

ASIAN HERITAGE AND THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

This paper explores the significance and profundity of the Asian heritage and how Christianity finds itself in Asia amidst ancient civilizations. Some important questions like the following need to be answered: What kind of future will Christianity have in Asia? How can Asia benefit from the Christian presence? What would be the distinct contribution of Christianity, if any, to Asia?

Asian Heritage

It is an interesting fact that all the major religions of the world originated in Asia—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in India, Confucianism and Taoism in China, Zoroastrianism in Persia, Judaism, Christianity and Islam in West Asia and Shintoism in Japan. One may ask, “Why did the world religions originate in Asia and not in Europe or Africa or elsewhere? This is a topic for research. Down through the centuries Asia has been profoundly religious. The essentially religious heritage of Asia manifests itself in the Asian way of life. The religions of Asia have inspired Asian philosophy, literature, architecture, sculpture, music, dance, painting, socio-political institutions and so on.

Asia is the largest continent with a number of regions, each having its own distinct culture inspired largely by the religion of the region. West Asia is predominantly Islamic, Central Asia Islamic and Buddhist, South Asia predominantly Hindu and Islamic, Southeast Asia largely Buddhist, Islamic and to some extent Christian, East Asia Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist and Shintoist. Asia is not like the Christendom of the Europe of the bygone days, unified by a single religion. It is a continent of diverse religions and cultures, each unique in its own way.

The Indian Heritage

Let me just highlight the Indian heritage as space does not permit a detailed look at the other cultural heritages of Asia such as Buddhist, Confucian, Islamic and so on. India is not a nation; it is nations. It comprises a multitude of regions, languages, cultures and religions. Hinduism too is not a single religion; it is a cluster of religions. The name Hindu is derived from the river Sindhu and ‘the Persians, who found difficulty in pronouncing the initial *S*, called it *Hindu*. . . With the Muslim invasion the Persian name returned in the form of Hindustan, and those of its inhabitants who followed the old religions became known as Hindus’¹

The origin of Hinduism in northern India dates back to Vedic period (1500 B.C. – 900 B.C.) and in southern India the Tamils had their own religion. Hinduism was finally shaped into a composite religion due to the intermingling of the Aryan and Dravidian elements. Prior to the Aryan and Dravidian civilizations, there existed the Indus Valley civilization dating back to the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C.

Hinduism’s contribution to Indian civilization is enormous. Some writers call India ‘the wonder that was’ (before the Muslim invasion). Indian civilization is the only living civilization from time immemorial. The other ancient civilizations of Egypt, Sumeria, Greece, Rome and so on have become museum pieces. India has made remarkable contribution to philosophy, literature, architecture, sculpture, fine arts, mathematics, astronomy and so on.

The Syrian astronomer-monk Severus Sebokht wrote in 662 A.D. as follows: “I shall not now speak of the Hindus, . . . of their subtle discoveries in the science of astronomy – discoveries even more ingenious than those of the Greeks and Babylonians – of their rational system of mathematics, or of their method of calculation which no words can praise strongly enough – I mean the system of using nine symbols. If these things were known by the people who think that they alone have mastered the sciences because they speak Greek they would perhaps be convinced, though a little late in the day, that other folk, not only Greeks, but men of a different tongue, know something as well as they.”²

India's influence on Southeast and East Asia has great historical and cultural significance. A.L. Basham acknowledges this as follows: "The whole of South-East Asia received its culture from India. Early in the 5th century B.C. colonists from Western India settled in Ceylon, which was finally converted to Buddhism in the reign of Asoka. By this time a few Indian merchants had probably found their way to Malaya, Sumatra, and other parts of South-East Asia. Gradually they established permanent settlements, often, no doubt, marrying native women. They were followed by brahmans and Buddhist monks, and Indian influence gradually leavened the indigenous culture, until, by the 4th century A.D., Sanskrit was the official language of the region, and there arose great civilizations, capable of organizing large maritime empires, and of building such wonderful stupa of Borobodur in Java, or the Saivite temples of Angkor in Cambodia. Other cultural influences, from China and the Islamic world, were felt in South-East Asia, but the primary impetus to civilization came from India.

"Indian Historians, proud of their country's past, often refer to this region as "Greater India", and speak of Indian "colonies". In its usual modern sense the term "colony" is hardly accurate, however. Vijaya, the legendary Aryan conqueror of Ceylon, is said to have gained the island by the sword, but beyond this we have no real evidence of any permanent Indian conquest outside the bounds of India. The Indian "colonies" were peaceful ones, and the Indianized kings of the region were indigenous chieftains who had learnt what India had to teach them.

"Northwards Indian cultural influences spread through Central Asia to China. Faint and weak contact between China and India was probably made in Mauryan times, if not before, but only when, some 2,000 years ago, the Han Empire began to drive its frontiers towards the Caspian did India and China really meet. Unlike South-East Asia, China did not assimilate Indian ideas in every aspect of her culture, but the whole of the Far East is in India's debt for Buddhism, which helped to mould the distinctive civilizations of China, Korea, Japan and Tibet."³

It is said that Indian philosophy had its impact on Greek philosophy as there was contact between Greece and India through brisk trade in the pre-Christian era as supported by archaeological evidences. The influence of Indian literature and philosophy is noticeable in European literature and

philosophy too. "... Goethe and many other writers of the early 19th century read all they could of ancient Indian literature. We know that Goethe borrowed a device of Indian dramaturgy for the prologue to "Faust," and who can say that the triumphal final chorus of the second part of that work was not in part inspired by the monism of Indian thought as he understood it? From Goethe onwards most of the great German philosophers knew something of Indian philosophy. Schopenhauer, whose influence on literature and psychology has been so considerable, indeed openly admitted his debt, and his outlook was virtually that of Buddhism. The monism of Fichte and Hegel might never have taken the forms they did if it had not been for Anquetil-Duperron's translation of the Upanishads and the work of other pioneer Indologists. In the English-speaking world the strongest Indian influence was felt in America, where Emerson, Thoreau and other New England writers avidly studied much Indian religious literature in translation, and exerted immense influence on their contemporaries and successors, notably Walt Whitman. Through Carlyle and others the German philosophers in their turn made their mark on England, as did the Americans through many late 19th-century writers such as Richard Jeffries and Edward Carpenter. . . . The sages who meditated in the jungles of the Ganges Valley six hundred years or more before Christ are still forces in the world. . . . India's contribution to the world's cultural stock has already been very large, and it will continue and grow as, in her new freedom, her prestige and influence increases. For this reason if for no other we must take account of her ancient heritage in its successes and its failures, for it is no longer the heritage of India alone, but of all mankind."⁴

Hinduism has been a way of life. The Hindus have been guided by a number of *shastras* such as the Vedas, the *Dharmashastras* like the great Epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, *Natyashastra* regarding dance and music, *Shilpashastra* regarding architecture and sculpture, *Arthashastra* concerning polity and so on. There has been a perpetual yearning for moksha or liberation from the world to union with Brahman. The Hindu way of life consisted of four stages: 1) Brahmacharya (of the student), 2) Grahasta (of the householder), 3) Vanaprasta (of the hermit) and 4) Sanyasa (of the homeless wanderer). The Ultimate goal of life is union with Brahman. Profound religiosity marks the Hindu way of life. The German Indologist Max Müller states: "If I were to ask myself from what literature we here in Europe, we who have been nurtured almost exclusively

on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw that corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human, a life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life – again I should point to India”⁵

Friedrich von Schlegel testifies similarly: “It cannot be denied that the early Indians possessed a knowledge of the true God; all their writings are replete with sentiments and expressions, noble and clear and severely grand, as deeply conceived and reverently expressed as in any human language in which men have spoken of their God... Among nations possessing indigenous philosophy and metaphysics together with an innate relish for these pursuits, such as at present characterizes Germany, and in olden times was the proud distinction of Greece, Hindustan holds the first rank in point of time.”⁶

The British knew they encountered a superior civilization in India which had a humbling effect on them. J. Seymour Keay, M.P., Banker and Agent in India, wrote in 1883: “It cannot be too well understood that our position in India has never been in any degree that of civilians bringing civilization to savage races. When we landed in India we found there a hoary civilization, which, during the progress of thousands of years, had fitted itself into the character and adjusted itself to the wants of highly intellectual races. The civilization was not perfunctory, but universal and all-pervading – furnishing the country not only with political systems, but with social and domestic institutions of the most ramified description. The beneficent nature of these institutions as a whole may be judged from their effects on the character of the Hindu race. Perhaps there are no other people in the world who show so much in their characters the advantageous effect of their own civilization. They are shrewd in business, acute in reasoning, thrifty, religious, sober, charitable, obedient to parents, reverential to old age, amiable, law-abiding, compassionate towards the helpless and patient under suffering.”⁷

Hinduism as an ancient religion has been the bedrock of Indian civilization for centuries. What is there in Christianity which is not there in Hinduism?⁸ Does Christianity have anything unique to give to the people of India who, according to the European historian A.L. Basham “reached a higher level of kindness and gentleness in their mutual relationships than

any other nation of antiquity?”⁹ The Catholic Church officially acknowledges the following about Hinduism, “Thus, in Hinduism men explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. They seek release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love.”¹⁰

“Eastern” Christianity in the West

Many Hindus look upon Christianity as a Western religion introduced in India by the Western colonial powers. They are hardly aware of the Eastern origin of Christianity. In the Old Testament of the Bible we see God singling out Abraham, an Asian to become the father of a great nation. The Christians believe that in Jesus Christ, an Asian Jew God became man. We may say God became an Asian. Mary, the mother of Jesus was a simple Asian woman regarding whom the Catholic Church promulgated the dogmas of Immaculate Conception and Assumption based on the tradition of belief and experience of the early Christian community. The same Mary is also honoured as the Queen of Heaven. No woman has ever been so lavishly honoured as Mary. Peter, the first Pope and Paul the apostle were Asians as well. When I say God became an Asian in Jesus, I do not advocate any nationalism or continentalism. Towards the end of their lives the apostles Peter and Paul were in Rome and died there. So historically Rome developed as the seat of Catholicism. Christianity began to spread all over Europe civilizing many barbaric tribes over the centuries. Eventually Europe emerged as a Christian civilization. Christianity with its origin in the East ended up predominantly as the religion of the West. But, according to tradition St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew, two of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, brought Christianity to India in 1st century A.D.

St. Thomas landed at Maliankara on the southwest coast of India in 52 A.D. He preached the gospel and established the first Christian communities in the ancient Chera kingdom known today as Kerala. Tradition holds that he was martyred in Mylopore (Chennai, Southern India) on the east coast in 72 A.D. Christianity has been alive in Kerala for

more than 2,000 years. This is a fact unknown to many Indians who think Christianity was first introduced in India by the Europeans. According to another tradition, St. Bartholomew, an apostle of Christ, preached the gospel in the Bombay region and established a Christian community.

“Western” Christianity in the East

With the discovery of new lands by the maritime powers of Europe like Spain and Portugal, Christianity was introduced in many regions of Asia by the European missionaries. Christianity, an Asian religion came back to Asia in a European garb. Obviously, the Asian view of Christianity as a European religion is not surprising. Christianity, the religion of the white man was associated with the colonial powers of Europe who were the ruthless exploiters of the colonies in Asia and elsewhere. That is why Gandhi said, “I like Christ, but not the Christians.”

The Future of Christianity

It is inappropriate to speak of *the* true religion. If a religion claims to be *the* only true religion, it would imply other religions are false. In fact there are no false religions. Every religion teaches its followers to be truthful and good. Every religion deserves to be respected and appreciated. Instead of speaking of *the* true religion, we may speak of the uniqueness of each religion. Every religion has something unique. For example, in Christianity there is an overwhelming experience of God grounded in human history. The call of Abraham is historical. The incarnation of God in Jesus is historical. The death and resurrection of Jesus witnessed by his disciples are historical. The founding of the Church by Jesus with the mission to preach the good news is historical. The experience of a personal God is historical. As Levinas says, “Nobody can really say *I believe – or – I do not believe* for that matter – that God exists. The existence of God is not a question of an individual soul uttering logical syllogisms. It cannot be proved. The existence of God, the Sein Gottes, is sacred history itself, the sacredness of man’s

relation to man through which God may pass. God's existence is the story of his revelation in biblical history."¹¹

Besides historicity, what is unique in Christianity is the incarnation and resurrection. No other religion has a claim to incarnation and resurrection. Incarnation means God became man in Jesus Christ. It is not the same as the avatar. There can be a number of avatars, but incarnation as a historical event took place only once and it is final. The resurrection means Jesus rose from death on the third day. Another important uniqueness of Catholic Christianity is its belief in the Eucharist, the body of Christ in which Jesus is truly present. Another unique feature of Catholic Christianity is succession to Peter and the other apostles. Peter was appointed by Jesus to look after his church. The Pope is the successor to Peter and the bishops to the other apostles. The pope and the bishops in the Church are guardians of the teachings of Christ and protects the purity of the truth handed down to the Church by Christ through his apostles. This solidarity of the bishops of the world with the pope is something unique to Catholic Christianity. Christianity, thus, can speak of its uniqueness rather than of its claim to *the* true religion.

What can Christianity offer to Asia which already has a rich and ancient heritage? In retrospect, one can speak of Christianity's impact, for instance, on India. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation was profoundly influenced by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which had its share in inspiring his adoption and advocacy of nonviolence. He had read the works of Tolstoy and Ruskin too. Social reforms such as the abolition of *sati* (burning the widow in the funeral pyre of her husband), of child marriage, and of the *devadasi* system (temple prostitution) were influenced by the Christian perception of human dignity. The Christian missionaries opened their schools to all the children whereas in the traditional educational system of India, not all and only those from the so-called upper castes were permitted to learn. Christianity made signal contribution to education and health care through schools, colleges and hospitals.

The Christian organizations continue to run good schools. Many non-Christians too run good schools. So what will be the unique contribution of Christianity to Asia? What will be the future of Christianity in Asia? Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen once asked Mother Teresa how she was able to lead so many persons to Christ. She replied, "I would ask

them: ‘Do you like to know about Jesus?’ They would ask me, ‘Who is he? Is he like you?’ I would tell them, ‘He is not like me; I am trying to be like him’. They would say, ‘Then tell us about Jesus’.”

This anecdote clearly reveals what the Christians are called to do in Asia. “Preach the gospel always; if necessary, use words,” as St. Francis of Assisi said to his brethren. It is not the task of Christianity to proclaim itself as *the* true religion. The greatest thing Christianity can do is to convince people that God must be given the first place in their lives. People must seek God above all else. Seeking God above all else implies obeying His commandments and His holy will at all times. Being a seeker of the Lord, one is immediately and simultaneously in love with his fellow human beings. Reaching out to the brethren, especially the rejected, the persecuted, the abandoned and the marginalized is gospel in action. When the non-Christians see the kind of deeply spiritual, caring and unselfish lives of Christians, they will realize what it means to love God. In such a context, Jesus as Lord and saviour, the church as a community of believers, the sacraments (in the case of Catholics) and the hope in resurrection and eternal life will be seen as meaningful and true.

Without having a profound experience of God, it is impossible to tell others about the love of God. We do not need professional evangelists with a million dollar proselytization program, but we do need men and women who have truly experienced the love of God and share it with their brethren in humility and joy. If much of the evangelical preaching is unfruitful, it is because it lacks the experience of having witnessed to the death and resurrection of Jesus in one’s own life.

Christianity’s dialogue with other religions should not aim only at converting others but for gently sharing with them one’s own profound experience of God in humility and to listen attentively and respectfully to the experiences of others. Christianity can contribute to Asia if it plays its prophetic role with regard to justice and peace in the context of globalization on the one hand and exploitation, poverty, environmental decay and violation of human rights on the other. Christianity is not a strategy. Mere organization, planning and management of the Church, without a profound experience of the Lord and intimacy with him, would be of no avail in sharing His light with others. It is in the holiness of the

Christians, can one sense the hope of Christianity's contribution to the people of Asia and of the world at large.

We live in times of great crises everywhere despite enormous advancement in science and technology. Many Third World nations face economic crisis, others political, spiritual and moral. Christianity in the West seems to be declining. The Churches are almost empty. A number of Catholic seminaries have been converted into hotels. Many Catholic priests are unemployed as their service is not very much required. People hardly marry in the Church. Many do not marry at all; they prefer to cohabit without marriage. The single parent family is another new phenomenon. There are also Western adherents of oriental religions and practices. Many seem to dislike the Church for several reasons. Some young people say, "Jesus, yes; Church, no." Some Christian doctrines seem spurious in an age of science and technology.

The Church in the West faces the task of revitalization of itself. The Church can learn from the experience of the Asians. The spiritual experience of the Christians of the West can fuse with that of the Asians. The Church can learn from the praxis of nonviolence of Gandhi as to how to bring about a nonviolent lifestyle the world over. The Westerners can learn the great Indian languages of antiquity such as Tamil and Sanskrit to discover the spiritual riches of India. The Tamil Bhakti literature of the Saivite Nayanmars and the Vaishnavite Alvars is a rich treasure of spirituality. It is no exaggeration to say it has no parallel in the world. One can truly learn from this literature what it means to love God, what it means to be human. This healing, ennobling and enriching literature should be tapped. Discovery of Asian spirituality can lead one eventually to the rejection of materialism, consumerism, individualism, atheism and agnosticism. Thus Christianity in Asia rooted in the values of Asian spirituality can contribute to the regeneration of spirituality the world over. In this sense Christianity has a future in relation to the Asian heritage.

ENDNOTES

¹ A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, Rupa & Co; New Delhi, 2001, p.1.

² *Ibid*, p. VI.

³ *Ibid*, p. 485.

⁴ *Ibid*, 486 - 487.

⁵ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj Or Indian Home Rule*, Navajuvan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1998, p. 95.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 95.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 94.

⁸ Someone asked Sadhu Sundar Singh, a convert to Christianity “What is there in Christianity which is not already there in Hinduism?” and he replied, “Jesus Christ.”

⁹ A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican II*, (Vol. 1), Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Nonchristian Religions, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 56321, 1984, p. 739.

¹¹ Richard Kearney, *Dialogue with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, Manchester Press, 1984, p. 54.