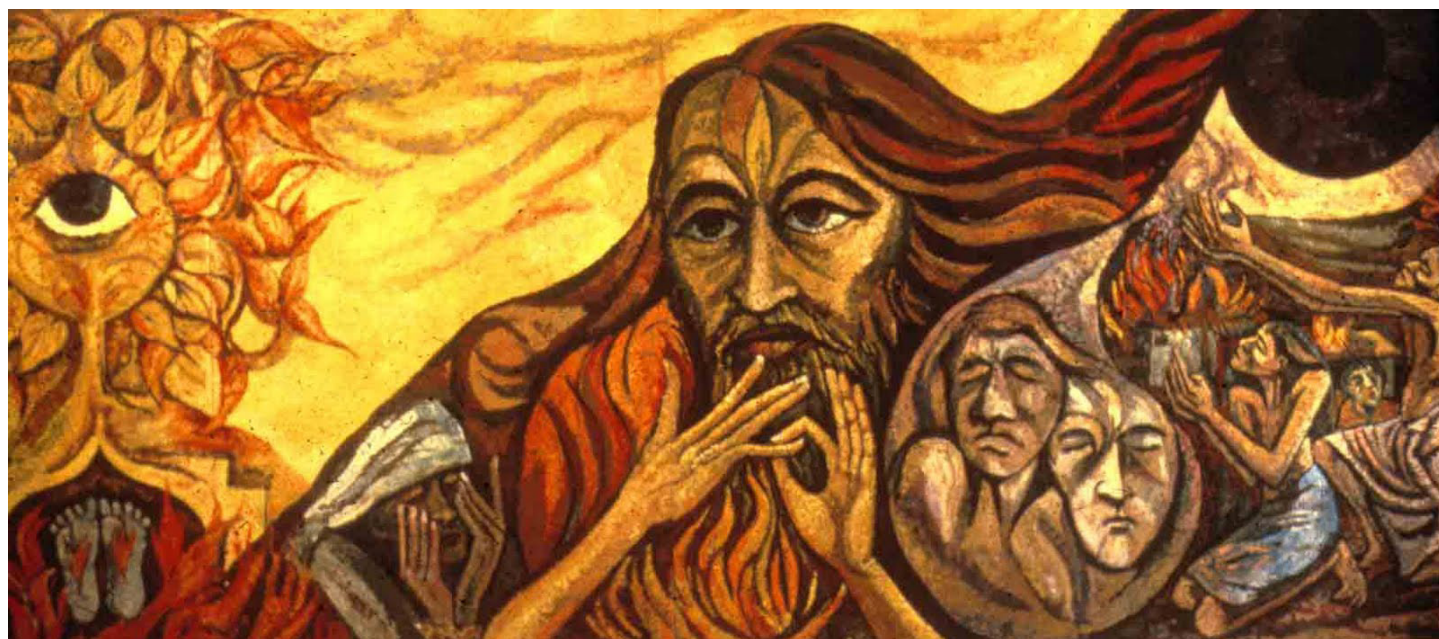


OUR SACRED TEACHER

Learning from Christians from the Indian Subcontinent

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER



Jesus the Compassionate Guru by Indian artist Jyoti Sahi

One of the special gifts of attending the 2022 Lambeth Conference in Canterbury, was the opportunity of spending time with Bishop Chandrasekaran, the Bishop of the Diocese of Tiruchirappalli Thanjavur (Trichy-Tanjore) in the Church of South India, our partner diocese. Not long before the Lambeth conference began, on July 3, Christians in India celebrated St. Thomas Day, commemorating the death of Thomas the Apostle who is considered the patron saint of India. It is an annual opportunity for Jesus followers on the Indian subcontinent to celebrate their distinct identity by uniting across their many languages, denominations, regions, customs, and creeds. St. Thomas Day serves as a beautiful display of the enormous diversity of Indian Christians, while also serving as a uniting force across their differences.



Followers of Jesus have lived in the Indian subcontinent for nearly 2,000 years. St. Thomas Day stresses the fact that Christianity reached India before Europe and North America, reminding us that Christianity is not a Western religion. In talking with Bishop Chandrasekaran about the celebration, I was reminded of how Christians in South Asia, the Indian subcontinent, can help Christians in the West come to see Jesus from a different perspective – a perspective that can provide us with spiritual freshness. Perhaps as in no other area of the world, their orientation toward Jesus show us the means of rediscovering and experiencing him anew.

Each time I have visited South Asia I have come away revitalized in my understanding and view of Jesus. One of the most interesting conversations I have ever had took place on a train heading toward Bangalore in South India. In my compartment was an Indian

physicist who was a high-caste Hindu. While being entirely uninterested in Christianity and the Church, he was drawn to the life and teachings of Jesus and confidently referred to him as “the greatest teacher who ever lived.” For three whole hours, he discoursed on the message and example of “the Great Teacher.” When he discovered my personal interest in Jesus, he could not be contained from sharing his own impressions with both passion and sincerity. I came away from my conversation with him reminded afresh that Jesus naturally attracts people.

During a visit to Bangladesh, I met a Muslim man who had learned about Jesus from a Christian colleague. He was so drawn to the personality of Jesus that his almost obsessive hunger to learn more had led him to steal a New Testament from a Hindu neighbor. Remarkably, a bestselling book in Muslim-majority Bangladesh is an “Islamized,” or contextually presented New Testament called *Injil Sharif*, the “Holy Gospel” in Qur’anic

terminology, demonstrating people’s hunger to learn about Jesus. In this country an astonishing movement took place in which hundreds of Muslims, if not thousands, of individuals, decided on their own to follow Jesus, resulting from their own readings of the Gospels (Injil in Arabic). These people have not adopted any of the traditions of Western Christian worship and therefore do not call themselves “Christians.” They simply refer to themselves as “followers of Jesus.”

Whether visiting Muslim-majority Bangladesh, Hindu-majority India or Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka, I have always come away from South Asia with a fresh reminder that Jesus naturally attracts people to himself. Many are not interested in the Christian traditions in which Jesus is often presented, or the Western Jesus that we have created over the centuries. However, many are interested in Jesus as he is simply presented in the Gospels.

In 1925 a fascinating book was written by E. Stanley Jones, a distinguished American Christian leader, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, who served in India, entitled *The Christ of the Indian Road*. It raises the questions, “How was and is Jesus understood and in what way does he go down India’s roads?” Its central theme explores the idea that Christianity and Jesus are not necessarily the same thing. One can have Jesus without the system that has been built up around him in the West – and vice versa.

The Gospel, the Good News, lies in the person of Jesus. He himself is this “good news,” and a Christian is one who follows him, lives for him and presents him as the good news. After all, the term “Christianity” is not found in the Scriptures, and Jesus was not a Christian. The term “Christian” did not come to be used until new followers of Jesus began gathering in Antioch in Syria, years after his death.

“If anything about Christianity is true, it is true because of Christ – not because of Christianity.”

Jesus on the Emmaus Road by Indian artist Jyoti Sahi



The Spirit of Wyoming

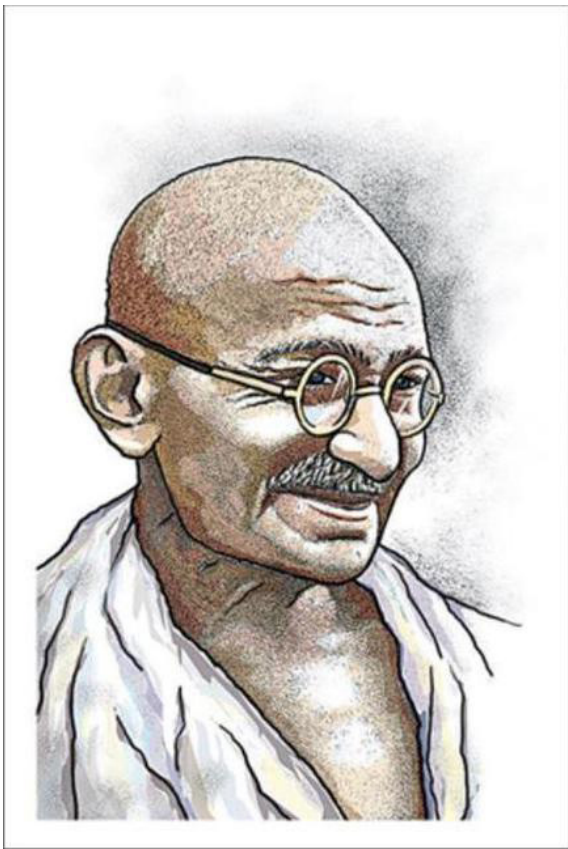
The essence of Christianity is Christ. Our starting point as Christians is Christ. Start at any other place and we inevitably get off track. And Christ is also our finishing point. Christ is the center of our faith – a full commitment to him, catching his mind and spirit, and living his life, constitutes being a Christian. There is a tremendous difference between Christian revelation, which is Christ, and Christian religion, which is Christianity. If anything about Christianity is true, it is true because of Christ – not because of Christianity.

While Christians – especially Protestants – are often called a “people of the book,” a more accurate title would be “people of a Person.” We value the Bible as an inspired record of God’s revelation, but the revelation itself is the person of Jesus Christ. Christianity has everything to do with following and knowing a person.

It was not long after the founding of the church in the Middle East that Christian congregations appeared in India. For two millennia, tucked away in the midst of a vast Hindu population, the Nestorian Church of St. Thomas has existed in India. This church finds its origins in the first century when Thomas (the doubting disciple) came as a missionary to southern India. Tradition says Thomas was martyred in what is today the city of Mylapore in South India.

This ancient Church – as well as the many other Churches that have existed in India throughout the centuries – will tell you Hindus are not impressed by personal experience or testimony, for they view religious experience as normal. Neither are Hindus impressed by the miraculous, as they are familiar with the many accounts of supernatural wonders in their own religious literature. Nothing has spoken as powerfully and generated as much interest as Christ’s personality and teachings.

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As a result, Indian Christians over the years have found that the best advice a Christian can give to someone searching spiritually is simply to encourage them to follow the historical Jesus, trusting that in so doing they will encounter the transformational teachings of Jesus.

Mahatma Gandhi called his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Throughout it you discover his fascination with Jesus. He was given the Bible at a young age and started reading it from the beginning. He said: “I read the book of Genesis, and the chapters that followed invariably sent me to sleep....I disliked reading the book of Numbers. But the New Testament produced a different impression, especially [Jesus’] Sermon on the Mount, which went straight to my heart.” Gandhi was drawn to the person of Christ and Christ’s teachings. The words of Jesus shaped his entire worldview. Hindu fundamentalists even accused him of being a secret Christian, which he considered a compliment.

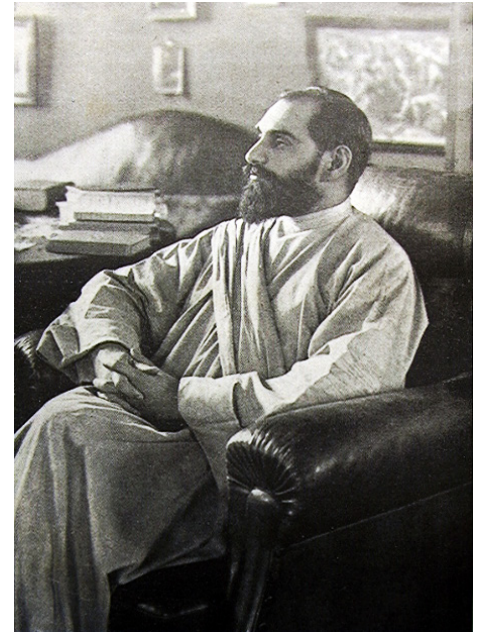
He regarded Jesus as the highest *Satyagrahi*, one absolutely devoted to following the truth. Satyagraha, meaning “truth force,” was the idea and practice at the center of Gandhi’s life. This “truth force” was in essence the way of the cross. One of his favorite songs was “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” This led to Gandhi, a non-Christian, becoming one of the most Christlike individuals in history. He embraced Jesus and his teachings, but rejected Christianity.

Among the many who came literally to sit at Gandhi's feet were Christian missionaries – and his evident respect for and interest in Christ made many Christians in India reanalyze their own faith and commitment. In this sense Gandhi, a non-Christian, through his life, helped to “Christianize unchristian Christianity.”

I have been profoundly influenced by the life and teachings of Sadhu Sundar Singh, an influential Sikh follower of Christ, who died in 1928. He was consumed by the person and presence of Christ. He was once interviewed by an agnostic European professor of comparative religions in a Hindu college. The evident intention of the interview was to show the Sadhu (meaning “holy man”) his mistake in following Christ. “What have you found in Christianity that you did not have in your old religion?” the professor asked. The Sadhu said, “I have Christ.” “Yes, I know,” the professor replied, a little impatiently. “But what particular principle or doctrine have you found that you did not have before?” The Sadhu answered, “The particular thing I have found is Christ.”

Sadhu Sundar Singh wrote:

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.”



Sadhu Sundar Singh



Jesus of the Slums – in Chennai (Madras), Tamil Nadu, India

For the Sadhu, his entire faith was a communion with the person of Christ.

On one of my trips to India I visited a church in the slums of Calcutta. It was located in the Kumartuli area, where thousands of Hindu idols are made. We sang together and shared with each other our stories of God's faithfulness. In poverty and unemployment these young men and women had nothing but their faith in Christ. It was all they could call their own. In situations like this I come to realize that the only thing we really do have in common to talk about, once all the irrelevant Western cultural traditions, terminology and trappings of our faith are removed, is Christ. In this small “church” that met in a one-room house, as we were singing a Bengali chorus, I was profoundly struck by the realization that these people were here only because of Christ. There was no other incentive. Christ had drawn them to himself.

“ Jesus explains our Life. When a visitor comes to our house, I take him to the chapel to pray a while. I tell him, ‘Let us first greet the master of the house. Jesus is here.’ Keep giving Jesus to your people...by your being in love with Jesus.”

Also in Calcutta is the society the Missionaries of Charity, begun by the late Mother Teresa, an Albanian nun born in Serbia. She lived and worked among the extremely poor in India for entire life. “I feel Indian to the most profound depths of my soul,” she once said. When meeting her I could not help but realize that her whole orientation in life centered around the person of Christ. She said, “Jesus explains our Life. When a visitor comes to our house, I take him to the chapel to pray a while. I tell him, ‘Let us first greet the master of the house. Jesus is here.’ Keep giving Jesus to your people...by your being in love with Jesus.”



Indian painter Swapan Das gives finishing touches to a portrait of Jesus on a busy road in the city of Kolkata (Calcutta)

In focusing primarily on Jesus Christ, South Asian Christians view him very differently than we do in the West. They picture Jesus with brown skin and in deep thought; very contemplative in his manner, even at times portrayed as sitting in a cross-legged lotus position. After all, Jesus came from western Asia. They make a point of this, in contrast to the European image of Jesus often presented by missionaries – a young man with pale skin, blue eyes and light-brown beard and hair.

This Asian face of Christ, for Indian Christians, takes the form of Jesus as a teacher who was not only the greatest of teachers (at one specific time) but who also lives and teaches them in the present. This fits perfectly into their culture, which is very teacher-oriented. India is renowned for its *gurus*, *sadhus* (holy men), *roshis* (prophets) and *swamis* (teaching lords) with their *chelas* (disciples).

India is also known for its ashrams, places of religious retreat and instruction where a guru lives with and teaches his disciples or chelas. These ashrams attracted so much interest among Indians that Christian ashrams began to be founded in 1917. This development of Indian Christian communities fitted perfectly into the local Indian religious culture. The ashram might have had a Christian sadhu as its leader, but residents and visitors alike were pointed toward following “Swami Jesus,” (Swami meaning “Lord who teaches”).

Some Indian Christians view themselves as disciples of Swami Jesus, often avoiding the label “Christian” because of its connotations in their local context (it brings to mind the former relationship between Western colonialism). They would rather call themselves fully devoted “followers of Jesus.” Jesus has become their personal and present divine teacher or swami, a living teacher-Lord.

Sadhu Sundar Singh beautifully illustrated this through his life and message. He constantly referred to himself as “sitting at the Master’s feet.” He once said:

“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 learned has been only at His feet.”

As Christians we are students in Jesus’ eternal classroom. There is never a point in our spiritual journey when we do not have to keep learning from him. Jesus must be allowed to be our living teacher if we are to grow in spiritual depth. Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, “To me Jesus is my God, Jesus is my Power, Jesus is my Life, Jesus is my Love, Jesus in my All in All, Jesus is my Everything.” We follow him, not because of anything he said, but because of everything that he is.

A Bengali Hymn

O Christ, the light of the way of my life, abide with me.
When I go into a dense forest I cannot find the way,
O Christ, the guide of the way of my life, show me the way.
My fellow-travelers have deserted me and darkness is all around.
O compassionate Christ, come, or else I will lose my life.
O Christ, the only help of the way of my life, hold my hand.
When the wild storm comes in the river of my life,
My oar is broken and the rudder is torn,
O Christ the boatman! ...Sit and hold the oar
Or else the boat will sink.
O Christ, the oarsman of the boat of my life,
Hold the oar.

Written by Nirod Kumar Biswas, a doctor, poet, musician and former Bishop of Assam