

Sub-Continent edition of S.P.C.K. Study Guides

This series was initiated by the Theological Education Fund in response to requests from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Special attention is given to problems of interpretation and application arising there as well as in the west, and to the particular needs of students using English as a second language.

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TEF Study Guide 29 (ADVANCED)

**READINGS IN
INDIAN
CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY 1**

EDITED BY

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14. Why is the language of the Bible, and its translation, important for Indian Christian women?
15. What are the theological perspectives of the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, as described by Samuel Amirtham?
16. List some of the advantages and disadvantages of residential theological training.
17. What is the 'praxis' model of learning?
18. Describe the difference between *Gurukulam* and *Gramkulam*.
19. In what way, according to Kappen, does S. Gutiérrez's definition of liberation theology as 'critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word' run into difficulty?

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION

20. Read again the passages by Chandran and Kappen on the subject of inter-religious dialogue (pp. 10, 11 and 27-32). Which of their two attitudes do you think is appropriate to your own context?
21. 'Theology can become power only if it is appropriated by the oppressed masses in whose interest it is to change the world.' How far do you think that any of the theologies prevalent in your own country fulfil this function? Give examples. How can the poor become the subject of their theology?
22. In Part 1 we have been introduced to examples of Indian contextual theologies: Indian liberation theologies, *Dalit* theologies, tribal theologies, feminist theologies, etc. What other Asian contextual theologies, if any, such as *Minjung* (Korea), 'theologies of struggle' (Philippines) or 'homeland theology' (Taiwan) have you encountered? If you have, evaluate the similarities and divergences between one of the Indian theologies and one of the other Asian theologies.
23. What do you see as the chief differences between the pre-suppositions of Western feminists and those of Indian feminists?
24. What sorts of discrimination against women, if any, exist in your Church? What practical steps can you suggest to overcome such discrimination?
25. What kind of theological education is prevalent in your country – or if you are a student, what kind are you receiving? – residential? extension? imported Western model? non-stipendiary? How far do you think this training is equipping you or others to face the ministerial tasks of today?
26. From what you have read in Part 1, what do you think are the major constituents of 'doing' theology?

Part 2

Indian Christian Understandings of Jesus

'It is in fact in Christology that, I suspect, most is to be learnt from Indian writers.' (Bishop John Robinson, in *Truth is Two-Eyed* 1979)

7. The Living Christ by Sadhu Sundar Singh

R.H.S. Boyd, a historian of Indian Christian theology, has written: 'Sadhu Sundar Singh could not be called a technical theologian. And yet his writings are full of theology, full of Indian theology....' Bishop A. J. Appasamy wrote this of him: 'The writings of Sadhu Sundar Singh are the outcome of the joy he personally experienced in Christ and the continuous endeavour he made to bring others to it.... He thought and spoke in pictures, and his frequent parables were like the stories which the Indian religious teachers always used.... He dwelt much in the presence of God.'

Sadhu Sundar Singh was born in 1889 into a devout Sikh family in the Punjab. As an adolescent he was for a time actively opposed to Christianity. But at a moment of spiritual crisis when he was fifteen and after urgent prayer to God for guidance, he saw a vision of the risen Christ before him and became a Christian. Soon after his baptism he became a Christian 'sadhu', leading a life of prayer and witness, and exercising a travelling ministry in many parts of India and beyond. At the age of thirty-nine he failed to return from one of his journeys in the Himalayas and into Tibet.

The following excerpts from his writings, originally written in Urdu, are taken from three books: *The Sadhu: A Study in Mysticism and Practical Religion* by B. H. Streeter and A. J. Appasamy (Macmillan 1921 and Mittal Publications, Delhi 1987); *The Cross is Heaven* edited by A. J. Appasamy (Lutterworth 1956), and *The Gospel of Sadhu Singh* by F. Heiler (London 1927 and ISPCK Delhi 1989). *The Christian Witness of Sadhu Sundar Singh* (Christian Literature Society, Madras 1989), edited by Dr Dayanandan Francis, also gathers up many of his writings in one volume.

The Living Christ and the Cross of Christ

When people ask me 'What made you a Christian?' I can only say: 'Christ Himself made me a Christian'. When He revealed himself to me I saw His glory and was convinced that He was the Living Christ.

I do not believe in Jesus Christ because I have read about Him in the Bible—I saw Him and experienced Him and know Him in my daily experience. Not because I read the Gospels, but because of Him of whom I read in the Gospels, have I become what I am. Already before

my conversion I loved His teaching; it is beautiful. But my doubts were not swept away until I became aware that Christ was alive.

Christ is my Saviour. He is my life. He is everything to me in heaven and earth. Once while travelling in a sandy region I was tired and thirsty. Standing on top of a mound I looked for water. The sight of a lake at a distance brought joy to me, for now I hoped to quench my thirst. I walked towards it for a long time, but I could never reach it. Afterwards I found out that it was a mirage, only a mere appearance of water caused by the refracted rays of the sun. In reality there was none. In a like manner I was moving about the world in search of the water of life. The things of this world – wealth, position, honour and luxury – looked like a lake and by drinking of whose waters I hoped to quench my spiritual thirst. But I could never find a drop of water to quench the thirst of my heart. I was dying of thirst. When my spiritual eyes were opened I saw the rivers of living water flowing from His pierced side. I drank of it and was satisfied. Thirst was no more. Ever since I have always drunk of that water of life, and have never been athirst in the sandy desert of this world. My heart is full of praise.

His presence gives me a Peace which passeth all understanding, no matter in what circumstances I am placed. Amidst persecution I have found peace, joy and happiness. Nothing can take away the joy I have found in my Saviour. In home He was there. In prison He was there. In Him the prison was transformed into Heaven, and the Cross into a source of blessing. To follow Him and bear His Cross is so sweet and precious that, if I find no Cross to bear in Heaven, I shall plead before Him to send me as His missionary, if need be to Hell, so that there at least I may have the opportunity to bear His Cross. His presence will change even Hell into Heaven. As the dumb man cannot express the sweetness of sweetmeats, even so a saved sinner cannot express the sweetness of His presence in his heart. Only a heavenly language can give adequate expression to this heavenly Peace. Even though I am in the midst of danger, temptation, sin and sorrow of this world, through Him who gave His life I am saved. The sea is salty and the fish lives all its life in it. But it never gets salty, because it has life. Even so if we receive life from him, though in the world we are not of the world. Not only here, but also in Heaven we shall find ourselves in Him.

Now I have no desire for wealth, position and honour. Nor do I desire even Heaven. But I need Him who has made my heart Heaven. His infinite love has expelled the love of all other things. Many Christians cannot realize His precious, life-giving presence, because for them Christ lives in their heads or in their Bibles, but not in their hearts. Only when a man gives his heart shall he find Him. The heart is the throne for the King of Kings. The capital of Heaven is the heart where that King reigns.

Some say that salvation consists in being absorbed in God. We Christians say that to live in Christ is already heaven. We are to live in Him and He in us. How can this be? When a ball of iron is thrown into the fire it becomes red hot. The iron is in the fire and the fire is in the iron, and yet the iron is not the fire and the fire is not the iron. In the same way we live in Christ and He lives in us and yet we do not become gods.

Consider the air we breathe. The air is our life, yet man is not the air, nor the air man. In like manner we breathe God's Spirit, but we are not God. Just as we draw in the air by breathing, we can inhale the Blessed Spirit by prayer. Not only do we draw near to God, but we are united with Him. This is not only union but life, and when we have this life we see the marvellous love of God.

The planets have no light in themselves. They shine with light which they have borrowed from the sun. Christians are like them. In themselves they have no light, but they shine with light borrowed from the Sun of Righteousness.

The Church is called 'the body of Christ' because the relation between Christ and Christians is not that between a master and his servants. It is more than that. Christians are Christ's own parts. They are not only friends of Christ, they are Christ Himself. He breathes through them.

In this world nobody can escape from suffering and the Cross; it is necessary to pass through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps.23.4) for a longer period or a shorter period. But true Christians who bear their Cross 'die', yet they 'live' and in the midst of persecution are like the leaves of a tree which fall in winter, only to appear in renewed vigour in the spring, and prove they are really living (2 Cor.4.8-10; 6.4-10).

If Christ lives in us, our whole life will become Christ-like. Salt which has been dissolved in water may disappear, but it does not cease to exist. We know it is there when we taste the water. Even so the indwelling Christ, although He is unseen, will become visible to others through the love which He shares with us.

My soul is like an ocean. On the surface there may be waves and tempests, but deep down there is undisturbed calm.

When I spent many hours at the Master's feet in prayer, then I found enlightenment, and God taught me so many things that I cannot express them even in my own language. Sit at the Master's feet in prayer; it is the greatest theological college in this world. We know about theology, but He is the source of theology itself. He explains in a few seconds a truth that has taken years to understand. Whatever I have learnt has been learnt only at His feet.

At one time I was a good deal perplexed about the doctrine of the Trinity. I had thought of three separate Persons sitting as it were on three separate thrones; but it was all made plain to me in a Vision. I entered in an Ecstasy into the third heaven. I was told that it was the same to which St Paul was caught up. And there I saw Christ in a glorious spiritual body sitting on a throne. Whenever I go there it is the same. Christ is always in the centre, a figure ineffable and indescribable. His face shining like the sun, but in no way dazzling, and so sweet that without any difficulty I can gaze at it – always smiling a loving glorious smile. I felt when I first saw him as if there was some old and forgotten connection between us, as though He had said, but not in words, 'I am He through whom you were created.' I felt something the same, only far more intensely, as I felt when I met my father again after an interval of many years. My old love came back to me; I knew I had been his before.

The first time I entered heaven I looked round about and I asked, 'But where is God?' And they told me, 'God is not to be seen here any more than on earth, for God is Infinite. But there is Christ, He is God, He is the Image of the Invisible God, and it is only in Him that we can see God, in Heaven as on earth.' And streaming out from Christ I saw, as it were, waves shining and peace-giving, and going through and among the Saints and Angels, and everywhere bringing refreshment, just as in hot weather water refreshes trees. And this I understood to be the Holy Spirit.

Indian Expression of Christianity

Once when I was travelling in Rajputana, there was a Brahman of high caste hurrying to the station. Overcome by the great heat, he fell down on the platform. The Anglo-Indian station-master was anxious to help him. He brought him some water in a white cup, but he would not take the water. He was so thirsty, but he said, 'I cannot drink that water. I would prefer to die.' 'We are not asking you to eat this cup', they said to him. 'I will not break my caste', he said, 'I am willing to die.' But when water was brought to him in his own brass vessel he drank it eagerly. When it was brought to him in his own way he did not object. It is the same with the Water of Life. Indians do need the Water of Life, but not in the European cup.

Christianity and Hinduism

Christianity is the fulfilment of Hinduism. Hinduism has been digging channels. Christ is the water to flow through these channels.

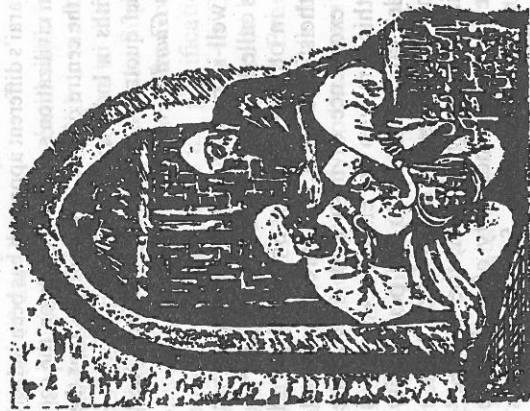
The chief doctrine of the *Vedanta** is that all is *Maya** or illusion,

except *Brahma** or God. The truth is that there is one true, almighty, and eternal God, and that this world is His creation. This material world is not *Maya*, but is real existence. The creation is neither God Himself, nor is the creation separate from Him. His life-giving presence is present in all creatures, because 'in him we live, and move, and have our being' (Acts 17.28).

Hindus commonly like St John's Gospel; 'I in You and You in Me' appeals to them. But they are apt to be confused by their pantheism. Christ's oneness with the Father and His oneness with ourselves is different. Light is Sun, and Sun is Light. Heat is Sun, and Sun is Heat. But you cannot say Heat is Light. Christ is the Light of the World. The Holy Spirit is the Heat of the World. Christ is not the Holy Spirit. Pantheism which blurs a distinction between me and God loses the main point. If I am to enjoy God, I must be different from God. The tongue could not enjoy sweetmeats if there were no difference between it and them.

In the early stages of my Christian career, I had some leanings towards pantheism myself. I used to think that the wonderful peace I had was probably the result of my being God or a part of God. But two arguments have removed this doubt: the first, that while practising Yoga* I did not have that peace; the second, that occasionally I feel gloom and depression from the consciousness of God abandoning me. It was the Holy Spirit who made me a Christian, but it was my mother who made me a *sadhu*.

Christ washing Peter's feet.
Mural by Jyoti Sahi in All Saints'
Church, Srinagar, Kashmir.



18. A Hindu Christian Funeral

by S. J. Samartha

For an introductory note about Dr Samartha, please see the introduction to chapter 11 above, *The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multi-Religious Culture*, another 'reading' from his writings.

This account was first produced for the *National Christian Council of India Review* 108 (4), April 1988, pp. 239-44.

He died on Palm Sunday morning, 12 April, 1987. In a week's time he would have celebrated his 86th birthday. During the last couple of years he was bed-ridden, but could recognize his friends and sometimes talk to them. During my visits I was always impressed by his gentle face, ready smile and soft voice. He never once complained about his illness. When I offered to pray at his bedside he welcomed it.

He was an official in the state department of education. He fell in love with a Christian woman and married her. He had promised his father that in order to marry a Christian he was not going to betray the faith of his forefathers. The continuity of Hindu heritage through the centuries and the depth of its accumulated tradition were too precious for him to exchange for the sake of personal happiness. He kept his promise to the end. He had made his son promise him that when he died he would be cremated according to Hindu rites. The son too kept his promise.

It is more correct to say that he knew me than to mention that I knew him. His wife belonged to the congregation of which my father was the pastor. He and my father were great friends. He never prevented his wife and children from going to Church or participating in Christian activities. With his permission my father baptized his children and, later on, confirmed them as members of the Church. He also attended Church services sometimes, but remained a Hindu till the end of his life. The funeral service was at four o'clock in the evening at the house of his son in Bangalore. His son told me that remembering my father he had asked that I be requested to say a few words about him and offer a prayer at his funeral. I gladly agreed to do so.

There was quite a large gathering at the service. He had many Hindu and Christian relatives and friends. Some of them had come from places as far away as Calcutta and Delhi, Cochin and Mangalore. They were all sitting together in the gathering. No one tried to behave like a theological porcupine or a spiritual jellyfish. They were all human beings drawn together in the common bond of grief.

In my brief speech I referred to his life as a husband, father, grandfather and friend, mentioning that although he lived within the fellowship of a Christian family, he remained faithful to his Hindu heritage. I pointed out that even as we Christians are committed to our faith so are our Hindu neighbours committed to theirs and that therefore we should respect each other's cherished beliefs and convictions.

In my prayer I made use of an Upanishadic reference to Ultimate Reality as 'that from which everything is born, that by which everything that is born is sustained, and that into which everything returns at the end' (Taittiriya Upanishad III.1). Since it was Palm Sunday I referred to the journey of Jesus who had started the journey from the Father and was now returning to Him by way of the cross and the resurrection. I affirmed that, at the moment of death, our faith and hope as Christians are grounded in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord. The prayer was unmistakably Christian in content and character.

Christians had their service first. Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die' (John 11.25-26). Two Christian ministers were present, one in his official robe, the other in his clerical collar. The order of service of the Church of South India for the occasion is beautiful and moving. The whole architectural construction with hymns, readings and prayers, has spiritual depth, theological strength and pastoral comfort. It was a clear affirmation of Christian faith and hope in God through Jesus Christ.

Next, the Hindu friends took over. *Nachiketas* said to *Yama* (the god of death), 'In the world of heaven there is no fear whatever, you are not there and no one is afraid of old age. Overcoming both hunger and thirst, and leaving sorrow behind, one rejoices in the world of heaven' (Kathopanishad 1.12). On the right side of the body, near the head, was the broken half of a coconut with a bit of camphor burning within it. On the left was a brass vessel with water from the Ganges river and leaves from *tulsi* (a plant sacred to the Hindus). An earthen pot with glowing coals was at the foot of the body.

Usually, the eldest son of the dead person officiates during a Hindu funeral ceremony (*anthyeshrit*), but in this case, since his son was a Christian, the eldest son of the dead person's sister who was a Hindu took over the leadership. All this was done without the slightest bit of argument or confusion or hesitation.

The Hindu friends slowly walked around the body in a dignified procession. Usually, women do not take part in such ceremonies. But in this case, I noticed that women and children were also in the circle. Each one took some *tulsi* leaves and put a few drops of water into the mouth of the body, folded hands in the *namashte** gesture, and touched

its feet. They were quiet, solemn, and moved with a sense of rhythm. No Hindu priest was present nor were any *mantras** recited.

The body was carried out both by his Hindu and Christian relatives, and placed on a wooden plank to be taken to the crematorium. And again, assisted by both his Hindu and Christian relatives the body was placed on a green bamboo frame, on which fresh banana leaves were spread, flowers were placed on it, sparks from the pot of fire dropped on the body, and then, at the turn of a switch, it quietly moved into the glowing door of the crematorium. The ashes were later collected and taken home.

Each rite had its distinctiveness and, perhaps in the perceptions of people, had something meaningful to say to the other. I was also struck by the differences between the two.

The Christian service was *formal*, orderly, well-structured, and with the minister in his robe, there was no doubt that it was official. In contrast, the Hindu rite was *informal*, less rigid, with hardly any words uttered and no priest being present. The whole group participated in the performance of the rite.

One could not but become aware of the *silence* that dominated the Hindu rite. No speeches were made, no *mantras* recited and, with the exception of three words of a chant when the body was carried out of the house, there was no singing. The Christians, on the other hand, seemed to be very uneasy about any periods of silence. The gaps between prayers and readings were constantly being filled with the singing of English hymns to Western tunes.

Except, of course, for the sign of the cross and flowers there were no other visible *symbols* which could add to the meaning of the Christian service. Hindus had a number of them, all taken from nature itself — flowers, coconut, *tulsi* leaves, water from the river Ganga, the bamboo framework, banana leaves and, of course, fire. *Agni* (fire) has a special place in Hindu symbolism. *Agni* is the priest of the gods and the god of priests. It is through fire that sacrifices reach God. *Agni* destroys, purifies and illumines, and is regarded as one of the five components of the cosmos.

During the whole period of about two hours I did not notice any individuals from either group openly or discreetly seeking to separate themselves from the other. Both Christians and Hindus, without being asked, left their shoes and sandals outside before entering the room where the body was laid. It was obvious that to many Christians the Hindu rite was entirely new, and that it was the first time for many Hindus to come near a Christian funeral service. Hindus and Christians do pay a *visit* to the house of a dead friend of either faith, but that is very different from being present during the ceremonies. Some were

probably uneasy, but none showed it. Each group was eager to see what the rite of the other meant.

During the next few days I talked to several people, both Hindu and Christian, who were present there. None expressed any difficulty or felt offended or uneasy at being present together during the ceremonies. Two Christian women told me it was a good thing that I asked people to respect their neighbours' faith. I was puzzled by the remark. Does this mean that Christians are taught not to respect their neighbours' faith? One Hindu lady, the wife of a medical doctor, told me that she was impressed with the orderliness and discipline of the Christian service and its Christian content. It was the first time that she had ever been present at such a service.

Funeral rites, Hindu or Christian, have an important contribution to make to the religious life of a community of faith.

First, based on the religious faith behind them, they are believed to influence the destiny of the person and to help in the metamorphosis of the body. When it is believed that there is only one life there is more pressure and anxiety at death than when it is accepted that there is a plurality of births and deaths, offering more opportunities for the individual to realize his or her destiny. Death, however, is never regarded as the final end. It is a deliverance or transition or passage into the Mystery of life, the perception of its meaning being reflected in the funeral rites.

Second, funeral rites help to comfort the bereaved. The words and symbols reassure, strengthen and sustain those who mourn the loss of their loved ones, thus helping to heal the wound of death.

Third, all funeral rites have a community dimension. This is one reason why so many relatives and friends make every effort to be present at a funeral. The ongoing life of the community is disturbed by the loss of one of its members. The gap left by that death has to be closed, slowly, gently and firmly so that the living can go on. Funeral rites thus help to revitalize the life of the community broken by death. When the mood is one of reverence and silence one does not feel justified in raising any questions. And yet, it may be that what strikes one deeply at the moment should be shared with others as well.

Can one body, in the utter helplessness of death, carry the weight of two religious rites? How will the destiny of the person be affected by this on the other side of death?

Can the same body be claimed by two religious groups, Hindu and Christian? Why not? Was he not related to both Hindus and Christians biologically and spiritually?

In India the distance between the temple and the church is very great, almost unbridgeable. At a time when religious fundamentalism is on

the rise and the politicization of religions is on the increase, this senior friend in his death brought together his Hindu and Christian relatives and friends who otherwise would never have come together. Immediately after the rites each group went away separately, perhaps never to meet again in the near future.

Is it not strange, even tragic, that life should separate religious people but that death should bring them together, even for a brief moment?

Did he live as a Christian and die as a Hindu or did he live as a Hindu and die as a Christian?
Who knows?

Who knows?