

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

Indigenization of Worship and its Psychology

S. P. ADINARAYAN

The Christian evangelist in India is faced with a problem which is to some extent peculiar to him. Whereas in many other countries his main task is to contend with the forces of agnosticism, atheism and indifference, here he has the added responsibility of facing the proximity of several highly developed religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam and all that such a juxtaposition implies. In this disturbing yet exhilarating atmosphere, the Indian Christian reaffirms his faith in the fundamentals of his religion in no uncertain terms but after this is done is left with many perplexing matters of adjustment and detail. The situation is fraught with many a challenge. There are two possible reactions: 1. To experiment, examine and exchange. 2. To retreat, crystallize and conserve. Students of contemporary Christian thought in India have found evidence of both these tendencies at work. Much depends on background. The middle-aged convert from the higher castes has shown an inclination to bring with him into the Church part of his spiritual past and has insisted that this should be somehow co-opted into the main framework. Others have just adapted themselves to existing forms untroubled by memory or atavistic urge.

Psychologically speaking there is a sense of conflict inherent in the situation. This is between pride and fear. Pride in the serried splendour of his country's spiritual attainments and fear that any adoption of Hindu ideology may result in his own religion losing its characteristic content and eventually becoming a sub-sect of Hinduism.

The desire to indigenize Christian worship is but a corollary of the general situation described above. Besides the desire to make worship more acceptable to the convert and more attractive to the outsider, there is also the feeling present that there is much in it that is foreign and therefore unessential. The Christian community, which like the rest of India was greatly influenced by the wave of nationalism that passed over the country during the early decades of the present century, keenly felt the need to eliminate this exotic element in their mode of worship. Yet not all of them. A considerable number were of the opinion that the practices of the Church were neither Eastern nor Western but universal in nature and were anxious to preserve the sense of continuity implicit in the present forms of worship though they had reached the country via the West. Besides, there was the fear already referred to that indigenization may eventually lead to absorption.

Architecture, music, the language of liturgy, prayer and its poses have been some of the chief topics considered under the heading of the

indigenization of worship. Our main concern in this article is to look at these problems not from the general but from the psychological point of view, i.e. to undertake an examination of the motives and conflicts involved either in a desire for change or in a desire to maintain the *status quo*. We have already referred to one general conflict, that between pride and fear, and now we may briefly consider another in the narrower context of the posture adopted while praying. The general practice in most churches is to kneel. But some have objected to the introduction of this Jewish posture into Indian worship. As an alternative it has been suggested that the traditional Indian pose of *padmasana* should be adopted. But this is possible only if the worshippers squat on the ground and there are no benches or chairs about. Such conditions do not prevail in most city churches. Admittedly kneeling for any length of time is uncomfortable but to the average anglicized Indian Christian the *padmasana* is even more tortuous and in many cases impossible of attainment without the breaking of bones or at least the cracking of joints. Is this merely a matter of Jewish versus Indian? In my opinion a more fundamental issue is involved, that of comfort versus reverence. Deep down in the hearts of many of us there is the feeling that prayers offered while sitting down comfortably are not acceptable to God. I do not know whether there is any theological justification for this but psychologically speaking there is no doubt at all that there is a guilt feeling at work here. Some churches have evolved a compromise in bowing but this has not been a very acceptable solution. The non-conformist Christians of the United States have solved the problem by frankly taking the side of comfort. During my recent visit to the States I was often shocked to find people not even bowing during prayer and sometimes even sitting upright with crossed legs but who am I to say that their prayers are less acceptable to God than that of the kneelers or the squatters?

Personally I think that the significance of the foreignness of Indian Christian worship has been considerably exaggerated. A good sermon is a good sermon no matter in what kind of a building it is preached and in what position you sit while listening to it. The great hymns of the Church have thrilled everyone irrespective of one's capacity to appreciate or participate in Western music. Here let me digress for a moment to consider some of the criticisms that have been brought forward against certain hymns sung in our churches. Hymns like 'Take my life and let it be consecrated dear Lord to thee' should, it is claimed, be sung only by saintly persons. The average Christian comes very near to hypocrisy when he proclaims, 'Take my silver and my gold, not a mite will I withhold.' Psychologically speaking, singing hymns without meaning them creates a ritualistic and unhealthy attitude in religion. A second group of hymns seems to uphold a social order which judged by modern standards is essentially unchristian. For example, the states of both 'the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate' being attributed to God. A third set of hymns has become particularly odious to Indians because of the uncomplimentary remarks that they make about Eastern nations, like Bishop Heber's famous missionary hymn in which occurs the line 'Where every prospect pleaseth and man alone is vile'. Friends among the clergy in England have assured me that this is good theology (though undoubtedly bad manners) and that the vileness referred to is

that inherent in human nature as such. All the same it is unfortunate that the good bishop should have chosen an Eastern nation to illustrate so general a trait. Hymns belonging to the second and third categories are no longer a vital issue as they are rarely sung in our Churches today but the same cannot be said of the hymns belonging to the first group.

Recently the Christian Literature Society at Madras brought out a small booklet containing a list of Sanskrit words and terms suitable for use in Christian worship. This is a pioneering piece of work on which it deserves to be congratulated. Sanskrit words have a peculiar meaning and significance of their own and do succeed in making Christianity less foreign to the Hindu. To take but one example: to call our Lord the *paramapurusha* means much more to the Indian than to merely call Him the divine being. It conveys the sense of a peculiar blending of divinity and beauty in a way in which no English word can do.

Of the six systems of Indian philosophy there is one that should be of particular interest to the Indian Christian, i.e. the *yoga* system. I do not pretend to assert that this system as a philosophical one is very clear or easily understandable. But the *yogin* has a vast and interesting technique for the promotion of concentration which may be usefully tried by the Christian, as a form of meditation. The Christian needs to develop a prayer technique of his own and he will do well to explore the possibilities of posture and control of breath. These remarks apply mainly to private and individual worship.

Preparatory purification has played an important part in Hindu worship. We Indian Christians have on the whole tended to neglect this side. The tank before the temple performs both a real and a symbolic function. The Christian has been somewhat unwilling to emphasize this aspect, perhaps due to the unconscious fear that it may create in the mind of the worshippers the idea that they become acceptable to God through their own personal efforts. There is also the possibility that there may be a transfer, again mainly unconscious, from purity of body to purity of soul. While we should be fully alive to these dangers, I think it is equally dangerous to go to the opposite extreme and say (at least in practice) that personal cleanliness before worship does not matter at all. Such an attitude definitely spells irreverence. How often do we rush to a Communion Service with unshaven faces and unwashed mouths? In our zeal to uphold the theological dogma of human incapacity we have tended to put a premium on human inefficiency.

There is one aspect of indigenization which is perhaps not so often discussed or thought about as it should be. I refer to the harmful effects of certain Western ideologies on Indian Christian thought. This is particularly the case regarding the crusading spirit and the idea that the Christian is a soldier. In the historic context of medieval Europe where the Christian had to fight actual physical battles he needed the inspiration of such ideas but they are entirely out of place in the Indian situation of today. Where the fight is on the spiritual level with highly developed religions the Christian needs an instrument much subtler than the sword. And should we talk of fighting at all or should we not rather borrow a phrase from contemporary political strategy—the round-table conference? Lest some immediately see red at this suggestion, I hasten to add that the aim of a round-table conference is not to compromise and capitulate

but to consult and benefit. Which is a more suitable uniform for the Christian—saffron robes or smart khaki?

In discussing indigenization of Christian worship we should not fail to remember that Hinduism is an ethnic religion. In an ethnic religion gods are born and bred up right amidst the people, so to speak. Legends coming down from the hoary past make these gods peculiarly their own. Therefore worship in an ethnic religion tends to develop along the lines of *familiarity* and *individualism*. Whereas the key-note of worship in historic religions is *dignity* and *corporateness*. Any helpful suggestions that we may get from Hindu practices will be in the department of private worship rather than congregational. To the small Christian community in India surrounded by much bigger and sometimes hostile religious groups congregational worship, and the solace and strength that the sharing of faith brings, is vital. But under the hurried conditions of modern living family prayers and individual meditations, which are equally important for the nurture of faith, are tending to get neglected. It is perhaps here that indigenization can be most effective.

In conclusion I wish to point out that indigenization is not an academic job where experts go into committee and draw up a list of innocuous ideas that can be 'safely' implanted in an exotic soil. It must be the result of the dynamic spirit of Christ working through the form of Hindu thought, adapting, moulding or transforming as the case may be. It must be the natural result of two spiritually minded groups living together as one family and sharing together their difficulties, ideas and ideologies.

Viewing the matter from the psychological point of view I wish to emphasize the following three points:

1. That the East-West controversy in religion may merely be the means through which certain fundamental inner conflicts find expression.
2. That the fear that some Christians show at the very suggestion of contact with Hindu thought may be pathological in origin and symptomatic of an ambivalent tendency (i.e. to hate the thing you love).
3. That the 'religious war mentality' that the Indian Christian has received as a part of a Western tradition is quite unsuitable in the present spiritual context in this country.