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Book Review: *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa,* by Alexander Henn

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Alexander Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity*

Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014. xi and 214 pages. Notes, index, 9 b&w images, 1 map. Hardback, \$80.00; paperback, \$30.00. ISBN 978-0-253-01287-6 (hardback); 978-0-253-01294-4 (paperback).

AS THE FIRST LINE of Alexander Henn's fine book avers, "Goa is a special place" (1). It is unusual in India for its large Catholic population, the clear impact of Portuguese rule on its landscape and culture, and for the fact that nearly five hundred years of Portuguese rule in the region ended only in 1961, fourteen years *after* India's independence from Britain. Goa is also peculiar for the complexity of its Hindu-Christian relations, in part because Portuguese rule produced both paroxysms of extreme, iconoclastic, anti-Hindu violence, *and* some of the most fascinating and thorough-going forms of Hindu-Catholic syncretism to be found.

In fact, one of Henn's central and most original claims is that both of these Portuguese Catholic postures with regard to Hinduism (the aggressive/iconoclastic and the assimilative/syncretistic) were related and emerged from the same source: a profound ambiguity and anxiety about the category of religion itself in this transitional historical moment when many Europeans still thought of religion in the singular, with true (Christian), false (Jewish, Muslim), and corrupted ("idolatrous," "pagan," and "gentile") versions, and when the modern notion of multiple discrete, "world" religions was just beginning to come into being. What then to do with Hinduism? Did its obvious similarities to European Catholicism suggest it was just a perverted form of it? Was it something demonic? Or was it something entirely new, something which did not fit into received categories? In Portuguese Goa, to use Henn's own words, "religion constituted a domain that was ridden by deep and lasting uncertainties, variously expressed in qualms as to whether similarities or differences, hermeneutics or violence, syncretistic mediation or religious self-assertion, should have strategic priority in the proselytizing mission and colonial conquest" (177).

The identification of these "deep and lasting uncertainties" help Henn provide a nuanced analysis (in chapter 1) of what I have long considered the single most

fascinating episode of European-Indian encounter. Soon after completing the first Europe-to-India sea voyage in 1498, Vasco da Gama's entourage entered a Hindu temple that at least some in the entourage mistook for a church. Da Gama's soldier-chronicler, Álvaro Velho, describes the "chapel" they had entered, which included statues and painted images of "Our Lady" and other "saints" with "teeth protruding an inch from the mouth, and four or five arms," managed by clergy wearing "some threads passing over the left shoulder" who threw "holy water" over them and gave them some "white earth" for their foreheads (19–20).

Da Gama's error has been variously interpreted, as Henn himself indicates. Charles Boxer views it as the natural mistake of a European raised on stories about, and obsessed with finding or allying with the mythological Christian King, Prester John, who, it was believed, ruled on the far side of the lands controlled by the Europeans' Muslim rivals, and who could be enlisted to help defeat them (20). Michael Pearson, on the other hand, perceives it as a manifestation of the explorers' "tolerant attitude," and "desire to find familiar things in Asia" (quoted on page 20). In Henn's hands, the episode becomes more complex: "Vasco da Gama's celebrated error ... can neither be reduced to a short-lived 'gaffe' nor a 'liberal attitude' on the part of the early-modern explorer, nor even a genuine first-contact hermeneutic deficiency. Instead, it marks an epitomic expression of the complexity inhering the notion of religion at the historical beginning of colonialism and modernity" (175).

A second prominent and intriguing theme of the book is syncretism. Many earlier anthropological treatments of syncretism have attempted, *contra* negative Christian theological appraisals, to rehabilitate syncretistic religion, at times by framing it as a mark of a modern, pluralist, tolerant attitude towards religion. While Henn acknowledges that the very notion of syncretism *presupposes* modern understandings of religions as distinct "traditions" with clear boundaries that can be transgressed, he draws upon several decades of ethnographic fieldwork in Goa to provide rich descriptions of syncretic Hindu-Catholic *jāgar* rituals and demonstrate (in chapter 5) that there is no obvious, necessary link between syncretism and interreligious tolerance. This is perhaps particularly clear in the context of recent, more aggressive forms of Hindu assertion in Goa, which have led, *inter alia*, to attempts, by Hindus, to favor the greater Hinduization of these and similar Hindu-Catholic syncretic practices and rituals. In this regard, Henn argues, "the people who ... engage in syncretistic practices ... self-consciously and sometimes even anxiously assert their respective religious identities ... frequently ... in the very syncretistic contexts themselves.... Obviously, such seemingly paradoxical circumstances can prevail only because the people involved do not consider what we perceive as 'transgression of boundaries' to have any effect on their respective religious identities, and, conversely, what we perceive as 'assertion of boundaries' to have anything to do with their syncretistic practices" (181).

Of the chapters not yet mentioned, chapter 2 discusses the anti-Hindu iconoclasm of Goa's Portuguese authorities in the context of shifting notions of "idolatry," and notes how some of the destroyed images and symbols of Hinduism were assimilated into, and thereby survived in the Christian icons with which they were

replaced. Chapter 3 discusses the missionary production of Christian “Puranas” that (sometimes quite successfully and poetically) borrowed elements of the very forms of Hindu literature and thought that were at the same time being paradoxically suppressed and/or destroyed by Portuguese authorities and missionaries. And chapter 4 provides a detailed description of Goan village structures and religious beliefs/practices, and the ways in which these structures, beliefs, and practices interacted with those introduced and/or imposed by the Portuguese. Along the way, there are compelling and profitably tangential treatments of “ritual memory,” “narrative memory,” “mimetic rituals,” “performative praxis,” and analyses of a whole variety of fascinating moments in Goa’s Hindu-Catholic history.

Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa is a tour de force, full of detailed, careful scholarship, and cogent, conceptually nuanced, and innovative arguments. It is clearly the work of a seasoned scholar adept in both the archive and the field. In terms of work published in the last five years, the only comparable work in the anthropology of Indian Christianity, and of Hindu-Christian encounters, is MOSSE (2012), a book with which Henn’s is occasionally in dialogue (and, at times, disagreement). The theoretical density and frequent use of words more common in anthropology than elsewhere—the word “ludic” seems to appear nearly as many times as there are pages—may make Henn’s work inaccessible for all but the most advanced and well-trained undergrads. But graduate students and scholars of anthropology and history with an interest in Indian Christianity and Hindu-Christian encounters will find it an appealing, provocative, compelling, and impressive work.

REFERENCE

MOSSE, David
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