

Oneness in Christ: Perspectives on Prejudice Indian and Britain

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This afternoon, I'd like to begin by exploring the following issues:

Oneness in Christ:

What does it mean?

Is it an essential or an unnecessary distraction for mission?

Based on the answer to these questions, I'll explore prejudice in India and Britain.

Personal Testimony

I was born in Chennai India into an orthodox Brahmin caste Hindu family. We immigrated to Britain in 1973 and I was brought up as a Hindu. At the age of 15 I returned to India for the thread ceremony, which entitles males to pursue salvation, moksha. When I returned to Britain I was treated with respect and deference by older non-Brahmins when visiting the temple. I couldn't accept a god who made distinctions by virtue of birth, therefore I became an atheist. At university whilst reading chemistry I explored the claims of Christ and accepted Him as my Saviour and Lord in 1985.

The leitmotif of my spiritual journey and my work as regional minister for racial justice with the London Baptist Association is Galatians 3: 28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

This is a revolutionary verse, written by a Pharisee who before his conversion to Christ would have recited a prayer in which he would bless God for not making him a gentile, a slave or a woman.

In Christ we recognise that each is made in God's image, in need of his mercy and forgiveness, and that no one has any basis to claim superiority over the other.

Our sinful propensity to divide, to express prejudice and act in discriminating ways towards one another is dealt with at the cross and through the outpouring of the Spirit we are equipped and empowered to become a new community in Christ.

Made in God's image each has something unique and special to share with others, and we would be foolish to ignore what the other brings to the table.

This sentiment was expressed by Cardinal Basil Hume, when he said...

"If every single person is made in the image and likeness of God, then every single person can tell me something about God that nobody else can. That makes me very anxious to listen to everybody, because they may be saying something that only they can say."

If each person brings something unique to the table, then we have a huge range of diversity.

Within Christian community, the task is to embrace, celebrate and learn to live by the best aspects that each brings to the table, while at the same time having the spiritual maturity to jettison that which is unhealthy and ungodly.

This is the best expression of that much maligned and abused concept called, multiculturalism. It is not the concept that's at fault but how it has been understood and applied in Western Europe. While in Europe it has led to fragmented and ghettoised communities, in the US it is understood as promoting unity in diversity.

In my work with the London Baptist Association, I promote this form of multiculturalism.

The difficulty is that it involves a lot of hard work to build genuinely inclusive multicultural communities. There are an infinite number of issues that one needs to understand, address and negotiate in order to build such communities.

Furthermore one has to live with the reality that such communities are perpetually transitional works in progress. One can never say one has arrived at the finished article.

Consequently while oneness in Christ, is attractive is it essential or an unrealistic pursuit given the urgent mission opportunities that we face ?

I am not an expert in the history of mission, so am open to your correction, but based on observation and reading I think that missionary endeavours in India have pursued one of two models:

- The majority have pursued segregation with assimilation.
- A small number have pursued segregation with contextualisation.

Segregation with contextualisation was pursued by Roberto Nobili.[1] He followed St Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 9: 20-22 of becoming all things to all men and became an Indian to the Indians. His methods proved successful in reaching the higher caste Hindus, including Brahmins, who were permitted to maintain those caste rules that were not considered idolatrous. [2]

In subsequent years this type of movement has resurfaced at different times and is now being expressed within the Hindu Jesu Bhakta (pious faith) movement. This movement parallels the C scale that is present amongst Muslims who embrace Christ.

While their desire to contextualise is understandable, the Hindu nature of their practice of the faith brings them into sharp disagreement with those who've embraced Christ from lower castes. We'll return to this at the end.

The majority of missionaries pursued segregation with assimilation. In India Catholic and Lutheran missionaries accepted caste as a cultural rather than religious phenomenon and allowed it to continue unchallenged within the church.

Protestant missionaries originally opposed the practise of caste and required converts to reject caste upon baptism.

Sadly, they abandoned the call to renounce caste on baptism because they feared that a church entirely composed of Dalits, also known as untouchables, would collapse. Some missionaries detested having to reach low caste communities and spoke of having to rake rubbish into the church.

Missionaries accepted caste and pursued mission to specific castes resulting in caste specific churches: i.e. segregation.

Even where more castes were present within a church, the missionaries tolerated and accepted caste separation within the church.

But in virtually every way these churches were carbon copies of whichever western church the missionary belonged to go: i.e. assimilation. The Portuguese Jesuit, Father Fernandez, "followed the method of turning converts as nearly as possible into Portuguese. [3]

The extent of assimilation is borne out in the statement that archbishop Rowan Williams made to Anglicans from Asia, Africa and Latin America, in November 2005...

In all sorts of ways the Church over the centuries has lent itself to the error, indeed the sin of trying to make cultural captives, [through] the mass export of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* to the remote parts of the mission field. [The] shadow of the British Empire... hangs over our own communion...

In the current context he referred to "the export of American values and styles to the whole world."

He went on to tell them that they needed to develop prayers and liturgies in keeping with their culture.

That's easier said than done, when you've been using *Hymns Ancient and Modern* for several hundred years.

Such a missionary endeavour has been a double curse to the church:

First, through assimilation significant sections of the Indian church has become ineffective in its missionary calling. The Church of South India was created after independence to present a united message to Indians of other faiths. But their structures and practices would be alien to those of other faiths.

I attended their 60th anniversary celebration in October 2007 in Chennai, India and I am glad that I did not ask any of my relatives to accompany me. Virtually everything that I encountered within the established, independent evangelical and Pentecostal church, was western. I attended one meeting in which an Indian tabla (drum) was used.

Second, through segregation along caste lines they've lost the credibility to challenge entrenched forms of prejudice and actually render the gospel of reconciliation null and void.

Therefore sections of the Indian church are in an unhealthy state.

I'm aware of church growth activists such as Donald McGravan advocate that the most effective form of mission is through employing the homogeneous unit principle where like attracts like.

If mission is simply about enabling as many people as possible to embrace Christ then oneness in Christ is an unnecessary distraction. Segregation and the creation of homogeneous churches, along the lines of caste, class, ethnicity and age is the most effective method of mission.

In this context addressing and overcoming prejudices is very much a subsidiary task that does not require urgent attention.

But if we adopt the view that through mission God is creating a new community in Christ where...

The old divisions are broken down, where

- The gospel of reconciliation is lived out and where
- The new community should be a sign to our fractured and divided world that there is an alternative way of living...

...then oneness in Christ, or unity in diversity, despite all its difficulties, is essential for mission.

Because of my spiritual journey from Hinduism to Christ, I am committed to pursuing and promoting an inclusive multicultural model for mission.

This view of mission requires us to understand, address and overcome prejudice if we are to effectively proclaim the gospel.

My work with the London Baptist Association and my connection with India, has led me to explore prejudice in these contexts.

Perspectives on Prejudice in India and Britain

I now offer my perspective on prejudice in India and Britain.

In considering the nature of prejudice, it's important to note and understand some common factors that occur in every context.

1. The Passage of Time

Prejudice is not static; it changes with time.

This was demonstrated last week when Carol Thatcher was dismissed for using the term Golliwog. I think that everyone who rang Radio 4's Any Answers to defend Carol Thatcher was of an older generation.

A derogatory word that has been used for many years, has now rightly ceased to be used. If you watch TV shows from the 1960s and 70s, the level of blatant racism is shocking.

Therefore when considering the nature of prejudice in India and Britain, we must bear in mind that what we now encounter in one context is what we'd have encountered in another some time ago.

2. Motivations for Prejudice

Fear:

- Fear of losing one's status and economic well being. (Brahmins and white British.)
- Fear of change, which affects every section of society.
- Fear of being marginalised and overlooked. (Sudras caste of India and English white working class)

Making Scapegoats: A knee jerk response to blame others for one's poor predicament.

Envy & Jealousy: The success of others can easily lead to envy and resentment.

One can attempt to address these three motivations through education, exposure to the truth and encounters with those who are the objects of these negative emotions.

This is what I seek to do in my work with London Baptist ministers and churches.

However it is far more difficult to engage and address a genuine belief in one's sense of superiority over others, which still exists in Britain and India.

In both contexts **RELIGION** first gave rise to this sense of superiority.

3. Religious Sanction

In India the caste system is identified with the Hindu faith, but it reaches beyond Hinduism. The system was formulated by the Indo-Aryans who invaded India about 3000 years ago. [4] In recent years this view has been endorsed by Dalits but has been rejected by those of higher caste who view it as a Western imposition on Indian history.

Whatever the origins of caste, caste rules are set out in the laws of Manu and are deeply ingrained in the minds of people.

Evidence for the intractability of caste is found among Christians, Muslims and Sikhs, who continue to practice caste even though caste is not found in these three faiths.

The caste system spiritually codifies power, inequality and prejudice.

This spiritual sanctioning of inequality and the detrimental consequences of challenging inequality, militates against any one challenging it.

In Britain and much of Western Europe, a *particular understanding* of the **Judeo-Christian** faith, gave rise to this sense of superiority.

David Goldenberg, in *The Curse of Ham - Race and Slavery in early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, makes the following key observations:

- 1. Biblical and post-biblical sources do not make negative evaluation of real Blacks, and negative symbolism of the colour black does not lead to antipathy toward black Africans.
- 2. The presence of black African slaves in lighter-skinned Mediterranean environment first led to the association of black with slave, which led to changes in exegesis of texts.

- 3. Black was introduced into the retelling of the biblical story. Syriac Christian writings imply that Canaan cursed with slavery was an ancestor of dark-skinned people. The curse of Ham is relied on more and more as black slaves increase in number.
- 4. Arab conquests led to skin colour moving from a description of complexion to a designation of ethnic groups. In the 16th century the English also did this as they encountered non-whites; it was a way to distinguish between 'us' and 'them.' This ethnic designation by colour is forced back into the biblical text.
- 5. From the 16th century white Europeans began to conquer and subjugate people of colour. The very act of conquering others led them to justify their "economic, political and cultural domination and exploitation" of the 'other' who have a different colour. This reinforced erroneous eisegesis of the text.

The attitude that blacks were inferior to whites is highlighted in the story of the slave ship Zong. In 1781 the crew threw 133 sick slaves overboard in order to make an insurance claim. When in 1783 they were tried for murder, John Lee the solicitor general said...

What is this claim that human people have been thrown overboard? This is a case of chattels or goods. Blacks are goods and property. The case is the same as if horses had been thrown overboard.

With the passage of time, in Britain and the West, religion has been replaced by other justifications for one's superiority.

Bernard Lewis, emeritus professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton, notes that in order to exclude Jews from participating in public life through conversion to Christianity, the Spanish made ethnicity, pure blood, not religion the marker of whether one was an insider or outsider.

This change makes it **impossible** for the outsider, be they Jews or any other ethnic group, to ever become a part of the establishment, because they are intrinsically different.

This mindset was played out in the conquest of people of other complexions, particularly Africans, who could never be accepted on equal terms with their conquerors because they were not white.

Racism, ethnic purity, **ECONOMICS** and white European conquest of people with darker skin led to their sense of superiority over those of darker skin colour.

Later pseudo-scientific and philosophical explanations were offered to justify colour prejudice.

- 1. Voltaire spoke about the innate inferiority of black people and derived income from slave trading enterprise based in Nantes.
- 2. David Hume said, "Africans are strategically shaped monkeys."
- 3. In 1994 the book called the Bell Curve asserted that African-Americans were less intelligent than whites.

Colour prejudice has permeated deep into the white Western psyche. It is not just a past phenomenon it is a present reality.

In October 2007 Dr James Watson, Nobel prize winner for discovering the structure of DNA, reasserted claims made in the Bell Curve and his lecture tour to the UK was cancelled.

However despite ingrained prejudice spanning several centuries and the continued racist expression of Dr Watson and others, in Britain and the US, steps have been taken to address and overcome prejudice.

In his inauguration speech Obama referred to the fact that his father would not have been served at a lunch counter, but now he was being inaugurated as president.

What led to such change?

Religion and changes in wider society, have contributed to change.

With respect to religion...

- (i) Despite the erroneous exegesis of the text, at its heart the Christian faith advocates a new community in Christ where old enmities are broken down.
- (ii) In the time leading up to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, some leading white Christians such as Wilberforce and Newton recognized the sin of the slave trade.
- (iii) Also in this era, Africans who embraced Christ were able to challenge the misreading of the text and agitate for their freedom and equality.

While there were many shortcomings, the powerful and powerless came together as followers of Christ to articulate for an end to the evil of slave trade and slavery.

This model has been repeated to some extent in the US Civil Rights movement and in efforts to end apartheid in South Africa.

This has continued within the British church with the appointment of officers to address racial injustice and inequality. Within the Baptist Union of Great Britain, this willingness to address prejudice and injustice found expression through an apology issued by the Baptist Union Council for the transatlantic slave trade in November 2007.

Within wider society the most significant change has been the reduction in power distance in Britain and other Western societies.

Geert Hofstede, an international authority on cross-cultural social psychology, identified "Power Distance" as one of four dimensions that shape a given culture.

Some cultures have a high power distance...

"...in which people believe that there should be an order of inequality in the world. The existence of inequality and hierarchy is an accepted fact of life. [5]

Other cultures have a low power distance in which,

"...the majority of people believe that inequality in society should be minimised. The existence of hierarchy is only for the convenience of accomplishing tasks of the organizations. Superiors and subordinates treat each other as equals. [6]

In societies with a high power distance a small elite exercise power, while the vast majority are powerless. The powerless do not think they have any power to change the system.

The opposite is true in societies with a low power distance.

I suggest that education could be a key factor in reducing power distance. In Dignity of Difference Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers this observation on the invention of the printing press,

"Print was a huge boost to literacy. The more books were available, the more people learned to read. The diffusion of reading led to the collapse of strictly hierarchical societies in which only a few were literate and had access to texts."

Knowledge is power and increasing levels of knowledge led to the status quo being challenged and the dismantling of hierarchy. Various writings including Olaudah Equiano's autobiography helped the British to understand the horrors of the slave trade.

Those campaigning for the abolition of the slave trade were able to amass signatures to petition parliament because sections of the wider public believed that they had the power to demand change.

With the arrival of immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia British society and church have been challenged to confront and address their prejudices.

How are these two factors, religious faith and wider society, challenging prejudice in India ?

With respect to wider society India is a secular democracy and from its inception in 1947, the Indian constitution has outlawed caste.

Legislation introduced in the post independence era, sought to redress the imbalance between castes through affirmative action in education and state employment.

Some charges of discrimination have been brought before the courts and successfully prosecuted. The National Human Rights Commission established in 1993 seeks to address violation of human rights.

Despite these efforts caste prejudice still permeates the mindset of every section of Indian society including Dalits. Within Indian society the power distance in 2009 is significant.

Whilst bodies exist to address violations and affirmative action seeks to redress the imbalance, there appears to be no effort to address the pervasive discriminatory mindset that exists.

Even though KR Narayanan served as India's first Dalit president from 1997-2002, most Indians accept hierarchy and inequality as normal while many in the West think inequality should be challenged.

This sentiment surfaced during my sabbatical study in India. I encountered those who struggled to understand the nature of my role within the LBA and considered it a waste of time.

Their opinion was, "Prejudice, inequality and difference is the way of the world. Don't fight it and don't try to change it, because it can't be changed."

Within Indian society the idea of challenging inequality is an alien concept. Two stories illustrate the point.

During the Celebrity Big Brother fiasco in 2007, the British pressed poured scorn on Jade Goody, even though some of her observations about Shilpa Shetty were fair.

However the most prescient observation was made by the India Express, which observed that while Britain debated the issue, Indians only notice the prejudice in their midst when communal riots result in death.

In Slumdog Millionaire the game show host repeatedly makes disparaging remarks about the contestant being a chaiwallah, teaman or tea lady. In Indian society inequality and prejudice are not considered to be wrong, they're simply accepted as the way things are.

While *Slumdog Millionaire* is fictional, Fred Husego a London black cab driver really did win *Mastermind* in 1980. That contrast epitomises the difference in power distance between India and Britain.

With respect to religious communities, for the Hindu majority, caste embodies high power distance and to challenge caste prejudice could lead to adverse consequences when one is reincarnated.

Therefore there is a spiritual disincentive to challenge the system. The one reinforces the other.

Among Christians, I informed Dalit Christian leaders that every mainline British denomination had appointed officers to address issues pertaining to racial inequality and prejudice within the church and asked if similar appointments had been made in India.

They were taken back by the question because such a step had not even entered their thinking.

Among *Hindu Jesu Bhaktas*, (HJBs) they have no desire to challenge caste, which they regard as primarily embodying cultural and community values. They believe that by challenging caste, they would undermine their ability to share the gospel with their family and community.

If oneness in Christ is essential for mission, then what steps do Indian followers of Christ need to take towards achieving that goal?

There is deep antipathy between Dalit and other low caste Christians on the one hand and HJBs and other higher caste Christians on the other.

Some Dalits vehemently reject the term Hindu. Dalits also reject the claims of HJBs that it is appropriate to continue to live by one's caste rules and values.

HJBs feel both anger and frustration towards Dalits. Some feel that Dalit Christians have put them beyond redemption. They reject the term Christian, because of the unhelpful cultural baggage associated with the word.

This deep antipathy needs to be bridged and overcome if the gospel is to be effectively preached in India.

Each party needs to recognise its shortcomings and make changes to move towards oneness in Christ. Both adopt a selective reading scripture and neither appears to consider the need for change and sanctification.

Each party should study relevant texts that challenge their world view.

In brief my critique of HJBs includes:

Though I'm unsure about describing myself as a *Hindu Jesu Bhakta*, I understand their passion to be true to their cultural values. Part of my spiritual journey has been to redeem and recover my Indian culture and heritage, which was almost obliterated by the British church.

Therefore as a friend of HJBs, I offer this critique:

HJBs rationale for adhering to caste rules and customs is based on Acts 15 where the Jerusalem Council decided

that Gentiles should not be compelled to be circumcised. In Acts 15: 19 James states, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

HJBs believe that the church, particularly Western versions on the Indian church, should not compel them to abandon caste rules and customs, which would compromise their ability to witness to their family and make it difficult for their family to embrace Christ.

Therefore they equate the Indian church with the Jews believers and themselves with the Gentiles.

However HJBs are oblivious to the fact that they have more in common with the powerful and pure Jewish believers because the laws and customs governing caste and Jewish life are very similar. Also the religiously powerless and impure Gentiles have more in common with Dalits and those of lower castes.

Therefore while Peter and other Jewish believers are challenged by God to not to "call any man impure or unclean" (Acts 10 vs. 28) and to associate with Gentile 'foreigners', HJBs continue to adhere by caste rules that regard and treat Dalits and other lower castes as subhuman.

Therefore HJBs need to carefully reconsider their rationale.

- They have an obsessively narrow focus on seeing their family won for Christ to the exclusion of other critical biblical perspectives, particularly justice. "I the Lord love justice." Isaiah 61: 8
- They cannot ignore Genesis 1 vs. 27, which teaches that all humanity bears God's image and Galatians 3 vs. 28,

which teaches that human divisions are swept away in Christ.

- In Galatians 6: 10 we read, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." By placing the earthly family above God's family they overlook the fact that Dalits and other lower caste followers are their eternal brothers and sisters. Some of their attitudes and practices do more harm than good to the family of believers.
- It is inappropriate to view caste as a mere expression of cultural values which enables effective witness to family and community, because its practical outworking is prejudicial and discriminatory towards those of lower castes.

As one who longs to see a casteless church, I offer the following critique of Dalit Christians

- Many Dalit Christians eschew the idea that they were ever Hindus. Their rejection of all things Hindu has led them to embrace a form of Christianity that is very Western. Consequently, they have severely blunted their ability to evangelise the local Hindu population.
- Dalits appear to ignore 1 Corinthians 9: 18-23, where in vs. 22b Paul states "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Contextualisation for the sake of the gospel is a missionary imperative that cannot be ignored.
- Dalit Christians need to realise that Genesis 1: 26-7 also applies to Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaisyas and Shudras.

My Next Steps?

For me this issue is so close to home that I've been analysing the best way forward for the past 18 months. Preparing this paper has helped me to arrive at some definite plans.

Any steps must be personal not institutional.

- (i) I need to engage with HJBs in India, the US and in London both to address their concern for appropriate contextualisation and to sensitively challenge their attitude to caste.

- (ii) I met an Indian Dalit leader and theologian who does not want to be bitter towards those of higher castes and rejects churches segregated by caste. I realise that it is important for me to cultivate a friendship with this individual, and explore with him how he would like to address the issue. It is critical for him to suggest how to achieve justice [7]I also need to explore partnerships with Dalits in Britain.

Education is critical to reduce the power distance and help people challenge the status quo. While it is critical for Dalits to suggest ways forward, I would seek a joint HJB/Dalit project to offer education to those with least access to education.

Revd. Devasahayam, bishop of Chennai for Church of South India comments, "Christ's blood can cleanse all sin except casteism. Caste blood is thicker than Christ's blood!"

These endeavours could be steps to break the stranglehold of caste and move towards oneness in Christ.

Lessons for India from Britain :

- The need to appoint individuals to challenge caste prejudice among church leaders, structures, and laity would be very helpful.
- The need for 'powerful' and 'powerless' followers of Christ to join forces to address caste prejudice.

Lessons from India for Britain:

- Our efforts to be inclusive and multicultural can be contrived. HJBs are very creative in their contextualization such that it is not an Indian reworking of Western church practice. Their experience could be source of invaluable lessons for Indian and British followers of Christ.
- Understand and adjust behavior to account for how power distance affects how ethnic minorities behave within churches and other institutions.

Conclusion

In India: Casteless Multicultural integration.

In Britain: Classless Multicultural integration.

In both contexts economic, social, political, ethnic, class, caste, gender, age and religious differences, could lead to greater polarisation and fractures.

The Indian economic boom has bypassed over 750 million and is a source of violence and strife as evidenced by the Maoist insurgency. In Britain the economic crisis is already pitting communities against each other.

The right-wing Hindu fundamentalist, Bharatia Janata Party (BJP) and the British National Party, BNP, have the potential to further exacerbate tensions during difficult times.

While governments and NGOs can address and seek to alleviate the effects of these issues, through God's enabling power the church can play a unique role by becoming a sign to the world of an alternative way of living.

This alternative way must grapple with the need for sustainability in a world of diminishing resources and take seriously the practice of the early church to ensure that "There were no needy persons among them." (Acts 4:34)

In these ways Indian and British followers of Christ will demonstrate a holistic oneness in Christ, which will help them to proclaim the gospel of reconciliation with conviction and credibility.

I hope and pray that the Indian and British Christian community can support, teach and encourage one another in the similar tasks to which God has called us in our different yet similar contexts.

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Notes:

i[1] Neill, A History of Christian Missions, p 156

i[2] *ibid.* p 157

i[3] Neill, A History of Christian Missions, p 156

i[4] While Dalits strongly advocate and endorse this view of history, it is rejected by some Indian scholars as a Western imposition upon Indian history. See Burnett, *The Spirit of Hinduism*, p 21-6

i[5] Law, *The Wolf Shall dwell with the Lamb*, p 19

i[6]ibid., p 20

i[7]Being Church and Overcoming Racism: It's time for transformative justice: World Council of Churches 2002. Document available on the web at www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments.nsf/index/plen-4-en.html