

Beyond Contextualization

The Life and Thought of R. C. Das: His Theology of Interreligious (Hindu-Christian) Relations

by *H. L. Richard*

Rajendra Chandra Das (1887–1976) was born in (then) East Bengal in the village of Shyampur, then some miles away from Dhaka but today integrated at the edge of the growing metropolis. He was from the backward Namasudra caste but his father was a somewhat prosperous farmer and a devout Vaishnava Hindu. As an intelligent boy Das won scholarships and by age 15 was sent to Dhaka for schooling. There he came into contact with Christianity and the Brahmo Samaj.¹ Both Christianity and the Brahmo Samaj appealed to him as he was drawn to the way of Christ. Das himself described his feelings:

I became attached to Brahmoism and to Christianity almost simultaneously though during the earlier part of my residence in Dacca I was inclined more to Brahmoism than to Christianity. Had I not kept up this connection with Christianity (for which I thank God) perhaps I could not have become what I am today. There was sufficient reason for my partiality to Brahmoism at that time.

First of all, it is indigenous in every way, and so naturally appealed to my heart. Secondly, it possesses a most excellent literature in the vernacular and music of a high standard which, I believe, is the most effective instrument to attract men to religion and spirituality and to change men's opinions (their traditional views). Thirdly, it offers a reconciliation of all the conflicting religions of the world though I discovered the fallacy of its eclecticism before long. Lastly, the Brahmo community is highly developed in point of education, morals and religion, and is a pleasant half-way house between Hinduism and Christianity. All these drew my attention to it.

I hardly found any good Christian literature, and scarcely frequented the Christian chapel. I remember having gone to the Bengali service once or twice, but it gave me little satisfaction. The whole thing appeared to be a got up show arranged by the missionaries. The service was dry and formal; no bhakti (devotional spirit) was seen among the few people. It was words and words and sound and sound. No spontaneous spirit of worship that I saw in the Brahma Mandir. Everything, even the very atmosphere, seemed to me foreign and alien to my taste. (Richard 1995, 27; written in 1911, published in *National Council of Churches Review* in March, 1949; revised and reprinted as a tract in 1974.)

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Embracing Christianity

Yet in the end Das opted for Christianity as more satisfying than the Brahmo Samaj:

Brahmoism stirred the depths of my soul, created a restless spirit in me, but gave no adequate consolation and peace. It told me to repent and turn to God, but I was unable to work true repentance. I often shed tears but found no peace, no assurance of God's love and forgiveness. It increased my restlessness and dryness of heart. I chased the shadowy ghost of the God of Brahmoism in vain while on the contrary without my wishing it or being even conscious of it the reality of the presence of God in Christ followed me, upheld me and even got hold of me. It was, it seemed to me, at least a feeble realisation in my own very humble and obscure life of the truth of the cat school of philosophy in Vaisnavism—the kitten being compulsorily moved and rescued by mother cat. The Brahmo God though true in theory eluded my grasp, and I could not worship unless I created a God in my heart. But I was not to be satisfied with imagination. I wanted reality which would at once satisfy my conscience and intellect. Brahmoism hardly told me anything of the stain and impurity which blackened my soul and heart, and dimmed my vision of God and defiled His image in me. Brahmoism scarcely offered me an adequate means of salvation except a false repentance which has to be worked out. It told man to go to God, but did not undertake to remove the barrier between. Reason and intuition are the ultimate criteria of truth according to Brahmoism. Revelation is an absurd impossibility. Well did my whole nature revolt against such a system when I arrived at the age of discretion and maturity. (Richard 1995, 32; written in 1911, published in *National Council of Churches Review*, March, 1949; revised and reprinted as a tract in 1974.)

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Christ followed me, upheld me,
and even got a hold of me. (R. C. Das)

So Das was baptised by Baptist missionaries in 1908 at the age of twenty-one. I fear the above account will be read too negatively in regards to the Brahmo Samaj, so this incident after Das' baptism provides another perspective:

On the day following the baptism, early in the morning came Prashanta Kumar Ray—my class friend in the Dacca Government College—calling me to his uncle and my beloved

acharya of the New Dispensation Church of Keshub Chandra Sen, Bhai Banga Chandra Roy, editor of East Bengal Times and member of an aristocratic Hindu family, who was one of the 40 outstanding converts initiated in one day's meeting of Keshub Chandra Sen into the Brahmo Samaj. My friend called out from the ground floor that Rajendra was coming. Immediately the octogenarian saint with a stick in hand started to come down to welcome me, stepping on a rather precarious wooden staircase. With some difficulty and with strong but loving words I succeeded in making him wait upstairs. I was pleasantly shocked to see his childlike delight and enthusiasm to run down to meet me at sight. When I went up slowly and carefully and bowed on his feet he stretched out his loving hand and shook it strong with mine and affectionately embraced me saying "From today you are my brother." I was like his son, his nephew's age, but I understood what he meant—brother in Jesus Christ. (Richard 1995, 35; from unpublished "Autobiographical Reflections")

Higher Studies

Das moved to Kolkata around 1910 to pursue a BA in English, Sanskrit, and philosophy; he graduated with honours. He spent a year in the newly reconstituted Serampore Theological College, intending to join the Baptist ministry, but the course work was not satisfying to him. He then spent three years earning a master's degree in philosophy in Kolkata, and during this time joined the Anglican church. He had been rejected from a position as an evangelist among the Baptists but was appointed by the Anglicans. He was married in 1917 and eventually had seven children.

Patterns and priorities of the ministry of R. C. Das were set in his early years in Kolkata (rooted in his Dhaka experiences outlined above). He was initially deeply involved in traditional Christian evangelistic work but moved away from this in favor of indigenous methods. Das himself wrote,

In spite of heavy work as an advanced student and soon as a teacher, I used to address large numbers in halls in the open air, in cities and in villages—sometimes audiences as large as five thousands. It was all direct and frank—preaching the word—and appeal to heart and head to accept the claims of Christ upon one's life. I soon realised the futility of it all—its impersonal vagueness, its vanity, its costliness in mental and physical energy, above all its temptation to name and fame. I preached in the villages of Dacca, Barisal, Faridpur, Jessore, Khulna, Nadia, 24 Parganas, and Pabna districts of the then divided Bengal and always in cooperation with missionaries and Indian evangelists. I preached with my gospel team in the halls and squares of Dacca and Calcutta; and was the leader in arranging huge evangelistic campaigns for John R. Mott, Sherwood Eddy and others and was the first and last editor of Prochar Abhijan—a monthly—promoting evangelistic campaigns in Calcutta and in the presidency of Bengal. . . . But soon I was led to a new spirit, a nobler motive, a congenial and quiet evangelistic approach. What follows will be a verification of the personal, friendly and indigenous

method in evangelism as spiritually and otherwise valid and effective. (Richard 1995, 40; from *God's Redemptive Acts and Creative Dealings through One Who Found Life*, Varanasi: R. C. Das, 1962)

As a developing Christian leader Das was encouraged by his mentors towards joining the Anglican ministry with the prospect of eventually becoming a bishop and bringing a genuinely Indian ethos into the church. But Das found it necessary to turn aside from this proposed path. He wrote,

I have a sense of vocation and a call from God, a freedom in initiative and a wider ideal—which I think cannot be fulfilled within the purview of the church which is too tight and strict in law and order. I shall be swamped in its thick atmosphere and thwarted at every step by the very tradition of the church—totally alien to India—and by the very close fellowship of its members in a different climate. . . . In the Anglican church I, a Hindu convert, as a priest shall be only one black rung in the entire white wheel of the church. What can I do for the church and what can the church do for my life development? (Richard 1995, 39; from unpublished “Autobiographical Reflections”)

Whether Das' Anglican friends could have steered him through the church system to rise up as a bishop cannot be known. What is clear is that there was opposition to his innovative indigenous approaches. Willie (W. E. S.) Holland was especially a friend and support to Das, and when he relocated from Kolkata to England for a time, he thought it best that Das also leave the city. So from 1918 to 1922 Das shifted to St. John's College in Agra.

Teaching in Agra

Das taught by a Socratic method rather than by focusing on rote memory. Since this paper is not solely biographical, I will only share one incident from the beginning of his Agra years:

While still in Calcutta a friend warned me that a Hindu convert and nationalist as I was I might have to face some social problems from the Christian community—unpopularity, exclusion and even persecution, U. P. Christians being what they were—not only western in their living style but harbouring anti-Indian and anti-Hindu prejudices and cherishing extra territorial politics and cultural loyalties and economic and religious gratitude to the west. I thought it was horrible. To obviate at least an initial unpleasant situation, the friend suggested that I should adopt European dress. In spite of my reluctance, as a tactical gesture, I wisely accepted the advice. Why should I under the actual circumstances allow an external thing like dress to be the cause of misunderstanding when Christians should have, and have, internal spiritual unity? (Das 1976, 129)

Throughout his life R. C. Das did not shy away from controversy when he felt important principles related to God's kingdom were at stake. But as this incident shows, he was willing to compromise on matters of less significance. In 1922 Das received a call back to Bengal, where he initially served under the Anglican Church Missionary Society for two years, then under the indigenous leadership of Allauddin Khan in the Church of God until 1930. The latter had rather extreme views, opposing both doctors and the wearing of gold ornaments by women, yet Das worked happily in this fellowship until an irresistible call came from Varanasi.

Varanasi

From 1930 until his death in 1976 R. C. Das was in Varanasi. He was called to serve in the Benares United City Mission (BUCM) which had been formed a few years earlier by a number of cooperating Protestant mission societies, such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the London Missionary Society (LMS), and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS), etc. The founder who recruited Das was J. C. Jackson, a British missionary who had first entered India under the Salvation Army but later joined the WMMS. He had married a Tamil lady and saw his role in Banaras primarily as a caretaker, looking for someone to truly lead the work. That person was R. C. Das.

While serving in Banaras under the BUCM, Das was the prime force in founding the Christian Society for the Study of Hinduism (CSSH). He was a major influence on the CSSH's journal, *The Pilgrim*, which ran from 1941 to 1955. In 1947 after the close of the BUCM, Das started his own journal, *The Seeker*, which in 1958 became *The Seeker and Pilgrim*. In 1964 Das changed the name of his journal again and called the new publication *The Church of Christ*, which he edited right up to 1973 when he was eighty-six years old. Das was a significant player in many national mission and church consultations in the middle of the twentieth century, including the Indian Theological Conferences and numerous National Council of Churches (NCC) consultations. He sought to establish a permanent school for Christian study of Hinduism and sought NCC backing for this, but it never came to fruition.

In Varanasi, Das often worked from a Christian ashram which he founded, the Kristapanthi Ashram located in Dasashvamedh not far from the main bathing *ghat* in the holy city. When the CSSH and BUCM folded, Das lived at the Dasashvamedh Ashram and he eventually died there. Das did not have a particularly happy family life. His wife left in 1949 to return to East Bengal related to fears of losing family property due to Partition. But there were also deeper marital problems.

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Relational Tensions

In his writings, Das was often rather severely critical of the Indian church and missions, as will be discussed below. This contributed to his reputation as a difficult person to get along with. The closure of the Benares United City Mission was closely tied to relational tensions that included Das.² On this complex topic I cannot do better than quote what I wrote over twenty-five years ago:

Das remained a bit of an enigma to many who knew him personally. His family life was not particularly happy and the lack of a close friend and co-worker, which he himself lamented, no doubt contributed to his general failing in relationships with other Christians. Yet many comment on how warm he could be personally even when seeming harsh in his printed diatribes. Das seemed simply not to understand why friends would be troubled by his public criticisms which he considered were made in the cause of Christ and truth. (Richard 1995, 4)

Writings and Insights

Das was a critical and creative thinker, but his writings are not easily available. He did not produce any major book, his most noted publications being the booklet *How to Present Christ to a Hindu* (North Indian Tract and Book Society, 1951 with some reprintings), and a collection of four shorter papers entitled *Convictions of an Indian Disciple* (Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society [CISRS], 1966). His magazines ran for twenty-seven years but few copies are extant in libraries. His autobiography was never published and is in too rough a form to be publishable. He wrote some major papers that appeared in various journals but as yet those have not been collected and published. My collection of selections and shorter pieces from his writings, as referenced above, remains the most accessible source for understanding Das.

The remainder of this article will look at some major themes in the thought of R. C. Das. Four topics will be touched. Evangelism was central to Das' life and concern, so that must be first. Evangelism for Das could not be separate from indigenization, or contextualization to use our modern term, so that will be second. Third, Das' approach to traditional churches and missions must be noted. Finally, his creative thought in relation to Hinduism will be outlined.

Das as Evangelist

It must first be highlighted that Das was an evangelist and among Christians was a promoter and teacher on evangelizing Hindus. His booklet *How to Present Christ to a Hindu* is a classic that should be reprinted and studied again.³ Das is an important figure in the discipline we now call Indian theology as he commented on many areas of theological thought. Yet Indian

theology has been a largely theoretical enterprise removed from practical life. Das was intensely practical, as his focus on evangelism indicates, so to consider him as an Indian theologian seems inappropriate, thus that designation will not be used here.

Das as Contextualizer

For Das, evangelism had to be related to the life and culture of the people, so he was an avid proponent of what today we call contextualization (he used the older terminology of indigenization). Das was an avid proponent of ashrams as the best site for interacting with Hindus, and for many years he sponsored an annual gathering of Christian *sadhus* (religious ascetics) and ashramites to reflect on issues of faith and life.⁴ Das recognized the centrality of devotional music in living Hinduism, as noted in his comment that "music of a high standard . . . is the most effective instrument to attract men to religion and spirituality" (1976, 33).⁵

Much more should be said about contextualization in the teaching of R. C. Das, but space prohibits extensive detail. He proposed Hindu architecture for worship centers, art, flowers and incense in worship, chanting the names of God/Christ, *arati* (an aspect of home or temple worship where oil lamps are rotated circularly clockwise in front of an image; also done to honor a human guest), the use of Sanskrit *slokas* (quotes from sacred texts or songs), etc. (Richard 1995, 123–4). Surely if Das were alive today, he would recognize that modern urban India has changed, but one suspects he would still press that Hindu cultures have a strong pull, as well as being largely in line with the Bible, whereas modernity often undermines the biblical focus on humility, meditation, bhakti, and service.

Das' Evaluation of Church and Mission

Related to his deep concern for contextualization, Das was a rather strident critic of the Indian church and of missionary influence on the church. We are now in a post-missionary era, so Das' thoughts on this topic are only of historical interest. Yet I find his perspective fascinating, compelling, and worthy of deep reflection. The core is that missionaries should leave the church but not the country; they should let Indian Christians alone to deal with all the issues of living for Christ in India, and they should instead engage in pioneer encounters with India's Hindus, Muslims, tribals, etc. This means he was opposed to partnership as the best way for Indians and internationals to relate:

The policy and practice of partnership between Indian and western churches or of merging and integration of missions into churches, have done great harm to both church and mission. It has made the Indian self complacent and uncreative and obstructed and frustrated the missionary. . . .

Music of a high standard is the most effective instrument to attract men to religion and spirituality.
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I believe in the ideal and principle of partnership but do not accept it, in the present circumstances, as a policy applied to the growing but weak church. Partnership, to be real and beneficial to both parties, must be practised between equals; when the Indian church will be mature and unafraid and on its own feet it can welcome mission partnership both as regards personnel and policy and resources in order to contact more effectively its non-Christian environment. . . .

Though the country has attained political liberty the church still suffers from slavery. She is tied to the apron strings of mission organisation. She is economically, morally and spiritually dependent on mission supplies. Her own life cannot be creative under the circumstances. (Richard 1995, 170; from *The Seeker*, vol. 6 no. 5, 1952)

Das' critical evaluation of missionary meddling in church affairs and Indian Christian subservience to foreign ways made him unpopular with both missionaries and nationals, with many exceptions for those who appreciated his insights and candid criticisms. Someone should undertake a major study of Das' views on the church and what a contextual church would look like, etc., and the relevance of his insights for modern times.

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Das had many critics, most related to his views on missions and on contextualization (i.e., the use of Hindu forms in evangelism and worship). I am not sympathetic with criticisms in this area. Das regularly called for "experiments" as he wanted to free up creativity and release spiritual dynamism among the followers of Jesus. In 1948 in a paper on "New Experiments in Religion" he wrote,

Construction is always preceded and accompanied by some amount of destruction. To build truly Indian Christian theology the first prerequisite is a revolutionary mind. Our young theologians will have to brag less of their learning which is secondhand. Out of their own personal experience of the riches of Christ they will have to weave, humbly and tremblingly indeed, the warp and woof of its structure in indigenous terms and thought forms artistically and strongly too. Then it will touch and tell. (Richard 1995, 101; from *The Guardian*, Sept. 20, 1948)

Another criticism of Das can be stated at this point. He supported "experiments" that had little hope of success, such as his annual meeting for Christian sadhus referred to above. He held out a romantic hope that a new Indian church would emerge from some of the unstable fringes of the Indian church and mission scene.⁶ Such support and encouragement for schismatics who left existing churches obviously did not endear Das to the leadership of churches and missions.

Das on the Gospel in Relation to Hindu Traditions

How to think about "Hinduism" is one of the burning issues of our day. Massive tomes are being written debating the validity and utility of the term, and it seems unlikely that debate will end soon. Conservative Christians seem stuck on the old, and now thoroughly discredited, idea that Hinduism is "a religion." But in academic circles, "religion" is debated as much or more than even "Hinduism." R. C. Das, as a practical evangelist, did not produce clear definitions of these terms, but he had a clear grasp of Hindu realities and insightfully presented perspectives that are still helpful today.

Fulfillment Thought

During over forty years of writing and commenting, Das made many points about Hinduism and the encounter of the gospel with Hindu traditions. To spell out his position in detail is beyond the scope of this paper; rather some representative comments will be shared and discussed. First, it can be noted that Das was largely favorable to the idea that Christ and Christianity fulfill Hinduism; but there are some careful nuances to his understanding, and in the end, I think it better NOT to consider Das a fulfillment advocate. In a 1937 paper on "The Christian Approach to Popular Hinduism" Das wrote,

. . . Christianity is the fulfilment of Hinduism in no mechanical sense. It is not like a dome or tower imposed externally upon the structure of Hinduism. Christianity is rather like leaven, qualifying, vitalizing and reshaping the whole system of Hindu thought, emotion and activity. The moral and spiritual ideas and practices of Hinduism, in so far as they are true and noble, are affected as it were by similar but far deeper truths in Christianity. As Christianity is not essentially a theological system or a moral code but a life and spirit inspired and generated by the Christ living in the hearts of men and transforming them by His dynamic principles, the spiritual and ethical ideas and attitudes that have emerged from Christian experience will naturally lay upon similar truths in Hinduism that have affinities with them. (Richard 1995, 128; from the *National Council of Churches Review*, April 1937)

Beyond Fulfillment

So fulfillment was acceptable to Das, but it was the "life and spirit inspired and generated by the Christ living in the hearts of men" in dynamic encounter with Hindu "thought, emotion and activity" that would produce a new expression

of discipleship to Jesus. In a paper written six years later on “A Modern Apologetics for Hinduism,” Das envisioned a similar type of interreligious engagement:

Attacking Hinduism from outside is like beating the wind or the water—Christianity must leaven and transform Hinduism from the inside. Votaries of truth need neither be alarmed nor delighted that in the process a good deal of Hinduism will be surely destroyed. It is the conviction of the writer that eventually Hinduism as a system will die a slow natural death and live within the church as a force, inspiration and mentality. Should Christianity or need Christianity suppress, supplant and uproot Hinduism or rather should Christianity transplant, transform, vitalise its ideas and institutions with Christian spirit, direction and motive? It is futile to attack Hinduism from without, however spiritual our weapons of warfare. A militant religion cannot destroy another religion that looks inward for power and support. The Christian leaven must be allowed to work from within. If this is done Hindu institutions and organizations—its legalistic system—will die, while the true treasures—the ethical and spiritual values—cleansed and replenished by Christian graces, will live within the church. Up to now the Christian leaven has worked very partially in the intellectual life of educated India but the spiritual springs and moral intuitions of Hinduism remain untouched. In a way it is quite urgent to influence the social and public life of India with the Christian verities of liberty, equality and fraternity and with the Christian standards of purity, truth and rectitude—which is possible only if and when the Christian community will act as salt and light, losing itself in the service of men, always being ready to discharge obligations without claiming rights for itself. (Das 1943, 22; partially reprinted in Richard 1995, 77)

In analyzing this statement, it must first be noted that “Christianity” and “Hinduism” are used in reified ways that do not really fit with the major point being made. The point is clearly *against* an opposition of Christianity and Hinduism as competing religions; “Christianity” is to go inside of “Hinduism” and transform it. Much of Hinduism will be destroyed in this process, but an unstated assumption is that much of Christianity will also be discarded (triumphalistic, colonial, militant Christianity must also die).

Possessio

In that same paper Das posed this same issue as a question:

Will Christianity face and touch this Hinduism from outside from the standpoint of an institution and a creed however good and true and thus supplant it or contact it and possess it, revivify it and regenerate it like a dynamic movement of the Divine Spirit? (Das 1943, 17)

“Christianity” taking possession of “Hinduism” and regenerating it presents a rich and profound perspective on gospel engagement with Hindu traditions. This fits with Dutch missiologist J. H. Bavinck’s missiological position, that *possessio* is the proper approach to other cultures and faith traditions.⁷

I would add a slight nuance here; the taking possession of Hindu traditions is for people from Hindu families; those of us born in Christian families are outsiders who must be very careful regarding how we approach and engage with Hindu traditions.

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Mutual Possessio

But Das has a more nuanced approach than Bavinck, as he presents a mutual penetration of the spiritual traditions. This statement is again from the 1937 paper quoted above:

. . . living Hinduism can easily and normally pass into living Christianity without serious loss to either. This means that our study and criticism of popular Hinduism should be dispassionate and constructive, with a view to truth and uninspired by mere propagandist zeal. Outwardly the evangelist should live the Hindu life subject to obedience to essential Christian principles. This will not only disarm opposition and melt prejudice but will also remove the harmful idea that Christian conversion is mere change of outward community. We should stand for genuine heart and life change, entrusting the consequences to the hand of God. . . . (Richard 1995, 132; from the *National Council of Churches Review*, April 1937)

Writing on “The Church’s Relation to Hinduism” in 1959 Das used the phrase “discriminating penetration” (Richard 1995, 125; from *The Seeker and Pilgrim*, vol. 13 no. 1, 1959). I would adjust this, and expect Das would approve the change, to “discriminating mutual interpenetration,” as the disciple of Jesus “lives a Hindu life” and possesses the riches of a particular Hindu heritage, while calling Hindus to honor Christ and make him central to their Hindu life and thought—thus a mutual taking possession of the heritages of the other.

Das wrote on this point again in a paper in 1962, addressing

. . . the important question of the relationship of Christianity to Hinduism—concretely that of the Hindu convert to his past and to the country. The proper relation must be fairly intelligently and emotionally grasped otherwise there is the danger of either (a) aloofness—resulting in an ineffective barren Christian life or (b) indiscriminate mixing—consequence being a flat syncretism. The heritage of India in its spiritual as well as cultural aspects belongs to the

Hindu convert to Christianity as to the Hindu himself. The difference is the Hindu accepts and follows the tradition blindly whereas the convert uses his judgment enlightened by Christian truth and rejects everything that is inconsistent with Biblical revelation. But he does not do it in any mechanical way. To a true believer and lover of his country it just happens. It is spontaneous. Because the word of God made flesh—Jesus Christ—is the truth all truths find their fulfilment in and through Him. He is the energising and directing spirit and judge of all and keeps his disciples from falling into error. . . . (Das 1962b: 21–22)

Two quibbles should be noted related to this statement. “The Hindu convert to Christianity” is not an acceptable description for the person who is doing what Das is talking about. This is a follower of Jesus to whom “the heritage of India in its spiritual as well as cultural aspects belongs.” He or she has embraced Hindu ways so is truly Hindu, not a convert to “Christianity.” Second, Das is too negative towards Hindus; surely some “blindly” accept and follow tradition, but many are engaged in spontaneous and intuitive transformation of Hindu life and thought, the very kind of transformative process that Das is calling disciples of Jesus to engage in. The disciple of Jesus does this under the guidance of the Spirit of Christ and of the Bible, but spontaneous change from Hindu agents is manifestly and rapidly happening to Hindu traditions all around us.

**To the Indian heart,
illuminated by the light of the cross,
will be manifest the wonders, beauty,
and fascinating power
of the love of God. (R. C. Das)**

Christ as King of Hinduism

I suspect this approach to the Hindu–Christian encounter is stretching the parameters of many, but I want to give one last stretch before closing this summary of R. C. Das’ perspective. In a 1952 paper on “Hinduism: The Source of Its Power” Das suggested that

To meet Hinduism in its anti-Christian aspects or to absorb Hinduism on its pro-Christian side, historical Christianity with its modern missions might find the task too difficult and complex. . . . But when Jesus Christ is disentangled from theology and historical phenomena and presented as a saviour, master and God he will both by his power and wisdom possess the stronghold and himself become its king and commander. (Das 1952, 8–9)

Traditional Christianity is probably not capable of coping with the vision Das lays out for taking possession of Hindu traditions, but here he looks forward to Christ himself bringing this to pass. Christ himself can possess Hindu traditions and emerge as king. This too easily becomes another variety of Christian triumphalism, but in this vision Christianity is not involved; this is a revived and regenerated Hinduism that is still true to its ancient roots.

Already in 1926 Das laid out a vision of this glorious possibility:

Touched by the magic wand of Christ, the great soul of India will reveal the mysterious depths of its moral and spiritual resources to the wonder and lasting good of all mankind. To the Indian heart illumined by the light of the cross will be manifest the wonders, beauty and fascinating power of the love of God in a manner, and with a result, undreamt of before. (Richard 1995, 106; from the *National Council of Churches Review*, Feb. 1926)

Conclusion

R. C. Das’ vision of India and Hinduism transformed by Christ almost takes one’s breath away. His vision is well supported by the Bible (1 Cor. 3:21–22, for example) and by mis-siological thought (as seen in Bavinck and the current consensus on contextualization). In light of Das’ understanding it must be said that the task of engaging Hindu India with the good news of Christ has hardly begun. We are ignorant, ill-equipped, unaware even of how far we are from ready to engage the Hindu world. May this paper, may the legacy of R. C. Das, awaken us to realization of the high call still waiting for response; the call of engagement with the fascinating complexity of Hindu traditions and the varieties of people (image bearers of God) who identify as Hindu. **IJFM**



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Endnotes

- ¹ About the Brahma Samaj, David Kopf wrote, “Originally the Calcutta Unitarian Committee in 1823, the Brahma Sabha in 1829, and finally the Brahma Samaj in 1843, this community played a crucial role in the genesis and development of every major religious, social, and political movement in India from about 1820 to 1930. Brahmans were the first Hindus to defy the taboo about crossing the seas to the West. They were the first social reformers, and the first to extend full equality to their women. Brahmans were the pioneers of liberal political consciousness and Indian nationalism, and they introduced ethical and professional standards into Indian law, medicine, natural sciences, teaching, journalism, and civil administration. Significantly, the man often known as the ‘Father of modern India,’ Rammohun Roy, was also the founder of the Brahma Samaj.” (Kopf 1979, xiii) Das met the Christo-centric Keshab Chandra Sen faction of the Brahma Samaj in the years of its declining influence after Keshab’s 1884 death.
- ² The details of the birth and death of the Benares United City Mission are outlined in my doctoral thesis which is accessible at <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/4657> (see chapter two, “The Benares United City Mission,” 99–119).
- ³ Much has changed since 1951, but the noted Indian Christian thinker P. Chenchiah commented that “It [*How to Present Christ to a Hindu*] contains in a short compass almost the whole of mature Indian Christian thinking on the subject and gives a correct picture of the Hindu religious psychology—very rare to get” (*The Pilgrim* vol. 9, no. 4, Dec. 1950: 19). The “Hindu religious psychology” remains “rare to get.” It is arguably not drastically different from what it was a century ago, particularly in relation to Christ and Christianity, and lies largely outside the grasp of Christians.
- ⁴ Das was more than a little skeptical about the quality of Christian *sadhus*. He wrote in 1970 saying “We have had experience of nearly a hundred Christian *sadhus*—good, bad, indifferent—having stayed in the Khristpanthi Ashram, Varanasi over the past forty years. These and many others have filled the Christian community in India. Some 25% of them are good, helpful and exemplary. The rest are wicked and even dangerous. . . . Even the good ones have not all kept their vows of celibacy and poverty. They have been acquisitive. Once they have collected some money or have fallen in love with some midwife or teacher or widow, they have built good houses and married. Their preaching has been a cloak to hide their worldly ambitions . . .” (Richard 1995, 115; from *The Church of Christ* vol. 7 no. 4, 1970).
- ⁵ Many blindspots can be identified in the missionary work that led to the Indian church, but most glaring has to be the failure to recognize the centrality of culturally appropriate music. Now there is a discipline of ethnomusicology to address this failure, and it needs to become much more widely known in India. But current Christians have embraced from the heart forms of music which do not touch the hearts of Hindus; this remains a massive problem in effective communication to Hindus.
- ⁶ Two quotations in support of my suggestion about “romantic hope”: “It will be easy to see now that the history of the baptised and unbaptised Hindu Christian movement and the indigenous church movement led by baptised Hindu intelligentsia is fairly long, ancient, diverse and widespread” (Richard 1995, 218; from *The Church of Christ* vol. 5 no. 3, 1968). “This is only one of hundreds of signs and evidences of the utter discontent among the different denominations and we regard them as the birth pangs of the true and indigenous church in India which must emerge and replace the myriad sects that have come from the west” (Richard 1995, 220–1; from *The Seeker* vol. 7 no. 1, 1953, commenting on the “All One in Christ Church” being started in Bengal).
- ⁷ See my brief exposition of *possessio* in Richard 2011.

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