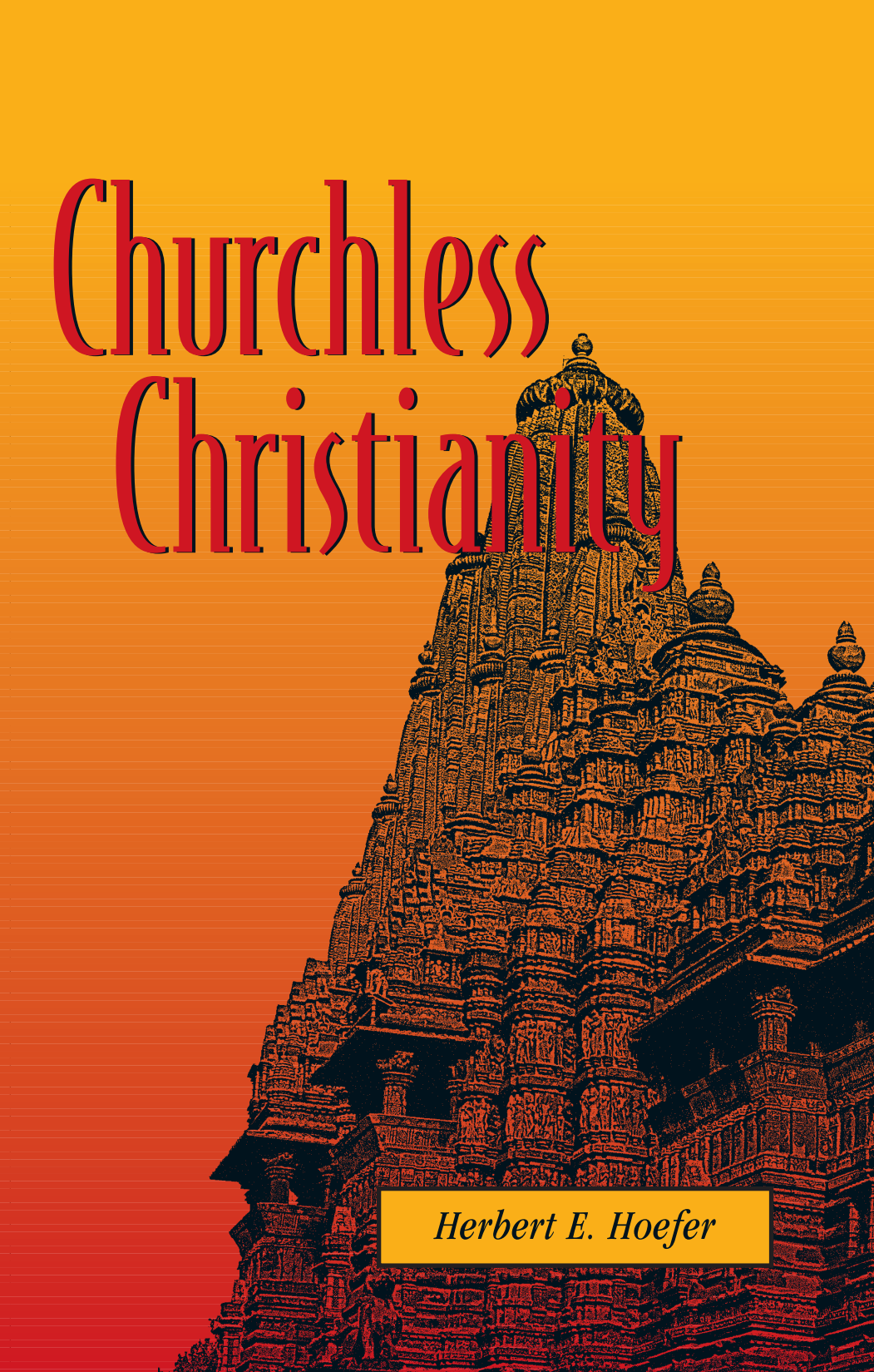


Churchless Christianity



Herbert E. Hoefler

Churchless Christianity

Churchless Christianity

William Carey Library

PASADENA • CALIFORNIA



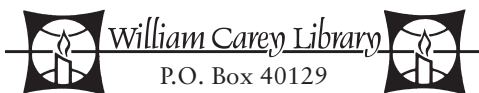
CHURCHLESS CHRISTIANITY

By
Herbert E. Hoefler

Copyright © 1991, 2001 Herbert E. Hoefler

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means - electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other - except for brief quotations embodied in critical article or printed reviews, without prior permission of the publisher.

Published under agreement with APATS and Distributed by:



P.O. Box 40129
Pasadena, CA 91114 USA

Phone: 626.798.0819 • Email: publishing@wclbooks.com

Chapters 1 through 6 and the Appendicies,

First Published: 1991

by

Asian Programme for Advancement of
Training and Studies (APATS) India
&

The Department of Research & Publications
Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute
Kilpauk, Madras, 600 010, India

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hoefler, Herbert E.
Churchless Christianity / Herbert Hoefler

p. cm.

Includes biographical references
ISBN 0-87808-444-4 (alk. paper)
1. Christianity — India. I. Title.

BR1155 .H64 2000
275.4'0825—dc21

00-046807

Cover Design: D.M. Battermann, R&D Design Services
Book Design & Layout : D.M. Battermann, R&D Design Services
OCR & Word-Processing: R.D. Battermann, R&D Design Services
Editing: Christine Shay, William Carey Library

Printed in the United States of America

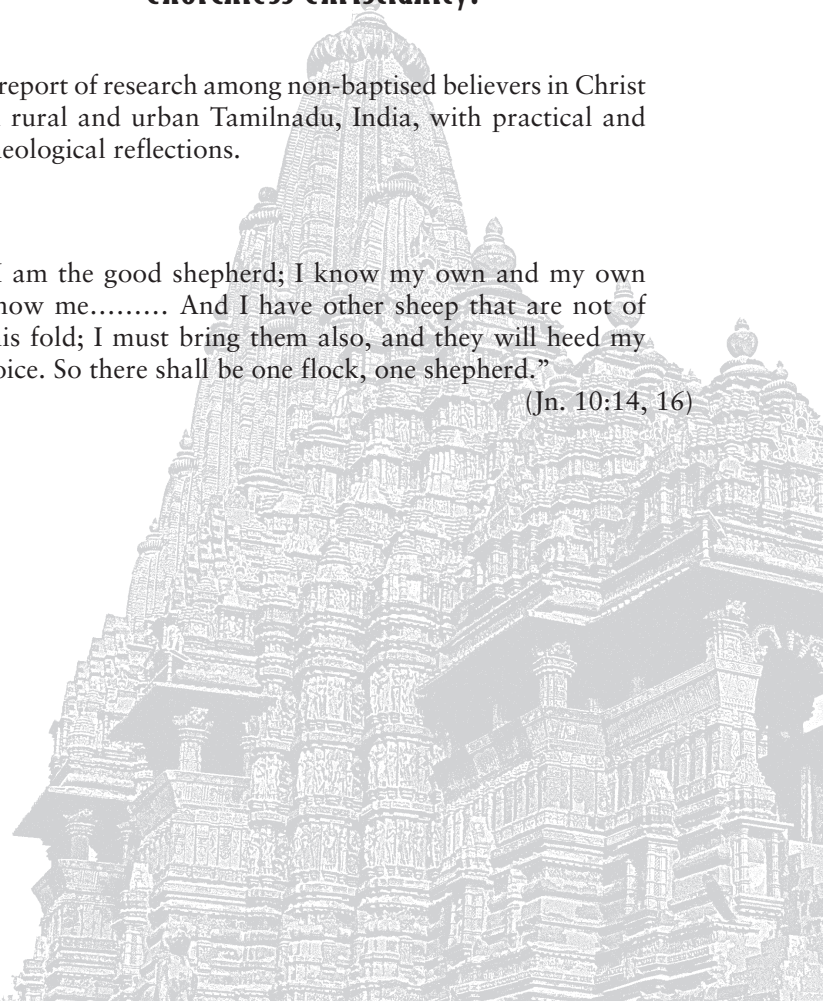
CHURCHLESS CHRISTIANITY

Churchless Christianity:

a report of research among non-baptised believers in Christ in rural and urban Tamilnadu, India, with practical and theological reflections.

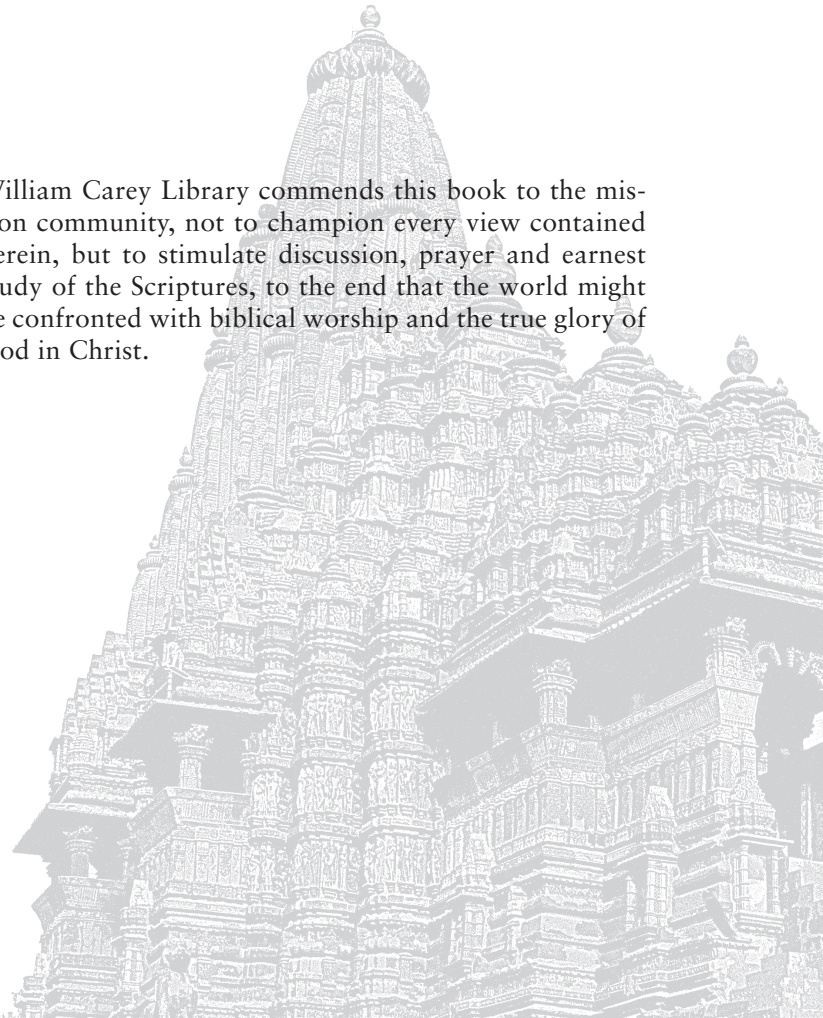
“I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me..... And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”

(Jn. 10:14, 16)



PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

William Carey Library commends this book to the mission community, not to champion every view contained herein, but to stimulate discussion, prayer and earnest study of the Scriptures, to the end that the world might be confronted with biblical worship and the true glory of God in Christ.



Contents

Preface	ix
A Word About this Book	xi
Introduction	xiii

SECTION 1

Jesus' Other Sheep in Rural Tamilnadu

1. Who Are They?	1
2. What Are They Like?	45

SECTION 2

The Non-Baptised Believer in Madras City

3. Madras, a Christian City?	67
4. Who Are These 'Churchless Christians?'	109

SECTION 3

Practical and Theological Implications

5. What Does All This Mean?	143
6. Where Is All This Leading?	183

SECTION 4

Further Reflections for the Year 2001 Edition

7. Follow-up Reflections	211
8. The Conversion Confusion	221
9. What Does It Mean to be in a Caste?	227
10. Burden of the Past	237
11. A Review of Churchless Christianity	255

by H.L. Richard

Bibliography	265
Appendices	269

Preface

Dr. K. Rajaratnam, M.A., Ph.D. (London)

D.Th. (Budapest), D.D. (Serampore)

Executive Secretary, United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India

I am happy to write this Preface for this book entitled “CHURCHLESS CHRISTIANITY” by Rev. Dr. Herbert Hoefler, former Director of Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Madras. This research work has been undertaken about a decade ago and subsequently the data collected for this purpose was classified critically, analysed and vividly reflected upon by the author who brought out many insights about the newly emerging community known as “Non-Baptised Believers in Christ” (NBBC) especially in one of the southern states of India, viz., Tamilnadu.

During the period of research in 11 districts of Tamilnadu the author conducted personal interviews covering the full range of castes and creeds, women and men and young and old in the state. In the information he collected through interviews, questionnaires, etc., he arrived at some basic conclusions regarding the concerns of different categories of people. For example, I may mention, Hindus and Muslims who believe in Christ strongly but do not come forward openly for baptism have sincere and deep concerns regarding marriages of children, inter-family relationships, cultural identity and integrity, etc. These are genuine and real concerns which need to be studied and met in a suitable manner by the local Christian leaders. But there are some common characteristics for both NBBCs and Christians. Both categories are deeply interested in spiritual quest, experience of love and power of Jesus, in expression of gratitude, in possessing a sense of God’s presence and power, etc. on one side and on the other financial and social insecurity, some mistaken or not well-informed ideas of Christianity, church structures, etc.

Interestingly, I noticed, some of the responses are very strong and positive in affirming Jesus as the “one and only incarnation of God” and “the only way to worship God is to worship Jesus.” Of course there are some surprising facts expressed by respondents regarding the means and ways they came to know of Jesus etc. The author brought out the implications of this research for the ongoing evangelistic outreach and restructuring of church programmes.

These suggestions are appropriate and adoptable for the church. The parallel he drew between the early church's struggle with circumcision and the Indian church's struggle with baptism is well pointed out while the Church's proper attitude towards the people of other faiths and other castes is being discussed.

The last chapter vividly deals with, while the related literature produced by eminent Indian thinkers like Sadhu Sundar Singh, M. M. Thomas, Abhishiktananda and some western missiologists and thinkers, proposals for redoing Indian Christian structure of nurture and mission to accommodate the real needs, desires and concerns of NBBCs among the Hindu, Muslim and other communities. The fact which draws the attention of a critical reader is the suggestion of the author to "Christ-izing" the Hindu and Muslim culture rather than changing or rejecting it. The spiritual life and practice of Indian Christianity should be different from that of the west and this is to be realized in day to day Indian Christian life.

I am particularly happy that Dr. Hofer's research on non-baptized believers in Christ in India follows a concern expressed in my report on 'The Structure of the Congregation in India' (1968) a study done for L.W.F. by an Indian team. This report referred to existence of non-baptized believers as a 'believing church' on the periphery of a 'proclaiming church' and called for ministry to this 'believing church'. Dr. Hofer's research only strengthens strongly the need for such a specialised ministry. The findings also urge the theologians and missiologists to accept the challenge of the meaning of baptism in the religious and cultural context of India which may prove embarrassing to the traditional understanding of missiology and church growth.

I heartily congratulate the author for his outstanding work. I also appreciate the efforts made by the Asian Programme for Advancement of Training and Studies (APATS)-India and the Department of Research and Publications of Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Madras, for bringing out these findings in the form of this publication.

I commend this book to every English knowing Christian, Indian or Western.

K. RAJARATNAM

Madras
Easter 1991.

A Word About This Book

The Rev. Dr. R. R. Sundara Rao, MA., B.D., Ph.D. (USA)
Dean, Research & Publications
Secretary, APATS —India.

Gurukul Lutheran Theological College
And Research Institute
Madras 600 010, India.

This book is an empirical study on the place of Jesus in faith and practice of Hindus and Muslims in the southern Indian State of Tamilnadu. This area has a long history of Christian mission, dating back to the 16th century; however the vast majority of converts have been from the outside major communities like Hindus and Muslims.

Yet, this study reveals that devotion to Jesus is pervasive in minds of people of other faiths. The author identifies and describes in detail, through 84 personal interviews and a statistical survey of Madras City, a particular group of Jesus-devotees he terms “non-baptised believers in Christ”. This situation is prevalent throughout the villages and towns of the State, sharing the beliefs of Christians and practising their faith privately outside the Church. The statistical survey reveals that there are about 200,000 members of this “Churchless Christianity” in the city of Madras alone.

In the concluding chapters the author offers his proposals for the evangelistic mission of the church in India, based on the information gained in this study. In the past, Christian mission work has often been an attack on the culture and family structure of the nation. Baptism, in particular, has in many cases been used to alienate people from their “roots” and create barriers. The author suggests that the Church must repentantly yet gradually begin anew its outreach to the Hindu and Muslim population and the non-baptised believers in Christ can be our guides and emissaries. They are the ones who successfully integrate Christianity into the faith and practice of Indian culture.

This study also provides valuable insights about the Hindu and Muslim population and their response to the various forms of evangelistic and outreach methods. I wish that serious students of

missiology and sociology will follow up this work with more detailed analysis and critical evaluation of the statistical material that is available at Gurukul Library.

As Dean of Research & Publications of Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Madras and as Secretary of Asian Programme for Advancement of Training and Studies (APATS), a L.W.F. concern in India, which are jointly responsible for the publication of this excellent and insightful study, I extend my grateful thanks to all the persons connected with this publication. First of all, special thanks are due to Dr. K. Rajaratnam, Executive Secretary, United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India for graciously providing funds through the above departments, to Rev. J. Adiss Arnold for correcting the proofs and to the IELC Concordia Press & Training Institute Vaniyambadi for the printing of this work.

I hope that this book will provide both insights and impetus to the leaders of the Church in India for their future strategy and work as they seek to serve the Church in Christ's name.

R.R. SUNDARA RAO

Madras
Easter, 1991.

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to describe a fact and to reflect upon it theologically. The fact is that there are thousands of people in the cities, towns and villages of India who believe solely in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour but who have no plans to take baptism or join the church. The first two sections of this book describe the life circumstances and belief patterns of these people. In these sections I attempt to be as objective as possible so that other missiologists and theologians can struggle with the facts, perhaps more successfully than I.

In the third section I attempt to think through the facts theologically and practically. The facts for our reflection are a new, non-Biblical phenomenon — though there are some interesting Biblical parallels — so we must proceed carefully and tentatively. We are dealing with facts of modern salvation history, so we must be as faithful to the past and as creative for the future as we possibly can. In this section I offer some suggestions for rethinking our theology and church structures missiologically. However, my purpose is to stimulate new thinking among the readers, rather than to set forth a completely established theological position.

The material is arranged, therefore, so that the reader will go through much the same pattern of reflection as I experienced. The reader will meet the non-baptised believers in Christ from the rural areas of Tamil Nadu as I did (chapter one), and he/she will draw certain conclusions about them (chapter two). We will then proceed to Section Two giving the general research on faith in Christ among Hindus, Muslims and others in the four-million population of greater Madras city. Through a study of these facts we will continue to reflect on the nature of Christian faith and the pattern of Christian nurture which has been developing around us. Finally, in the last two chapters we will attempt to think through the practical and theological implications of what we have experienced.

Initially, I had thought to limit the book to the first four chapters. I felt that everyone should have simply the bare facts and come to his/her own conclusions. However, friends advised me that I would inevitably colour the facts with my own opinions and interpretations anyway. In addition, since I have presented and discussed

this research with more than thirty groups over the past two years, the reflections I have gathered from those discussions also should be shared. At any rate, the point to be kept in mind by the reader is that the first four chapters are the most important. It would be best if the reader wrote his/her own Section Three before going on to read mine.

One part of this research is not presented in this book. Therefore, I will inform the reader briefly about it. In October 1980 we selected a random sample from the clergy lists of the three Lutheran Churches in Tamil Nadu and from the five Church of South India dioceses who responded. I wrote these pastors concerning my research among non-baptised believers in Christ and requested that they describe the non-baptised believers known to them in their own pastorate area (according to age, sex, caste, years as non-baptised believer, etc.) I also asked the pastors for their evaluation of the faith and practise of these people and of their relationship to the church.

The prime purpose of this initial questionnaire was to make contacts in a random manner with the non-baptised believers themselves — which I did during the first months of 1981. However we were also able to determine through the responses of the pastors that they generally have a quite appreciative attitude toward the non-baptised believers known to them and a quite open pastoral relationship. Of the 246 non-baptised believers identified by the pastors only concerning 6% did the pastors mark the question saying that they felt the person was denying Christ by not taking baptism. In most cases the pastors also reported that the non-baptised believer welcomes him and other church workers to his/her home. Their faith in Christ is public, and their relation to the church is as close as possible. My personal contacts with the pastors during the second phase of the research and my subsequent discussions with groups of pastors and church workers have confirmed this impression from the questionnaire.

My suggestions for more missiological church structures in Section III also reflect the openness and eagerness which I found already there among local pastors, Bible women and evangelists. Many are already bending and ignoring missiologically frustrating church practices in order that the call and nurture of the Gospel can readily go beyond the church walls. Their greatest frustration and anger is directed not against the non-baptised believers but against the rigid

church rules and rigid congregational attitude which hinder the free flow of the Gospel into the community. They want to be servants of the Kingdom, rather than servants of the church. Hopefully the practical and theological discussion which may result from this research will provide some loosening of minds and structures so that these dedicated church workers can follow the lead of the Spirit to which their hearts are responding. Usually church structures and rules change only after church practices have already changed.

The two-pronged research effort has attempted to describe both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of the sociological fact of non-baptised believers in Christ in India. As surveyed in the text, the acceptance of Christ without acceptance of baptism has been a long and pervasive fact of Indian mission history. I began my research by first attempting to answer the qualitative questions. Through my interviews with the individuals I wanted to determine how far their belief was genuine and orthodox. Once I was sufficiently impressed with the quality of faith to be found I wanted to determine how extensive this phenomenon was yet today.

A great blessing of our Lord on this research was the availability of three female graduate students from the Madras Christian College — Dept. of Statistics. They brought both Christian zeal and academic skill to this formidable task of surveying a random sample of the entire city of Madras. The Statistics Department had previously carried out such a research several times in making studies of City voting patterns. Now we were able to harness this skill for a missiological study.

At the time I didn't realize it, but it was particularly providential that the researchers were women. Since we were concerned to get a reading of the Indian society traditionally inaccessible to the church, the non-threatening character of both the research and the researchers was crucial. Traditionally conservative Hindus and Muslims, even women, were willing to answer questions asked by young women at their door on a hot summer day. Since most of the non-baptised believers are women and since women tend to carry out the religious responsibilities of social life, it was essential that the researchers have access to women respondents. Thank God that He plans so much better for His work than we do.

As I urge scholars to study this primary data, I want also to urge Hindu and Muslim scholars to add their insights. I personally learned a great deal for this study from orthodox Hindu friends in Ambur and Madras, from the inter-religious seminars we had at Gurukul (especially the dialogue with the RSS), and from ‘high caste’ Christians and non-baptised believers. They presented to me a portrait of Christ as captivated within the Indian church. I have made some analysis and suggestions from this perspective, but what we desperately need is that these mumblings of frustration become a rising chorus of objection which we can no longer ignore.

As people concerned that the Gospel of salvation reach all people, we must try to keep up with the leading of the Spirit of God. In this research it became evident that God was leading in ways which are not only personally surprising but also theologically and institutionally disturbing. I have tried to catch the upsetting nature of this data with my choice of title: “**Churchless Christianity**” Theologically and traditionally, those two words are mutually contradictory. However, the data presents us with just this contradiction. We are dealing with a fact of mission history in India. We have a “happy problem”. We should be grateful that our Lord is able to carry us forward in His great mission and present us with such wonderful surprises.

As church leaders confront this data, their happy problem will be how to react practically. As I describe in the text, on the local level many pastors are already taking initiatives. However, they realize that many of their thoughts and actions are contrary to church rules. What should the church’s reaction to this phenomenon be: ignore it? foster it? guide it? squelch it? In the dozens of discussions I have conducted with church leaders on this topic I have found all these reactions and many more.

My guess is that this movement of the Spirit will continue with or without us — just as it has up till now in the mission history of India. I would further anticipate with the gradual elimination of Western organizational influence in the Indian church that a uniquely Indian mission scene will develop — perhaps similar to that unfolding before us in nearby China. God will carry out His Kingdom work. The only question is if God’s People will help Him or hinder Him.

In a research effort like this, the cooperation of so many people is required. This research was controversial, but, nonetheless, I received fullest cooperation at almost every turn. It is a testimony to the maturity, generosity and zeal of the Indian church that it is willing to consider and encourage even that with which it disagrees — in the hope that the strange effort might also result in the promotion of our Lord's mission in the overwhelming and complex challenges before us. I have already thanked so many people privately and personally, but I would like to record some general words of thanks here publicly if for no other reason than to illustrate the fine cooperation which church leaders at all levels provided in this effort:

I thank the President and Bishops of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Arcot Lutheran Church, the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the CSI dioceses of Madras, Coimbatore, Madurai, Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari.

I thank the fifty-four local pastors who responded to my initial questionnaire and the twenty who helped me with the local interviews. I thank their generous wives and congregation families who so willingly hosted me and provided accommodation.

I thank the Gurukul office staff especially Mr. Duraisamy, Mr. Joshua, Ms. Jayakumari who energetically and efficiently carried out the mailings and prepared the subsequent research documents.

I especially thank my co-Programme Secretary on the Gurukul Faculty, J. Adiss Arnold, who so ably and selflessly guided this research work. He helped me to formulate and interpret the questionnaires, and he carried out the taxing job of classifying all the castes in the Madras City survey.

I thank Dr. Gift Siromony, Head of the Statistics Department of Madras Christian College, for encouraging and guiding the survey of Madras City and for approvingly reading through chapters 3 and 4 of this book.

I thank Mr. David Ipe of the MCC Statistics Department especially, for he took up the implementation of the Madras City survey as a personal ministry, aiding me at all points in the work, from the several draft tests of the questionnaire, to the choosing and training of the researchers, to the final typing of the computer cards and seeing the material through the IIT computer.

I thank with great respect the three Statistics graduate students who carried out the survey in the heat of June all over the lanes and corners of this large city: Ms. Helen George, Ms. Shanta David, and Ms. Vanaja Pushparaj.

I thank the excellent typists who prepared all these materials for the press, Mrs. Shirley Malani of Kodaikanal School for chapter 1—4 and Mr. K.I.E. Victor of Gurukul for chapters 5—6. They, too, took up this task as a personal ministry, giving of their free time.

I thank the Gurukul Director, Rev. J. Gnanabaranam Johnson, and the Gurukul College Council for releasing me from regular programme activities so that I could pursue this special research on behalf of Gurukul and on behalf of the broader mission of the church.

Finally, I thank the mentor of the new Gurukul, Dr. K. Rajaratnam, who so energetically supported and guided our ministry even while away serving as Asia Secretary in the Lutheran World Federation. He commended this initiative and provided the funding for this publication.

Thanks above all to God who has entrusted to us His ministry of reconciliation and uplifted our lives into His great redemptive work among the nations.

March, 1983

Herbert E. Hoefler
*Gurukul Lutheran Theological College &
Research Institute,*
Madras, India.

Because of changeover of staff at Gurukul and Concordia Press, it has taken seven years to bring this book to publication. In the meantime, several Gurukul faculty members had to step in as editors. The last one, Rev. J. Adiss Arnold, has indeed done yeoman service in overseeing all the final details — even while in the midst of completing his own doctoral dissertation. I thank him very much for his time, skill and dedication.

Dr. K. Rajaratnam has kindly agreed to write a Preface for the publication. Two successive Directors of Gurukul, Bishop Dorairaj Peter and Dr. M. Bage and Dr. D. W. Jesudoss, Principal of Gurukul's

revived academic programme oversaw the administrative arrangements. Dr. R. R. Sundara Rao oversaw the original book jacket as Dean of Research and Publications for Gurukul. The staff of IELC Concordia Press and Training Institute, Vaniyambadi, faithfully brought the whole process to completion.

I made a visit to India in August 1990, to help with the final details. Because of the long delay, some of the statistical tables and some of the footnotes had been lost. We got everything together except some of the footnotes for the sixth chapter. I apologize to the reader for this gap in the publication.

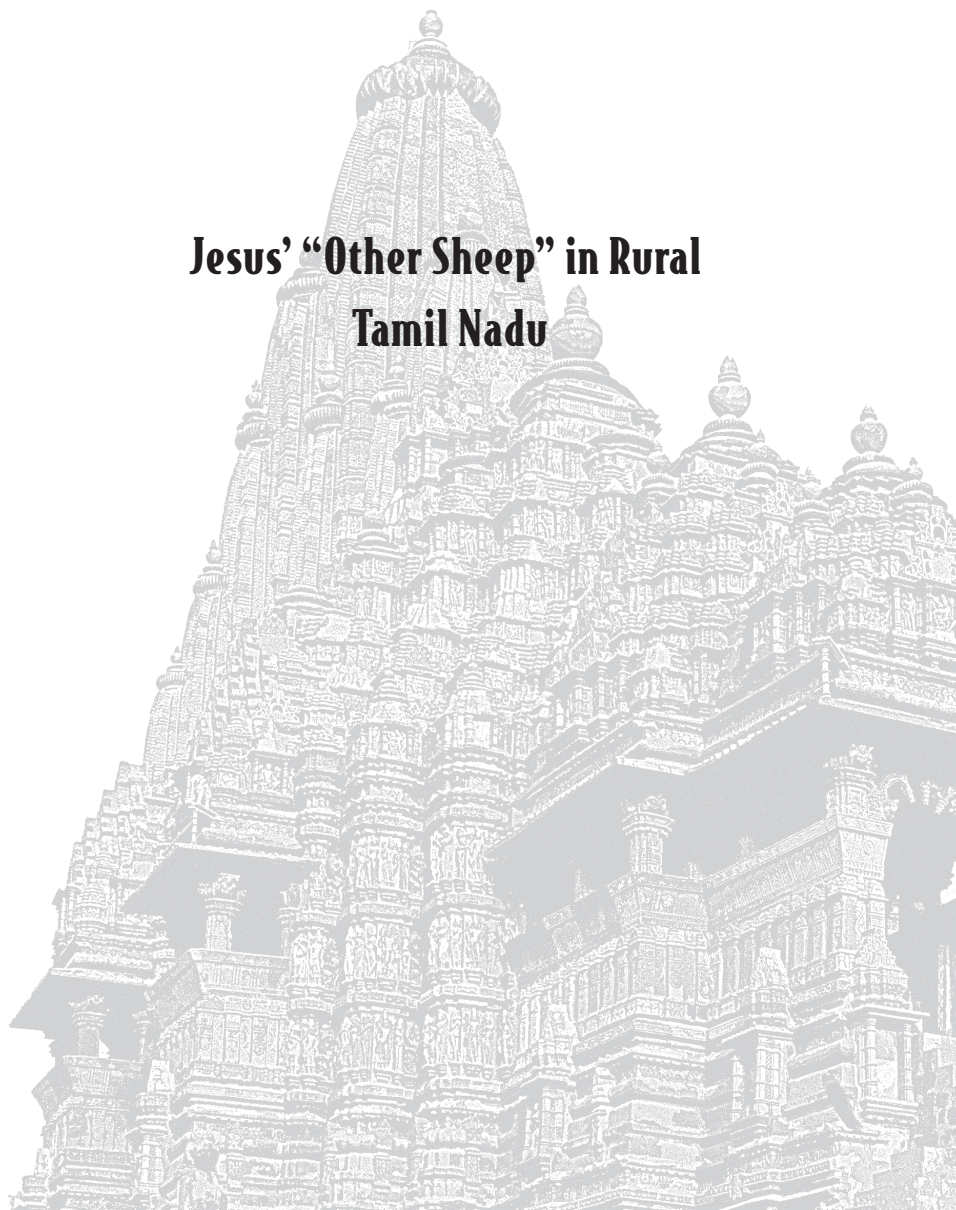
At any rate, it was a great joy to be back with God's wonderful people of India, from whom I have always learned and received so much. I deeply hope and pray that this publication will be of some service to them in their great mission of God in that great land.

Herbert E. Hoefler
Pastor,
Luther Memorial Church,
River Falls, Wisconsin, U. S. A.

April 1991

SECTION ONE

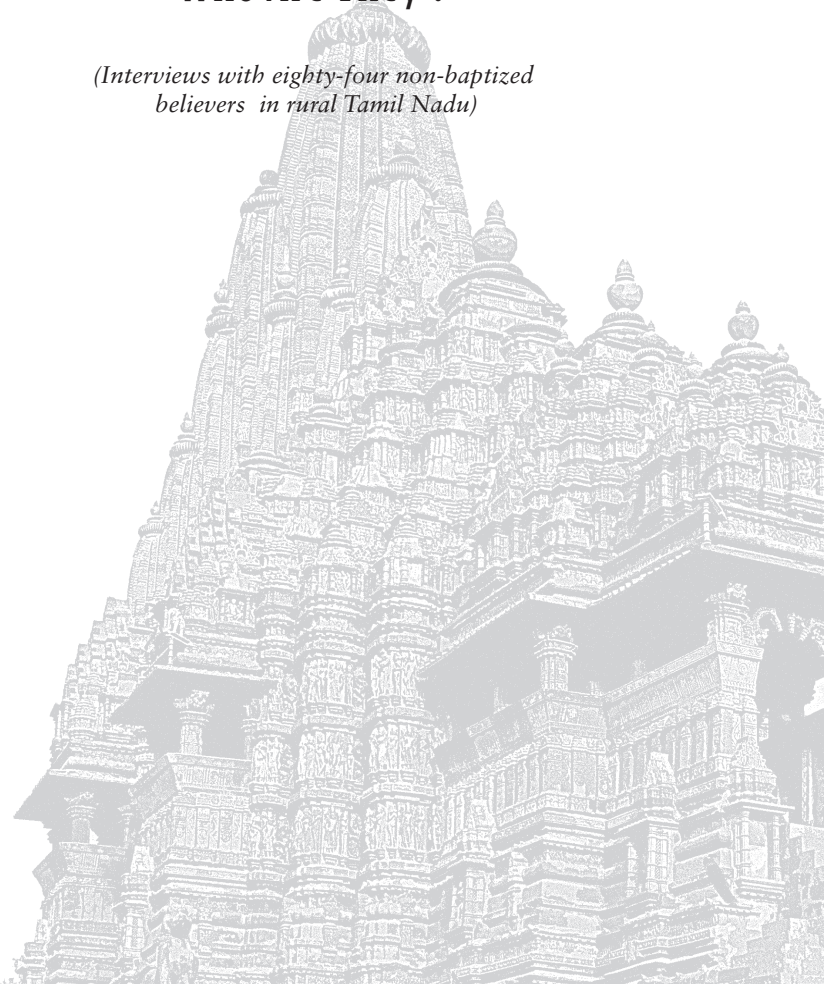
Jesus' "Other Sheep" in Rural Tamil Nadu



CHAPTER ONE

“Who Are They ?”

*(Interviews with eighty-four non-baptized
believers in rural Tamil Nadu)*





Various regions in Tamilnadu where the Author had interviewed NBBCs.

“Who Are They?”

Let us meet some of Jesus’ “other sheep.” These people consider themselves followers of Jesus, and they are considered such also in the general community. As per the survey I did among a random sample of CSI and Lutheran pastors in Tamil Nadu, the pastors also consider these people faithful disciples of Jesus. (The pastors evaluated only 6% of them as denying Christ by not taking baptism).

In the random sample of pastors I asked the pastors to list the non-baptized believers in Christ known to him in his parish area. I then visited those pastorates which had a significant number. In total, I interviewed 84 of the 247 NBBCs listed by the pastors. They were in typical cross-section socio-economically, spread out over nine districts of the state.

The interviews were generally carried out in the presence of the pastor or Bible woman/evangelist. The locus was according to the preference of the interviewee, often in the home unless the interviewee preferred to meet at the church or in the pastor’s house. We would sit on the floor together. Since I speak Tamil, no interpretation was necessary. The duration was 45—60 minutes on an average.

I would open the interview with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for this opportunity to discuss as brothers and sisters in Christ, asking for His guidance as we shared with each other. Only in a couple of instances was I asked to teach on a particular topic. I would close with a prayer summarizing the joys and problems expressed. Generally the interview was a matter of their responses to my questions. Often toward the end of the interview period I would share with them some other experiences of NBBCs similar to them.

Several times I was asked for advice as to whether they should take baptism or not. My usual reply was that they should take baptism in a way which attracts and convinces their relatives. I advised them to visit each relative’s home beforehand to explain their motivation for baptism. They might also offer to wait until

their relatives give consent. Their goal should be to bring the whole family to Christ.

I usually began the interview with similar questions. However the course of the discussion would differ according to the particular problems and viewpoints expressed by the interviewee. Examples of the questions asked are as follows:

“How did you first come to learn about Jesus?”

“What attracted you about Jesus?”

“What benefit have you found in praying to Jesus?”

NB.: the Hindu term here for “praying” emphasises the idea of worship, the word “benefit” in Tamil literally means “good things”; thus, the literal translation of this important question would be: “What good things have you received in worshipping Jesus?”

“After receiving these benefits, what have you felt that Jesus expects of you?”

“If you have already received benefits from Jesus, do you see any need for baptism?”

“What practice of personal devotion and regular nurture do you follow?”

“Do you celebrate any Hindu festivals? If so, how do you celebrate them and why?”

“Do you celebrate Christmas at home? Do you go to Church at Christmas, Easter, Good Friday, or any other Christian festival?”

“Do you have cottage prayer meetings in your home with the Pastor and other Christians? If not, would you welcome such a thing?”

“How do you feel about a person of Christian faith wearing a *tilak*, putting a *kolam*, changing his name, etc.?”

“How do you try to witness to Jesus?”

“Do you expect problems ever arranging marriages for your children because of your Christian faith?”

“Do you have family devotions? Do you teach your children your Christian faith?”

“Do you plan eventually to take baptism?”

“Do you desire to take Holy Communion?”

In a few instances there was hesitation to discuss these points. I will note this when I describe the interviews in the next section. However, the vast majority were quite happy to discuss their situation and experiences. Most also showed surprising confidence concerning the correctness of their position on baptism and comfortableness concerning their more distant relationship to the organized church. As my initial survey of the pastors' opinions showed (cf. pp.) generally the church leaders show sympathetic understanding toward their situation. Their remaining without baptism leaves less problems for all concerned.

Now let us meet the individuals and groups with whom I spoke. I will describe briefly the setting in which the interview took place, but I will not reveal the exact village or the interviewee's name. I have those details in case anyone desires to make a responsible follow-up research. One might also contact the local pastor, for the NBBCs I was able to interview were ones well known in the community. There are many others, of course, unknown to anybody — except our Lord.

I will present the interviews beginning from the Southern tip of Tamiinadu and proceeding North. Thus we will begin in an area (Kanyakumari District) where Christians are one-half of the population and conclude where Christians are only 3%. I will add occasional notes on the relevant socio-cultural dynamics behind the situation described, since some of the readers may not be familiar with the dynamics of rural Tamilian society. I would request the reader to try to enter into the mind and heart of these “other sheep” of our Lord in order to determine empathetically their spiritual state. Only thereafter can we responsibly and creatively reflect on the theological and practical implications.

A Small Town near the border of Kerala, Kanyakumari District

The CSI pastor invited the two men to come at one time to his parsonage to discuss with me. The men preferred that I not come to their home. Both were of lower middle class, Nayar caste; one is a tailor and the other runs a small shop.

The tailor attends church regularly, but he goes to and from Church by a circuitous route in order to avoid the ridiculing comments of his Hindu neighbours. Twenty years ago a pastor's prayers

had helped to heal his sister. He has a picture of Jesus in his private room at the back of his shop, but a Hindu picture in the shop itself. He celebrates Christmas in his home but not other Hindu festivals or rituals, for which he suffers ridicule from Hindu neighbours and relatives. He reads his Bible in the evening. His brothers and sisters also believe in Christ secretly, not being bold enough to go to church. His children also believe but they are not baptised. He says that he would have no objection to their baptism if that is what God wills for them and what they desire.

The small businessman does not go to Church, but he reads his Bible and prays before a picture of Jesus in his home. He had studied in a Christian school and thereby learned of Jesus. He has experienced Jesus' help in response to his prayers. He listens to Christian Radio programmes. He celebrates only Pongal. (N.B.: Pongal is a three-day festival in January, which is primarily a social event, involving the whole village community. Many village Christians also participate in the festivities, though avoiding the one or two traditional Hindu home rituals).

In the conversation, they jointly made the following statements:

They fear the reaction of their relations if they would take baptism.

They want to have a Christian burial.

They attend Christian public meetings, but their wives do not come along.

They expect Jesus to take them to heaven and to take care of their children.

They do not feel bad about not taking baptism, nor do they feel that God is displeased with them because of it.

God expects of them that they lead a decent life as a follower of Jesus.

They feel they should go to church.

If they take baptism, they feel they should leave going to the cinema, smoking and other bad habits. (NB.: Emphasis on cleansing one's life of bad habits is strong among many Protestant denominations, especially in Southern Tamilnadu where "low church" missions were predominant)

They do not try to persuade their wives to join their Christian faith, as it would only cause conflict in the home and among the relations. Now they are still accepted by their caste people and family members.

Their wives also fear that the family Hindu god would punish them if they ceased to worship.

The best way to reach their wives would be through Christian literature. If there were Bible women, they could possibly speak with them. Otherwise, only prayer for them is possible.

They expressed appreciation for the pastor and the congregation. (N.B.: The pastor spoke of the many conflicts and factions in the congregation, however. These men knew of the congregational life only through the regular worship).

They would not be interested to join in a cottage prayer meeting even if it was nearby.

They understood Jesus as teaching us to avoid a sinful life and to do good to others.

A Village near Martandam, Kanyakumari District:

The Lutheran pastor knew of this Nair family, though he had not had much intimate contact with them. (However, as a result of this interview he now visits them regularly). We walked through the rice fields to reach their home which is located on temple property just beside the wall of a large Hindu temple. They are quite poor.

This family is the physical and spiritual descendent of one Devasahayam Pillai, an officer of the Maharaja of Travancore who converted to Christianity in the early nineteenth century and suffered martyrdom. The Roman Catholic Church has constructed a small shrine in his honour on the roadside nearby. The old man of the house (now deceased) was aged eighty-nine years. He said that he was fifth generation non-baptised believer in Christ in his family. The widowed daughter has the same Christian faith, as do her four small children. One of the sons, who is a doctor in a nearby town, also is of Christian faith though not baptised. He has suffered blindness and the loss of both wife and son in his life. The

other sons have no religious faith or practice, and they live elsewhere.

The family does not participate in any of the local Hindu functions though they rent from the temple itself. This has caused some friction with the local Hindu community, who at times threaten to vacate them from the house. Everyone knows of their Christian faith, but they do not practice it outwardly because it would irritate the surrounding Hindu authorities upon whom they are dependent. The elderly man is a retired Tamil Pandit, and the family survives only on his pension.

The family occasionally worships at the local Roman Catholic Church, but the priest does not come to visit them. At one point the priest had also advised them against taking baptism, as they would have to face many more difficulties in their life. They do not keep a picture of Jesus in their home, but they pray to Him. They have found no relief in their troubles through their prayers to Jesus for help. When he dies, the old man expressed that he wants to be buried in a sitting position and that he knows he “will be going to Jesus.”

Another Village near Martandam, Kanyakumari District

The same Lutheran pastor took me to the home of a former teacher of his in his hometown. He is of the Pannikkar community, retired with his Hindu wife. They have only his pension to live on.

The man came to the Christian faith while studying in a Christian school as a boy. He believes that Jesus has saved him from his sins and will give him good in the future. He feels that he “lost his chance” to take baptism before he got married. After marriage he had to consider his wife and her family, and, most important, the marriage alliances of his children. (N.B.: Marriages are arranged only along caste lines, and relatives would not be willing to give their sons or daughters into a family where there might arise religious dissension and division). He expressed that this was the big problem also for “many others.”

He says he goes to church occasionally and also to large public meetings. He observed that caste feelings also continue inside the church so he doesn't see any benefit in joining. He also attends temple worship and Hindu festivals, but he says that his prayers then also are Christian. He spoke quite dejectedly about his spiri-

tual situation, for he felt compelled by circumstances to live “against his conscience.”

In the same village we met a woman of upper middle class who is from the same Pannikkar community. Her father had appealed to the missionaries several decades previously, along with the above mentioned teacher, to construct a separate chapel for the five Panikkar families in the village on land which they would provide; however, the missionaries refused. After her marriage she had to join in her husband’s religion, and her sons are leading devotees in the local temple. She complained that the local church no longer visits her house when they come on *bajanai* (N.B.: “Bajanai” is a form of carolling which is practiced on full-moon nights and festivals.) She no longer practices a Christian faith in any way.

Poovancode, Kanyakumari District

This next example I mention only to illustrate another aspect of the Hindu relationship to Christ. There are several high-caste families here who regularly call the pastor for any family function (e.g. opening a new business, moving to a new house, sending off to college, etc.) They also send their children to Sunday School and VBS, attend big Christian rallies, read Christian magazines, and listen to Christian radio programmes. However, when asked what they understood to be the teaching of the Christian religion, all they could reply was the Ten Commandments.

As we sat on the verandah of one of the houses and discussed, they spoke proudly of the harmonious way in which religions co-exist in their town. They tried to take what is best in all religions. They have only Hindu worship in their homes because the festivals and customs are their “Family heritage.” They do not pray to Jesus privately. They view Jesus as one of the *avatars*, but not sinless. When asked if he would object to one of his sons taking baptism, the father said he would not object if this is what the son sincerely wanted — though he also observed immediately that he does not see that Christians are any better than anybody else.

Such people - who are, of course, very numerous - I do not classify as non-baptized believers in Christ. They have neither the orthodox belief nor devoted practice which is expected of a follower of Christ. Jesus has no special place in their spiritual life, and they have made no break with their Hindu pattern of worship.

Nagercoil, Kanyakumari District

Around the beginning of the century, the “Zenana Mission” (“Zenana” is the term for Hindu women staying inside the house) of the LMS began work in Nagercoil. They opened several schools on caste Hindu streets for girls. The women missionary teachers would teach about Christianity in the schools, and they would visit the mothers of the girls in their homes to teach literacy and Christianity. They did not emphasize baptism in their ministry because the “Zenana” women had to live within Hindu households.

In the mid-60’s the CSI diocese decided to give all their schools to the government, but these Zenana Mission schools were converted into meeting halls. Some of the teachers volunteered to leave the security and benefits of government teaching in order to continue the mission work as diocesan Bible Women. These Bible women now have a regular schedule of worship and Bible study for high-caste women in these meeting halls.

I visited three such meeting places and met groups of women ranging in number from ten to fifteen. Some were curious, some hostile, some inquirers, some non-baptised believers, and some baptised. They came from a variety of high castes. (N.B.: As long as the mission does not emphasise baptism or congregational membership, the women feel free to mix on this informal basis. Baptism is viewed and given as a free privilege of participation, rather than as a necessary requirement of participation.

At one place the Bible women pointed proudly to a small Hindu shrine just outside the small meeting hall. They said the local Hindu men had erected this shrine when they heard that the mission workers were going to use the building for Christian work. They tried to inaugurate the shrine by having the “devi” dance and receive possession of the spirit as a sign that the spirit had come to the idol. However, the “devi” never entered into her trance, though she tried several times, so the men apologised and left the shrine unused.

(N.B.: The incident demonstrates how popular Hinduism also discriminates between the idol and God. If a spirit is not known to have made its dwelling in the object, it is not worshipped. Jyoti Sahi tells an interesting story of some villagers in Karnataka in this regard in his article in “Christian Art in India”).

Through events like this the women gained faith in the power of Jesus. They also had many personal experiences of the power of

the mission workers' prayers, so women from all backgrounds will come to them when in personal or family distress. These women are completely tied to the house and family affairs, and they find mental peace from their worries through the prayers of the Bible women. They came to the meetings out of curiosity and unexpectedly found new peace and happiness. Many witnessed in our discussions concerning the power of Jesus to heal their family members and to bring peace in their distress. A few spoke of the faith in Jesus which had been created in the hearts of their husbands as well through these experiences, but they will not come to church or kneel in prayer.

The major problem they all expressed in regard to baptism was the marriage of their daughters. When one woman spoke of having four daughters, all the other women assented a sympathetic "Aah." One woman said she would take baptism if God made this necessity clear in her own heart. (Later, one of the Bible women commented to me that she blames the church people primarily for these women's hesitation to take baptism; for if they would arrange inter-caste marriages, the major obstacle to baptism would be removed.)

However, all have a deep fear in their hearts over the anger and power of the family gods. They understand that they must worship only Jesus if they take baptism; whereas, now many keep a picture of Jesus among with the pictures of other gods in their *puja* room. If they take baptism and cease to carry out the family rituals, every family difficulty and calamity thereafter will be attributed to the women's failing to serve the family god. One woman expressed that baptism is not necessary, for one can pray to Jesus and receive His help also as an unbaptised person. The understanding in the families and community is that each person has the right and privilege to worship the god of his choice, the god which meets his/her needs. One woman specifically said that all gods are the same, but "my god is Jesus."

(N.B.: This understanding of religious reality and practice is called throughout India as "ishta devata". A god will serve those who serve it. It will punish those who are unfaithful to it. All gods are real forces and one must choose and experience the god whose help and protection one will solicit in life. Thus, there is a very personal, mutual relationship between the devotee and the god.)

Travelling one early morning on the government bus they put the usual Hindu morning devotional songs over the bus cassette tape recorder. One of the songs had the tune and theology of a Christian devotional lyric; but when I listened carefully, it was devoted to *Murugan*, not Christ. Another negative illustration of the same religious reality can be shown through the story, one convert, from the Nadar community, told me concerning his brother who also had been considering conversion. One early morning he had a vision in which *Murugan* told him that he would care for him if he continued to worship him. In order to prove his power and promise, *Murugan* told the young man, a cocoanut tree worker, that he should not tend his trees that evening. In such case, there would normally be no flow of sap into the bags the following morning. However, when he went to inspect the bags the next morning they were abnormally full. Thus, the brother gradually fell from the Christian faith. The village gods are a reality for these people to cope with. Jesus is understood as a god who must prove His faithfulness and power in competition with many other divine forces.)

The women also understand that many of the traditional customs of their Hindu community will come under question if they take baptism. Besides leaving the *pujas* which are an essential part of daily family life and of important community festivals, many feel they should leave the wearing of the *tilak* on the forehead, the putting of the *kolam* in front of the house, going to the cinema, etc. Others argued that the *tilak* and the *kolam* are simply cultural decorations. (N.B.: The “*tilak*” is the red spot placed on the forehead, traditionally representing the third eye of Shiva, emitting consuming fire. The “*kolam*” is the ricepowder decoration put by the women in front of the door each morning and evening traditionally to welcome the good spirits to the house. Most Protestants reject the *tilak* and some reject the *kolam* as external signs of identification with Hindu tradition. Roman Catholics practice these signs as cultural decorations and some innovatively avoid religious connotations by avoiding the red *tilak* — putting only a colour which matches their saree. A few spoke of how their children happily attended the mission Sunday School until they were told that going to the cinema and reading certain books were wrong.

In addition, certain common Christian customs would cause misunderstanding and offense among their Hindu family members. A Hindu woman removes her *tilak* and wears a white saree (worn

by Pentecostal women on Sundays) only when she is widowed. In Christian prayer she is taught to cover her head with her saree, but in Hindu practice this gesture is only done to symbolize sorrow while on the way to a funeral. Similarly, Protestant social mores in the area are that a woman should not beautify herself with jewels or “manjal” (yellow sandal paste to make one’s complexion fairer). Once again, avoidance of these things is a public sign of mourning in the general community. Family members and husbands oppose these practices because they become the subject of community ridicule when others see the woman in these inappropriate symbolic postures.

The women’s practice of their Christian faith is confined to their private prayers in the home and to participation in the mission meetings as and when they feel the need for Bible study or special prayers. Many still go to the temple with family and friends, especially at festival time but they say that they only think of Jesus when they are there. One said that she was allowed to conduct a Christmas celebration in her home. All contribute to the mission financially, especially at festival time. They do not know about Holy Communion, for they have never seen it. Some had attended Roman Catholic worship but they did not like it because it was too much like Hindu worship.

Report of a Family in Kanyakumari District

Rev. S. Daniel, a faculty member at the Concordia Seminary, Nagercoil, told of a visit he had made to a Vellala headman’s family in Kanyakumari district. Twenty years previously they had been ministered to by a Vellala pastor, who would hold worship in their home. However, subsequent pastors of different caste backgrounds had refused to treat them differently from others. When Rev. Daniel (a man of Vellala caste origins) visited them, he found that they were still exclusively Christian in their worship and belief and extremely happy to have a Vellala pastor minister to them. (N.B.: It is common experience that village families prefer the ministry of pastors/evangelists/Bible women from their own caste background. They are able to relate without any cultural barriers. However, it is also common experience that any church-worker of proven spiritual character or of effective prayer is welcome into any home.)