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## Hindu Missionaries and Conversion

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**Abstract:** “Hinduism is a pacifist, non-violent, and tolerant religion.” “It is a model for all religions.” “Hinduism is not missionary.” “It has no expansive designs and does not send any missionaries.” These are some of the presuppositions and assumptions propagated by even scholars of international repute. The famous indologist Max Muller, for example, declared that Brahmins never proselytized.<sup>1</sup> Almost all the articles published in the leading secular dailies of India like the *Hindu*, *The Times of India*, and *The New Indian Express*, after the Indian Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee’s call for a national debate on conversions in the context of the attack on the Christian communities and the murder of the Australian Missionary Graham Steines, presupposed as self-evident that Hinduism is not missionary and does not convert. But is this true?

**Keywords:** Max Muller, A. B. Vajpayee, Religious conversion, Graham Steines

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## Hindu Missionaries and Conversion

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### Introduction

“Hinduism is a pacifist, non-violent, and tolerant religion.” “It is a model for all religions.” “Hinduism is not missionary.” “It has no expansive designs and does not send any missionaries.” These are some of the presuppositions and assumptions propagated by even scholars of international repute. The famous indologist Max Muller, for example, declared that Brahmins never proselytized.<sup>1</sup> Almost all the articles published in the leading secular dailies of India like the *Hindu*, *The Times of India*, and *The New Indian Express*, after the Indian Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee’s call for a national debate on conversions in the context of the attack on the Christian communities and the murder of the Australian Missionary Steines, presupposed as self-evident that Hinduism is not missionary and does not convert. But is this true?

No serious research has been done on the missionary character of Hinduism so far. Obviously, there is a scarcity of historical records in this regard. Besides, the Hindu Scriptures and the Puranas do not give any direct evidence of missionary activity. These pose serious problems for a researcher.

All the same, even a superficial researcher cannot escape being struck by

the missionary character of Hinduism. Let us first of all search for evidences of missionary activity in Hindu Sacred literature. Then we shall investigate Hindu missionary activity in the pre- and post-Christian era, tracing some of the tendencies from the beginning up to now.

### The Hindu Sacred Literature

Although there are no direct evidences of missionary activity in Hindu Sacred Literature, one could trace in them clear evidences for unmistakable missionary activity. The disappearance of *Dasyus* and *Panis* – referred to by *Rgveda* as enemies of the Aryans and described as “riteless, indifferent to gods”<sup>2</sup> – and the institution of *vratyastoma* sacrifice to receive outsiders into the brahmanic fold<sup>3</sup> are undoubtedly such instances.

*Absorption and Assimilation:* The Aryans progressively absorbed non-Aryans into the brahmanic fold by absorbing their deities and assigning them a place in the vedic pantheon. Rudra, who later became Siva, is a non-Aryan deity.<sup>4</sup> Sri Lakshmi appears only in the supplements to the *Rgveda* – an indication that it is a later addition.<sup>5</sup>

The Upanisads give further evidence of absorption and assimilation.

Non-Aryan doctrines like karma, re-birth, yoga are integrated, assimilated and become part of brahmanic heritage.<sup>6</sup> This all-absorbing, all-assimilating tendency of Hinduism has become even more pronounced in recent times. Vivekananda mentions three religions which received tremendous shocks but survived by their internal strength; they are Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism. About Hinduism Vivekananda declares:

... sect after sect arose in India and seemed to shake the religion of the Vedas to its very foundations; but like the waters of the sea-shore in a tremendous earthquake it receded only for a while, only to return in an all-absorbing flood, a thousand times more vigorous; and when the tumult of the rush was over, these sects were all sucked in, absorbed and assimilated into the immense body of mother faith.<sup>7</sup>

*The Absorption of Buddha and Buddhism:* Not only sects, but even heterodox religions are absorbed into Hinduism. Buddhism, as we know, arose in fact as a reaction against brahmin domination and casteism. Paradoxically, not only is Buddha accepted in the course of time as an avatara but Buddhism is itself presented as the fulfilment of Hinduism:

As the Jew did not understand the fulfilment of the Old Testament, so the Buddhist did not understand the fulfilment of the truths of Hindu religion. Again, I repeat, Shakya Muni came not to destroy, but he was the fulfilment, the logical conclusion, the logical development of the religion of the Hindus.<sup>8</sup>

Vivekananda continues:

Hinduism cannot live without Buddhism, nor Buddhism without Hinduism. Then realize what the separation has shown to us, that the Buddhists cannot stand without the brain and philosophy of the Brahmins, nor the Brahmin without the heart of the Buddhist.<sup>9</sup>

This all-absorbing, assimilating tendency has been further enhanced in recent times.

*Blanket-labelling:* The term “blanket-labelling” may be used for the wholesale induction of tribals, dalits and other non-Aryan folks into the Hindu fold, though, in reality, they have nothing in common with Hinduism. Unlike other religions, Hinduism does not demand a change of heart or faith but only the prior acceptance of the label. Progressive integration of their culture is a slow and unperceived process. The following text expresses the just described attitude:

In the context of India’s modernization, the only section of the Indian society which can be considered really important is the Hindu majority. For legal, sociological and historical reasons, this community also includes the Jains and the Buddhists, and modern movements like Sikhism, the Radhaswamis and others. It is plain enough that while there are important differences of beliefs and world-view as well as of social organization, the ultimate foundations are the same. The word “Hindu” has covered and continues to cover all religions which took birth in India.<sup>10</sup>

This is an extremely subtle way of converting non-brahmanic religions and

bringing them under brahmin domination

Thus absorption and assimilation have been used as powerful means of conversion from vedic times to the present. It is evident that Hinduism was not averse to proselytization right from early times not only in India but also abroad.

### Conversion of South-East Asia

We may take it as a well-established fact that there were Hindu kingdoms by the fifth century CE in South-East Asia. Both historical and archaeological evidence favour this view. How did this process take place?

*Colonization:* Jawaharlal Nehru writes in *The Discovery of India*:

From the first century of the Christian era onwards wave after wave of Indian colonists spread east and south-east reaching Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Siam, Cambodia, and Indo-China. Some of them managed to reach Formosa, the Philippine Islands and Celebes.<sup>11</sup>

There were four principal waves of colonization between the first century and about 900 CE. These were organized by the state. Colonies were situated on strategic points and on important trade routes. Most probably colonization started much earlier than the first century CE because such waves of colonization could not have occurred "unless they had been preceded for many generations or centuries by individuals or small groups intent on trade."<sup>12</sup>

These colonizations were not always pacific:

The military exploits of these early Indian colonists are important as throwing light on certain aspects of the Indian character and genius which have hitherto not been appreciated. But far more important is the rich civilization they built up in their colonies and settlements and which endured for over a thousand years.<sup>13</sup>

It would not be wrong to conclude that colonization and conversions progressed hand in hand.

Two other factors contributed to conversions: i) in South-East Asia Hinduism enjoyed royal patronage because Hindu *raja dharma* firmly established the authority of the kings. ii) the missionary zeal of the Indian legates was another reason which brought about such a remarkable change:

It is only a story of great triumph against enormous odds. However, it seems that Brahmanical religion was not probably much behind Buddhism in respect of missionary zeal and proselytising activity.<sup>14</sup>

This proselytising activity never stopped except perhaps for brief periods. George Campbell in his report about his government in Bengal wrote:

It is a great mistake to suppose that the Hindu religion is not proselytising; the system of castes gives room for the introduction of any number of outsiders, so long as people do not interfere with existing castes, they may form a new caste and call themselves Hindus; and the Brahmans are always ready to receive all who will submit to them and pay them. The process of manufacturing Rajput from

ambitious aborigines goes on before our eyes.<sup>15</sup>

Campbell's report not only substantiates Hindu proselytising activity but also gives an insight into another dimension of Hindu missionary methodology, namely, formation of sub-castes under brahmanic supremacy. It also throws light on Hindu opposition to Islam and Christianity because they resist reduction into other Hindu castes, although both the Christians and the Muslims – but to a lesser extent – have castes in their own respective communities.

What we have seen so far illustrates that Hindu proselytising activity was going on right from the beginning of its existence till now with occasional interruptions caused by socio-political situations such as Muslim invasion of India and British colonization.<sup>16</sup>

In this missionary activity we may notice a threefold approach: i) peaceful, calm sharing of religious experience; ii) aggressive missionary activity; and iii) most subtle intellectual approach unsurpassed in the annals of the missionary history of any religion so far.

### **Sharing of Religious Experience**

Seeking and sharing religious experience is a common phenomenon in the Upanisads. Yajnavalkya shares his experience of brahman both in public debates (BU 3.1-9) and in private (BU 4.1-4). There are others who seek realization like Narada who approaches Sanatkumara for instruction (CU 7.1-26). We may observe that both the sharing of religious experience and instruction lead to conversion of heart.

Though it may not be termed a missionary activity in the strict sense, the inherent missionary dimension cannot be ignored.<sup>17</sup>

With Vivekananda, the sharing of the experiential dimension of Hinduism becomes a real missionary approach, a method, a tool. Vivekananda declares:

You must come out from all form if you would see the Light. Drink deep of the nectar of the knowledge of God. The man who realises, "I am He," though clad in rags, is happy. Go forth into the Eternal and come back with eternal energy. The slave goes out to search for truth; he comes back free.<sup>18</sup>

This realization is the most important:

Religion is not in doctrines, in dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming, it is realization.<sup>19</sup>

Then follows the subtle, implicit invitation:

We hear so many talking about God and the soul, and all the mysteries of the universe, but if you take them one by one, and ask them, "Have you realized God? Have you seen your soul?" – How many can say they have? And yet they are all fighting with one another.<sup>20</sup>

Indirectly it means that Advaita does not fight, offers realization.

S. Radhakrishnan, one of the former Presidents of India, proclaimed the message of religious experience:

The Upanisads speak to us of different forms of genuine religious experience. whether it is contemplation of the Absolute, or meditation on the Supreme Person, or worship of the Cos-

mic Spirit or absorption in the world of nature, they are all genuine forms, as they aim at the same ultimate conclusion of self-transcendence.<sup>21</sup>

Then Radhakrishnan refers to other religions which seek union – an indirect reference to Christianity, Islam, etc. – and indicates what is beyond them:

There are others who wish to go beyond union to unity, a state of consciousness which is above subject-object relationship. Naturally the Upanisads do not adopt an attitude of dogmatism. This attitude of acceptance of all forms of worship has been a persistent character of India's religious life. The world of God is not bound by languages in which it is spoken. It is the one voice that is heard in all religions.<sup>22</sup>

Indirectly, it is an affirmation of the superiority of advaitic experience, its non-dogmatic character and tolerance.

While these are indirect, implicit missionary approaches through an invitation to share religious experience, with Swami Prabhupada it becomes an open, public proclamation and missionary activity.

### **Conversion through Proclamation**

With A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the Krishna Consciousness Movement (ISKCON), sharing religious experience becomes a proclamation to conversion and adherence to the movement. The Swamiji embraced sannyasa in order to be a missionary:

In later years Prabhupada would recall, "I was sitting alone in Vṛndāvana,

writing. My Godbrother [Kēṣava Mahārāja in Mathura] insisted to me, 'Bhaktivedānta Prabhu, you must do it. Without accepting the renounced order of life, nobody can become a preacher.' It was my spiritual master who insisted through this Godbrother. So, unwillingly, I accepted."<sup>23</sup>

The missionary activity of Swami Prabhupada produced marvellous results. Goswami describes this:

Before leaving India, he had written three books; in the next twelve years he would write more than sixty. Before he left India he had initiated one disciple; in the next twelve years, he would initiate more than four thousand. Before he left India, hardly anyone had believed that he could fulfil his vision of a worldwide society of Krishna devotees; but in the next decade he would form and maintain the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and open more than a hundred centres.<sup>24</sup>

What was the reason for this marvellous success? To an intellectually overfed West, Swami Prabhupada offered a religion of the heart, of experience. The method he followed was the ecstatic singing of Kirtans which attracted people and he preached to them. Conversions followed.

While these are pacifist missionary activities, aggressive approaches are not unknown to Hinduism.

### **Aggressive Hindu Missionary Activity**

Colonization of South-East Asia was not without violence. It is implied in the statement of Nehru cited earlier. India embraced Buddhism at the con-

version of emperor Ashoka (272-236 or 232 BCE). But by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, Buddhism had almost become non-existence, a religion of no consequence in India. Scholars assign various causes for this - sudden internal corruption and decay, divisive effect of sectarianism, insufficient cultivation of the laity or the social failure of Buddhism, Brahmanic persecution, withdrawal of royal patronage and Muslim invasion.<sup>25</sup> the argument that Buddhism was simply exhausted and died in India seem ridiculous.

The most important cause for the disappearance of Buddhism was brahmanic hostility and Śankarācārya's persecution of the Buddhists and the reconversion of the masses to Hinduism:

Kumarila is said to have instigated king Sudhanvan of Ujjain to exterminate the Buddhists. The Tibetan historians Bu-ston and Taranatha record his wars against the Buddhists. The Kerala utpati describes how he exterminated the Buddhists from Kerala. A great role in the decline of Buddhism was played by Sankara. The ěankaradigvijaya of Madhava tells us that ěankara led a religious expedition against the Bauddhas and caused their destruction from the Himalayas to the Indian ocean. ěankara himself has described the Buddhist system as "VaināṣikaÔ or ĥSarva-vaināṣika". According to the Tibetan tradition, at his approach the Buddhist monasteries began to tremble and the monks began to disperse pell-mell.<sup>26</sup>

### **Aggressive Reconversion<sup>27</sup>**

The Arya Samaj established in 1875 by Swami DayĒnand Saraswati took "reclamation and reconversion" as

one of its main activities. There were and are two kinds of reconversions. One is the reconversion of Hindu converts to Islam or Christianity back to Hinduism. The other is the reconversion of Dalits and tribal Christians to Hinduism based on the assumption that all Dalits and tribals are Hindus. In reality, it is not reconversion but conversion of Christians to Hinduism under the guise of reclamation and reconversion.

### **The Methods Employed**

Besides philanthropic and relief work, the Arya Samajists successfully employ two methods. The first is to raise the caste status of tribals by entitling them to wear the sacred thread. The second is to raise the untouchables to the rank of touchables.<sup>28</sup> To these we may add the disinformation and misinformation campaign against Christian missionaries by the RSS, Viṣwa Hindu Pariḥad and other sister- and frontal organizations. Since some of these are semi-clandestine organizations, it is difficult to get details about their hidden agendas. While some of the activities of these organizations come to the fore at one time or the other, there is an open yet unperceived Hindu missionary activity going on all over the world under various guises.

*An Intellectual Missionary Onslaught:* Vivekananda began this missionary onslaught at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, and this was continued by Radhadrishnan and many others. This is carried out at the intellectual and popular levels. In fact, several dissertations could be written on this topic. I may mention some general

outlines of this missionary approach which on the one hand hid the ugly face of Hinduism such as untouchability, brahmanic domination, oppression of the poor and so forth and made Hinduism the most universally acceptable religion, more desirable than monotheism.

*Devaluation of Monotheism:* Monotheists believe that the highest idea of God is that of a personal God. The ancient thinkers of India think differently:

... the monotheistic idea with which the Samhita portion is replete, was thought by the Aryans to be useless and not worthy of philosophers and thinkers, and (. . .) struggled hard for a more philosophical and transcendental idea.<sup>29</sup>

Radhakrishnan continued the attack:

Personality is a limitation, and yet only a personal God can be worshipped. Personality implies the distinction of self and not-self, and hence inapplicable to Being who includes and embraces all that is.<sup>30</sup>

While devaluing monotheism, Hinduism (there is an implicit identification of Hinduism with advaita, although advaita is only a school of thought in Hinduism) was presented as the most tolerant universal religion.<sup>31</sup> It is further claimed that Hinduism is a religion which is in perfect accordance with science.<sup>32</sup> These together with other aspects that are appealing to people at large such as peace, tranquillity, and so forth have been exploited to the hilt by several Hindu Godmen to propagate their religion and ideology, too vast an area to be covered here.

## **Christian Response – the need for a new theology of Religion**

A blind acceptance of the biased opinion of certain scholars is the reason why the Christians are blissfully ignorant about the Hindu missionary activity. As a result, no serious research has been carried out on this matter. In the face of today's multi-faceted and even violent campaign against Christian missionary activities, the search is on for an apt Christian response. Any response born out of an ignorance of the missionary nature of Hinduism itself is bound to be defensive and ineffective. A genuine and serious Christian response first of all calls for the courage to expose those open and subtle ways of Hindu missionary activities. Inter-religious dialogue does not mean tolerance of hypocritical standpoints! Undoubtedly there is the need to enlighten millions of sincere, honest, saintly and open-minded Hindus about the true nature of Hindu missionary activity.

Going a step further, it must be pointed out that it is the ignorance about the very nature of religion itself that makes theologians, missiologists as well as Hindus to cry out: "Don't Convert!". Conversion is indeed God's work, and not man's. God may convert one to Christianity, another to Hinduism. If the essence of every religion consists in its life-giving function, i.e. its very nature to show that way for anyone to find meaning and fulfilment for human life, and if the uniqueness of each religion consists in the uniqueness of the way it stands for, then the freedom to preach and propagate it is logically implied in the very nature of religion itself. Simi-



larly, the freedom of conscience to accept any religion of one's choice is a fundamental human right, which no state or organization can deny. It is therefore the need of the hour, as part of the Christian response, to develop a new theology of Religion along similar lines, which would definitely provide the basic orientation for true religious harmony.

## Conclusion

A brief glance at the Hindu Sacred literature as well as the historical development of Hinduism makes it amply

clear that Hinduism is not only not averse to proselytization, but it has also its own manifold ways of conversion, from the very aggressive to the quite subtle very effective types. Any meaningful Christian response, therefore, should be born out of an awareness of this naked fact and the courage to expose it. Since the freedom to preach and propagate the unique way that every religion is is part of the defining character of any religion, it is the crying need of the hour, as part of the Christian response to the 'loud' Hindu protests to stop 'conversion', to develop a sound new theology of religion.

## Notes

1. Max Muller affirmed it in a lecture delivered in Westminster Abbey and prophesied that Brahmanism would die. See A.C. Lyall in *Asiatic Studies, Religious and Social*, Vol. I, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 99-100.
2. For details see Antony Mookenthottam, "Hindu Missionary: History and Methods," in *Jeevadhara*, XXVI /155, 393-395.
3. *Ibid.*
4. A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, HOS, 31, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, p. 147-150.
5. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, p. 90-102.
6. See *Chandogya Upanisad*, V.10.7; *Katha Upanisad*, 3; 5.6-7.
7. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. I, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1963, p. 6.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884) presented Christ as the fulfilment of Hinduism. It is very probable that Vivekananda is applying in a subtle way the same teaching to Buddhism and Hinduism. See Antony Mookenthottam, *Indian Theological Tendencies*, Peter Lang, Berne, 1978, p. 32-33.
9. *Complete Works*, Vol. I, p. 23.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 146. The author conveniently forgets that the Aryans came to India from outside carrying with them their own gods and religious traditions.
11. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1973, p. 202.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
14. For details see: Dawee Daweewarn, *Brahmanism in South-East Asia (From the Earliest Time to 1445 AD)*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 23-24.

15. Quoted by M. G. Chitkara in *Hindutva*, p. 94.
16. It is beyond my scope to touch on the relaxation of Hindu Missionary activity due to invasions and colonizations. It is also perhaps too evident to need further development.
17. Sister Namita, *A New Paradigm for Evangelization in the Light of Mission in the Gospel According to St. John and the Early Upanisads*, Doctoral Dissertation to be published soon, St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, Bangalore, 1998, See Part Two.
18. *Complete Works*, Vol. 6, pp.82-83.
19. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 43.
20. *Ibid.*
21. S. Radhakrishnan (ed. & trans.), *The Principal Upanisads*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1968, p. 143.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.
23. Satsvarupa Dasa Gosami, *Prabhupada, He Built a House In Which the Whole World can Live*, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Los Angeles, Bombay, 1994, Introduction, p. xxxii. Prabhupada's Guru was Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati. He asked Prabhupada, then a layman, to preach Lord Caitanya's message throughout the world when he first met him.
24. *Ibid.*, p. ix. This book details about Prabhupada's life and missionary activity as well as the methods he followed – though not presented as methods as such.
25. S. R. Goyal, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, Kusumanjali Prakasan, Meerut, 1987, pp. 384-386.
26. *Ibid.*, pp.394-395. See also assimilation of Buddhism by Brahmanism, *Ibid.*, pp. 397-399.
27. For details see, Gulshan Swarup Saxena, *Arya Samaj Movement in India (1875-1947)*, Common Wealth Publishers, New Delhi, 1990; Lala Lajpat Rai, *The Arya Samaj: An Account of its Origin, Doctrines, and Activities*, Reliance Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 111-183.
28. Lala Lajpat Rai, *The Arya Samaj*, pp. 120-122.
29. *Complete Works*, Vol. I, p. 346.
30. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol.I, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1962, p. 97.
31. *Complete Works*, Vol.I, p. 3; *Ibid.*, Vol.II, pp.359-396.
32. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 432-434; Vol. VIII, pp. 20-21.