



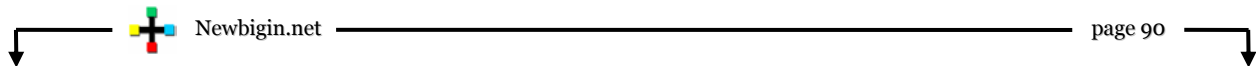
Review of “India and the Latin Captivity of the Church”, by Robin Boyd

1975

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

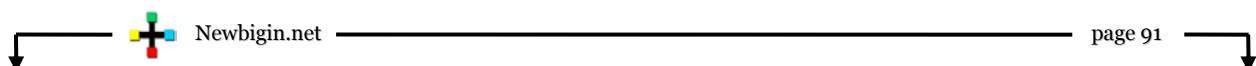
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*India and the Latin Captivity of the Church.* By Robin H. S. Boyd. Cambridge University Press. Pp. xiv + 151.

Dr Bold is a missionary of the Irish Presbyterian Church and Vice-Principal of the Gujarat United School of Theology. He has already put the Church in his debt by several outstanding books,

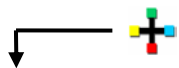


including an Introduction to Indian Christian Theology and a very persuasive presentation of the Gospel for Indian inquirers. In the present volume, drawing upon his extensive knowledge of Indian thought, he shows how dependent this has been upon the language and thought forms of the Western Latin heritage, and yet what exciting possibilities it has already shown in the development of a genuinely Indian theology, using the language and thought forms of India. One of the most valuable sections of the book provides an introduction to the thought of the little-known theologian Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai, with whom Dr Boyd worked in close association for several years.

The problem with which the book deals is one that is familiar to missionaries, but perhaps not familiar enough to those who do not have to carry the Christian message across a linguistic frontier. In one sense one must say that the Gospel cannot be translated into another language except through the lives of people who are changed by it. If a Hindu who has had no contact with Christianity reads, for example, 1 Tim. 1.15 in the authorised Tamil translation, what he will *really* read means ‘Jesus Christ came into the world to provide free board and lodging for drop-outs’. If the words come to have a deeper meaning for him, it is through some kind of contact with the living Christian community. Real Indian theology develops when one tries to communicate the reality of the new life in Christ through an Indian language. This is constantly being done by preachers and evangelists, but the difficulty in India is that higher theology has been conducted

not in Indian languages but in English. The efforts to create an Indian theology in English always have a slightly artificial character about them. The Christian reader whose mother tongue is English inevitably imports Christian meanings into the Indian words, just as an Indian reader whose mother tongue is, for example, Tamil, inevitably imports into the Tamil words of the Bible meanings which derive from his own culture and experience.

Dr Boyd makes out a good case at many points for using Indian words to express a developed Christian theology. His discussion of the word *Saccidananda* as a vehicle for developing an Indian statement of Trinitarian doctrine is very suggestive. So also is his discussion of the sources of authority. I am less convinced about the use of Ramanuja's doctrines of *avatara* and *bhakti marga*. I know from experience that one can come to an almost complete verbal agreement about the meaning of salvation with a disciple of the Visishtadvaita school, and yet find that a little further probing reveals that this agreement covers a profound (and in my opinion decisive) difference in the real meaning. In the one case the centre of



concern is myself and my need of salvation; God or gods are peripheral to this concern. In the other case the centre of concern is God and his righteousness. Moreover I think that some of the language of Indian spirituality, if uncritically adopted, can lead to a grave dilution of the biblical understanding of the human person as a responsible partner in a community of reciprocal responsibilities – a community which has to express itself in some kind of institutional form.

This leads me to a basic question about Dr Boyd's book. He accepts the very common view that the Christian Church in India is too western, too much in bondage to Latinity, and that it has to become more Indian. I think a strong case can be made out for the opposite view. Certainly the Indian Church is western in many external respects-forms of worship, organisation, and architecture for example-although the last two are matters in which the Christian Church is more and more a homogeneous part of modern Indian culture. But in respect of its inner beliefs and attitudes I think it can be shown that the Indian Church is very profoundly influenced by – one might even say in bondage to – its Hindu past. Western theological language can be used very easily to express ideas which are basically Hindu. The other-worldly pietism which is sometimes associated with the (very western) style of conservative evangelists fits exactly with the corresponding strain in Hinduism and powerfully reinforces it. It is not common to find Indian Christians who have really grasped at the depth of their being the radical challenge which the Bible puts to Hindu views of human personality and human history. On these matters the thinking of most Indian Christians would be at least as much (even though unconsciously) influenced by the Hindu background as by the Bible.

I think that Dr Boyd overstates his case against Latinity. Can it really be maintained, for example, that our Latin heritage (as distinct from the Greek, Syrian, Hebrew, and other elements in our background) is responsible for the idea of a state religion (p. 71) or for the 'colonial view of Church growth' (p. 119)? Is it really so that the idea of the secular state came to India through the ideas of Sri Ramakrishna (p. 9)? I should have thought that we owe that debt much more to the very westernised mind of Nehru.

In spite of these questions, I think that he has presented an important thesis which well deserves serious thought. And, as one would expect from anything which Dr Boyd writes, the book is full of much wisdom about the Christian task in the contemporary world, from which any reader should profit.

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