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Prospects of Evangelism in India

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The prospects of evangelism in India, as in any part of the world, may be considered from two points of view. We can look at them from the perspective of the eternal purpose of God, in which the Gospel is believed to be God's answer to man's essential need which he must sooner or later discover, and in which the goal of history is to 'sum up all things in Christ'. Such a conception, and consequent hope, need no special reference to geographical location, historical development, present situation, or the state of the church. Or we can consider the prospects of evangelism from the point of view of these very factors. It is from this latter point of view that we are going to consider the prospects of Evangelism in India.

The Background

Though India was several thousand miles away from the birthplace of Christianity, within a generation after our Lord's Resurrection, the Gospel seems to have reached her shores. If the tradition is to be believed—and the balance of probability is heavily in its favour—exactly nineteen hundred years ago, the Apostle Thomas first preached the Gospel in our land and established a church. No one can doubt that the church has been in existence in India for at least sixteen hundred years. That the Gospel reached the shores of India so early is the evidence both of her religious attraction and the adventurous and consecrated zeal of the early Christians.

The late Canon W. E. S. Holland has, in his book, *The Goal of India*, pointed out that India has been the religious mother of half mankind. She has given birth to four living religions, namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, and has extended hospitality to three others, namely, Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism. This fact alone gives her a significance and importance which no history of civilization can underrate or bypass. It is also to be noted that during at least the first two thousand years of her known history, her religious development is the main texture of her culture and civilization. Her religious quest is not yet over. No other country can show a book such as the late J. N. Farquhar wrote on *Modern Religious Movements in India*, and the book is already out of date!

Unfortunately, the religious development of India instead of moving towards ethical monotheism, as happened in Judaism, took a turn towards pantheistic monism, and this has had grave consequences for the religious thinking of Hindu India. Dr. P. D. Devanandan, in an article

contributed to *World Dominion* entitled 'Evangelism in a Renascent India', has summarized these consequences as four: 'One is that Ultimate Reality is essentially unknowable The second basic affirmation is that no one theological formulation about the nature of the Ultimate Reality can claim absolute validity. All religions are equally true (and equally false); the exclusive claim of any one religion cannot be regarded as valid. . . . The third basic affirmation of Hinduism is that, since all religions are only partially true, it is possible that if one accepts many different interpretations of God and Reality, believing in the essential truths for which they separately stand, the sum total of partial truths will certainly be more than the partial truth affirmed by any one religion. . . . Fourthly, Hinduism recognizes the right of every Hindu to accept and practise whatever way of life he may find useful to his way of thinking and his peculiar social circumstances.' This way of thinking has resulted in a kind of vague religious universalism and its corollary, religious syncretism—two serious problems which the preaching of the Gospel has constantly to encounter.

Buddhism and Jainism sprang up as 'protestant' movements within Hinduism. Jainism has not made much headway except in claiming a few hundred thousand adherents among whom are some of the wealthiest merchants. Buddhism though driven out of the country by Brahmanism, has found deep roots in the soil of Far Eastern countries, especially in Burma and Ceylon, where it is being revived under the guise of nationalism. Buddhism is entering India from a back door, and the enthusiasm it has evoked in Dr. Ambedkar, the leader of the 'untouchables', is a factor not to be overlooked.

Sikhism, born out of military necessity to oppose the fanatic onslaught of Islam, has lost its spiritual vigour, and a strong section of it has taken on a political colour and is now claiming 'a place in the sun'.

Islam came with the freshness and vigour of a conquering faith. With its monotheism and consequent iconoclastic zeal, it made rapid headway, but except for a large number of conversions in the wake of political conquests, and some indirect influences on the social and cultural life of India, it has made little impact on the Hindu mind. Islam and Hinduism have, for the most part, remained like oil and water. Any attempt at synthesis, such as made by Akbar the Great through his *Din i Ilahi*, or through mysticism such as that represented by the rustic poet Kabir, or, in modern times, such as that made by the Theosophical Society, have not met with any appreciable success. The establishment of Pakistan is a direct consequence of the lack of understanding between Hinduism and Islam. There are, however, two legacies, good and bad, which Islam has left on the soul of India. Islam has always stood for the missionary character of religious truth. It has no use for the point of view summarized by Dr. Devanandan in the quotation above. And we cannot belittle the contribution of Islam in securing in the Constitution of India the freedom not only to profess and practise but also to propagate religion. But, on the other hand, Islam has also brought with it a spirit of intolerance. Not that Hinduism has always been free from such a spirit—the treatment of the Buddhists by Brahmins would belie that—but on the whole the Hindu mind tends towards tolerance and a kind of religious universalism as

we have seen. The reaction to this religious intolerance can be seen in such Hindu movements as the Hindu Mahasabha or the Rashtra Swayam Sangh. This intolerance is not now confined to Hinduism's relation with Islam but has extended itself to Christianity. An English Weekly called *The Organizer* published from Delhi containing violent attacks on Islam and Christianity, serves as an example of this attitude.

Before we come to the state of the Christian Church in India, we must touch briefly on the political, social and economic factors which in the present century have assumed growing importance.

The political struggle for independence has made India politically awakened. The achievement of freedom and her strategic position in the international world, have brought a political consciousness which is fraught with important consequences. Socially, the Hindu Caste system has played a part which is nothing less than a social crime in history. The impact of education and contact with the outside world in the realm of thought has produced a dilemma as to how the movements of social progress and the age-long traditions of Hindu society are to be reconciled. Economically, poverty has been the inheritance of the vast majority of people to this day—India is a rich land where poor people abound! Of all the problems which the Free India has to tackle the problem of poverty is the most serious as well as urgent.

In the meantime a new factor has entered the scene—Communism. This is no place to dilate upon the good and evils of Communism. One thing is clear, that it has presented another dilemma to the heart and mind of India. She is still incorrigibly religious, but she is hungry for a social order in which justice would be done to the underdog. This dilemma is the travail of her soul which we must recognize if we are to do justice to the spiritual and mental struggle through which she is passing today.

What about The Christian Church? The history of the church in India is a history of successes and failures, and we must look at both to evaluate her strength with reference to the task which God has committed to her. We can do no more than barely mention some points on both sides.

The Christian Church, Roman and non-Roman, claims today about nine million Christians in India and Pakistan. The vast majority of these have come from very poor social, economic and religious background, though in many parts of India, particularly in Madras and Travancore, there are exceptions to this. This fact is both an asset and a liability, asset because it is an evidence of the transforming power of Christ (and have not the 'mass movement' Christians by the witness of their lives drawn the caste people to the church?) and liability, because their nurture and development involves leadership which the church does not possess.

The deeds of mercy through such enterprises as hospitals, infirmaries, asylums, have not only spoken in vivid terms of the love of compassion of the Master, but have provided inspiration and pioneering experiment for Government as well as private efforts. Through social work, organizations like the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A. have rendered similar service and inspiration. The educational enterprise has been one of the most potent factors in leavening the thinking and conduct of a vast number of non-Christian people who have come within its influence.

But in these enterprises there has been the danger of rationalizing social service as a half-way evangelism or *preparatio evangelica*, while in actual effect the results do not justify such a conclusion.

The Church in India has not developed adequate self-support. Its dependence on financial assistance from abroad has had good and bad consequences. It has enabled her to carry out work on a scale and at a standard which is not insignificant. It has also maintained an ecumenical link with the church abroad. But on the other hand, it has made it an object of suspicion and derision in the eyes of non-Christians. It has produced a standard which is unrealistic, and worst of all, it has retarded in the church the process of self-expression and aspiration after a pattern of its own.

But by far the greatest handicap is the disunity of the church. Disunity not only produces duplication which the church in India cannot afford, but it weakens the reconciling witness of the church and brings it under subjection to traditions and modes of worship which are exotic and which have little relevance to the spiritual needs of the country.

Prospects for the Future

In considering the future, we must once again remember the two points of view mentioned at the outset. India with her religious sensitiveness must sooner or later find the satisfaction of her spiritual hunger in Jesus who is 'the Bread of Life'. But we are concerned at the moment with the immediate future in the context both of the present situation in the country and of the church to whom is committed the task of evangelizing her.

We shall first mention some of the outstanding opportunities for the Gospel at the present time, some signs of new life in the church, and conclude with making some suggestions as to the principles which need to be kept in mind in tackling this great and glorious task.

The first observation that we should make is this. The political freedom of India has brought about a situation which is nothing short of revolutionary. This does not mean merely the protection of the fundamental religious rights in the Constitution, although that fact is of no small significance. It means, rather, the attitude of the Hindu India to Christianity. Of course India has always had a deep respect for our Lord. But on the whole it will be true to say that the prejudice which apparent association of Christianity with a ruling power had engendered is fast disappearing. It is interesting, for instance, to note the progress of leaflet and newspaper evangelism. In Nagpur on Good Friday this year, a leaflet entitled 'The Cross' was distributed throughout the city as part of an evangelistic campaign on the streets and in the homes. Copies of the leaflet were supplied to some of the local papers. One English daily reproduced the entire leaflet, another published a faithful summary, and a Hindi paper published a long reference.

Or to take another kind of instance, a Christian Governor can today give a personal witness to his faith in Christ at an official or public gathering and the public listens to him with appreciation and admiration.

Next we must mention a new interest in the Gospel on the part of the intelligentsia. While it is not possible to quote figures, I believe it will be true to say that the last five years, since independence, there

have been more converts and enquirers from among the educated classes than in any other five years since the beginning of the modern missionary enterprise in India. Among those who are eagerly studying the Bible through correspondence courses there is a large number of university students. And, of course, there are many who have found the anchorage of their faith in Christ but who have not clearly understood the relevance of the organized church. Dare we blame them altogether?

There have been in the recent years some significant 'caste movements' towards Christianity, particularly in the Telugu area and in the Uttar Pradesh. The problem has been how to find teachers for those who are seeking instruction.

The Muslims, finding themselves in a new situation, are having to prove the sustaining power of their own faith. The last few years have seen some outstanding conversions from among the educated Muslims. In the Uttar Pradesh the movement among 'Rajput Muslims' is a striking phenomenon. It can be said without fear of contradiction that the Muslims are today more open to the influence of the Gospel than they have ever been since the advent of Islam in this country.

Another significant movement worth mentioning is that among women and housewives. Some of them are no more 'secret disciples' but have come out into the open, and their relatives or husbands, though at first averse, are now following their footsteps or cheerfully conniving. Large number of instances can be cited from South India.

Among the tribal people, the march of Christianity goes on. Assam continues to gather a rich harvest for the faith. Some States where preaching of the Gospel was not possible under the old regime have now been opened to the Gospel. Even Nepal is gradually opening its doors. Faith is removing mountains!

One other fact must be mentioned. The growing influence of Communism has caused grave concern in many parts of the Christian world. Personally I am not terribly exercised about it. In this connection the following points must be remembered: first, the religious sensitivity of the Indian people (I say this in spite of the apparent secular outlook of the vast majority of educated people) and second, the challenge which Communism brings in regard to social and economic justice. It is not surprising to find a considerable number of Christian youth having Communist sympathies. Not all of them have renounced the Christian faith. Some who had actually joined the Communist party have even come back into the fold of the church. We must remember that many fine serious Christian young men and women are having to face the paradox so beautifully portrayed by our Lord in the parable of the two sons, one who said that he would go into the vineyard and did not go, and the other who refused to go, but actually went. We must not forget that the ideals of social justice, equality of opportunity appeal to the young mind, and when it fails to find in the church a deep concern for them, it revolts. There is another angle from which we must look at this question. Let us remember that God in His providence can use unexpected agencies to stab his people awake. The Cyrus of old in relation to the people of Israel is not the only example. Finally, Communism, as we have seen, raises the issue of social justice. An educated non-Christian is moved by the challenge. His religious heritage makes him look into his own religion to find 'a moral equivalent'

to Communism, and he finds none. But where the church has been the church, he is drawn to it and to the spiritual power behind it. Bishop Pickett not long ago referred to some university students in Delhi who frankly confessed that the real issue was between Christianity and Communism, and therefore they wanted to know something about Christianity.

I hope enough has been said to indicate that the prospects of evangelism are not only bright but challenging. But is the church adequate for the task? As we looked at the state of the church, perhaps we felt depressed. It must, however, be remembered that our sufficiency is of God, and we believe the Christian enterprise is His enterprise. Its future is fortunately not in our hands. But we must thank God for many signs of vitality in the church today. The missionary concern is growing. The Church of South India is a living manifestation of the evangelistic concern. It had become concerned with lands outside India and has already sent a missionary to Papua. The Lutheran Church has a missionary in Indonesia. The United Church of Northern India has had a missionary in Africa, and plans are afoot for sending more Indian missionaries. The National Missionary Society has broken new grounds in some of the erstwhile closed states. The border of Nepal is being gradually penetrated. Perhaps the most significant movement is seen among groups of young men and women, especially in Travancore, who are looking for fields which they can evangelize through community living and its missionary outreach. The evangelistic potentiality of the Ashram movement and that of itinerant preaching are being discovered afresh. This is only a gleanings from a rich harvest. There are many other signs of a new evangelistic concern in the church today.

If 'the stupendous task', to use the phrase given by those who initiated the movement of church union in South India, is to be accomplished, certain actions are obviously called for:

(a) Deepening of the spiritual life of Christian people. It is only as we 'come' closer to Christ that we hear His constraining call to 'go' and make disciples. The church in all its local manifestations must think out ways and means of meeting this need for revival and renewal.

(b) The lay forces of the church must be mobilized. Dr. Emil Brunner has called the present age an age of the lay Christian, not because the lay people are doing all that they should, but because of the opportunity and the obligation which are theirs in the evangelistic mission of the church.

(c) Within the lay forces of the church the place of youth is strategic. Young people are ready for adventure, otherwise why should Communism claim so many of them? It is a pity that the Student Volunteer Movement in the West has lost its place, perhaps for reasons which we in a different context cannot appreciate. But that there is a place for some such movement in India cannot be doubted. Thank God the S.C.M. is making an effort to revive it. But must it be confined to university students? What about the rural youth and rural evangelism?

(d) Our homes must be Christianized in order that they may be like a city set on a hill. In days to come the 'Mission Compound' isolation will have to be broken. In such a situation their silent witness will become an eloquent testimony.

(e) The importance of literature cannot be overemphasized in this new day of hunger for books and reading material. Literature is needed both for the nurture of the Christians and for evangelistic outreach. Much lip service is paid to literature but this 'handmaid of the church' continues to receive poor treatment.

(f) The church must tackle the problems of social and economic justice within its sphere of influence, and show an active concern for this in the country through study and fearless pronouncements where called for, if her voice is to be respected and her message is to ring with challenging relevance.

(g) India is too much for a divided Church. The days of academic discussion on church reunion are over. We cannot continue to be dictated to by considerations, however deep rooted historically they may be, which are not relevant to the situation in our land. We must be dictated to only by the behest of the Lord who prayed that they might be one so that the world might believe.

The prospects of evangelism in India can be expressed in no better words than those given by the Master Himself, 'The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few'. We must therefore in conformity to His injunction pray—wrestle with God—that He may send labourers, many and more adequate, into His harvest.



But a missionary especially from one land to another must also take account of the freedom of the Church. He must beware lest he confuse the Christian culture of his country with the Gospel. The Gospel is seed which, when it is sown in the soil of a country's life, brings forth a plant. The plant is Christianity. It bears the marks both of the seed and of the soil. There is only one Gospel, but there are many Christianities, many cultural forms in which men express their Christian faith. It is inevitable that the missionary should bring a pot plant, the Christianity of his own culture; it is essential that he allows the pot to be broken and the plant to be rooted in the soil of the country to which he goes. 'For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake' (II Cor. 4:5) that is the missionary ideal. Perhaps another word, with respect to the calling of the missionary, may not be out of place here; a word just to emphasize the desirability of the missionary calling being looked upon as a calling to serve a people and not only as a calling to do a particular work. It should not be possible for a missionary to speak too easily of leaving one country and going to another.—Daniel T. Niles in *That They May Have Life*.