

Christian Mission in India Today

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The subject of conversion is a very sensitive issue where Christians are in a minority. Christians believe that Christ gave them the mission to preach the good news and convert people to Christianity. The Hindu organizations in India in general are against conversions and some allege that whatever social welfare activities Christians do their only motive is conversion. The Indian Christians argue that the Indian Constitution gives them the right to preach and propagate their religion. This creates a conflict between Hindus and Christians and results in constant tension and violent activities. I want to explore in this article if conversion has any relevance for India today. I would like to propose that the dialogue with Hinduism will necessitate Christianity to step out from its exclusive vision of Christ and grow into the inclusive vision of Christ in which it will shake hands with Hinduism and work together for the empowerment of people. This dialogue will take Christianity not only beyond 'conversion' but also beyond 'dialogue' because it discovers that the essential truth of Jesus Christ is similar to the essential truth of Vedic Sages or Vedanta, even though there are some basic differences, like the belief in reincarnation, which can be resolved with good will.

Jesus Christ announced his good news with the statement 'the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent'. It is the good news of Jesus' realization of oneness of his consciousness with the divine consciousness. It is the good news of peace and liberation or empowerment. His mission was twofold. First, to break down all the artificial and man-made walls of division between God and human beings and between one human group and another human group and establish one God, one creation and one human kind and thus bring peace in the world; secondly, to liberate people from all the oppressive structures (social, political, economic, ecological and religious) and establish a society of justice, equality and peace in which human beings unfold or manifest the divine attributes of love, compassion and sharing in human relationships. His mission was to be a peacemaker and liberator or empowerer. He invited everyone to realize this good news and become instruments of peace and empowerment.

Jesus Christ saw the whole of creation and the whole of humanity already in God. He inaugurated a new human consciousness that is united with the whole of humanity and of creation. He referred to this identity as 'Son of God' or 'Son of Man'. These expressions are more metaphorical than metaphysical. We can also call it 'Daughter of God and Daughter of Man' (human kind). The Son of God or the Daughter of God has a dual role: one is to stand before God representing the whole of humanity and of creation; the other is to speak to humanity in the name of God. He or she is the liberated human being. He or she is the bridge, the mediator between God and creation. He or she lives for the welfare of the whole of humanity and that of creation. Hinduism calls it *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the whole earth

as one family) and prays *Lokah samasta sukino bhavantu*, may all beings in the world be happy. Thus the vision of Jesus includes everyone and everything. His God is the God of the whole of human kind and of creation. No exclusive system of belief or religion can contain this immense truth of Jesus. It is *Sanathana dharma*, the eternal truth or religion. He invited everyone to enter into his vision. He gave the mission to his disciples to realize this truth and to proclaim it to the whole of creation—not just to human beings.

Proclaiming the good news of Jesus is not proclaiming a belief about a person or inviting people to join a religion; it is proclaiming the universal and eternal truth that God is everywhere and everyone and everything is already in God. It is proclaiming that everyone and everything is already the manifestation of God and ultimately one with God. It is proclaiming who human beings are in their deepest level. It is inviting people to repent: that is, to wake up from the ignorance about their true self and false identity and become aware who they truly are or meant to be. According to Jesus, repentance or conversion is not stepping from one belief system or religion into another belief system or religion but stepping out of all belief systems and discovering the indwelling and universal presence of God, the kingdom of God within. Jesus invited Nicodemus to come out of his religious womb and enter into the universal presence of God. It is discovering one's oneness with God and being able to say with Jesus: I and the Father (God) are one. It is living from that oneness in which one's life becomes the life of God and one's actions become the actions of God. Jesus Christ said 'the works that I do are not my own but the Father (God) who dwells in me does his works'. This is the arrival of the kingdom of God, the *Sanathana Dharma*. Jesus Christ also said: 'I am the Light of the world' and 'you are the light of the world'. These two statements constitute the good news of Jesus. Jesus Christ realized that his eternal 'I' was God and this 'I' was the light of the world. In this experience he also realized that the eternal 'you' of everyone is God and this 'you' is the light of the world. This is truly the mission he gave to his disciples to invite everyone to realize that they are the light of the world. To be the light of the world means to live by the inner light, the inner truth in which a person declares with Jesus or like Jesus 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. It is spiritual self-rule, spiritual self-empowerment.

This truth was totally dissonant to the Jewish tradition. The Jewish tradition was familiar with the experience of the universal presence of God and even expected the New Covenant in which God would write the Law in the heart of everyone but it did not expect the identification of the ground of human consciousness with divine consciousness. It conceived God as creator and human beings as creatures. That understanding could not have given them the possibility of the experience of oneness with God. Therefore the statements of Jesus became controversial and were considered blasphemous. That earned the wrath of the religious leaders who took him to the political leaders and that eventually led to his crucifixion.

The truth or the profound experience of God that Jesus had was not something new to the Upanishad Sages and it would not have surprised them, except perhaps its social vision, which might have challenged them. Five hundred years before Jesus' birth they had already realized the indwelling and universal presence of God and the oneness of human consciousness with the divine consciousness. Isa Upanishad declares that the whole of creation is permeated by divine intelligence. Renouncing one's ignorance a person may discover this truth and live a life of freedom and joy. The Upanishad sages had already declared that Atman was Brahman. The ground of human consciousness, Atman, is one with the ground of the Universe, Brahman. It is similar to the statement of Jesus: the Father (Brahman) and I (Atman) are one'. They also declared *aham brahma asmi*, I am Brahman and *tatvamasi*, and you are Brahman. These statements are similar to the following statements of Jesus, 'I am the light of the world' and 'you are the light of the world'. The Hindu seekers are in constant search of the realization of this truth, which is mukthi or liberation or freedom from samsara—birth and death. There are many examples of this realization of truth in every generation.

The disciples of Jesus, unfortunately but understandably, misconstrued the universal and inclusive vision of Jesus into an exclusive vision. Most probably, being born and brought up in a very dualistic vision of God and of creation, they might not have imagined that the experience which Jesus had was open to everyone. Even though accepting that possibility for one person could be seen as a progress, a step forward in the spiritual evolution, they accepted it only for Jesus and closed the door to everyone else. This understanding created a kind of spiritual apartheid. It created an unbridgeable gap between Jesus and the rest of humanity. Jesus Christ was believed to be the only Son of God, the incarnation of God and the rest of humanity was placed in the second position. They are seen as a kind of adoptive children but they still remain creatures of God. 'Jesus Christ is the only way, the truth and the life' became the life force of Christianity and it tended to exclude any other way to God. It proclaimed Jesus as the light of the world and denied the same possibility for others. Everyone else was just invited to follow him. They interpreted the mission given by Jesus as an order to convert people from other religions to Christianity. Hence 'conversion' became an inseparable part of Christianity.

Christianity suffers from a dual spiritual vision: one vision for Christ and another vision for Christians. It applies non-dualistic vision to Christ saying that he is one with God and it applies dualistic vision to Christians saying that they are creatures of God. It is this dual vision that creates spiritual apartheid between Christ and Christians. While the advaitic tradition of Hinduism feels at home with the advaitic vision of Christ, it has a difficulty to accept that only Jesus can have that experience and not anyone else. It has a difficulty with the dualistic vision of Christianity that keeps people eternally separate from God. This dualistic vision of Christianity has no higher spiritual vision to offer to the advaitic vision of Hinduism. One can say that it has no 'good news' to offer to it. Probably this is the reason

why dualistic Christianity does not appeal to the non-dualistic mind of Hindu seers. Thus there is no meeting point between these two visions. We can often hear Hindus say, 'we love Christ but not Christianity or Christians'. It seems to me that the meeting point is possible only between the advaitic vision of Hinduism and the advaitic vision of Christ. Swami Abhishikthananda and Bede Griffiths, the founders of Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, have shown this possibility.

The exclusive vision of Christ, as understood by Christianity, makes God a sectarian God who belongs only to one group of people, excluding others. It makes Jesus Christ a sectarian head of one big religion excluding others. It creates a wall between God and non-Christians and between Christians and non-Christians. It presents Jesus Christ as a kind of spiritual colonizer who wants to bring everyone under his rule and control. It interprets, unfortunately, his mission as propagation and conversion. Christian Churches officially believe and affirm that they have the command from Jesus to proclaim the good news and convert people to Christianity even though today many mainline Churches in India do not involve in direct conversions. It is this belief that has become a source of conflict and violence with other religions, particularly with Hinduism in India. Some Hindu organizations, unfairly, allege that whatever good works that Christians do, their only motive is to convert. Certainly it is far from being true. It is in this context that Christians are invited to rethink on the good news of Jesus and his command to his disciples to proclaim that good news to the whole of creation. The question is: does religious conversion have any relevance in India today?

My spiritual search has led me to discover that the spiritual vision of Jesus Christ is not about his person or a new religion but it is about who human beings really are from all eternity. It seems to me that the vision of Christ presented by Christianity does not do justice to what Jesus Christ did and wanted his disciples to do. It has reduced his eternal and universal truth into a mere debatable concept. Christians may think that they are doing great service to Christ by presenting an exclusive vision of Christ. In fact they are doing disservice to him by reducing his inclusive truth to an exclusive truth. His God was the God of all. He broke down all the dividing walls and he was a spiritual liberator and empowerer. He saw everyone already in God. In the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul said very beautifully that Jesus was peace. He broke down all the dividing walls and made two groups into one. He came to preach peace to everyone, to those who are near and to those who are far (cf. Eph. 2.14-18).

There are four principles which can be considered as the foundation of Jesus' vision: first, there is only one God and this one God is the God of all; He is greater than human beings and belief systems. Second, human beings, as manifestations of God or in the image and likeness of God, are greater than belief systems and they have the potential to realize their oneness with God. Third, belief systems or religions and all spiritual paths are meant to

be at the service of human beings to realize their potentiality and not human beings at their service. Fourth, the purpose of human existence is to realize oneness with God and unfold or manifest the divine attributes of love, compassion and sharing in human relationships.

What makes Jesus' message unique is his combination of these eternal truths with the message of social transformation and empowerment of the marginalized. His concern for the poor, the down-trodden, the marginalized and the oppressed of society differentiates his experience and vision from the Vedic seers. His social activism, direct confrontation with the religious, social and political authorities and his willingness even to accept his humiliating death on the cross for the liberation of human beings was a unique phenomenon.

The Vedic seers had the experience of the universal presence of God and the oneness of human consciousness with the divine consciousness but somehow, for reasons unknown, this vision did not penetrate the social fabric. The social structures, like *Varna asrama dharma*¹, which were born out of great wisdom, good will, talents and the need for social stability, were turned into unjust and unchangeable social structures that were used to control people and use them.² The phenomenon of un-touchability and the oppression of Dalits was a black mark on the face of the glorious wisdom of the Vedic seers who believed that every creature was the manifestation of God; who declared *sarvam khalvidham brahma* (all creation is indeed Brahman), *sarvam eitad brahma* (all creation is truly Brahman). The profound insights of karma and reincarnation were tailored to keep the status quo, and to oppress the society's down-trodden and marginalized. The wisdom of the Vedic seers was thus confined only to a small group of experts (probably in the beginning for good reason) and was not accessible to everyone; it was forbidden even for some to hear it spoken. It is only today that everyone has access to that perennial wisdom.

What might have attracted many people to Christianity and what still attracts is the person of Jesus Christ and its social vision. Jesus Christ was very close to the poor, to society's down-trodden and marginalized. He loved the sinners and showed them God's compassion and unconditional love. He presented God as the one who was in love with humanity and was in search of human beings like a good shepherd who went in search of the lost sheep. He preached a God who did not accept oppressive structures in society. He proclaimed the dignity and the supremacy of human beings over institutions. He made an option for the poor and the oppressed and gave his life for them. He asked people not to look at the afflicted and disadvantaged people in society as the product of karma and reincarnation but as the manifestations of God and encounter God in them. He identified with the afflicted people and said: 'whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters

¹ Caste system and stages of life

² Buddha rejected the *Varna ashram dharma*. It is like throwing the baby with the bath water.

that you do unto me'. He was humble and washed the feet of his disciples to show that he did not seek power and authority but wanted to empower people.

Christians interpret their mission as the 'mission to convert'. They think that they have to tell people who Jesus was and make them believe in him and become Christians. Their vision of Jesus is very exclusive. To convert the inclusive vision of Jesus into an exclusive vision is not doing justice to Jesus and to his spiritual vision. It is like crucifying the truth. This vision creates an inner ambition to expand one's boundary and to increase one's numbers. Where this ambition exists there is inner violence and this inner violence attracts violence from outside. In this scenario one cannot be an instrument of peace. But one cannot deny the fact that this ambition has attracted a large number of committed persons to Christianity who did not hesitate even to sacrifice their lives for its cause and spread it far and wide despite the negative consequences. Today Christianity caters for the spiritual needs of the largest following in the world.

Today we live in the context of Interreligious dialogue. The serious encounter of Christianity with the other great world religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, calls Christianity to a serious introspection concerning the will of God for its future mission. The non-dualistic vision of Hinduism is a great challenge to the mainline dualistic vision of Christianity³. It seems to me that the spirit of Christ is asking Christianity to take one more step, to step out from its exclusive truth of Christ into the inclusive truth of Christ. It is a quantum leap that demands great courage and humility. This transition calls for a radical approach in its spiritual vision and mission. If one grows into the inclusive vision of Christ then one discovers that everyone is already in God or in the kingdom of God. In this vision there is no place for external religious conversion but conversion or repentance is understood as the continuous process of inner purification until one comes to the realization of God's presence within oneself and finally oneness with God. In this process spiritual growth is aimed towards God and not towards a religion. Any entry into a religion or religious affiliation is only provisional, like entering into a bus to arrive at a destiny. However beautiful the bus may be we do not make it into a living house and forget our destiny. Religion is not an end in itself but it is only a means to God. In this way religions, as belief systems, lose their absolute power over people and the persons who have had the experience of God guide people on their spiritual path.

This implies that it is not sufficient to train spiritual leaders in the knowledge of God but to lead them into the experiential knowledge of God. In Hinduism a spiritual person need to be a *srutistotra* and a *brahmanista*, well versed in the scriptures (knowledge of God) and established in Brahman (experience of God). At the same time this path to God should be made clear like a highway with signposts in order that people are not taken on a ride in the

³ Many Christian mystics have transcended this dualistic vision.

name of leading people to God. In this milieu Christianity will not have any ambition to expand its boundary or increase its numbers because everyone is already in God who has no boundaries. Spiritual education, then, is a matter of helping people to realize this universal truth. Christian mission then becomes twofold: to announce the good news of the universal presence of God and the oneness of human consciousness with the divine consciousness, thus breaking down all the dividing walls; and to empower people from all the oppressive structures without, in the back of their minds, any mission to convert.

This means breaking away from two thousand years of belief and conviction. This may be a shocking proposal but this is the only way to do justice to the vision of Christ and to become the instruments of peace and empowerment. This vision removes the gulf between Christ and Christians and opens the door to all Christians to aspire to the non-dualistic experience that Jesus had. Christ, then, is no longer seen as a spiritual colonizer but as an empowerer of people. With this understanding Christians do not present Christian belief system as an exclusive truth that denies fullness of truth outside its belief system and thus requires conversion but they see their belief system only as a nest (not a cage) that points to the fullness of Truth, which Christ embodies. The Truth of Christ cannot be placed into any exclusive belief system. Jesus said, 'the foxes have their holes and the birds have their nests but the son of man has nowhere to lie down and rest'. To discover that Christ is not identical with Christianity can be a great liberation to the Christians in their spiritual evolution.

Now Christians must present Jesus as someone who participated in the ongoing spiritual evolution of human consciousness and gave his own original contribution to it. Jesus said, 'I have not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it'. It means that Jesus Christ not only accepts all the spiritual discoveries (and not just the Torah) that happened before him but also adds his own original contribution to them. In this realization 'the mission to convert' loses its meaning and significance and is replaced by 'mission to dialogue'. This 'mission to dialogue' with Vedic vision finally opens the door to the discovery of the similarities between the Vedic vision and the vision of Christ. This dialogue also helps discover the uniqueness of the Vedic vision and the uniqueness of Christ. This is the great challenge that Jesus Christ demands today from the Christians and the Christians need to have tremendous courage and humility to accept this challenge.

A public statement from the Christians that they no longer involve in conversions will allow their opponents disarm and will greatly help to bring peace among religions and among the different group of people. This will render Christians invulnerable as they will have no boundaries to defend or expand but will be able to embrace everyone in their boundless vision. They will have the freedom to collaborate with everyone to work for the empowerment of people. In this way the Christian message truly becomes 'good news' and Christians truly become the instruments of peace and empowerment as intended by Jesus Christ.