technologies make *Ijtihaad* (independent judgment based on authentic Islamic sources in the light of changing times) easier? There is no doubt that instant availability of all sources including original ones and their multiple explanations and interpretations can make the clerics, going by their vested interests, irrelevant. Thus, there is a range of possibilities vis a vis the new communication technology.

**REFERENCES**


**Communicating Religious Dimensions of Culture in the Traditional and New Social Media: The Christian Experience in India**

Keval J. Kumar

Infinite diversity, plurality and multiplicity are the primary features that mark popular Indian culture and religion. This culture and religion have come about through centuries of absorption, integration and acculturation as the subcontinent evolved at its own leisurely pace engaging with invaders, settlers and colonialists who brought with them their own audio, print and visual cultures. Conversations and exchanges with these different cultures and religions over two millennia gave rise to the ecumenical, syncretic and hybrid cultures of contemporary India. There were along the way many conflicts and resistances, narrow chauvinisms, nativism, and even fundamentalism.

These tendencies also contributed to and in some ways vitiated attempts at fusing the many strands that make for any national culture and its expression in religious beliefs and practices. The fine and the plastic arts, applied arts, performing arts, literature, and the numerous local and regional folk art traditions contributed to this cultural and religious evolution. True, some cultures and religions dominated in each space. Others fell by the wayside, most just plodded along, happy to be left alone. The Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Persians, Syrians, Sakas, Hunas, Turks and Mongols, and finally the Europeans (mainly French, Portuguese and British) came as explorers, traders, missionaries, and invaders: some left in a hurry, others stayed on for some time, while still others settled down among the natives and made the country their home. The colonizers from Central and West Asia stayed for more than three centuries (1526-1857), though many came, plundered and went away.

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the Europeans remained for almost a hundred years (1858-1947); while the Mughals stayed on and ruled some parts of North, West and South India, the Europeans edged out the Mughals, except for some princely kingdoms, and then transformed much of the subcontinent into the British Raj. All and sundry cultural and religious groups left their mark and even blended into the huge melting pot of native Aryan, Dravidian and tribal cultures. In their turn, Indians travelled to other parts of the world, including the countries that colonized India, giving rise to ‘old’ and ‘new’ diasporas of over 24 million in around a hundred countries, though largely concentrated in North America, Great Britain, South Africa, Fiji, Australia, West Asia and parts of South-East Asia. These Indians of the diaspora took their cultural and religious practices to countries around the world, adapting and re-adapting them over the centuries in terms of their needs and interests. Among these Indians of the diaspora were not only Hindus of various sects and denominations but also Muslims and Christians from different parts of the country.

This paper will focus on Christianity in India and how the religious experience of ‘Indian Christians’ within the context of this cultural diversity (though dominated by Hinduism) is reflected and perhaps shaped by its presence in the traditional and new digital social media.

Religious Dimensions of Culture: Christianity and Hinduism

In late July 2014, The Deputy Chief Minister of Goa, a Catholic and a member of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), raised the eyebrows of many Christians and minorities. He declared that ‘India is a Hindu nation’ and that he himself was a ‘Hindu’ though being a baptized Catholic. A few days earlier, another BJP loyalist and also from Goa, declared that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would make India a Hindu nation. More recently, other BJP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang (RSS) leaders, echoed these very same sentiments in public speeches and public fora. These include Yogi Adityanath, BJP member of parliament, Mohan Bhagwat, chief of the RSS; some have even advised Muslims and those who support them to go to Pakistan.

The current debate in India on Indian and Hindu identity raises several issues related to the religious dimensions of Indian culture and the cultural dimensions of Indian religions. The emergence of Hindu fundamentalism has been given a fillip by the victory of the BJP, the political arm of the Sangh Parivar. In public speeches and media talk shows, elected BJP leaders and RSS officials are making claims that ‘all Indians are Hindus’ and that ‘India is a Hindu nation.’ A Catholic member of parliament in the state of Goa, where a third of the population is Catholic, recently declared in public that he was a ‘Hindu.’ The only Muslim Minister in the Indian cabinet argued recently that ‘Indians are Hindu’ using the Arabic word for Indians. Earlier, the same Minister asserted that ‘there are no minorities in India.’

Religious and Cultural Hinduism

Such public statements raise questions about the cultural dimensions of religion (Hinduism) and the religious dimensions of ‘Indian’ culture. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, those questions do not have straightforward answers since for most Indians, religious or secular, there is little or no distinction between the two. They are seen as inseparable, the one and the same. Indeed, Indian languages do not have a distinct vocabulary for religion and culture. It is interesting that the Sanskrit scholar Wendy Doniger (2013), in her 660-page volume entitled On Hinduism has no entries at all for the terms ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ in the index of the book. One reason for this could be that, as Vishram Dhole (2006) argues, “there is no exact equivalent to ‘religion’ in Sanskrit or other Indian languages. The term instead is ‘Dharma’ which is very broad and interpreted in flexible ways. The word originates from the Sanskrit ‘Dhru’ (Dharayati) which means ‘to bear’ or ‘to be the basis of’ or ‘to nurture.’ Therefore, dharma takes into its ambit a whole range of ideas and actions leading to various interpretations.... Sometimes the term may bear no direct relevance to the divine or the spiritual.’ Dharma is ‘a code of conduct and thought,’ referring to ‘rights, responsibilities and duties of an individual in a particular situation and as member of a community or society’ (ibid.).

Who then is a ‘Hindu’ or what is ‘Hinduism’? Wendy Doniger in her two tomes on Hinduism, one of which has been withdrawn by Penguin India, states that Hindus are defined by geography, by texts and by practices. The name ‘Hinduism’ that we now use is of recent and European construction. Prior to the British, ‘few people in India defined themselves exclusively through their religious beliefs: their identities were segmented on the basis of locality, language, caste, occupation and sect. Even today... most people in the country would define themselves by allegiances other than religion’ (Doniger 2013, p. 3). The term ‘Hindu’ derives from a word for ‘river’ (Sindhu or the Indus). Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian called them ‘Hindoí’ while the ancient
Arabs and Persians used to refer to everyone who lived beyond the great river of the northeast of the subcontinent. “It was,” Doniger argues, “an outsider’s name for the people who inhabited the territory around the Indus river.” The Persians called the region ‘Hindustain’ (p. 7) and its people ‘Hindus’ as they still do today (Interestingly, as Doniger points out, Manu the code-giver, does not use the word ‘Hindu’).

Sometimes, the Hindus defined themselves by texts (p. 8) or by practices. In general though, Hindus have defined themselves not by beliefs, or even by geography, but by practices. Hindutva (Hindu-ness), however, is a political and nationalist ideology. As Ashish Nandy describes Hindutva: a modernist creed which seeks to retool, on behalf of the global nation-state system, Hinduism into a national ideology and Hindus into a ‘proper’ nationality (qtd. in Osuri 2012). For Vinay Lal, Hindutva is ‘political Hinduisms’ (ibid.), for Osuri it is ‘Hindu nationalism.’ For the founder of the RSS, Veer Damodar Savarkar, ‘Indian national identity must, at its foundation, be based on the political philosophy of Hindutva’ (qouted in Osuri 2013); this philosophy is not identical to Hinduism.

**Religious and Cultural Christianity**

Christianity in India is anything but a single whole or a monolithic entity (Frykenberg 2008, vii). Indian Christianity has three major branches: the Catholic (or Roman Catholic), the Orthodox and the Evangelical (also termed the Protestant). The Indian States of Kerala and Goa were the earliest parts of the country to turn to Christianity; Kerala from the days of The Doubting Thomas in the first century (52 AD) and Goa from the 16th century (cf. Fernando and Gispert-Sauch, 2004; Frykenberg, 2008 for a more detailed account of the history of Indian Christianity). These Christians of Kerala are the Thomas or Syrian Christians, one group following the Syrian rite, the other the Latin rite.

Further, Christianity within India is ‘Indian’ indigenous for the most part. “Christianity within India can be seen as rooted within the history of distinct ethnic communities, each different from the next. These are distinct peoples that have not or do not, as rule, intermarry or even interdine outside of their own community and often do not share many common memories or traditions” (Frykenberg, 2008, vii). The result for Christians has almost always been that they have tended to carry ‘dual identities’ or have become manifested as possessing ‘hybridized’ cultural features; moreover, since all ethnicities are ranked by degrees, into respectable and non-respectable, or polluting, categories or varnas (or ‘colours’), various Christian communities are also fitted into some category and ranked, whether they like it or not. In this respect, Christianity in India merely reflects the entire country and its multiple antiquities and legacies—which are very difficult to escape (ibid, p. viii).

The Christian community is just one of the many religious minority groups of India; it comprises barely 2.3% (24 million) of the entire population in comparison with Hindus who comprise 80.5% (one billion) and Muslims 13.4% (135 million). Yet, it is perhaps one of the most ‘visible’ in both urban and rural India, particularly in the south and north-eastern regions of the country. It remains ‘visible’ in terms of the prominence it exhibits in the public spaces. Churches, schools, colleges, hospitals, care centers and a host of other institutions scattered all across the country. In the public sphere too, Christian media institutions and professional personnel in both the traditional and new social media find a rather disproportionate space in comparison to its minority status.

It was perhaps in recognition of this service to the nation that in April 2014, the Vice-President publicly acknowledged this when he released a postage stamp commemorating the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the National Council of Churches, which represents all the Protestant and Orthodox Churches of India. The Catholic Church, which is the largest Christian denomination in India, is not a part of this Council but works closely with it when lobbying with the national government whenever the occasion arises. An ecumenical relationship pervades this collaboration.

Christian ownership in print and electronic media is limited to weekly or monthly publications from the metropolitan cities; hardly any TV channels are owned by Christian media groups. Yet, as a recent survey of news media professionals in the print and electronic media suggests, Christian participation in the Indian public sphere is much greater than that of any other religious minority.

According to this survey, most professional journalists in India belong to the higher castes. According to Robin Jeffreys’s (2000) survey of Indian journalists, this is perhaps why the interests of the poor and the dalits are rarely on the agenda of public discussion.

Jeffreys’s conclusion is confirmed in a survey conducted in June 2006 of 315 senior journalists working for 37 English and Hindi dailies and television news channels. The survey found that ‘India’s national media lacks social diversity
and does not reflect the country’s social profile... Hindu upper-caste men dominate the media. They are about 8% of the population but among the key decision makers of the national media; their share is as high as 71%. Twice-born Hindus (‘dwijas’ comprising Brahmans, Rajputs, Vaishyas and Khatrias) account for about 16% of the population but are 86% among key decision-makers. Brahmans (including Bhumiars and Tyagis) alone constitute 49% of key media personnel; if non-dwija forward castes like Marathas, Patels, Jats and Reddys are also added to this list, the total share of the upper-castes would be 88%. Dalits and adivasis are conspicuous by their absence among the decision makers: not even one of the sample of 315 journalists belonged to the SCs or STs. The proportion of the OBCs is abysmally low: only 4% compared to their population of around 43% in the country.’ Muslims comprise 13.4% of the population but have a share of only 4% in top media posts. However, the share of Christians who make up only 2.3% of the population is 4%. And women make up 17% of key decision makers in the media (Yadav, Chamaria and Kumar, 2006).

Indian Christianity Online

Heidi Campbell’s (2012) critical review of recent studies on ‘Internet and Religion’ in edited books and journals (comprising 109 articles and chapters) suggest that there are five clear themes that are explored in this literature. The dominant theme is the exploration of religious rituals and practices online (with as many as 49 articles). The conclusion Campbell draws from these 49 studies is that users’ tendency is to combine traditional and new forms of social and spiritual engagement in a type of ‘convergent practice.’ The second and third themes (with 16 and 15 articles respectively) relate to how the internet influences the definitions and understandings of religion, and the extent of interconnections or embeddedness of online and offline contexts.

The fourth and fifth are minor themes (with only 12 and 11 articles): the study of religious community and the study of identity. These explore how the internet facilitates new forms of community and how it contributes to “the fluid construction of religious identities.” Seven research articles are devoted to the question of authority in religion. They highlight “shifting understandings of authority related to the online context.”

In the context of Christians’ experience of using the Internet in India’s multi-religious situation, these five themes are relevant, though, hardly any such surveys of Christians’ use of the social media have been conducted; anecdotal accounts though abound. Where religious rituals and practices online are concerned, it is widely known that those with access to the digital media, make ‘online petitions’ to the Blessed Virgin and the saints. A search for ‘Apparitions of Our Lady’ does yield hundreds of results. Stories of online Confessions have been written about in the popular press, but there is little discussion of how ‘absolution’ is granted in cyberspace. Further, there is an abundance of religious hymns, sermons and prayers available online. The The Vatican has a YouTube channel (www.youtube/user/vatican) and if one searches for ‘Indian Christian movies’ one is given the choice of over 17 million religious films, feature length films, short films and clips. Moreover, several religious events are streamed ‘live’ by the Vatican and other Christian bodies. Most notable in recent months was the live coverage of the prayers for peace by Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders in the gardens of the Vatican. The global Catholic television network EWTN (www.youtube.com/EWTN), is also available as an app. The United Evangelical Church in Fellowship is yet another Christian community that has its own website (www.uecf.net). Among the websites openly hostile to Indian Christianity, the most virulent perhaps is the Hindutva site, www.indiachristianwatch.com.

However, as to what extent the Internet influences definitions and understandings of religion, it is difficult to pinpoint. It’s apparent though that offline religion does impact upon the online practices, and vice versa. Often, one ‘extends’ the other. Also, the extent to which online religion undermines the religious authority of official or religion online is unclear. The religious-social shaping approach to technology, taken by Heidi Campbell, takes into account the factors informing a religious community’s responses to new media—their relationship to community, authority, and text, and combines it with a social shaping approach that highlights the practices surrounding technology (Campbell 2013, pp. 41-42).

In the digital social media too, the Indian Christian presence is fairly significant. The thrust of religious sites is to promote both inter-religious and intra-religious communication, though addressed primarily to their own religious communities. However, the attempts to proselytize by the Evangelical Churches do take on aggressive overtones; so do the attempts by fundamentalist Hindu, Muslim and other religious groups. Popular sites for international and national news from a Christian perspective include www.christiantoday.co.in and www.ucannews.org. Further, most Catholic dioceses
in India, for instance, have launched websites of their own to inform and to inspire their congregations with news reports, articles and films. These are instances of what Campbell (2013) and others term ‘religion online.’ Then there are deeply personal expressions of religion and spirituality, termed ‘online religion’ (ibid.) in the form of blogs, forums, tweets and social network sites. These provide what Stewart Hoover (2013) calls a ‘generative space for religion.’ “What is new and what is different about the digital’ states Hoover “is the extent to which it encourages new modes of practice, and that it is practice that defines what is going on and not the symbols, not the history, not the authority. We need to explore the generativity of digital religion, and how ‘it’ becomes a complex expression of nuance and constantly layered practice of interacting with tradition, quoting religion, particularizing religion, coming up with new and elastic forms of tradition. We need to explore more how the digital serves as a generative space for religion, and how we can actually generate meaning from online engagement and interaction” (Hoover, 2013, p. 267).

**Religion on Indian Television**

Religious programs do comprise a popular genre in the Indian context. In recent years a number of religious channels (one estimate suggests that there as many as 35 channels) have drawn millions of the faithful, each to his own religion. The Christian evangelical channels of the United States such as God TV, Miracle TV and TBN (Trinity Broadcasting Network) and the Catholic channel EWTN set the trend for other religious denominations. The major elements that make up religious TV programs are discourses, readings from the scriptures, rituals and services, the singing of bhajans, and finally the request for donations. Some channels have introduced programmes on Ayurveda, Yoga, Vastu and Astrological Forecasts. Panjabi channels transmit the ‘Gurbani’ direct from the Golden Temple. Among the top Hinduism-oriented religious channels are: Sanskaar, Aastha, Zee Jagran, Jain TV; the main Christian channels include Jesus Calls, GOD, Miracle, TCTV (Tamil Christian TV), PowerVision and Velugu TV. Most channels do not produce their own programmes; rather, they sell television time to religious leaders and sects that can afford to pay upfront for time-slots. So, for instance, Jain TV sells time-slots to Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Sikh groups. This business strategy of religious channels appears to be paying dividends.

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<tr>
<th>Major Religious Channels</th>
<th>Main Religious TV Genres</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Ashirwaad</td>
<td>1. Religious Discourses / Pravachans</td>
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<td>2. Aastha</td>
<td>2. Bhajans / Hymns</td>
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<td>4. Jagran (Zee Network)</td>
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<td>5. Jesus Calls</td>
<td>5. Yoga</td>
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<td>8. TCTV</td>
<td>8. Religious/Mythological Movies</td>
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<td>10. QTV</td>
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**Conclusion**

Unravelling the religious dimension of Indian culture or the ‘cultural’ dimension of multi-religious India is no easy task for the social scientist. The religious and the cultural are so intertwined in the Indian historical experience that to separate one dimension from the other is problematic, particularly at a time when the country is witnessing a rise in religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism. Any talk now about either ‘culture’ or ‘religion’ turns immediately ‘political.’ Indeed, the politicization of the public sphere has made serious discussion about the need for dialogue between and among the major religious groups (Hinduism, Islam and Christianity) well-nigh impossible.

A Christian or a Muslim citizen of India (or for that matter a Sikh, Jain, Zorastrian or Jew) has as much claim to being ‘Indian’ as the members of the majority Hindu community. True, etymologically the terms ‘India’ and ‘Indian’ can be traced to the geographic term for the river Sindhu (later Hindu) preferred by the Greeks, Arabs and Persians for its people, but in contemporary India with political Hinduism on the rise, Christians or Muslims who declare that they are ‘Hindus’ are playing into the hands of fundamentalist forces. This is precisely what such forces want to hear and then to capitalize on such declarations to propagate their kind of ‘cultural nationalism.’ As James (2010) in his analysis of the competitive media campaigns of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity in India reveals, several promotional strategies by the Hindutva brigade are borrowed from Christian evangelical churches in the United States. Religious television channels and digital social media while propagating a militant form of Hinduism have taken a leaf out of American televangelists;
they reflect the language and tenor the ‘hellfire and brimstone’ discourse of these evangelists. Such is the practice of ‘Internet Hindus’ in the social media where hate-speech rather than any talk of peace, love, and dialogue rules cyberspace. Religion online and online religion, while extending the practices of offline religion, have proved to be a mixed blessing indeed.

References


Religious Aspects of Chinese New Year Celebration

John Mi Shen

Chinese New Year, also known as Spring Festival, is a traditional typical Chinese festival which has been celebrated for over 4000 years. There are many versions of its origin among which is the commonly accepted version that it originated from the time of Yu and Shun (21 BC). Usually, Spring Festival falls on the 1st day of January in the lunar calendar and also called “passing the year.” However, traditionally in the folk, Spring Festival extends from offering sacrifices to ancestors or kitchen god worshiping (the 23rd day or 24th day of the 12th lunar month) to the 19th day of the first month of lunar year and culminates in New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day in the Chinese lunar calendar.

The Spring Festival has been influenced, to some degree, by varieties of religious cultures during the period of its formation and evolution. New Year Celebration originated in the totem worship with the original form—offering sacrifices to gods or ancestors. The celebration of worship mainly manifests that humankind show their respect, worship and fear of the supernatural powers which have the ability to dominate human’s destiny and all kinds of natural phenomena.

Laba Festival

Laba Festival is the prelude to the Spring Festival with the popular name “Lari Festival.” In ancient China, the sacrifice offering to gods at the end of the year is called “蜡” (la) while the sacrifice offering to ancestors is called “腊” (la). In Chinese culture, people attach importance to the sacrifice offering to gods.