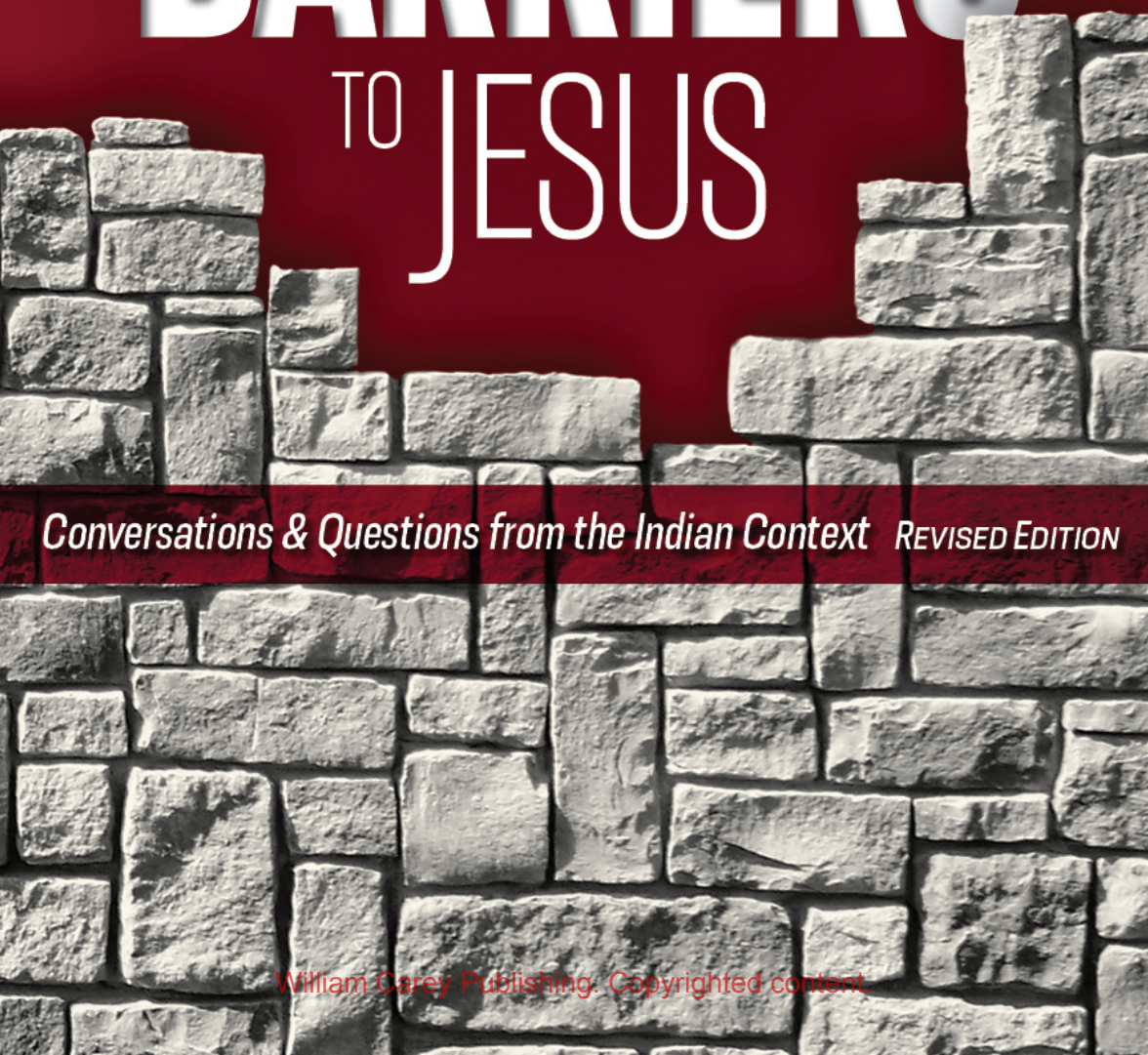
J. PAUL PENNINGTON

Christian BARRIERS TO JESUS



Conversations & Questions from the Indian Context REVISED EDITION

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Christian Barriers to Jesus (Revised Edition): Conversations and Questions from the Indian Context

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Published by William Carey Publishing (formerly William Carey Library)
10 W Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

Melissa Hughes, editor
Joelle Bridges, copyeditor
Joanne Liang, interior design; Mike Riester, cover design and interior

Printed worldwide

26 25 24 23 22 2 3 4 5 6 IN

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-381-8 (paperback), 978-1-64508-383-2 (epub)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022931195

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CHAPTER 1
THE BARRIER OF CULTURAL SEPARATISM

Everywhere we looked, we saw colorful symbols of clay pots boiling over, smiling suns, and cows with brightly painted horns. My wife and I were on our first visit to India and had arrived in Chennai during *Pongal*, the Tamil harvest festival. Chennai traffic is challenging under normal circumstances; the evening streets were packed with vehicles and people coming and going for the festivities. We wanted to learn a little about what this festival and these symbols meant, so as we rode with an Indian couple, we inquired about what we were seeing.

After several questions, the wife suddenly responded from the back seat, "This is a Hindu festival. The Bible says, 'Come out from among them, and be separate. Touch no unclean thing.' We are Christians, so we have nothing to do with such things." With that, the conversation about Pongal ended.

That abrupt stop nagged at me. I sensed I had touched a nerve. The feeling with which she expressed herself conveyed a deep uneasiness. Our inquiries, it seemed, had pushed beyond her comfort zone.

ENCOUNTERING CHRISTIANITY'S CULTURAL SEPARATISM

Later I reflected with seminary professors and church leaders about the conversation and the uncomfortable conclusion. They indicated, in various conversations, that Isaiah 52:11, "Come out from among them … ," has at times defined how many Christians believe they should relate to the Hindu culture around them.

Described by Indian Friends

Indian friends described attitudes and behaviors from some Christians which cause levels of confusion, discomfort, or even offense to some Hindus. The following were a few examples:

- Say *Hindu* with a wrinkled nose and a tone of disdain

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- Reject local cultural music as "the devil's music." Accept Christian music only (often foreign music in some form)
- Cheer against Indian sports teams or the Indian military
- Avoid Republic Day or Independence Day and refuse to sing the national anthem
- Forbid or discourage wives from wearing *bindi* (forehead dot), *mangalsutra* (wedding necklace), *sindoor* (red paste in hair part), and other jewelry
- Reject Hindu hospitality or offers of *prasad* (food offered at temple), *pongal* (rice), or *laddoo* (temple sweets) in impolite, offensive ways that foster resentment
- Refuse to carry a single piece of Hindu literature for study in colleges and seminary libraries
- Parents forbid children to enter a Hindu person's home because demons live there
- Engagement parties, weddings, and other social gatherings where Christian pastors learned they had Hindus in the audience and launched anti-Hindu diatribes that shamed and turned off Hindus

The spirit I experienced for the first time that night became more apparent in these diverse reports and observations. We now term it "cultural separatism." We have seen or heard its subtle or overt manifestations during every trip to India. Its effects play out at times in news reports of the tensions between Christians and Hindus in India. As I researched and explored the barriers examined in later chapters, this cultural separatism psyche intersected in various ways with each one. It sometimes appeared as a more understated disconnect or disregard for Hindu concerns. Some Christians, though, described overt disrespect or even disdain for the Hindu communities and traditions around them.

Confirmed by Other Indian Voices

These recurring oral accounts of cultural separatism were further confirmed from other Indian sources. In late 2012, an Indian missionary I have long known and respected asked me to read a short paper he had written about why India is so resistant to Jesus. He reiterated several of the items in the list above, but in greater detail. He articulated how these issues have prevented Hindu people from considering or following Jesus.

He confirmed what my Christian friends had observed. Many Indians admire Jesus and respect the Bible. Yet, despite this interest, Christian

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practices like those above actively keep people from considering Jesus. Sadly, he observed, the spirit of cultural separatism sometimes prevents Christians from even caring that these things might present a barrier. My friends shared his concern, but knew of many who seemed untroubled by the damage their separatist traditions could cause.

In early 2013, the reality of the Christian cultural separatism unexpectedly gripped and broke my heart. I picked up a small volume, *Living Water and Indian Bowl* by Dayanand Bharati. Ten or so pages into his book, Bharati had me in tears as he described the same cultural separatism and Christian barriers that my Christian friends had been identifying for some time. Bharati, though, wrote from Hindu experience. I heard and sensed from a cultural Hindu some of the hurt Hindus feel when exposed to Christians' cultural disregard and disdain. I repeatedly had to put the book down while I wept over further examples of how some Christians actively keep Hindus from Jesus by insensitive and unscriptural traditions.

I finished *Living Water* deeply burdened that cultural separatism was a far deeper barrier than originally suspected, so I purchased several copies and began sharing them with my Indian friends who had already expressed so much concern about these issues. They too began to wrestle at deeper levels with the sources and implications of this all-too-common separatist spirit.

Further research uncovered additional examples of how cultural separatism could keep Hindus from even meeting Jesus. A Christian leader interviewed his father, who had followed Jesus for much of sixty-five years. He asked his father in retrospect, "Would you still take the same course?" Yisu Das Tiwari replied "Christ is my 'ishta' [chosen God], he has never left me, I will never leave him, *but I would not have joined the Christian community*. I would have lived with my people and my community and been a witness to them" (Petersen 2007, 87–88; emphasis mine).

In a second example, D. D. Pani told of a young *Brahmin*[1] man who was studying in another Indian state. He met a Christian missionary there and decided to become a Christian. The missionary, wanting a quick conversion, encouraged him to make the choice without discussing

1 I will use *Brahmin* to refer to the highest caste in the Hindu system. Technically, some scholars now prefer *Brahman* as more in line with Sanskrit tradition. *Brahmin*, though, is more commonly used in the literature, even among Hindus, when referring to these communities.

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with his parents. Afterwards, when he called to inform his parents of his unilateral decision, they told him never to come home. The missionary recommended that he should just leave his family and have nothing more to do with them. Several decades later, he has never returned to visit his family or village, even after marrying and having children. Pani concludes, "Many would call my friend's life a success story; I consider it a great tragedy" (Pani 2001b, 35).

The spirit of cultural separatism assumed that the family's view should be completely disregarded in a culture where family is intimately involved in every decision. The young man's decision to follow Jesus might have been mediated and discussed in respectful ways. The Christian separatist spirit ignored those possibilities. The missionary's disregard for family led to such insult and offense that the young man had no opportunity to even interact with his family about his desire to become a Christ-follower.

The separatist spirit also contributed to graver social consequences. Pani concludes, "Because he *abandoned his people*, his family and the people of his home locale have become *further polarized against the gospel*. They view him as a *traitor*" (ibid., 36; emphasis mine).

This is a sadly repeated tragedy in India. When Christians do practice such cultural separatism, Hindus rarely view it as an individual's neutral, harmless decision. To some Hindus, as Dayananda Saraswati once put it, conversion is an act of violence against family and community (Saraswati 1999) (detailed in Chapter 5, p. 112).

EXPLORING CHRISTIANITY'S CULTURAL SEPARATISM

In discussing the cultural separatism issues with my Indian friends, several factors became apparent. Believers who followed this spirit honestly believed they were serving and honoring the Lord in doing so. These attitudes and perspectives had been inculcated from generation to generation as the Lord's will for believers.

At the same time, though, a growing number of Indian Christians inherently sense that this cultural separatism is not what Jesus asks or Scripture teaches. The Lord seems to be challenging them to reexamine this long-held tradition with a closer look at God's word.

Ultimately, no matter how it is expressed, cultural separatism arises from a seemingly simple, yet incredibly complex question:

> *What should be the attitude of the followers of Jesus towards those who do not follow Him*? There is a wide variety of possible attitudes, all of which have

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> been adopted by Christian people at different times. Do we despise them, fear them, shun them, tolerate them, condemn them, or seek to serve them? *What is the true responsibility of the church to the world*? (Stott 1976, 173, emphasis mine)

John Stott's question lies at the heart of this chapter and, in fact, the heart of this book. How should followers relate to those who do not follow Jesus? What is their responsibility, if any, to the majority culture that surrounds them? Out of Stott's list of responses, all but one, "serve," reflect some aspect of the separatist spirit.

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL SEPARATISM

For some Indian Christians, like our friends at the beginning of this chapter, Isaiah 52:11 seems to provide the definitive answer to Stott's question. For them the church's true responsibility is to "*come out* from among them and be *separate*." They primarily fear, shun, or condemn Hindus, although some grant a level of suspicious tolerance (see Stott above). Cultural separatism provides the reference point for any discussion of how these believers relate to the Hindu culture around them.

As we examined Scripture, though, we discovered that the word of God raised serious questions about the separatist tradition.

Isaiah 52:11—Foundational Verse for Cultural Separatism

Let's look first at that defining verse, "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing" (Isa 52:11). For many believers in Asia and the Middle East, this verse is interpreted to say that Jesus expects his followers to separate from the socioreligious community around them into a distinct Christian community (and often culture).

If Jesus understood this to be God's will, then we should see clear evidence of such cultural separatism in his own teaching and practice. We should also see this separatist understanding reflected in the lives of those who followed him.

Jesus and Cultural Separatism

On the contrary, Jesus clearly and repeatedly rejected the common separatist interpretation of Isaiah 52:11. The Pharisees personified the cultural separatism view of Isaiah 52:11. In fact, their name meant *Separatists* (Bromiley 1986, 1246; Bauer, et al. 1979, 853). Their traditions expected

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