

## From Vedic Dharma to the Christian Faith

by Y. D. Tiwari

Much of Yesu Das Tiwari's later life has been spent in theological education:

E.g. as Professor of the History of Religions at Serampore College in West Bengal and on the staff of Bishop's College, Calcutta. He has also played a leading role in a new translation of the New Testament into Hindi. But for some time after his baptism as a young man of twenty-three, he was a travelling *sadhu*\* in various parts of North India.

This reminiscence was written for the Conference of Converts from Hinduism to the Christian Faith at Bangalore in May 1963 (published in *Religion and Society* 10 (3), Sept. 1963, p.1 i3-20). The earlier part of the article describes the experience that led to his conversion as a young man.

My father a staunch *Advait Vedantin*\*, my mother a devout *Vaishnava*\*, bathing in sacred rivers and worshipping in temples, I was early attracted to the teachings of a modern religious reform movement - the *Arya*\* *Samaj*. This was because I read Arya Samaj literature from my uncle's shelf. I remember greatly enjoying the readings of Swami Dayanand's *Satyarth Prakash*\* at the age of thirteen. What attracted me most in this book was its polemic against orthodox Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. I had a further reason for reading it. There was an Indian Christian teacher in our school who used to preach Christianity and criticize Hinduism. I was much annoyed by his arguments and wanted to give crushing replies to his criticisms. This induced me to read the *Arya Samaj* literature carefully. I even edited a hand-written magazine to uphold the Vedic religion and criticize other religions, especially Christianity

Though my love for my traditional faith, and my adolescent age, drew me into controversy, I really did not like religious controversies. My mother's noble example reminded me often that real religion consists not in disputations but in prayer, in fasting, in doing *tapasya*\*. I read the lives of the ancient devotees Dhruva and Prahiada, and longed to go to some forest and do *tapasya* there. So at the age of fifteen, when I had passed the Middle School Examination, I ran away from home and went to *Pushpar Tirtha*. My aim was to become the disciple of a Swami there. I had read books and poems composed by this Swami and pictured him leading a life of *tapasya* and *yoga*\*, but instead I discovered him to be a worldly man, rich and carefree, rolling in luxury. I was disillusioned and returned home.

The influence of Arya Samaj lasted for about four years only. I was growing mentally and spiritually. At the age of seventeen, I developed a liking for the *Vedanta*\* as preached by Swami Ram Teertha. This teacher has been aptly described as 'Poet-monk of the Punjab', because he suffused the dry intellectual teachings of Shankara's *Advaita*\* with emotion. Swami Ram Teertha seemed to me to have in his teaching the philosophical ideas of my father as well as the devotional fervour of my mother; he was modern in his outlook and still very other-worldly. So he held my head and heart for a while.

But times were moving fast. When I joined St John's College, Agra, as a student, the movement for political freedom had started all over the country. The Simon Commission visited India in 1928. The

Resolution for Independence was passed in 1930. In the summer of that year Gandhiji marched to Dandi. The salt law was broken everywhere. Arrests were made. Was all this a dream, I asked, as Shri Shankaracharya had tried to prove and as Shri Ram Teertha had preached? Were the sacrifices and sufferings of the countrymen a dream? Was my continuing my studies selfish, when so many of my friends had given up careers for a patriotic reason, a mere dream? The *Advaita* view seemed very unsatisfactory and unreal in those heart-moving days, and I changed it for Gandhi's ethico-religious outlook. I gave up wearing mill-made cloth and wore hand-spun cloth from 1930-42. I took vows for speaking the truth and for service to the poor; started a night school for *Harljans*\* (which still continues!) and worked for the prevention of child marriages.

This devotion to social service brought a certain happiness to my distracted soul because my motive in doing so was to realize God. However, I was still far away from the spiritual peace for which I longed. When I was studying in the Third Year at the St John's College, Dr Stanley Jones visited Agra and gave a series of lectures at the College. I could not understand much of what he said (later on I was to derive much benefit from reading his books) for I was not much used to the English language and the acoustics of the College hall were bad. But when Stanley Jones invited those who wanted to inquire further into Christianity to give their names to him, I was caught unawares in his net. Moved by curiosity I got my name included in the list as some other Hindu fellow-students also did. Thus a Bible study group was formed which used to meet once a week at Canon Holland's (my Principal's) residence. From him we studied the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospels of Mark and Luke. I also used to attend Bible Fellowship groups which the Rev. G. D. Reynolds, a Baptist Missionary, conducted at his place (I learned to respect Mr Reynolds as a sincere devotee of God. To him and his younger missionary colleague, the Rev. W. J. Bradnock, who joined him later, I owe much).

When I left St John's College after two years of happy fellowship, I had ceased regarding Christianity as an alien faith. I respected Christ as I respected Buddha or Kabir or Nanak. He was a great religious man who lived long ago in Palestine.

I had now taken the BA degree and was studying Philosophy and Law in the local Hindu College. Canon Holland had retired and gone to England. From there he sent me a copy of C. F. Andrews' book *Christ in the Silence* which was just out of the press. This book is a devotional commentary on the Farewell Discourses in St John's Gospel. I read this book first because '*din bandhu*' (the title given to Fr Andrews by Indians) had written it. Later I continued to read it because I liked its contents.

One thing I could not understand in this book. The author spoke of Jesus as 'the Lord' who is living, one who is present here and now. I had so far thought of Him as a great man who lived long ago in Palestine, so I could not understand this way of speaking about Jesus. I thought that this was perhaps a stylistic peculiarity of the author.

I had completed twenty-two years of my life. Though a spiritually-minded youth, sin had entered into my life. I wanted to be good, religious, spiritual, but I could manage only to be wicked, unholy and worldly. The more I struggled, the more I sank in the mire of sin. In one such despondent mood I went to *Christ in the Silence* and read the commentary on the words of St John's Gospel, 'Ask in

My Name'. The commentary spoke of the Bishop, Charles Gore, of Sushil Kumar Rudra and of, Sadhu Sundar Singh, and how their prayers were answered. C. F. Andrews then went on to relate his own experiences.

Suddenly a thought occurred to me, 'why not pray in Christ's name?' I was horrified at this thought. 'What', said I, 'should I pray in this name? Why should I pray in His name? I am a Brahmin, a Tiwari, a descendant of the *rishis*\*, a teacher of the world. Shall I pray in His name? Never'.

But I was face to face with the Lord. He said, 'You have used all your methods. You have tried to be good by your own efforts, through philosophy, through meditation; all this has not worked. Why not try this method? Why not try?'

So I got up from my chair and went to the small room adjacent to my study and knelt there and prayed, 'O Lord, if you are a living Lord, save me from my sins. Save me from myself'. At once I realized that there is a gracious Personality by my side on whom I may repose my feverish head, one who is closer than the closest friend, one who understands, one who is undescrivable (*anivarchaniya*).

I knew instantly that my sinful habits and besetting temptations were broken, life became different. Trees looked greener, and the chirping of birds was sweeter.

Christ has said that we should not hide our light under a bushel. We have to bear witness. It was when I tried to follow this command that storm broke out first in my home and then in the city. The people at home said, 'Better you had become a drunkard, a gambler or an adulterer. That would have been more tolerable than to know that you worship this strange God.' Soon people began to pour in to argue with me or sympathize with my father. It was incredible news that an educated Brahmin wanted to become a Christian.

But I must cut the story short. I was baptized one year after my conversion at Christ Prem Seva Sangh, Poona. Fr W. Q. Lash (now Bishop) baptized me.

### ***The Elements of the Christian Faith which have appealed to me***

1. The presence of the Living Christ. To quote Thomas a Kempis, 'He that findeth Jesus findeth a treasure of infinite value, good transcending all that can be called good.... That man only is poor in this world, who liveth without Jesus and that man only is rich with whom Jesus delights to dwell'.

2. Certain sects of Hinduism believe that God is personal. They teach about the grace of God and many other things which we Christians ignorantly think belong to Christianity only. Hinduism also has *Bhakti*\*, the way of devotion and faith: but the objects to which this love and faith are directed are not worthy. Indeed the devotees have a nobler character than the gods whom they worship. In Jesus only we find human perfection which is divine too. He is unique.

3. Christ has taught that the Eternal God, God who is the Creator of this universe, is our Father. This teaching has given to Christian prayer a simplicity a directness, a dignity, which is seldom found

elsewhere. What is exceptional in other faiths is commonplace here.

4. Christianity has always emphasized the practical service of humanity. A Christian Bhakta is *iosofacto*\* a servant of humanity. The existence of innumerable schools, colleges, hospitals, churches and other places of service proves this.

#### *Attitude to Hindu Religion and Culture*

When I decided to be baptized, I did not think that I was 'leaving' Hindu society. I thought I was adding something new, something glono is to my Hindu heritage. I wanted to continue to live with my parents, to co-operate with the other Hindus in social service work, to visit the temples, etc. I was like those early Christians who met daily at solomon's porch in the temple.

Soon I discovered that this was not possible. The leaders of the community told me that I could not work with them and my own family shut the door, literally, in my face. I was driven Out. But I did not go to the NISSION Compound! I became a *sadhu*, wandered long distances, and reached Mahatma Gandhi's *Ashram*\* and he graciously took me in.

During those days of wandering far and wide, I met C. F. Andrews. He heard my story sympathetically and asked me a straightforward question: 'Do you feel bitter against your father and against the society which has treated you so harshly?' I had to pause and look within honestly. Then I said, 'I do'. C. F. Andrews pointed out to me that that was not the Christian attitude. I should always try to have love and goodwill towards the Hindus. 'For God's sake, do not cut yourself away', he pleaded earnestly, 'from the political and social movements in the country'.

I have tried to follow this advice. I try to maintain cultural links by cultivating interest in Hindi and Sanskrit\*. This brings me into closer and happier contact with people engaged in these pursuits. I visit such priests and laymen who are less prejudiced, I attend meetings -religious, political, and academic. My experience is that when I waJk closely with God I am able to exercise a good influence on these people. While I live on a lower spiritual level the effect is harmful.

What is Hindu culture? It is hard to define. One thing is certain. It is constantly changing. As Hindus themselves say, it has its strong points and its weak points. The same holds true of the Hindu Scriptures. We are not obliged to eulogize everything in them, or to ondemn them.

I am glad to say that responsible and informed Christian scholarship has always exercised wise judgement and Christian charity in dealing with Hindu doctrines. One can name Farquhar, Macnicol, W. D. P. Hill and many others.

The question is often asked, 'Should we use Hindu philosophical terms to express Christian thought? I am afraid I am conservative here. I shall use the literary vocabulary of Sanskrit language, its idioms, figures of speech, its literary allusions, so far as they harmonize with our presentday usages and ri"eds, but, as far as possible, *not t!*;~ *Hindu philosophical terms*. Wo~ds like *A vatar*\*, *Jagadguru*\*, *Rishi*\*, *Diksha*\* are better avoided. Sorn words we should adopt (*viz. Mukti*\*) but in general it is good not to borrow technical terms from other faiths. A wide use of Hindu terms will weaken the Christian message. The Hindu will say, 'Well, you are saying the same thing which our philosophers and sages have said. Only, you say haltingly and in bad idiom what we have said in a

charming and effective manner.' Any indiscriminate use of such language will produce vagueness. We cannot be theologically accurate if we use these terms. I have followed the principle propounded here in the revision of the Hindi New Testament - Sanskritized vocabulary but not Sanskrit philosophical terms.

### *Problems of Thought and Life*

I became a Christian because of the faith in the person of Christ. Him I regarded as my Saviour. He had the devotion of my heart and the obedience of my will.

But now I was face to face with the creeds and doctrines of the Church. For example, it was maintained that Christ rose from the dead. I was taught from childhood that the soul is immortal, but the body changes, decays and perishes. Here was now an article of faith - the physical resurrection of Christ. Is this doctrine rational? This question agitated my mind long before I took baptism. Then there was the doctrine of Atonement. One suffering and dying for the sins of many. I asked, is this doctrine ethical, moral? One of my teachers of philosophy (a Hindu professor), had written on this topic. I also thought that it was very bad to glory in the fact that someone else had suffered from my sins. The whole 'Washed by the blood' doctrine and preaching was strange to me.

But God gave me wisdom to be humble in my doubts and questionings. By His grace I knew that I was too young and immature. I was looking through a glass dimly. One day I shall know the reasons for these doctrines which the Church believes to be true. I thought these must be true doctrines though I cannot yet understand them.

However, I thought that it would be only honest to join a Church, which recites creeds in its worship. So after long deliberations I joined the Baptist Church.

Today I hold that creeds embody great and vital Christian truths. They safeguard the unchanging gospel from subjectivism and from passing fashions of thought. Moreover they are helpful for clear theological thinking. They provide a useful measure to find out where my personal faith falls short of the faith held by the saints both past and present.

I, like many other converts, have found it difficult to adjust myself to the Christian community of which we have become members. The community has its defects and these can be easily pointed out. But converts have to realize that largely the fault lies in the attitude of the converts. We need social education which the religion of our ancestors has not given us. Hinduism has taught meditation, individual perfection, communion with the divine, but it has never emphasized the virtues of good citizenship, harmonious community living, the art of having fellowship with our friends and neighbours. Little wonder a convert alienates his fellow-Christians. This is very unconscious. I ~ that if we become conscious of this defect something can be done to remedy it. Of course we need the grace of God and the love and prayer of our fellows to effect this adjustment.