Global Christianity – Core Seminar

October 28, 2019

“The History of Christianity in India”

Introduction –

What nation has the largest population of functional English speakers? What nation has the seventh largest number of citizens who call themselves Christians? What nation has one of the oldest Christian communities on earth? The answer to each of these questions is India.

Origins of Christianity in India:

There is a great deal of ignorance in many places about the history of Christianity in India. Many think of India as a Hindu nation with a generous minority of Muslims tossed in. But in fact, as historian Robert Frykenberg has noted - “Christianity is as native to India as any place on earth.” The roots of that history are debated, but all agree the roots are very, very old.

Some would hold to longstanding tradition, that the Apostle Thomas himself brought the gospel to India around 52 AD. The historic story was that Thomas shared the gospel with a North Indian king named Gundiphar who imprisoned him. But that very night the king’s brother, Gad, died. As the result of a dream involving his just-dead brother, Gundiphar had a change of heart and he released Thomas and gave the Apostle leave to evangelize throughout his domain. And as the story goes, as a result churches were planted in N. India by around 60 AD. Now, this story was generally discounted by European historians and dismissed as fanciful legend. For one thing, there was no record of any first Century Indian king named Gundiphar in any historical account. Then, in 1884, near the city of Kabul, in Afghanistan a store of ancient coins was discovered – all bearing the name of king Gundipahr. Subsequent archeology revealed that Gundiphar was in fact a king in Bactria (N. India/Afghanistan) during the 50s/60s AD. And that he had a brother, named Gad, who had died during his reign. That, and other more modern archaeology have moved the central story of Thomas taking the gospel to India from the realm of legend, to the present where it is one of several seriously-debated historical theories.

What is not in doubt is that by 180 AD, gospel missionary work to India was undertaken from Alexandria in Egypt. In that year a missionary named Pantaenus sailed to the SW Malabar coast of India to spread the gospel. And by 200 AD clear examples of crosses and Christian inscriptions are found on plates and other items of church usage throughout SW India.

But whatever the exact dates, whether in the first or the third century, it does seem accurate to say that “Christianity is as native to India as any place on earth.”

The Indian Context:

Yet, saying that Christianity is ancient in India is not to say that the culture is, or ever has been, deeply influenced by Christianity beyond a few coastal states with large Christian populations. What we think of today as Hinduism is a relatively recent religions innovation, not attaining anything like its current form until at the earliest during the Gupta dynasty in the 4th and 5th Centuries. By that time Christianity was centuries old in India. But the old pagan, Vedic worldview of India is much older and more pervasive. Like so many places in the ancient world, India has been characterized by a disorganized, personalized polytheism and supernatural fascination. These different streams of theism and paganism, along with a number of existing epic poems. It’s during this period in the 4th Century that the various streams of Indian paganism merge and the two Hindu streams of Vaishnavism and Shivavism are finally established, though other traditional Hindu deities like Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of Shiva, aren’t invented until late in the 5th Century.

I digress into this history of Hinduism for two reasons. First, because many Hindus take false comfort in the idea that theirs is the most ancient religion and thus must be true. But the ancient religion of India is not Hinduism, it’s merely the same complex mish-mash of pagan spirituality that we see throughout the fallen world. While in fact, anything like what we mean by Hinduism doesn’t appear until the Christian churches of India were centuries old. Second, because it’s helpful to understand that the early development of Christianity in India was not a contest with Hinduism, but the same battle against various pagan and polytheistic spiritualties that marked the missionary effort in much of the world of the first few centuries.

India’s Thomas Christians:

And so, it’s in this stew of religious fluidity that the Christian church in India emerged. And from the start, these churches tended to look East, not West. They found their fellowship and theology from the centers of Christianity in Edessa (modern day Urfa, Turkey), Damascus and Baghdad – all part of Syriac Christianity. Later, their numbers were enhanced by two large migrations – from Persia in 350s AD and from those fleeing Muslims in 700s AD. So that by 800 AD you had a unique Christian community that was not Eastern Orthodox and not Roman Catholic. Not that they were free from errors and syncretism, but their errors were their own not imported from East or West. Which set the stage for a great conflict to come.

Pfarangi imposition:

In 1498 Vasco da Gamma of Portugal came to the SW coast of India to establish trading cities. With the power of the Portuguese military they settled coastal enclaves, like Goa, and began to try to convert the Thomas Christians to Roman Catholicism. Arrests, imposition of doctrines, mass conversions under threat, and kidnapping their Metran (high bishop) and shipping him to Lisbon all followed. By 1565 their Metran, Mar Joseph, and his people had enough of the Portuguese (whom they viewed as impious hypocrites). As one historian puts it – “He repudiated the Latin rite and renewed his attachment to the old ways: abandoning mandatory confession, condemning image worship and insisting that Mary be known only as Mother of Christ and not as Mother of God! But when his actions became known he too was hunted down and arrested and sent to Lisbon for indoctrination.”

Early Modern Missions to India:

Despite all this persecution and trouble, there has never been a time when Christians were not going to or coming from India. But in the decades following the start of the Protestant Reformation a special emphasis on the evangelization of the “heathen” became a major concern of Protestants. Interestingly, the root for much of the missionary movement of the late 1600s comes largely from the effort of three cousins, in three different countries. Professor August Hermann Francke of Halle, Germany conceived of a plan to take the gospel to the nations. He stated that Christian obedience to the Great Commission if taken seriously, required that every single soul on earth, whether child or adult, male or female, should have a continuous, personal access to the Word of God, and that they should be enabled to read it, in his or her own mother tongue. To that end he embarked on a grand effort to improve literacy and help churches to preach the gospel through Germany, from Brandenburg to Prussia. But Germany was too small a thing, so he enlisted the help of two of his cousins, also devout Evangelicals – Queen Anne of Great Britain and King Frederick the IV of Denmark. An informal partnership was formed that lead to the establishment of multiple church missionary societies in all three nations with the aim of Bible translation, literacy development, evangelization and church planting.

Numerous German and Dutch missionaries were sent out to India over the next half-century. A Century before William Carey sailed for Serampore 1789, men like Bartholomeus Ziegenbalg, Benjamin Shultze and Christian Schwartz were planting churches among the Tamil and Telagu of South India. In 1727 they had established their first “model school” in Madras. And by 1741 the number of baptized church members among the Tamil and Telagu congregations came to 3,766 adults. At the time, observers noted that the great secret behind Schwartz’ unusual success was that he focused most of all on training competent pastors and local evangelists. It was these, often uncelebrated, Indian elders who carried the gospel and planted churches, long after Schwartz died in 1798.

Likewise in 1793 the British Baptist William Carey arrived in the Dutch Colony of Serampore. There he established a school and spent the next 41 years laboring as an educator and evangelist. At the end of his 41 years he counted just 700 converts but he had laid a solid foundation. In years that followed his death in 1834 dozens of churches and many more souls were converted by the men and women he’d trained.

And we don’t have time to talk much about the amazing work of the Spirit among the Naga People of Assam in Eastern India. In 1880 there were only a handful of Christians among the Naga…who were feared head-hunting tribal mountain people. But from the fruit of just a few faithful American Baptist Missionaries God saw fit to save thousands of Naga during the 30-40 years from 1880 to 1920. So that today the majority of Naga are Protestant Christians, mostly in Baptist Churches. One of our own church members, Singmila Shimra, is the daughter of a Baptist pastor from Nagaland in India.

Major Movements within India:

But we should note that while missionaries from outside India were faithfully preaching the Biblical gospel, God was also at work inside the ancient Thomas Christian churches of India. Some of these churches had succumbed to Roman Catholic teaching through the power and imposition of the Portuguese. Others stayed connected to the Chaldean traditions from Damascus and Baghdad, but slid into gospel-less formalism. At various points in history, there have been Indians who have read God’s word and called their churches to greater faithfulness. This happened in 1653 when the majority of Thomas Christians swore an oath, the Coonan Cross Oath, to reject the errors of Portuguese Catholics and would have nothing to do with the Jesuits, whom they detested. And again in the 1840s as Anglican missionaries began to bring Reformation doctrines to the Thomas Christians of Kerala. By the early 1880s churches began to break away and a doctrinal reformation took hold. The modern Mar Thoma church was born in this reformation. Then in 1940s, as many Mar Thoma churches began to slide back into Syrian formalism and theological liberalism, another reform movement began. In the end this the leaders of this group were put out of the Mar Thoma church, and they formed the St Thomas Evangelical Church in 1961. That group exists to this day. Some translated excerpts of their statement of faith reads -

*We believe the Holy Bible to be the inspired and only infallible authoritative Word of God.*

*We believe the Holy Bible which consists of 66 Books of the Old and the New Testaments as the basis for all matters of faith and doctrine.*

*We believe in the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His Virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.*

*We believe that regeneration by the Holy Spirit is essential for the salvation of sinful man and that salvation is available by grace to everyone through repentance and personal faith in Christ.*

As one of your elders, I could happily affirm pretty much everything in their statement of faith. God is faithful to preserve a witness through all of history.

Modern Missions to India:

Much of the modern history of Christian work in India has been more challenging and discouraging. Both from without and within there have been great challenges to the work of the gospel in India.

From without, the appearance of Hinduism as a social and political force has been a problem for Christians since the 1820s. Certainly traditional Indian Vedic religion existed before that, but it was a disorganized system of traditions and myths. In the 1820s, in part as a reaction to accelerating conversions among the Tamil peoples and the growing indigenous missionary work from South to North India, Hinduism as we know it sprang onto the scene. In large part it was made possible by the work of Western Scholars like William Ward whose 1823 book Hindooism (in three volumes) sought for the first time to bring some order to the eclectic polytheistic stew of India. Indian high-caste scholars latched on to these organized ideas and the term, Hindu, to try to bring a politically cohesive order to the faith systems, in order to unify the nation against the British and the gospel. The militant, Hindu Nationalist BJP government of India today is just the latest chapter in this religio-political program. It’s shocking intolerance of any non-Hindu peoples is in a sense just the political expression of the goal that enlivened the invention of modern Hinduism back 150 years ago…unity and nationalism.

But Christianity in India has also suffered many blows from within. The three worst have been ecumenism, theological liberalism, and pragmatism.

Ecumenism, or the drive to have visible unity of all Christians, let to the merger of the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian Christians into one church body, in 1947. But while them motive may have been well meant (if rather naïve) the fruit was bad. The only way to create outward visible unity was to ignore and confuse doctrine. In the end this became a super-highway for liberal theology and the loss of the gospel. One would be hard-pressed to hear a biblical gospel in any CSI church today. The same goes for the Church of North India, formed from similar ecumenical mergers in 1970.

As one observer put it “The formation of the CSI and CNI confused doctrine, minimized polity such that much good was lost, and little was gained.”

Along with Ecumenism and liberalism, the third bane of Indian Christianity has been pragmatism. Meaning, the kind of thinking that looks for immediate, visible results more than careful fidelity to the Bible. Why has that happened especially in India? One reason seems to be the vast population, so obviously lost in idolatry and sin. Many a well-intentioned pastor or missionary seems to have been overcome by the sheer numbers in India and decided they had to come up with some way to spread the gospel and plant churches faster. Some even demand they have to spread it faster than the rate of population growth, otherwise they think Jesus is losing out to demographics. The result has been a subcontinent that is peculiarly characterized by the missionary equivalents of “get rich quick schemes.” Where each new year or two brings a new magic key methodology that claims it will result in massive movements of people to Christ and thousands of churches planted with little effort. As you would expect, over time these rapid movements tend to fade just as rapidly.

Along with this pragmatism has come an emphasis on para-church organizations rather than on local churches. These kind of focused organizations are easier to lead, and easier to raise funds for, than the often messy work of local churches. Often resulting in the most fruitful pastors being enticed away from local churches to lead para-church organizations, ironically funded by Western money.

Added to this, the so-called Prosperity Gospel continues to expand in India, eating up the lives of Christians and churches. And enticing many into a religion called Christianity that in fact is just like the offerings and prayers of Hinduism. Giving sacrifices to appease the Gods to get what you want now, in this life.

Put altogether it looks like a pretty discouraging picture. But as we look at the history of India we see that India has always looked discouraging. Deep seated idolatries, religious intolerance, poverty, the caste system, opposition to conversion…all these have marked India for hundreds if not thousands of years.

And yet, just as in the past, God continues to advance his gospel in India. India has never seemed like a welcoming and easy mission field. But just as in the past, slowly here, faster over there. At rare times in seemingly sudden advances, such as in among the Tamil or the Naga, God builds his church. But in fact, even those were really the fruit of more than a century of brutal hoe work in seemingly barren fields.

So our own church knows and rejoices in faithful churches with whom we partner in Lucknow and Delhi India. We have members of our congregation living in India, sharing the gospel, discipling believers and training church leaders. We hear regularly of Hindu-background conversions and new churches carefully planted. And we pray for more fruit, even while we celebrate the steady advance amid so many trials.

Lessons from the history of India:

1. Christianity is always local
2. Numbers can deceive and distract.
3. Mass movements need time to tell.
4. Faithfulness is the best methodology.
5. Quality is better than speed.
6. Gospel Change leads to social change.
7. Contextualization is for clarity not comfort.
8. God is always at work.
9. Modern India is a mess.
10. Train pastors to help churches to save individuals.