

**William Carey University**  
Hattiesburg, Mississippi, USA

**Lecture on the Topic**

**“Hinduism in India and William Carey’s Approach  
to People of Other Faiths”**

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To REL—WORLD RELIGIONS  
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**1. A General Introduction to Hinduism in India:** Many Hindu thinkers would not call Hinduism a religion but a set of beliefs, philosophies, customs, view points and traditions of diverse religious movements. So, it may be termed as a vast and complex socio-religious body, which reflects the diverse and complex nature of Indian Hindu society. It was not founded by any single founder at any single point of time. It has no prophet or seer as its founder. It is not controlled by any central organization. Hindu tradition grew in Indian subcontinent over a period of 6000-7000 years. It has largest number of gods and goddesses. But there is no supreme deity. Hinduism shares common features with other world religions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. There are contradictions within Hindu beliefs among the adherents. Such as, one may believe reincarnation of God and another may not believe it. One may not recognize caste system, but another may follow it. There were also critics of Hinduism who brought out some of those evil practices once they experienced those systems. For example, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the maker of Indian Constitution, who left Hinduism and joined Buddhism, said, “Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of karma and the senseless law of status by birth are to the untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against untouchables. These very instruments which have mutilated, blasted and blighted the lives of the untouchables are to be found intact and untarnished.” Thus, it has both a large number of devotees as well as critics. Hinduism claims that the one God revealed Himself in many different forms. It has not one overall religious authority nor has it any supreme book to claim supreme truth and dogmas.

**2. The Hindu Scriptures and deities:** The foundations of Hinduism were laid on the teachings of anonymous *Rishis* or sages who transmitted those teachings to adherents orally. Those teachings are recorded in the *Vedas*, a collection of hymns and other ritual texts composed in different periods. The Hindus have, it is said, 33 crores (330 millions) gods and goddesses. In Hinduism, some gods get more attention than others and different groups suggest different hierarchies of gods and goddesses. Agni, Indra, Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu and Ganesha are a few examples of very

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important Hindu gods who were regarded at different times by different hierarchies as the most important gods. Images of gods and goddesses are made with clay and are worshipped on different dates throughout the calendar year in India. Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma were part of holy Hindu Trinity. Shiva is associated with the destruction process and Vishnu is associated with the regeneration or creation process after the destructions. Thus, there are unending stories and descriptions about the Hindu gods and goddesses.

**3. William Carey's Approach to People of Other Faiths in India:** In such a country of innumerable gods and goddesses, William Carey the Missionary cum Social Reformer came as a friend, philosopher and guide to the people of Bengal. Carey besides being a missionary was also a great revolutionary who transformed not only the lives of people but also their cultures and practices. Carey was very friendly to people of other faiths in Bengal, India. He made intimate friendship with local Hindu people by his incomparable ways of interacting with them. He appointed them for various important works with him. Carey's scholarship in Hindu Scriptures also attracted many of the Hindu scholars and pundits to him. So, when he opposed various evil practices of the Hindu society, he was given due respect because he did it with lots of concerns and love for the common suffering people. He was instrumental in bringing great changes in the Hindu society of Bengal by abolishing many of their superstitious practices which had evil consequences in their lives.

Shortly after his arrival in India, in the year 1802, he began an investigation on the commission of the Governor into religious killings among Hindu people in India, and very soon he got the result. Carey made special efforts to collect the data of *Sati* and he reported that nearly 300 widow wives were burnt alive around Calcutta and about 10,000 in all of India within a short span of time. As a professor in Fort William College he could influence the civil servants who were his students, so that they could resist the evils of that society. When widows were converted to Christianity he arranged marriages for them.<sup>2</sup> At last because of Carey's revolutionary attempt, William Bentinck passed a regulation on December 4, 1829, declaring *Sati* as an illegal and criminal practice. While making such a brave attempt, William Carey had to study the Hindu Scriptures to see whether those customs were supported at all by the Scriptures. After a careful study he found that the Scriptures were not supporting those practices, so he could persuade the Government for legal proscription, about which Timothy George writes, "His studies of the Hindu sacred books also revealed that this cruel custom was by no means required by these writings, contrary to the common view. The government was reluctant to forbid a practice so long sanctioned by tradition and religion. Still, Carey continued to campaign against the *sati*. Eventually, in 1829, his appeals were heard by those in authority and the burning to death of thousands of widows was legally proscribed."<sup>3</sup> This act of Carey saved thousands of unwilling young widows from being perished with their dead husbands in the same funeral pyre.

Carey also professed that the mere abolition of evil practices from the society will not solve the problems from the roots. So he suggested that the welfare of the society is possible when proper education will bring awareness in the society. And that is why Carey concentrated more and more

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth and Vishal Mangalwadi, *William Carey: A Tribute by an Indian Woman* (New Delhi: Good Book, 1993), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Alabama: New Hope, 1991), pp. 151-152.

on the spread of primary as well as higher education throughout the society of Bengal which was largely a Hindu society. The spread of proper and good education brought Carey closer to the hearts of the Bengalis. Carey's mission also pioneered the emancipation of women through education by establishing schools for girls and women. Carey emphasized that everyone should have equal right to education; so that the educated well-wishers of the society could stand against the evil practices and support the cause of the poor. Carey also fought against the caste system. He preached and encouraged inter-caste marriages. Thereafter, Carey also fought for the eradication of another evil practice called *ghat murders*, a practice by which the sick and the dying were left by the riverbank to die. There was also the burning of lepers by their families. Carey taught people to love the lepers. He provided medicines and established a hospital for them. There was another social evil existing in those days as the cult of *thug*, a belief that the goddess granted sanction to certain people to strangle others and to take their valuables. William Carey's fight against such an evil practice led to the suppression of *thugs* by William Bentinck in 1830. Carey's role was also enormous in abolishing infanticide by the Governor General Lord Wellesley's passing of the legislature in 1802. Carey also promoted the idea of saving money in the banks for the poor. He encouraged the rich people and the government employees to be sympathetic toward the poor people of the society.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we find that William Carey was very a kind, compassionate and thoughtful well wisher of the people of other faiths, particularly Hindus, in Bengal and throughout India, which helped him to win their hearts for his revolutionary mission endeavors.

**4. Conclusion:** Though William Carey fought against caste systems and other evil practices of the Hindu society in Bengal and India, yet it is sad to note that the same caste system and many other superstitious practices had crept into the practices of some of the Christian churches in India. The Christian churches in their burial grounds have divisions for high and low caste Christians. Some of the churches during worship services have separate seating arrangements for dalits (oppressed class) and lower caste Christians. But, on the other hand, the Hindus in Serampore and Bengal are still remembering William Carey with great honor in their homes and society. It is reported that some families give flowers in front of the picture of William Carey (which is done to the deities only). William Carey's picture and motto are inscribed on the wall of Serampore Railway Station's platform, which was prompted by some of the Hindu local leaders. William Carey's name is pronounced with the other great names of Bengal in all programs and various walks of life even today, which shows how much impact William Carey had in the lives and society of his Hindu friends in Bengal and India.

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<sup>4</sup> Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Baro Sadh Baro Seba* (Bengali), *Great Desire Great Service* (Seoraphuli: S. K. Chatterjee, 1989), pp. 123-124.