

Foreword:
The View from the Other Side:
Postpostcolonialism, Religious Syncretism, and Class Conflict

This is an important moment, in both Indian history and American scholarship, to open up the issue of the assimilation of Christianity in India. Scholarship dances to the music of history. The history of Christianity in India has recently opened up to a whole new way of thinking that has not, until now, reached the page, though it may very well have occurred to a number of people who had no access to a printing press, or even to a diary.

For most of the twentieth century, scholars of South Asian religions, on the one hand, and Christian theologians and church leaders, on the other, largely ignored the popular manifestations of Christianity in India, though for very different reasons. Many historians of religions were European or American Christians, whose only slightly displaced missiological drive traditionally focused on exotic and “pagan” religions, the dramatically other Others such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. An unfortunate remnant of the missionary and colonial legacy was the never-acknowledged assumption that Christianity was a metatradition immune to and beyond the purview of the empirical methodology of the history of religions. On the other hand, when the history of Christianity in India was taken as an object of study at all, it was viewed, like history in general, from the standpoint of power, from the top down: from the records, and hence inevitably the point of view of the conquerors, in this case the missionaries. This approach regarded the context in which Indian Christianity grew—the world of Hinduism and Islam—as nothing but a problem that Christianity solved, a question to which Christianity was the answer. As Corinne Dempsey notes, the academic community, so heavily influenced by European Christianity, is only now revising its self-understanding of its position as peripheral Other in south India. Protestant scholars in the nineteenth century, adding an anti-Catholic bias to the more general Christian bias, produced an agenda that has continued to pollute the scholarship on comparison even in our day (Smith 1990). The unspoken Protestant bias in religious studies has tended to drive all studies back to “the

beginning," ultimately to the Veda, ignoring the long process of history that came after the Veda, a history in which Europeans played an important role.

Precolonial, imperialist history recorded only one half of the story of this interaction, the missionary-eye-view, like someone listening to a person talking on a telephone, unable to hear the responses of the person on the other end of the line. Postcolonial history began to listen in on the call, to hear the voice on the other end of the line. The postcolonial revolution in scholarship, following right on the heels of the political liberation of India in 1947, questioned the motives and ideologies of the conquerors; and, in the shadow of Michel Foucault and Edward Said (Said 1979), it viewed religion in general as nothing but a thinly veiled arm of political power, in this case imperial European domination of India, and scholars of religion rightly responded largely by paying more attention to the political aspects of the construction of religion.

That, however, too, was just half of the story; it failed to analyze the religious aspects of the political construction of India. What might be called postpostcolonialism, a movement reflected in the later writings of Edward Said (Said 1993), rebelled against the first rebels, attempting to rescue the colonized from the still insulting position of victims to which early postcolonialism had consigned them. It sought to excavate and restore the integrity of voices of resistance, and it found them, sometimes preserved in obscure sources that had been overlooked, sometimes embedded like a fifth column within the records of their oppressors. As a more political and less scholarly movement, this resistance has taken on a new face in our day, in the form of violence directed by Hindus (largely incited by right-wing Hindu fundamentalists) against Indian Christians, violence that has been luridly documented in the Western press. Who, now, are the victims and who the resisters?

The British left their props and scripts on stage in India, but most of the actual players exited. By contrast, the Christians are still there, in the form of people who converted from Hinduism or Islam or are descended from such converts. They are also there in the form of people who were born in Europe and went to India as missionaries or are descended from people who did not leave the stage in 1947 (a set movingly evoked by Paul Scott in *Staying On* [Scott 1977]), and we now know that these people are us, at least to the extent that, as postcolonialism has taught us, all European scholars are implicated to some extent in the history of the European presence in India. We can still hear the voices of all of these people now.

The present volume represents a postpostcolonial historiography, one that views the Indians who were subject to Christian missions neither simply as victims nor simply as resisters (against Hinduism or Islam, as was once

argued of those who did convert, or against the Christians, said of those who did not convert), but rather as active agents. Not content merely to hear their responses to a call initiated by the British, these scholars are now listening for calls made by the Indians themselves, calls directed not merely to the British but to one another. This is the converts'-eye-view, the view from (in twentieth century, Ph.D. students in the history of religions began to do fieldwork that investigates popular manifestations of Christianity in non-Western regions in general and South Asia in particular. In broadening its scholarly focus and readjusting its methodological lens, the history of religions has opened up a new subfield within the discipline that is bringing fresh data to public discourse and scholarly scrutiny. The present collection of essays signals this new movement, interpreting a rich compendium of empirical data through methodologies that acknowledge the complexity of popular Indian Christianity and the complicated identities of Indian Christians, while challenging facile distinctions between Hindu and Christian.

The new consciousness also makes it possible now to consider not only the negative but the positive—or, at least potentially positive—aspects of imperialism, an aspect perhaps easier to see in religion than in politics. Dempsey tells the tale of a boy captured by demons, a boy who had a European vicar (or bishop) on his side. The bishop is constructed as "foreign" (Persian, an ethnicity with positive valences for the Syrian church). This story has resonances in other stories that tell of other foreigners, perhaps Europeans, who fought against demons in India. Stella Kramrisch wrote, years ago, of "white-skinned foreigners said to have come in the thirteenth century from Anatolia and Syria and to have killed the tyrant Punvaru. He had cut off the hands of the architect who had built the city of Patan so that he might not construct anything like it again. The seventy-two horsemen took the fort and killed the chief. . . . These apocalyptic horsemen transmute the fear generated by Muslim invasions into India into a liberating legend in which the evil power does not come from outside but is local, embodied in the tyrant Punvaru" (Kramrisch 1968, 55). Even today, villagers in Kutch make statues of the seventy-two horses and offer sweet rice to the horsemen and ask them for boons (Narayan 1999).

Nowadays we would go on to ask who constructed this myth, and who perpetuated it, and we must not forget that the British found it very useful to tell, on many occasions, other variations on the theme of "the British saving Hindus from Muslims." But there are also many tellings of the story of Punvaru that have a more clearly Hindu provenance, and in Chennai (Madras) today, Hindus do say that the British, especially the early East India Company, liberated Hindus in south India from Muslim control and played not merely a neutral but a positive role in establishing an evenhanded attitude

to all religions in its new territory (Waghorne 1999). The story of Punvaro is subversion turned on its head, as it were, subversion inverted, subversion from the top down: it speaks of false consciousness, of mythology imposed from the top down, and of the assimilation of the values of the conquerors by those who are conquered. It views the demon-killing invaders as demons, too, but as benign demons (a well-known category in Hinduism [Doniger 1975, 281–89]) who brought something of value, the gift from another world (Doniger 1999). Demons teach the gods about resurrection in a story told in the *Mahabharata*, in which the gods send the son of their guru Brihaspati to learn the secret of revival from Shukra, guru of the demons (*Mahabharata* 1.71–2; O’Flaherty 1975, 281–89). Being demonized is not always such a bad thing. If the Europeans, hawking their secret of resurrection, are demons, they may well be that sort of demon, the sort that can do you some good—too.

These essays speak of Indian attempts to achieve a new kind of both religious and political dignity through some sort of combination of the religion of their birth and the Christianity of their choice. Never ignoring the destructive aspects of conversion that have been so well documented by those postcolonial scholars who depicted Hindus as victims, and that surely must be supplying at least part of the energy fueling the anti-Christian attacks that are going on in India today, the authors of this volume go on to consider the manner in which many Hindus who came in contact with Christianity, whether as converts or merely as neighbors, found ways to benefit from the contact. These ways took very different forms depending upon a number of factors, such as the moment in history, the part of India, the form of Christianity, and the gender and class of the potential converts.

Of the ten essays in this volume, two deal with history and the other eight primarily with contemporary fieldwork, often historically contextualized. Geographically, the majority of the essays present fieldwork in south India, six from Tamil Nadu and one from Kerala; the other three deal with Delhi, Benares, and the general area of Bihar, West Bengal, and Orissa. This geographical bias is a direct reflection of the fact that the majority of Indian Christians live in south India; and the predominance of Catholics in this area is reflected in the predominance of essays in this volume dealing with Catholics, while only three deal with Protestants and one with the Syrian Church. Eliza Kent notes that the Protestants, less sensual than the Catholics (or Hindus, I would add), afford far less examples of explicit “syncretism” and shun Hindu-Muslim “superstition,” perhaps (I would suggest) through an anti-Catholic bias. (Such a bias, as Lata Mani has well argued, fueled the British emphasis on “Scripture”—the *Laws of Manu*—over oral tradition—the rulings of local Indian judges—in their legislation regulating the burning of widows [Mani 1998, 99]). The three essays on Protestantism, by Eliza

Kent, John Webster, and Zoe Sherinian, also deal more explicitly with gender issues, Kent with women’s literacy, Webster by noting that, in the absence of *zenana* work, no Dalit women were converted, and Sherinian with female images of god. Dempsey also tells the stories of two women saints, and Richard MacPhail writes about a female medium. The other essays deal primarily with men or with people of unspecified gender.

The issue of class is more complex. Intersecting with the top-down or bottom-up point of view of colonizer vs. colonized, missionary vs. convert, is the more complex question of the class from which converts were drawn. Hotly debated from the time of the earliest successful missionary, de Nobili, the question of elite vs. lower class converts has almost always been studied, like everything else in Indian religion, from the standpoint of the missionaries: what were the advantages of proselytizing among one class or the other? But some of the present essays deal not merely with lower-class Hindus but with tribal people like the Santals, entirely outside the Hindu caste system, and with the Dalits, formerly known as Untouchables, consigned to a limbo inside the Hindu world but excluded from its official social hierarchy. Sherinian, analyzing a Dalit theologian’s use of a Tamil version of the Lord’s Prayer, grapples with the problematic assertion that Christianity offers Dalits a promise of freedom (from Hindu persecution); elsewhere, Kent has demonstrated just how problematic this assertion is when it is applied to women, who found that, in many cases, they had leapt from the frying pan of Hindu misogyny into the fire of Protestant sexism (Kent 1999). John Webster writes, in this volume, of the conversion of the Chamars, a particular caste of Dalits, who probably perceived Christianity as a “panth,” or non-Vedic religious path.

More generally, these essays focus on lower classes in contrast with an assumed elite, on vernacular and oral culture in contrast with assumed Sanskrit literati, above all on lay people in contrast with a professional priesthood. The emphasis on popular religions reflects not only the influence of anthropology upon the history of religions but the increasing presence of new religious movements as an object of study within the discipline, a discipline which, partly in reaction against the construction of “the Veda” by right-wing political factions in India, has begun to seek the heart of Hinduism elsewhere.

There is a still more fundamental (if I may use the expression) way that this volume tears the lens out of the hand of traditional European scholarship about religion in India. That scholarship has heretofore consisted overwhelmingly of the study of Indian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Indian Islam) by Christians, occasionally by Jews (Doniger 1994). The Christian bias is strident in some scholars than in others, but the point of view has proved inevitable. The Christian-Hindu comparison, always implicit in Western scholarship, now comes out of the closet and makes Christianity an object, as well as a subject, of comparison. This switch of lens is yet another gift of the

postcolonial, as well as postmodern, revolution, which has taught us that the cultures that we are comparing have compared, too, that they are subjects, like us, as well as the objects of our study. One of the first historians of religions, Herodotus, compared his ancient Greeks with the Persians and the Egyptians; a number of recent studies have documented the attitudes of the ancient Chinese, Hindus, and others toward the Others on their borders (White 1991). From the advent of Christianity, however, the scholarly enterprise of comparison was heavily colored by mission, often a deeply submerged agenda. We now know, for instance, how the early Christians strove to understand, and to justify, the stunning resemblances between their religion and that of the pagans they so despised. Justin insisted, "It is not we who think like the others, but all of them who imitate us in what they say," and Clement of Alexandria accused the (ancient!) Greeks of stealing from the Christians (Pépin 1991, 659b). This Christian comparative apologetic, in a twisted form, was the driving force behind that great nineteenth-century comparatist, Sir James George Frazer, too: what to do about the similarities between Christianity and "paganism" (Ackerman 1987, 95 and 189). This history of the ways in which Others have compared their own Others shows not only that our colonialism was not the first colonialism, but that comparison has long been an imperial enterprise (Doniger 1998).

These essays give us access—in the form of works cited and spoken words quoted—to the thoughts and words of natives of India, not of Europe or America, who are doing the comparison, to comparatists who never read Eliade. In a sense, these native informants are also syncretists who don't use the "s" word. Several of the scholars in this volume challenge or reject the concept of syncretism because it entangles us in the problem of essentialism: to say that Hinduism combines, in a syncretistic fashion, with Christianity is to imply that each religion is a fixed entity that mixes with the other to form a new entity, as red mixed with blue produces purple. The problem, of course, is that religions have fuzzy edges and multiple parts; their interaction is more like mixing the palette of a Monet with the palette of a Rembrandt. There is Something in India that is neither Muslim nor Christian but that some of our authors hesitate to call "Hinduism." Dempsey notes that "ahistorical constructions of overly tidy categories—for example, 'Hinduism' (or 'Christianity')—have created situations where religious tension and violence erupt. . . . particularly . . . when such lived expressions reflect affiliations and identities that defy politically contrived rigidities." Joanne Waghorne suggests that, instead of Hinduism, we might speak of a "shared religious sensibility," and she notes that kings would designate themselves as Shaiva or Vaishnava, or as Muslim, but not as Hindu. This is all true, but none of these essays can manage without the term "Hinduism," with or without scare quotes; a good balance is struck by Waghorne's

wise confession at the end (still using the dastardly term): "I could not distinguish easily whether the devotees were in fact Christian or Hindu, and somehow in the atmosphere of the moment, this identification seems not to matter." Without assuming any clear red-vs.-blue distinction between religions, however, it is both possible and useful to determine aspects of a particular religious moment that are Christian (the Cross, the Lord's Prayer, the Eucharist), aspects that are Hindu (the Shiva-linga, the Vedic mantra, the slaughter of a goat), and aspects that are shared (the rosary, the chanting of a prayer, the [symbolic] sacrifice of a lamb or a goat).

Within these broadly shared goals and assumptions, the authors of these essays offer us a number of more specific insights into the most pressing problem of the day: religious conflict. In some areas, but not, alas, in others, anti-Christian rhetoric has diminished, as Indian Christians have become assimilated, generating a different, more peaceful rhetoric in which Europeans, rather than Christians, are the Others. What is it that makes one rhetoric rather than another prevail in a particular place? Waghorne asks what it is about a chariot that can be shared by Hindus and Christians, when other religious factors cannot be shared; she speaks of a shared public space, a "civil theology," and asks, "Why are some styles of worship so readily shared with official and semi-official sanction, while others are not?" She notes that Mary appears to her Hindu devotees in the form of a goddess and to her Christian worshippers as the Holy Mother, and that it was permissible to the Hindus when J. Jayalalitha represented herself as the goddess Durga (not the sort of image most American politicians would court—biting off the head of a buffalo—but tastes differ), but that it was *not* acceptable to the Christians when she appeared as Virgin Mary. So, too, Schmalz's Keralite Syrian is troubled when one of his own converts uses Jesus' name as a mantra. There are limits to this sort of assimilation.

Selva Raj acknowledges the conflict between Hindus and Christians but sees positive, fruitful aspects of the more specific conflict between Indian lay Christians and the Church in Rome, a contrast he sees in terms of a tension between popular and elite religion. He offers a new model for dialogue—ritual dialogue—and advises concentrating on ritual rather than on theology. Waghorne, too, notes that a shared ritual does not necessarily imply a shared theology. Myth, rather than its cousin, theology, has dominated the study of Indian religion for a long time; now its heyday is over, and both anthropologists and scholars of religion have brought new insights to our understanding of the third cousin, ritual. Margaret Meibohm, too, writes of the creation of religious identity without demonizing the other, through interaction with others past and present, to find and/or create past and present selves. These essays demonstrate the rich rewards that attention to ritual offers to anyone interested in religious interaction between Christians and Hindus.

Categories, rather than specific items, of religious excellence become cross-cultural; Syrian Christians who eat pork revere the Jewish woman who died rather than eat pork. Mathew Schmalz introduces us to a Keralite Syrian Catholic healer who is revered in the Hindu mode and employs Hindu tropes. Richard MacPhail, like Selva Raj, writes of Tamil symbols used to represent Christian sacred power outside the institutions of the Church, and, like Schmalz, tells the story of a converted sinner. Implicit in all of these essays is the relationship between not only Hindus and Christians, the main subject of this volume, and Hindus and Muslims, widely studied elsewhere, but Christians and Muslims. Islam is the silent partner here, the invisible third side of what is not just a dialogue between friends or lovers or rivals (Hindus and Christians) but a *ménage à trois* (Hindus, Christians, and Muslims). The third partner in this triangle, too, poses limits to its willingness to assimilate, like the limits transgressed by Durga as Mary and by the Jesus mantra. The emperor Akbar delighted the Jesuits who came to convert him by assuring them that he had indeed become a Christian—and then infuriated them by continuing to worship as a Muslim and, in many ways, a Hindu. This was not what the Jesuits had in mind at all, and is yet another incident that reveals how Europeans regarded the boundaries between religions as being impenetrable, where Indians saw them as rather porous. The Islamic third side of this vital triangle still remains to be integrated into a study of this nature, and I would hope that such a study would benefit from the clarity of vision and concern for social justice demonstrated by the essays in this volume.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: Between, Behind, and Beyond the Lines

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and

Corinne G. Dempsey

Indian Christianity may well be as old as Jesus Christ himself. Church tradition and legend trace the beginnings of Indian Christianity to the evangelical works of St. Thomas—one of the twelve disciples of Jesus—who arrived in southwest India in 52 C.E. According to the 1991 census of India, nearly 19.6 million Indians or 2.3 percent of the country's population claim to be Christians (Heitzman and Worden 1996, 170). Though spread throughout the country, major concentrations of Christians are found in the southern Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the western state of Goa, and the tribal belt of Bihar and Assam. In comparison with other minority religious groups, such as Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains, who constitute 1.9 percent, 0.8 percent, and 0.4 percent of the total Indian population respectively, the numerical and institutional strength of Indian Christians is significant (119–20). While there is ample—even abundant—scholarly interest in non-Christian religious traditions of India, the heritage and strength of Indian Christianity is little reflected in scholarly literature. This book represents an attempt at bringing some balance to this equation.

Another way in which this volume attempts to provide balance is in its presentation of Christianity from a “popular” perspective, one that stands outside institutional prescription. Most studies of Christianity in India, until recently, have focused on the historical, colonial, missiological, and theological dimensions, leaving out the experiences and expressions of the people on the ground. An important corrective offered by popular expressions and practices is that they challenge commonly constructed distinctions and power relations between Hindu and Christian, elite and local, East and West, and

indigenous and foreign. The volume's subtitle, *Riting Between the Lines*, evokes this challenge.

Popular Indian Christianity indeed takes us to "messy" terrain in which religious identities, borders, and authority are not concrete and absolute, but often fluid and subject to negotiation. Yet this "mess" seems only discernable from the backdrop of institutional, universalizing formulations of identity, boundary, and authority, not from the perspective of the practitioner. A common reaction to this perceived discrepancy has been to relegate popular Christian traditions to the realm of aberration or sideshow. Yet we feel it is important to take seriously the ways in which local traditions offer coherence and meaning to practitioners in ways that complement and, in some significant instances, supplant institutional modes. By retrieving popular practice as a vital and viable part of the Christian package, this volume adds depth and breadth to our understanding of Christianity as a whole and wrests ourselves from possible inclinations to treat it (or its denominations) as an agreed-upon, centralized, monolith.

Distinguishing local Christianities from institutional prescriptions, often giving rise to intrareligious tensions and promoting interreligious solidarity, is the tendency for the former to formulate leadership, ritual, and meaning based on immediate, earthly concerns such as health, wealth, and human dignity.¹ In some instances, these concerns reflect devotees' seemingly precarious position as Indian Christians: as natives who adhere to an ostensibly foreign system, and as Christians who practice amid a Hindu culture. More often than not, local practices work to validate such seemingly "mixed" identities, giving them cultural continuity and coherence. Grassroots Christians experience in these practices, as Michael Amalados puts it, "the roots of their own identity as a people. They show that religion is for the people, not vice versa" (1999, 272). This attention to earthly concerns and enactment of complex identities partially explain the tenacity and resilience of local practices in the face of institutional disdain and constraint.

The volume is arranged in three sections that reflect broad themes having to do with issues of identity, healing, and alternative models of leadership reflected by popular religious practices. Although these themes drive the formation of the volume's three sections, they play out throughout the entire volume to differing degrees. The first section, "Festivals and Rituals: Forging Hybrid Christian Identities," illustrates the role of public religious expressions and tackles the issue of identity most directly. Joanne Waghorne describes chariot processions during Tamil Christian festivals as expressing and celebrating layers of shared Hindu-Christian practice and symbolism, historically and currently promoted by devotees in spite of clerical disapproval. While virtually identical in design, Hindu and Christian chariots artistically

mark crucial differences as well; such practices stake boundaries between traditions but do so differently than institutionally mandated. Selva Raj's first essay likewise notes how north Indian Santal Catholics articulate their layered tribal, Hindu, and Christian allegiances through their enactment of ritual. Raj argues that ritual's reflection of complex identities and relationships offers an important type of interreligious dialogue, one that organically emerges from the lived experiences of the laity. In her discussion of the Velankanni shrine in Tamil Nadu, Margaret Meibohm demonstrates how some Indian Christians perform pilgrimage as a means for integrating disparate aspects of their complex identities. Focusing on Mumbai (Bombay) Christians, predominantly westernized urbanites, Meibohm argues that their annual participation in the Velankanni festival helps them to integrate and assert the indigenous, Indian side of themselves and their tradition. In this section's final essay, Selva Raj describes shared practices at the St. John de Britto shrine in Tamil Nadu. He argues that shrine activities, enlivened by both Hindu and Christian devotees and largely removed from clerical expectation, create a liminal space that transcends religious distinction. De Britto not only offers healing and fertility to his pilgrim devotees, but a welcome transgression that proves redemptive.

It is important to note that ethnographic data in these essays suggest that the process of identity formation does not entail the demonization or domination of others—both indigenous and foreign—but rather their juxtaposition and merging. As such, public festivals and rituals are a resource for creating complex, vibrant expressions of Indian Christian identity. In addition, ritual performances like these also serve as vehicles and mediums for dialogue between Indian Christians and their Hindu neighbors, a model that radically differs in form and efficacy from those adopted by institutional religion and its leadership. This "dialogue on the streets," implied by the essays, is indeed a dialogue of rituals, a dialogue in action, and an ecumenism of the laity.

The second set of essays, "Saints and Wonderworkers: Healing Disease and Division," focuses on the role of healing in local Christian contexts to illustrate the tensions between lay spirituality and institutional prescription. In Corinne Dempsey's study of three Christian saint shrines in Kerala, she notes how one "saint" garners his powers from demons; another's claim to fame is the healing of a Muslim boy; and a third "Christian" saint is, in fact, Jewish. Drawing pilgrims of all faiths to these shrines are the saints' reputations for miracles, not particular religious allegiances; local religious delineations are more tied to efficacy than to creed. Richard MacPhail describes a Tamil Catholic woman, Philomena, who acts as a medium between her burgeoning clientele and the Virgin Mary. Her typically Indian mediumship and its supporting rituals mesh religious distinctions and provide access to saints and the spirit

world. Philomena's healing practice and charisma, free from priestly intervention, challenge traditional authority structures in such a way that they provoke disdain and censorship from local church leaders. Mathew Schmalz introduces us to a self-appointed Catholic charismatic healer, Jude, who works in north India with clients of all religious backgrounds. Schmalz points out Jude's ingenious strategies and improvisations that blend north Indian Hindu conceptions and perceptions into Christian discourses on healing. Jude's practice simultaneously preserves his Christian identity and guarantees his ministerial power.

The volume's final section, "Visionaries and Missionaries: Redefining Religious Authority," examines alternative forms of leadership within the realm of Protestant Christian practice. Distinct from Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, Protestant traditions typically steer away from religious syncretism and thus do not test the parameters of hybrid affiliations. This does not mean, however, that local Indian Protestant traditions do not pose their own kind of challenge to structures set by religious elites and foreign missionaries. Eliza Kent writes about a Tamil lay woman, Muttammal, who restructures the gendered and classed power relations of the Church of South India (CSI) to enhance her own spiritual powers and authority. Using the highly valued "text" as her vehicle, assimilating its meaning to the local landscape and culture, and using it in ways that highlight her skills, Muttammal ministers to a nonliterate population for whom her style and message have particular meaning and power. In John Webster's essay, he argues that the shaping of Christianity in India, typically seen through the eyes of missionaries, can be understood differently when viewed in light of the lived experiences of Indian Christian converts. Comparing missionary strategies in Delhi, 1859–1884, he notes how British Baptist leaders strategically promoted low-caste Chamar members' abilities to form and build the Delhi Church. As clergy quickly discovered, Chamar-led open-air *basti* (settlement) services, involving lively singing and dancing, had a far greater impact on the growing Church than did staid Sunday services or intellectualized bazaar preaching. Zoe Sherinian concludes this section with the music and theology of CSI priest-composer, James Theophilus Appavoo. Under his visionary leadership, Dalit (oppressed) Christians in Tamil Nadu attempt to redefine traditional power relations. Deliberately non-Western and nonelite, Appavoo's choice of musical style signifies a break from and resistance against established religious and social power structures. Drawing upon realities embedded in the lives of Dalit Christians, Appavoo aims, through music and liturgical innovation, to help them reclaim their voice and sense of dignity. The central themes in this collection of essays have been artfully captured and eloquently framed in Wendy Doniger's Foreword and Vasudha Narayanan's Afterword. In her Foreword, Doniger, who has developed a new interest in the study of

popular Christianity in India, sets the stage by positioning the volume within the context of contemporary post-colonial critique. In her Afterword, Narayanan reflects on the essays from the perspective of a Hindu scholar and highlights three distinct types of Hindu responses to the diverse Christianities in India.

As these essays demonstrate, popular Christianity in India is neither homogenous nor uniform but essentially plural and diverse, formed by era, region, caste identity, and local earthly and spiritual need. In significant ways this plurality reflects the pluriform cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious landscape of India. It is therefore both legitimate and appropriate to speak of many popular Christianities in India. As such, these essays not only broaden and alter the scope of Christianity, but challenge normative scholarly and religious understandings. This is reminiscent of recent debate over the category "Hinduism." In part, the debate stems from the fact that "Hinduism" is a somewhat contrived term, originally applied by outsiders to denote indigenous religious practices in India.² More related to the issue at hand, Hinduism is a problematic term because it is not a centralized entity containing universally agreed upon texts, teachings, and traditions. In the interest of accuracy as well as in an effort to avoid privileging any particular brand of Hinduism as authoritative (typically Sanskrit or Brahmanical), some scholars have taken to referring to the tradition in the plural as "Hinduisms" or "Hindu traditions."³ In light of the essays in this volume, if we are to acknowledge intrareligious diversity through a plural label, it seems consistent to think about Christianity/ies in the plural as well. On the other hand, it would be equally consistent to use the singular when referring to any major religious tradition, as long as we understand that all contain diversity in spite of moments when they appear, or wish to appear, unified and centralized. In either case, and most importantly, to concern ourselves with Hinduism's multiplicity up against a taken-for-granted Christian singularity is misleading at best.

Scholars have recently had much to say about the ways Christianity has been used as the measuring stick against which missionaries and European- and North-American trained scholars identified and gave value to—or devalued—"religion" outside the Christian domain (Asad, Balagangadhara). While this phenomenon stems largely from nineteenth- and early-twentieth century colonial chauvinism, with its antiritualistic, belief-centered bent, it nonetheless continues to influence the field of religion and the comparative study of religion today (Smith 1987, 100). As a result, non-Western others have traditionally been viewed through lenses that understand Christianity—and therefore the category "religion" more generally—as textually oriented, based on belief and doctrine rather than practice. To fit the mold, Hinduism, for example, has largely been constructed through its relationship to ancient and elite texts that may have little meaning for the majority who today think of themselves as Hindu.⁴ This is true

of Indian Christianity as well. It is quite telling that those scholars of religion who study popular traditions have typically limited themselves, until very recently, to non-Christian expressions. The study of popular Christianity has largely been the domain of anthropology.

One way to remedy this bias is to develop an alternative measuring stick, to expand the categories that drive the enterprise of labeling and comparison to include non-Western and nonelite constructions, including those that inform popular Christianities. A means for this kind of reformulation, implicitly expressed throughout this volume, is to change the fodder from which we engage our study. When we physically move the location of comparative religious studies to the ground and, in the case of India, to shared terrain, then fodder for comparison and intra- as well as interreligious dialogue becomes organic events that emerge from human needs and lived experiences. When viewed from this new terrain, the question as to whether or not a practice, event, person, or community is or claims to be Christian or Hindu (for example) may be difficult if not impossible to answer. Yet this is precisely why such a shift is important. When the center is decentered, the lines once drawn may no longer apply. Perhaps it's time for some new lines.

Notes

1. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty writes about how ritual provides a response to human suffering whereas, in the face of such real life issues, religious philosophy seems inadequate (1976: 9).
2. This is an important point to consider when thinking about the history of religious traditions and of colonialism in India. Indeed, some have chosen to use the term "Samatana Dharma" in place of Hinduism when describing their own religious practices and beliefs. Yet, in many ways, "Hinduism" does indeed exist, adopted by a good many contemporary Indians and others in a variety of ways. Responding to what many feel to be an ideological dilemma, T. N. Madan insists that "it is futile and rather pedantic to insist on the artificial character of modern Hinduism, as if all reality were not socially constructed" (179).
3. The tentative way scholars of religion use the term Hinduism is comically portrayed by Donald Lopez, who says that scholars of Hinduism can be distinguished from experts on other religions "by their overdeveloped pectoral muscles, grown large from tracing quotation marks in the air whenever they have mentioned 'Hinduism' for over the past ten years" (832). For further discussion of this issue, see Larson and Frykenberg.
4. Max Müller himself was disappointed with many of the Hindu rituals he witnessed in India. He encouraged students of Hinduism to study the ancient texts in order that they might distinguish "between what was the doctrine of the founders and their immediate disciples, and what were the afterthoughts and, generally, the corruptions of later ages" (20).

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