

CRUCIAL SKILLS

in Witnessing to our
South Asian Neighbors

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What do I need to know before I can share Christ with my Hindu friends? Many Christians ask this, and probably dread being told that they have to read the Vedas, be familiar with Indian history, geography, languages, and cultures, besides distinguishing between the six major streams of Hindu philosophy, as well as reciting the features of the 330 million gods and goddesses....

Relax, all that is not necessary! The average Christian who cares about sharing Jesus as good news with their with Hindu neighbors can easily develop four skills that will help them communicate very effectively. But underlying all these skills there must be love, which can be demonstrated by a genuine interest in your friends from South Asia – in their culture, history, and beliefs; and in the individual as a person, with all his or her needs, longings, pride, and shortcomings. Are you motivated by love? If so, let's move on to the skills.

SKILL #1: INITIATING SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS

This skill consists of three parts: **Ask, Listen, Share**. Does it surprise you that the first skill should be to ask questions and listen to our friend talk? Aren't we the ones with the message they need to hear?

Are you motivated by love?

Yes and no. But even when it's yes, who likes one-sided monologs? I once talked with a Muslim for about 20 minutes casually after a class we were taking. He would say something about what he believed in, then I would summarize by repeating, "So you are saying that..." Or "So you believe that..." Three times in that brief conversation he interrupted himself to say, "You're actually listening to me!" Then he added, "All my other Christian friends just get mad and tell me I'm going to hell." What a sad commentary on Christians' poor listening!

Asking Good Questions

To get things started, think of good, non-threatening questions about spiritual topics that communicate curiosity and respect on your part. Sometimes Christians raise questions or issues which leave the non-Christian feeling threatened:

- Accusations about their bad behavior, such as persecuting Christians
- Insinuations about their gods or ways of worship
- Pointing out the poverty in India, oppression, casteism, or other negative customs

AVOID THESE!

What are some good questions, which can lead to mutual respect and sharing of views?

- I'm curious to know how you pray.
- May I know your opinion about God?
- What kinds of blessings are you hoping for from your god? How will you know if you are blessed?
- Why do you choose this path to God, what do you like about it?
- What's your favorite festival? What's the story behind it?

Remember, tone of voice has a lot to do with communicating respect or disdain. If you ask a yes/no question, be sure to follow it up to continue the conversation thread.

Listening to the Answers

As your friend talks, practice active (reflective) listening. **You know you have listened to someone when you can repeat back in summary form what they said and they agree that you got it right.** Here are some good ways to summarize:

What I hear you saying is...

So you believe that...

I guess you feel like....

Are you afraid that such listening will only encourage the other person to talk more, and you won't get a word in edgewise? On the contrary, I have found that reflective listening leads them to respect and listen to you, when you step in at the right moment to share your view. My Muslim friend mentioned above listened to me very politely when it was my turn to share.

Once I really got cornered by a Hindu temple leader, when a Christian in my group began raising threatening, accusative issues. I had been teaching a Hindu evangelism seminar in a church and took the group on a field trip to a local temple, where we were given a guided tour. Defying my clear instructions, the Christian challenged, "If Hinduism is so good, why is India in such a mess?" After some exasperated exchange, the guide turned to me, knowing I was the leader, and posed her own challenge: "Okay, just tell me why I am going to hell?" Although I could calmly sidestep this affront and answer her gently, we don't want to get into this kind of situation. Asking good questions and respectful listening will gain you respect and the invitation to share in return.

Equal Sharing

When it is your turn to share, be sure not to use it to put down anything they just said. Use a transitional statement that affirms the person without affirming the wrong beliefs they may have shared: "Thank you for sharing that / I learned something new / That's really interesting." Then ask politely if you may share about your beliefs. Take roughly the same amount of time to share on the same theme about Lord Jesus. For instance, if your friend just talked about why they pray to Lord Krishna, you may share why you pray to Lord Jesus and mention a recent clear answer to prayer.

SKILL #2: UNLEARN “CHRISTIANESE”

Okay, so you’ve asked your friend some good questions, listened to his/her answers, and now you’re ready to give them the gospel. They need to know that Jesus died for their sins and rose from the dead, and they need to believe in God, be born again, get saved, convert to Christianity, accept the Lord, and be redeemed. Right? Wrong!

All of the above standard Christian phrases will not communicate well to your friend. They will likely produce confusion or even anger. A teenage Indian girl wrinkled her whole face when I said “Jesus rose from the dead.” With a look of total bewilderment she said, “Rose from the dead, rose from the dead – what does *that* mean?”

I once asked my Hindi teacher the word for resurrection. He didn’t know! Resurrection is simply a concept our Hindu friends don’t think about even in their own language (although there is a Hindi word – *punneruthan*). Nowadays I say, “Three days after being killed, Jesus got up alive again in the same body. That’s what ‘resurrection’ means, the same person coming back to life in the same body.” Longer, but that’s what it takes to communicate the meaning. What’s the point of settling for the handy term when it doesn’t do the job?

Jesus, Not Religion

Keep “Christianity” out of your witnessing as much as possible. Jesus is the issue, not religion, denomination, or church. Instead of saying “Christianity teaches,” I say “Jesus teaches” or “The Bible says.” Making that change at first was like changing my handedness, but eventually I got used to it. You can too.

Emphasize themes like power, healing, love, discipleship, peace.

Don’t just offhandedly refer to “the Lord.” Always specify “the Lord Jesus.” Even “God” has to be clarified! What is your Hindu friend’s concept of “god”? Is it an impersonal force, just a term of convenience? Is god just an inner state to be realized by the individual? Is it the monistic concept that god is everything, one with creation? Saying “God loves you” will not make much sense if that is their concept of god.

“Born again,” like “resurrected,” conveys the meaning of “reincarnated” to the Hindu—implying Jesus came back later in another body. “Saved” or “salvation” (*moksha*) as a Hindu concept is quite different from the biblical meaning. “Redeemed” will draw a blank. Don’t mention “convert” unless you’re prepared for a fight – it’s highly controversial in India. Heaven and hell tend to be treated by the Hindu as mythological concepts useful for keeping children in line but not for adults. Or worse, as emotional blackmail for devious missionaries to frighten naïve people into converting. “Missionary” itself could be problematic, in light of popular misconceptions.

Work at replacing these terms that don’t work with longer, yet simple explanations. Try telling it all as a personal narrative of your “experiences with Lord Jesus” rather than as a theological treatise. Emphasize the person and attributes of Jesus Christ rather than your involvement in church or religious activities. Themes like power, healing (emotional and physical), peace, love, discipleship to a living Guru (spiritual master), and grace appeal to most of our Hindu friends.

SKILL #3: OVERCOME OBJECTIONS

The good news is that most Indian people don't object to Jesus – only to Christianity! While we aim to introduce our friends to Jesus, the baggage that's been added to him over the centuries gets in the way. We need to be prepared to address the misunderstandings and objections that will probably come up at some point. In this brief booklet, I can only introduce some of the most common objections along with the beginning of an answer, and urge you to do more study. I have included a Recommended Reading list at the end of the booklet.

Christians are intolerant. Our Hindu friends view “tolerance” as something very positive, almost like our concept of love. We look intolerant or unloving to them when we try to “convert” people, because they view conversion as a change of loyalty to family, community, and even nation.

Christians are arrogant. Not if our source of truth is outside ourselves. We don't claim to invent or attain truth by our intellectual or spiritual achievements, which is part of the Hindu worldview. We only claim to receive it as a revelation from God and believe it.

Christians should not convert other people. That statement itself is trying to “convert” or persuade us to a point of view. Assure your friend in word and deed of your genuine love and respect for all people. Talk about a change of heart, not religion.

Christians have done a lot of evil in the world. Define a Christian as a follower of Christ, one who does what He does. Condemn any bad behavior, regardless of who did it.

There are many paths to God. Only if God is reachable by our effort. But the Bible says he is not, and that he alone provided the way by sending Jesus from heaven to earth. Analogies like paths to the top of a mountain, rivers flowing into the sea, and blind men touching an elephant, do not prove anything – they are merely illustrations that presuppose a belief.

All religions teach the same thing. To our Hindu friends, this is a gesture of affirmation and respect. It can also be a way of subtly hinting, “Don't try to convert me!” Try to create a spirit of humility as you seek for reality and truth together.

Jesus and Krishna are really the same. Many Hindus will say this sincerely, but the superficial similarities in the two deities are overshadowed by the far more numerous differences. Ask gently, “Has anyone ever tried to share with you the differences?” Proceed if they are open but don't put their deities in a negative light – just lift up Lord Jesus.

Salvation that is free is worthless. If salvation is something to be achieved, like a university degree, then free would be worthless. It is a gift that was costly to the giver and therefore to be valued by the receiver. The whole atonement concept is so problematic for Hindus, it is better to avoid it in the early stages of witnessing, and instead stress the life of discipleship to a perfect Master.

Christians should not eat meat; that is a sin of violence. Some Hindus feel proud that they have a religion with such strict rules. But adding rules that no one can keep doesn't help to save us from our sins.

Jesus went to the Himalayas to learn from Hindu holy men and eventually died there and his tomb is in Kashmir. Researching this produces no credible

historical evidence. What would the creator of the world need to learn from people who are searching for truth themselves?

Christianity is a western religion. Lord Jesus was born, lived, died, and resurrected in Palestine (western Asia) and when He comes back to earth it will be to Asia! He is the creator of the whole world and naturally belongs to every tribe and nation.

I want to follow Jesus, but my family members are opposed. Advice can depend on age; in general, for an adult, eliminate unnecessary offenses like “converting to Christianity,” reduce faith in Christ to its bare absolutes, and prepare to count the cost.

SKILL #4: BE A STORYTELLER

Two thirds of the world’s people prefer oral learning rather than literate learning. With the advent of movies, television, and the internet in the past century, even the literate are returning to a preference for visual and oral learning. That means that the art of storytelling is more crucial than it’s been in a long time. The old “logical proof” gospel presentations are seldom appealing. They sound to our Hindu friends like “I’m right, you’re wrong” – no wonder they feel we are arrogant!

Learn to bring up spiritual conversations with the Ask, Listen, Share approach (Skill #1). When it is your turn to share, you will find it easy and appealing to do your sharing of some spiritual truth in a Bible story. A young woman told me she had read the whole New Testament. I asked her if she remembered anything she read. She replied, “Yes, I remember the prayer, ‘God have mercy on me.’” It was so natural to tell her the Bible story where that came from – the story of the religious leader and the sinner (aka Pharisee and Tax Collector). When I was done, her eyes got big and she exclaimed, “I like you a lot! I need to get your email so I can keep talking to you.” Time and time again I have seen how stories go straight to the heart without the obstacles and suspicion that logical persuasions tend to bring.

May I share with you a true story from the Bible about that?

Remember the themes that attract our friends to Christ – power, love, peace, grace (Skill#2)? Our friends are attracted to these because they are lacking from their own deities and religious experience. Choose Bible stories that present these attributes of Christ, and learn to tell them in a natural and conversational way, without memorizing or reading them from the Bible. When your friend evidences a felt need in any of these areas, ask, “May I share with you a true story from the Bible about that?”

If your friend continues to seem interested after hearing the Bible story, go on to share your personal experience of Christ’s power, love, forgiveness, or peace. Then stop to get their response.

Motivated by love, equipped with these skills, bathed in prayer, introduce your friends to Jesus Christ as good news!

RECOMMENDED READING

The best of books and websites by Christians, Hindus, and Muslims

BOOKS BY CHRISTIANS

Hinduism

by HL Richard

The author has done an admirable job of giving a simple but not oversimplified overview of a religion that defies definition. Start with this highly readable short book for your introduction to the beliefs of those calling themselves Hindus.

Disciple Making Among Hindus

by Timothy Shultz

A great how-to manual with plenty of cultural explanation. The chapter on anubhav (experience) is worth the whole book.

Christian Barriers to Jesus

by Dr. J. Paul Pennington

A courageous yet humble approach to problems in Christian communication of the gospel to India. Every issue is examined scripturally and experientially, with recommendations for improvement. Not light reading, but a must-read for those who are serious about avoiding mistakes.

Missionary Conspiracy: Letters to a Post-Modern Hindu

By Vishal Mangalwadi

An effective rebuttal to Arun Shourie's book "Missionaries in India" (see next section), scholarly and philosophical. Avoids fighting fire with fire as a Christian should.

BOOKS BY HINDUS

Hinduism for our Times

By Arvind Sharma

A Hindu writes to Hindus to interpret their beloved religion meaningfully in today's world, especially as Hinduism interacts with western cultures and religious values.

Missionaries in India

By Arun Shourie

A must read for those who want to know what Hindus think of Christianity. This book will make you hopping mad, because of its distortions and prejudices. But it will also fill you with a desire to refute the lies with the truth.

Bhagavad-Gita

translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood

In this most popular Hindu scripture, you will meet Arjuna, a warrior faced with the daunting task of fighting his own relatives in battle; and Krishna, his charioteer and teacher, who explains to Arjuna why he must fight. Surprisingly light and easy reading in a mixture of prose and verse, the Gita ("Song of the Lord") provides the justification for the caste system, and propounds devotion to Krishna as the supreme worship.

Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga

By Swami Vivekananda

A famous Hindu philosopher of the last century expounds two beautiful and popular Hindu paths to God: one of “works” and one of “devotion.” Eloquently described, but where is the power to attain salvation?

The Story of My Experiments with Truth

By Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi is no longer a living person but remains a powerful symbol in India. His struggles with Christianity are a major part of this striking autobiography, and his problems echo those of many Hindus today. Essential reading for Christians who want to understand Hinduism and India’s struggle for independence.

BOOKS ABOUT ISLAM

Muslims, Christians, and Jesus

By Carl Medearis

The author tells how he engages Muslims in fresh, non-threatening ways that diffuse tensions and pique interest in Christ.

The Crescent through the Eyes of the Cross

By Dr. Nabeel Jabbour

You will gain an appreciation for the difficulties Muslims have in understanding and being attracted to the Gospel as it is typically presented by Christians. A powerful appeal to reexamine cherished assumptions and to make sense to your audience.

Glad News! God Loves You, My Muslim Friend

By Samy Tanagho

Written to the Muslim inquirer, this book is an excellent presentation of the message of salvation covering all the important misconceptions and questions the Muslim may have, as well as the essential biblical teachings. Use this one for an evangelistic gift, as well as your own reference.

WEB SITES

www.nayajeevan.org/resources — A Christian-only website with strategies, resources, and articles on South Asian ministry

www.mgl-southasian.com — Website full of low-priced materials of all sorts for reaching Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims. Music, books, tracts, and links to other websites.

learningindia.in – a great website to introduce the western person to Indian culture, intended for business people or those going to India to live and work.

This article is just a small taste of the skills imparted in our full “**Love Your Neighbor**” evangelism seminar. Twelve hours of dynamic teaching, interaction, group discussion, videos, slides, field trip, and effective tools, offered both in-person and online as a webinar. Contact us through our Christian website

www.nayajeevan.org/resources, or email nayajeevan@cru.org.

John and Cathy Douglass are missionaries with Cru. Cathy serves as Director of Naya Jeevan Project, a ministry of Cru offering strategies, resources, and trainings to mobilize Christians for South Asian outreach. She has been working among South Asians since 1993, in Kenya, California, Florida, and Texas; and in South Asia via the internet since 2004. John and Cathy make their home in Dallas, Texas.



