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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

"HOW We Do Hindu-Christian Studies" is the main topic of this issue. In the following essays we get a sense of how much things have changed in recent decades in scholarly approaches to Hindu-Christian relations. Studies are no longer restricted to questions of missiology and Christian apologetics; they now include a greater representation of Hindu scholars, they frequently employ ethnographic methods, and they are more attentive to the voices of those Hindus and Christians "from below" whose identity and praxis are sometimes not easily distinguishable.

In the first essay **Harold Coward**, the founding Editor of the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* (originally called the *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin*), provides a detailed survey of the changing topics and various methodologies employed by Hindu and Christian article contributors since the inception of the *Journal* in 1988.

Susan Abraham approaches the Hindu-Christian encounter as a "theologian of culture," one for whom standard doctrinal demarcations are inadequate to appreciate the lived reality of shared religious and cultural identity. Often enough scholars in the North American academy have formulated conceptual distinctions that have tended to empower Christianity while devaluing Hinduism. Abraham thus calls for a different approach to understanding the other, one that is more spiritual in orientation, made possible through an "ascesis of the ego" and "a spiritual ascesis of knowledge," which draws in part on the work of Ashis Nandy.

The complexities involved in writing a history of the Hindu-Christian encounter are the subject of **Brian Pennington's** essay. He offers a number of suggestions and observations that should be taken into consideration when articulating such a history. A greater awareness today of the historical richness of past Hindu-Christian relations has made necessary a broadening of the range of topics to be investigated. These include ethnographic-cultural studies of the interaction between Hindus and Christians, the description of syncretistic movements in the modern period,

and a shifting of the geographical focus from India to include the history of the Hindu-Christian encounter in Europe and in North America. In addition, Pennington notes, we are also more than ever aware that the history handed down to the present has been primarily articulated from a limited Christian perspective that needs the correction of a greater scholarly balance in the future. These are just a few of the many points the author makes in his rich essay.

Arvind Sharma contends that a major obstacle to Hindu-Christian understanding today is the simplistic assumptions held by each group regarding the ethics of the other. Hindus and Christians are frequently unaware of the complexity and variety of positions present within the other's religion. Many Hindus, for example, mistakenly believe that all Christians in India are under the obligation to try and convert others to their faith. By citing various Christian scholars on the subject Sharma is able to demonstrate that within the Christian community there is to be found rather an "internal tension" on the question of proselytisation. Likewise, he adds, Christians frequently enough suffer from the illusion that Hindus follow only caste law and have no universal humanitarian ethic. Yet both are central elements of Hinduism; the *Manusmṛiti*, for example, presents general ethical injunctions applicable to all castes and stages of life. The author recommends further discussion of the ethical tensions within both Hinduism and Christianity as a possible fruitful source for further inter-religious dialogue in the future.

Catherine Cornille raises the question as to whether Christian missionary presentations of Hinduism, despite their frequent bias and derogatory language, might nevertheless offer important and accurate descriptions of Hindu life. She examines the famous work attributed to Abbé Jean-Antoine Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (1817), which despite its unfortunate condemnation of Hindu beliefs, offers detailed descriptions of Hindu ritual life that meet the highest standards of contemporary anthropological research. Such descriptions provide "an irreplaceable source of information

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on the religious life of eighteenth and nineteenth century Hindus in a particular region.”

Kristin Bloomer's piece argues for a more ethnographic approach in doing comparative theology. She begins by briefly noting the long history of religious comparison as it has been implemented by Christian theology and then goes on to observe how in modern times the study of religion via the human sciences has increasingly separated itself from the theological enterprise. Yet this newer approach to religious comparison, which seeks a greater neutrality and objectivity than that offered by theology, is itself subject to some of the same “blind spots” and biases as found in theology. And so a more responsible approach is needed today. While finding much merit in the comparative theological approach of Francis Clooney with its emphasis on the reading of texts she urges an expansion beyond textual reading into an investigation of other religious phenomena, such as how the fluid boundaries between religions contribute to the making of a text, and the role of religious practice. Recognizing that the ethnographical method, too, is subject to the same pitfalls as other disciplines as it seeks to negotiate between universalism and “radical particularizing,” she advocates – drawing on the work of Wendy Doniger – a “method constructed from the bottom up,” i.e. one that starts with less culturally mediated human phenomena, such as “the body, sexual desire, procreation, parenting, pain, and death.” Bloomer notes how this approach coheres very well with the growing discipline of “Theologies of the people.”

T. S. Rukmani's essay is a response to the other six. She begins by praising Coward, the founder of this journal, for having always steered it towards balance and objectivity in treating even the most volatile issues involving Hinduism and Christianity. As to the other articles to which she responds, which for the most part she finds to be of excellent quality, Rukmani would have liked to see greater attention given to more concrete and less academic problems that beset the Hindu-Christian encounter today. She mildly chastises the other contributors for not connecting their particular methodologies more explicitly to urgent contemporary problems, such as the continued discrimination against low-caste converts from Hinduism to Christianity by other members of the Christian community or the aggressive proselytisation of Hindus by Pentecostal Christians. Overall, in noting where she agrees or disagrees with each of the other contributors to this issue, she describes the complexity of the actual lived encounter of Hindus with Christians, the oft times fluid identity of those involved, and the need to be always aware of one's own biases and prejudices when striving after objectivity in research. She recommends that theologians and professional scholars of religion move beyond their own disciplines to read the works of scholars and intellectuals who approach the Hindu-Christian dynamic from new and different angles.

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