Christian faith is a liberating force. It needs to be presented in this way and carried out in this way. The philosophical objections and discomforts presented above are quite irrelevant to them. The typical Hindu worldview is not their worldview or their reality. Their reality is survival and desperation. The gospel and the church meet that yearning.

Relating to the Hindu Worldview

But what about the vast majority of Hindus, the 80 percent who are in the caste system? For them, the issues raised above are real stumbling blocks. Christians need to meet their intellectual and moral sensitivities in a meaningful way.

When it comes to worldview, only a person who is one with that worldview can really understand it and relate meaningfully to it. For that rea-

son, it is best to turn for guidance to converts from the Hindu worldview for help in understanding the situation. The people in the caste system generally decline to join the dalit church. The social customs and worship practices are not of the traditional Indian culture. Indeed, the caste realities of India usually make the dalits themselves uncomfortable having a high caste person among them.

In the 19th and early 20th century, many such high caste converts (e.g., Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, R. C. Das, Chenchaiyah, Nehemiah Goreh, Chakkarai, Krishna Mohan Banarji) tried to change the life of the church. They were totally unsuccessful, as there are good reasons for the dalit church to be the way it is. For dalits, as mentioned above, traditional Hindu culture has been the source of much of their indignity and oppression. Turning to Western forms was part of their rebellion and new identity.

Currently, high caste devotees of Jesus simply keep themselves away from the church. They are focusing on developing their own social practices and worship forms, ones rooted in traditional Hindu culture. In regard to social practices, they are resolved to remain within their families and carry out their traditional responsibilities (*dharma*), rather than be alienated from the family because of their new faith. Notice the things that are important to them:

1. They want to demonstrate that being a *Jesu Bhakta* (devotee of Jesus) only makes one a better member of the community and family, even though they often face a good deal of opposition and suspicion.
2. They want to remain as a witness to the faith and share it with their fellow caste and family members.
3. They want to respect their culture and heritage and enjoy all its profundity and beauty.
4. They want to show how one can be a follower of Jesus while also being a good Hindu (culturally and socially).

For these reasons, usually these current converts continue to call themselves Hindus. Within Hinduism, they are devotees of Jesus. They do not participate in the religious aspects of Hindu festivals, and they do not go to temples. They meet, as they are able, with fellow devotees and gurus.

In their religious practice, they do not insist on immediate baptism. This public demonstration of their faith is generally delayed until their family and community understand and accept the decision. When a baptism takes place, it is done in the home, with relatives and community members present. The baptism is not recorded in any church records, so they remain legally a member of the Hindu community.

These *Jesu Bhaktas* realize well the vulnerable position many of them are in. They know they need fellowship and nurture in the faith. They may access spiritual nurture by the church through informal contacts with

church workers or attending mass rallies or take correspondence courses or make *yatras* (pilgrimages). They like to use Roman Catholic roadside shrines and cathedrals because they can do so any time of the day anonymously. They are not against the church; they just know they do not fit in.

Their worship forms follow traditional Hindu styles. They develop *bhajans* (antiphonal singing) and use them within their families or small groups in homes. When they have group gatherings, they now use a rite of worship called the *mahaprasad* (great blessing), decorating an altar area with flowers and incense. At the climax of the worship, a cocoanut is cracked open, its milk poured, and its white pulp revealed, saying, "and Christ died on the cross, spilling His blood for the salvation of the world, and making us white as a cocoanut."

The *Jesu Bhaktas* can be placed in the *bhakti* tradition of Hinduism. Jesus is their chosen deity. Jesus is their guru, teaching them in the gospels and guiding them through their prayers to him. Often they will think of their faith as a fulfillment of the longings, searchings, and truths of Hinduism. They find the true nature of God revealed in Jesus. Their approach to evangelism is soft and non-confrontative: "Jesus is my guru, and I can tell you why. Here is how He has transformed my life and brought me peace."

These groups and approaches have been spreading throughout India and among the Indian diaspora. Hindus have always had a great attraction to Jesus. The problem is that he has been inaccessible to them except through the dalit church. Now it is being affirmed that one can access God through Christ in traditional Hindu ways, within Hindu society and culture.

Research has revealed hundreds of thousands of such *Jesu Bhaktas* in Chennai, South India, and estimates are that there may be ten million around the nation (Hoefer 1991:106). Many are very isolated and do not even know about each other or about these developing forms. However, as the groups multiply, more *Jesu Bhaktas* have access to the various groups and their spiritual resources.

Is this a model of church and discipleship that should be encouraged and spread when witnessing among high caste Hindus? Previous approaches have been highly unproductive and highly resented. Does this approach root itself well enough in the Hindu worldview without compromising the Gospel?

Whether we in the West are comfortable with the development or not, it seems quite clear that the movement has a life of its own now. It has acknowledged leaders, though no central organization, as it is in Hinduism. It is flexible and adaptive and evolving. The *Jesu Bhaktas* are thrilled that they can follow Jesus within their own culture and can share that opportunity with others.

As my Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Board for Missions director commented after a few days in India, “There’s the rest of the world, and then there’s India.” Will a culturally rooted spirituality and discipleship of Jesus in India need to be as unique as the culture and worldview is? I think so.

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