

# Can Hinduism face the onslaught of Project Thessalonica?

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Some months back I watched a documentary which aired an interview with a young Palestinian terrorist. Most people would be appalled simply at the fact that someone who had killed innocent people is being treated like a celebrity and given an opportunity to "explain" himself. But what was more shocking was that he showed absolutely no remorse for having killed innocent people on the streets of Israel, including women and children. Worse still was the fact that even the parents of those youngsters supported the violent activities of their children. The reason: they were simply doing their religious duty as true Muslims. For them killing an innocent bystander is Jihad, the God-ordained religious duty of every Muslim.

I was born to Catholic parents and raised by a missionary Catholic mother and an abusive, born-again Christian, who I will refer to only as "my mother's husband". I was raised in an "ideal" Christian environment, and would have followed my parents' footsteps and would have spread hate against other religions, if it weren't for a fortuitous meeting I had with a Chinese friend of my dorm roommate. Little did I realize then that the chance encounter would end up being a turning point in my life.

The Chinese student was Buddhist who talked about meditation and its advantages. Finding it curious I checked with my University library for some books on meditation. After some searching, I found a book on Transcendental Meditation (TM), a meditation technique founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. That book sparked a profound spiritual and emotional transformation in me and I have never looked back. My thirst for knowledge led me to read more about TM and its roots in Hinduism. I started reading every book on Hinduism I could lay my hands on. In the Ramayana, I came across the life of Lord Rama and his only wife Sita. Hindus consider Rama and Sita to be the ideal couple and the path shown by them as the perfect man-woman relationship. It was a refreshing change from the abusive relationship I had witnessed and experienced in my own christian family.

The wisdom and spirituality that I found in Hinduism has no parallels. There is practically no aspect of life that is not dealt with in detail by the innumerable texts that are a part of Hinduism. There are texts which deal with the mundane aspects of day-to-day living and those which deal with more profound questions such as those about life and death. To me, the most fascinating aspect of Hinduism was that it was inclusive, respectful and tolerant of all people and their various beliefs, in stark contrast to the exclusivity that pervaded my native religion. Unfortunately the adherents of the latter seem to be on a mission to destroy Hinduism.

Josh, my childhood friend with whom I communicate frequently was trained in a seminary is currently a Baptist missionary. I met Josh during my recent trip to USA. He had just returned from India and was going back again in November. Much of our conversation centered on his current assignment as

part of something called Project Thessalonica. Josh was very passionate when he spoke of Project Thessalonica - passionate in a scary kind of way. In his eyes I could see the same resolve that was visible in the Palestinian terrorist in the interview.

Project Thessalonica is a sub-project of Joshua Project II. Joshua Project II set the scope and strategy for converting the "heathen" of the world in 10-40 window (regions that lie between the latitudes of 10 and 40 degrees north) whereas project Thessalonica (called PT) prioritizes the tasks to be taken. Joshua project II strategized the methodology called 'Adopt-a-peoples' wherein every mission agency or church adopted a 'people group'. Tribals were the first and easy missionary targets. Unfortunately the missionary activity didn't weaken Hinduism as the church strategists had anticipated - many of the converts still celebrated and attended Hindu festivals and continued to follow Hindu traditions. As a counter measure Project Thessalonica was started in 2004. Before getting into the details of Project Thessalonica it will be useful to look at the origins of the name of the project.

Thessalonica was a major port city strategically located at the junction of the main land route from Italy to the east and the main route from the Danube down to the Aegean Sea. It was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, a free city ruled by a popular assembly and magistrates. The people of this city were rich, technologically advanced and culturally distinct. Paul and Silas, during the Apostle's second missionary journey, visited Thessalonica to preach the Gospel and propagate Christianity. However, Paul's teachings received a lukewarm response from the people. Some locals irritated by Paul's teachings got a hold of Jason and his brothers, who were hosting Paul, and took them to city officials. They were charged with harbouring traitors, but faced no physical harm. They were eventually made to post a bond and set free. In 390 AD, the Christian ruler Theodosius the Great, punished a revolt by the inhabitants of the city by massacring more than 7000 people. Much of the city was eventually converted to Christianity.

A few observations about the city of Thessalonica at the time of Paul will make its relevance to today's world clear. First the city was strategically located in terms of access to other cities by both land and sea. Before their forced conversion to Christianity, its inhabitants were economically and culturally prosperous. Perhaps more importantly they were tolerant, which explains why, inspite of provocation, the lives of Paul, Jason and his brothers were spared. The government was also indifferent to the missionaries and the adverse impact of their activities on the people.

Hindus in India today are in the same situation as the people of Thessalonica found themselves in at the time of Paul. They are prosperous economically and culturally and extremely tolerant of other people and faiths. The government is completely indifferent to the activities of the missionaries in India, in spite of the tremendous damage that missionary activity has wrought on the local population all over India. Seen in this context, the choice of "Thessalonica" as a name for a project focused on converting Hindus of India to Christianity seems particularly apt.

Project Thessalonica aims to stop or limit Hindu activity by converting people who form the pillars of Hindu culture, festivals, traditions and activity. Traditionally missionaries hate any public expression or display of heathen religions in the form of festivals and temples. Missions want to ensure that no new temple construction activity starts. With this objective they are converting masons, craftsmen and others involved in temple

construction activity. The First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tennessee adopted towns where the annual Kumbh Mela takes place and has been actively converting the locals so that visitors face extreme hardship during their next visit trying to find services and supplies. Another mission group is adopting boatmen of Kasi where Hindus drop rice balls in river Ganges as an offering to their forefathers. The boatmen are being trained in other fields so that they abandon this profession. They are making environmental groups raise the voice so that Ganesh processions, Kumbh Melas and Jagannath Rath Yatras are limited. One big worry seems to be the extremely popular Hindu television programs. Christian agencies have decided on buying these prime slots at a premium and are actively working with programming sources. Over the past 20 years, missionaries also appear to have invested a lot in handling the political leadership. So much so that their activities appear to be almost immune to the ruling political party. It seems that a good section of media is also on their side to such an extent that any group opposing their activity finds itself identified as a militant or extremist group in the news media.

My friend Josh doesn't have any sense of remorse, guilt or reasoning when he speaks about converting the "heathens" of India through any means. Instead he shows a sense of pride and achievement as he believes that he is simply implementing God's word as written in the Bible. Just like the Islamic terrorist in the interview.

With Christian Jihadis like Josh at the forefront of missionary activities in India, one can only hope that Hindus don't face the same fate as the people of Thessalonica.

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