

HINDUISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

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IT is a remarkable fact that the Church has been established in India for over fifteen hundred years and has had for the most part everything in its favour, and yet in all this time hardly one in a hundred of the people has been converted to the Christian faith. The position is, indeed, worse even than this figure would suggest, as the vast majority of Christians are concentrated in a few very small areas and in the greater part of India the mass of the people remains today untouched except in a very general way by the Christian faith. It is necessary to go even farther than this and to say that for the immense majority of the Indian people Christianity still appears as a foreign religion imported from the West and the soul of India remains obstinately attached to its ancient religion. It is not simply a matter of ignorance. This may have been true in the past, but in recent times there has been a remarkable revival of Hinduism, which is more or less consciously opposed to Christianity, and the educated Hindu today regards his religion as definitely superior to Christianity. These facts, which can scarcely be questioned, suggest that there has been something wrong with the way in which the Gospel has been presented in India (and the same remark would apply to all the Far East) and especially in the relation which has been established between Christianity and Hinduism.

It is not as though India were in any sense indifferent to religion or opposed to any new form of it. On the contrary the Indian people may be said to be the most religious people on earth. For five thousand years India has lived on a continuous tradition of religion. Its beginnings can be traced back to the time of the beginning of religion in Egypt and Mesopotamia, but while the religion of Egypt and Babylonia has become a thing of the past, as dead as Greek religion, the religion of India has undergone a continuous evolution and has emerged today as one of the great living faiths of mankind, so that it even attracts converts from the West. In the course of this time Hinduism itself has undergone a remarkable transformation, while yet remaining true to its inmost 'idea', and at the same time India has given birth to other forms of religion, like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, which remain no less vital today than Hinduism itself. Why is it that Christianity has remained outside this living stream of religion as a thing apart and has failed to penetrate

into the religious spirit of India? Is it due to the nature of Christianity itself or is it due to some failure in the Christian apostolate?

Perhaps we can best approach this problem if we consider briefly what has been the history of Christianity in India. According to a tradition, derived from the apocryphal Acts of St Thomas, which is widely attested by the Fathers of the fourth century (St Ephrem, St Gregory Nazianzus, St Ambrose, St Jerome), St Thomas the Apostle originally brought the Gospel to India. There is also a strong local tradition in Kerala (the extreme south-west corner of India, formerly known as Travancore-Cochin) that St Thomas established the Church there. But unfortunately the tradition of the Acts places his apostolate in the north of India (the Punjab) where no trace of Christianity remains; while there is no documentary evidence for the existence of a Church in Kerala before the sixth century. All we can say with certainty is that there was a Church established in Kerala in the fifth century which was under the jurisdiction of the Persian Church and used the East Syrian or Chaldean liturgy. This Church has survived to the present day, still preserving its ancient traditions, and forms the strongest body of Christians in India. The number of Catholics in Kerala alone is almost equal to that in all the rest of India, and almost half the vocations to the priesthood and the religious life in all India come from Kerala.

This then is the first thing to be noted. The Church in India is largely concentrated in one small area, from which priests and religious are sent out all over India as 'missionaries'. The majority of these Catholics belong to the Syrian rite, though there is also a considerable body of Latin Catholics deriving from the time of St Francis Xavier and the Portuguese missions of the sixteenth century. Very little is known of the history of this Syrian Church from the fifth to the fifteenth century. It seems to have preserved its faith and its integrity in its isolated state by becoming what was practically a separate 'caste' among its Hindu neighbours. Thus the Syrian Church remains today wonderfully integrated in its social customs with the surrounding Hinduism. Christians do not appear here as foreigners, but are a distinct but perfectly integrated element in the social life of the country. In their religion on the other hand, the Syrian Christians seem to have kept rigidly aloof from Hinduism. Until recently they showed no power of expansion whatsoever; they remained a people apart, exercising no apostolate. In recent years a great 'missionary' movement has grown up among them and they send out priests and religious, as has been said, all over India. But their Catholicism is now, apart from the liturgy, entirely western in all its forms of piety and thought and it shows no more capacity

to enter into vital contact with Hinduism than any other form of Christianity in India.

The other great concentration of Catholics in India is to be found in Goa (which is now, of course, not strictly a part of India at all) and its offshoots in Bombay and Mangalore. This Church derives from the expansion of the Portuguese Empire in the sixteenth century and it is here that the great weakness of the Church in India is to be found. The gospel was brought to India in the train of the Portuguese armies and the policy of the Portuguese was to make their converts renounce all their distinctive Indian customs (which were considered to be tainted with Hinduism) and to become Portuguese as far as possible in every way. They were given Portuguese names (which they retain to this day) and compelled to adopt European habits of food and clothing (particularly in the matter of eating meat, which meant that they became 'outcastes' to the Hindus). Not only were all the forms of religion, liturgy, theology and devotional customs of a rigidly western pattern but all the external forms, churches, statues, paintings and music, were faithful copies of western models. It is difficult to exaggerate the effect that this has had on the Church in India. The Goan Catholics are today in a sense the élite of the Church in India. They have preserved an extremely firm faith (and in this respect it must be said that the Portuguese policy has been fully justified) and have a great many vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. After Kerala the majority of 'missionary' vocations in India come from Goa and Mangalore, and what is perhaps even more important, the majority of the bishops in north India come from this Church. But with all their admirable qualities, the Goan Catholics remain cut off from the main stream of Indian culture. It must be said that in the last few years they have begun to awake to this fact and a great effort is now being made to 'adapt' the Church to Indian culture which is having considerable effect. But the consequences of the past cannot be wiped out in a day. It is this more than anything else which has made the Church in India appear as a foreign importation and a relic of colonialism. It is this which has kept the Church isolated from the main stream of Indian life and incapable of penetrating to the heart of the people. Though through the labours of St Francis Xavier and other apostles of his kind the Church was able to win converts in the first century of Portuguese rule, the number of converts, at least among the educated, has since then been negligible.

In regard to this it must be said that the failure of the Church to win converts among educated Hindus corresponds with the failure to win converts from Buddhism or Islam in other parts of the world.

We are compelled to ask again whether it is not due to some failure in the method of the apostolate. In fact we find in India, as elsewhere, in general no attempt was made to understand the religion of the people to whom the Gospel was to be preached. On the contrary it was generally treated with the utmost contempt and condemned without consideration as 'paganism' and 'idolatry'. Can we be surprised that Christianity has so often been despised and hated in return? Even a holy man like St Francis Xavier, who is moreover the patron of Catholic missions, made no attempt at discrimination. To him all Hindus, but especially Brahmins, were 'devil-worshippers', the Buddhists were 'atheists', the Moslems were 'infidels'. It may surely be said that an attitude like this makes it morally impossible to win converts, except by a miracle of grace on which a saint like St Francis could often rely. But for the ordinary missionary it has meant that the hearts and minds of educated people are necessarily closed to the Gospel.

There have, however, been exceptions to this general rule. In China there is the example of Ricci and his fellow Jesuits who, by studying the Chinese classics and living as mandarins, were able to win a sympathetic hearing among the most learned and religious of the Chinese; and in India there is the wonderful example of de Nobili, who by living as a 'sannyasi' (one who has 'renounced' everything to seek God alone) and making a deep study of the Hindu scriptures was able to win even the Brahmins to his faith. De Nobili, in fact, gives us the key to what was wrong in the Christian approach to the Hindu and shows how the Gospel might have been presented to India in such a way as to attract its deepest minds and its most religious men. De Nobili worked in the Tamil Nad, that is the region of South India between Kerala and Madras, with its centre at Madura, one of the great 'sacred' cities of India. He found in Madura a Portuguese priest, who had been there eleven years without making a single convert. His mission was entirely confined to the poor fisher-folk, the people to whom St Francis had preached, who were regarded as 'outcastes' by the Hindus. As a 'parangi' (a Portuguese, the name which was, significantly, given to all Christians) this priest was himself regarded as an 'outcaste' and his mission was therefore doomed to failure from the start. De Nobili immediately changed all this. He became a 'sannyasi', that is one who has reached the highest stage of the spiritual life and is considered to be 'above' caste, and scrupulously observed all the rules demanded of this state (such as not eating meat fish or eggs, or drinking alcohol, and observing perfect poverty, chastity and religious devotion). In this way he immediately found the way open

to him to approach the Brahmins and the other caste Hindus and to win a hearing for the Gospel.

Though De Nobili eventually obtained the approbation of the Holy See for his method of apostolate, yet the constant and unscrupulous opposition of the Portuguese to all his efforts at evangelization made his work almost impossible. Yet he left behind him a considerable body of converts from among the Brahmins and the other caste Hindus, and his apostolate was continued after him by his followers, Beschi and de Britto. In the nineteenth century, after the suppression of the Society of Jesus, all this work ceased and a return was made to the conventional methods of preaching. Yet in spite of this there remains to this day in the Tamil Nad a Catholicism which one feels to be more closely integrated with the surrounding culture than in any other part of India.

In De Nobili's method of evangelization there are two elements which need to be considered in relation to the apostolate today. There is first of all his study of the sacred writings of Hinduism. De Nobili made himself a master both of Sanskrit and of Tamil, the Tamil language being second in importance only to Sanskrit in the religious culture of India, and he seems to have obtained a deep and thorough knowledge of the Vedanta. In the second place De Nobili lived as a 'sannyasi'; that is, he adopted the traditional way of life of a 'holy man' in India. Both these seem to be essential elements in the apostolate in India and in both respects he has had followers in modern times. The study of the Vedanta has been principally the work of the Jesuits in Ranchi near Calcutta. Two great Sanskrit scholars, Fathers Dandoy and Johanns, edited for twenty years a periodical called *The Light of the East*, in which an attempt was made to relate the Vedanta to Catholic philosophy in a series of articles called 'To Christ through the Vedanta'. These articles were by Father Johanns and represent the most thorough and systematic attempt to study the different schools of the Vedanta in the light of the philosophy of St Thomas which has yet been made. His contention was that all the elements of a perfect system of philosophy, or rather of natural theology, existed in the Vedanta, but that as it lacked the idea of creation, in the proper sense of '*creatio ex nihilo*', it was never able to establish the true relation between God and the world. Either it had to say with Sankara that the world, as such, has no real being and that God alone is the one reality 'without a second'; or it had to say, with Ramanuja and the other masters of the Vedanta, that the world is in some sense a 'part' of God, a 'mode' of the divine being. But once the doctrine of creation was introduced, he believed that it was possible to construct

a perfect system of Christian philosophy on the basis of the Vedanta.

The work of Father Johanns has not yet received the attention which it deserves. His mode of exposition is perhaps too much westernized to appeal to Hindus, though many expressed their appreciation of his learning. On the other hand, Indian Catholics as a whole remain impervious to any serious study of Hindu thought and *The Light of the East* had to cease publication for lack of support. Yet this task of the confrontation of Hindu and Catholic thought remains one of the principal tasks of theology in our time, and the work of Father Johanns and Father Dandoy (whose *Ontology of the Vedanta* was published in French with a commentary by Maritain and Olivier Lacombe in 1932) must be considered the most important pioneer work in this direction. There are happily other Jesuits who are continuing these studies today in India, but there are few Indians among them. Yet it is to Indian Catholics that we must look ultimately for the development of theology along the lines of the Vedanta and the production of what may be called a Christian Vedanta which would show how the doctrine of the Vedanta finds its proper fulfilment in Christ.

But perhaps even more important than the study of the Vedanta is the following of the ascetic life, which has always been characteristic of the Hindu seer. For the Hindu, philosophy has never been merely an abstract science but always a way of salvation. It is a 'theology' in the deepest sense, a way to God. The word which is used to describe the state of one who is engaged in the study of the Vedas is 'brahmacharya', which can best be translated as 'seeking God' and which is held necessarily to involve the observance of chastity. Moreover, those who have reached the final stage in the search for God are called 'sannyasis' that is men who have made a total renunciation (*sannyasa*) of the world and live in absolute poverty. It can hardly be doubted that if the Church is ever to penetrate deeply into the inner life of Hinduism, it will be necessary to have Christian 'sannyasis' who are prepared to live in the same kind of poverty as the Hindu. This involves something much more than the normal standard of religious poverty in the West. What is considered poverty in the West is regarded as luxury by the Hindu. A single full meal of rice and curry a day (without meat, fish or eggs), a mat to sleep on, bare feet or at most sandals for walking; these are considered the norm for a 'sannyasi' and there seems to be no reason why a Christian should not adopt these customs.

The most serious attempt to follow this way of life in modern times is that of Father Monchanin, a French priest of saintly character and remarkable learning, who came out to India in 1932 to work as

a member of the S.A.M. under the Bishop of Trichinopoli in the Tamil Nad, not far from the scene of De Nobili's apostolate. After working for seventeen years as a poor parish priest in this district, he joined with a French Benedictine monk, Father le Saux, to establish an ashram on the banks of the sacred river Kavery, not far from Trichinopoli. The ashram consisted of small huts of brick with a concrete floor and a thatched roof and no furniture, built in a mango grove by the banks of the river. They had a small oratory built in Hindu style, the sanctuary taking the form of a 'mulasthanam' (the inner shrine of a Hindu temple), and a narthex for the people being attached in the style of a 'mandapam' (the outer court of a temple). Here they lived in the utmost simplicity wearing the Kavi (saffron-coloured) dress of the Hindu 'sannyasi', going bare-foot, sleeping on a mat on the floor, and adapting themselves in all their habits of food and behaviour to Hindu customs. Those who visited them there know how deep was the silence and solitude, the atmosphere of peace and of the 'desert', in this ashram.

But there was more than this. Father Monchanin and Father le Saux were both deep students of Hindu thought, but they had also realized that the ultimate ground of meeting between the Church and Hinduism must take place not in the realm of thought but in that of contemplation. Behind all Hindu philosophy, behind all its search to know God, there is a still more profound impulse to experience the reality of God, to participate in the very being of God. This is the ultimate quest of the soul of India, which has inspired its religious tradition from the time of the Vedas to the present day. Unless the Church can answer this desire, unless she can show not merely that she possesses the true knowledge of God but also that she can lead souls to the experience of the truth, to that wisdom which passes all understanding, she will never reach the soul of India. This was the ideal for which Shantivanam (the 'abode of peace') stood. It was to establish a school of the contemplative life in India which would correspond with the most profound aspirations of the Indian soul, to lead India to the fulfilment of its quest for the experience of God by showing that it could be found in Christ.

Unfortunately this initiative in the contemplative life met with practically no response. Indian Catholicism appears to be still too deeply rooted in its fear of Hinduism (a fear based on ignorance) to be able to make this contact with the Hindu tradition at its deepest level. When Father Monchanin died rather suddenly in 1957, Father le Saux was left alone and externally nothing had been achieved. Yet it is difficult to believe that his work has failed. We

must rather believe that he was a pioneer, the fruit of whose labours have yet to be seen. Like Charles de Foucauld, perhaps, he was ahead of his time and we may hope that the seed which he planted will one day bear fruit.

The ideal of a contemplative life adapted to India is, however, still being continued at Kurisumala ashram. The founder of this community, Father Francis Mahieu, is a Cistercian of the abbey of Scourmont in Belgium. He came out to India in 1955 in search of the contemplative life in an Indian form and lived for a year at Shantivanam. But he was then led to start a new foundation in Kerala on somewhat different lines. Kerala, as has been said, is the strongest centre of Catholic life in India. He felt that if the contemplative life was to take root in India, it must first be planted here in the very heart of the Church. He was attracted also by the Syrian rite, which is in use all over Kerala and is profoundly Eastern in all its forms of expression and ritual, especially in the Syro-Malankara rite, the rite of Antioch, which he adopted. The life of this ashram is, therefore, based on the Syrian liturgy, a liturgy which is extremely rich in Biblical imagery; it is in fact an offshoot of the Semitic genius and as it were a continuation of the poetic genius of the Semites in Christian times. The life is, therefore, deeply rooted in the soil of the Bible and of Biblical tradition. At the same time, an attempt has been made to return to the sources of monastic tradition, to the Fathers of the Desert, not only to Cassian and the Egyptian fathers but also to the great Fathers of the Syrian tradition. Thus, though based on the Rule of St Benedict with a strict Cistercian observance, the life may be said to have a definitely Eastern character. As yet no attempt has been made to link up with the Hindu tradition except in externals: the monks wear the Kavi habit of the 'Sannyasi', go barefoot, sleep on mats on boards and eat, squatting on the floor, with their hands. It is felt that the Indian Church is not yet ripe for a meeting with Hinduism at a deeper level.

Yet it may be hoped that if the contemplative life can thus be established within the Church in a form which is attractive to Catholics, it may eventually provide a meeting place, in which contact can be made with the Hindu mystical tradition. The Church has first of all to recover her own foundations, to return to the sources of the monastic life, to the Bible, to the primitive liturgy to the 'holy fathers', to whom St Benedict referred his monks for the daily inspiration of their lives. Only when the contemplative life has taken root and begun to grow in this way may we hope for that contact with the living sources of Hindu spirituality, by which the

Church may ultimately be enriched. But always this must be the goal. India must find the answer to her own quest for God in Christ and she must find it in her own way. It must come as the fulfilment of her own tradition, the end to which by secret ways God has been leading her from the beginning of her history.

ANCIENTS VERSUS MEDIEVALS

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‘IN time no less than in regions there are wastes and deserts.’ So wrote Francis Bacon with medieval science in mind. And when Whewell two hundred years later spoke of ‘the almost complete blank which the history of physical science offers, from the decline of the Roman Empire, for a thousand years’, he was only summing up a view of the Middle Ages generally accepted from the seventeenth century down to our own times.

Historians of science did not need much encouragement before passing rapidly and gratefully over the medieval period. Many of the works had never been printed and existed in manuscript only; and everywhere one was confronted with an unfamiliar terminology and barbarous style. That we now know as much as we do about medieval science is due in the first place to the French physicist Pierre Duhem. He re-examined works that had been untouched for centuries and in his monumental treatises of fifty years ago made some disconcerting claims for medieval physicists, especially for his fellow-countrymen of the fourteenth century. To take just one example, Nicolas Oresme emerged as the inventor of co-ordinate geometry, and even as a precursor of Copernicus, although he discussed the motion of the earth only to reject it. Not surprisingly, many took the view that Duhem had overstated his case, but now the medievals had their champion. Issues had been raised, and evidence must be heard.

Unfortunately, the evidence was not forthcoming, unless one accepted Duhem’s quotations at their face value, and overlooked his tendency to tear them out of context and to offer only his translation even when this meant imposing his own interpretation. And there, by and large, the matter rested for thirty years.

In the last two decades, however, the history of science has emerged as a university discipline. This has provided scholar-