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Introduction

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Constructing Indian Christianities

Culture, Conversion and Caste



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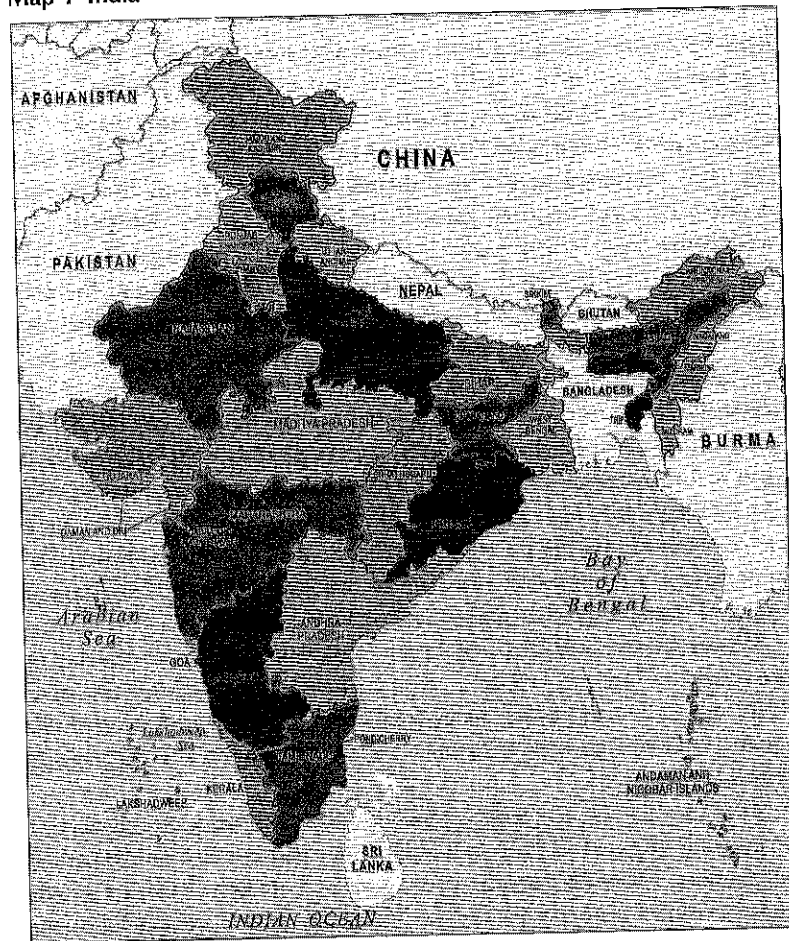
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Introduction

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Map 1 India



Source: Prepared by the editors.

Speaking of the vigour and vitality of contemporary scholarship on Indian Christianity in one of our two Afterwords, Rowena Robinson makes a claim that would seem rather prosaic — ‘we can now speak of the presence of a field’ — were it not also the case that until the 1980s much or most of the work on Indian Christianity was being done by scholars in the field of mission history. For such scholars, Christianity was less *of* India than *in* India. What is more, Christianity’s template for reproduction was assumed to be Euro-American (English Baptist, say, or Swedish Lutheran, or American Mennonite). Historiographically, much has changed, and Indian Christianity is more rarely written about as though it were merely an add-on to someone else’s missionary history. This is a welcome change. The reasons for it include the rise of subaltern studies, the emergence of World Christianity as a field of study focused on the global South, and the growing popularity of the new Anthropology of Christianity. The fact of change, as Robinson avers, appears unarguable.

Naturally, in now being a field and no longer the preserve of mission historians, Indian Christianity has become an interdisciplinary crossroads. In most such studies, humanities-based or social-scientific, Christianity’s Indianness now has a certain taken-for-grantedness, even though Christianity may not always look or act Indian to those who think of ‘Indianness’ as an invariable, unchanging essence. Here, our bedrock assumption is that the cross-cultural transplantation of any religion — Christianity included — necessarily entails transformation. Not only that, we concur in conceiving of Indian Christianity as culturally and socially constructed, predominantly by indigenous agency, but without trivialising exogenous agency altogether.

Being explicit about our assumptions will make it easier to appreciate why we highlight intra-Christian difference within an overall Indianness by speaking of ‘Christianities’ in the plural instead of ‘Christianity’ in the singular. Readers should also note that diversity as we think of it has nothing at all to do with deviation from a norm. Here, we eschew any and all efforts at reconciling one Indian Christianity with another or with an idealised ‘original’, even

though one may wonder at how few the traits are that the Syrian Orthodox of Kerala, Baptists of Nagaland and Pentecostals of Chennai appear to have in common.

Taking all such diversity at face value, we interrogate the controversies — past and present, local and global — that Indian Christianity's pluriformity engenders. First, though, our preamble will place the larger discussion of the book in historical perspective. Since many of the controversies we study had parallels in Christian antiquity, we need to underscore the fact that there has never been a time when Christianity was either monoform or monolithic.

Global Questions, Local Answers

One of the Christian New Testament's most notable preoccupations, particularly in its Pauline and other epistolary books, was what kind of interface the life and teachings of the figure at its heart — Jesus — were supposed to have with the cultural norms and religious practices of the larger Greco-Roman world. Though not called 'Christians', until they arrived as refugees in Antioch in the aftermath of a backlash in Jerusalem against the new movement, Jesus's early followers all happened to be Jews. It was therefore of critical urgency for them to reflect on 'who' and 'what' a Christian was in the wider Mediterranean milieu. Was the newly-emerged movement to be thought of as a mere sect within Judaism — and, *ergo*, only for Jews and their proselytes? Or, was faith in Jesus of Nazareth for everyone, everywhere, in which case the brakes were to be taken off the attempts already being made at bringing outsiders in (by the Apostle Peter, for instance, who bore witness of Jesus to Cornelius, the Roman centurion spoken of in the Book of Acts)?

Once that dilemma had been resolved to the satisfaction of the dominant party and the constraints removed from the fledgling church's interactions with the gentile world outside Israel, a surprisingly vigorous thrust toward universalistic inclusiveness became evident. New conundrums — theological, social and political — about being Christian *differently* from Jesus's first Jewish followers then had to be solved. The questions Christians nowadays ask may not look the same in a South Asian context, but they ask them in ways that allow us to locate them on a trajectory similar to that of their first-generation predecessors, two millennia and a world away.¹

Historically, each of Christianity's multiple cross-cultural diffusions has elicited from its own adherents — invariably the ones left behind, on the far side of the change — cries of protest. Of this, again, one need look no farther than the Book of Galatians (Chapter Two) in the Christian New Testament.

There, one finds the Apostle Paul rebuking the Apostle Peter for having backed away from his earlier and unprecedented welcome of the gentile Cornelius into the fold. Despite the ensuing decision of Jerusalem's Christian elders to exempt gentile converts from cultural conformity to Jewish norms, there has always been a Petrine exclusivist for every Pauline inclusivist.

That is, while the earliest Christians may have been shaped by Jewish cultural particularities, gentile Christians had difficulty being bound by them. Right from the start, doubts loomed over Christianity's coherence and cohesion, as believers broke through their monocultural shell and became a diverse, polymorphic community. Not only their orthodoxy but also their orthopraxy came into question. From early antiquity, this has been an on-going, see-saw debate, and its eventual outcome may never be known. One side will insist on Christianity's immutable untranslatability, while the other will uphold its translatable mutability. Similarly, arguments over what it takes to make an Indian Christian *Indian* or a Christian Indian *Christian* are part and parcel of a global Christian conversation. One might call it one of the few things about Christianity that seems truly timeless and unchanging.

The Catholic and Protestant theologians who contribute to the contemporary phase of the debate sketched out previously often make use of the term 'inculturation', a semantically-important term. To them, it denotes a deliberate attempt, initiated by Christians on behalf of other Christians, to adopt and adapt Christianity to the religious beliefs and practices, symbolic forms (material, linguistic, etc.), cultural aesthetics, and social arrangements of the many worlds outside of Europe and North America to which Christianity travels, now and in the past. Generally speaking, these intramural theological discussions focus on something Xavier Graciano-Tirole (Chapter 6, this volume) aptly refers to as *missiological* inculturation. He means by this the adaptations, adjustments and accommodations that are deemed *destrable* — whatever the reason — as ways of making Christianity intelligible and appealing to a wide range of people at the same time that they remain *permissible* in terms of Christian orthodoxy. As such, 'inculturation' may connote a kind of strategic concession, aimed at gaining a local advantage; it may also presuppose a norm somehow imagined to exist above the 'receptor' culture in question, if not indeed above all culture(s).²

Who, then, and What, is an Indian Christian?

In contrast to theologically-determined conversations such as the one described here, the approach of our authors in Part One to the study of Christianity's

interactions with India's cultural and religious traditions conforms to the descriptive practices of ethnography. There, instead of 'inculturation', the term 'acculturation' would be the one preferred. While 'inculturation' is heard today almost exclusively within Christian circles where it denotes a self-consciously deliberate and intentionally missiological project, 'acculturation' more often refers to processes that take place unintentionally and without apparent awareness. Acculturation can also occur *despite* the actual intent of religious leaders, traditionalists and other elites who do their best to prevent this kind of change from occurring. This, then, is the reason why we find it useful to differentiate the designedly missiological projects of inculturation from *relatively* more organic processes.³ A distinction of that kind is observed by the authors in Part One. Analysing a variety of ways in which Christianity adapts itself to a range of Indian cultural contexts, they trace how this occurs, largely in the absence of formal ecclesiastical intervention.

Part One of our volume begins with Miriam Benteler's ethnographically-detailed and historically-informed account of the Catholic practice of godparenthood in the Latin Catholic communities of coastal Kerala (Chapter 1). Using data from the field to improve on conventional models, she illuminates how a practice of extra-Indian origin, introduced in the early 1500s, particularised itself locally. We learn, for instance, of how the roles ordinarily performed by the mother's brother in patrilineal South Indian societies were gradually assimilated at the same time that the distinction between 'natural' parenthood and 'spiritual' godparenthood became more blurred. As Benteler demonstrates, the Kerala Catholic practice of godparenthood was both adapted to and altered by South Indian kinship patterns and mores. Or, to make the same point with McKim Marriott's typology (1955) for differentiating between India's 'big tradition' Hinduism (Brahmanical, pan-Indian, Sanskritic, temple-based) and its 'little tradition' counterpart (localised, oral, vernacular, village-based), Christian godparenthood was 'parochialised' or 'reparticularised'. Unless one imagines a process different from transplantation or the reproduction of practices that were first introduced into South India from Portugal, the cross-cultural process described so ably by Benteler will remain analytically unclear. That both kinds of kinship systems, Southern European and South Indian, cannot remain unchanged when they exist in juxtaposition, she also demonstrates, arguing that certain features of local kinship systems (the heightened importance of 'avunculate' relationships, for instance) have been extended and taken up into Kerala Catholic life, despite being absent from the Portuguese model originally introduced. Throughout Part One,

evidence will be found of how the processes of cultural interaction are never unidirectional, and instead are always reciprocal, at least to some extent.

In Chapter 2, Kerry P. C. San Chirico shines a much-needed light on Varanasi's vibrant community of Khrist Bhaktas ('devotees of Christ'), a group of mostly marginal-caste folk who regularly worship at the Mātṛ Dhām Ashram, a popular site for Catholic worship. Notwithstanding their devotion to Jesus, such persons neither undergo baptism nor formally affiliate with the Catholic Church. As indicated previously, the unregulated messiness of on-the-ground acculturation often looms ominously over Christian elites (theologians, priests and pastors, etc.) as a threat to their authority. As San Chirico observes, the fuzzy identities of the Khrist Bhaktas — are they 'Hindu' or 'Christian' or 'Hindu-Christian' or 'Christian-Hindu' or something else? — also poses a *definitional* problem for scholars of religion. Uncertainty may simply mean that our definitions are somehow ill-conceived and one-sided; it may also mean, however, that attempting to draw a boundary between 'Christianity' and 'Hinduism' ('Buddhism', etc.) may in fact impose an alien taxonomy on phenomena that in the final analysis remain fluid and stubbornly unreifiable.

Here, it also helps to be aware of the growing availability and popularity of a heterogeneous mix of practices associated with faith healing in today's India, some of them new and others old. About them, we learn a good deal from San Chirico and Ashok Kumar's contribution (Chapter 3) to this volume. As San Chirico observes of the Khrist Bhaktas, the impetus for an initial visit to the Mātṛ Dhām Ashram is frequently a quest for healing in one form or another, physical, spiritual or interpersonal. Not only are such findings congruent with historical and ethnographic work more generally (see, for example, Bauman 2008), there are indications that in rural India today, healings and exorcisms account for the vast majority of Christian conversions (Bergunder 2011). Although such conversions may depend on the repeatability of a 'miracle' and are therefore conditional, provisional and temporary, they engender the kind of non-exclusivistic relationship to religion that conforms to well-established Indian patterns of itinerancy among sites associated with the sacred. Making the rounds from one saint or shrine to another in search of efficacious power, physical and spiritual, is nothing new. As Susan Bayly (1989) and Chandra Mallampalli (2004) argue, one reason why Christians of the pre-colonial era used to fit more naturally into the contours of South India's sacred theoscape is that they too were often on the move, impelled and propelled by a quest similar to that of their Hindu and Muslim neighbours. Historically, the perception of Christians as the adherents of a 'foreign' faith

worsened when colonial reforms forced them to abandon improvisational and unsanctioned worship at the shrines of Christian saints in favour of fixed-locality parish worship.

Except for the ancient Syro-Malabar churches, the dominant trend in Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal Christianity since the high imperial period has been institutionalisation along Western denominational lines (ecumenical successes notwithstanding, of which the Churches of North and South India are notable examples). Along with that, a more tightly-bound sense of what and who a 'Christian' is has emerged. 'Tightly-bounded', however, would be an inaccurate description of who the Khrisṭ Bhaktas are; preoccupied with Jesus at the centre of their devotion, they are less fixated upon the 'edges' and putative boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. As such, they remind us that a 'Christian' identity can be constructed additively and not only subtractively. In any event, conversion could never entail a total rupture with the past, except perhaps of affiliation — and not always that, as the Khrisṭ Bhaktas demonstrate.

San Chirico's essay (Chapter 2) will not be the only one in this volume where standard-issue models of 'conversion' are shown to fail at accounting for religious behaviour observed *in situ*. The subject as he handles it, however, lends itself to a salient critique of problems that ensue from making a term such as 'conversion' carry too great a load of Western assumptions about the ideal singularity of religious orientation (one per individual, community, nation, etc.). Whether it would help our vocabulary for analysis to rehabilitate a term such as 'adhesion' and to think of conversion more as a process than a time-bound event is the kind of conversation San Chirico opens up.

Since a total rupture with the past is an impossibility, it almost goes without saying that few systems of social organisation have proven more durable or more resilient among India's Christians than caste (or *jati*; cf. Forrester 1980). Chapter 3 takes this up when Ashok Kumar adduces historical evidence for the lack of unanimity among Christians on whether caste is an unmitigated evil of which the church must be expunged, or a benign and ultimately tolerable feature of Christian life without which Christians would cease to be recognisably Indian. As the author points out, caste is a bone of contention between Catholics and Protestants, with Catholics being relatively more tolerant — in principle and in practice — of caste-based segregation in the churches (or segregated spaces within them). While few issues facing the churches, Catholic or otherwise, are often thought of as more intractable than ones having to do with caste and its eradication, the gamut of opinions actually held by Indian Christians is quite broad, from the abolitionists to

the preservationists (for the latter, less-popular position, see Hephzibah Israel's Chapter 5). Indeed, whether the continuum can be broadened beyond Catholicism and Protestantism to include at the extremes India's most ancient churches, the Syro-Malabar, or its most recent, the Pentecostal, Ashok Kumar's invocation of Louis Dumont serves as a helpful reminder of acculturation's powerful tug: 'A [foreign] sect cannot survive on Indian soil if it denies caste or consistently presents an uncompromising hostility to caste in all its manifestations' (1970: 36).

Be that as it may, formal projects of an inculturational kind are of less interest to Ashok Kumar than the action observable at ground level among the Dalit Christians of Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh. Working like San Chirico and Benteler from an ethnographic perspective, he identifies the various factors — political and social — that contributed to what he terms the 'interlocking' of caste and congregation among the district's Dalit Christians. Mainly, these are Mala Lutherans, who by virtue of their numbers dominate the caste's council of elders, nowadays called the Sangham (which in certain respects supersedes the importance of *panchayats*, the village governing body). Previously, Christians on the Sangham tended to adjudicate conflict with the best interests of the entire Mala community in mind. They were Malas first and Christians second — Christian *Malas* — and interacted cordially with the Hindu Malas whose rights they also endeavoured to defend. Today, however, Christians on the Sangham, who as often as not are pastors and church elders, have begun to distance themselves from Hindus and Hindu religious practices in the region, reversing the older sequence of primary and secondary identity such that they are now more properly understood as Mala *Christians*. While caste and congregation are merging in ways that are indigenously initiated, from the ground up, all such change is also offset and counterbalanced by the fact that some mask their Christian identity and register themselves as Hindus in government records in order to remain eligible for state-sector employment and other reservation benefits available to Dalits who are not Christians. Here again, identity issues loom large, not only religiously and theologically but also socially and politically.

Whose Religion is Indian Christianity?

While the Christians discussed in Part One provide contrastive answers to the question of what an authentically indigenous — Indian — Christianity looks like, the essays in Part Two address concerns of a different kind: *viz.*, on a question of this kind, *who* has the final say? Or, to use the word an American

president famously coined, who gets to be 'the decider'? Here, some caveats are called for, given that earlier we introduced the term 'organic' to refer to the acculturative processes described by our first set of authors (Benteler, San Chirico, Ashok Kumar). Our reason for introducing this distinction was to underscore their spontaneity and mark them off from inculturation, which is usually orchestrated and implemented from the top down. Yet we do not mean to imply an absolute difference between these categories, since acculturative processes are not unaffected by circumstance or isolated from the interplay of power and politics. Agency is always rife with enigma and is always exercised within the constraints of a particular social context, making certain kinds of behaviour more likely than others (Asad 1993; Ortner 2006). Questions having to do with *what* and *who* an Indian Christian is are therefore unanswerable if we only ask them theologically.

As Part Two demonstrates, such questions are not only intrinsically political but also essentially and unavoidably *politicised*, regardless of the India we are talking about, past or present. Nandini Sundar (2006: 359), an astute observer, argues on the basis of her research into Hindu-Christian sectarian competition for the allegiance of India's tribal peoples that, '[u]ltimately, all religions (like languages) are products of a particular politics of classification, and the recognition accorded to their gods depends on the economic and political power of a people'. *What*, then, an Indian Christian is, or *who*, depends in no small measure on the persons or parties who arrogate to themselves the power of decision. Even so, the outcome will remain inchoate, congealing only within a cauldron of intergroup rivalries, competing interests, and contestations over authority and authenticity.

We begin Part Two with a piece of pioneering scholarship on Agra in the Mughal empire, more than a millennium after Christianity's actual origins in the south of India. Here, Gulfishan Khan's essay, Chapter 4, documents and discusses a Muslim-Christian encounter, sustained over a period of years and remarkable for its dialogical character and intensity. In this story, the European actors are Jesuits from Goa who were dispatched to the court of Akbar — invited at his initiative — and remained there through Jahangir's reign. Although Jesuits would soon be suspected of complicity in European expansionism (as in the adage from later years: behind the missionary comes the artillery), Khan discerns an irenic convergence of interests among these interreligious interlocutors. Such was the case, despite Jesus's simply being a much-beloved Prophet on the Muslim side but God the Son, Second Person of the Trinity, on the Christian. At the time, Mughal India had a wide-open intellectual horizon and its curiosity about Christian Europe was hardly superficial.

The tremendous effort that went into translating the Persian-language Life of Jesus called the 'Mirror of Holiness' (*Mirat al-Quds*), involving Jesuits and Qur'anic scholars in a collaborative project, must be seen in this light. When all was said and done, however, there was never really any doubt about the 'decider' of the real Jesus. Besides making parts of this rare text available in English, Khan also works with verbatim minutes of the Agra dialogues involving Jahangir and his Jesuit interlocutors. One (a Florentine, Fr Corsi) who was so forward (and foolish) as to trumpet the truth of Christianity in the imperial presence is said to have had to beat a swift retreat, 'sweating profusely'.

A recurrent theme of Part Two is in fact, the regularity with which foreign missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, saw their authority to dictate the meaning of 'true' Christianity subverted and undercut by *Indian* agency. 'Sweating profusely' is something many a Euro-American church emissary has done when confronted with resistance, behind their backs or in front of their faces, not only by Mughal emperors but also by ordinary village folk of the dominant castes or marginal communities. Although the question of what it means to be an Indian Christian or a Christian who happens to be Indian is still on the table today, the difference now is that we are talking about resistance *to* Christians *from* Christians and about a template for Christianity's reproduction that has never been incontestably alien or un-Indian.

As Hephzibah Israel's Chapter 5 unfolds, one sees that even though missionary authority should not be trivialised, the outcome of most intra-church struggles has been the re-appropriation of power by Indian Christian brokers. Approaching her topic innovatively, with a focus on hymnology instead of doctrine or praxis, Israel focuses on mid-19th-century controversies over the properly 'Christian' content of Tamil hymns sung in South Indian Lutheran churches founded in the early 18th century by the German Pietist mission at Tranquebar (a Danish enclave south of Chennai). How this conflict was in large part waged over contrastive aesthetics (musical and performative) each side regarded as culturally and religiously incompatible, we leave to Israel to explain. With respect to agency, however, the point is how little the missionaries had. As her study shows, Pietists, scandalised by Tamil hymns with lyrics saturated in bhakti, accused their parishioners of being more of the temple than the church. Despite the hue and cry, such accusations were more or less shrugged off.

The irony is poignant, since Pietism is arguably a Christian corollary to Hindu bhakti — that is, a form of fervently theistic devotionism. And so it may be, but the upshot of Israel's essay has more to do with how the missionaries were upstaged by one of their own — Vedanayaka Sastri (1774–1864),

a renowned Protestant musician who became the figure at the forefront of indigenous resistance. Unwilling to stomach an alien (European) aesthetic, Vedanayaka also felt bound by conscience (quickened, in certain respects, by Pietism) to strip off the erotic from the bhakti of his Christian faith and anything else deemed 'un-Christian'. Most interestingly, Israel highlights how he mobilised alternative sources of authority, ranging from the more permissive missionaries of the previous century to his own sovereign, the Hindu king of Tanjore, and — most tellingly in a Protestant context — the Christian New Testament itself.

To navigate through Part Two as a whole, one has to have a high tolerance for perspectivalism. Not only that, Indian Christianity should be seen both through a wide-angle lens and in a multi-angled way. As the camera pans around, though, cognitive whiplash may occur. Just a moment ago, we were talking about missionary agency and how easily thwartable it looked; now, however, in Xavier Gravend-Tirole's essay, Chapter 6, we learn that one indigenous community's subversion of alien ecclesiastical hegemony may entail setbacks for another. To segue from Israel's chapter to his, it helps to observe that Vedanayaka Sastri's triumph over his missionary adversaries helped shore up the dominance of his caste, the Vellalas (propertied cultivators; technically, Shudra), over the church, its cultural assets, and power structures.

That the triumph of a dominant-caste Christian might have been won at the cost of the Dalit Christians who are themselves nowadays the preponderant population cohort of the Christian church as a whole (with the exception of the Syro-Malabar churches) brings us back again to questions of acculturation. Although organic and emerging from the ground up instead of the top down, such developments may bode well in one sense and ill in another. For India's Dalit Christians, the singing of church hymns composed by Vellala Christians entails much more than just a dissonance of aesthetics; the very language of the lyrics serves as a painful reminder that in the pre-Christian past Dalits did not participate in temple-based bhakti traditions with the same privileges Vellalas had.

As Israel demonstrates for the past and Gravend-Tirole for the present, projects of inculturation fail less often because their initiators are European than because of being conceived and implemented from the top down. While the analogy may seem a stretch, it might help to imagine that what Vellalas were to Europeans, Dalits were to Vellalas. That is, even though Vellalas chafed under European domination, they were not, as the dominant caste, uninvolved in the oppression of communities nowadays called Dalit. As Christians, however, both communities, Vellala and Dalit, found (and find) in aesthetics

ample scope for self-definition and self-assertion. Here, then, lies the point of tangency between Israel, whose focus is on Vellalas, and Gravend-Tirole's on Dalits. For each group, worship lies at the heart of Christian identity, whether voiced in song (Israel's Vellala Protestants) or enacted liturgically and in sacramental rituals such as the Eucharist (Gravend-Tirole's Dalit Catholics). After a post-Vatican II efflorescence of Catholic inculturationism in the 1970s and 1980s, catalysed in large part by a kind of Catholic think-tank, the Bangalore-based National Biblical and Catechetical Centre, the tepid response from Dalits has thrown most such efforts into doubt. Again, their exclusion from the Brahmanical, Sanskritic ethos of temple-based Hinduism accounts for a good deal of the antipathy toward the aesthetic of the dominant caste — and understandably so, as there are perfectly good Dalit resources that could be mobilised instead.

As Gravend-Tirole goes on to show, inculturation not only stirs up a lively — sometimes edgy — intramural debate among Christians of diverse social backgrounds, it also precipitates and provokes a barrage of irate criticism from Hindu nationalists. Condemning it as a cynical ploy, they regard it as a desperate strategy intended to dupe hapless and witless Indians by cloaking the wolf of Christianity in the sheep's garb of Hinduism (Goel 2010; Swarup 1983). Dalit Christians and Hindu nationalists are indeed strange bedfellows, but their opposition to inculturation from the top down also finds support among Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals. Imagining faith and culture in adversarial terms, resolvable only by the triumph of one over the other, they are especially averse to worship forms derived from Sanskritic Hinduism. News of this seeps into the Indian public square where it becomes grist for the Hindu nationalist mill (e.g., Arun Shourie's 1994 exposé of intra-Catholic dissension on the nature and obligations of Christian mission). Besides the other insights they offer, Chapters 5 and 6 flag the subject of inculturation as one of the most challenging ones faced by Indian Christians. Not only is deculturation the flipside of inculturation, depending on one's social and religious location (Dalit, for instance, as opposed to Vellala), but in addition any discussion of it invariably elicits the criticism from Hindu nationalists that foreignness remains the church's most defining feature.

Chapter 7 of Part Two, James Ponniah's essay, draws richly upon his rural ethnographic work among contemporary Tamil Dalit Christians to elucidate two overlapping phenomena. First are the ways in which Dalits employ and deploy Christian symbols, reinvesting them with a 'surplus of meaning' (meanings, that is, over and beyond the ones officially propagated and traditionally transmitted by the Catholic Church). And the second is how

Dalits appropriate and exploit 'the project of modernity inaugurated by the Christian missionaries' through literacy and other forms of education. They do this, he argues, in order to voice more compellingly the suffering that comes with being Dalit and to contest the very conditions that account for their marginalisation. While scholars have often thought of Dalit conversion to Christianity as akin to social protest, or as an 'opting out of an oppressive social structure' (Oddie 1996: 5), Ponniah goes further, for the Dalits in his study are Christian already. Needing a socio-cultural *retranslation* of Christian faith and praxis into terms more truly reflective of their Dalithood, Dalits initiate changes, whether sanctioned or not, ecclesiastically, and are undeterred by official opposition.

In short, as part of the self-initiated process of revisioning their marginalisation, Ponniah's Dalits literally walk with the Cross 'from subalternity to modernity'. Already a multivalent symbol, the Cross in Dalit perception is not merely an ornament one wears or to which one genuflects or that one carries during a Passion Play. Rather, it encapsulates and articulates both the sorrows of marginality and the assurance of a final triumph over the adversities of death, experienced socially. Documenting a Dalit village during Easter, Ponniah finds in the re-enactment of the Stations of the Cross a passion for justice and human dignity that becomes the superadded meaning Dalits discover in Jesus's Passion. Unsurprisingly, the same dramas afford ample scope for tweaking the pretensions of oppressors of all shapes and sizes, including priests and publicans, Hindu and Christian.

Can Christianity be Indian?

Thus far in this collection, a variety of voices on the Indianness of Christianity have been heard. By and large, Christians have been the most vocal, although others — from yesterday's Muslim emperors to today's Hindu nationalists — have entered the conversation as well. Here at the end of our volume, the decibel level of non-Christian voices rises a notch, for the voices that clamour to be heard in Part Three, claiming to speak for 'India' or on behalf of 'Hinduism', can no longer be denied, ignored, or trivialised. As controversy intensifies, voices from the Indian diaspora also join in, demanding from afar an India purged of (allegedly) un-Indian anomalies such as Christianity — at least of the uncontrollable variety they find objectionable. Militancy of this kind worsens the globalisation of communal and interreligious conflict in ways that mirror the evangelistic excesses these long-distance nationalists

decry. While we do not doubt that one can be privately intolerant, religiously or theologically, without also being publicly intolerant, socially or politically (e.g., by withholding from others their constitutionally-protected freedoms), the last three essays of our volume take a hard look at those who actually violate such guarantees and run amuck in riots, or come uncomfortably close to advocating a crackdown on minorities for reasons of their religion. Overall, when the question becomes one of whether Christianity can be Indian — or *cannot* — suddenly the whole conversation seems less amenable to rational discourse, more urgent and supercharged, and impossible of distantiation.

While Georg Pfeffer's (Chapter 8) and Chad Bauman's (Chapter 9) essays stay well on the far side of academic advocacy, the last in our collection, Chapter 10, by Richard Fox Young and Sunder John Boopalan, makes no bones about being an act of concerned scholarship. Despite differences of approach and the inclination or disinclination of their authors, on this occasion, to separate 'value' from 'fact', all three essays can be read as if there were hardly any seam at all between them. For stereoscopic effect, Pfeffer works comparatively, bringing into conversation the troubled past(s) and present(s) of two Christian communities, geographically dissimilar but handicapped by similar marginality: the Chuhra sweepers of the Punjab in Pakistan and Orissa's tribals of the Kandhamal Highlands. As Pfeffer documents from years of observation, it was only in recent times that the Muslim majority grew alarmed at the influx of Chuhras into the Christian church. As soon, however, as Chuhras took advantage of their newfound educational opportunities, prospered and attained prominence in church-related institutions, the indifference of the dominant population to their conversion gave way to animosity. Chuhras, accordingly, were targeted for reprisal and re-inferiorisation.

Although different contextually and a world away on the other side of the Indian sub-continent, Pfeffer finds in the hills of Orissa a troubling parallel for Adivasi Christians. Here, Chad Bauman picks up where Pfeffer leaves off, reaching a conclusion similar to his by means of an analytical overview of the anti-Christian riots that rocked the Kandhamal Highlands in 2007 and 2008. Drawing upon Clifford Geertz's famous analysis of religion as a 'cultural system' which fuses the 'world as lived' with the 'world as imagined' (Geertz 1973), Bauman argues that interreligious riots function in a similar way, fusing the world as actually experienced (the world *produced* by and after riots) with the world as Hindu nationalists ideally imagine it to be — free of Christian and Muslim, Dalit and Adivasi assertion or insubordination. Accordingly, outbreaks of mob violence aim at turning the clock of history

back to a time when traditional structures of power and privilege were unaffected by conversion to Christianity.

Last, in a twist of irony, considering where our volume began, Young and Boopalan round off Part Three with their reflections on how essentially local questions about the Indianness of Indian Christianity are nowadays addressed globally and not only domestically. More and more, Hindu Americans of the Indian diaspora, whose nationalism migrated with them, vie with their Dalit Christian American counterparts over who ought to be considered more representatively 'Indian' than the other. While the outcome of this intra-diasporic quarrel remains uncertain, evidence accumulates of Dalits being doubly marginalised, at home and overseas. The spoils of the contest being waged abroad are indeed considerable, for the role of being 'the decider' brings with it the privileges and prerogatives of rectifying (mis)information about India in America and wherever the travails of India's Christians, documented by Pfeffer and Bauman, are a subject of widespread concern and watched by the media. By now it may seem obvious, but here in Part Three, as our volume comes to a close, we draw attention to an under-recognised linkage between the current debate over Indian Christianity's claims to Indianness and a concurrent debate going on in the background. That debate, long-stoked by Hindu nationalists — whether Indians or Americans or residents of other countries — purports to be not only about Indians as a singularly-religious people but also about India as a religiously-singular 'Hindu' nation.



Notes

1. Our outlook on Christianity's pluriformity and plasticity, cross-culturally, has been shaped in part by the historiography of Andrew F. Walls in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (1996), especially 'The Translation Principle in Christian History' (Chapter 3).
2. On 'inculturation' and its numerous Christian spinoffs ('enculturation', etc.), Stanley (2007) provides a helpful overview.
3. An example of intentional inculturation would be the attempt by Catholic theologians to reconfigure classical Thomism for Indian consumption by adopting and adapting the terms and categories of Advaita Vedanta. As Xavier Gravend-Tirole observes in Chapter 6, this kind of inculturation can seem transparently imperialistic to its critics.

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