

J. L. Samir

Jewelry in Hinduism: A Mission Challenge

Disclaimer

This paper does not replace or intend to promote an alternate position concerning the wearing of jewelry in the Seventh-day Adventists Church. Rather, the recommendations and research are the expressed ideas and position of the author and indicate an attempt to deal with cultural issues that are real and challenging among Hindu converts to Seventh-day Adventism.

Description of the Issue

Hindus are an unreached people group, one that has resisted the gospel for many reasons. Hindus perceive the Adventist Church as primarily a Western institution and based on a culture and ideology considered to be a threat to their South Asian worldview. This association is not entirely inaccurate. The Adventist Church was birthed in the United States, and Western ideals are embedded in the foundational principles of its operation. For example, the Adventist Church governance structure mirrors elements of the American representative system of government.

It is impossible to divorce ourselves from the influence of culture. When Adventists with a Western worldview minister within an Eastern context, they bring with them biblical teachings along with Western cultural ideals. This is not an issue until they impose on their audience Western practices that are antithetical to a people group shaped by a different set of values (Richards and O'Brien 2012:35). In the West, Adventists are taught that people who wear jewelry elevate worldly practices over the Bible (Wheeler 1989:10). In Eastern contexts, the wearing of jewelry represents one's status in society. A married woman puts on certain jewelry when she marries and is expected to wear it until her husband dies (Shukla 2008:309).

The issue of adornment and jewelry is a point of contention between Western and Eastern Christians. When Hindus accept Jesus Christ, they are expected to dispose of all adornment and jewelry before becoming members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. To Hindus, this is one of the confirmations that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is an agent of Western culture trying to replace their Eastern values and way of life. The Adventist position on adornment and jewelry is a challenge to many Hindus because of the different cultural ideals and meanings behind adornment within the South Asian context.

Definition of Adornment and Jewelry

A definition of adornment is needed, but caution must be taken because any one definition may not adequately address the issue in every context or culture. The *Collins Dictionary* defines adornment as “something that is used to make a person or thing more beautiful or is the process of making something more beautiful by adding something to it.” The above definition implies that adornment is anything that a person uses to enhance and improve beauty. Jewelry is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary* as “personal ornaments, such as necklaces, rings, or bracelets that are typically made from or contain jewels and precious metal.”

It is helpful at this juncture to define jewelry from an Adventist perspective. Angel Rodriguez in his book *Jewelry in the Bible*, defines jewelry as “ornaments made of different materials with different functions that can be placed directly on the body or on the garments of a person in order to enhance the appearance of the individual, establish social distinctions, and communicate personal convictions” (1999:8).

Adornment among Hindus

South Asians are recognized for their historical interest in adornment art, which contributes to their identity as a people group, particularly in the nation of India. Visitors are intrigued by the aesthetic beauty of India, both ancient and modern, which is dated as one of the oldest civilizations in the world (Janannathan 2018). India is the birthplace of Hinduism, which has no founder and no single set of beliefs (Klostermaier 2007:1). To understand the meaning of adornment to Hindus, it is necessary to survey its meaning in the religious setting, everyday life, and traditions. Hindus employ cultural adornment in a vast variety of forms. Yet, South Asian society is able to distinguish the subtle differences in adornment that differentiate between religious affiliation, caste, status, and even economic standing (Shukla 2008:5).

The Hindi language contains more than seventy words for how a person might adorn themselves with ornaments (Bhushan 1979:48, 49). *Shringar* and *suhag* are Hindi terms with Sanskrit roots that describe adornment. *Shringar* implies beauty and love in the sense of romance, while *suhag* means husband and *suhagee* refers to a married woman who is blessed to have a husband who is alive so that she might adorn herself (Shukla 2008:3, 4). *Suhag* is also referred to as a sign of marriage, an agreement between a newly married woman and her husband in which she will wear the marriage ornament as a symbol of her status until she becomes a widow. Applying red dye to the center part of her hair or wearing a toe ring or a marriage chain around her neck are all signs to family and community that she will remain faithful to her marriage vows (Leslie 1995:96).

Adornment of a South Asian woman begins in her childhood and ends when she becomes a widow. After the birth of a girl, her parents begin preparing her for marriage when she will leave their home and move in with her husband's family. The steps for marriage preparation vary from family to family and society to society. In most cases, the young girl is not aware of or does not have a choice regarding the adornments prepared for her. When a woman is married, she adopts a very prescribed form of adornment that is mandated for a married woman by her society.

In general, it is accepted that women adorn themselves more than men. This is true for the Indian subcontinent and the diaspora, primarily because of the expectations placed on women to adorn themselves in very prescribed ways (Shukla 2008:6). In contrast, men in modern times wear Western clothes and are given no prescription or limitation on adornment, with the exception of priests (Gayen 2018).

The rapid change of culture and the exposure of women to the outside world through education and travel have given Hindu women a voice regarding the demands of their society when it comes to adornment. Researchers are noticing a shift from rigid cultural demands to giving women some limited personal choice when it comes to adornment within the urban context; however, in the villages, women are still expected to honor the cultural expectation of adornment, regardless of their individual preferences or desires.

Adornment in Hindu Marriages

Marriage is the most important rite of passage for a Hindu woman and it is the climax of her adornment journey. In modern Indian cities, a married Hindu woman could wear any one or all four of the symbols of marriage recognized in India: the *sindur* (a red dot on her forehead), marriage chain, bangle, or toe ring (Nag 2018). However, in many parts of India, the

specific symbol is required based on ethnic group. For example, in southern India, married women generally wear the marriage chain, known as a *tali* (Shukla 2008:22). At a typical wedding, a woman will have 16 adornments made of pure gold or the finest artwork (History of Indian Jewellery n.d.).

Hindu brides, both past and present, typically move to the home of the husband's parents to begin married life (Shukla 2008:23). Most newly married women's wealth is contained in the bridal jewelry that they receive upon marriage (Shukla 2008:144, 145). Beginning with the marriage ceremony and continuing for the next few months, community members will visit the bride in her new home and present her with gifts. This ritual is called *muhdikhai*, meaning "to see the face of the newly married woman" (Kapur 2009:224). When these visitors from the community see the bride wearing the 16 adornments, her parents are honored, as people recognize that the bride came to her new home with wealth (Cultural India n.d.).

When the wedding and honeymoon are over and a baby enters the home, the expectation of adorning with the full regalia of marriage is lowered. Many women settle for only the essentials, and even imitations made of plastic are worn in the interest of security and preservation of the precious ornaments from their weddings (Shukla 2008:25).

Adornment in Public Spaces

Visual imagery in the South Asian culture is one of the primary modes of communication, especially in religious and social settings (Shukla 2008:35). Glassie observed that it takes superior skill to read an image and understand its message (2002:218). For example, the face of a deity is the most important visual element for a devotee. This is known as *darshan*, which is defined as "a visual exchange between a worshiper and a *murti*" (Shukla 2008:26).

The bride's face is also an important visual element. During the wedding ceremony, only the bride's face is visible to guests. According to South Asian traditions, the face of a woman is one of the ways beauty or sacredness is revealed (29-32). Shukla notes that some young women adorn themselves with garments, such as a sari or shalwar; however, they communicate with their faces and eyes. This is where many use certain jewelry and makeup to draw attention to themselves (47, 48). Shukla observes that women are compared to a deity's wife (such as Ram's wife, Sita) and husbands are compared to Ram, a male deity. In the Hindu worldview, it is expected that a married woman be perfect in behavior, temperament, and appearance while men are expected to be perfect only in temperament and to be physically strong (32). South Asian women argue they are treated as ornaments by their husbands or family (84).

In India, it is expected that a Hindu will dress differently from a Muslim although there are important similarities. The difference is noted in very distinct styles and colors of garments. Shukla (2008) notes that religious affiliation is an important distinction among South Asians in India. However, both Muslims and Hindus wear similar jewelry to identify their status in society. For instance, Muslim married women wear the same chain as Hindu women. The wearing of marriage symbols in South Asia transcends religious affiliation.

Shukla also notes that South Asians are expected to follow the cultural norms of adornment. For example, unmarried and married women are expected to adorn themselves with the proper symbols that represent their status. On the other hand, a woman may decide to draw notice to herself by using adornments outside the norm of the Indian culture and thus gain unusual attention that could be either positive or negative (2008:50). It is generally accepted in Indian contexts that individuals who excessively adorn themselves may do so with a goal of compensating for something that is missing, such as a lack of education or some other perceived inferiority (55). This observation has some merit but is difficult for an outsider to determine.

Summary

India is a patriarchal society strongly influenced by customs, religious affiliations, and socioeconomic patterns (Ahmed-Ghosh 2004:94). The subject of adornment among South Asians, especially Hindus, is a complex issue that demands extensive research. Adornment among women is more prescribed than among men. Adornment to a Hindu is not a fashion statement but a way of life that guides them from one stage of life to another or from situation to situation. These life events are essential for passing on the South Asian way of life to the next generation.

Biblical Perspective on Adornment and Jewelry

The Bible is the guide for the Christian faith, and thus, it is relevant to seek counsel from the Word of God on the subject of adornment. In the Bible, adornment is influenced by culture (McCracken 1986:78). Scholars agree that jewelry was part of adornment for both men and women in the biblical narrative (Exod 35:22; Judg 8:24, 25; Prov 25:12; 1 Pet 3:4). The usage of jewelry as part of adornment seems to be the norm rather than the exception (Braun 1996:18).

Both the Old and New Testaments describe many ways people in the Bible adorned themselves and how jewelry was used in ancient times. It

was used as personal adornment (Ezek 23:40; 1 Pet 3:4; Rodriguez 1999:22, 44) and also as currency (Gen 24:22; Acts 3:6; Rodriguez 1999:23, 46). It was a form of wealth accumulation (Gen 24:35), especially in marriage where the bride was given her wealth to take with her to the husband's home (Isa 49:18; Rev 18:16; Rodriguez 1999:25, 46). In general, the bride was expected to display her wealth on both the day of the wedding and beyond (Rodriguez 1999:26). Jewelry was also a symbol of social status, used, for example, by kings, priests, and women on the day of their marriage (Rodriguez 1999:27, 47). This is noted as the most common use of jewelry in the Bible (2 Sam 1:10; Jas 2:2). Jewelry was also used as a symbol of power or authority (Gen 41:42; Luke 15:22; Rodriguez 1999:27, 48). Finally, jewelry appeared to be used in religious functions (Exod 28:36–38; 2 Kgs 11:12; Rodriguez 1999:34), as an offering (Num 31:50; Matt 2:11), and in magic and evil practices (Isa 3:20; Rodriguez 1999:25).

Angel Rodriguez, a recognized Adventist theologian and former director of the Biblical Research Institute of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, wrote a comprehensive book entitled *Jewelry in the Bible*. He states that as a Seventh-day Adventist, he accepts the Church's position on jewelry. However, his, "main interest is to examine all the relevant biblical materials in order to determine whether the standard is biblical or not, or whether it needs adjustment" (1999:8). He observes that the Old Testament promotes a "restrictive attitude" towards jewelry. For example, the High Priest was authorized to wear decorative jewelry (42). Rodriguez notes that the New Testament also promotes a "restrictive usage" of jewelry, similar to the Old Testament. He concludes that the New Testament rejects the usage of jewelry for "personal ornamentation" (50).

According to Rodriguez, jewelry was used in the Bible in many different ways, ranging from a symbol of authority to a symbol of beauty. He notes that jewelry itself is not evil but rather how it is used (92). His argument is that the Bible supports the usage of jewelry for functional purposes but not as "personal adornment" (93). Roy Adam's review of Rodriguez's book, *Jewelry in the Bible*, notes many good points but claims that the book does not address the practical issues of wearing jewelry in non-Western cultures (2000:1). He asks, "Is the argument watertight?" (2). According to Adams, Rodriguez' biblical study reveals that God does not completely condemn or support the usage of jewelry (3).

Dennis Braun's study of the biblical texts on the issue of jewelry arrived at a different conclusion than that of Rodriguez. Braun concludes that the "Israelites practiced the free use of jewelry and adornment in all its varied forms," and he does not see any biblical evidence that the wearing of jewelry is forbidden or limited in the Bible (1996:10). He notes that God counseled the Israelites on many occasions about the misuse of jewelry. He refers to Elizabeth Platt's research on Isaiah 3:16-24 which,

according to Braun, is the passage used by many Adventists as proof that God condemns the use of jewelry. Platt's research suggests a new way of understanding this passage. She states that Isaiah 3:16-24 is about God sending a strong message of warning to both male and female aristocrats who are taking advantage of the poor. This passage describes 21 items used for adornment, including jewelry, apparel, and cosmetics (1979:83, 84). According to Platt, this is a new and more accurate interpretation of the biblical text because 16 of the 21 articles are used solely by men in high office, and the additional six items could be used by women.

In Exod 28:2, *tiph'eret* is a noun and is translated as "beauty." The meaning of *tiph'eret* in Exod 28:2 and 28:40 implies that clothing or a turban is included to make something beautiful. Hamilton describes a turban as a general garment that is worn by both men and women in the Middle Near Eastern context (1980:2:714). This means that adornment includes garments and jewelry, and these should not be separated in the biblical interpretation of adornment (714). The biblical meaning in the context of the Middle Near Eastern understanding suggests that the act of putting on clothes and ornaments, not merely jewelry, is what determines beauty.

Principles of Adornment in the Bible

Biblical scholars agree that jewelry was part of the everyday life of people in the Bible as pointed out above, and was used for power and authority, marriage, and personal beauty. However, God intervened when adornment or the usage of jewelry became a problem in society—either as an interference to worship or a misuse of wealth.

In Genesis, God instructed Jacob and his household to take off their jewelry (Gen 35:4). The biblical narrative indicates that God called Jacob and his household to go and worship at a specific place known as Bethel. He required Jacob and his household to prepare themselves before going to Bethel. This preparation included getting rid of foreign gods and earrings (Gen 35:1-4). Scholars are divided as to whether this instruction from God means that Israelites were required to stop wearing jewelry or God was particularly interested in their heart transformation and did not want the Israelites to come to him with jewelry that represented another god. One conclusion that could be drawn from the biblical narrative is that God was more concerned about purity and removing objects that interfered with his people's communion with him. God was also teaching his people that jewelry and adornment should not take his place. The Bible suggests that jewelry itself is not evil, but how jewelry is used is the concern expressed by God in Scripture (Rodriguez 1999:92).

God also addressed the issue of jewelry as a misuse of economic blessings He bestowed upon his people. In Isaiah 3:18, 19, God challenges the status quo of the period. He says that men and women who take advantage of the poor will pay a high price if they do not stop. They were dressed in the finest apparel and jewelry and appeared to be honest and caring people, but inside they were selfish and greedy. Throughout the biblical narrative there are two situations in which God directly confronts his people—first, when the Israelites worship idols (Ezek 14:4; 2 Kgs 17:12; Hos 4:12) and second, when they take advantage of the poor (Zech 7:10; Prov 22:22, 23; Amos 2:6; Isa 10:1-3). The second reason mentioned above is important because God pronounced judgment on wealthy evildoers who displayed their jewelry at the expense of the weak and less fortunate. This act of God is consistent with Rodriguez's findings that jewelry by itself is not evil but the motive behind it is what leads to evil (1999:90).

The Bible presents the principle of transformation taking place from inside rather than from the outside. Jesus challenges a longstanding Jewish tradition that teaches that cleaning the outside of the body is what makes a person pure. Jesus teaches that transformation occurs internally (Matt 15:11). The outward behavior may or may not indicate that change has taken place in a person.

At times, the use of jewelry is actually affirmed in the Bible. In Ezekiel 17:9-14, God describes his plan to adorn his children. The description resembles a wedding ceremony in which God wants to take Israel as his bride. The picture painted is not easily understood without an exploration of the cultural context. Weddings in the Near East are similar to those in India. On the wedding day, the bride is adorned with the finest apparel and jewelry available to her. The reason is that she will leave her father's home and go to the family home of her husband. This tradition was recorded in the biblical story of Rebekah leaving her home and being given a dowry and jewelry to take with her (Gen 24:53). This tradition teaches that a father's gift to his daughter is her departing gift to help her survive in her new life with her husband and his household. God used the cultural norms, such as bridal adornment, to teach us about his love and expectations for Christians.

The Adventist Position on Jewelry

The Seventh-day Adventist position on jewelry and adornment, as stated in the Church's Fundamental Beliefs and *Church Manual*, is influenced by the writings of Ellen White, who is one of the founders of the denomination. According to Seventh-day Adventists, their position on adornment and jewelry is biblically based.

In the current 28 Fundamental Beliefs document, the 22nd doctrinal statement, titled “Christian Behavior,” states that Adventists “should meet the highest standards of Christian taste and beauty,” and “while recognizing culture differences, our dress is to be simple, modest and neat. . . . True beauty does not consist of outward adornment but in the imperishable ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015a:9). The document does not explicitly use the word jewelry but appears to include the usage of jewelry when it mentions outward adornment. The biblical references listed are limited to the New Testament (1 Pet 3:1–4; 1 Tim 2:9), and the omission of Old Testament passages without explanation is surprising (Gen 35:4; Exod 32:2; Isa 3:18–23).

The *Church Manual* is the governance document of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It provides leadership, policies, and guidance for the local church and addresses matters of discipline. The *Church Manual* includes the exact statement on adornment as found in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs; however, it also has a section titled “Dress” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015b:146). This section summarizes the counsels from Ellen White on dress, adornment, and jewelry. It states that Seventh-day Adventist Christians are called out from the world and must be influenced only by their religion. It emphasizes that “customs and fashions change, but principles of right conduct must remain the same” (147). It maintains that White’s statements on dress, adornment, and jewelry are “to protect the people of God from the corrupting influence of the world” (1904:4:634). White states that dress should be about service, not beauty, and should be modest and of good quality. She emphasizes that members should not wear jewelry or ornament (1904:3:366).

The *Church Manual* adds that the wearing of jewelry “is contrary to the will of God” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015b:147). It equates the wearing of ornaments or jewelry to a promotion of self instead of a promotion of Christian values. The *Church Manual* notes that some countries and cultures require their people, regardless of their religion, to wear the wedding ring as a symbol of marriage, and thus, it is “not regarded as an ornament,” and the Adventist Church does “not condemn the practice” (147). The *Church Manual* appears to promote modesty and simplicity in adornment and forbids the use of jewelry as display. It affirms the biblical teachings of inward beauty over outward beauty, for this is in keeping with the will of God and the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In the 21st century, young Adventists from different cultures have contrasting views on the practice of jewelry. For example, I once attended a university board meeting in North America in which an Adventist

university student had been invited to share the devotion. She shared her spiritual journey as a child whose father diligently sought to instill in her the values taught in the Bible. She grappled with these beliefs and eventually embraced all the teachings of Jesus Christ, and today she is a spiritual leader on campus. She is the head of campus ministries that focus on student spiritual development. Surprisingly, she had two studs in each ear. Ten years ago, it was customary to see other devout Protestants with earrings, but today it is our Adventist young people wearing the earrings. It would not be Christ-like for me to judge her walk with Jesus solely on the fact that she wore earrings.

Ellen G. White and Jewelry

There is no doubt that Ellen G. White wrote and counseled the Seventh-day Adventist Church on the subject of adornment and jewelry. The Church heeded her counsel and adopted her statements into the *Fundamental Beliefs* in 1972. However, from 1932 to 1942, when the first *Church Manual* was published, none of White's counsels or statements were included except a statement against the usage of gold ornaments. The position and wording changed in the 1951 *Church Manual*, which included White's statements on adornment and jewelry, along with biblical references.

Braun's study on the history of jewelry and adornment details how Seventh-day Adventists and White's positions evolved over time and how the counsel given was not always followed (1996:32, 33). There are many evidences that the official position of the Church was not practiced by many of its members. For example, members of the Battle Creek church made a resolution on dress reform on April 30, 1866, that was also adopted by the Seventh-day Adventist governing body that same year. This reform included giving up gold watches, gold chains, gold rings, gold bracelets, gold sleeve-buttons, diamond studs, and pins (Land 1989:46, 47). Braun notes that White in her writings addressed the issue of adornment in a more comprehensive manner than official church documents such as the *Church Manual* and *Fundamental Beliefs* (40).

Braun argues that White's position on jewelry was influenced by her Methodist background which promoted simplicity, including the elimination of jewelry (36). White noted that her former denomination struggled to maintain the prohibition against jewelry. She witnessed that a "lady was baptized with her gold rings, earrings and a bonnet" (1952:123). Braun observes that White's counsels on jewelry and adornment are based on two important issues: (1) the urgency of the second coming of Jesus and (2) living one's personal life as though Jesus' second coming were imminent (37). He also notes that White spoke out against the middle class and their

spending habits, not only on adornment and jewelry but also on other excesses. White wrote in a letter dated September 28, 1896, "Those who invest the Lord's goods in expensive buildings, in extravagant adornment, in furniture, in dress, in needless ornament of show or display are embezzling our Lord's goods that are only lent us for a time" (257).

The *Church Manual* succinctly quotes White's statement in her third volume of *Testimonies for the Church* in its official denominational position: "To dress plainly, abstaining from display of jewelry and ornaments of every kind, is in keeping with our faith" (1904:3:366). This volume was written during a time when the fledgling Adventist Church had a presence only in the United States, mainly in the central and northeastern states. An examination of the purpose and audience of the preceding statement on jewelry indicates that White was addressing women and young people who were being influenced by a worldly culture and who were losing their first love for Jesus Christ. Her admonition was not only against adorning with jewelry for display but also against dress, amusements, or anything that might take the place of Jesus Christ (366).

To better understand the principle taught by White on the wearing of jewelry, it is necessary to compare the author's life with her teachings. Wheeler's research suggests that White herself wore pins and brooches, and family photos indicate that her "granddaughter wore a long metal chain around her neck" (1989:10). In one photo, White herself can be seen wearing a "a straight dress of black with nothing to break the somberness, save a tiny white collar about her neck and a heavy metallic chain which hung suspended near her waist" ("A Female Oracle" 1888).

The Adventist Church's position on adornment and jewelry as taken from White's counsel reveals the context and rationale for its position. Wheeler argues that White's counsel on adornment and jewelry was a reaction to middle-class America. Her personal life reveals she did not have a problem with basic adornment such as pins, brooches, necklaces made of shells, and silk cloth (1989:10). It is important to note that White did not contradict herself or present a double standard on the issue of adornment and jewelry. Her position, according to Braun, is that one's use of jewelry and adornment should fit within the broader picture of an Adventist Christian lifestyle of simplicity (Wheeler 1989:44).

The Adventist Church's position on modesty and simplicity is in keeping with the biblical mandate for followers of Jesus Christ. White emphasizes the importance for both ministers and church members to live a simple life and spoke out against Adventists living with an extravagant lifestyle. According to White, in a letter dated September 28, 1896, Adventists ought to practice simplicity and use the money given to them by God for saving souls instead of spending it on outward adornment such

as costly apparel and jewelry. These instructions are as relevant today as in her time.

At the same time, when giving counsel on the use of jewelry, White took the overall mission of the Church into consideration. In 1895, White wrote a letter concerning Ethel May Lacy, who was about to marry her son, Willie White, in Australia. According to the letter, Ellen White gave permission to Lacy to wear a wedding ring since it was the custom of British women to do so. Lacy stated that if she did not wear a wedding ring in the colony, many would assume that she was unmarried and living with Willie as a mistress, which would damage their and the Church's reputation in the colony.

The personal account of Ellen White allowing her daughter-in-law to wear a wedding ring made of gold was the first recorded exception approved by the co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Her position on American Adventists wearing any jewelry had not changed because in August 3, 1892, she wrote that ministers' wives serving at home or in the mission field should not feel required to wear a wedding ring except in those cultures that stipulate that they wear a ring as a symbol of marriage (White 1895:6).

White's decision to allow her daughter-in-law to wear a wedding ring suggests that she weighed two risks. On the one hand, there was the danger of church members seeing this as license to begin wearing all types of jewelry. But there was also the real danger of those outside the Church concluding that Adventists had a low view of marriage. The following factors could be drawn from White's letter: (1) the risk of Ethel and Willie being labeled as having a relationship outside of marriage, (2) the risk of the fledging Church being falsely accused of immoral lifestyles, (3) and the shame of Ethel's father, a strict vegetarian who lived in India, if his daughter would not wear a ring, which was the socially accepted symbol of marriage.

The experience of Ellen White and her position on the wearing of jewelry provides some guidance for the South Asian context. Her support for wearing jewelry as a symbol of marriage is a good example for understanding the principles behind the wearing of jewelry in the South Asian context.

Missiological Considerations

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has its presence in 213 out of the 216 countries recognized by the United Nations. This indicates that the Adventist Church has heeded the command from Jesus Christ to take the gospel to the world and is now a very diverse community of believers.

This achievement has brought many unexpected challenges, including a clash of cultures and ideologies. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate how the Adventist Church presents its teachings and the application of its doctrines in diverse cultures, such as the South Asian context. The issue of jewelry and adornment among South Asians needs to be reexamined from a missiological perspective. This section seeks to discuss that challenge.

Historically, the Adventist position on adornment centered around modesty and simplicity; however, in the 21st century, it is more difficult to define because of the multiplicity of cultures that make up the Adventist Church. Concerning the issue of jewelry, the Adventist Church clearly defined its position in its statement of Fundamental Beliefs. No jewelry is allowed, with the exception of wedding rings in cultures that require such. The Fundamental Belief is against jewelry worn as decoration, beauty, or as an ornament, but not items worn for functional purposes, such as a brooch or tiepin. Any jewelry used should be worn in harmony with Christian principles (North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists 1986:86). A brief survey of biblical texts on the issue of jewelry suggests that the Adventist Church's position on jewelry is influenced more by the Victorian culture of the 19th century than the biblical narrative, as outlined above.

The inconsistency in the renunciation of jewelry as a prerequisite for baptism and membership in the Adventist Church, the Western cultural understanding of adornment and jewelry, the biblical interpretation, and the meaning and usage of jewelry in the South Asian context are important issues that should be addressed as the Adventist Church engages Hindus with the gospel. This examination is not intended to determine a new position for the Seventh-day Adventist Church but rather to evaluate the impact and misunderstanding of jewelry within the South Asian context, especially for Hindus who accept Jesus Christ and their responsibility to be a witness to family and community.

How do Adventists respond in the South Asian context where jewelry and adornment have different meanings and application? For example, a South Asian woman does not get to choose whether she will or will not wear her marriage adornment. These symbols are a requirement of her family of origin, the family she is marrying into, and her community. This jewelry symbolizes both marriage and her status in society, exactly like the wedding ring within the Western cultural context.

Missiological Issues

Trouble comes when Hindus accept Jesus Christ and are preparing for baptism. They are told that they must take off their jewelry in order to be

saved and become a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The argument is that items of gold such as chains, bangles, nose rings, and toe rings are a violation of God's requirements and must be removed in order to follow Christ. Many South Asians are caught in a difficult situation in which they are expected to choose between pleasing God according to the rules of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and meeting the social and moral expectations of their family and community. Married women in South Asia are expected to wear three symbols of marriage until they become a widow. The Adventist Church policy treats South Asian marriage symbols as jewelry and requires their removal. This is based on the Church's pronouncement that the only approved jewelry is the wedding band. For Hindu women, the three symbols of marriage are their equivalent of the wedding band: the chain, nose ring, and toe ring, along with red dye painted as a dot on the forehead or applied along the center part of a woman's hair.

This expectation for the removal of jewelry has consequences for newly baptized members who are burdened with cultural expectations from a foreign land. As noted above, South Asian married women are only allowed to take off their wedding symbols when their husbands die. Unfortunately, many church leaders are making Hindu women widows before the death of their husbands. This social upheaval creates many challenges for the married woman coming to Christ as well as for her family and community.

In India, the status of widowhood occurs when a married woman loses her husband by death. Even though many of the older traditions of widowhood are no longer practiced among Hindus, social obligation requires widows to dress in a very specific way that communicates their status. A widow is still expected to remove all the marriage symbols and begin wearing a white sari. White in Hinduism is symbolic. For a widow, white indicates mourning, post-reproductive status, and the end of life with a husband (Lamb 2000:164). Widowhood in Hindu society is classified as the last stage of a woman's life. This period is marked with mourning and eating non-vegetarian food (Lamb 2000:175). Shukla notes from her study of widows in Varanasi that widows see themselves as partially dead because they have lost part of their lives, or their reason for living is no longer there (2008:321). Shukla observes it is socially unacceptable for a widow to act as though she is still married or for a married woman to visually suggest that she is a widow (316). The question remains, how does the Seventh-day Adventist Church address the issue of social upheaval caused by requiring South Asian married women to adopt the status of widows when their husbands are still alive?

As leaders in God's church, how do we deal appropriately with cultures that use symbols of marriage other than the wedding ring, a marriage symbol sanctioned in the *Church Manual*, such as a chain around the neck, toe ring, or nose ring? This issue can be divisive because historically, one culture in Adventism makes the decisions for all cultures. This paper is not intended to debate that issue but is simply seeking to answer the questions many Hindus are asking. Can Jesus Christ save them while wearing the marriage symbols of their culture? The most logical question to ask Westerners is *Can Jesus save a Westerner who wears a wedding ring?* It is a nonissue when considering it from this perspective. Jesus Christ did not list the removal of wedding rings or chains or nose rings or toe rings as a prerequisite for salvation.

An additional missiological issue related to the Adventist position on adornment can be noted in Ellen White's discussion of jewelry and adornment, mainly from the perspective of extravagance and wasting resources that could be used for meaningful ministry, such as helping the poor. This position is consistent with the biblical position on jewelry. God pronounces judgment on those who take advantage of the poor, and he warns them that they will lose their wealth of gold and precious gems. Today, many leaders condemn the wearing of South Asian marriage symbols or any other ornaments that are functional while these same leaders wear expensive watches, ties, and clothing. This reveals a troubling inconsistency in dealing with jewelry and adornment. The value of the items that Adventists condemn does not equal the value of Western functional jewelry.

Ultimately, the work of mission must be based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Transformation begins from the inside out and not the outside in. This principle is not always practiced by Adventist pastors and leaders. It is easier for Adventists to focus on the externals as a sign of the condition of a believer's heart. The important principle is to allow people to grow in Christ and an understanding of the value and implications of jewelry within their cultural context.

Recommendations for the South Asian Context

The missiological issues explored above are helpful for formulating guidelines that will empower Adventists who are working among the 1.2 billion South Asians or 13 percent of the world's population. These front-line workers labor to expand the kingdom of God in places where the gospel is resisted by people due to cultural issues such as adornment and jewelry. The following are some steps that will assist church planters and leaders working among South Asians.

The first step is for church planters and mission leaders to research and understand the meaning and usage of jewelry for the South Asian who is coming to Jesus Christ. Ellen White's counsel on wedding rings is helpful. She states, "Let them wear it if they can do so conscientiously." She was addressing the European context where the wedding ring was a social and moral obligation (1923:181). Careful study should be given on how to apply this principle to the South Asian context.

Additionally, South Asians coming to Jesus Christ should be offered instruction on how jewelry has been viewed in the Western Adventist Church. This helps to inform leaders and new members and potential members on the teachings against the usage of jewelry and puts the discussion in perspective as it relates to an Adventist identity. Not wearing jewelry has been a way of identifying Adventists from non-Adventists. It is like a uniform. One could assume that a person without jewelry follows a lifestyle of simplicity.

The current *Church Manual* endorses only the Western symbol of marriage (the wedding ring) and excludes more than 13 percent of the world's population that uses a different symbol of marriage. One final recommendation is to request that the General Conference review the current position in the *Church Manual*, which does not consider the different symbols of marriage used by non-Western people groups, including South Asians. The review should also provide a supplement to or revision of the *Church Manual* to affirm and include South Asian contexts. This recommendation is needed for the Adventist Church to be more effective and reduce cultural barriers to the gospel when reaching out to the people of South Asia.

Conclusion

The Seventh-day Adventist Church brands itself as the last-day church that preaches the Three Angels' Messages and prepares men and women for Jesus' second return. Adventism puts a major emphasis on the behavior and lifestyle of its members. Early Adventist teachings stressed that the wearing of jewelry was a direct contradiction to God's ideal for a believer. However, after the 1895 mission experience of Ellen White, when she permitted her daughter-in-law to wear a wedding ring for cultural and sociological reasons, Adventists outside the United States were allowed to wear the wedding ring.

For South Asians, culture demands a very prescribed form of adornment and jewelry, which needs to be considered in the context of Ellen White's position on jewelry. Many South Asian women are expected to signify their marriage by wearing a marriage chain, nose ring, or toe ring. This is a social obligation to identify their status in society. This expectation

of South Asians within their context is similar to the one Ellen White's daughter-in-law faced. Ethel May Lacy's culture and her own family expected married women to wear the wedding ring. The co-founder of the Adventist Church recognized the negative impact if her daughter-in-law did not wear the ring. Ethel would be seen as a mistress and the Seventh-day Adventist Church would be labeled as a church that condoned adulterous practices.

South Asians are faced with an even more difficult situation. The only time a married woman is allowed to take off her marriage jewelry is after the death of her husband. According to the definition of and Adventist position on jewelry, South Asians who wear their symbols of marriage are within the boundary of the Church. Adventists are permitted to wear jewelry as long as it is to signify marriage, or it is functional, for example, tie pins, brooches, and so on. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is called to be inclusive of all people groups as it prepares men and women for Jesus Christ's second coming.

Notes

¹The root of *tiph'eret* is the verb *tip'ara* and is also translated as beautify. It appears thirteen times in the OT, six in the *piel* form, which essentially means "beautify/glorify where God is the subject and the recipient is His children" (Hamilton 1980:2:714). The additional seven uses are in the *hithpael* form, which have a similar meaning.

Works Cited

- Adams, Roy. 2000. Jewelry in the Bible: What You Always Wanted to Know but Were Afraid to Ask. *Adventist Review*, November 9, 28-29.
- Ahmed-Ghosh, H. 2004. Chattels of Society: Domestic Violence in India. *Violence against Women* 10, no. 1:94-118. <http://www.journals.sagepub.com>.
- Braun, Dennis H. 1996. A Seminar on Adventists, Adornment, and Jewelry. DMin dissertation, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University.
- Bhushan, J. B. 1979. *Masterpieces of Indian Jewellery*. Bombay, India: Taraporevala.
- British Broadcasting Corporation. 2009. Seventh-day Adventists. http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/seventhdayadventist_1.shtml.
- Cultural India. n.d. Solah Shringar. Accessed 10 October 2018. <https://www.culturalindia.net/weddings/wedding-traditions/solah-shringar.html>.

- A Female Oracle. 1888. *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 21. Quoted in Gerald Wheeler, *The Historical Basis of Adventist Standards*, *Ministry*, October 1989, 10.
- Gayen, Chanchal. 2018. Interview by author. Port of Spain, Trinidad. August 27, 2018.
- General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. 2015a. 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Adventist.org. <https://www.adventist.org/fileadmin/adventist.org/files/articles/official-statements/28Beliefs-Web.pdf>.
- General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. 2015b. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*. Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.
- Glassie, H. H. 2002. Mud and Mythic Vision. In *Myth: A New Symposium*, 203-22. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hamilton, V. 1980. Garment, Jewelry. In *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, edited by R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, and B. K. Waltke, 714. Chicago: Moody Press.