

# Dharma and Christianity according to Chaturvedi Badrinath

by Dayanand Bharati



It is perhaps a mark of progress that at the present time everyone is able to talk about Indian theology. But progress towards a truly Indian theology is abysmal; apart from Dalit theology and some highfalutin attempts at Advaitic theology there is almost nothing to be seen, and certainly nothing that impresses one as authentic. In such a situation it is imperative to take seriously the effort by Chaturvedi Badrinath in the direction of a deeply Indian analysis of Christianity, and his contribution toward Indian theology.

Badrinath published a series of articles first written for *The Times of India* in 1993 under the title of *Dharma, India and the World Order*. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin wrote a foreword for this impressive effort. He recently produced another seminal work, *Finding Jesus in Dharma: Christianity in India* [Badrinath 2000].

## *On Dharma*

The confusion present in western interaction with and interpretations of India inspires Badrinath's books, and particularly the confusions of Christians.<sup>[1]</sup> Most impressive about Badrinath's work is his commitment to deal in foundational issues. He finds the foundation for most Christian confusion (and frustration and failure) in the concept of dharma. He is even to be commended for resisting western ways of definition and presenting an Indian definition of dharma, drawn from the Mahabharata epic.

What is dharma? In Indian thought, an entity is known by its attributes, or lakshanas, and not by its arbitrary "definition". Dharma is manifest in its three main attributes: prabhava, dhaarana, and ahimsa. The Mahabharata says:

"All the sayings of dharma are with a view to nurturing, cherishing, providing more amply, enriching, prospering, increasing, enhancing, all living beings: in one word, securing their prabhava. Therefore, whatever has the characteristic of bringing that about, is dharma. This is certain." [Badrinath 2000:1; the Mahabharata selection is from Santi Parva 109.10-12].

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Badrinath also gives a traditionally western definition of dharma as "order, . . . not just any positive order but the order that was inherent in all life. Derived from the Sanskrit root word dhr, 'to support', 'to sustain', dharma means that whereby whatever lives, is sustained, upheld, supported" [Badrinath

1993:22]. Lesslie Newbigin also commented at length on dharma in his introduction, and that may further clarify the meaning of this elusive but vitally important concept:

The key concept which will enable us to grasp the truth about India and to unmask the confusions created by the other three words [Hinduism, religion and secular], is the concept of Dharma. Dharma is that which sustains life and order in all their forms, cosmic, human, animal and divine. It is a secular concept in the sense that it arises from no alleged divine revelation but from a study of the human person in all the dimensions of human existence (which are certainly not merely material). The concept of Dharma is not religious or anti-religious; it is secular. But, and here confusion begins to multiply even within India, the word Dharma has been used to embody the western concept of "religion", and therefore secularity has been understood to be anti-Dharmic. But the confusion originates in the West, where the concept of "religion" (from a Christian point of view a very suspect concept) was used to explain what the [Western] invaders found in India [Badrinath 1993:xi].

Badrinath points out that these two books are intimately related, and it is helpful to consider that the first book presents a theory and the second is a practical demonstration of this theory. This article will survey the main points of the two books, with concluding critical comments on the validity and significance of his insights.

### *Dharma, India and the World Order*

This book is a collection of essays which sometimes may be difficult to understand, or at least it can be hard to remember all the discussions put forth by the author in a cohesive way. To help the reader to remember as well as to refer precisely, Badrinath gives "an outline of the inquiry and arguments in the twenty-one essays" in pp. 3-16. The last essay, "Modern Indian Perceptions of India and the West" covers almost half the book (pp. 151-339) and is a remarkable, almost encyclopedic survey of leaders of Indian thought and their various conflicting views of British

attitudes and aims which one way or another shaped Indian politics and government. This essay starts from Rammohan Roy and comes down to Nehru, including comments on Gandhi, Muslims, Christians, Depressed Classes [Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Ambedkar], the Non-Brahmans [from Tamil Nadu], social reformers [Ranade, Bhandarkar, Chandavarkar, Gokhale], Vivekananda, Indian Marxists [Roy, Kosambi, Chattopadhyaya], and Hindu nationalists [Golwalkar, Deenadayal Upadhyaya]. In each of these cases the analysis points out 'two main streams: the one that adopted the Western perceptions of India; and the other... Indian categories of thought' [1993: 328]. After exposing the 'destructive ambiguities in the stated perceptions of both kinds,' [p. 329] in the final sentence of the book the author poses a remarkable question:

That the others can misunderstand you is too well-known. That you can misunderstand your own self is seldom recognised. Of the two, which is more harmful? [Badrinath 1993:339].

This question is important to keep in mind while considering the other essays in the book. With this question in mind, one can join the spirit of the author to ask questions to ourselves and resolve to find answers for our own misunderstanding about "us" as Indians. Otherwise this will become just another academic exercise of reading one more scholarly book.

Badrinath successfully challenges several of our own Indian misconceptions about Indian values and civilization. At least this book should awaken all to the need and importance of proper rationalistic enquiry into this topic, a need particularly evident in those who follow popular ways of believing anything and everything either heard or passed on to them by a particular tradition (religion or politics), without seriously viewing and reviewing and evaluating. It is sad to hear from the author that several of his works remain unpublished; this illustrates the trend to neglect serious challenges in favour of blindly going along with tradition. We must hope that those few who actually read this book will take up the responsibility to introduce this and other books by the author to others so that our self-misun-

derstanding can be recognised and the harm and damage to ourselves may be minimized.

The first essay is provocatively titled "Hindus and Hinduism: Wrong Labels Given by Foreigners". The fifth essay is "Dharma is Not Religion: Misconception Has to Be Removed". Badrinath's emphasis is that Dharma "is a secular view of life, not a 'religious' one; but is not secularism either. It cuts across the religious-secular polarity of Western thought, which because of this polarity created a religion called 'Hinduism' [1993:3]. Unlike the Western logic of viewing life "in the method of either/or, or the law of the excluded middle", dharmic thought saw the "manysidedness of life and its diversity" [1993:3]. The aim of dharma is "to create and sustain individual and social conditions where each individual, in his or her own being, and in relationship with others, is able to explore the potential of his or her life and bring it to fruition in such ways that he or she can" [1993:27].

Chapter three is entitled "Understanding India: Key to Reform of Society". Ironically, the main point to understand is that understanding is not the main point. "Given the idea of dharma on which is founded the whole of Indian culture, the question 'how does one understand one's society?' was of no particular relevance. The question always was 'how does one order one's life?'" [1993:31]. In India the human situation was always seen with "many eyes and spoke[n] with many tongues," and "particularly in the higher reaches of Indian thought, one finds propositions that assert and deny a thing at the same time, or assert of a thing two opposite attributes simultaneously" [1993:30]. Understanding the universe was vital to Indian philosophy, but in terms of society "acceptance, and not understanding, has been the main Indian social value for centuries together" [1993:31].

Life is not divided in watertight compartments in India, and this is clearly seen in the fact that in India "religion" has never been separated from politics. The fundamental truth was that "sovereignty is of dharma, not of the king," so "Indian political principles are not isolated or severed from other human concerns" [1993:4-5]. But

when the Western concept of secularism as separation of religion and state was imported, great confusion resulted. Both secularism and religion were soon not only misunderstood but actually abused. "The use of the word 'religion' in relation to Indian civilisation" "create[s] wrong perceptions and bring[s] about false consciousness," leading to "much conflict and disorder" [1993:5].

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The sixth essay is rather an intrusion into the presentation on dharma as it deals with guruism and the corruption of this concept, especially as exported to the West. Essays seven to ten deal with conflict in human relations and within the individual, and Badrinath considers this "the chief concern of traditional Indian thought" [1993:5]. The essence of karma is defined as the teaching that "what one does to other alters one's self in the same measure or even in a greater measure," so "one cannot truly serve one's own interest without... serving the interest of others" [1993:51]. Further, "the Dharmic method of reconciliation is a method of respecting limits" [1993:7]. Since the "three primeval impulses of seeking pleasure, acquisition and violence" are "in the very depths of his being," people should follow the three "primary disciplines that the Brihadaranayaka Upanishad speaks of: self-control, sharing, and compassion" [1993:65-66].

The next five essays (11-15) deal with the problems of regionalism, nationalism, and the world, developing a dharmic perspective on the vital tensions of modern times. Essay sixteen deals with truth, especially as discussed in the Mahabharata. Essay seventeen is a biting critique of the Mandal Commission which provided reserved jobs for people from the lowest castes. The eighteenth essay focuses on the Western concept of nationalism and the great confusion there has been and is in India related to the western way of viewing this topic. The two following essays probe again western misunderstandings of India, the first a detailed

look at the work of Max Weber and the second identifying the central problem as Western rationalism and its absolute deference to Aristotle's law of the excluded middle.

*Finding Jesus in Dharma*

These perceptions lay the foundation for understanding the plight of Christianity in India in Badrinath's book *Finding Jesus in Dharma*. The core

issue in the Christian interface with the Hindu world is of course the issue of dharma, and Chaturvedi considers that "any attempt to convert Dharmic India had to show successfully the essence of Dharmic thinking on human order to be wrong and false, and not merely remove this institution or that. Success in the latter would in itself mean no conversion at all" [Badrinath 2000:8].

Badrinath strikingly starts by affirming that "Jesus Christ is the perfect embodiment of dharma" [2000:1]. This is due to his being the embodiment of love. But historical Christianity is different; "not love but power became its driving force" [2000:2]. In this opening chapter (entitled "Entry into the Subject") Badrinath defines two fundamental issues is the encounter between western Christianity and Indian civilization. The most central issue, "from which the militancy of the Church, and her missionaries, flowed" is the "conviction that there is only one absolute Truth; that the advent of Jesus Christ was one unique happening through which that Truth was fully and finally expressed; and that it is a paramount Christian obligation that the mankind be made aware of it" [2000:3]. But other issues were evident in the Syrian and Roman Catholic (particularly de Nobili's) interaction with India. These specifically related to issues of society.

These secondary issues are well summarized at the start of chapter four on Protestant Christianity: "Was Christianity a new religious faith to which Dharmic eyes had to be opened? Or was it an instrument also of Western

culture, whose aim was to replace the Dharmic social values with Western concepts of man and society?" [2000:19]. Badrinath proceeds to a fascinating outline of Protestant mission history, seeing the 19th century as "abusive Christianity", which was "barren" [2000:32]. Sympathetic, rethinking Christianity from 1910 was an improvement but did not get to the root of the issues. This new missionary thought could not succeed since it started by asking the wrong question of "what is Hinduism"? Thus "the changed missionary attitude suffered now from the fallacy of wrong identity twice over", 'for there was no such thing as 'Hinduism'. There was only Dharma; and Dharma was not religion" [2000:35]. Moreover,

Let it not be supposed, because there took place among the serious-minded missionaries a change of attitude towards their 'Hinduism', that that is what happened to the missionary class as a whole.... Missionary labours still resulted in conversions, the motive thereof being, as before, largely economic, or at best mixed; but the converts never became free of their deep-rooted cultural conditioning [2000:53].

In chapter five Christian interaction with Hindu social institutions is outlined, and the abject failure of Christianity is portrayed. The big issue was caste, and caste has come to thrive in the Indian church. As Badrinath strikingly expresses it,

The fact remains that, despite the protest against it, caste is imprinted on the Indian Christian brow as firmly as it is on the brow of the Hindu, despite Buddhism and all the bhakti movements. "It is because Christianity became a caste that it could offer no challenge to the Hindu mind." Caste remains now, as it did then, a distinctive feature of Christianity in India [2000:64; the quotation is from Moraes 1964:294].

The main reason for this lost battle was that Western thought insisted on separating civil from religious life, which does not apply in a Dharmic society. And the result was that "though Christianity in its essence is a distinctive social force" yet "in India it did not prove to be so... because all the grounds of criticism of the excesses

of the caste system, and even of the system itself, were available in Dharmic history. There was nothing distinctive that Christianity had added to them” [2000:65].

Idolatry was another focal point of missionary attack, and it thrives all across Indian society. When it became clear that the majority of converts from Christianity were from the lowest castes, this became another area of vital missionary discussion. A last topic addressed in the chapter is the nature of Christian education, and Badrinath quite rightly considers the development of a defense of Christian schools for the leaven they introduce as an admission of the failure of the original vision for Christian education.

After their lost wars against Hindu social institutions, another issue which confronted the missionaries was the indigenization of the church. This is discussed in chapter six, and Chaturvedi does not see any great

Christianity from the church. He rather quickly dismisses the work of the radical rethinkers of Christianity in India, and their work indeed failed. At greater length he critiques those who sought to change the church, and then rather oddly devotes 18 pages to Raimundo Panikkar.

Panikkar proves a good bridge into chapter eight on dialogue. A discussion of J. A. T. Robinson moves into a discussion on syncretism followed by a biting analysis of the failure of dialogue. The root of this again lies in the failure to understand India and Indians:

They feel that the dialogue itself is somewhat misconceived. Or that it does not touch the real questions of human living. Or that it is hardly ever in accordance with proper “place” and proper “time”, *desa* and *kala*, which govern all meaningful conversations. Or that it is far too much organised; it is a project; and therefore self-conscious; and in being self-conscious, is

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success in the Protestant achievement of some churches uniting and Indians taking over leadership. Indian Christian thought, discussed in chapter seven, is likewise seen as inconsequential. Chaturvedi is rather bemused over Indian Christian consternation over indigenization:

When were the attitudes and standards of Indian Christians different from their Hindu neighbours? Both were conditioned by Dharma. It was ridiculous, of course, that many of them adopted Western names; given the Indian climate, abandoned the comfort of Indian dress for the discomfort of the Western; set Indian hymns to Western music; expressed their faith in a foreign liturgy. But, for all that, they remained in sensibility and outlook thoroughly Dharmic [2000:97].

Chaturvedi then insightfully summarizes the efforts of pioneer Indian Christian theologians to separate Indian religion and culture, and then

often self-defeating. Or that it soon becomes so full of words, written and spoken, that it excludes from the start that well-known component of all dialogue - silence. It could be for any one of these reasons, or all of them together, which undoubtedly characterise most of the Christian-Hindu dialogues, that Hindus as a whole are not interested in them in any personal sense [2000:161].

Chapter nine is on “History and Freedom in the Light of Dharma” and dwells mainly on history and the Christian preoccupation with history. The concluding chapter 10 considers both Jesus and Dharma as lying beyond theology and beyond history. But the main point he makes is that Indian Christian thinking is severely marred by its minority complex, and a dharmic viewpoint has no room for the categories of minority and majority sections of a society. And the Jesus he presents is not the Christ presented in the gospels but an ephemeral cosmic Christ.

## Analysis

An analysis of Badrinath must begin with appreciation for his sweeping view of life and history and his effort to deal with vital core issues. These books are stimulating and address so many of the questions that need to be raised about the Hindu-Christian interface, and many of the observations are exactly on target. But there are problems, some of them very significant indeed. Five observations will be made as analysis and conclusion to this presentation of Badrinath’s thought.

First of all, despite great appreciation for the focus on dharma and much of the insight on dharma, it does seem that Badrinath does not have as much support from scripture and Indian tradition as he would like to think. In fact the author sets up his own presuppositions about the dharmic concept and tries to establish this as an universal concept by his powerful and rationalistic arguments. But his selective interpretations

of the dharmic history of this civilization, despite very helpful comparisons with several Western religious and political concepts, does not conclusively establish his position. Dharma is a vast subject with many shades of meaning, and while Badrinath’s presentation is winsome and impressive it surely will never become the accepted position of all students of Indian thought.

Second, Badrinath ends by giving a picture of Jesus that does not at all ring true. Opposing traditional views of Jesus he says, “the problem was that whereas Jesus was talking symbolically, those who heard him, including his disciples, understood him literally, and therefore did not understand him at all” [2000: 184]. But if Jesus’ disciples understood him wrongly, surely we should not claim that we can understand Him rightly. Promoting a cosmic Christ in opposition to the personal understanding of the disciples of Jesus based on their experience is wrong. For them He Himself was that Great Reality—the

very God in flesh in His PERSON. Definitely there was a progressive understanding about this among His disciples, which was completed only after his crucifixion and resurrection. It is true that “what Jesus was saying, was that it is truth and love, and not the satisfaction of physical appetites alone, that make man fully human. What he was saying, was that it is love, and not the laws, that has the redeeming power” [2000:184-5]. But it is a wrong perception to say that, “seen in this light, neither his crucifixion nor his resurrection is to be understood in its gross physical sense, although that is how they mostly have been understood” [185]. Because at least for the first disciples of Jesus all that happened in a gross physical sense in the life of Jesus, which has become a historical event for us now, is not a “mere records of events” [166]. but also the meaning of those events, the interpretation the disciples of Jesus taught to others who confirmed that meaning in their own experience. The criteria for history is not just an event, but the interpretation of that event by those who have directly encountered it. It is not that “Christianity in history” with its all varieties of beliefs that will help us to understand Jesus Christ as a PERSON, but the relationship which we have with Him because of our faith; faith both as a gift of God and our conscious response to that gift.

Third, the two comments above should be enough to demonstrate that Badrinath, like many before him, has developed a perspective that is too elitist, an intellectualist approach that surely will never impact the life of the common people.

But, these are books to be studied and carefully considered. Badrinath has analysed Indian Christianity in a way that rings true and needs to be grasped. He is at times perhaps too kind to Indian Christians, at other times perhaps even a bit harsh. But his basic insights ring true. Christianity and Indian Christians are in a schizophrenic state; dharmic civilization has absorbed them and they live and move and have their being in dharma. But this is neither acknowledged nor desired. Vast volumes on Indian theology and dialogue and contextualiza-

tion are written (and sometimes read) but all seem oblivious to this basic fact. The confusion of Christianity in the dharmic world, compounded by modernization, leaves both Hindu and Christian thinking and acting in terms of minorities and majorities, and Indian Christians delight to affirm their minority status. Christians and Christianity are isolated and irrelevant in dharmic India, and Badrinath’s kind effort to affirm their non-minority place in this civilization will impact neither Hindus nor Christians as reality will triumph over Badrinath’s theory.

A final observation must be towards a positive response to the failure of Christianity in dharmic India. Christianity with its basis in power rather than love could not adjust to dharma and produced confusion. But Jesus as the perfect embodiment of dharma surely can find a home in India, and modern disciples of Jesus who recognize the error of the imposition of Christianity can surely work out their discipleship to Jesus within dharmic Indian civilization. Badrinath does not commend this approach, but his diagnosis of the ills of Indian Christianity certainly points in this direction, and those committed to walk this path can take much encouragement from his profound insights.

So “Finding Jesus in Dharma” is both an easy and a difficult task. It is difficult because of the complexity involved in gaining a proper perception of the relativistic, multifaceted (even ambiguous) dharmic civilization of India. But it is easy once we have a right understanding of who Jesus is and what He means to every individual in his/her relationship with Him; He will help every Indian (Hindu) Christ bhakta to uphold all that is good in our dharmic civilization. He will help us come out from our self “misunderstanding” and will enable us as Indian (Hindu) Christ bhaktas to continue in and develop our relationships and responsibilities towards our own family and society. Thank God that some Hindu Christ bhaktas have understood this and are happily living as witnesses for the Lord. We wish and pray that the same kind of understanding should come among the Christians in India

(in particular) and everywhere in the world, to enjoy the freedom which Christ has given to every one of His followers to live naturally in their family, society and nation without any inferiority complex either as a minority in any multi-religious society or with any racial/religious superiority complex to civilize other societies in the name of God and the Gospel. And these two books by Badrinath can contribute a lot towards this understanding of this aspect of freedom in Christ. **IJFM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Nearly five hundred years of western Christianity; a hundred and fifty years of British liberalism; a century of modern science; and more than half a century of Marxism — each of these tried to change India, and was itself quickly changed. Neither harmonised, nor absorbed, but all of them just neutralised, their main force defused, scattered. And that was because, in each case, Indian civilisation and its foundations were not understood, or have been understood wrongly” [Badrinath 2000:ix].

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# Book Reviews

## Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"

By Richard King, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1991, pp 283 + x

—Reviewed by H.L. Richard,  
*Independent Research Scholar presently focusing on issues in South Asian culture and religion.*

"This work can be located within the history of ideas and is an examination of a constellation of categories surrounding the cultural symbolic of the 'mystic east' in modern Western consciousness."

With that striking definition of his task Richard King opens his stimulating study of east and west in the modern world.

Mysticism and the development of interest in and definitions of the mystical is outlined in the first chapter. The western and Christian bias of the story becomes the main theme; does western scholarship by necessity impose false paradigms on all that it studies? The second chapter similarly looks at the concept of "religion". Anticipating that, King writes that "The search for the 'essence' of religion or the various religions, or of 'mysticism', is misguided since it is operating under the aegis of the essentialist fallacy that the phenomena included in the category of religions (for instance) must have something universally in common to be meaningfully classified as religious" (p. 11).

This western problem is perhaps the lesser evil than the labeling of "eastern religions" as mystical, especially in contexts where "rational" and "mystical" are juxtaposed. This along with the western separation of public and private realms and the relegation of "religion" to private life paved the way for relegating mysticism to the realm of irrelevant personal experience. But King is unwilling to allow this, and his second chapter is a spirited defense of religious studies as

an important academic discipline in the modern university.

The literary bias of Western, Christian-influenced studies of religion is helpfully discussed in the third chapter. The fourth chapter takes this a step further in an analysis of the anti-Orientalist critique of Orientalist treatments of Indian religions. This involves a helpful critique of some of the inadequacies in the ground-breaking work of Edward Said. But these points only confirm his major emphasis that Orientalism created the East as an "Other" which it sought to control and manipulate, no matter how subtly or even subconsciously. The reductionism involved in generalized observations about the Orient are grossly simplistic and distort the reality of vast diversities and disagreements involved in Eastern life and thought.

"The Modern Myth of Hinduism", "Mystic Hinduism", and "The Discovery of Buddhism" are the chapters at the heart of this book. A fascinating theme running throughout the book is how local Asians adopted the convoluted theories of Western scholars about their lands and faiths, and then used these false ideas for purposes very other than those the scholars had intended. Nowhere is this more clear nor more fascinating than in the discussion of Hinduism as a religion. King gives a striking and important definition of his own in this area:

today what most Religious Education courses mean by 'Hinduism' is a colonially filtered and retrospective Vedanticization of Indian religion (p. 69).

King is careful to show that the (mainly Brahmin) informants of the early Orientalists contributed greatly to this distortion.

"Mystic Hinduism" can be considered an analysis of the advaitic kidnapping of Indian religion, and why and how Orientalists contributed to this process. The discovery of "Buddhism" is similarly discussed, granting that this con-

cept seems more valid than "Hinduism":

The term "Buddhism" seems to have arisen at around the same time as its sibling "Hinduism", and it is by no means a straightforward task to find a meaningful version of the term (or indeed for the terms "religion" or "mysticism") in Asian languages. This is not, as has often been stated, merely a problem of translation but one of social identity. It is not clear that the Tibetans, the Sinhalese or the Chinese conceived of themselves as "Buddhists" before they were so labelled by Westerners. (pp. 143-144)

Comparative religion and comparative mysticism are helpfully discussed in the penultimate chapter which focuses on privatization of experience and knowledge. The danger of Western presuppositions still dominating academia even in the post-colonial and postmodern era is amply demonstrated. Whether we are in a post-orientalist era is the question of the closing chapter. King's central appeal is that the anthropology of knowledge, the situational context of all ideas, must be acknowledged at all times. The danger of relativizing all knowledge is granted, but this danger must be faced rather than allowing culture-bound formulations to be passed off as universals. Subaltern studies are helpfully analysed and critiqued in this closing chapter, and illustrate most of the problems and tensions discussed throughout this engaging book.

Popular evangelical writings about Hinduism continue to be shockingly Orientalist in outlook. "Hinduism" is parodied as a monistic religion, and "Christianity" is suggested as a religion that will solve all of India's ills. The shattering of this simplistic paradigm is a necessary first step towards a truly fruitful encounter with the peoples following Hindu traditions. King's book is a helpful survey of why the Orientalist paradigm must be abandoned, and it is recommended for wide reading among Christian academics.