

## Staying Within the Boundaries: Contextualization of Adventism for India

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### Introduction

**The Task.** It has been said that contextualization must be “true to the complete authority and unadulterated message of the Bible on the one hand, and it must be related to the cultural, linguistic, and religious background of the respondents on the other.”<sup>1</sup> For Asia, the task has been described as “the insertion of ‘the Christian religion minus European culture’ into an ‘Asian culture minus non-Christian religion.’”<sup>2</sup> But this has been seen as an impossible task. Some have asked whether any Christian experience is culturally pure—uncontaminated by any culture—or whether the “essence of the Christian gospel” can be distilled from any cultural form such as Western Christianity, then embodied in a different culture.<sup>3</sup>

What makes this task of distilling the essence of Christianity from a given culture difficult is the wide boundaries of culture. The line that divides what is secular and religious in culture is hazy and includes a large gray area. What some consider secular may have religious significance behind it. For example, the simple greeting of folding the hands in *namaste* indicates obeisance to “the god within you.”

Opinions vary regarding the extent to which contextualization is necessary. It has been argued that just as Christ assumed the human condition with “all its

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Aloysius Pieris, “Western Models of Inculturation: How Far Are They Applicable in Non-Semitic Asia,” *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 22 (1985): 117. Aloysius says this of the concept of “inculturation.”

<sup>3</sup> George M. Soares-Prabhu, “From Alienation to Inculturation: Some Reflections on Doing Theology in India,” *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today: The Collected Writings of George Soares-Prabhu* (JDV Theological Series, 1999), 1:92.

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characteristics except sin,” so Christianity must also incorporate all elements of local culture except those that clash with Christian teachings.<sup>4</sup> This represents the upper limit of contextualization.

It has even been suggested that not only secular aspects of non-Christian cultures, but also non-Christian religious ideas and philosophies can be utilized to serve the Christian religion.<sup>5</sup> Can adequate common elements be found that could suggest that accommodation within Hinduism is possible? How much can a Hindu remain in Hinduism and be a Christian at the same time?

**Pluralism.** It is easy to share Christ with Hindus. Anyone who tries to witness to one will quickly find them very open. This is the nature of Hinduism. The religion possesses the quality to absorb and incorporate other philosophies. Hindus will usually accept an invitation to enroll in a Bible correspondence course with enthusiasm. They are eager to learn of Christ and Christianity. When the Bible course is over, they may frame their certificate of completion and hang it on the wall. Several Hindu homes have pictures of Christ hanging on the wall, along with pictures of numerous other Hindu deities. Christ may be worshiped just as other gods are. At times the picture of Christ is adorned with a garland. Adding Christ to their already large pantheon of gods to be honored is easy.

Is this type of “conversion” sufficient? Is this type of Christianity adequate for the salvation of a Hindu? If it is, then spreading the gospel will be virtually painless in India, and this approach should be seriously examined. But if it is not, then it will be necessary for a convert to put away all that is incompatible with Christianity. Herein lies the difficulty, for Hindus will normally refuse to renounce Hindu gods and goddesses and follow Christ exclusively.<sup>6</sup>

If the doctrinal beliefs of Hindus and Christians are proved comparable, it could be argued that it might be possible to allow a Hindu to remain a Hindu and merely add the values and unique teachings of Christianity to his understanding. Thus it is important to examine the philosophy of Hindus and see how far they are compatible with the teachings of Christianity.

### **Contextualization of Theology: Comparing Major Doctrines**

While similarities and points of contact in minor areas can certainly be demonstrated, it will be seen that in the basic concepts of God, man, sin, and

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Osei-Bonsu, “Biblically/Theologically Based Inculturation,” *African Ecclesial Review*, 32 (1990): 348.

<sup>5</sup> Pieris, 117, quotes the allegorical interpretation of Deut 21:10 by Clement of Alexandria. A beautiful woman captured from the enemy could be married so long as she would be of service. The enemy is the local foreign religion, the conquest of the enemy is the conquest of another religion, the beautiful woman represents beautiful philosophy, and the appropriating of the woman as spouse is the use of the philosophy for the service of one’s own religion.

<sup>6</sup> For an example, see Atul Aghamkar, *Insights into Openness* (Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2000).

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salvation can be seen diametrically opposite philosophies, to the extent that in my opinion, it would be wiser to ask a convert to make a complete break with his former religious philosophy in order to embrace the new.

**God.** In contrast to the Christian view of God—righteous, holy, and united in purpose, thought, and action—the Hindu concept varies. Hindu philosophy asserts a belief in only one God—all pervading, self-luminous, eternal spirit, the final cause, and the power behind all things.<sup>7</sup> However, folk Hindus serve a plethora of deities. According to Vedic texts, the number of deities was limited to thirty-three. In fact there exist as many as thirty-three score deities worshiped by various Hindus.<sup>8</sup> Practically, there is a severe contrast between monotheism and polytheism. Another area that can be contrasted with similar results is the character of God.

**Man.** In contrast to the Biblical view of man as mortal, Hindus believe that man is not the being we perceive, not the body, nor the senses, nor the mind, but he is Atman, i.e., Brahma himself. The goal is to break the cycle of rebirth to merge again with Brahma.<sup>9</sup> The immortality of the soul and its transmigration are considered to be the “most significant,” original, and influential aspects of the Indian conception of the universe. These occupy the foremost position in Indian thought.<sup>10</sup> What we have is another stark contrast as to the nature of man.

**Sin.** For Christians, sin is the transgression of the law. Not having a code like the ten commandments, Hindus are traditionally weak on the concept of sin. It is usually defined as ignorance, error, or illusion. They believe that proper attitude is more important than a regular code. However, a variety of ideas are expressed. Sin has also been defined as disease, debt, breach of caste rules, defiance of god, absence of harmony with the spiritual environment, lack of spiritual power, etc. The emphasis in Hinduism is more on ideas such as non-violence, sacrifice, renunciation, and purity of mind.<sup>11</sup> Hindus do not see a need to be saved from sin. They are not trying to free themselves from sin, and the fact that Jesus saves people from sin is a new concept for them.<sup>12</sup>

**Salvation.** For Hindus, the goal of life is to break away from the cycle of birth-death, to merge again into Brahma, and the way to break the cycle is through good works—*Karma*.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the Christian concept of salvation,

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<sup>7</sup> V. Krishnamurthy, *Essentials of Hinduism* (New Delhi: Narosa, 1989), 7–8. All the other names and forms only help to express that single reality.

<sup>8</sup> Jitendra Nath Banerjee, “The Hindu Concept of God,” in *The Religion of the Hindus*, ed. Kenneth Morgan (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), 51. The thirty-three were divided into three sets of eleven, the three sets being determined by heaven, earth, and the water/atmosphere.

<sup>9</sup> Arun Shourie, *Hinduism: Essence and Consequence* (Sahibabad: Vikas, 1979), 18, 23, 158.

<sup>10</sup> P. Deussen, *Fundamental Philosophy of Upanishads*, trans. A. S. Geden (Delhi: Kranti, 1989). He compares the idea to the death of a plant that lives again through its seed.

<sup>11</sup> Sivaprasad Bhattacharya, “Religious Practices of the Hindus,” in *The Religion of the Hindus*, 151-153.

<sup>12</sup> Atul Aghamkar, 117.

<sup>13</sup> See Arun Shourie, 158, 165.

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in which God takes the initiative in saving humanity, Dhandekar asserts that Hinduism believes that “man himself, and not any extraneous power, is responsible for his own emancipation.” Dhandekar goes on to say that “This view is the very antithesis of God’s grace.”<sup>14</sup>

### Doctrinal Bridges<sup>15</sup>

The above contrasts are not to deny that certain elements of Hinduism can be used as bridges to Hindus. Among these are the following:

**Bhakti.** Whole-hearted loving devotion to God is one of several paths to salvation that might be selected. The emphasis of this path is on love. It is open to all.<sup>16</sup>

**Incarnation.** Examples of incarnation are numerous, and some can be related to the concept of a holy God. This could include reference to Jesus.

**Eschatology.** Hindus believe in the imminent end of the world. The tenth incarnation of Vishnu, Kalki, is expected to put an end to sin and sinners.

### Conclusion

Points of contact in minor areas may serve useful purposes, but these are limited.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is my opinion that in general, one should not try to use Hindu religious philosophy as a vehicle for Christian beliefs. I will therefore limit this paper to areas of contextualization related to cultural practices without religious implications.

### Contextualization in Secular Areas

In India, the indigenization of Christianity is urged primarily by the Catholics. As a result of Vatican II, the Catholics held a seminar in Bangalore, India, in 1969. They used terms like “adaptation,” “acculturation,” “involvement,” “integration,” “transculturation,” and “indigenization,” though the most popular term appeared to be “Indianization.”<sup>18</sup> Since the 1990s, their term of preference

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<sup>14</sup> R. N. Dhandekar, “The Role of Man in Hinduism,” in *The Religion of the Hindus*, 126.

<sup>15</sup> See N. Sharath Babu, “Bhakti, A Bridge to Philosophical Hindus,” D.Min. Dissertation, Andrews University, Spicer College Campus, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> The other methods are *karma* actions and *jnana* knowledge. These form chapters 3 and 4 in the Gita. *Bhakti* yoga is described in chapters 12 and 18. See also E. Ahmad Shah, *Theology: Christian and Hindu* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publ., 1966), 134.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, some of the M.A. Research Projects at Spicer Memorial College in Pune, India: Franklin David, “A Comparative Study of the Role of Blood in Christianity and Hinduism in Restoring a Right Relationship Between God and Man,” 1983; Daniel Devadhas, “A Study of the Concept of Bhakti in Relation to the Christian Doctrine of Righteousness by Faith,” 1985; Jala Israel, “A Comparative Study of the Christian Concept of Incarnation and the Hindu Concept of Avatara,” 1991; Victor Sam, “A Comparative Study of the Concept of Soul in Vedanta of Hinduism and Seventh-day Adventism,” 1992; Rajaram Bharati, “Concept of Mediation in Catholicism and Hinduism,” 1995.

<sup>18</sup> See Thomas Paul, “Inculturation in the Context of India for the Next Century,” *The Living Word* (Jan-Feb 1996): 74.

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has been “inculturation.”<sup>19</sup> The goal is that the worshipping community should retain and incorporate important elements of local culture “while at the same time critically shaping these elements so that they may bear witness to the gospel of Christ, who transforms all cultures.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Reasons for the Discussion**

The first questions that may come to mind are, “Why are we talking about this?” “What is wrong with the status quo?” Christianity donned a western garb early in the Christian era and has now become synonymous with western culture. It is through this accepted form of Christianity that thousands have found Christ and salvation. We ourselves were found by and reared through this system. Why then should we rebel against it and try to change the system, starting again from square one? People seem happy to westernize. The church should focus on other more important jobs.<sup>21</sup>

However, everything is not as ideal as could be hoped for. As Christians increase in numbers and make their presence felt, they are facing a growing hostility in many lands. The church is perceived as belonging to a foreign culture. The commitment and loyalty of Christians to the nation is questioned.<sup>22</sup> Soon after I graduated from college, I was invited to intern with a senior pastor in a large city in India. While the senior pastor was away from the city, his house was ransacked and searched by the police on the suspicion that he was an agent for the CIA.

It is not difficult to determine the reasons for these suspicions. Adventists in India, for example, tend to wear western-style clothes, speak in English, sing English songs, adopt a western-lifestyle, and more importantly, shy away from participating in the life of the community, as “this world is not their home.”

Our educational institutions are seen as major culprits in the westernization of Indian Christians.<sup>23</sup> Our main Adventist college perpetuates western culture. The nomenclature for administrators, the system of education, and the curriculum are all clearly patterned after the American model. The academic and social

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<sup>19</sup> The word “inculturation” appears to be of Catholic origin. For a study into the origin and meaning of the word “inculturation,” see Francis Clark, “Making the Gospel at Home in the Asian Cultures,” *Teaching All Nations*, 13 (1976): 131-149.

<sup>20</sup> S. Anita Stauffer, “Worship and Culture: An International Lutheran Study,” *International Review of Mission*, 85 (1996): 181.

<sup>21</sup> See D. S. Amalorpavadass, “Gospel and Culture: II. The Basis of an Authentic Inculturation,” *Word and Worship*, 11 (1978): 152. He proposes that both the tradition of the local culture and the tradition of the Church should be incorporated.

<sup>22</sup> Antony Pulickamandapam, “The Scope for Cultural Adaptations in the North Indian Culture,” *Ephrems Theological Journal*, 4 (2000): 176, 177.

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Moroney believes that Christian seminaries make seminarians strangers to their own culture. See “Some Dangers of Inculturation,” *Verbum*, 31 (1990): 328. Yet, he does not totally blame seminaries, as he sees all formal educational institutions in some way westernizing and alienating people from their traditional culture.

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activities have more in common with America than with the local culture. In a number of countries our colleges are labeled “American.” In fact, the American system of education is often associated and confused with the “Adventist” system. A student who enrolls at Spicer coming from a very different system of education must register for a course called “Orientation for College.” The course carries one hour of credit and is designed to acquaint new students with concepts new to them, such as the semester, the GPA, electives, majors, minors, selection of courses, and other things that Americans take for granted. Even with this course, most students have a difficult time adjusting. Also, by the time a ministerial student graduates, he must have a suit for graduation, and he has no desire to return to his village and work there. It is said that even if he does, he will require a translator.

Spicer does attempt to encourage a person to remain in the language and culture of origin. Fourteen language prayer groups meet on alternate Fridays after vespers. Students attain proficiency in witnessing and worshiping in their own language. Every year the college celebrates a Cultural Emphasis Day. Students depict scenes in a booth, participate in folk dances, and share ethnic food from their home area with others.<sup>24</sup>

#### **History of Christian Missions and Contextualization**

According to tradition, the apostle Thomas brought Christianity to India. Though Syriac was used in the liturgy, the Thomas Christians did not abandon their culture. Until today they share many social and religious customs with their Hindu neighbors.<sup>25</sup>

Western Christianity came to India through Portuguese colonizers who imposed their culture and theology on the Indian Christians.<sup>26</sup> Their legacy may be seen in the state of Goa, where the culture is more Hispanic than Indian. The East India Company for years resisted the urge to Christianize India, but eventually they allowed it.

In the 17th century an Italian, Robert de Nobili, noticed the “aversion of the Indians to the culture of their colonial masters.” He adopted the life style of a *sanyasi* and promoted the concept that Indian Christians should be allowed to remain in their culture and social traditions. He contributed greatly to the Indianization of Christianity by writing large theological treatises in Tamil.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The Cultural Emphasis Day has not been without question. Students have been guilty of heavy ornamentation in the name of culture, and separation of culture and religion has not always been achieved.

<sup>25</sup> IBC Research Wing, *Christianity and Conversion in India* (Rishi, 1999), 6. See also R. H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1989), 7, 11.

<sup>26</sup> S. Arokiasamy, “Towards Contextual Theology: Reflections on the Development in the Indian Church,” in *Contextual Theological Education*, ed. James Massesy (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 50.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 51

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Seventh-day Adventists came to India at the end of the 19th century. By then they had already developed a system of evangelization that was geared to English-speaking Christians.<sup>28</sup> Many of the first converts were already Christians. One early convert was even an American missionary for another denomination.<sup>29</sup> When the first Hindu was converted, it was a traumatic experience for all involved—the convert, the family, and the missionaries.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1970s, the mainline Protestant churches united into a “Church of North India” and a “Church of South India.” However, the liturgy and evangelistic methods remained largely unchanged. Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian traditions continue.

Around 1985, Dr. Brian deAlwis, a Sri Lankan, returned from the Seminary at Andrews to teach at Spicer College. One of his burdens was to free the Indian church and its theology from western influence. He started a series of publications under the banner, “Bullock Cart Theology.” After his early demise, Bullock Cart publications continued from the pen of Dr. D. K. Sankeethamony till he retired in 2000. Since then no effort has been made in that direction.

Sensing the need for a new approach to missions in India, the Southern Asia Division began a doctoral program in missions with the help of Andrews University professors trained in missions and cross-cultural ministry. Almost all of the twenty students have completed the program successfully, and their impact on the field is beginning to show.

#### **The Biblical Foundations for Contextualization**

One will notice over and over again as Bible passages are studied that when decisions regarding contextualization had to be made, in some aspects there was compromise and in others there was not.

**The Incarnation.** Roman Catholic authors refer to the incarnation of Christ as the guiding principle for inculturation. They point to Paul, who tells us that Christ emptied (*ekénōsen*) Himself, taking the form of a servant (Phil 2:7). He laid aside all His glorious form. Then Christ became flesh and dwelt among humanity (John 1:14). The Greek verb for “dwelt” is *eskénōsen*. Literally it means, “to pitch a tent.” Christ as the Son of God assumed a human context that included history, culture, traditions, and religion. He took upon himself Jewish language and practices, ate Jewish food, and wore Jewish clothes. He immersed

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<sup>28</sup> Owen McIntyre, “Seventh-day Adventist Approaches to Contextualization of Theology,” *International Association for Mission Studies*, 16 (1999): 128. McIntyre points out that early Adventist evangelistic strategy was developed through missions to English speaking countries such as Australia, England, and New Zealand.

<sup>29</sup> Gordon Christo, “How it All Began,” *Adventist Review* (April 12, 2000), 12. Fredrick Brown had been a missionary in India for another church.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon Christo, “Anywhere With Jesus,” *Adventist Review* (Jan 10, 2002), 23. Nanibala, the first Hindu convert, went through a traumatic separation from her family.

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Himself in the culture of His day.<sup>31</sup> Where Christ drew the line was sin: “he was without sin.” Thus, Catholics assert that just as Christ accepted some aspects of human nature but did not accept sin, so also only that which is incompatible with Christianity needs to be avoided.

**The Stoning of Stephen.** At first, primitive Christianity closely followed many of the tenets of Judaism. For that reason it was allowed to exist for a while within Judaism, rather than as a separate religion. Christ was understood to be the Messiah prophesied in the Scriptures, and Pentecost was interpreted as a fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. Christians worshiped the God of Moses, and the Jewish scriptures were authoritative for the followers of Christ, too. Most of their beliefs and practices were compatible with Judaism. The leader of the Christians was James, the brother of Jesus.

However, the Jewish Christians who were from outside of Palestine and were in many ways foreigners with strange customs and languages soon observed that their widows were not receiving as much food from the reserves held by the community of believers as were the native Judean widows (Acts 6:2). When they complained, seven deacons were appointed to see that no widows were neglected. All seven deacons had Greek names, suggesting that though Jewish, they were outsiders more influenced by Greek culture than many Judeans. Stephen was one of them. Accused of blasphemy against Moses and the law, he was stoned by the Jewish leaders (Acts 6:12-14). It is quite likely that he was seen as a liberal, advocating the abandonment of certain aspects of Hebrew culture in the name of the gospel of Christ. Apparently being physically circumcised meant little to him, as he accused his detractors of being uncircumcised in heart (Acts 7:51). This was a substantial threat to Jewish dogma, as physical circumcision was required by God’s own law.

**The Jerusalem Council.** When the gospel reached non-Jews in Antioch and other cities, the church faced its first big theological decision. Jewish Christians were in most respects observing the Law of Moses. Certain Pharisaic Christians were insisting that the gentile converts to Christianity should also be required to keep the rites and rituals of the law of Moses, like the Jewish Christians (Acts 15:5). After all, these laws had been given to Moses by God!

Peter testified to what he had been shown, and Paul and Barnabas spoke of their experiences. The council of leaders in Jerusalem finally made a distinction between what was only cultural and what was essential for Christians. The gentiles were required to abstain from food offered to idols, from blood, from meat that had blood in it (due to its being killed by strangulation), and from sexual immorality. But they were exempted from other areas of the Mosaic law, including circumcision.<sup>32</sup> (It is possible, of course, that these forbidden things

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<sup>31</sup> Amalorpavadass, 149; Osei-Bonsu, 348.

<sup>32</sup> Despite its being a clear command of God (Gen 17:9–14), the Christian leaders seem to have considered it part of the culture of Jewish Christians, not applicable to the gentiles (Acts 15:1-29).

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were chosen from a list of disputed issues, while some things, such as the ten commandments, were not mentioned because there was no question regarding their continuing validity.)

Again, it should be noted that in some areas there was accommodation, and in others there was not. Still, it was gradually discovered that one could be a completely submitted Christian while not being at all culturally Jewish.

**Paul in Jerusalem, AD 57.** The Jewish Christians tolerated the gentile Christians' new attitude to the Mosaic Law (Acts 21:25), but apparently they were angry that even Jewish Christians were allowed to abandon the Law of Moses. In other words, Jewish Christianity was changing even for Jews. Paul is accused of instructing the Jewish Christians (1) to turn away from Moses, (2) not to circumcise their children, and (3) not to live according to Jewish customs (Acts 21:21).

**Christianity Moves to the West.** Romans and Greeks are the only Europeans mentioned as present at Pentecost—and these Romans were soldiers and these Greeks were Jews. Nevertheless, all roads lead to Rome, and it was inevitable that Christianity would find its way there. Two Christians—Aquila and Priscilla—came to Corinth from Rome around A.D. 50, so the gospel had evidently reached the West before then.

The Church changed the culture in many ways—at least the culture of the believers. For example, people of all classes and cultures became brothers and sisters and were urged to love each other and worship with each other. Men were urged to bring their wives to the worship service—a novel idea to Greeks. Men were required to be faithful to their wives, rather than turning to prostitutes and boys for entertainment.

But the culture also changed the Church. Greek philosophy and pagan religions influenced the developing Christian theology as the centuries passed, and this led to many schisms. The hierarchical structure of Roman religions was introduced into Christianity (such as the position of *pontifex maximus*). Anti-Semitism led to ever greater rejection of Jewish elements in Christianity.

The apostles showed a lot of flexibility in dealing with culture as Christianity spread. The church should show similar flexibility when meeting new cultures. As the cultures influenced the Church, the Church changed in many ways, but at heart it remained Christian, more or less, or at least offered believers the road to salvation (though not always clearly marked).

#### **Some Possible Areas For Cultural Contextualization**

**Language.** Language is not only the vehicle of expression but the vehicle of culture as a whole. Subtle insights into culture and traditions are best expressed in the mother tongue. A religion communicated in another language remains a foreign language.<sup>33</sup> India's problem is that it is multilingual. The government

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<sup>33</sup> See Paul, 86.

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recognizes this difficulty, so English has been retained as one of the national languages. The formula followed is three languages: Hindi, English, and the local language.

Worship services and evangelism are conducted largely in local languages, but education for the ministry is carried out in English. We do not have the resources to establish a ministerial training center in every language area. The church should consider the benefits of establishing seminaries in the major language areas, such as Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu. Another difficulty is the availability of textbooks. However, Bibles exist in all major languages, and English can be used as a second language.

As mentioned before, at Spicer College, prayer groups in the major languages meet on alternate Friday nights. Ministerial students receive practice in conducting worship services in their own languages. The Sabbath School lesson classes are conducted in most of the languages.

**Lifestyle.** Perhaps the greatest difference between a Hindu holy man and an Adventist pastor is in lifestyle. The Hindu holy man is marked by simplicity, whereas the pastor tends to acquire as many western conveniences as possible. However, westernization is not only found among Christians, but among all who aspire to modern urban society. Hindus would certainly respect a pastor who renounced modern conveniences and would accept him more readily as a spiritual leader.<sup>34</sup>

The life of a *Sanyasi*, who has renounced everything, is marked by hours of meditation and prayer and simple living. Adventists also renounce much of the world's attractions in terms of entertainment, dress, adornment, tobacco, and alcohol, and they actually follow a rather simple lifestyle. Yet, the pastors have a long way to go in achieving the lifestyle of Hindu *sanyasis*.<sup>35</sup>

**Clothing.** A pastor in an Indian village was waiting one Sabbath morning for the candidates for baptism. As a woman arrived, the pastor noticed the glass bangles on her wrists and remonstrated with her, saying, "Sister, I told you to take off your bangles before you can be baptized." The husband promptly retorted, "Pastor, you are worried about my wife's bangles. Why, your wife is wearing pants!" In the setting of an Indian village, the wearing of bangles meant next to nothing. Taking them off would mean much to society, but would have little religious significance. On the other hand, for a woman to wear pants was really showing off. In Indian society a woman revealing her midriff is nothing, but showing off legs and thighs is indecent. It is important for pastors and their families to not draw negative attention by their clothing. Also, a careful study of the Indian context should be considered regarding what constitutes undesirable jewelry, and what, if any, ornamentation is required for decency.

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<sup>34</sup> Paul, 86; Pulickamandapam, 179, 180.

<sup>35</sup> See Christopher Prabhudas, "A Comparative Study of the Concept of Self-denial in Adventism and Hinduism," M.A. Research Project, Spicer Memorial College, 1991.

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**Diet.** *Ahimsa* (non-violence) is one of the great principles of Indian culture. Buddhists, Jains, and high caste Hindus give great importance to life, especially animal life, resulting in vegetarianism. Yet Christians are marked by their non-vegetarianism. Astonishingly, only a minuscule number of Seventh-day Adventists in India are vegetarians.

This is an area of great potential for Adventists. Most Christians are looked down upon for their habits of eating, drinking, and meat-eating. The Adventist temperance and health message, if practiced more strictly, would gain the respect of Hindus.

### Some Possible Areas For Liturgical Contextualization

**Worship.** There is great merit in a common liturgy for the Adventist Church worldwide, in that it promotes a sense of unity for the worldwide organization. However, it must be recognized that the liturgy itself is culturated in favor of the West and bears little resemblance to the service of the apostolic church. There should therefore be enough flexibility for the worship to be meaningful. Postures, gestures, prayers, and hymns can take inspiration from the artistic and cultural heritage of India.

**Music.** Most Adventists in India have little understanding of why our worship begins with the Gloria Patri.<sup>36</sup> Foreign visitors to our churches often remark on how we sing the same songs they sing. Early missionaries condemned the use of local instruments, especially percussion instruments. As a result, vernacular compositions were almost non-existent. For many years the only vernacular religious songs were those that used tunes from Indian movies. Congregations should use more *bhajans*—liturgical songs. The fine arts in the local language must be encouraged, especially poetry, prayers, hymns, and instrumental music. Indian instruments are to be preferred to western instruments.<sup>37</sup>

**Reverence in Church.** Indians naturally remove their shoes before entering a sacred place. Women cover their heads. Christians would do well to follow these practices. The Hindu sense of the sacred also contributes to the artistry and beauty of their temples. It might be well for Adventists to consider an architecture that is inspiring. Hindu temples usually face east or face the center of the community.<sup>38</sup> Adventists would do well to consider the advantages of constructing churches following these principles (and the possible problems, too).

**Pilgrimages.** Hindus are devout in their preparations for and participation in pilgrimages. Fasting and gift giving mark these occasions. These activities serve to intensify their faith. Thomas Christians who go on pilgrimage to Mylapore, where Thomas was martyred, are honored much like a Muslim who goes

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<sup>36</sup> Chanchal Gayen, "Inculturation in the Worship of the SDA Church," M.A. Research Project, Spicer Memorial College, 1994.

<sup>37</sup> See S. Vasanthraj Albert, "Unhealthy Tensions and Dynamics," *India Church Growth Quarterly*, 8 (2001): 163.

<sup>38</sup> Stella Kamrisch, *The Hindu Temple* 1:165, quoted in Pulickamandapam, 182.

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to Mecca or Medina.<sup>39</sup> While there is no holy place for Indian Adventists to visit, perhaps substitutes might be found, such as going to campmeetings. Occasions for church members to leave home for worship are practically non-existent in India. Members may gain much spiritually from such events.

**Festivals.** These are occasions for Hindus to come together and celebrate the god who helped them. Festivals serve to unite Hindus and are an opportunity for renewal. There is practically no substitute for Adventists. It has been suggested that Christmas and Easter be used for such celebrations.<sup>40</sup>

### **Other Possible Areas For Contextualization**

**Education.** Most Adventist schools are English medium and follow the ISC Board rather than the local State Board. This is of necessity, as only the ISC Board follows a five-day week. Our high schools are popular, and Christian education is much sought after. Spicer College, however, follows the American system of liberal education. Very few non-Adventists enroll at Spicer largely because the degrees are not recognized and not geared for jobs in the marketplace. The Adventist church needs to take a serious look at making college education relevant for India.

**Finance.** In order to be recognized as mature, the Adventist church in India must become financially self-sufficient. The church will then feel less dependent on the West materially and culturally.

### **The Dangers of Contextualization**

**Over-emphasis.** There is the danger that Christianity may distance itself too far from the West and be swallowed up by the East. In order to convince Hindus that Christians are very like Hindus, people may become more like Hindus than like Christians. Not much is accomplished in being just imitative. There is no reason for Christians to conform to Hindu standards of spirituality. Hindus do not regard Christian clergy as spiritual in that sense, anyway.<sup>41</sup>

**Syncretism.** Syncretism makes compromises with Christianity. When appealing portions of one religion are combined with selected portions of another religion, rejecting significant elements to make a new whole, the result is syncretism. Ultimately, syncretism is another form of Christ-rejection.<sup>42</sup>

**Annoyance to Hindus.** Adoption of certain customs and symbols indiscriminately may annoy followers of the religion from which the borrowing is

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<sup>39</sup> Pulickamandapam, 183, notes that even the non-pilgrims share in this by helping the pilgrims.

<sup>40</sup> See Chanchal Gayen, "Festivals for the Adventist Church in India," D.Min. Dissertation, Andrews University, Spicer College Campus, 1999.

<sup>41</sup> Soares-Prabhu, 100, 102, writes of the dangers of *ashram spirituality*.

<sup>42</sup> Mar Abraham Mattam, "Christianity and Inculturation," *Ephrems Theological Journal*, 1 (1997): 66. See also David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Allahbad, 1981), 113.

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done. This may indicate an irreverent disregard to their sensitivities and may alienate them further.<sup>43</sup> Also, Christianity cloaking itself on the surface with Hindu garb will not fool them, but rather seem like a wolf in sheep's clothing. Similarly, Christians would not appreciate neo-eastern religions trying to appear like forms of Christianity to attract westerners.

**Culture Freezing.** Culture is dynamic and is constantly changing. For example, the chili was unknown in India before the Portuguese introduced it, but today it is an inseparable part of its culture. Arguably, culture is never the same at any two given moments.<sup>44</sup> Going back to a certain environment after a gap of a decade or more can illustrate that well. Just as computers advance so rapidly that as soon as one is purchased it is outdated, by the time an anthropologist has researched and published a work on a given culture, many years may have gone by, and the culture may have changed. The description may not be accurate anymore.

Most indigenous ministers feel guilty that they do not know their culture as well as they should. This is probably because they do not know it as well as it was described by an anthropologist many years ago. They probably know their culture well enough by functioning on the same wavelength, understanding the people, and being able to communicate with them.<sup>45</sup>

**Cultural Prescriptivism.** When a culture is encountered, it frequently does not match with the description given by the anthropologists. Sometimes colonialism is blamed for the change, and an attempt is made to purify the culture of foreign influence. In the process, clergy might start prescribing how the people should act and react—how one should greet another, how to behave at a funeral, or how to bury a corpse. Anthropology is a useful tool for a person who wants to understand a culture that is not his own. But it is a tool and should not become the master. Not only missionaries, but also local workers are sometimes the arbitrators of which customs should be preserved and emulated. Some prescribe customs from the “good old days,” motivated by nostalgia.<sup>46</sup>

**Distinguishing Between Gospel and Culture.** Some so-called Christian values may not be so much Christian as they are western. Down through time, Christianity has assimilated many western values, and western values have been influenced by principles of Christianity. This was inevitable during the time of confusion between church and state. Thus a distinction needs to be made between what is really the gospel and what is culture. It should be noted that Jesus'

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<sup>43</sup> Pieris, 118, refers to Buddhists in Thailand who “reacted with bitter indignation against the church for allegedly usurping their sacred symbols for Christian use.”

<sup>44</sup> Moroney, 329, quotes Heraclitus, “You can't step twice into the same river, because the water is constantly flowing.”

<sup>45</sup> Moroney, 329, 330.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

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own contemporaries, who belonged to the same culture as He did, did not cherish His values. They found them unacceptable and unlivable for the most part.<sup>47</sup>

**Distinguishing Between “American” and “Adventist.”** Adventism, having started in America, has many Americanisms attached. For example, the American system of education has become accepted as the Adventist system. In many countries the Adventist Church stands by itself, unaffiliated with any university, unrecognized by any accrediting body other than AAA, issuing degrees that nobody outside the church accepts. Attempts to change the system attract charges of not following the “blueprint.”

**Conclusion**

Evangelists soon realize that cultural barriers impede the spread of the gospel. Many of these barriers may be unnecessary. The church in India must undertake serious study to remove unnecessary cultural obstacles. Conversion to Adventism must involve as little trauma as possible. Apostolic Christianity probably had a lot more in common with Indian culture than does today’s Adventism. The sooner this is examined, the better.

At the same time, one should be aware that there is serious danger in using Hindu philosophy as a vehicle for conveying Christian theology. It is bound to confuse rather than clarify, to antagonize rather than attract, and to weaken the gospel rather than strengthen it.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 336.