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Towards a Theology of Human Identity

Competing Identities: Imagining and Inventing new Identities

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AT TIMES MEN AND WOMEN construct their identities intentionally and at other times they allow external forces to shape their sense of self. It is agreed that we need positive and healthy identities to order our lives. It seems that one's identity is the essence of one's being. If so, is it necessary to establish absolute identities? For humans, questions such as, Who am I? Who are we?, relating to personal and communal identities matter most.

Human identity is embedded in culture, and culture is influenced and shaped by one's faith, ideology, ethnicity and religion. People are often naturally self-centred, so that individual identity is important for them. What is the essence of 'will for identity'? Is it only a preference of self to the other, or is it something more than that? What kind of identity do humans want to nurture and what kind of communities do humans want to create? Why are identities asserting themselves as dynamic forces? While there are many

kinds of human identity, this paper will deal with it in relation to religion and culture.

As far as India is concerned, currently *religion* and *culture* are the two forces that contribute to formations of *Indian and Christian identities* more than other factors such as caste and ethnicity. However, in India caste and ethnicity are included in the religious cultural systems.

Even so there may be various options available for the Indian masses in the formation as well as transformation of their identities. This paper will examine how humans as individuals/persons have the capacity to continue to imagine and invent new and positive identities in relation to religious or spiritual and cultural ethos.

I The Complexity of Human Identity

Human identity is very complex. While modern science can explain human

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identity based on the theory of evolution, religions cannot. Science reduces the human being to its anatomy. Anatomy itself is an act of dividing anything, corporeal or intellectual for the purpose of examining its parts. As a result, in the modern scientific age there are many reasons and opportunities for people to lose their identities as individuals.¹

Similarly, materialism considers human beings as composed of nothing more than material components. Our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects are products of our material nature, acting according to the rules of physics and biology. As a result humans are not responsible for their behaviour, nor are they distinguishable from the other forms of creation. Therefore, one has no dignity or inherent worth. Materialism unlike religion does not address the issue of human dignity and destiny.

However, one's physical relationships—bodies, food, clothing, housing, as well as geography, determine one's identity. Likewise one's family, friends, community, government, managers and co-workers as well as enemies also contribute to one's identity. Modern science as well as materialism cannot exclude these factors.

Even so, Semitic religions do not advocate evolutionary theory for understanding humans or the world. Almost all religions treat humans as individual persons with unique personalities and characteristic features. In religions humans are significantly important beings compared with other living beings.

In some religions, such as Judaism and the Christian faith, the human being is considered as the crown of creation. In Hindu religions such as Saivism and Vaishnavism, humans have unique identity with God.² For the most part, in all religions, humans are considered not to have evolved, but to be created and sustained by a personal God. A human being is a *person*, which is an idea deriving from the concept of the existence of a personal God, and is therefore capable of making conscious moral choices.

Names given to human beings at the time of birth or at a later period are part of culture and religion. Among the Hebrews, names were not taken for granted because one's name was supposed to reveal one's personal character. The first human was named Adam and this particular word indicates the human as a being created from material; a dustling, or earthling.³ Also, it is believed that the name of a person or thing was closely related to its essence. Thus Esau and Jacob were named at their birth. When parents give a child a name, they are also making a confession about their hope for who their child will become. In this way, the name carries with it some identity for the child.

Moreover, because for the Hebrews

¹ This is a complicated issue in the context of organ transplantation, etc.

² But there are exceptions. In some eastern religions such as Brahminical Hinduism and Vedantic monism humanity merges into the divine. Atmans (humans) emanate from Braman so that in some way they will reunite with that supreme being.

³ Adam is the Hebrew word for 'man'. It could be ultimately derived from Hebrew '*adam*', meaning 'to be red', referring to the ruddy colour of human skin, or from Akkadian *adamu* meaning 'to make'.

a name is so profound in its meaning, a *change* of name is very much the same thing as a change of personality or character. Thus Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah; Jacob becomes Israel and Saul becomes Paul. Names given to persons have inherent benefits. They include psychological, spiritual, legal, religious, and ethnic aspects.

It takes time for people to discover who and what they are. For instance, for the most part in India, the Bahujans (the majority of the people) are given an identity by the dominant elitist religious discourses arising from Hindu Vedas such as Manusmriti as we shall see below. Similarly, the Government of India reinforces the caste identity of individual persons through its *identity policy and politics* such as reservation.⁴

Religion and culture provide people with some sort of psychology for understanding their selfhood. Identity from the psychological perspective relates to self-image, self-esteem, and individuality which include gender identity, how an individual views him or herself both as a person and in relation to other people. Thus, from the perspective of psychology, 'identity' refers to the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self.⁵ However, the understanding of who we are and what we are is for the most part shaped by a psychology informed by culture and religion.

In contexts such as that of India,

culture and religion overlap. While cultural identity is the identity of a group or culture, or of an individual as far as one is influenced by one's belonging to a group or culture, in India groups could refer to people groups, castes, clans, tribes, extended families, *kulam* and *kothrams*. Culture refers also to the religious customs, rituals, practices, languages (sacred/secular), values and world-views that define social groups, such as those based on nationality, ethnicity, region or common interests. Therefore for Indians, cultural identity such as Dalit, Dravidian, Aryan, etc are important for people's sense of self and how they relate to others.

The current concept of national culture is a construct. Nation-states for the most part believe that a strong 'cultural identity' can contribute to people's overall well-being. It is assumed that cultural identity based on ethnicity is not necessarily exclusive, because people may identify with more than one culture, especially in the globalized urban western contexts.

It is suggested that such inclusive cultural identity is an important contributor to people's well-being. 'Identifying with a particular culture makes people feel they belong and gives them a sense of security. It also provides access to social networks, which provide support and shared values and aspirations.'⁶ However, it is also recognized that strong cultural identity expressed in the wrong way can contribute to barriers between groups.⁷

⁴ L. D. Jenkins, *Identity and Identification in India: Defining the Disadvantaged* (London, Routledge, 2003), 180.

⁵ M.R Leary and J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), 3.

⁶ *The Social Report, Ministry of Social Development* (New Zealand, 2010). (An Internet Article) <http://socialreport.msd.govt.nz/documents/the-social-report-2010.pdf>

⁷ *The Social Report*, 2010.

It is argued that national identity is *an illusion* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. This is especially true of India—nations within a nation. India is truly a multinational federation like the USA, so that this vast nation could be called ‘the United States of India’. But everyone is free to imagine and invent their own caste, clan and people-identity.

II Inventing New Identities in Modern India

India is a grand mosaic, comprising numerous ethnic communities, speaking different languages, and practising different faiths and ideologies. The creation of Indian identity began only during the British rule, and this newly developed identity became ‘strong’ only after Independence. The Indian national identity was nurtured after the manner of European nation-state identities. As far as European States were concerned, it was the new nationalism that contributed to the emergence of such language and race-based identities in Europe.

Similarly, in India the cultural nationalism, *swadeshi*, played an important role in the construction of Indian identity. For the Europeans it was not too difficult to form such nation-states and nurture-identities because most of the nation-states had only one language and only one culture which was an advantage for them. However, for Indians, there are numerous disruptive factors such as culture, language and religion.

India as a nation-state is defined by its Constitution. India adopted a constitution which defines the nature and the functions of state, the rights citizens enjoy and the role of the executive and judiciary. Constitutional sanctions maintain secularism. Thus India is a political construct—a political identity created for nurturing oneness in spite of the realities of the numerous otherness.

Yet, for the most part, Indian people are individually as well as collectively conscious of their racial and religious identities, such as Dravidians, Aryans, Sikhs, Parcheesi, Hindus, Muslims and others. As a result we have the Hindu Mahashaba and its sister organizations, like the Muslim League, which all nurture religious, racial and cultural identities.

As we shall see below it was the European ideologists as well as some of the missionary scholars who discovered new identities for various people of India, especially for the Aryans and Dravidians. There were two different projects: one was the Orientalists School of Calcutta and the other was the Madras School of Orientalists trying to invent identities for various peoples, researching into language, culture and religions.⁸

1. The Orientalists’ invention of Aryan cultural identities

The Orientalists’ invention of Aryan racial theories has contributed to competing identities among the vast

⁸ For a detailed discussion see M. Rajive and A. Neelakandan, *Breaking India: Western Interventions in Dravidian and Dalit Faultlines* (New Delhi: Amaryllis, 2011), 1-10.

majority of the Indians until today. In India modernity was a project initiated and controlled by the British Raj with the aim of maintaining its own rule through people educated by them and loyal to them. They aimed at shaping Indian culture according to their understanding of modernity, by judging it to be both corrupt and pre-modern.⁹

One such project was the Calcutta School of Orientalism headed by William Jones (1746-1794) who is viewed as the founder of British Orientalism and one of leading figures in the history of modern linguistics. Later Max Muller (1823-1900), who studied the 'Aryan family of languages', in particular Sanskrit literature and Vedic culture, led another project. His translation (and publication) of the Rigveda in English 'conferred a boon upon Brahmins for which they are eternally grateful'.¹⁰

These activities resulted first of all in the objectification and use of Indian languages as instruments to understand, appease and control the people of India; secondly in the construction of history of the relationship between India and the West, to classify, order and locate their civilizations on an evaluative scale of progress and decay; and to incorporate India into universal

history. Thirdly, it involved the patronage of Brahminical religion, culture, traditions, institutions, etc.¹¹

It was obvious that the Raj was committed to preserving, reviving and consolidating the dominant native traditions (culture, language and religion) and upon this ideological commitment the whole empire stood. R.E. Frykenberg examines the nexus that existed between the colonial Raj and the Brahminical Hindus. For him 'the Raj forged its grand all-embracing imperium out of earlier imperial institutions and ideologies... of the still earlier Hindu structures...'¹²

Furthermore, Indologists such as Max Muller contended that the Aryans were a branch of the Indo-European race and Sanskrit was an Indo-Aryan language, related to the languages of the West. The Aryans invaded India around 1500 BC, conquered the indigenous people, and established Vedic culture which became the foundation of Indian culture. These conclusions encouraged the Brahminical Hindu nationalists to press forward to establish their *Sanatanadharma*, an abiding, spiritual, primordial civilisation which became their unifying principle. 'From here, it was easy for nationalism and nationalist historiography to take on a religious turn, identifying these realities with the Hindu religious past—Hindu understood as a monolithic conception'.¹³

9 S. Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate*, (Oxford: Regnum & Delhi: ISPCK, 1999), 361. Cf. Vinay Samuel, 'Modernity, Postmodernity and Ethnic Minorities', *Transformation* (October, 1993), 14.

10 'From the Secretary of the Adi-Brahmo Samaj of Calcutta', (May 28, 1875) in *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Muller edited by his wife in two Volumes*, Vol.1 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1902), 488.

11 B. S. Cohn, 'The Command of Language, and the Language Command', in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies, IV, Writings on South Asian History* (Delhi: OUP, 1985), 316.

12 Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 91.

13 Felix Wilfred, 'Whose Nation? Whose His-

When the British established political superiority over all other European rivals in India, they tried also to establish intellectual superiority over all other European countries with regard to understanding India. Even so, it was colonial policy to civilize and educate the elite (the Brahmins and upper-castes) which would arrest the decline of the great Indian culture so that 'difference' could be preserved. The British colonial Raj endeavoured to bring social change by reforming the native culture, but not the religion. The aim was to construct a civil society after the model of their nation-state by producing a caste elite who used the benefits of the Raj for them and knew that their position was secure because their religious foundations were not threatened.¹⁴

Consequently, the colonial Raj sponsored Oriental studies that resulted in the renaissance of Brahminical Hinduism and Hindu nationalism and the emergence of several religious reform movements. Some of these movements were orthodox or counter-reform while others were modern and secular, purged of superstitious beliefs and customs. As Corrie Acorda has said, 'modernization and colonization are two sides of a pair of scissors. Whenever colonization cuts across a nation, modernization splits that nation's culture in two, the modern and the traditional.'¹⁵

Ambedkar could clearly see the results of the modernization that came through the colonialists. Leaving the poor and the oppressed classes behind, the Brahminical Hindu nationalists tried to build their empire with the help of the British.

The Brahmin believes in a two-nation theory. He claims to be the representative of the Aryan race and he regards the rest of the Hindus as descendants of the non-Aryans. This theory helps him to establish his kinship with European races and share their arrogance and their superiority. He particularly likes the part of the theory which makes the Aryan an invader and a conqueror of the non-Aryan native race. For it helps him to maintain and justify his lordship over the non-Brahmins.¹⁶

Firstly, the imagined historical claims of Hindutva were made much more possible within the modern forms of a colonial historiography that was constructed around the complex identity of a people, the nation-state.¹⁷ Orthodox movements like the Arya Samaj made the people more and more traditional and orthodox. They produced the Hindu nationalists, V. D. Savakar, K. B. Hedgewar and Golwalkar, who framed the agenda of Hindutva, a way of life, which is at present forced on the people of this country.

Secondly, while the promoters of

tory?', *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XXXII, No. 187, January, 2002, 64.

¹⁴ Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 227. Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, pp. 92, 249.

¹⁵ Corrie Acorda, 'Tradition, Modernity and Christian Mission in Asia', *Transformation* (Oc-

tober, 1993), 18.

¹⁶ Vasnt Moon (ed), *Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 7 (Pune: Government of Maharashtra, 1990), 80.

¹⁷ Partha Chatterjee, 'Claims of the Past: The Genealogy of Modern Historiography', in *Subaltern Studies Vol. VIII: Essays in Honor of Ranajit Guha* (Delhi: OUP, 1996), 2.

Hindutva co-opted the under-classes into their discourse for building their empire, they excluded them from democratic participation in the sphere of religion, economics, politics and so on. 'Nationalism' was a very subtle discourse which lacked moral foundations. Now the result is that Dalits and the backward castes want to quit Hinduism.

Kancha Ilaiah shows why he is not a Hindu:

I was not born a Hindu for the simple reason that my parents did not know that they were Hindus. ... My illiterate parents, who lived in a remote South Indian village, did not know that they belonged to any religion at all. People belong to a religion only when they know that they are part of the people who worship that God, when they go to those temples and take part in the rituals and festivals of that religion. My parents had only one identity and that was their caste—*kulam*: they were Kurumaas.¹⁸

Thus today the Dalits–Bahujans have begun to assert their identities in terms of their local religion and culture.

2. Dravidian racial consciousness and cultural identities

On the other hand, it was the nineteenth and twentieth-century Protestant Christian missionaries who introduced modernity (including the process of change and the resulting values) among the Dalits. As far as South India

was concerned, for the most part, the missionaries represented a well-educated middle class in the Victorian era when England itself was developing an increasing sense of national and imperial destiny. The country was becoming more and more part of the world.

Also, England was becoming a materially prosperous country as it grew in technological advancement and population. The general belief was that 'whatever the shortcomings of the past, today was good and tomorrow would be better'. According to Kitson Clark the increase in population, the industrial revolution, the religious awakening and the increase in literacy were some of the powerful forces that were at work in the community.¹⁹

However, as I have argued elsewhere,²⁰ it is wrong to identify the evangelistic work of the British missionaries as a mere colonial enterprise. European missiological thought and missionary methods were firmly rooted in the Christian traditions and heritage of that period. As in England, so in India, the Christian missionaries were concerned about 'civil life', 'morals' and 'virtues' (Christian character formation) among the Dalit converts. The missionaries, being influenced by the religious and intellectual currents of their time as well as out of sympathy and concern, were eager to spread the benefits of western civilization along with the gospel. They wanted Christianisation and civilization (modernity) to go hand in hand.

Being motivated by evangelical con-

¹⁹ G. K. Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (London: Methuen & CO, 1962), 207.

²⁰ Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 151–153, 169.

¹⁸ Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I am Not A Hindu* (Calcutta, Smayee, 1996), 1.

cern, and the long tradition of learning and scholarship among the Church of England's clergy, Christian missionaries like Robert Caldwell and G.U. Pope, the pioneers of South Indian scholarship, gave a lead to a project independent of and even quite antithetical to the colonial government-sponsored projects.

Caldwell's foremost thesis was that the Dravidian languages, in particular Tamil, were independent of Sanskrit. The South Indian scholars who continued the research pioneered by the missionaries and came up with new perspectives on Tamil history and culture supported this thesis. This resulted in the emergence of Dravidian racial consciousness, cultural ideology and recently, Dalit consciousness.²¹

Like the Dravidian movement, Dalit movements were also an attempt to return to a former period of glory. Dalit consciousness premised on the question of Dalit identity—the question of their roots. Dalit scholars have traced the Dalit movements from a cultural point of view back to Dravidian culture and Tamil renaissance.²²

However, it is important to note that, while modernity that came through the Raj helped the Brahmins and the upper caste Hindus, the mis-

sionaries empowered the poor and the oppressed communities to find dignity and identity by retrieving their history and heritage. In other words, while modernity that came through the British aided the Brahminical castes, modernity that came through Christianity assisted the Dalits.

They were two different projects with two different motives. If the one was political, the other was Christian. Although the researches of Caldwell and Pope became a great advantage to the common people, the missionaries exhibited the spirit of universalism. They were supporters of neither the Aryans or non-Brahmins. As Burton Stein has pointed out, missionaries were simply the pioneers of Indian scholarship.²³

The foregoing description suggests that in both cases modernity, as in the European renaissance, enabled the Indians (Brahmins and the non-Brahmins) to idealize their past (invent further histories and create new myths) for competing identities such as Aryan, Dravidian and now Dalit.²⁴ Though the non-Brahmins and the Dalits initially benefited from modernity, it was the Brahmins and the upper-castes who benefited most.

The colonial project that created the myth of Aryan racist Vedic culture is the base for the ideological platform

²¹ With the help of the research initiated by the Christian missionaries, the oppressed classes invented histories for their own advantage. When an oppressed group seeks to throw off oppression, it seeks to 'invent' a history that glorifies its past as the first step in acquiring self-respect. Inventing histories are normal for people who are in Diaspora. (Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 42.)

²² Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 20.

²³ Burton Stein, *Essays on South India* (New Delhi: Vikas, Publishing House), 1975, viii.

²⁴ 'Modern man invents himself and valorises the new in a heroism of self-discovery and self-revelation. ... Modern man comes of age'. See P. Sampson, 'The Rise of Modernity' in P. Sampson, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (ed) *Faith and Postmodernity*, (Oxford: Regnum, 1994), 33.

called Hindutva-Hindu revivalism and cultural nationalism. As Anandhi has pointed out,

The Brahminical Hindus especially, the Hindu communalists are tactfully utilizing the ideological resources of the modernizing nation state to mobilize the so-called Hindus in the name of 'national culture' and ascribe a homogenized content to the notion of citizenship. In this process, they erase and suppress the multiple identities of various religious and ethnic groups. ... The modern state ... constructs identities, which simultaneously exhibit the temptation to return to the so-called traditional glories of the nation and the drive to go further into modernity.²⁵

Furthermore she contends that,

In India, the process of nation-building, the nationalist movement and the subsequent creation of a modern nation state—all of which drew inspiration from an Orientalist discourse which allowed the Brahminical ideology to co-opt efforts to reform Hinduism—were premised on the perceptions of India as a single aggregate, a so-called 'traditional' community-society. Subsequent modernizing efforts too went hand in hand with the institutionalization of tradition and the instrumental use of traditional symbols and myths.²⁶

Thus among the Indians, there is a continued struggle between the Dal-

its and the non-Dalits in order to establish their identities, while they are collectively challenged by the forces of modernity.²⁷ As we have seen briefly, Hindutva is a new form of monoculture which has resulted from orientalist's discourse. It is a culture or way of life being constantly created, recreated and shaped by the forces of modernity.

The Dalits, being met with this particular challenge, waged a counter cultural movement by utilizing the Christian missionary output and other ideologies, such as Marxism and Ambedkarism. The present approach of the Dalit leaders is similar to the approach of the Brahmins and caste Hindus that promotes class division.²⁸

The missionary project had a different aim so that the process of utilising modernity for the benefit of the Dalits was also altogether different. Christian missionaries did not aim at a counter cultural movement, but their activities were cross-cultural—not to confront other groups but engage with them. For missionaries, ethnic and national identity was not the proper way of shaping the identity of the Christians.²⁹ The dignity and worth of a person depended on what God had done in Jesus Christ for that particular person.

The discovery of self-identity and

27 'Modernity locates human identity immanently within the world and at the centre of the world; human beings are reflexively related to themselves in self discovery and insight.' Sampson, *The Rise of Post-modernity*, 45.

28 For details see Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 362.

29 Cf. 'Church and State and Nation Building: A Conference Report', Hong Kong, 1988, in Chris Sugden and Vinay Samuel (ed), *Mission as Transformation*, 459.

25 S. Anandhi, *Contending Identities: Dalits and Secular Politics in Madras Slums* (New Delhi: ISI, 1995), 1 (Italics are mine).

26 Anandhi, *Contending Identities*, 2.

self-worth as a child of God revealed in the Scripture was an influential factor in the formation of the new Dalit identity among those people with whom the missionaries worked. The invitation to discover such an identity in Christ provided fulfilment and security to the poor and the oppressed. Moreover, Dalit identity was shaped by the relationship with Christ and fellowship with fellow believers locally and universally.³⁰

III Religious and Cultural Identities vs Christian Identity

When people are in diaspora, they invent new identities for their survival and mobility. In the 19th century various depressed classes invented competing identities for their collective social advancement. They used cultural and religious idioms for constructing such identities.

The mass-movement Christians were no exceptions in this regard. For instance, among the languages spoken in India, Tamil was the first language into which the Bible was translated. As a result the Protestant Christians of South India who were predominantly from the outcastes began to regard themselves as *Vethakaramga*, the people of the Scripture. It was a kind of counter-cultural identity over against the existing Brahminical Hindu Vedic identity.

The outcaste communities who were once considered by society as polluted and fit for nothing, effectively utilized the biblical images such as 'new crea-

tion' and 'sons of God' to increase their self-worth and dignity which had been denied to them for centuries. For the outcastes the religious identity, that is, the association with Christ and fellowship with believers, had precedence over communal identity.

In a sense Christians have no exclusive or separate identity for themselves. They are supposed to nurture an inclusive mindset to create space for others. This involves a broadening of the mind, escaping from the ghetto mentality, nurturing a catholic or universal personality, and becoming a world-Christian, transcending culture and caste boundaries in order to join the main stream of Indian society). For the most part Christians try to maintain such integrated identity. Even so, resurgence of native religious pride, Christian religious sensitivity, patriotism, Christian publicity, and unity of Christians are some of the national concerns to be debated.

Due to centuries of socio-economic and political oppression, the Dalit communities of southern states such as Tamil Nadu, the Shanars and the Paraiyas, became a people who had lost their dignity and self-worth.³¹ When the Dalits embraced Christianity they became, in the course of time, a dignified people provided with an awakened consciousness and a new self-identity, based on their new understanding of who they were in Christ Jesus through a progressive conversion experience.

The awakening of the Dalit con-

³⁰ Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 339.

³¹ Though both communities were branded as untouchables, the Nadars were a somewhat less oppressed community than the Paraiyas, who were at the bottom of the Hindu social pyramid.

sciousness and formation of new identity was directed and energized by missionary-led Christian experiences such as church fellowship, sacraments, liturgy, adherence to the Scriptures and devotion to Christ. This seems to be an invariable element in the social transformation of the poor and oppressed communities of the Indian sub-continent.

Before conversion to Christianity the untouchables of Tamil Nadu had a poor self-image. For instance the Nadars and Paraiyas were described by the upper caste Hindus as untouchables, a polluting class, outcastes, *panchamas*, fifth caste, *Paraiyas*, *Shanars*, *Illapa-jathi*, lowest caste, *Kalla*, thieves, *panaiyeri*, palmyra tree climbers, and so on. They were identified as people who were not entitled to receive *mantras*, Brahminical prayers, and who were denied access to the *Vedas*, Scriptures. They did not worship Hindu gods, nor were they served by Brahmins or had any Brahmin priest at all.

Moreover they had no access to the interior of ordinary Hindu temples.³² They had come to accept that they were nobody. They came to believe what they had been told so often: you are untouchables, fit only for slavery and servitude. These are examples of what created the negative identity which the Brahminical Hindu social order had given to the Dalits.

Furthermore, they were a people who could not secure profitable and dignified jobs. Unable to own land they were forced to be content with hard and sometimes dirty and degrading labour. They were illiterate because

they were denied education. This was always controlled by Brahmins and the upper castes.³³ They were forced to develop their own social customs and manners which were not consistent with the accepted social behaviour of the upper-caste society.³⁴

The contempt and humiliation was legitimized by the Hindu Code of Law called *Manusmriti* which provided each caste with an identity. Manu wrote,

Give a name to a Brahmin which invokes in others the idea of reverence and respect; give a name to a *Kshatriya* which invokes in others valour and courage; give a name to a *Vaishya* which invokes in others the idea of wealth and prosperity; give a name to a *Sudra* which invokes in others the idea of contempt and humiliation.³⁵

Hence, it is obvious that while all other castes were given an identity, the so-called *panchamas* or fifth caste were not given an identity at all in the Brahminical social order. Wherefore, if an untouchable tried to lead a life with human dignity and honour it would be looked upon as an act of rebellion, and an issue of law and order.³⁶ For instance, when Christian Nadar women

33 See Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 4.2.4.

34 L. K. A. Krishna Iyer, *The Tribes and Castes* (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1987), 68-69, 85, 277, 278. S. Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, (Madras: AES, 1991), 82, 83, 99, 100, 291, 297, 299, 300, 331, 304, 310. Cf. B. Basavalingappa, *The Emancipation of Scheduled Castes* (Bangalore: Nagasena Vidyalyaya, 1991), 3.

35 G. C. Houghton, *Manava Dharma Sastra* (Delhi: AES, 1982), 275.

36 Cf. Vasantmoon (ed), *Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol.VII (Pune: Government of Maharashtra, 1990), 71.

32 See Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 2.3.3,4; 5.4.

began to wear blouses like other women, the upper-caste men and women could not tolerate it and it became a matter of legal concern in society.³⁷

In Tamil Nadu in regions such as Tirunelveli various untouchable communities turned to Christ in groups as a way of finding their corporate identity, since this important personality need was denied to them by the Hindu Brahminical caste-ridden society.

As Vinay Samuel has pointed out,

Christian identity is not confined to place or race. Our identity is to be as children of God—‘He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:5). ... Thus a Christian response to those alienated from their identity is to bring them into relationships of wholeness. The foundation of this is the reconciliation of which the cross is a sign and the basis: ‘he himself is our peace who made the two one’ (Ephesians 2:4).³⁸

Vinay Samuel goes on to say that God’s intention is to create one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. In response to the hostility of ethnic barriers, Christians are to focus on wholeness and a new humanity through the power of the cross. For Vinay Samuel these are not words—they are a reality. The New Testament shows that Paul had seen it work as the age-old hostilities between

Jews and Gentiles were overcome in Christ.³⁹ William Storrar also shares a similar view.

The one new humanity in Christ is a community of unity in diversity, a holy nation made up of people of all nations who, in embracing their new identity in Christ, retain their social and cultural identities as Gentiles and lose only the oppression and distorting effect of sin and their separation from God’s covenant people (Ephesians 2:3). ... There is also a fundamental equality of all God’s people in Christ (Galatians 3:26-29), but that does not efface our identities as Jew or Greek.⁴⁰

Missionaries taught their Dalit converts, who practised mutual untouchability and were hostile towards each other, to love one another by acknowledging the biblical truth that they were all the children of the one living God and saved by his only Son the Lord Jesus Christ. They taught their upper-caste converts, who were the traditional oppressors of the Dalits to comprehend the core of the gospel which says that, ‘what God has cleansed you call not unclean’.

The missionaries and the Christian community believed in the truth that all human beings are equally worthy of respect because they are created in the image of God. They took efforts to unmask and expose the falsehood of the Aryan racist myth of caste.⁴¹

37 Cf. J. W. Gladstone, *Protestant Christianity* (Trivandrum: Seminary Publications, 1984), 77-97. R. L. Hardgrave, *Nadars of Tamilnad* (Berkeley: UCP, 1969), 65-70.

38 Vinay Samuel, ‘Strangers and Exiles in the Bible’, *Transformation*, 12:2 (April-June, 1995), 28-29.

39 Samuel, *Strangers and Exiles in the Bible*, 29.

40 W. Storrar, ‘Vertigo or Imago?’, *Themelios*, 21:3 (April, 1996), 4.

41 Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, 340-341.

Modernity represents a great assault on humanness in precipitating a crisis of identity.⁴² The way the Christian mission tackled the identity crisis is important. It becomes a lesson to be learned by the Indian church.

IV Nationalism and Closed Identities

As H. Kohn has made clear, contemporary nationalism is a political creed that underlies the cohesion of modern societies and legitimises their claim to authority.⁴³ In India, since the 19th century, a variety of nationalisms emerged, particularly in the context of its interaction with the ideologies of the British Raj in general and Christianity in particular.

According to Vincent Kumaradoss, nationalism cannot merely be 'endowed with a monolithic, anti-colonial content' and there can be 'multiple histories of nationalism and colonialism', depending on the specific context. However, 'in the nationalist discourse the concept of "nation" and "nationalism" are invested with an aura of utmost sacredness, endowing nationalism with a monolithic anti-colonial and anti-Christian content'.⁴⁴

42 Os Guinness, 'Mission Modernity: Seven Checkpoints on Mission in the Modern World', in Samuel and Sugden (ed), *Mission as Transformation*, 296.

43 H. Kohn, 'Nationalism' *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968), 63. Quoted by Leela D'Souza, 'Ethnic Nationalism in India—An Appraisal', *VJTR* Vol.66, (January, 2002), 44.

44 Vincent Kumaradoss, 'Nationalism and Christianity in Colonial India', Unpublished Seminar paper, Mission Studies Forum (Bangalore, February 26, 2000), 1.

Not only in India but also in other Two-Thirds world countries, nationalism emerged in the context of British rule. As we have noted in the previous sections, the 'initiators' of the modernization process in these countries, particularly in India, were the colonizers—the British themselves who provided much of the infrastructure for the emergence of nationalism(s) of various types, both cultural and ethnic.⁴⁵ The modern Hindu nationalists' pride was invented to counter (Christian) western accusation of Brahminical Hinduism as an irrational religion and Brahminical caste Hindus as inferior people.

The Hindu nationalists claimed that the irrational elements of Hinduism, such as caste, child marriage and sati, were later additions to Hinduism and the true Hinduism of the past was free from such practices and was indeed rational.⁴⁶ They sought to revitalize and regenerate as well as reinvent the so-called Hindu *sanantan* culture ('abiding' primordial civilization) as a way of re-establishing Hindu Brahminical imperialism so as to suppress other religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians. But they achieved it in the name of 'resisting colonialism' and now they do it in the name of opposing westernization and globalization.

The cultural nationalists glorified the ancient past and developed several myths for their own selfish advantage. Three of them are noteworthy:

First of these myths is the belief that Indian society reached a high water-

45 Leela D'Souza, *Ethnic Nationalism in India*, 38.

46 Kumaradoss, *Nationalism and Christianity*, 8.

mark, the golden age, in ancient India, from which it gradually slid downwards during the medieval period, the period of decay and foreign rule and continued to slide downwards till the revivalist movements made partial recovery but that the real task of reviving the past glory and civilization still remains.

The second myth arose out of the necessity to prove that India of ancient past—the golden age—had made the highest achievements in human civilization. But this was not obviously true in material civilization, cranks who talk of atomic bombs and aeroplanes in ancient India notwithstanding. Therefore the myth grew that Indian genius lay in ‘spiritualism’ in which respect it was superior to the materialistic West.

The third was the Aryan myth, which was a copy of the Anglo-Saxon myths, (*but it was originally invented by two Brahmins, namely Manu and Kaudillya*) and it was the Indian response to the white racialists’ doctrines. This was the myth that Indian people were Aryans and that the pure Indian culture and society were those of an Aryan, Vedic period.⁴⁷

This sort of cultural nationalism became a precursor to the later development of Hindu ethnic nationalism

led by Savakar,⁴⁸ Hegdewar and Golkar.⁴⁹ While the Hindu view highlighted the glory of the ancient past, it ignored at the same time the rich heritage of other people groups, such as the Dravidians and the Tribals, which then resulted in the hatred of minorities.⁵⁰

As Ramanathan points out, the state of Orissa today witnesses such a mass consciousness in its naked form.

The construction of the ‘others’ is more or less complete and the ghettoisation and consequent change in the behaviour of the weaker sections further aggravates this social common sense. The motivated political formations controlled by cultural organizations keep doing this all the time in the society. They advocate that India can be kept secular only if its Hindu identity can protect India. Thus, by decrying that the Hindu identity is endangered, they set the stage for violently destroying others who are deemed to be their enemies. As a net result, gullible people are turned into unruly gangsters, who indulge in violence in the name of religion.⁵¹

It is a psychology of ‘will to purity’ similar to the Freudian ‘will to pleasure’, which is a dangerous principle destroying others. It is aimed at the

⁴⁷ Romila Thapar, Harbans Mukhia and Bipan Chandra, *Communalism and the writing of Indian History* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1981), 45-47. Quoted by Kumaradoss, *Nationalism and Christianity*, 8-10. Italics are mine.

⁴⁸ Cf. R. A. Ravishankar, ‘The Real Savakar’, *Frontline* (August 2, 2002), 17.

⁴⁹ P. M. Manohar, ‘Political Challenges and Mission Perspectives’ in W. S. Milton Jegannathan (ed), *Mission Paradigm in the New Millennium* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 306.

⁵⁰ Melwin Pereira, ‘Hindutva and Hatred on Minorities’, *Social Action*, Vol.50, No.3 (July-September, 2000), 303ff.

⁵¹ P. Ramanathan, *Contributing Factors for Orissa Violence*, an article emailed to author.

destruction of religious and cultural identities of others who have no place in the land. The pathology of purity for the majority considers minority as a cancer for the rest of the society. It has often resulted in a routine of cultural or ethnic cleansing that has been happening in India as well as many other parts of the world.

Volf describes it as 'politics of purity'; the blood must be pure, the territory must be pure, the origins must be pure, the goal must be pure: 'plurality and heterogeneity must give way to homogeneity and unity'. The will to purity contains a whole program for arranging our nations and worlds. This sort of 'social arrangement'—uniformization—is another consequence of globalism which tries to control further proliferation of differences—an approach to the problems of identity and otherness.⁵²

However, this may result in a civil war as predicted by Kancha Illiah. Recently he wrote that, 'the Indian nation is on the course for a civil war; a civil war that has been simmering as an undercurrent of the caste based cultural system that Hinduism has constructed and for centuries'.⁵³

52 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 20, 21, 57, 74, 75. See Arjun Appadurai, 'Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization' in Birgit Meyer and Peter Gerschiere (ed), *Globalization and Identity: Dialects of Flow and Closure* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 305ff.

53 Kancha Illaiah, *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse on Dalit Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution* (New Delhi, Sage, 2009), ix.

V Memory and the Christian Identity

Memory often provides us with an identity—who we are and what we are. However, we are not just shaped by memories; we ourselves shape memories that shape us. Remembering is the gathering of fragments because we have deliberately forgotten certain aspects of the past.⁵⁴

As Volf has pointed out, 'memory defines the identities of Jews and Christians. To be a Jew is to remember the Exodus. To be a Christian is to remember the death and resurrection of Christ.' A memory, such as the Lord's supper, shapes identity by drawing worshipers existentially into the sacred past. In fact it reactualizes the story of Christ—his passion, death, resurrection become the story of every Christian.⁵⁵

Also it is a collective and communal memory; individuals do not remember alone, but as members of a group.

As Christians, our wounded self is healed, which takes place when we remember therapeutically. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we remember so as to learn from the past. Christians live in God and in their neighbours. Christians do not construct their identity or re-invent it by using the past, but they draw their identity from their faith relationship with God. But God does not take away our past; he gives it back to us—we are people forever healed and reconciled.⁵⁶

54 Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 21, 24-25.

55 Volf, *The End of Memory*, 97-98.

56 Volf, *The End of Memory*, 198-201.