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Critiques of Christianity from Savarkar to Malhotra

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12. Critiques of Christianity from Savarkar to Malhotra

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In the chapter that precedes this one, Richard Fox Young discusses Hindu-Christian polemical texts appearing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The end of his chapter details the decline of Sanskrit as the prime language of such polemics, and the rise of an Anglocentric Indian intelligentsia that in many ways typified the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hindu encounter with Christianity. This chapter picks up where that one leaves off, though it does elide several important transitional figures who are covered elsewhere in this volume (like Vivekananda, for example, who is discussed by Rinehart). Featured in this chapter are a number of prominent Indian critics of evangelism and conversion to Christianity over roughly the last one hundred years. After briefly covering early twentieth-century figures like Savarkar, Hedgewar, and Golwalkar, the chapter focuses primarily on postcolonial leaders of the last few decades, especially Mohandas Gandhi (who survived just barely into the “postcolonial” era), Ram Swarup, Sita Ram Goel, Arun Shourie, Ashok Chowgule, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and Radha Rajan. Finally, at the end, to demonstrate the multinational scope of these polemics, I briefly discuss the views of the Hindu American Foundation and Rajiv Malhotra. It is important to note that the critical focus of this chapter’s polemicists differs somewhat from those featured in the previous chapter. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century polemicists described in the previous chapter tended to focus on perceived religious differences of an ethical, theological, soteriological, or epistemological nature. While such differences remain of concern to the figures featured in this chapter, they tend to focus more on the *sociological or political ramifications of those differences*, and therefore on the sociological and political manifestations of Christianity in India.

The intent of the chapter is to provide a straightforward account of the views these figures espouse. These views range from the mild and relatively uncontroversial to the rather extreme and tendentious. Much more could be said about the misunderstandings and prejudices that fuel the most extreme, or about how they are made possible through the intentional misuse of historical evidence, or about how even the most moderate critiques of Christianity in India have been used by violent anti-Christian activists to justify their actions. However, the necessary brevity of the chapter prevents any significant critique or contextual analysis of the views it describes. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that there is a good deal of coherence to the arguments these authors articulate. There is in their rhetoric plenty of bluster, bombast, and sarcasm, but there is not *only* that.

Similarly, it is important to note that many Hindus in contemporary India—probably even a significant majority—find Christian attempts to convert others to their faith mystifying at best. They would agree with much of what the authors highlighted in this chapter have to say on the matter, though nearly all of them would reject violence as a response to grievances against Christianity, and would demand that the debate about conversion and the religious rights of minorities proceed through civil and democratic means. The views expressed by the authors in this chapter therefore represent, on many (but not all) points, the views of a majority of contemporary Hindus.

Predecessors: V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966), Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940), and M.S. Golwalkar (1906-73)

While there were Indian critics of Christianity long before the twentieth century, as discussed by Young in the preceding chapter, the broad outlines of the contemporary Hindu nationalist critique of Christianity emerged in the 1920s, particularly with V.D. Savarkar's 1923 publication, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* Savarkar's seminal text argued that the genius of Indian civilization derived from its "*Hindutva*," or Hindu-ness. *Hindutva* for Savarkar designated a broad, cultural kind of Hindu-ness; nevertheless, Savarkar himself defined a Hindu as one who declared India both fatherland (*pitrubhumi*) and holy land (*punyabhumi*). No Christian or Muslim, of course, could do the latter. According to Savarkar, "That is why Christian and Muslim communities, [who] might have a common Fatherland, and an almost pure Hindu blood and parentage with us, cannot be recognized as Hindus; as since their adoption of the new cult they had ceased to own Hindu civilization...as a whole" (Savarkar 1989 [1923], pp. 100-101).

In 1937, Savarkar became president of the Hindu Mahasabha, which was at that time a lobby within the Indian National Congress. His ideas had a far greater impact, however, through his disciple, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940), who founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925. As an institution, the RSS perpetuates the ideology of *Hindutva* while using drills and physical activity to strengthen and embolden young Hindu men to work in its defense. Often referred to in short as "the Sangh," the RSS became the first of many *Hindutva*-oriented organizations associated with the Sangh Parivar (that is, the "family of the Sangh"). The Sangh Parivar also includes prominent social, religious, and political parties, such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council, VHP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which ruled the central government as this volume went to press. The writings of Hedgewar's successor, M.S. Golwalkar (1906-73), including *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939) and *Bunch of Thoughts* (1966), borrowed much from Savarkar and Hedgewar, and established many of the anti-Christian critiques we will encounter in this chapter. For example, Golwalkar argued that Hinduism was a non-proselytizing religion, but Christianity was an inherently expansionist religion bent on the destruction of Hinduism and political domination of India. Similarly, Indian Christians had foreign loyalties, and were therefore anti-national and incapable of being loyal citizens (Golwalkar 2000 [1966], pp. 188-94).

Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi (1869-1948)

In the postcolonial era, Gandhi represents an early figure, of course, having been assassinated just after independence. But his work as a leader in the independence movement makes him an

important leader with regard to the topic of this chapter, as does the fact that his influence is unparalleled in the debate about conversion in contemporary India. Nearly every figure featured in this chapter quotes Gandhi approvingly, even if they go on to criticize him for not going far enough. Many of their publications quote him extensively.

Gandhi was eminently gentle in dealing with his interlocutors, and he scrupulously avoided the rhetorical embellishment, snide vituperation, and hyperbole that characterizes the argumentation of many of the other figures featured in this chapter. Moreover, no one could accuse Gandhi of inciting violence or of espousing an ultra-chauvinistic kind of nationalism. He therefore helps us begin the work of decoupling criticism of Christian conversion efforts from the violence against Christians it is sometimes accused of provoking. If the two can be kept distinct in our minds, then it becomes easier to discern that there is a certain logic to the critique of Christian evangelism and conversion that warrants scholarly engagement.

Gandhi was not so much opposed to *conversion* as to conversion from one faith to another. “I believe that there is no such thing as conversion from one faith to another in the accepted sense of the term,” he wrote. “It is a highly personal matter for the individual and his God” (Ellsberg 1991, p. 48). India had need only for “Conversion in the sense of self-purification, self-realization” (Ibid., p. 45). Conversion for Gandhi, therefore, was self-transformation, something one did, or could do, within any religious tradition.

Gandhi’s conception of conversion follows logically from his understanding of religion. Gandhi conceived of religion not in terms of a body of doctrinal assertions, but rather as a repository of spiritual practices that could be utilized for the purposes of moral development. Moral development was possible in all religious traditions, and was the standard by which a religious person, and religious traditions, should be judged. In fact, Gandhi’s primary objection to mass Christian conversions, and missionary attempts to provoke them, was not so much that they would entail Hindu demographic decline, but rather that in his estimation such conversions failed to (and could not possibly) produce moral transformation.

Religions, it followed, were not true or false based on their doctrinal assertions, but rather on whether or not they could facilitate moral development. And since it was beyond debate that saints had been produced by all religions, all religions were equally true (and, of course, according to Gandhi’s conception of truth, equally false). If all religions were equally true, then there was no justification for converting from one religion to another, let alone seeking to provoke the conversion of another.

If one found impediments to personal transformation within one’s tradition, then one had an obligation to reform one’s own tradition, to improve it. It is important to highlight this point: Because no religion was fully true in the absolute sense, the discovery of defects in one’s religious tradition did not constitute sufficient grounds for apostasy. Religion, for Gandhi, was a journey *toward* truth, and he rejected the claim, made by many Christians, that a faith could be revealed from God in fully-formed, static, universally valid, propositional truths.

Gandhi’s rejection of the claims to universality made by religions like Christianity stemmed in part from his conception of particular religions as representing the cumulative spiritual wisdom

of a particular people, and tailored to/appropriate for that people's idiosyncratic ways of thinking and behaving. Religious traditions, for Gandhi, were *ethnic*, not universal. The great faiths of Indian origin were sufficient for Indians, just as other religions were sufficient for other peoples. Because of this, attempts to convert others were unnecessary, disrespectful, and intrusive. For Gandhi, religion was not, and *should not* be about public or formal affiliation, particularly the exclusive kinds of affiliation demanded by most Christian denominations. So while conversion as an interior process of spiritual transformation was something to be desired, conversion as a change in religious affiliation was not, particularly if that change in affiliation required that one cut oneself off from one's ancestral traditions.

Throughout his career, Gandhi was a critic not only of the missionary impulse to convert others, but also of the association of Christian evangelism with educational or medical service. For Gandhi, so long as there remained the ulterior motive of conversion, the value of the service was undermined, both in terms of the good it did for those who received it, but also—and here, we might remember the Bhagavad Gita's exhortation to do one's duty without attachment to results—in terms of what it did to those who provided it. Ulterior motives in service provoked insincere conversions from one faith to another, he argued. "If a person, through fear, compulsion, starvation or for material gain or consideration, goes over to another faith, it is a misnomer to call it conversion" (Ibid., p. 71).

Ram Swarup (1920-1998)

Gandhi can be credited with having established and/or popularized many of the basic arguments against conversion to Christianity, but it was Ram Swarup who brought those arguments back to life at the end of the twentieth century. In 1982, Swarup established a publishing house, Voice of India, which has since then published a significant amount of literature in defense of Hinduism, including many of the texts referenced in this chapter. One of the stated goals of Voice of India, according to Swarup, was to "show to its own people that Hinduism is not that bad and other religions not so wonderful as they are painted by their theologians and televangelists" (Goel 2009 [1988], p. 176). With Voice of India's publication of his own *Hinduism vis-à-vis Christianity and Islam*, Swarup inspired a new generation of anti-Christian critics, as we will see in the next section on Sita Ram Goel. Though many of his arguments may have been Gandhi's originally, the assertive, orotund, and confrontational style was distinctly Swarup's, and the influence of that style can be felt in the writings of nearly all the other authors profiled in this chapter.

For Swarup, as for Gandhi, religion was and *should* be an interior thing, guided by experience. In the "predominantly mystical approach," that in his view characterized Hinduism, "God is the innermost truth of one's own being; ethical action is its natural expression; higher truth is revealed to one who sincerely invokes it. In this approach, therefore, God is the inner controller, ethical life is natural and spontaneous, truth is experiential, and revelation is open to all" (Swarup 1992 [1982], p. 10). (In her chapter for this volume, Voss Roberts helpfully interrogates the orientalist assertion that Indian religions were uniquely typified by "mysticism," an assertion that seems to have been accepted by figures such as Swarup, but that is nonetheless problematic, among other reasons, because of the way it obscures mystical strands within religions like Christianity.) Because religion is an interior thing, Swarup argues, following Gandhi, no tradition

is necessarily better or more soteriologically effective than another is. Moreover, each religious tradition is particularly adapted to meet the spiritual needs of the community from which it emerged. “This attitude means that different peoples and different races have their own presiding genius, their own talents and their own *svadharma* [personal dharma],” he argues. “They worship the best when they worship through their *svadharma*” (Ibid., p. 6). Religious people, therefore, should be tolerant of the beliefs of others and encourage them to develop themselves within their own spiritual traditions.

In contrast to this conception of religion, in traditions like Christianity (and Islam) where the growth of mysticism had been stunted or suppressed, “God is conceived externally; ethics are commandments and injunctions from an external authority; moral laws are matters of exhortation and warnings. *Here one’s obligations do not extend beyond one’s brothers in faith.* In this approach, truth is creedal, revelation exclusive, and salvation belongs only to the elect...” (Ibid., p. 10). Notice here how what appears at first blush to be a comparative statement morphs not only into an argument about what religion is and by implication should be, but also into a charge leveled against Christians and Muslims: They are, due to the inherent nature of their religion, loyal only to their coreligionists, and are therefore a threat to national cohesion.

The proprietary nature of truth in Christianity leads inexorably to intolerance for other doctrines and other gods, and to the hypercritical language deployed in Christian anti-Hindu polemics: “The fact is that intolerance is inbuilt into the basic Semitic approach and cursing comes naturally to it. The Bible is full of curses invoked on rival-gods, prophets, apostles, doctrines. For example, Paul told his Galatian followers that ‘should anyone preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed’” (Ibid., p. 32). No amount of Christian theological development could ever eradicate this basic intolerance, Swarup asserts. Times may change, necessitating gentler language and strategic adjustment, but the intolerance remains (Ibid., p. 15).

Sita Ram Goel (1921-2003)

Trained as an historian at the University of Delhi, Sita Ram Goel had an active career as a social activist, fighting for various causes throughout his career. As he describes it, a narrow escape from a murderous Muslim mob in 1946 appears to have moved him in a more conservative direction, particularly with regard to his views on Islam. After 1982, he became involved, with Swarup, in establishing Voice of India. Goel’s central claim is that Christianity is a sly, minatory, and colonizing pseudo-religion from which Hindus need legal protection. In a line he reproduces in several of his writings, he proclaims, “Christianity has never been a religion; it has always been a predatory imperialism par excellence” (Goel 2010 [1986], p. 5). His *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters* is more or less a chronicle of that “predatory imperialism,” as he frames it, from the time of Constantine and the squelching of paganism in Europe, through the Inquisition’s manifestation in Portuguese Goa, right down to recent Christian evangelistic campaigns.

Like Swarup, Goel argues that the imperialistic nature of Christianity emerged naturally from its historical and theological foundations. The Israelite God, Jehovah, was a jealous God who facilitated His putatively chosen people’s underhanded acquisition of other people’s lands and

possessions (Goel 2009 [1988], p. 12). Hindus therefore need to be wary of wily Christian expansionism. Soft-spoken, gracious, and feeble critique is insufficient. While praising Gandhi for his critique of proselytization, Goel found his irenic personality a liability. According to Goel, Gandhi had inadvertently weakened the position of Hindus by overemphasizing “the concept of *sarva-dharma-samabhava* (equal regard for all religions),” which missionaries had parroted to counteract criticism of conversion activities (Goel 2010 [1986], p. 235).

Moreover, Gandhi had been too generous, and had unnecessarily spoken approvingly of Christianity. Gandhi “upheld an unedifying character like Jesus as a great teacher of mankind, and glorified [to] no end the sentimental nonsense that is the Sermon on the Mount” (Ibid., p. 235). This is one of the points at which Goel, iconoclast that he is, differentiates himself from other critics of Christian missions in India. Many of them go to great lengths to distinguish Christians and Christian missions (which they criticize) from Jesus (whom they admire). Goel refuses even to admire Jesus’ teachings and ministry, as is more than clear from the title of one of the chapters in his *History*: “Plea for Rejecting Jesus as Junk.”

Goel also rejected what he considered the purely cynical and sinister Christian project to “indigenize” or “inculturate” Indian Christianity by utilizing as much as possible from Indian and Hindu culture in the development of Christian ritual, worship, and theology (for more on inculturation, see the chapter by Amaladoss in this volume). Whereas many Christian theologians view “inculturation” as a positive solution to the troubling tendency of Christianization to provoke Westernization, Goel (like Rajiv Malhotra and others featured in this chapter), conceives of the indigenizing project as little more than a change in tactics necessitated by the failure of more direct methods of evangelism. “The mission’s new-found love for Hindu culture is a sham,” Goel contends. “It is neither spontaneous nor sincere at any point” (Goel 2009 [1988], p. 26).

Goel’s *Catholic Ashrams: Sannyasins or Swindlers?* is an extended critique of the Christian ashram movement, an important manifestation of Christian indigenization efforts. In both this text and in his *History*, Goel traces the development of the indigenizing impulse from Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) right up to the present day, providing critical biographies of key figures in the indigenizing movement, like the Indian “Hindu-Christian” Brahmabandhad Upadhyay (1861-1907) and European Christian “sannyasins” like Jules Monchanin (1895-1957), Henri Le Saux (aka Swami Abhishiktananda, 1910-1973), and Bede Griffiths (1906-1993), for whom Goel reserves his most potent venom. Goel criticizes these Christian indigenizing figures for engaging in trickery, and calls upon scholarly evidence that at least a few of their disciples had been confused about their gurus’ religious origins. The long, detailed debates Christians have had about exactly what can be acceptably utilized from the Hindu tradition in the effort to indigenize Christianity strike Goel not as the “deliberations of the divines” but as cynical and calculating, akin to communist strategizing or the desperate marketing of a multinational corporation peddling a tired product (Ibid., p. 7). Imagine if the roles were reversed, Goel suggests, and Muslims came to a poor ghetto of San Francisco, using petrol dollars to build a Muslim “cathedral,” adopting Christian orphans and raising them Muslim, preaching only from parts of the Bible that accorded with the Qur’an, wearing priestly vestments, and suggesting that Islam was little more than a more perfected form of Christianity (Ibid., pp. vii, 87-88). Would American Christians not be justifiably incensed?

Arun Shourie (1941-)

Among contemporary Indian critics of Christianity, Arun Shourie is the most widely known. Trained as an economist, Shourie has edited two reputable Indian newspapers: the *Indian Express* and the *Times of India*. Shourie was also a member of the Rajya Sabha and a high-ranking minister in the BJP government from 1998-2004. He remains a prominent public intellectual who writes and speaks frequently on a range of topics.

In 1994, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) met in Pune for a consultation and invited Shourie to attend and give a Hindu perspective on Christian missionaries. Shourie was critical, yet the interactions remained courteous, and Shourie even complimented the bishops and others gathered for listening with “unwavering attention” to what he had to say. Shourie’s presentation at that meeting eventually grew into a book of nearly three hundred pages: *Missionaries in India: Continuities, Changes, Dilemmas*. Its publication appears to have strained the previously polite relations between Shourie and the CBCI. Among other issues, the CBCI was frustrated that Shourie had quoted liberally from reports that had been produced for the consultation, thereby making what was intended as internal discourse available to the public. But CBCI officials also complained repeatedly about the fact that *Missionaries in India* condemned Christian missionaries for harsh rhetoric and other strategies and practices that they argued had been largely abandoned, particularly by the Catholic Church.

Shourie’s basic premise in the book is that the very survival of India is “in jeopardy” (Shourie 1994, p. 232), due to security threats both external and internal. In such a situation, internal unity and security are of utmost importance, yet they are threatened by the communal strife caused by conversion and attempts to convert. Moreover, the constitutional right to propagate religion is subject to considerations of security, law, and order. Therefore, Christian missionary activities can and should be regulated and curtailed.

Shourie argues that missionary aims and methods exacerbate the problem. At one point, after surveying literature on mission that had been produced for the conference by the CBCI, Shourie declares that it “sounds more like the Planning Commission [that develops the Indian government’s five-year plans], if not the Pentagon, than like Jesus” (Ibid., p. 15). The problem, Shourie suggests, lies in the shift from Christ to Christianity, or, as Max Weber might have put it, from charisma to routinization. The principal factors influencing Christians during this process, according to Shourie, were “the objectives characteristic of most secular organisations—numbers, market shares, the debates over one marketing strategy over another...even of which aspect of the doctrine is to be emphasised and which is to [be] underplayed in the light of what effect either is liable to have on the market share. The sacred secularised, from St. Francis of Assisi to a marketing agency” (Ibid., p. 19). Like Gandhi, Swarup, and Goel, Shourie is making a subtle argument about the “true” nature of religion here. It is interior and “purely” spiritual, not institutionalized and expansionist.

Like Swarup and Goel, Shourie argues that Christianity’s predilection for criticizing other religions and its penchant for conversion grow naturally from the very nature of the faith. And with Gandhi, Goel, and others, Shourie contends that Christians have too often stooped to

material inducements and vague, undeliverable promises of social improvement to attract Indians to their faith. Chief among the questionable methods utilized by Christian missionaries, according to Shourie, is (and has been) their targeting of lower-caste and tribal communities, whose penury and lack of education makes them vulnerable targets. Essentially, Shourie sees as cynical and perversely calculating what many missionaries consider good stewardship of human and financial resources, that is, targeting the groups that are most likely to convert. In the end, Shourie maintains, along with Goel and Swarup, that the inclination of Christians to be critical of other faiths and to be obsessed with converting others is related to Christianity's dogmatic absolutism; it is the "ineluctable position that every adherent of a revelatory, millennialist religion must take" (Ibid., p. 12). And even when Christians admit that there might be some truth in non-Christian religions, as in fulfillment theologies, they do so with condescending pity, and without repudiating the aim of conversion (Ibid., p. 137). In fact, Shourie and many of his fellow critics are unable to understand why, after Vatican II, Catholics are still interested in conversion at all. And in their confusion, they are not alone. Shourie quotes extensively from CBCI documents he had been given to show that Catholics themselves were uncertain how to reconcile evangelism with Vatican II's assertion that truth and salvation may be found in other religions. If this is the case, Shourie asks in a variety of ways, why not disavow conversion? The fact that Catholics have not given up trying to convert others is evidence, in Shourie's view, for his assertions about the essentially absolutist nature of Christianity. The solution, in Shourie's view, also comes from Gandhi, upon whom Shourie draws extensively, and "whose advice was always the same: stop conversions altogether as it is 'the deadliest poison that ever sapped the fountain of truth'" (Ibid., p. 37).

Ashok Chowgule (1948-)

Ashok Chowgule was born into a wealthy industrialist family and was trained in economics in the UK and business in the US before getting involved in the family business, the Chowgule Group. Eventually, he began associating with the VHP in Maharashtra, becoming the organization's state president there, and eventually its national vice president. As such, he represents what could be called the "*Hindutva* Perspective," as the subtitle of his most comprehensive work, *Christianity in India: The Hindutva Perspective*, implies.

Borrowing a line from Gandhi, Chowgule frames religion as something national and particularist, noting that each nation believes its religion to be as good as that of any other (Chowgule 1999, p. 36). The primary difference between Hinduism and Christianity is that the former has recognized this fact while the latter insists on arrogantly claiming special status for its own "truth." Hinduism is for this reason tolerant, but only to a point. "Hindu philosophy has always been accommodative," he writes, "[and it] will continue to be so, provided Christianity reciprocates the tolerant spirit of Hinduism" (Ibid., pp. 8-9). (Evangelism, for Chowgule, is an act of intolerance, and therefore suggests that Christianity does not reciprocate the "tolerant spirit of Hinduism.")

More than any of the other authors profiled in this chapter (with the possible exception of Swami Dayananda Saraswati), Chowgule suggests that Hindus cannot and should not tolerate what he considers the intolerance of conversion. "A senior RSS leader was once asked by a Christian, 'Since you believe in *Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava*, why are you against conversion?'" Chowgule

reports, “The reply was, ‘Since you do not believe in *Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava*, I am against conversion’” (Ibid., p. 75). In addition, more explicitly than others, Chowgule asserts that any violence that Christians in India have experienced or might experience in the future has been a (implied: justifiable) reaction to their provocations:

In a pluralistic Hinduism, religious minorities need not have any fear. At the same time, there has to be responsibility of these other religions to respect the Hindu civilisation, and not to provoke it. Hindus have resisted the attacks that have been mounted not only on the land, but also the culture. Hindu tolerance should not be confused with cowardice, lack of self-confidence, or weakness of faith. (Ibid., p. 13)

In his mildly menacing tone, then, Chowgule differs somewhat from the other critics profiled in this chapter and gets the closest to openly justifying violence against Christians. Many of his other assertions, however, should sound by this point quite familiar: Christianity, in his view, is an imperialistic religion; Christians’ tendency toward exclusivism and demonization of others (here he references Pat Robertson) is an inevitable outgrowth of the doctrine of election and the Great Commission; inclusivist and liberal theologies are cynical and superficial whitewashing; conversions to Christianity are denationalizing and provoked only by false offers of social and economic improvement; etc. (Ibid., pp. 17-19, 24, 38, 42-43, 61-62, 70, 137).

Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1930-2015)

A native of Tamil Nadu, Swami Dayananda Saraswati worked as a journalist for several years before getting involved in the Chinmaya Mission of Swami Chinmayananda and eventually becoming a well-known and well-traveled teacher of Advaita Vedanta. After some time, he left the Chinmaya Mission and established his own centers for study from Rishikesh in India to Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, in the US. In 2002, he founded the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha (HDAS), which brings together the leaders and heads of more than a hundred Hindu lineages in India to discuss matters of concern to Hindu society at large (including conversion and the growth of Christianity and Islam). He continued to act as convener for the HDAS until his death in 2015. He was a prolific writer and speaker, and he commanded great respect among certain sectors of the Hindu public, including from many Hindu religious leaders. When he spoke, therefore, he spoke with some authority and could claim that he represented a significant portion of India’s Hindus, though the claim was contested (Radha Rajan, the next critic of Christian evangelism profiled, was among his critics).

According to Swami Dayananda, religious assertions and “beliefs” are rationally “non-verifiable,” and for this reason no amount of rational disputation could logically lead one to abandon one body of doctrine for another, and there is therefore no justification for conversion (Dayananda 1999a). While religious traditions cannot be shown through rational disputation to be superior to one another, they remain (and should remain) intimately related to the cultures of the people from which they emerge. For this reason, “[C]onversion implies destruction of...culture. The living religious traditions, intimately woven into the fabric of their respective cultures, have to be allowed to live and thrive. Religious conversion should stop—the aggressive religions should realize that they are perpetrating violence when they convert” (Ibid.). Evangelism, in this view, is tantamount to ethnocide.

Worse still is that conversion from Hinduism to Christianity involves an act of violence committed against people (Hindus) who because of the putatively nonproselytizing nature of their religion are religiously “unarmed” (*ashastrapaani*) (Dayananda 1999b, pp. 19-20). “Thus, conversion is not merely violence against people; it is violence against people who are committed to non-violence,” he argues. “In converting, you are also converting the non-violent to violence” (Dayananda 1999a). And here, then, is where Swami Dayananda’s explanation (or perhaps implicit justification) of reactionary violence against Christians parallels Chowgule’s: Religious sentiments are so central to human life, he says, that the “hurt caused by religion can turn to violence... When the hurt of the religious becomes acute, it explodes into violence. Conversion is violence. It generates violence. Conversion is, therefore, a rank, one-sided aggression” (Ibid.).

Radha Rajan (1956-)

Radha Rajan is the editor, with Krishen Kak, of *NGOs, Activists, and Foreign Funds: Anti-nation Industry* (2006) and *Eclipse of the Hindu Nation: Gandhi and his Freedom Struggle* (2009), both of which touch upon the issue of conversion. Her views have become increasingly prominent in recent years, particularly in the context of Tamil affairs. Rajan is democratically critical, focusing her sharp analytical gaze both on those she agrees with and those she does not. She has, for example, criticized Swami Dayananda’s willingness to engage with Christians in interfaith dialogue (which she believes unnecessarily accommodates and legitimates their evangelical tendencies) and the Hindu American Foundation (see below), with which she would agree on many other issues, for sponsoring a report on caste in India that she considered overly critical.

Rajan argues that India’s problems are not entirely unlike those of Europeans and Americans, who “are being compelled to re-examine the importance of national identity, and the substance of their national identity and nationhood,” and will soon “begin to confront the thorny question of whether national identity can be defined ignoring the interests of the majority population” (Rajan 2007). In the face of foreign intrusion (through conversion, migration, and the like), she asks, can the culture of the majority survive if that culture includes and values accommodation and tolerance? The fact that this difficult question does now also confront Western countries she considers a “delicious irony” since those countries “until recently used these very issues to hector and lecture to countries where they have political and strategic interests” (Ibid.).

Due perhaps to their more recent genesis, Rajan’s writings (like those of the similarly-oriented Sandhya Jain, who could have been profiled in this chapter, and Rajiv Malhotra, who is profiled below) evince the influence of anti-globalization rhetoric more than those of the earlier critics. Christian evangelism, in her view, is but one aspect of the larger neocolonial political and cultural project carried out by Western countries through military interventions, multi-national organizations like the World Bank, and support for capitalist economies and free markets. For this reason, she uses the word, “Church,” to refer not only to historic Christian churches, but:

also Christian NGOs, Christian funding agencies, White Christian governments and countries which legitimize and use evangelization and militant Christian missionary objectives as instruments of foreign policy in countries of Asia...[T]he generic Church also includes the United Nations with a charter that enforces Christian “liberal” political

principles as the universal socio-political ideal which will be enforced coercively by any one of the arms of the generic Church, including military intervention. (Rajan 2011)

Here again, like Shourie before her (cf. Shourie 1994, pp. 132, 166), and like her contemporary Rajiv Malhotra, Rajan identifies a network of global forces that in her view conspire together to undermine India's integrity. Also like others profiled in this chapter, Rajan understands Christian involvement in this project as a natural outgrowth of the Christian religion itself. All Abrahamic religions have inherited the "basic genes from the parent; in this case, conquering the world for their jealous god who will not co-exist with other gods...[A]ll Abrahamic ideologies, parent and heretic offspring alike, are about political power and control of territory[;] Abrahamic ideologies are always about numbers" (Rajan 2011).

Because of this, Christians will use any means, fair or foul, to advance their political ambitions, and with Rajiv Malhotra she blames Christians for the particularly strong strain of anti-Brahminism that informs Tamil politics and society. This "anti-Brahmin ideology," which South Indians themselves have now assimilated, was the result of the anti-Brahmin preaching of Christian missionaries. The point, as Rajan sees it, was to pit lower-caste Tamils against upper-caste Tamils in order to prepare the former for conversion. This, Rajan maintains, "is vintage Christian war strategy—de-link the target community from its parent, give it a sense of separateness resulting in alienation, render it defenseless, alone and vulnerable and then step in for the kill" (Ibid.). Because of this, and surreptitious evangelical methods (e.g., the Catholic ashram movement), Christianity represents a "cancerous cell that lodges itself quietly and unnoticed within the bloodstream of the body it intends to kill" (Ibid.).

The Hindu American Foundation

Founded in 2003, the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an organization that advocates in particular for Hindus living in America, but also on behalf of Hindu interests globally. On its original website (HafSite.org, which has since been replaced by HinduAmerican.org) and elsewhere, the HAF described itself as a group that provides "a progressive Hindu American voice," and on many issues it has done so. It has, for example, joined progressive causes on the environment, human rights, and LGBTQ issues. At the same time, because of its desire to defend Hinduism against attack and misportrayal, its agenda also, at times, overlaps with that of others profiled in this chapter. The group is very much in conversation with contemporary Hindu leaders in India. For example, after conversation with Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Radha Rajan, and other critics of a report on caste they published in 2011, HAF revised the document. I include a discussion of HAF's views on conversion in this chapter both because of the group's interactions with prominent intellectuals in India and because HAF staff and volunteers have played an increasingly public role in the American debate about conversion and Hindu-Christian conflict, publishing opinion pieces in prominent media outlets such as *Huffington Post* and *The Washington Post*.

One of HAF's primary concerns is with what it calls "predatory proselytization," a phrase coined by HAF itself to designate evangelical attempts that take undue advantage of some weakness or vulnerability of those targeted for conversion. "Conversion, when born from genuine faith, belief, study, or religious experience, can be beautiful," a HAF position paper that appears to be no longer available online stated, "But, conversion begot by aggressive or predatory

proselytization is a form of violence” (Hindu American Foundation, n.d.). Predatory proselytization is proselytization that proceeds by means including “...the conditioning of humanitarian aid or economic, educational, medical, and social assistance on conversion; denigrating other religions to sell the ‘primacy’ of another religion; or knowingly and intentionally promoting religious hatred, bigotry, and even violence” (Ibid.).

Like Ram Swarup and Swami Dayananda Saraswati, HAF criticized the United Nations “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (UDHR) for privileging Abrahamic conceptions of what counts as religious freedom. These conceptions of religious freedom, enshrined in respected national and international bodies and documents “will continue to foster global asymmetries in favor of non-pluralist religions,” HAF declared, and will “promote various forms of inter-religious tensions and violent conflict, religious imperialism and supremacy, terrorism, and ultimately, the annihilation of more pluralistic peoples, cultures, and traditions” (Ibid.).

Rajiv Malhotra (1950-)

Educated in India before moving to the United States, Rajiv Malhotra had a successful career in various technology and media industries before retiring and using his wealth to help establish the Infinity Foundation in the mid-1990s. In its earliest years, the Foundation focused on funding academic programs and research on Indic studies, but over time, Malhotra began to educate himself about the history of India and Hinduism in order to counter what he and his supporters perceive to be the skewed and unfavorable treatment of India and Hinduism in Western academia. A prime target of Malhotra’s critique has been the University of Chicago’s famed Sanskritist, Wendy Doniger (and her students, “Wendy’s Children”), whom Malhotra has accused of focusing inordinate attention on the most exotic and erotic aspects of the Hindu tradition.

Malhotra’s vigorous critique of Western academic portrayals of India distinguish him from other figures featured in this chapter. These problematic Western academic portrayals of India do not stand alone, however, according to Malhotra, but rather function as but one node in a network of global forces intent on “Breaking India” (the title of a book that Malhotra published with Aravindan Neelakandan in 2011). Along with Western academic institutions, other forces within the Breaking India network include Western governments, liberal NGOs, human rights and religious freedom organizations, lower-caste and Dalit rights organizations, Western funding agencies, and—pertinent to this volume—transnational Christian evangelistic organizations and intellectuals. The Breaking India network controls the “socio-political discourse on India” (Malhotra & Neelakandan 2011, p. 2) not only globally but also within India itself through its influence on and cooptation of Indian scholars, journalists, churches, and NGOs, which is made possible by the network’s “superior funding-capacity [*sic*], its globally positioned nexuses, and its long-term experience in strategic thinking—all of which [India] lacks” (Ibid., p. 88).

According to Malhotra, all of the nodes within the Breaking India network share certain core values and pursue complementary goals. Some approach India employing a Western secular and progressivist perspective while others approach India with a Christian faith and agenda, but all work together, both consciously and unconsciously, to undermine India’s integrity. They do this through the publication of “atrocious literature” (Ibid., p. 5) documenting human rights abuses against Dalits, Dravidians, women, and ethnic and religious minorities, and in this and other ways pitting Indians against one another while encouraging separatist formations that fracture

India in order to prepare it “for the second coming of the western empire” (Ibid., p. 195). (For a quick overview of how these organizations reticulate, according to Malhotra and Neelakandan, see the charts, Ibid., pp. 174, 177, 188, 246, and 335).

Malhotra is a polarizing figure both in the West and in India. His views on Christianity in India draw in significant ways upon that of other figures profiled in this chapter, while being at the same time more all-encompassing and informed. Accused of harassing and encouraging the harassing of Western academics he does not like, and found (by Richard Fox Young, author of the previous chapter) to have failed to indicate several instances where he borrowed directly from the writing of other authors without using quotation marks or providing an immediate reference to the source material (as is standard practice in Western academia), Malhotra is something of a pariah among Western scholars, despite his impressive range of knowledge and his deep familiarity with at least some of their academic work. Similarly, while he is reviled by more secularist intellectuals and minority and Dalit rights activists in India and abroad, he has developed a large, international following through a strong social media presence, the regular posting of videos on his YouTube channel, and a listserv on which he encourages and occasionally browbeats supporters to be ever more active in the work of countering “Breaking India” forces. This influence and clout have gained him intimate access to leaders within the Sangh Parivar, like Mohan Bhagwat, Sarsanghchalak (Chief) of the RSS, and Subramanian Swamy, a prominent Indian economist and BJP politician who could himself have been profiled in this chapter.

Consensus and Conclusion

The authors profiled in this chapter refer frequently (and generally approvingly) to each other’s writings. In some cases, they reproduce them entirely (or nearly entirely) in their own work. It should come as no surprise, then, that they evince significant agreement, which I summarize by way of conclusion. These authors generally agree that the purpose of religion is moral and spiritual development, which is equally possible within all the great religious traditions. For this reason, no particular soteriological superiority or greater absolute truth inheres in one religious tradition over another, and conversion as a change in affiliation (particularly affiliation implying exclusivity) is never necessary. The attempt to convert another to one’s faith, therefore, represents either a misunderstanding of the purpose of religion or a crass and cynical attempt to increase the numbers and political power of one’s religious group. Unfortunately, however, the drive to expand and convert others is a built-in feature of the Abrahamic religions, and poses a particular threat to Hinduism, given the religion’s generally non-proselytizing nature and India’s brand of secularism, which does not explicitly forbid this kind of “predatory proselytization” (but should).

As indicated in the introduction, both because of a desire to present the views of these authors as sympathetically as possible, and because the length of the chapter prohibits it, I have avoided directly evaluating their claims. Those interested in a critique of such positions need go no further than Fernandes’s chapter in this volume, which contests the putative naturalness of such a “Hindu” understanding of religion, and sees it, following Roberts (2016) and others, as a rhetorical move *constructed for the sake of maintaining the political power of dominant-caste Hindus* (and their allies, among which can be counted many upper-caste Indian Christians, as

both Fernandes and Thomas indicate in their chapter in this volume). Similarly, I myself (Bauman 2013) have called into question both the presumption that conversion in India proceeds primarily through material inducement, and the presumption that there are no material incentives for Hindus to *remain Hindu*. There is no doubt, then, that the arguments articulated by the authors featured in this chapter are contestable and—even more than that—biased in favor of preserving the privileges of certain religious communities and the social arrangements that advantage them. That is not to say, however, that alternative conceptions of religion are somehow neutral and unbiased. All definitions of religion (and definitions of related terms like tolerance and religious freedom) privilege certain kinds of religious people and certain kinds of political arrangements. Some such arrangements are clearly more desirable than others, though which deserve that honor cannot be presumed in an *a priori* fashion, but can only emerge, it should be clear from this chapter, from social discourse, debate, and contestation.

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