

The Problem of Christian Missionaries

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My involvement

Now that the dust has settled, let us have a look at the problem of Christian missionary activities which raised a storm during the past autumn and winter. In a debate on conversions, it may be useful to hear the voice of a convert. I was raised as a Roman Catholic in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, which was for centuries a Catholic frontline region against Protestant Holland and Masonic-secularist France, and a top-ranking provider of missionaries.

One of my uncles is a missionary in Brazil, another was a parish priest in Antwerp until his death. We were raised with the example impressed on our minds of countrymen like Father Constant Lievens, who built the Jesuit mission in Chotanagpur in the 19th century, and of Father Herman Rasschaert, the Jesuit who was martyred there in 1964. He had tried to prevent a tribal, largely Christian mob from killing some local Muslims in revenge for the mass-killing of Garo tribals, also mostly christianized, by Muslims in nearby East Pakistan. His death is included as number 2 in the list of "atrocities on Christians" circulated by the United Christian Forum for Human Rights. I still have the highest regard for Father Rasschaert, though I have become skeptical of the claim made in all the press reports and literary narrations of his martyrdom that he was killed by "Hindus": in the Christian version, tribals are emphatically "not Hindus", except when they misbehave.

In a sociological sense, I am still part of the Catholic community, meaning that my children go to a Catholic school, I am a member of the Christian-Democratic trade-union, cultural foundation and so on. I have also retained my sympathy for the causes of Catholic nations, like Quebec's sovereignty and the Irish cause, and I can still argue the Catholic point against Protestantism or refute the allegation that the Inquisition killed millions of people or that Pope Pius XII was a Nazi collaborator. I still think highly of the Catholic social teachings and occasionally reread passages from Saint Thomas Aquinas. And I would still feel at home in the company of a Lievens or a Rasschaert, or their successors. Nevertheless, I am no longer a Roman Catholic. I am a secular humanist with an active interest in religions, particularly Taoism and Hinduism, and keeping a close watch on the variegated Pagan revival in Europe. The reason why I became an apostate has nothing to do with revolt against Christian morality, nor with indignation at the inhuman persecutions of unbelievers in various countries and ages, nor with a rejection of the Church's political alliances, Left or Right. The real reason simply is that the basic doctrine of Christianity in all its denominations is untrue. While ultimate truth may elude us, it remains perfectly possible to decide on the untruth of a given doctrine, when it is found to be contrary to reason and to observable facts.

Christianity, a mistake

The essence of Christianity is a belief, a particular truth claim: that Jesus was the sole son of God and that he redeemed mankind from sin by his crucifixion and resurrection.

Modern Bible scholarship has made that belief untenable. Jesus was a troubled personality whose beliefs were entirely within the Jewish tradition, at least within its extremist fringe of people who expected Judgment Day to arrive within their own lifetime. He never founded a new religion, Saint Paul being the real inventor of Christianity as a sect separate from Judaism. The Gospels are highly doctored texts, rewritten to suit the theological developments and political needs of the budding Church. Thus, the injunction to pay taxes to the Romans ("give unto Caesar...") and the depiction of Roman governor Pilate as innocent of Jesus' crucifixion were included to mollify the Romans after the defeat of the Jewish revolt in AD 70. Most importantly, Jesus never rose from the dead. The decisive difference between the dead and the living is that the living are someplace in this world, while Jesus, like all dead men, is nowhere to be found in this world. He was spirited away in the "Ascension to Heaven", which amounts to dying: he left this world. Of course you could say that "his spirit lives on", but that is equally true of other inspiring characters, both historical and fictional.

The reason why Christians are a shrinking minority in Europe is that an educated population, which applies its mind to religious questions, cannot keep on managing the contradiction between this faith and reason forever. This is not for want of trying: generations of Christian intellectuals have tried to harmonize faith and reason. The Saint Thomas institute (Leuven, Belgium) where I studied philosophy was founded in 1889 as an instrument to prove the basic unity between Aquinas's Christian philosophy and modern science. But to no avail: most professors teaching there now are no longer practising Catholics themselves. Many moderns including myself have discovered that religion is still relevant, that the religious urge has survived the interiorization of the scientific worldview, that "the 21st century will either be religious or not be at all" (André Malraux); but the Christian belief cannot satisfy that religious need, because we cannot base our lives on fairy-tales anymore.

One of the great surprises which Indian "secularism" offers to people familiar with genuine secularism, is that it totally shuns and even condemns the fundamental questioning of Christian (or Islamic) dogma. For ten years I have closely followed the Indian communalism debate, and not once have I seen a "secularist" mentioning the debunking of Christian beliefs, still the single most revolutionary achievement of the secular study of religions. Even non-essential Christian fairy-tales like the story of apostle Thomas's arrival and martyrdom in South India are repeated ad nauseam in "secularist" pieces on the current missionary crisis.

If Christianity were true

No less surprising is that even the Hindutva campaigners against Christian proselytization are silent about what ought to be their strongest, most peaceful yet most devastating weapon: the fictional nature of Christian dogma. On the contrary, quite a few of them have lapped up Theosophical stories about Jesus having come to India for his spiritual training, and returning there after his resurrection. Their point is that Jesus' message has been "distorted" by the Church (which is true but hardly proves that he was somehow a Hindu), and that Jesus himself would therefore have abhorred the missionary subversion in India, his Gurubhumi. It is probable that Jesus' injunction to "go and teach all nations" is a Pauline interpolation, repellent to the Jewish Christians led by Jesus' brother James, but it is quite certain that Jesus was a preacher who wanted people to follow him.

The entire Hindutva argument against the missionaries ignores the question of the truth of Christianity. Yet, the answer to that question makes all the difference when we want to evaluate the practical problems underlying the present crisis. Consider the allegation that missionaries use material rewards to induce conversions. This is absolutely correct, as anyone from Christian countries can testify: in religion class, we were told that “material help is a necessary prerequisite for spiritual help”, so we should put some of our pocket-money into the donation box for the missions. On the Evangelical programme of Dutch television, an evangelist recently boasted how he converted Nepalese tribals at a fast rate by giving them a kind of walkman reciting the whole Bible in their own language, a modern equivalent of the trinkets given to African chieftains by Vasco da Gama. It is likewise well-attested that missionaries use deception to over-awe illiterate people, e.g. staged miracle healings. This material inducement or exploitation of gullibility may seem unethical from a non-Christian viewpoint, but it looks very different once you assume that the Christian belief is true. In that case, remaining a Pagan means eternal damnation, while conversion brings eternal salvation, and the greater good of eternal salvation amply justifies the minor evil of bribes and deception needed to lure people into the true faith.

The Sangh Parivar alleges that conversion is “anti-national”, a position supported in part by the historical fact of Christian separatism in the Northeast (and, less well-known, of 1947 intrigues between Jharkhand leaders and the Muslim League). But here again, anti-national designs should be evaluated differently if Christianity is true. In my country, secular nationalists recall with sadness that in ca. 1600, Belgium failed to gain independence from Catholic Spain while Holland succeeded, so that Holland turned Protestant while Belgium remained Catholic. The Catholic position on this national defeat is different: the Dutch heretics may have won their national struggle but they are now burning in hell, while the Belgians lost their freedom but won their eternal salvation by remaining in the true faith. Certain things are more important than nationalism. If Christianity is true, we must support the strengthening of the faith in all Christian pockets in India, if necessary by separating them from Hindu India. But the best would then be to convert the whole of India, which would turn Indian Christians into the greatest patriots.

Failure of the Hindutva critique

The Sangh Parivar is disinclined to educate its cadres on the illusory nature of Christianity, possibly because this would entail the tedious job of clearing the superstitious deadwood from Hinduism as well. It avoids polemicizing against Christianity as such and prefers to focus on the historical and contemporary misbehaviour of Christian missionaries: the Goa inquisition, the destruction of the Mylapore Shiva temple near Chennai, the expulsion of Riyang tribals from Christian-dominated Mizoram. These arguments about Christian fanaticism are valid and deserve being repeated by secularists, but to Christians they miss the point. They are well aware that all men are sinful, a basic Christian doctrine, so the sins of the missionaries do not nullify the truth of Christian dogma.

Moreover, their money and media power and their alliance with “secularist” and Islamic forces allows them to trump any reference to Christian misbehaviour with impressions of far worse sins on the Hindutva side. When over a thousand Hindus are killed and a

quarter million Hindus ethnically cleansed in Kashmir, the world media doesn't even notice, but watch the worldwide hue and cry when a few local riots take place and a few missionaries are killed by unidentified tribal miscreants. Christian Naga terrorists have been killing non-Christians for decades on end, and this has never been an issue with the world media, except to bewail the "oppression" of the Nagas by "Hindu India". The clumsy Sangh people cannot hope to outdo the Christian lobby at the blame game when you consider how well-crafted the recent Christian media blitz has been, how aptly designed to satisfy the needs of the world media. The India-watchers abroad were standing shamefaced because the predicted "fascism" of the BJP government had failed to materialize, yielding instead a year of communal cease-fire with the lowest number of riot victims in decades. So they welcomed the "persecution" of Christians as a gift from heaven.

An additional reason why Hindutva spokesmen cannot expect to convince world opinion, is that some of their allegations against the missionaries are demonstrably wrong. Most importantly, they are denying the plea that the missionaries are rendering a "selfless service". To appreciate how this criticism is mistaken, let us first understand on what it is based, and in what respects it is right. The Churches as such are of course not investing all their money and manpower in Indian schools and hospitals as a matter of selfless service: they do want to gain from it, viz. a harvest of souls. The missionary network is willing to give, but just like the Devil, it wants your soul in return. Even in the elite schools where no direct proselytization is attempted, Hindu pupils are subtly encouraged towards skepticism of their own religion, and are also used as political pawns when Christian demands (e.g. reservations for Dalit Christians) are aired through pupils' demonstrations or school strikes. This way, Christian schools become a power tool rather than a service, and it was to serve as a power tool that these schools were created in the first place. When the Sangh Parivar, without the benefit of foreign funding, opens schools in tribal areas, this is decried as "infiltration", as creating channels of "indoctrination", but such suspicions are at least equally warranted in the case of Christian schools.

At the individual level, there is yet another gainful element in the missionary vocation except for the satisfaction of converting people. In many Protestant denominations, the mission is actually a profitable career, but more than the material aspects, there is a psychological stake involved. People who would be nobodies in Germany, the US or Australia, can derive enormous ego gratification from a missionary career: suddenly they are promoted to a frontline post in the war against idolatry, they are praised back home as messiahs to the poor lepers even when stationed in non-leprosy areas, they are revered by some of the illiterate villagers for teaching them beliefs which would only provoke laughter back home, and strangest of all, they are applauded by "secularists" whose Western counterparts would prefer to put an end to the whole circus of the Christian Churches. It is rewarding to be a missionary in India, and much safer than China or Pakistan.

And yet, the element of "selfless service" in the missionary project should also be acknowledged. Firstly, it is a fact that quite a few Christians sent for work in the missions in India are genuinely not interested in conversion work. A Flemish nun said on Flemish TV early this year: "I went to India to convert people. But it is India which has converted me." Not that she turned to any Indian religion herself, but she is doing sterling social work among housemaids in Mumbai regardless of religious identities. Of course, Church strategists calculate that in spite of their non-missionary vocation, such social workers

are helpful in creating goodwill towards Christianity, preparing the ground for future work by real missionaries.

Secondly, even the proselytizers are altruistic, at least subjectively: eventhough their desire for “harvesting souls” is objectively a peculiar type of greed, they are convinced that they are only rendering a service to their converts. It is for the love of God and their fellow-men that they leave their comfortable lives in the West behind and settle in the heat and dust of a jungle village there to destroy the tribal religion. Yes, for love. If you believe that Pagans are bound for eternal hellfire, baptizing them is the greatest gift you can possibly give them. They are not evil but simply deluded, and the evil they work is the result of lack of knowledge (as Socrates already understood). So, we are again face to face with the basic issue: Christian belief. The Hindutva spokesmen are completely misconceiving the problem of proselytization unless they inform themselves about the modern evaluation of Christian beliefs.

Proselytizing and politics

Another mistake often made in Hindutva polemic against the missionaries is to deny that their motive is Christian religion. It is said that their real motive is political, that they serve the interests of a secular entity, typically European colonialism or American hegemonism. There is a historical basis for this suspicion, e.g. the militantly secularist French Third Republic (1870-1940) encouraged the missions as de facto French outposts and agents d'influence in the colonies. Conversely, tribal anti-British rebellions in India typically started with attacks on mission posts. It is also likely that during the Cold War, the CIA supported attempts to set up a Christian state in India's Northeast as an American foothold in Asia. Yet, apart from being largely anachronistic now, such scenarios simply don't represent the main thrust of missionary activity.

The Churches have a history of accomodating all kinds of political forces and regimes, and they can be quite patriotic too. In some countries where society was very decentralized, esp. the Germanic and Slavic parts of Europe, the Church played a decisive role in nation-building, and it is now quite hard to separate Russian patriotism from Orthodox Christianity. Even with India being predominantly non-Christian, the Churches have largely accepted the fact of India and are abstaining from risky involvements in separatism or American intrigue. It is a simple calculation: if Nagaland would manage to break away, this could hurt the position of the Churches in the rest of India.

Another historical development is that with the demographic stagnation of Christendom in Europe and North America, and with the emptying of the churches in Europe, most Churches have mentally prepared for the shift of their centre of gravity to the Third World. Very soon, the average Christian will be non-white. Already, one third of all new Jesuits are Indians. For the Catholic Church in particular, priestly recruitment is targeting India more than any other country: while most other peoples tend to dislike or ridicule the celibacy imposed on Catholic priests (which is why in Africa, many priests do have a common-law wife in defiance of Church rules), Indian culture holds it in high esteem. Of course, none of this alters the historical fact that Christianity is a foreign religion, but depicting it as something which the West is trying to force on India is anachronistic. The indigenization of missionary work has advanced to the point that all over North India, you find Christian institutions manned by Kerala Christians.

It will not do to say that “Christianity is not a religion but a political ideology masquerading as religion”, for even where Church interests are closely intertwined with certain political forces, the deeper motivation of most Church agents is definitely religious. Moreover, if American power collapses and there is no political danger anymore in a foreign connection of the missions, would that make the replacement of native religion with Christianity acceptable? At this point, the Hindutva movement has to decide whether it is a nationalist movement (as frequently proclaimed in its efforts to sound secular) or a Hindu movement. From a Hindu viewpoint, the Indian Republic’s unity and integrity are necessary to provide Hindu civilization with a home, but lose their importance if India ceases to be Hindu. The problem with Christian proselytizers is not their degree of patriotic or foreign loyalty, but their determination to destroy the native culture.

Is violence warranted?

An aspect of the current crisis which no “secularist” would dare to mention, is that the Churches have a fawning respect for strength. They lick the boot that kicks them, and bite the hand that feeds them. When millions of Christians were persecuted in the Soviet bloc, Christians in the cosy West started the quasi-Marxist fad of Liberation Theology. Now that Christians are oppressed in Islamic countries, the Christian media are full of sugary rhetoric on Muslim-Christian dialogue. In India, the Christians have formed an anti-Hindu front with Muslims and Communists, as has been obvious once again in the support which the Christians have received during the recent missionary crisis from Imam Bukhari, A.G. Noorani, Syed Shahabuddin and other veterans of the Babri Masjid cause, who gratefully remember how the Christian media supported the Muslim side in the Ayodhya conflict.

These media give far less coverage to the numerous acts of terror against Pakistani Christians, because it would only make things worse for them. So they save their fire for the propaganda war against the Hindus, who have given Christians hospitality for a full sixteen centuries, and who today give them facilities and constitutional privileges which contrast with the restraints imposed on them in most Asian countries. Since the missionaries have no hope of converting Pakistan, they concentrate on converting India and consequently vilify Hinduism much more than Islam.

So, there seems to be a connection between beating the Churches and gaining their friendship, as also between generosity to the Churches and earning their hostility. There is a name for this peculiar psychological disorder, but that need not detain us here. The point is that one could understand impatient young Hindus who conclude that force is the language which the missionaries understand best. Beat the padre and he will start praising you, right? Yet, they would be mistaken to think that force will further the Hindu interests.

First of all, there is a moral problem. Hindus are right to be skeptical of Mahatma Gandhi’s unbalanced and masochistic rejection of the use of force in all circumstances, which amounts to submission to the aggressor. But they should not go to the other extreme. Let us take a leaf here from Saint Thomas Aquinas’s “just war” theory. The doctor angelicus taught that the use of force should not be ruled out altogether, but should always be subject to strict conditions: it should be a defensive war, all peaceful means of achieving the war aims should be exhausted first, there should be a

reasonable chance of victory, the non-combatants must be spared, and so on. To a mature mind, these conditions ought to be self-evident, especially to Hindus who should recognize something of their own notion of Dharma-Yuddha here (contrary to Khalistani and "secularist" usage, Dharma Yuddha is not a Hindu equivalent of Jihad, but a war restrained by a code of ethics and chivalry). How do these principles apply in the present conflict? The Hindu side is definitely on the defensive, but it cannot claim to have exhausted all peaceful means of countering the missionary offensive. It has not even challenged the missionaries to a debate on the irrational beliefs in which they try to indoctrinate Indian tribals. In Sri Lanka in the 1870s, the Buddhists challenged the Jesuits to public debates, and it is generally acknowledged that their good performance in these debates has stemmed the tide of conversions to Christianity.

Why are Hindus too lazy to follow their example? As for the chance of victory, this moral condition brings in a strategic consideration: can Hindu society gain from violent attacks on the missionaries? Lenin has observed that it is necessary to gain the moral ascendancy before starting the next phase, that of forceful action. Obviously, the Hindus do not enjoy the moral ascendancy. Destroying Hindu idols is a standard ingredient of the conversion process in tribal villages, yet it is only when a Christian church is damaged for once that the incident is even registered. There has been plenty of violence by Christian converts against their Pagan neighbours, but they have been getting away with it, their crimes go unreported and remain unpunished. Already in the 1950s, anthropologists like Verrier Elwin and Christoph von Fuehrer-Haimendorf described how conversions destroy communal life in tribal villages, yet even mentioning this widespread phenomenon is denounced as "anti-Christian hate propaganda". Christian clerics subverting tribal culture are "rendering selfless service", Hindu sadhus encouraging tribals to stand by their own traditions are "communal hate-mongers". Clearly, it is the missionaries who have the moral ascendancy, and consequently, it is they who will reap the moral and political harvest of any physical conflict between Hindus and Christians.

If Hindus want to win the war against the missionaries, they will have to start using their brains instead of their itching fists. They will first of all have to define the problem correctly. Thus, no more breath should be wasted on the discussion whether Christianity is a foreign religion. Of course, Christianity originated in distant Palestine, and the first Christian community came as hapless refugees seeking asylum in a country which they did not arrogantly claim as their own. But if some people want to deny these facts and insist that Christianity is indigenous, just let them. The question is not whether a belief system is indigenous. As Bal Thackeray has aptly said: we shouldn't take the Swadeshi idea too far, for then we would have to do without the electric lightbulb. The law of gravity was discovered by some paleface in distant Europe, yet even RSS schools teach it. If Christianity is true, then we should all embrace it, no matter where it originated. Conversely, if Christianity is untrue, we should inform everyone that a quack belief is being promoted, in violation of the Constitutional injunction that Indian citizens should develop the scientific temper. And we should imitate the missionaries in extending our heartfelt love to them by patiently liberating them from their false religion.

A question to the Christians

In the 4th century AD, Christianity became the dominant and then the established religion in the Roman Empire. The Sassanian rulers of Iran wisely foresaw that the Syrian Christians within their borders would develop into a fifth column of their powerful

neighbour. Their solution was to persecute the Syrian Christians. Some of these Christians fled Iran and one group, led by Thomas Cananeus (whose name would later get confused with that of Thomas Didymos the apostle), arrived on India's Malabar coast and asked for refuge. The generous and hospitable Hindus granted the wish of the refugees and honoured their commitment of hospitality for more than a thousand years. The Christian world has no record at all of any such consistent act of hospitality: the only non-Christian community which they tolerated in their midst were the Jews, and the record of Jewish-Christian co-existence is hardly bright. The Hindus, by contrast, have likewise welcomed Jewish and Parsi communities. Unfortunately, the Portuguese Catholics gained a foothold on the Malabar coast and started forcing the Malabar Christians into the structure of the Catholic Church. Even so, the Christians, who had gotten indianized linguistically and racially, tried to maintain friendly relations with the Hindus. This attitude is not entirely dead yet, a recent instance is the statement by a Kerala bishop denying the false allegation that the BJP was behind the gang-rape of four nuns in Jhabua, a lie still propagated by the missionary networks till today. However, many other Malabar Christians have been integrated into the missionary project, and are now gradually replacing the dwindling number of foreign mission personnel. My question to them: don't you think that working for the destruction of the very religion which allowed your community to settle and integrate, is an odd way to show your gratitude?

Conclusion

To conclude, I must say that I find it sad to see something dying, especially when the dying entity is the religion in which I grew up. Yet, it is mathematically certain that this will happen. Just as the belief in a flat earth cannot survive mankind's inquisitive interest in the fact of nature, the beliefs underlying Christianity will not survive the advancement in knowledge. It is painful to lose your faith, to find your beliefs untenable or disproven, to feel like you have been fooled for all those years, often in good faith by your beloved parents. But then, losing an illusion is also liberating. And to avoid being trapped in that illusion is even better. The Indian tribals can save themselves the trouble of outgrowing Christianity by not becoming Christians in the first place. Therefore, all peaceful and legal efforts to stop Christian conversion work in India's tribal regions deserve our support.

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