

4-1-2023

## Book Review: Christian Barriers to Jesus: Conversations and Questions from the Indian Context by J. Paul Pennington

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### Recommended Citation

Gudka, H. (2023). Book Review: Christian Barriers to Jesus: Conversations and Questions from the Indian Context by J. Paul Pennington. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 15(1), 151-154. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol15/iss1/12>

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## **Book Review**

### *Christian Barriers to Jesus: Conversations and Questions from the Indian Context*

By J. Paul Pennington

William Carey Publishing, 2017

270 pages

US\$22.99, Paperback

Reviewed by Harshit Gudka. Harshit is a Ph.D. candidate in Intercultural Studies at the Cook School of Intercultural Studies, Biola University in Southern California. He also serves as an associate lecturer in theological and intercultural studies at the International Leadership University, Kenya (formerly known as The Nairobi International School of Theology).

Some years ago, my nine-year-old nephew who knew about my journey to faith in Christ from a Hindu religio-cultural background overheard a conversation I had with my parents. He quipped, “Why are you speaking in Gujarati (our vernacular)? I thought you are a Christian!” Laughter followed from the family members who heard his frank but rather opinionated comment on “Christian” cultural expectations. On another occasion, my aunt, curious to discover what we had named our children, was much relieved (though surprised) to know that we had not given them Western “Christian” or “baptism” names. Dr. Paul Pennington’s book, as the title suggests, dives deeply into such issues and more on how Indian Hindus think about foreign-sounding concepts surrounding the Christian faith. These concepts can present unnecessary barriers for Hindus in India to meaningfully meet Jesus.

Far from offering an exhaustive treatise dealing with all the possible barriers that keep Hindus from considering Jesus, Pennington writes a

penetrating introductory text that competently tackles three foundational or “fundamental” barriers that Hindus in the complex, diverse Indian context encounter. One caveat, admitted by the author, is that the book is a “work in progress” (p. xvi) inviting further refinement and understanding of the barriers identified. From the three primary barriers, Pennington integrates and addresses six other related barriers. These are discussed below.

A clear strength in the book is that the author bases his work on empirical evidence he gathered through extensive visits to India as he engaged in meaningful pastoral conversations and discussions with both Hindus and local Indian Christians. In this sense, his work competently blends both an insider’s (emic) local Indian perspective, as well as an outsider’s (etic) synthesis and analysis of the barriers. However, the work would have been more robust if he provided a more rich, thick description of the Indian voices.

The first fundamental barrier Pennington mentions is “cultural separatism.” This barrier creates an impression of cultural segregation, isolation, and extraction versus a more preferable way, in which Christ-followers would relate with Hindus in their cultural contexts. In this regard, Pennington helpfully appeals to Jesus’ friendship model and the apostle Paul’s incarnational model of cultural engagement (e.g., Mat. 9, 11; 1 Cor. 9:19-23). Pennington draws powerful parallels from Jesus, the friend of sinners, and from Paul who became “all things to all people” (1 Cor. 9:22, NIV). By implication, the challenge is posed for Jesus Followers in India to embody Christ’s example as a “friend of Hindus” (p. 7) and Paul’s incarnational way among Hindus.

The second related fundamental barrier is the word-concept “Christian” and its corollary “Christianity.” Such terms elicit negative perceptions for Hindus, due to the negative cultural baggage the concepts have accumulated in India’s history. While not rejecting Christ’s person and message *per se*, it is the “Christian” package with its negative foreign and alien associations that hinder Hindus from considering Jesus. Pennington carefully assesses the very rare usage of “Christian” in the Bible and boldly invites other more appropriate scriptural-based terminology given the sensitivities of that term in the Indian Hindu context. One such term is “Yesu bhaktas” — “incarnational believers in India” who are “devoted followers exclusively of Jesus” (p. 244). Hence, Pennington provides an insightful answer to the central question, “Do you need to *become a Christian* to genuinely follow Christ?” (p. 41; emphasis mine). The Yesu bhakta as a burgeoning “incarnational believer” movement is certainly innovative and necessitates more empirical research into this phenomenon.

The third fundamental barrier is “church,” due to Hindu perceptions

and experiences linked to the term. “Church” is a complex barrier which, to the Hindu, further connotes foreign notions of extraction from their community, membership into a new foreign socio-religious and cultural organization, and unhealthy institutionalism — not to mention the Indian legal and divisive caste-affiliated consequences of joining the “Christian church.” Pennington makes a creative contribution here in terms of a call to return to the biblical Greco-Roman concept of *ekklesia* which he defines as “an incarnational fellowship of disciples of Jesus” (p. 61). *Ekklesia* understood this way can better capture the essence of what the New Testament “church” originally depicted.

The rest of the barriers highlight and build on the previous three foundational barriers. The fourth barrier is presented by the terms “evangelism,” “gospel,” and “preaching.” These are also conceptualized as alien intrusions characterized by confrontations with Hindu gods and culture, misunderstandings, and confusion around methods and forms of presenting the Christian message.

The fifth barrier of conversion is also complex and adds to the offensive Hindu perception of conversion understood mainly in external terms of converts extracted from their Hindu community to another foreign one. Renaming converts and imposing matters of personal conscience are examples. Pennington wisely draws the negative implications of such an antagonistic perception from the vantage point of the Hindu philosophy of tolerance toward those of other faiths, and collectivistic Indian culture vis-à-vis the more individualistic Western culture. He boldly suggests that the solution is to rid such conversion jargon within the Indian context, given the associated counterproductive connotations.

The sixth barrier is baptism. To be sure, Pennington does not cite the essential biblical practice of baptism as a barrier *per se*, since similar rituals of devotion mark Hinduism. Baptism becomes a barrier only when it is identified with communal separatism or church institutionalism rather than the person of Jesus. He thus proposes appropriate contextual forms of baptism that befit Indian culture and are faithful to scriptural teaching.

The seventh barrier of worship is addressed in terms of form and style that further seek meaningfulness and relevancy in Indian Hindu settings. Pennington helpfully dispels the myth that “Christian” music was developed in a cultural vacuum, implying that there is ample room to explore diverse worship forms and methods suitable within Indian culture.

The eighth and ninth barriers of financial dependency and benevolence (or financial inducement) can be treated together. These are again complex topics for extended discussion, but Pennington offers valuable insights from the Hindu perspective. The common Hindu perception identifies

dependency as a problem inherent in foreign funding of church and mission work. These are also negatively seen in terms of representing Western interests of promoting a proselytism agenda (conversion business), hindering local responsibilities, and fueling the above-mentioned barriers. This occurs for example when Indian churches and mission agencies misrepresent evangelism and conversion intentions by masking “their purposes as economic, social, or educational” uplift (p. 186). Such “proselytizing” activities disguised as benevolence work to attract financial inducements can perpetuate mistrust by Hindus and tempt Christians to misappropriate methods to garner Western donor funding. Pennington advises believers to examine their motives and explore creative ways to address the issues around benevolence, inducement, and dependency.

Pennington’s book title, *prima facie* may appear as a confrontational polemic centered on negative barriers hindering Hindus from considering or following Jesus. However, in reality, it is balanced and practical, and it is a sensitively reasoned invitation to his readers to love and embrace Jesus over and above unnecessary human-created cultural traditions and inventions which externally come in the way for Hindus to truly meet and consider Christ. Throughout his work, he draws upon additional insights of influential Hindus speaking on Christian realities in India, giving a resonant voice to the barriers concerned. He further evaluates from a scriptural perspective the often uncritically accepted assumptions of Indian Christians regarding these realities that are often founded on incorrect biblical interpretations and propagated down the generations. In this way, he invites much-needed further empirical and theological research in the areas of missiological study. This missiological emphasis especially relates to the ongoing contemporary debate of the so-called insider movements phenomenon. As applied and modified for Indian contexts, insider movements are concerned with the retention of the Hindu identity of Hindu background believers vis-à-vis their Indian “Christian” communities. Such missiological issues concern more effective contextualization of the good news of Jesus— not only in Hindu Indian contexts but in other settings as well.

This book will prove valuable for a diverse range of audiences. It can benefit followers of Christ from Hindu, Western and other backgrounds. It is also relevant for missiologists and mission practitioners working among Hindus, and for *Yesu bhaktas* who have chosen to incarnate their faith in their socioreligious and cultural Hindu settings. In fact, it can speak to Hindus who are on a quest for a nuanced understanding of what it means to be a believer in Christ in the Indian context.