

Conversion Historiography in South Asia: Alternative Indian Christian Counter-histories in Eighteenth Century Goa

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Conversion as a historical process is discussed in South Asian post-independence historiography mostly following the demands of the political present. In the present article, I first try to trace a fragmentary and incomplete history of what I will call conversion historiography in and about South Asia, referring mostly to conversion to Christianity from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Then, I discuss a particular case of religious and cultural conversion, in which the descendants of the early converts to Christianity in Goa re-appropriated conversion histories as an analytical and historiographical tool in order to reconfigure their relation with the past and the present and thus, shore up their cultural authority. In the process, they created their own communal history and historiography that fed directly into Portuguese and Catholic Orientalism. This particular historical example should help us see to what extent the act of conversion is a self-transforming work in progress, a communicational project without teleological guarantees, capable of empowering alternative historical readings.

Conversion is one of the perennially vilified or, on the contrary, extolled religious and cultural experiences, which cuts across periods and resurfaces occasionally as a historical and historiographical problem. In historical

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archives and narratives, it is recorded as a dramatic and disruptive event responsible for either bringing civilisational loss or for enhancing heavenly or cultural gain. In a word, it is emplotted in tragic or comedic mode, to paraphrase freely Hayden White.¹ There are historical archives that tell yet another story about conversion and its aftermath. Against the background of a pluralised and politically volatile world in which cultural encounters stimulate migration of ideas, beliefs and social practices, assuming a new and seemingly clear-cut self-identification provokes mistrust. Hence, accusations of apostasy, duplicity, hypocrisy and treason are hurled at converts from all sides. Under the professional rewriting of an inquisitor or a colonial official, a historical narrative of a dubious or spurious conversion may therefore turn into farce.

The ideological and rhetorical burden under which conversion historiography constructed its objects of study and its field of competence is obviously heavy, varied and unflattering. Partisan historians most often than not over-invest in positivistic scholarship, surreptitiously or openly, geared at celebrating or denigrating particular historical religious movements, while secular historians tend to assume positions ranging from ironic distance to an attitude of downright aversion. From missionary hagiographies or jeremiads to sociological and anthropological studies of today, narratives of religious conversion in South Asia inhabit some of the lowest circles of academic hell.

In South Asian post-independence historiography, conversion as a historical process is mostly discussed, following the demands of the political present, as conversion to Islam and Christianity with underlying politically charged dissatisfactions and lamentations, although these two religious formations came to play a prominent role relatively recently in religious history of the subcontinent.² Other types of individual and communal acts of conversion, belonging to what is considered today as a Hindu civilisational core, are usually given other names such as 'purification', 'enlightenment', 'renunciation', 'insurrection', 'acts of devotion (*bhakti*)', 'cultural translation', 'cultural migration', etc.

¹ Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*.

² According to Gauri Vishwanathan, 'it has been a long-standing belief among Hindus that only Christians and Muslims actively proselytize'. See Gauri Vishwanathan, 'Literacy in India's Conversion Storm': 273. See also, Rowena Robinson's and Sathianathan Clarke's 'Introduction' to their volume *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meaning*.

In the present article, I will try to trace only a fragmentary and incomplete history of what I will call *conversion historiography* in (or about) South Asia. I will then discuss a particular case of religious and cultural conversion, in which the descendants of the former converts to Christianity re-appropriated conversion as an analytical and historiographical tool in order to reconfigure their relation with the present and the past. In the process, they created, for the better or the worse, their own communal history and historiography. This particular historical example should help us see to what extent the act of conversion is a self-transforming work in progress, a communicational project without teleological guarantees, capable of empowering alternative historical readings. It defies current and equally simplistic historicist approaches to conversion based on continuity or discontinuity paradigms. An anthropological model based on three-stages theory (proselytising, conversion, acculturation/adaptation) is also incapable of accounting for unpredictably changing social locations and temporalities involved in the process of conversion, and combined with historiography, it easily slips into articulating foundational and supplementary narratives. More helpful are recent efforts by some historians, notably Saurabh Dube, to define conversion as an idiom of social and cultural mobility.³

As a way of telegraphic conclusion, I will propose that there are merits to revisit the concept of conversion in South Asian historiography—even more than the recently over-debated concept of religion—because it is one of the principal generative tropes of religious and cultural phenomena as they appear to us in their historically mobile disguises. Moreover, as a space saturated by contemporary adversarial politics and the growing fear of religious terror, religious and conversion history has become lately an interdisciplinary *El dorado* in which theologians, religious studies scholars, sociologists, anthropologists and historians are invited to play together. It is therefore imperative that historians resurrect and reflect on the concept of conversion in their interpretative operations.

It may be true what Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote some years ago criticising Marxist and Left-liberal historians (Sumit Sarkar, in particular), that they never developed ‘any framework capable of comprehending’ religious phenomena because of their ingrained hyperrationality inherited

³ Saurabh Dube and Ishita Banerjee Dube, ‘Specters of Conversion: Transformations of Caste and Sect in India’.

from colonial modernity.⁴ However, this is also true for subaltern studies scholars that Chakrabarty defended in the same article. ‘The strong split,’ writes Chakrabarty further on, ‘between emotion and reason...is a part of the story of colonialism in India’, and that is, according to him, why modern Indian secular scholarship is incapable of coming up with analytical categories ‘that do justice to the real, everyday, and multiple connections that...we have come to see as non-rational (religious).’⁵ Although the split between emotion and reason may appear as a frivolous way out of theorising religion and historiography, he is certainly right in pointing to the fact that professional—and mostly secular—historians neglected religious history for too long. Moreover, nowhere as in religious processes, of which conversion is the central arena, can we find a more sustained individual and institutional effort at reconciliation of reason and sensibility.

From a different discipline, Rowena Robinson, dissatisfied with the way religion and religious conversion was treated by sociologists, has recently written that ‘religion has for too long been identified with Indology’, and with theories that associate eastern religiosity with irrationality as opposed to western rationality.⁶ Max Weber and Louis Dumont were often chastised, guilty or not, for being at the origin of eurocentric epistemologies of this kind. There has been a lot of conceptual soul searching in the relatively recently constituted academic field of religious studies as well, and some scholars like Richard King and Will Sweetman took a long look at some of the concepts that needed to be unravelled, like ‘mysticism’ and ‘religion’.⁷

In the field of South Asian historiography in particular, it is perhaps time to rescue and reclaim the concept of conversion from the black list

⁴ Chakrabarty’s critique focuses especially on Sumit Sarkar’s *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908*; Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Habitations of Modernity. Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*: 22.

⁵ See Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*: 26. This remark is somewhat unfair since Sarkar’s later work such as his article on Ramakrishna published in *Economic and Political Weekly* (1992) is a masterpiece of social history based on deep understanding of the Bengali religious traditions. This article and a response to Chakrabarty are included in Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*.

⁶ Robinson, *Religious Conversion in India*.

⁷ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’*; Will Sweetman, ‘Unity and Plurality: Hinduism and the Religion of Indian in Early European Scholarship’.

of the nationalist political mythology of today. It may help us come to a better understanding of how religious processes work to embed individuals and identities in communities and the nation, as well as how they politicise, liberate, valorise and inevitably, reformulate social distinctions, horizons of hope and social aspirations at different periods of history. Conversion is always a project that opens up a cognitive space for the play of contingency, difference, consensus and terror.

Historiography of conversion to Christianity in India, the field in which I may claim some competence, will serve as an example here. It has a long history and it possesses many different branches that do not necessarily have a common trunk. In spite of occasional moments of fame and importance within certain historiographical fields, such as British India in the nineteenth century, and a feeble but continuous scholarly production in Portugal and Rome, the historiography of conversion acquired the role of a marginal subgenre with the rise of the post-independence Indian historiography. As a semi-autonomous field, it never even tried to connect to debates that raged in mainstream historiography among the Marxists, nationalists and scholars of the Cambridge school, and it remained, surprisingly, outside of the analytical reach of subaltern studies.

A prudent interest was shown towards the controversial missionary histories, which are also seen as the tools of conversion, by a relatively recent current of inquiry confederating historians, religious studies specialists, Indologists and anthropologists trying to establish, once and for all, the genealogy of Hinduism. This urgency came in the wake of the emergence of a counter-current of folk Hindutva historiography, stimulated by television series and other types of political mythologies of recent fabrication. Tracing the genealogies of the 'late' construction of Hinduism, of its name in English, its first occurrence, meaning and actors or agencies who employed or invented it forced some of the scholars to revisit the reviled and discredited missionary histories, in addition to the British Orientalist classifications.⁸

⁸ British scholars, Orientalists and colonial administrators are mostly held responsible for the 'construction' of Hinduism, although some historians like Romila Thapar balanced the list with Indian nationalists and communalists, while David Lorenzen pointed to the rivalry between Muslims and Hindus between 1200 and 1500 as crucial for the emergence of the 'sharper self-conscious religious identities'. The question of when Hinduism, with or without the name, came into being is another hotly debated historiographical topic and

The scholarly consensus has recently converged on defining the concept of Hinduism as originating in the eighteenth century and of being shaped according to the Judeo-Christian idea of a unitary religion. Of course, the question of how and when religion as a concept came into being is an equally hotly debated subject. It is from the field of religious studies, not from history, that a plethora of stimulating scholarly works emerged during the past three to four decades, not only about different religions but about the history of the concept of religion itself. Thus, it has been recently shown, to a tiny detail, to what extent the concept of religion—from its various Latin etymologies (Ciceronian *re-lego* or Lactantius's *re-ligo*) to contemporary anthropological definitions—is impossible to be used rigorously as a historically or methodologically coherent category. Wilfred C. Smith, Michel Despland and Ernst Feil argued that religion meant different things in different periods and when applied to non-European traditions, it had to be reformulated from within and from without in order to encompass different phenomenal forms and structures of meaning. In the process of historical and philosophical repackaging, especially from Enlightenment onwards, it has been also argued, some of the features of religious experience were universalised and reified and thus, we accept today that all cultures had and have some sort of religion since even secularism fits into the religious paradigm.

At the same time, there is a tendency among scholars to privilege a minimalist and affect-centred definition of religion—one that draws on modern religious expressions—that is that religion is a matter of belief, private faith, or a matter of public attitude. Just as the privatisation of religion meant intensification and diversification of psychological categories, at least from Freud onwards, ritual behaviour and performance, religious mythology and cosmology became a privileged territory for sociological and anthropological objectification. Religion as a historical/historiographical category is, therefore, fraught with epistemological and methodological uncertainties, aggravated in addition by the tradition inherited from evolutionary theories of the nineteenth century according to which religion was considered a lesser kind of social knowledge, detached from

the answers are many and far from being conclusive. David Lorenzen, 'Who Invented Hinduism?'; Romila Thapar, 'Syndicated Hinduism'; and Gauri Viswanathan, 'Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism'.

law, science and politics. Some philosophical currents went so far as to predict the disappearance of religion.⁹

By substituting Hinduism for religion of the Heathens, a well-known category in the early modern classification of religions which also encompassed Jews, Christians and Muslims, the West, the argument goes, also reduced it to constitutive elements that apply to these other religions. In the process, one to which missionaries, Orientalists and Indian literati and nationalists in the twentieth century wittingly or unwittingly contributed, Hinduism was homogenised into an elitist religion, based on Sanskrit (sacred) texts and containing dogmas and theologies comparable, if different, to the founding texts of other world religions. It is precisely these homogenising and reductive definitions that provoked a reaction by scholars who either tried to put back into Hinduism whatever appeared to have been silenced or to split it into smaller units; thus, Vaisnavism, Saivism and Saktism were to be called religions as well (Stietencron), 'non-linear religion' (Lipner) and as R. Thapar wrote 'a convenient general label for studying the different indigenous religious expressions'.¹⁰

Besides historiography dealing with the genealogy of Hinduism that resurrected missionary archives, from the 1970s onwards, some historians, without partisan affiliations (or without aggressively visible partisan affiliations) and without forming a school or a branch of historiography, did address the question of conversion to Christianity. Most of them also came to challenge the idea of a unified Hinduism in one way or another. The early significant works, such as Duncan Forrester's (technically not a historian, and moderately partisan, though) and Robert Hardgrave's, relying much for their conceptual framework on the anthropological and sociological theories in vogue in the late 1960s and late 1970s, mostly used the experience of conversion to Christianity in order to understand caste formation in south India.¹¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, Susan Bayly and David Mosse, heirs to new anthropologising social-history-from-below approaches, emphasised the importance of the processes of

⁹ Marxism in particular. The secularisation thesis was further developed from August Comte to Max Weber.

¹⁰ Thapar, 'Syndicated Hinduism'; Heinrich von Stietencron, 'Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term' (p. 1027); and Julius J. Lipner, 'Ancient Banyan: An Inquiry into the Meaning of "Hinduness"'.
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¹¹ Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*; Robert L. Hardgrave Jr, *The Nadar of Tamilnad: The Political Culture of a Community in Change*.

adaptation and syncretism at the grassroots level of the society whenever there is a religious and cultural encounter.¹² They gave ample evidence of complex social and economic processes at work in redefining corporate solidarities that are best studied through conversion histories. G.A. Oddie, Rosalind O'Hanlon, Henriette Bugge, Richard Fox Young, Robert Frykenberg, to mention just a few authors who focused in some of their works specifically on conversion, espoused, self-consciously or not, the contingency paradigm, namely, that there is something unpredictable about conversion cases in the South Asian setting.¹³ They all agreed that Indian religions provided a floating pool of cultural elements (ideas about salvation or redemption, theological precepts, cults of fierce goddesses, warrior heroes and the ranking system) and material objects (such as shrines, sacred spots, etc.) that were re-appropriated and re-created, sometimes in fantastically innovative ways, by convert lineages and social groupings.

Yet, in spite of the obvious explanatory potential for understanding religious processes provided by histories of conversion, the general political 'mood' in 1980s and 1990s, in India, was not propitious to scholarly debate on this topic. Converts were increasingly stigmatised in public as 'foreigners' and identity politics provoked in many places violent confrontations, while scholars ducked and waited for the storm to pass. Moreover, Edward Said's inspired 'colonial discourse analysis', that became the most prominent theorising current in the 1990s historiography, was joined by the subaltern studies' innovative approach to, as Ranajit Guha called it, 'subaltern politics', which he defined as inseparable from 'religious', which, however, took only a scant, if at all, interest in conversion (David Hardiman's work is more of an exception).¹⁴ It is often from other

¹² Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900*; C.D.F. Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism: A Study of Social Organisation and Religion in Rural Ramnad'.

¹³ G.A. Oddie, *Social Protest in India. British Protestant Missionaries and Social Reform, 1850–1900*; Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*; Henriette Bugge, *Mission and Tamil Society*; Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism. Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India*; and Robert Frykenberg and Brown Judith, *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Religious Traditions*.

¹⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*; Ranajit Guha, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India' and *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*; and David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*.

disciplines such as sociology (Rowena Robinson), anthropology and even literary studies that some new research on conversion has come, such as Gauri Viswanathan's *Outside the Fold*.¹⁵

Nevertheless, conversion is and should be a prime field of historical research. One of the reasons is that disciplines other than history tend to adopt a synchronic approach to conversion, which is defined as a foundational moment. Whatever follows is then seen in terms of continuities and discontinuities with the past. A proper historical, longer and harder glance reveals that conversion is neither a steadfast estrangement from one's own past, nor can one expect essential and permanent identities on either side of the conversion line. It is rather a work in progress of appropriating and reinventing traditions to fit and serve communal or personal projects and, along the way, creating, as Saurabh Dube said, a variety of 'vernacular religiosity'. In a word, no conversion is final. And it is this finality that the scholarship on conversion often reinscribes into the conversion histories, while national and community mythologies exploit it for their own purpose.

Even when religious identities appear to be stable and shored up by the state (or bureaucracy), the church and the community, the maintenance and management of desirable traditions and boundaries is, in fact, facilitated by the 'threat' of conversion (or apostasy). This is why the figure of a convert is often denied both stable and moral identity and has to double or triple the labour of reinvention and dissembling.

By briefly looking into a dispute between eighteenth century Goan Christians, whose forefathers converted during the sixteenth century and who were subjects of the Portuguese Crown, I will discuss somewhat schematically how these converts continued to 'convert' or 'translate' or 'reinvent', selectively and self-reflexively, their local cultural heritage and used modern technologies such as printing in order to broaden their identificatory framework.¹⁶

Ângela Barreto Xavier studied in detail the dispute between the Goan Christian Brahmins and Christian Charodos (Kshatriyas) that raged in Goa during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, especially through

¹⁵ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*.

¹⁶ On the broadening of identificatory frameworks, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. On broadening of identificatory spatial frameworks in Goan history, see Alexander Henn, 'The Becoming of Goa; Space and Culture in the Emergence of a Multicultural Lifeworld'.

what she calls ‘identity writings’, that is, printed pamphlets by which each group tried ‘to surpass the status of subalternity’ and to acquire privileges within local Portuguese imperial and ecclesiastical administration.¹⁷ While their ancestors initially converted to Christianity in order to preserve their lands, goods and elite status under the Portuguese rule, therefore, under coercion, by the end of the seventeenth and in the eighteenth century, these two elite groups had developed strategies and institutions that maintained and strengthened their social identity to a point of considering themselves better Christians and better Portuguese and better royal subjects than the Portuguese settlers and their descendants in Goa.

Unlike in other parts of India, beyond the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*, where missionaries worked alone and hard, constantly negotiating with local political hierarchies and in competition with other religious specialists, in the capital Goa or the ‘key to all India’, conversion to Christianity was an essentially political act and the local elites had only two choices: to convert or to leave.¹⁸ Conversion in this precious piece of territory, the biggest in the whole Portuguese Asian ‘empire’ was, in fact, an integral part of the state building, endeavoured by John III in the sixteenth century. This is what he had in mind when he invited the newly established Jesuit order, with Francis Xavier arriving to Goa in 1542, to take the lead in the conversion of the ‘heathens’.¹⁹ Without sufficient military and bureaucratic institutions, the only way to spread and imagine Portuguese imperial sovereignty was by way of establishing missions and claiming ‘spiritual’ conquest.

After the destruction of temples on the island of Tiswadi and establishing a system by which temple-owned land and its revenue were diverted towards the construction and maintenance of the churches, the authorities in Goa left the rest of the spiritual guidance and disciplining in the hands of the religious orders (Jesuits, Franciscans and Dominicans).²⁰

¹⁷ Ângela Barreto Xavier, ‘David contra Golias na Goa seiscentista e setecentista, Conflitos entre aspirantes a colonizadores’ and *A Invenção de Goa, Poder Imperial e Conversões Culturais nos Séculos XVI e XVII*: 333–80.

¹⁸ On the *Estado da Índia* in the first part of the sixteenth century, see Catarina Madeira Santos, ‘Goa é a chave de toda a Índia’. *Perfil político da capital do Estado da Índia (1505–1570)*. For the latest and most complete work on the construction of Goan colonial and convert society, see Ângela Barreto Xavier, *A Invenção da Goa*.

¹⁹ See the first chapter on Francis Xavier’s life in Asia in Ines G. Županov, *Missionary Tropics, The Catholic Frontier in India (16th–17th Centuries)*.

²⁰ Ines G. Županov, ‘Compromise: India’.

Bitter rivalry between the missionary families forced the Portuguese Crown in 1554–55 to partition off and delimit their respective jurisdiction to defined territories. Thus, Dominicans and Jesuits were allowed to share the island of Chorão and Divar, the Salcete went entirely to the Jesuits and Bardez became exclusively Franciscan.

The most difficult and challenging territory, from the missionary point of view, was Salcete to the south, where the borders with the surrounding area under Bijapur's rule continued to be threatened all through the sixteenth century. As a consequence, Goan village communities, such as those in Cuncolim on the southern border of the Portuguese 'Old Conquests', continued to resist Portuguese centralising efforts, on the forefront of which were Jesuit missionaries.²¹ Violence was, at times, the way to resolve these problems. The story of the so-called 'martyrs of Cuncolim' figured prominently in all Jesuit hagiographies, especially because one of the victims was Rodolfo Acquaviva, a nephew of the Jesuit General in Rome, Claudio Acquaviva, and a former head of the mission to the Mughal Court.²² The actual acts of force and cruelty against the missionaries, all in all relatively few and more of an exception in the early modern period in India, were often promptly redesigned to serve as the founding moments of community conversion. The victims and the assailants were thus united in the (ritual) moment of the spilling of sacrificial blood.

The scenarios of martyrdoms such as that of Antonio Criminale in Vedalai on the Fishery Coast; of the Cuncolim party; of João de Brito in Oriyur among the Maravas; and sometime later, of Devasahayam Pillai in Travancore, figured prominently in Jesuit and Christian hagiographical literature, but they were also appropriated by local Christian communities and rooted into their own sacred geography. Even today, the pilgrims to Oriyur can freely collect a handful of sand—turned red, it is believed, after St João de Brito's bloody execution—from the concrete container next to the old church wall.

In places sufficiently distant from the Portuguese secular arm, such as in the Tamil country, in Mysore and at the Mughal Court, the method of conversion called accommodation was applied from the early seventeenth century. First elaborated by Alessandro Valignano upon his arrival in India in 1575, and inspired by the missions among the St Thomas

²¹ On Cuncolim martyrs, see Ângela Barreto Xavier, *A Invenção da Goa*: 333–80.

²² See *Admirable Vida, y virtudes del santo martyr Rudolfo Aquaviva, hijo del Exc.mo Señor Duque de Atri don Juan Geronimo Aquaviva*.

Christians in Kerala and those in Japan and China, it was an offshoot of a long theological tradition going back to the early biblical exegesis.²³ From the antiquity, *accommodatio* referred to the hermeneutic procedure by which new figurative significations were allowed to be read into the literal meaning of the Scriptures. With the rise of Protestantism, the problem of how to interpret the Holy Scriptures became of crucial importance and another philosophical concept—adiaphora (indifferent things)—was resurrected in order to elucidate and delimit the ‘human’ sphere from the ‘divine’. It is this particular concept of ‘indifferent’ customs and meanings—those that are neutral in terms of their moral content (neither good nor bad) and of no religious connotation (neither divine, nor diabolical or superstitious)—that helped the Jesuits convert the signs of ‘heathenism’ into purely social customs.

As it was applied in India by Roberto Nobili in his famous Madurai Mission, and defended in his treatises and letters to his superiors in Goa and Rome, it was much discussed and disputed both as a theological concept and a missionary practice.²⁴ He arrived perniciously close (from a Catholic point of view) to a Protestant idea of radically separate spheres between the divine and the human by conceptualising (almost) all customs and rites observed among the Tamils as belonging to ‘political’, human inventions. Thus, he wrote on the *kudumi* or the tuft of hair as a sign of learnedness, the Brahman thread was a sign of nobility and the ceremonies in honour of its investiture were, he claimed, purely social events. Even the religious rites per se—such as veneration of a ‘heathen’ divinity—could be easily converted into adoration of the one and true, Christian God, with the redirection of interior intention.

The distinction between the interior and exterior is important because Nobili himself adapted his body, externally—from clothing to gestures and dietary habits and by always speaking Tamil, Telugu and reading Sanskrit—to the local customs and models appropriate for a *guru*, or a religious teacher. He also adapted the celebration of the Mass to fit Indian expectations and not to break any kind of taboos such as the use of saliva in baptism and consecrating wine as a symbol of Christ’s blood. In fact,

²³ See my forthcoming article, ‘Accommodatio’. See also, Pedro Lage Reis Correia, *A concepção de missão na Apologia de Valignano: Estudo sobre a presença jesuíta franciscana no Japão (1587–1597)*.

²⁴ I have developed this particular topic in Ines G. Županov, *Disputed Mission, Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-century India*: ch. 1 especially.

these kinds of adaptations were already applied in the mission among the St Thomas Christians, who faced similar challenges long before the early modern proselytising movement started.²⁵

Accused by his fellow missionary, Gonçalo Fernandes Trancoso, for going native himself and practising dishonest dissimulation, especially when he publically declared that he was not a *Parangi* (Frank, Portuguese) and that he was a Brahman by profession and raja by birth, Nobili spent two decades defending his method, and the controversy spilled out of India to Lisbon and Rome and became a famous 'Malabar rites quarrel', joined at the same time with the 'Chinese rites quarrel'.²⁶

At the heart of Nobili's method was cultural translation brought to the extreme by the fact that the medium of conversion became Tamil and Sanskrit, not Portuguese and Latin. He had no choice, and the same happened, for example, with Mandarin in China, but to follow the logic and respect the polysemy of the receptor language. However, Nobili decided that even with the interior intention switch towards the True God, the names such as Tambiran and Siva were not appropriate semantic vessels and that *Caruvecuran* [in Tamil] corresponded to the omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent Christian deity. Just as it was language that helped Christianity become rooted in different cultural and linguistic setting, it was also languages that, in many ways, reshaped the initial message. Especially in the first years after the conversion, it is quite uncertain how the new converts understood the religion they espoused. No need to ask about their grasp of the fine theological points.

It is well known that Nobili made just a few converts, most of whom were from high and literate castes, and knowledgeable of their own religious (textual) tradition. In fact, Nobili used them as informants for his catechetical works in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit in which he refuted Indian 'idolatries' and 'sects'. As individual converts they may have undergone an intellectual, interior conversion, which is an ideal conversion in the Jesuit sense of the word. But, that was neither decisive nor sufficient for the widespread 'fire' conversion. '*Ite, inflammate omnia*', attributed to Ignatius of Loyola in his farewell address to Francis Xavier, became an emblematic Jesuit motto.

²⁵ See my article on the Jesuit mission among the St Thomas Christians in the sixteenth century, Ines G. Županov, 'One Civility, but Multiple Religion: Jesuit Mission among St. Thomas Christians in India (16th–17th centuries)'.

²⁶ See also, D.E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology and The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*.

However, if one examines a rugged map of Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the missionaries succeeded in kindling, under the blazing banner, only a few scattered bushfires. All Catholic success stories in India such as among the Parava pearl fishers and traders, and in Goa show that conversion was not a momentary, individual affair.²⁷ It was rather a repeated community event that had to ripen for at least a decade through sustained missionary efforts involving some coercion and a lot of religious edification and spectacles. During this gradual process of assimilation, negotiation and adaptation of Christianity, the local converted elites strived for and competed for the highest ritual status, often corresponding, in their view, to their socio-economic position within the community before the conversion. Within a generation of conversion, they produced the first 'native' priests and replaced non-Christian *línguas* (interpreters) from the positions of intermediaries in the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*.

It took another century and a half in Goa for them to start using historical writing in order to construct their own alternative history of conversion and of Christianity, and to contest and fight similar claims from other ascending Christian convert elites. One of the ways of proving their superior status was, according to Barreto Xavier, through the 'genealogical' or 'historical' pamphlets in which they tried to convert what they defined as their traditional and hereditary noble status into the 'noble status' within the Portuguese imperial nomenclature. It was a strange balancing act in which these Goan elites used simultaneously the arguments for (social) continuity and for radical (religious) disjunction. These treatises, written in perfect Portuguese and clearly destined to metropolitan Portuguese officials, nobility and the king, combined their broadly common Indian heritage with Christian historical tradition and in the process, created some interesting 'Catholic Orientalist' narratives. At the same time, a similar process of status jockeying relying on genealogical texts is well known in Indian historiography of this period, when many obscure, but militarily advantaged groups started to claim Kshatriya or royal status and employed local literati to create their family histories.²⁸

²⁷ Ines G. Županov, 'Prosélytisme et pluralisme religieux: Deux expériences missionnaires en Inde aux XVIème et XVIIème siècles'.

²⁸ See Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown, Ethnography of an Indian Kingdom*; : Gordon, Steward. 1993. *The Marathas, 1600–1818*, Cambridge: New Cambridge History of India. See also various works by the famous *trojka*, namely, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, David

What these different genealogical treatises have in common is their sharp sense of temporality and a barely disguised intention of their authors to create authoritative—printed and indelible—knowledge about the pasts. These authors were, in fact, creating their own strategic communal memory. Simultaneously, however, their politics of memory was based on *conversion* that they manipulated into two different, perhaps at first glance, contrary directions: Christianising their pre-Christian past and indigenising Church history. I will briefly mention only two of these texts, of which the second responds to and disclaims the first: the *Halo of the Indians and the System of Nobility of the Brahmans, a historical, genealogical, panegyric, political and moral treatise*, published in Lisbon in 1702, by Antonio João de Frias (Apostolic protonotary, Notary of the charter of the Holy Crusade, etc., and the vicar of the parochial church of St André in Old Goa),²⁹ and the *Summary of the Indian Definitions deduced from various Indian Chroniclers by Serious authors and from the Gentile Histories*, by Leonardo Paes, published in Lisbon in 1713.³⁰

Both Frias and Paes were disgruntled Catholic priests, as were most writers of similar treatises, unhappy with their inferior status in the local Portuguese ecclesiastical and imperial bureaucracy. Although they acknowledged the sovereignty of the King of Portugal over the Goan territory, they also promoted a subversive ‘indigenist’ thesis, as we would call it today, about ‘native nobility’ or ‘nobility of the soil’ being higher than the ‘foreign nobility’. This particular claim overlapped with Portuguese contemporary metropolitan discussions about old ‘hereditary nobility’ and new ‘political nobility’. However, the common agenda of displacing the Portuguese *descendentes*, *mestiços* and *reinões* from the top of the local social hierarchy and thus, from the positions of authority and power, was a poor incentive for Catholic Brahmans and Catholic Charodos to work together towards these goals. In fact, these two elite groups often considered one another as rivals in the scramble for honours and status.

Shulman and Velcheru Narayana Rao, *Textures of Time; Writing History in South India 1600–1800*; Subrahmanyam, *Penumbra Visions, Making Politics in Early Modern South India*. Sumit Guha, ‘Speaking Historically: The Changing Voices of Historical Narration in Western India, 1400–1900’.

²⁹Antonio João de Frias (Protonotario apostólico, Notario da bulla da Santa Cruzada), *Aureola dos Índios & Nobiliarchia Bracmana, tratado historico, genealogico, panegyrico, politico, & moral*.

³⁰Leonardo Paes, *Promptuario de diffinições Indicas Deduzidas, De varios Chronistas da India, graves Authores e das Histórias Gentílicas*.

António João de Frias—just as one of his predecessors, Matteus de Castro, who wrote *Espelho de Bramenes* (The Mirror of the Brahmans), and just as Filipe Nery de Xavier³¹ in the nineteenth century—defined Brahmans as the ancient and the most noble ‘nação’ (nation, ethnic group) in Goa and the whole India and of the purest blood and ‘geração’ (lineage). The Brahmans were the natural and true nobility, Frias argued, because they came from the royal lineage of the Emperor Cherimperimalle, ‘a famous conquistador of the kingdoms of Malabar and the founder of the empire of Calicut’.³² Hereditary nobility, it was a common presumption in Portugal, started their lineages and dynasties with an act of heroism and the display of martial prowess, followed by an act of providence confirming the election.³³ By using historical–hagiographical narratives that circulated among the Syrian Christians and with which the Portuguese were well acquainted, Frias invented a second originary moment for his lineage in which Indian and Christian history meet—in epiphany and conversion. Cherimperimalle was, according to Frias, one of the Magi kings who returned to India and was baptised by St Thomas, the Apostle, and who upon baptism renounced the throne. It is this renunciation that made the rise of the royal house of Calicut possible, to which the contemporary Zamorin, who played the role of the archenemy of the Portuguese, was the heir.

Another proof that Frias mobilises in order to underscore the hereditary nobility of the Brahmans is concocted through a careful mix of Christianity and idolatry. Thus, Cherimperimalle, also called Brama, built a church in Calicut that was later converted into a temple in which Vasco da Gama recognised Virgin Mary and the Magi kings painted on the wall when he visited it almost a millennium and a half later. This magnificent structure remained in possession of the Brahmans and their ‘descendents’, who alone had and continued to have the privilege to approach the ‘throne of Our Lady’. This privilege that was a prerogative of the Christian Brahmans became, in the course of the time, perverted into a ‘superstitious rite’. In the course of the history, heathenism grew over the ‘ancient and primitive Christianity (*Christianitas*) of that Empire’ and it was subsequently

³¹ Xavier, ‘David contra Golias’: 16.

³² Frias, *Aureola dos Indios*: 12.

³³ A similar process of political enlargement (kingdom building) in south India in the early modern period can be seen in the histories recorded in the MacKenzie collection of manuscripts in London.

subjugated by the kings belonging to the 'infamous Mahometan sect'.³⁴ Frias is quite skilful in manipulating the plot, which constantly amalgamates historical distance and ethnographic closeness. It is 'a pure effect of the temporal inconstancy', writes Frias, that empires pass from one hand to another, from a Christian to a Muslim king, and that Christians return to heathenism or convert to Islam. Temporality, as an agency in its own right and possessing an arbitrary power to convert one thing into another, is the ultimate Frias's explanation for the disappearance of Christianity in India.

However, Brahmans have certain permanent qualities that mark them out from the rest of the population. Not their martial prowess (as was implied in the opening statements of the treatise), but their 'magical' skills, their learning and their monopoly over the dignity of priesthood, the highest nobility of all, qualified them for the highest social status.³⁵ Even a well-known legend of the role of the Brahmans in killing St Thomas in Mylapore was refurbished to support Frias's thesis. The Brahmans killed the apostle because they were fervent in their faith and at that point had not yet heard his message. Those that did, immediately became staunch Christians because the intrinsic quality of the Brahmans was constancy.

In fact, Frias's evidence is a series of historical fabrications with loopholes and escapes by which his foundational narrative avoids uncomfortable issues. For example, he writes an apology of the important Goan Brahmans who were appointed bishops in India in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, without mentioning that most of them were persecuted by the Goan ecclesiastical authorities. Most of them were sent by the Roman Propaganda Fide in order to undermine and supplant Portuguese Royal Padroado system. Simultaneously, however, Frias makes it clear that only Brahmans were the 'natural leaders' and 'nobility' of India and that the metropolitan and local Portuguese were not indispensable agents of the Portuguese colonial order. Brahmans could play the role even better was Frias's ultimate message.

Leonardo Paes responded to this apologetic tirade in favour of Brahmanhood with a counter-apology of Kshatriyahood. Like Frias, he admitted that the only true nobility was hereditary nobility, rooted in

³⁴ Frias, *Aureola dos Indios*: 27.

³⁵ Uneasily, he then makes a case that only those of the royal blood among the gentiles, barbarians and Christians were eligible for priesthood.

land and confirmed by antiquity. However, he rejected, point by point, all the arguments so precariously constructed by Frias. Thus, there was never in India a king that did not originate from the royal nation of the Rajput Kshatriya (*nação de Razeputrus Qhetris*). The Charodos in Goa were their descendants, and the family of Paes traced its genealogy to the King of Sirgapor. As for the King Perimal, the alleged ancestor of the Brahmans, Paes claims that he lived in the eleventh century (taken for a Kadhamba king) and was a descendant of the King of Calicut who introduced Islam and died on the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The origins of the lineage of the Charodos, according to Frias, goes all the way back to Indo, who was a grandchild of Saba (a son of Sam, who was a son of Noah), who, in turn, was the grandchild of Noah. The Emperor Pondo, a descendent of Indo, left the palaces that lie in ruins all over Tiswadi and Salcete. Another emperor connected in blood with the Charodos was the King Poros who fought against Alexander, and one of his descendents, the Satespor Raja had a palace in the village of Colvale in Bardes. As for the Brahmans, Paes proposed a different genealogy. Following closely analogical protocols for the sake of his foundational narrative, he restated a well-established genealogy linking Jews and Brahmans. As descendants of Noah's grandson Magog, Brahmans were responsible for the death of St Thomas, just as Jews were responsible for the death of Christ. Moreover, according to Paes and another Charodo writer, João da Cunha Jacques, whose treaties remained in manuscript, Brahmans obscured the origin of their 'nation and their caste', since Brahmanism was, in fact, a religious sect, not a caste. While one was born in the caste, Jacques claimed, one joined a sect after performing certain rituals.³⁶

These are only some of the virulent attacks exchanged between these competing texts and their authors. The writers on each side of the divide were perfectly aware of what they were doing: working on memory and forgetting, inventing archives and writing texts that would fix, once and for all, a particular narrative of origin, providing an edge to their respective social groups and supremacy over the other and over the Portuguese. Thus, at the very source of Christian history and human history, according

³⁶ Jacques, João da Cunha, *Espada de David contra o Golias do Bramanismo pessimo inimigo de Nosso Senhor Jesu Christo, verdadeiro Deos e verdadeiro Homem, dedicado a S. Francisco Xavier*.

to these texts, one finds Brahmans and Charodos. Neither Portuguese nor Europeans were anywhere in sight. This particular effacement of Portuguese can be found in all missionary literature in vernacular languages. For example, Henrique Henriques began his *Flos Sanctorum*, printed in Tamil in 1586, with a statement, 'in the beginning there were no Muslims, only Tamils and Jews'.³⁷ The ambiguity inherent in translation was part of the missionary strategy of conversion. However, Frias, Paes and Jacques added another layer of 'strategic opacity' to their genealogical texts in Portuguese.³⁸ In the colonial situation, as permanent subalterns to the metropolitan Portuguese, they established their identities as *convertible double-occupancy* of an appropriated Christian tradition filled in with a reconstituted regional 'caste' folklore.³⁹ These 'duplicated' identities are visible in other successful convert communities (in Pondicherry, for example). However, even if they lasted for two hundred years, these collective religious distinctions and aspirations are never permanent, but ever changing compositions, and may disintegrate under new types of political pressures or may be woven into other types of religious forms and communities.⁴⁰

What the Goan Christian elites started to do by the end of the seventeenth century and continued well into the twentieth century, although the actors and the outcomes inevitably changed, was to try to reinvent and 'naturalise' the link between past identities and the legitimacy of their present political claims. Finally, Frias, Paes, Jacques and their likes were no less than 'engaged' community historians. With the help of historicist analysis—which always links past and present in an

³⁷ Ines G. Županov, 'Twisting a Pagan Tongue; Portuguese and Tamil in Sixteenth-Century Jesuit Translations'.

³⁸ Stephen Greenblatt is responsible for introducing 'strategic opacity' when writing about Shakespeare's hidden Catholic persona. See Greenblatt, *Will in the World, How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*.

³⁹ Double-occupancy is Alexander Henn's term by which he defines the religious conquest in Goa as a 'space-filling project'. 'Substitution of local deities by Christian monuments and saints not only replicated the ancient spatio-religious system of the Hindus, but also prepared the ground for its eventual duplication and synthesis'. See Henn, 'The Becoming of Goa': 335.

⁴⁰ With the liberalisation of Goan politics in the nineteenth century, a massive reconversion took place of certain castes and communities, and in a similar way, in other parts of south India, Catholic converts moved to various Protestant sects or established their own syncretistic varieties of independent churches.

organicist way—these articulate authors responded to the contemporary political demands of their particular lineage-based collectivities. Against Portuguese colonial historiography, Goan elites devised their alternative community histories in which conversion ‘performs the epistemological function of negotiating differences in viewpoints’ but also, and more importantly, of improvising desirable identities, that is, applying old scenarios to new and upcoming political and social exigencies.⁴¹

Like it or not, conversion historiography is obviously deeply involved in politics of representation and identity. The fact that conversion in India, that is, conversion to Christianity and Islam, is perceived as destabilising activity, threatening the community, the nation and the secular state, should be a signal and an incentive to historians to reinvest into the field of conversion historiography.⁴² Although subject to misinterpretation and manipulation in nationalist, communalist and fundamentalist narratives, conversion historiography can also produce a counter-space for alternative histories and thus, escape approaches based on theories of cultural finitude, cognitive incommensurability and immobile scepticism. The concept of conversion, as an analytical tool, may be helpful in the context of South Asian history and the plural religious traditions that inform it, in disaggregating lineaments that constitute and connect, according to the nationalist narrative (and often counter-nationalist narratives as well), categories such as ethnicity, race and religion. While we have often conceptualised conversion in terms of choices, it may be better to understand it in terms of facilitating access to desired worlds and goods it makes available to individuals and communities in particular time and space. For example, access to language, to economic betterment, to social and territorial mobility, to education, to spirituality and salvation, to desirable self-identity, to mystery, to unknown, etc. At the same time, the inbuilt logic of religious conversion is expansion, conquest and incorporation, and it can take many forms and contrary directions. It is this and similar kinds of historical mobility of social and cultural forms—that some scholars (from Weber to Hefner) somewhat misleadingly call ‘rationalization’—that needs to be revisited and revised in the field of Asian historiography.⁴³

⁴¹ Gauri Viswanathan, ‘Literacy in the Eye of Indian Conversion Storm’: 276.

⁴² Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*: XVI.

⁴³ Robert W. Hefner, *Conversion to Christianity; Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*.

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