

FCI

St Thomas of India Unity Lecture 2012

A summary of the lecture appears at the end of the full text.

“A Driver’s Manual for the Indian Road: Bishop Appasamy and Comparative Theology in India Today”

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I first learned to drive when I was sixteen years old. With the help of a manual, an instructor and carefully controlled after-school driving lessons, I learned how to check my mirrors, indicate, make safe and considerate lane changes, parallel park and ultimately to merge at highway speed into the four-lane traffic of the Trans-Canada Highway. Thirteen years later, when I moved to India with my young family for a seven-year term of work at an international school, I learned quickly that if I were ever to dare to pull a motorized vehicle out onto the Indian Road I would have to learn to drive all over again. All bets were off. Cows, dogs, rickshaws, children playing in gutters, Tata trucks overloaded with falling stalks of sugar cane – the Indian Road posed challenges that the Young Drivers of Canada manual knew nothing about, and could not even begin to imagine. It was a bewildering new language game of ‘rock, paper, scissors’ in which larger, faster and louder vehicles trump smaller and slower ones, unless, of course, those smaller and slower vehicles happen to be oblivious, meandering cows or *kaanvar* pilgrims carrying pots of Ganga water. It is not as though there are *no* rules for the Indian road. There are a few very obvious ones, and these I hope to present to you today.

These two roads will serve as a framing analogy with which to address the purpose of this, the eighth triennial St. Thomas Unity Lecture presented by the Friends of the Church of India. The lecture’s purpose, I am told, is to “enable the British and Irish churches to learn something from the ecumenical unity of the united churches in the sub-continent”. While it is certainly the hope that my address will fulfill this purpose, at the same time I also hope that what I have to say here today might be of use and encouragement to those of you who claim no membership in any church at all, or who belong to other religious traditions. It is obvious *what* the overarching purpose of a ‘Unity’ lecture is, but I would like to approach it from a more counter-intuitive angle – not on the basis of unity, but plurality. Contrary to what many believe, plurality is not the enemy of unity. It is, rather, its ultimate test. And there is no plurality quite like the Indian road. If you learn to drive in a place like Canada then you can safely drive in other places like Canada. But if you can drive in India, you can drive anywhere. In

more academic terms, I would like to present to you a mode of inter-religious scholarship known as 'comparative theology'. And I would like to do so with reference to the life and writings of an important Tamil Christian theologian named Ayadurai Jesudason Appasamy (1891-1975).

You have every right to wonder what in the world an American-born Canadian who currently calls Northwestern Ontario 'home' is doing talking to you about a Tamil Christian theologian from last century. Well, to make that very long story short, I grew up in North India with the foothills of the Himalayas as my second home, and Hindi as my second language. More to the point, as far as FCI is concerned, I was confirmed at the age of fourteen into the Church of North India by the Bishop of Agra Diocese, where, so far as I know, my church membership remains to this day. I am, thus, what one might call a hybrid, a 'third-culture kid' still trying to reconcile the many places I have called 'home'. This hybrid identity has made me both naturally suspicious of the absoluteness and self-confidence of settled, centrist packages of 'orthodoxy,' as well as irresistibly draws me to the in-between, the interstitial spaces where traditions, cultures and languages meet in real and vital exchange. It was in these interstitial spaces that I first came across the writings of Appasamy. Although he was a Harvard, Oxford and Marburg trained theologian, and taught for a number of years at Bishop's College, Calcutta, his vocation was not only an academic one, but a pastoral one as well. He served as an Anglican priest prior to Independence and, post-Independence, as the first Bishop of Coimbatore in the united Church of South India. Notable Indian Christian theologian M. M. Thomas describes the Bishop as being "perhaps the first systematically trained Indian theologian to have made a pioneering contribution to indigenous theology with professional competence".^[1] I propose that the pioneering contribution of which Thomas speaks also has much to say with regards to the stated purpose of this lecture. For lack of any driver's training manual for the Indian road, I have found in Appasamy an instructor of sorts, a guide and guru by which to engage its bewildering plurality.

So, what indeed do the British and Irish churches have to learn from the ecumenical unity of the united churches in the sub-continent? We shall have to wend our way towards an eventual answer to that. But first, it is my belief that if Bishop Appasamy were delivering the Lecture here today he would want to push that question back even further. What do *all* of these churches have *yet* to learn from the Subcontinent itself, for it was his lifelong conviction that he, as a Christian theologian and *bhakta* ('devotee') of Christ, had much indeed to learn from the living traditions of his homeland. Working from the premise that doctrines, theological systems and even ecumenical creeds are largely cultural and linguistic negotiations, and that these are therefore provisional rather than permanent or universal constructs, Appasamy dreamed of a day when the Indian Church, knowledgeable and conversant

in the Hindu traditions, could formulate its own systematic interpretive frameworks. He dreamed of a church that could write its own theology, as he puts it, “answering the questions thrown out by the Hindu mind.”^[2] For only then, he says, “will a Creed, truly Christian and truly Indian, emerge.” It was a time of ferment and change, of urgent calls for Independence, and Appasamy, no less than his compatriots, was calling for the Indian Church’s own urgent need for theological independence, for the freedom to think and believe for itself.

His earliest theological interest was in recasting Christianity as a living *bhakti* (‘devotional’) tradition deeply rooted in the soil of the Subcontinent. From the 1920’s to 1940’s he published a series of interesting books to this end including *Christianity As Bhakti Marga*, *What Is Moksa?*, and *The Gospel and India’s Heritage*. Throughout these, his pre-Independence writings, his focus was mainly on the content of theology – on rethinking his own views on Incarnation and Sacrament by learning from the language, analogy and idiom of the *bhakti* traditions and, more specifically, from the great 12th century Srivaisnava reformer, Ramanuja. What he eventually produced out of this engagement was a challenging and original four-fold approach to the doctrine of divine embodiment, in his own words a “Christological reconstruction” in light of what he found in Ramanuja. Using Ramanuja’s celebrated analogy of the ‘Body of God,’ Appasamy developed a way to explain how and to what extent God can be described as present in the world. The Universe, the Incarnation, the Eucharist and the Church can all in distinct, yet interconnected ways be understood as being the ‘Body of God’.^[3] While there is certainly much of interest and value to be considered in the content of Appasamy’s early work, that is a lecture for another time. It is the comparative method that he developed over the course of his career and especially post-Independence that I would like to draw your attention to here today. It is an approach that has much to commend it and one that is, in my view, akin to and perhaps even prototypical of what is today being called ‘comparative theology’. So that is it by way of introductions. Before proceeding any further it is necessary to define what, precisely, is meant by our term ‘comparative theology’. Two encapsulating statements should serve by way of introduction, the first from Appasamy, and the second from one of the current leading comparative theologians, American Jesuit scholar, Francis Clooney.

In his soteriological study from 1931 entitled *What is Moksa?*, Appasamy, then a young Anglican priest about to take up his teaching post in Calcutta, first outlined his three-stage comparative approach.^[4] Rather than dismissing the Hindu traditions out of hand with contemptuous terms such as ‘idolatry’ or ‘superstition,’ Appasamy makes the modest proposal that perhaps a healthy agnosticism is more appropriate towards what he describes as the “open questions”. Both Indian Christian and missionary

alike need now to take the time to actually read and explore the Hindu texts and beliefs with the purpose of finding out, in order:

1. "...what this doctrine really means..."
2. "...what it purposes to achieve and ...
3. "...whether our Christian doctrines should not be thought out again in relation to this idea... We should not be content to turn down in contempt all the vast tracts of doctrine and practice in India ... we should rethink our [Christian] fundamental ideas in relation to them [the Hindu concepts]."[\[5\]](#)

At this early stage of his career he has not yet considered the mechanics of his method. This will come later. What he *does* have is the intuition of it, the very clear sense that he has much to learn from the Hindu traditions, and that an encounter with these ought rightly to help him rethink and rearticulate his own position. Consider Appasamy's statement now next to Francis Clooney's described method nearly seventy years later. In his landmark book, *Seeing Through Texts*, Clooney describes comparative theology as: "... a theology that remains rooted in one tradition while seriously engaging another tradition and allowing that engagement to affect one's original commitments".[\[6\]](#) Fourteen years later, in his most recent 2010 book *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* Clooney adds to this that the comparative theologian engages in:

"...acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition."[\[7\]](#)

The similarities here are striking. Appasamy calls, in his context, for serious theological study of the Hindu texts in order to rethink what he calls the 'fundamental ideas' of his own. Clooney opens himself up to the possibility that theological dialogue with other traditions may bring 'fresh theological insights' to that of his own. Both propose a mode of theology that is expressly heuristic, especially in its initial stages, a journey of discovery with both the risk and promise that this comparative encounter will potentially challenge, sharpen or even radically change the understanding and articulation of the 'home tradition', and possibly even of all the traditions involved. This is comparative theology.

It is not my purpose here to try and reinvent Appasamy as a visionary who foresaw post-Critical comparative theology decades ahead of his time. With his early emphasis on 'mysticism' and an experiential focus on the 'phenomena' of religion, it is clear that the Bishop was, in fact, in many ways very much a man of his times. What Appasamy was searching for, rather, throughout his career, was a method with which to do the sort of comparative work he was envisioning. But for lack of any Western analogue in 'comparative religion' or 'phenomenology of religions' he was forced to improvise. But he did so by first looking back into the Indian traditions themselves and found in them a much more ancient model of discourse. The approach the Bishop had been developing, notably after his Episcopacy, would borrow increasingly from the classical Indian notion of a *vada*, an intellectual 'discourse' conducted within, between and across traditions (*sampradayas*). Not all *vadas* are theological, of course, but depending on how one defines 'theology,' again a paper for another time, many if not most of the historic Indian traditions have been engaging in something that looks a lot like the sort of discourse that both Appasamy and later Clooney would describe. Being a *bhakta* of Christ, although Appasamy remains convinced throughout his career of the uniqueness of the Christian revelation, the mode of discourse that he is undertaking here is nothing new to the Indian scene. He sees himself then as simply taking his place in that ancient discourse already well underway.

Now back to the Indian road. There are three cardinal rules, all of which find useful application in the practice of comparative theology as well. These are, in order:

1. Slow down and share the road
2. Know the exact dimensions of your vehicle
3. Horn please

The first of these rules, as a road sign on Rajpur Road outside of Dehra Dun advises us, is to "speed slowly". Because all creatures of our God and King are on the Indian road, all at varying top speeds, everything has to move much, much slower - and not just slower, but closer as well. Unlike the wide-berth of the fast lane on a sprawling Canadian highway, driving in India is almost always up close and personal. Analogous to that, scholars can theorize from a safe academic distance all they want about larger artificial groupings called 'religions', but when it comes to actual encounter, it is all about real historic traditions as lived, reasoned and practiced. Comparative theology thus avoids the artificial tidiness of academic groupings called 'religions' and embraces the slower, messier business of particular engagement between particular thinkers, texts and traditions. Appasamy

learned to do this over the course of his career. As his work matures it is less about the convenient shorthand of 'Christianity' and 'Hinduism' and more about how his post-*Lux Mundi* Anglican sacramental theology encounters different traditions of *bhakti*. His penultimate book is a primer of the distinct Hindu *bhakti* traditions in which he both explains their historic and textual roots as well as interacts with them as distinct theological systems.

Appasamy would do more than simply theorize, however, again from safe academic distance, by reading ancient texts in dusty libraries. He would demonstrate in actual interaction, again up close and personal, with flesh and blood proponents of the traditions themselves. His repeated appeal to all who would hold stake in the Indian Church was thus to no longer simply theologize *about* the Hindu traditions, but to actually work out their theology *with* and *among* them. With Srivaisnava devotees being his actual and not theoretical neighbors, and Saiva ones actually being members of his own extended family, this was quite simply a matter of necessity, and this he did from the start. Although he began his study of the *bhakti* traditions at Oxford and Marburg, it was not until he returned to India, in the late 1920's and early 30's, that he undertook his more focused study of Ramanuja's texts from Sanskrit pundits in his own hometown of Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu.^[8] More along the lines of actual comparative encounter across traditions he mentions an initiative, in 1934, that he calls a "school of religions" in Darjeeling, and in 1939, the Christian Society For the Study of Hinduism based out of Benares,^[9] to which he regularly invited *sadhus* and *swamis* to share something from their particular tradition. Appasamy's approach was slower, messier and less predictable than what 'comparative religions' of his day was doing in colleges and seminaries, but I would suggest that it was an approach much more suited for the Indian road.

What Appasamy is trying to model here is an Indian Christianity that has learned, or at least is learning to do theology within the forms and conventions of a more recognizably Indian dialectic. This is precisely what Amartya Sen describes in his recent book, *The Argumentative Indian*, as "the Indian argumentative tradition".^[10] As he matures in his theological position Appasamy also increasingly demonstrates how a uniquely Indian form of Christianity might think and express itself *in the mode of* a discourse such as Vedanta. To be clear, this is not purporting to be some sort of 'Christian Vedanta' as Bede Griffiths and others have, in my view, incorrectly claimed. He is not a Christian pretending to be a Vedantin. Rather, what he is proposing is that Indian Christians need now to learn *how* to do theology from traditions such as the various schools of Vedanta that have engaged in reasoning about revelation between and across traditions. This brings us to the next cardinal rule of the Indian road.

The driver on the Indian road needs to know, down to the centimeter, the exact dimensions of the vehicle he or she is driving. What is the size and shape of this negotiation? And that is exactly what it is – a negotiation. So, too, must the comparative theologian know the size and shape of the theological discourse that is being undertaken. With the publication of two insightful journal articles, 1949's "Pramanas" and 1953's "The Christian Pramanas",^[11] Appasamy proposes a rediscovery and application of the widely recognized epistemological categories known in Sanskrit as *pramanas* ('evidences' or 'sources of knowledge'). The *pramanas* would become increasingly important in his thinking as his thought develops, and was in fact even the subject of his final publication, 1971's *What Shall We Believe? A Study of the Christian Pramanas*. In this mature study, as he puts it succinctly, "the primary task of Christian theology in India today is to settle the sources of our authority."^[12]

He is not trying to replicate in his Christian context the *pramanas* as historically practiced in any one of the Indian argumentative traditions. Rather, he is reimagining them under the conviction that the Christian theologian in India must now learn to think clearly about these, just as proponents of the multiple *darsanas* ('philosophical schools') and *vadas* of the Subcontinent have historically done. During the course of commentarial exegesis, and often even before a proponent asserts anything at all, epistemological authorities, *pramanas*, are declared, ordered and appealed to. In doing so the proponent also defines the shape and scope of the discourse. Whilst there is no standardized list or order for the *pramanas* that the historic Hindu *darsanas* will agree on, there are a few that are shared across the traditions, or at least that can be recognized as cognates between them. Historically, these have been identified as *sabda* ('verbal testimony'), *anumana* ('logical inference') and *pratyaksa* ('perception'). Appasamy, in Christian application of these, offers three more popularly understood terms - *sruti* (sacred Text), *yukti* ('reasoned analysis') and *anubhava* ('experience'),^[13] and in that order. Affirming these three, 'Scripture,' 'Reason' and 'Experience' as being what he calls the correct "psychological order",^[14] Appasamy makes his own original contribution to add to these a fourth *pramana* as shall be examined shortly. Bearing in mind that these are what he, himself, calls the 'Christian Pramanas', the following list and description is taken from his 1971 study.

The *Srutipramana* takes priority according to the Bishop.^[15] *Sruti* meaning 'heard' refers to the authority of the sacred Text as *heard* and faithfully transmitted by Rishis, Apostles or Prophets. In this he is quite right to observe that this is not a uniquely Judeo-Christian obsession, but that Ramanuja, indeed like many other Indian commentators, has also upheld the primary importance of the Text.^[16] Like his Vedantin counterpart, the

Indian Christian theologian is primarily in this regard an exegete, and the theological discourse that is its result is always to be rooted in a tradition's notion of 'Revelation'. In argumentation analysis this would constitute what is called the first-order discourse. On the other hand, by situating *Sruti* as the first among four *pramanas*, it is also clear that Appasamy does not subscribe to an unexamined *sola scriptura* version of fideism. For even as he insists on the primacy of the Text he also knows that he must think clearly and not disingenuously about the hermeneutical lenses through which he is reading it.

In his repeated and increasing emphasis on the communal nature of a Christian *bhakti* tradition in India Appasamy next makes the original and, in my view, very important contribution that Indian Christians should add to the three *pramanas* a fourth – *sabha* (usually rendered 'meeting' or 'council'), and that this must immediately follow Scripture in its priority. What he means to emphasize here is the role that sectarian traditions play in how texts are read and practiced. If there is a *magisterium* to which an exegete is ultimately accountable, or if there are texts beneath texts, as in Ramanuja's case, then it is best to be honest and clear about that, declaring them at the outset. It is, of course, a valid question as to whether a tradition's authority even needs to be identified as a separate *pramana*. For in the historic traditions, this would usually be understood as implicit to *sabda* or *sruti*. Again, Appasamy is not trying to replicate here. He is adapting and improvising. But it *is*, in my view, an important distinction, for in a post-Critical age in which there is no such thing as a so-called objective 'view from nowhere', academic integrity now demands a declaration of intentions and hermeneutical framework. In this the Bishop proves, once again, to be quite prescient. Ranking communal 'tradition' as second in his descending list of *pramanas*, he has come up with a framework by which to examine theological discourse, but only as it comes already embedded and embodied within the praxis of the communities that have shaped and been shaped by it. Here is what would be called the second-order discourse of traditions reasoning about 'Revelation' and its claims.

His third *pramana*, *yukti*, literally 'connection' or 'relation,' has the sense of 'logical reasoning' or 'analysis'. As Appasamy applies it is to be understood in two senses. The first of these, in Appasamy's words, is the recognition of "a real need for a scientific study of religion". Anthropological studies, philology, the natural sciences, history of religions, all these bring a necessary corrective to the theologian's committed position. Here is that third-order discourse that multi-disciplinary resources can and *must* bring to both a robust and reflexive theological reasoning. This must all the more so be the case if the comparative theologian is to remain fair and honest in his or her journey into another's theological terrain. Secondarily, *yukti* is also applied in much the same manner as Aquinas' Aristotelian philosophical

framework or Augustine's Neo-Platonist one was. In this sense, along with its primary definition of 'reasoned thought' or 'inference', *yukti* becomes that uncharted territory where a tradition can be freshly reasoned and imagined with new analogies, philosophical frameworks and lexicons. If Aquinas' application of Aristotelian logic and metaphysics could produce a *Summa Theologica*, then what might an Indian Christian's encounter with Ramanuja produce? What if Aquinas' 'Aristotle' had been Ramanuja? How, after all, are Plato and Aristotle any more 'Christian' than Sankara or Ramanuja?

Finally, with *anubhava*, he establishes 'experience' as an important yet limited means through which knowledge is obtained. Appasamy was very interested in the notion of 'mystical' or 'religious' experience as his lifelong admiration of his friend and mentor Sadhu Sundar Singh attests. Mystical experience was, in fact, his starting place. His Oxford DPhil thesis, after all, indebted to the essentialist framework of Rudolf Otto, was entitled "The Mysticism of Hindu Bhakti". But the Bishop developed a career-long theological answer and alternative to his early essentialist training. By prioritizing *sruti*, *sabha*, and *yukti* over *anubhava*, he has de-emphasized and effectively demoted the primacy of 'religious experience' as found in Otto, and the Friedrich's Heiler and von Hugel. Almost in anticipation of what George Lindbeck, Fergus Kerr, Francis Clooney and other post-Wittgensteinian theologians have said more recently, Appasamy makes it clear in his mature work that religious language mediates and even in some way *precedes* religious experience and not the other way around. As a theologian who believes in the revelation of God in Christ he cannot say that tradition and language actually creates or generates the divine. What he has learned, however, is that we cannot really speak of an experience of the divine outside of the semiotic systems of language, text and tradition. In doing so he has also put the existentialist priority of the individual in its place by situating 'experience' within these communally inscribed realities. In a number of contexts Appasamy makes it very clear that he has little time for Plotinus' notion of religion as being the lonely transcendent ego's "flight of the alone to the Alone".

With his four *pramanas* now set – *sruti*, *sabha*, *yukti* and *anubhava* – and in that order, the Bishop has set out an epistemological framework by which first-, second- and third-order discourses all provide valid and appropriate resources for the Indian comparative theologian. The astute listener will have noticed a distinct similarity between the Bishop's *pramanas* and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, but again, that is a paper for another time. The prioritization of *Sruti* and *Sabha* over *Yukti* and *Anubhava* ensures that the discourse is always theological, and always in some way responsible to the traditions with which it is in dialogue. The *pramanas* thus provide a structure with which to think clearly about the kind of comparative study that is being undertaken. Is it an intra- or inter-textual study? Is it taking into account

sectarian sources such as Ramanuja's Srivaisnava *Pancaratra* texts, or is it confining itself to the wider Vedantic discourse alone? Is there a *magisterium* that has a final say on how scriptures are to be interpreted? In other words, should *sabha* take priority over *sruti*? Or are these both of a piece? In any number of dialogical configurations, the point here is that the driver on the Indian road needs to know the exact dimensions of his or her vehicle, for comparative encounters such as this will lead to some fairly close contact.

I would like to return now, once again, to our two roads. The wide-berthed law-enforced tidiness of the Canadian road, I have discovered, hides beneath its civil and usually predictable surface an uneasy social contract, a tolerance of the other that is easily and instantly shattered. An unexpected and inconsiderate lane change or failure to indicate a turn, can induce in otherwise rational and mild-mannered Canadians a surprising and irrational 'road rage'. On the Canadian road when one hears the blast of a horn it is almost always translatable as the rough and ready equivalent of a rude hand gesture. By contrast, on the Indian road, disguised beneath what seems like nothing short of chaos to the uninitiated, there is a different sort of social contract that allows vehicles of all speeds and species to share the same public space with stoic resolve. While pedestrians take their chances, and are numbered among either the 'quick or the dead,' most who share the road return to their homes safely at night, for as the road sign on the way to Delhi says "Safety on road, means 'safe tea' at home". And we do love our chai. By contrast to the Canadian road, on the Indian road one 'plays' the horn as one would an instrument, and that is the correct Hindi verb - 'horun bajaana'. It is a statement of existence. I honk therefore I am. This brings us to our third and final rule for safe driving. As the back of nearly every Tata truck in India will implore you, "Horn Please", *horun bajao*.

The Indian argumentative tradition was no politically correct mutual admiration society tiptoeing through the minefield of each other's truth claims. Even a cursory reading of the various Vedantic schools of exegesis should quickly disabuse a secularist reader of the misguided notion that 'respect' and 'tolerance' means simply 'to let someone believe whatever they want'. In Vedantic discourse 'respect', ultimately, is shown to another's system only by interacting with it, with the explicit and quite unapologetic goal, in many cases, of dismantling and refuting it. To give a sense of the sort of rhetoric we are dealing with here, in his opening salvo against Sankara's views on undifferentiated Brahman and the ultimate unreality of the universe, Ramanuja calls his opponent's position a "fictitious foundation of altogether hollow and vicious arguments... devised by men who are destitute of those particular qualities which cause individuals to be chosen by the Supreme Person... whose intellects are darkened by the impression of beginningless evil...".[\[17\]](#) Vedantic discourse is, as one can readily see,

anything but irenic. Instead of 'comparative theology' perhaps it should, more accurately, be called 'competitive theology'.

The Indian argumentative tradition must eventually come down to argument. This is not merely a Vedantic, in house sort of argument, fighting as only a family can fight with itself. The *Suttas* of classical Buddhism are full of episode after episode of the Buddha and his disciples demolishing what are ostensibly the current Vedic and Jain arguments against his *dharma*. Just as every vehicle on the Indian road is jostling for space and claims to have the right to be ahead of you, so too do the Indian traditions feel quite free to actually say something. They declare and assert themselves, and expect others to do the same. Horn please! On the Indian road, the horn is not an insult. It is a courtesy. Here is where I would like to build on Appasamy's pramanic proposal by making a proposal of my own. Just as there is an honesty in declaring one's epistemological authorities, one's *pramanas*, so too must there be an honesty in argumentation. At least since Sankara's and Ramanuja's centuries, the Indian argumentative traditions have employed a dialectic cycle that usually takes place in three stages. First, the inquirer sets up his opponent's viewpoint in a formal section known as the *purva paksa* (literally 'previous wing'). This is then responded to in a subsequent, although not always discrete, section known as the *uttara paksa* ('later wing'), which functions as an 'on the other hand' sort of statement. Finally, the enquirer's own viewpoint is then clarified and expounded as a result of this engagement in what is known as the *siddhanta* ('established view').[\[18\]](#)

By shifting the purpose of this dialectic cycle slightly from refutation to reconstruction (Appasamy's word), from polemical competition to comparative encounter, I propose that this structure might serve as a very useful and recognizably Indian approach with which to do comparative theology in India today. The comparative theologian is journeying out from an established position for the purpose of discovery and learning from another's theological reasoning. The first stage of this, then, is the articulation of the *purvapaksin's* view in the fair and accurate transmission of it. Often in commentarial exegesis this is done in the first-person, as if the enquirer actually inhabits the *purvapaksin's* position. While an unscrupulous polemicist might want to take this opportunity to set up a strawman of the other's position, as many indeed have done, it is in the comparative theologian's best interests to really get this right. The articulation of another's position must be respectful of, but ultimately also recognizable to, the dialogue partner. The proponent of the other tradition should be able to say: "Yes, that's fair. That's what I am saying." The *uttara paksa* stage of the journey then becomes a critical re-evaluation as a result of this encounter, that moment of hybridity when the meeting of the two traditions has 'disoriented', so to speak, the comparative enquirer. This is where

comparative theology really happens, the ‘engine room’ as it were, where the deep structures of one’s own theological assumptions get rethought and reexamined in light of the other’s. Then, and only, then can the comparative theologian begin to rearticulate the home tradition in the form of a *siddhanta*, an ‘established view’. But it is a newly established view, one that is now indebted to both traditions. A healthy asymmetry it may remain, with original truth claims still upheld, perhaps even held more dearly and deeply. On the other hand, those original truth claims may also be radically re-envisioned or even abandoned. Herein lies both the risk and the promise of the comparative theological project. But whatever is its outcome, say something – or as we say on the Indian road: “Horn please.... *Horun bajao!*”

Back, now, to the purpose of this lecture – unity! Unity would be no problem, of course, were it not for the persistent inconvenience of plurality. Please note, however, that ‘plurality’ does not mean ‘pluralism’. To put it simply, plurality is reality, but pluralism is an ‘ism’. In post-Critical modes of scholarship all of our ism’s, our grand and overarching narratives and ideologies must now come under the scrutiny of the so-called ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’. What is popularly defined as pluralism, pluralism as an ‘ism,’ is not the ideology of post-Modernity, as is commonly misconstrued, but is rather a vestigial throwback to Modernity, and the logical end of its essentialist assumptions. Essentialism assumes that the various disparate phenomena of the multiple religious traditions are but appearances and manifestations of a single common essence, a singular underlying supra-traditional ‘religious experience.’ In this present age of post-Critical scholarship these assumptions have been tried and found seriously wanting. Truth claims are not the problem in a post-Critical age. Undetected, undeclared and disingenuously held ones are. Unfortunately, the encounter between religious traditions is, still to this day, too often short-circuited by popular and ideological pluralisms that rush to neutralize traditions and their historically held commitments.

Another CSI Bishop, Leslie Newbigin, has something quite insightful to say about the ideological pluralist’s paradigmatic story, the parable of the blind men and the elephant. While at first glance it would appear as though the truth claims of poor, benighted blind men is nothing short of folly and arrogance, Newbigin turns this seemingly axiomatic interpretation right on its head. To paraphrase, he makes the astute observation that the truly arrogant one is not the blind man claiming that his perception is the truth, but rather the one who sits above the action, looking down on all these poor groping blind men assuming himself, of course, to be the only one who can see it all clearly. Ideological agendas that conveniently bypass truth-claims with platitudes declaring that all these traditions are “saying basically the same thing”, or are “heading to the same goal”, in my view, are as offensive and at the same time revealing as a statement like “all Africans, or all

Oriental look the same to me". The statement itself is, quite simply, the evidence that the speaker is not in actual face-to-face and heart-to-heart relationship with any of the 'others' of which they speak.

The phenomenon called 'road rage' is the result of an unmet expectation. If I pull out onto one of the four wide lanes of traffic on the Canadian road with the expectation that oncoming traffic will stay right where it belongs, that I will not be cut off, inconvenienced or impeded by anything but the stop lights, then it is only a matter of time before I succumb to a bad case of 'blocked goals', with the horn being used accordingly. The Canadian road then becomes an *antagonistic* space where secularists and neo-atheists can just as soon demonstrate the same sort of conversation-killing fundamentalism as religious conservatives. But if I pull out onto the slower, noisier plurality that is the Indian road expecting that driving on it is more like a dance of negotiation, of assertion and readjustment, then the horn becomes a new moment of hybridity. It is at once both an assertion of its own truth claims as well as a new interstitial moment of negotiation with another. The Indian road becomes, by contrast then, an *agonistic* space, where argument is expected and uncomfortably close encounters are ensured. The sort of unity that Appasamy's approach has to offer is not based on uniformity, on a shared systematic theology or doctrine, nor is it based on some imagined pluralist essence. Rather it is the simple and patient willingness to be on the road together, to learn from the other and to allow oneself to be changed in the encounter. Plurality has become the irreversible reality of our world. It is the reality that has always been and, quite simply, it is time now to embrace it. Instead of engaging it on the basis of popular or ideological pluralism, however, perhaps we might be able to apply these three simple rules from the Bishop Appasamy school of driving instruction: slow down and share the road, know the exact dimensions of your vehicle, and use your 'horn please'. Follow these and you should be able to get home safely for tea. If all of this does not convince you, then at least be reassured by a sign encountered just past the Rohtang Pass in Himachal Pradesh on the windy switchback road up to Ladakh: "Accidents are prohibited on this road". Thank you for your attention.

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[1] M. M. Thomas and P. T. Thomas, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology : Life and Thought of Some Pioneers*, 2nd impr. ed. (Tiruvalla, India: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 1992).

[2] A.J. Appasamy, *Church Union*, (Madras: Christian Literature Society's Press, 1930), 9-10.

[3] ———, *The Gospel and India's Heritage* (London and Madras: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1942). 204-208.

[4] A. J. Appasamy, *The Johannine Doctrine of Life: A Study of Christian and Indian Thought* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1934). 19.

[5] Ibid. 20.

[6] Francis Xavier Clooney, *Seeing through Texts : Doing Theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India*, Suny Series, toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996)., 37.

[7] ———, *Comparative Theology : Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). 10.

[8] A. J. Appasamy, *A Bishop's Story* (Bangalore: Christian Literature Society, 1969). 28.

[9] *Ibid.*, 50-55.

[10] Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian : Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (London: Penguin, 2006). 6.

[11] A. J. Appasamy and T. Dayanandan Francis, *The Christian Bhakti of A. J. Appasamy : A Collection of His Writings* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1992). 51-69.

[12] Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1994), 136.

[13] Other *pramanas* such as *pratyaksa* ('perception'), *anumana* ('inference') and *sabda* ('verbal authority') get subsumed, in Appasamy's system, under these larger headings.

[14] A. J. Appasamy, *What Shall We Believe? : A Study of the Christian Pramanas* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1971). 12-13.

[15] *Ibid.* 13.

[16] *Ibid.* 30.

[17] George Thibaut, trans. , *The Vedanta-Sutras with the Commentary by Ramanuja (Part 3, Sacred Books of the East Vol.48)*, The Echo Library (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006). 29.

[18] Frits Staal, *Universals : Studies in Indian Logic and Linguistics* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 1988). 106-107.

"A Driver's Manual for the Indian Road: Bishop Appasamy and Comparative Theology in India Today."

St Thomas Unity Lecture by Brian Dunn BA MSt (Oxon)

Summary by Timothy Mark

Brian Dunn introduced his lecture by contrasting the experience of driving on the high speed Trans-Canada Highway with that of driving on an Indian road. Driving in Canada was rule oriented, high speed but relatively safe; driving in India was totally different – slower most certainly, sometimes chaotic, always interesting, and with different rules. He used the analogy of the two roads as a framework in which to address the purpose of the St Thomas Unity lecture. His intention was to introduce comparative theology from a standpoint of plurality and with reference to the life and writings of the Tamil Christian theologian, Bishop Ayadurai Jesudason Appasamy (1891-1975). His starting point was to indicate his own position as a “third culture kid”, living in Canada, having been brought up in North India, with Hindi as his second language, and “trying to reconcile the many places he had called *home*”. *This hybrid identity had made him “both naturally suspicious of the absoluteness and self-confidence of settled, centrist packages of orthodoxy, as well as irresistibly drawing him to “the in-between, the interstitial spaces where traditions, cultures and languages meet in real and vital exchange.”* It was in these interstitial spaces that he had come across the writings of Appasamy.

Brian believed that the British and Irish churches today have much to learn from the ecumenical unity of the united churches in the sub-continent. His outline of some of Appasamy’s key theological ideas was as follows: -

Appasamy’s life-long conviction was that, as a Christian theologian and bhakta (‘devotee’) of Christ, he had much indeed to learn from the living traditions of his homeland. Working from the premise that doctrines, theological systems and even ecumenical creeds are largely cultural and linguistic negotiations, and that these are therefore provisional rather than permanent or universal constructs, Appasamy dreamed of a day when the Indian Church, knowledgeable and conversant in the Hindu traditions, could formulate its own systematic interpretive frameworks. He dreamed of a church that could write its own theology, as he puts it, “answering the questions thrown out by the Hindu mind.” For only then, he says, “will a Creed, truly Christian and truly Indian, emerge.” It was a time of ferment and change, of urgent calls for Independence, and Appasamy, no less than his compatriots, was calling for the Indian Church’s own urgent need for theological independence, for the freedom to think and believe for itself. His earliest theological interest was in recasting Christianity as a living bhakti (‘devotional’) tradition deeply rooted in the soil of the Subcontinent.

Throughout Appasamy’s pre-Independence writings, his focus was mainly on the content of theology – on rethinking his own views on Incarnation and Sacrament by learning from the language, analogy and idiom of the bhakti traditions and, more specifically, from the great 12th century Srivaisnava reformer, Ramanuja. What he eventually produced out of this engagement was a challenging and original four-fold approach to the doctrine of divine embodiment, in his own words a “Christological reconstruction” in light of what he found in Ramanuja. Using Ramanuja’s celebrated analogy of the ‘Body of God,’ Appasamy developed a way to explain how and to what extent God can be described as present in the world: (1)The Universe, (2) the Incarnation, (3) the Eucharist, and (4) the Church, can all in distinct, yet interconnected ways be understood as being the ‘Body of God’. Rather than dismissing the Hindu traditions out of hand with contemptuous terms such as ‘idolatry’ or ‘superstition,’ Appasamy made the modest proposal that perhaps a healthy agnosticism is more appropriate towards what he described as the “open questions”. “Both Indian Christian and missionary alike needed to take the time to actually read and explore the Hindu texts and beliefs” with the purpose of finding out, in order: 1. “...what this doctrine really means...” 2. “...what it purposes to achieve and ... 3. “...whether our Christian doctrines should not be thought out again in relation to this idea... “We should not be content to turn down in contempt all the vast tracts of doctrine and practice in India ... we should rethink our [Christian] fundamental ideas in relation to them [the Hindu concepts].”

As Appasamy’s work matured it was less about the convenient shorthand of ‘Christianity’ and ‘Hinduism’ and more about how his post- Lux Mundi Anglican sacramental theology encountered different traditions of bhakti Appasamy’s approach was slower, messier and less predictable than what ‘comparative religions’ of his day was doing in colleges and seminaries, but it was an approach much more suited

for the Indian road. What he was proposing was that Indian Christians needed to learn how to do theology from traditions such as the various schools of Vedanta that have engaged in reasoning about revelation between and across traditions.

Appasamy proposed a rediscovery and application of the widely recognized epistemological categories known in Sanskrit as **pramanas** ('evidences' or 'sources of knowledge'). The **pramanas** would become increasingly important in his thinking as his thought developed. Whilst there is no standardized list or order for the **pramanas** that the historic Hindu **darsanas** will agree on, there are a few that are shared across the traditions, or at least that can be recognized as cognates between them. Historically, these have been identified as **sabda** ('verbal testimony'), **anumana** ('logical inference') and **pratyaksa** ('perception'). Appasamy, in Christian application of these, offered three more popularly understood terms - **sruti** (**sacred Text**), **yukti** ('reasoned analysis') and **anubhava** ('experience') and in that order. Affirming these three, 'Scripture,' 'Reason' and 'Experience' as being what he called the correct "psychological order",

Appasamy made his own original contribution to add to these a fourth **pramana**, namely, **sabha** (**usually rendered 'meeting' or 'council'**), and that this must immediately follow Scripture in its priority. The **sruti**_pramana takes priority. *Sruti* meaning ('heard') refers to the authority of the sacred Text as heard and faithfully transmitted by Rishis, Apostles or Prophets. Other pramanas such as **pratyaksa** ('perception'), **anumana** ('inference') and **sabda** ('verbal authority') get subsumed, in Appasamy's system, under these larger headings.

Returning to his two roads analogy Dunn points out that on the Indian road one plays the horn as one would an instrument, and that this is the correct Hindi verb – 'horun bajaana'. It is a statement of existence – "I honk, therefore, I am". The comparative theologian is journeying out from an established position for the purpose of discovery and learning from another's theological reasoning. Building on Appasamy's pramanic proposal Dunn himself proposes a "shifting of the dialectic cycle "from refutation to reconstruction" as a useful and recognisable Indian approach with which to do comparative theology in India today.

Dunn concludes his lecture by emphasising the importance of plurality in the debate about unity. "Unity would be no problem... were it not for the persistent inconvenience of plurality". He notes that plurality should not be confused with *pluralism*. "*In post-critical modes of scholarship all of our isms, our grand and overarching narratives and ideologies must now come under the scrutiny of the so-called hermeneutic of suspicion. In an important conclusion he states: "Truth claims are not the problem in a post critical age. Undetected, undeclared and disingenuously held ones are". He laments the fact that encounter between religious traditions is, still to this day, too often short-circuited by popular and ideological pluralisms that rush to neutralize traditions and their historically held commitments.*

Dunn commends Appasamy's approach which is not based on uniformity, on a shared systematic theology or doctrine. Rather it is the simple and patient willingness to be on the road together, to learn from the other and to allow oneself to be changed in the encounter. This is the ecumenical challenge facing the churches in Britain today. **Timothy Mark**