

Response to Guillermo Cook

Ron Flaming

In many ways the Indian experience [as my primary point of comparison] really relates more closely to conversations on the Middle East and Eastern Europe which we had this morning. To understand this whole question of proselytism in India, I think two things need to be brought to the fore. First of all is the question of how the India church has tried to deal with proselytism with reference to denominational sheep stealing by forming the United Church of North India and the Church of South India. The attempt is made there to avoid denominationalism, at least among the ecumenical churches.

Now I might say here, that of the two negative things which have come out of that, one is that the church has been saddled with the unbelievable burden of the properties and institutions which the parent organizations began and then left to the church to maintain somehow. That burden has brought with it a whole set of complicated issues relating to proselytism, especially on leadership questions. The other negative point has to do with the view that avoiding proselytism has usually been identified with the ecumenical churches, whereas from the evangelical standpoint it is perceived as the loss of the mission field.

From the evangelical standpoint, that has been the point at which there has been a perceived understanding that the church has not been faithful to its mission call. So in that sense, these newly developed union churches become the 'ancient churches' and the evangelical response is to say we need to renew this from without. I once talked with a missionary who came to start a church in our particular town who was adamant about this point. The church is unfaithful and therefore we cannot work with them and we must start a new movement of the church.

Another thing which is critical for understanding this whole phenomenon in India is the way the government continues to deal with the question of what it means to be a formerly colonized country, so that you notice tremendous assumptions about the west and Christianity as it relates to Hindu culture. In the 1980's India was almost broke. The IMF came in, gave their plan for how to solve that problem. Predictably what it did was to open up the free market enterprise and what that predictably did was to

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enable the full onslaught of consumerism. From the Hindu perspective all the valueless empty morals of the West have made their onslaught on India. Now this has predictably brought a Hindu fundamentalist reaction to that kind of values attack.. Now you can go up into a village, as I did close to where we lived, where they don't have electricity or running water, and there will be a satellite dish on the roof of the village center with a solar powered battery, and villagers watching western programs such as "The Bold and the Beautiful". You can understand the kind of social dislocation and unease which that creates. When that culture is associated with what it means to be Christian as has been pointed out so many times, there is this reaction against it.

I might note that this accounts for the fact that the recent testing of an atomic bomb was hugely popular in India. It was part of this reaction against whatever powers are out there, to feel we can stand up to them. Further what has happened as the Asian economic crisis has developed is that there has been a backlash against the IMF, cheered on by the Indians who said, "Look what it's done to us. It's been a disaster to let them come in and tell us how to solve these problems." So that has now led to a new kind of anti-Americanism in the last while.

The Indian response has been to say we do not want missionaries. You cannot get a missionary visa. That has had its good effects on the Indian church in the sense of indigenizing and creating a response of their own which is appropriate to the culture. There are tremendous examples, particularly coming out of the south, of missionary movements now where the church itself is sending missionaries up to the North and to other parts of the Hindu heartland. Mission has become more central to the church. But it also has led to two very difficult situations, namely the relationship to the church from the West and to some extent to the church in Korea.

There are a growing number of Christian workers who are coming into India under some sort of 'creative access' theory. Now some of these are successful in the sense that they are doing tent-making industries, etc. Many of them, however, are largely deceptive in explaining their origin and what their reasons for being there are. This is creating a tremendous problem in the sense that Christians are largely viewed as Western Christians being deceptive, untruthful, and deceitful in their response to the culture because they are there under false pretense. They will come under business visas or tourist visas or for other reasons and it is tremendously detrimental to that whole witness, because it is part and parcel of the gospel they present, for it cannot be divorced from that.

I have argued with some of these folks at great length without much success. I'm somewhat pessimistic about how that is going to be curbed because these largely independent para-church groups have their own agenda and are not accountable to the larger church group. They simply do their own thing and when they finally get kicked out, which often happens in that the government finally pulls the visa. The local Christians who are a minority in their community to begin with, who are seeking to live in a creative relationship with their Muslim and Hindu neighbors, are left to deal with the problem.

I might just note that in part the government's reaction is two-pronged. The point

which they are really worried about is the Muslims and so when they have anti-proselytizing laws, their worry is about the Muslim population which is the larger one. It includes these border problems and Muslim immigration. The whole question of birth control has become a very interesting point. Hindus now believe that Muslims do not take birth control seriously because they have an underlying agenda of trying to take over the country with their Muslim numbers. So now the Hindus say, "We aren't going to abide by it either." Hence the whole question of controlling the growth of the population, which is enormously difficult to begin with, is complicated by the Muslim-Hindu tension.

The second thing that I think is very, very difficult for us to imagine how to resolve has to do with the tremendous growth of denominations and para-churches who are taking away local leadership and providing funding for them from the West to do ministry in India. There is example after example after example where creative leadership within the church has been identified, has been seen as something good but a Western church or para-church organization has said, "We want to support this." Then they have taken that leadership out of the church, then have offered their own kind of funding, usually at higher levels of income, with a jeep, the various support structures and the status of periodic trips to the West. This creates tremendous problems within the church and produces a certain sense of cynicism about the motivation of such ministry.

When you talk about the corruption of the witness, it is enormously problematic when that happens over and over again. The most painful example that I saw, happened last year when the local church was struggling with a pastor who had been having trouble with infidelity questions within his own marriage, so they put him on a probationary status. A denominational ministry picked him up, put him on their payroll, gave him a salary that was significantly higher than the one he had from the church, sent him to the local villages which were the same villages that his former church was trying to do ministry in. That story is repeated over and over again under the guise of trying to develop local leadership as opposed to sending in missionaries from outside.

I could go on at some length with such examples, but the challenge which we have in the Indian context is to find appropriate ways to remain in relationship with these churches that have been part of our history. To just simply walk away from that relationship is not the answer, but to face the challenge of the effectiveness of ministry in that area of the world.

