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# New Faces of the Church: An Indian Case Study: A Response

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THIS IS A RESPONSE to the article, 'New Faces of the Church: An Indian Case Study' by Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj which was published in our issue of January 2010 (34:1), pages 79-83. The author of this response is H. L. Richard, of the Rethinking Forum, Institute of Hindu Studies, at the US Center for World Mission, Pasadena, California, USA. The author of the original article who has seen this response welcomes the discussion it has provoked and the valuable platform for dialogue provided by *Evangelical Review of Theology*. However, he is not able to make a rejoinder due to pressure of other work.

It is encouraging to see a sympathetic depiction of efforts towards truly Hindu discipleship to Jesus outlined in Bhakiaraj's paper. He gives a good summary of the issues and clearly understands the problems that have led to regular attempts for more than a century to develop new patterns of discipleship to Jesus among Hindus.

Bhakiaraj's paper concludes with what are clearly intended to be constructive criticisms, but this part of the paper cannot be so highly appreciated. It should be noted immediately that the author of this response is among those criticized in this section of the paper. With appreciation, I also immediately note that the criticisms are not vicious

or intentionally unfair, and I hope this rejoinder will match that standard.

Despite what appears to be the beginning of an enumeration of concerns, it seems that only one problem is identified.

First, if the vast majority of the church is painted with the same brush and thought to have had a negligible impact on the nation, the very notion of discussing alternative shapes to Christian discipleship will be superfluous since the Christian presence will be so miniscule it will perhaps attract little attention in its own right, let alone effort to rethink its shape. (page 82)

This rather convoluted sentence needs to be unpacked and challenged. Perhaps it is true that too broad a brush has occasionally been used to paint the diversity of Christian expressions in India, but that broad brush can be defended as well (see below). There is nothing in Bhakiaraj's analysis of Rethinking authors, and I think even nothing in the writings of the authors he refers to, that supports his statement that 'the church has had a negligible impact on the Indian nation'. The concern of the Rethinking Forum is not the impact of the church on the nation, but the impact of the gospel on Hindu peoples. Regarding the latter, I have

documented that there is a Christian presence in only 339 out of 4,693 distinct sociological communities in India; less than 8% of communities have a Christian presence.<sup>1</sup>

'Alternate shapes to Christian discipleship' is likewise not the concern of the authors who are criticized. The concern is precisely with areas where Christian presence (better gospel presence) is 'miniscule'. Reading Bhakiaraj gives the impression that some maverick critics ('less than noble approach', page 83) are seeking to undermine the church. But Hoefer clearly says 'with the help of the church' (quoted on page 83); the focus is on Hindus who are estranged from Christianity; perhaps most importantly, documentation is provided (but not addressed by Bhakiaraj) that the problem with the church is very real and quite severe.

It is not possible even to outline a discussion on 'church' in this brief rejoinder, but it is necessary to call attention to this as a central issue that needs to be addressed. Bhakiaraj makes no mention of documentation regarding the 'church as Christian community' (the title of a WCC study on the problematic separation of Indian Christianity from its surrounding milieu).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, there is no mention

of the striking Indian Christian conclave in Nasrapur in 1966 which stated that

baptism has been made to appear as an act by which a person repudiates his ancient cultural heritage and accepts an alien culture. So long as this is so we cannot judge those who while confessing faith in Jesus, are unwilling to be baptised.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Bhakiaraj does seem to understand the problem, as he refers to Hindu disciples of Jesus in these terms: 'They seem to be attempting the impossible; holding together the complex socio-religious context they inhabit and their indisputable devotion to Jesus' (page 81). Here again unpacking is needed; why does Bhakiaraj consider this equation to be impossible (or seeming impossible)? One could argue that 'holding together a complex socio-religious context and devotion to Jesus' is a very apt description of what contextualization is all about. Is contextualization in the Hindu world impossible? Are Jesus and church necessarily foreign in Hindu contexts?

In the end, Bhakiaraj is particularly opposed to efforts to 'reinvent the wheel...as far as the church is concerned' (page 83). But if the New Testament meaning of 'church' has been lost in the concept of 'Indian Christian community' (as the data of Hayward in note 2 above and other studies suggest), then some serious rethinking and reinventing is needed. This is the

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1 H. L. Richard, 'Rethinking "rethinking"' in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* vol. 19 no. 3, (July-Sept. 2002), pp. 7-17.

2 E. W. Hayward edited the WCC study *The Church as Christian Community: Three Studies of North Indian Churches* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966). See also my paper 'Community dynamics in India and the praxis of "church"' in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* vol. 24 no. 4, (Oct-Dec 2007), pp. 185-194.

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3 David Lyon and Albert Manuel (eds), *Renewal for Mission* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1968). This is also quoted in my paper referenced in note 1, which Bhakiaraj refers to in his paper.

case I have attempted to present, and despite the weakness of my efforts, it still seems legitimate to state that if Bhakiaraj wishes to oppose this position he needs to wrestle with the presentation and refute the data rather than merely affirm that it is not 'helpful' (page 83) to reinvent the church wheel.<sup>4</sup>

I may mention a final caveat where Bhakiaraj seems to have seriously misjudged the position he attempts to refute. He suggests that it is 'ironic that in such a pluralistic milieu like India, it is promoted as the "only" approach' (page 83). It is true that the word 'only' appears in a number of the few quotations Bhakiaraj pulled from Rethinking writings; but a more empathetic and contextual reading of those

papers is needed. The 'only' approach which is suggested is the 'contextual' approach. Bhakiaraj is certainly welcome to dispute the suggested analysis of the context(s) and what contextualization means, but to suggest that the position he critiques is somehow narrow and reductionist seems way out of line. Deeply contextual expressions of discipleship to Jesus will look vastly different across the multiple cultures and communities of India. However, insofar as there is conformity to the New Testament pattern of distinctly Gentile discipleship to Jesus (at times appearing to be proudly opposed to conformity to Jewish ways) there will be a similarity in missiological application.

Bhakiaraj calls for a 'mature dialogue' (page 83) on these issues. I thank the publishers of this journal for welcoming this rejoinder which I pray does contribute towards such a dialogue.

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4 Note also Herbert Hofer, 'Church in context' in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, vol. 43 no. 2, April 2007, pp. 200-08, which grapples with the meaning and implications of 'church'.

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