



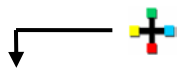
A Review of "God's People In India," by John Webster Grant

1960

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The author of this book, a member of the United Church of Canada, spent the year 1957-58 in India, and as the fruit of this visit, enriched by wide reading, he has written a valuable study of the Christian Church in India. It is a very hard thing to give a true account of the life of the Church in 'one country to the people of another, especially when there are such wide differences of background as exist between India and Canada. Every missionary engaged in deputation work wrestles with this problem. The Church is known by faith to be the temple of the Holy Ghost, but without faith it is not so known. The perpetual temptation of those who are called to report on the life of the younger churches as part of the business of raising funds for missions is the temptation to try to make the life of the younger church appear even without faith to be a manifestation of the work of the Spirit. The reaction comes in the disillusionment which can be so devastating an experience for a young missionary when he comes in contact with evil in the life of the Church. We greatly need a type of reporting which is honest, searching and at the same time written 'from faith to faith', founded securely upon the Christian faith in God, in His unfailing grace, and addressed to the same faith in the reader. This is what Dr Grant's book furnishes. He shows up weaknesses in the life of the Church, but it is always against a background of real understanding and of a firm faith that these are indeed 'God's people'.

Many of his comments, if rightly understood, would save us from our judaizing attempts to press western forms upon the Indian Church and to judge by standards appropriate in Europe or America, but inappropriate in India. Consider the following:

A visitor discovers that in India the relation between the individual Christian and the group is subtly different from what he knows in the West. The average North American tends to think of himself as a Christian individual, but he has *difficulty* in recognizing any real bond linking him with the other members of his church. There is often an element of artificiality in our Christian fellowship. We find it necessary to foster the group sense with 'mixers', socials, suppers, service clubs. In India, on the other hand, the Christian thinks of himself instinctively as a member of the

Christian community. His difficulty is in seeing the necessity of being a Christian by personal decision or even by personal conviction. The efforts that we devote to socializing Christianity must in India be directed towards individualizing it.

There is a valuable chapter entitled 'Towards an Indian Theology' which is full of wise comment and the closing paragraph of which reads:

The early Fathers of Christianity wrote theology because the Church had to think or perish. A distinctive Indian theology will emerge when the Indian Church has to find its own way through the trials and opportunities that will be presented to it. When the Church itself enters into the dynamic conversation that has been opened by a few scattered individuals India will make her own contribution to the ongoing thought of the Christian community.

Dr Grant agrees with many Indian Christian leaders when he says, 'I sometimes wonder what possibilities might open up if the Church were willing to glory in its poverty, willing even to glory in being largely an outcaste community, willing to invite others to die with it in order to live'. Is that perhaps the truly Christian answer to the challenge both of the Gandhian and of the Communist?

There are one or two points at which one would disagree with Dr Grant. Has he (on p. 38) quite done justice to the genuinely religious strength of the revived Hinduism of our day? Does his justifiable enthusiasm for Indian lyrics as against western hymns enable him quite to appreciate the reasons which account for the stubborn survival of the latter, which are not always badly sung? These are small points. A more substantial one occurs in his discussion of the role of the foreign missionary. He is surely right when he says that 'he goes to identify himself with the Christian cause in India', that he should 'hold himself clear of positions in which he will wield power' and that he should have 'a humble love of God enabling [him] to place [his] gifts at the disposal of the indigenous church'. But is he right in suggesting that a missionary is primarily 'a teacher or scientist or minister on loan to the Indian Church'? This conception of the missionary's task was understandable as a stage in the process of re-thinking it in terms which take the younger church seriously. But if we stop here we have certainly evacuated the term 'missionary' of its proper meaning. Surely the central element in the make-up of a missionary should be concern to get the Gospel across the existing frontiers of the Church to the place where it is not known or not believed. The great task of our time in this field is to develop patterns of missionary service which take seriously the fact that the missionary is part of the Church in the place in which he serves. But to take this element of concern to get across the frontier out of the heart of our definition of a missionary is to side-step the problem. It is no doubt true, as Dr Grant says, that 'to-day a David Livingstone would be an embarrassment to Church

and Mission alike'. He was an embarrassment then! But embarrassment is preferable to euthanasia.

Having registered that disagreement, which is marginal to the book as a whole, one must express gratitude for a wise, penetrating and encouraging piece of Christian reporting. We need more like it.

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