Mary E. Hancock

Landscapes of Christianity in colonial South India: The matter of Hindu ritual and Christian conversion, 1870–1920[1]

Introduction

The introduction of Protestant Christianities to South Asia relied heavily on the work of British and North American missionary women. Scholarship on their efforts has illuminated the role of missionization in British imperialism, explored the cultural hybridity of Christian subjects, both Indian and Eurowestern, and problematized the embodied, affective and gendered dimensions of these transformations.[2] This article builds on this scholarship by relating colonial Christianity's globalization and vernacularization to the materiality of both Christian and Hindu traditions, as it shaped the process of Christian conversion and the formation of gendered, racialized Christian subjects. I focus on the proselytic activities of American women of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) in Tamil south India, between 1870 and 1920, dates which correspond to the florescence and decline of the women's mission movement in the United States. Methodists, by 1869 the largest Protestant denomination in the U. S., provide a useful case study, first because of their early and intense interest in India as a mission field and the associated scale of Methodist women's participation in mission and, second, because of Methodism's activist theology, with its focus on the pragmatic and material contexts of everyday life.

The period between 1870 and 1920, besides bracketing a phase of relative autonomy for Methodist women in mission, was also a critical time for the consolidation of anti-colonial nationalisms and contemporaneous social reform movements, many launched by and on behalf of South Asian women and with goals of modernization. In this volatile

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[1] I thank Michael Bergunder, Joseph Muthuraj, Andreas Nehring, Vakulabharanam Rajagopalan, Ulrike Schroeder, Ravindiran Vaitheespara, and A. R. Venkatachalapathy for their helpful comments. I thank the archivists at the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church at Drew University for their assistance, and I gratefully acknowledge the grant from the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which supported the archival research for this article.

[2] Bergunder 2008; Bowie, Kirkwood and Ardener 1993; Burton 1994; Burton 1999; Flemming 1992; Forbes 1986; Haggis 1998; Haggis and Allen 2008; Hill 1985; Kent 2004; Ramusack 1992; Robert 1996; Singh 2000; van der Veer 1996; Viswanathan 1998.

environment, American Methodist missionaries occupied conjunctural positions – identifying racially and culturally with India's colonizers, even while allying themselves, at times, with Indian social reformers and nationalists.[3] Consistent with both the interventionism of the American ideology of 'manifest destiny' and the millennialism of Methodist religiosity, they promoted an implicitly racialized Christian modernity that was communicated not simply as a worldview, but was meant to be enacted behaviorally and spatially.[4] This modernity claimed the home as its stage and encompassed individualism, companionate marriage, rationalized home management, hygiene and temperance, and women were its privileged exponents.[5] Elements of Christian modernity were absorbed and reworked within nationalist autonomy movements (pan-Indian and regionalist, including Dravidian) and in those social reforms, such as the promotion of women's education and widow remarriage, temple entry, and child marriage prohibition, that were sometimes aligned with nationalist causes.[6] The late nineteenth-century fiction of Krupabai Satthianadhan, for example, illustrated how feminist aspirations for higher education and personal autonomy could be woven into notions of Christian subjectivity.[7]

This article examines the circulation of key tropes of domesticity and femininity, associated with discourse on the zenana, in Methodist writing during this critical period. Zenana was the term used by Eurowestern missionaries and colonizers to refer to the women's quarters of elite Hindu and Muslim homes throughout South Asia, but it also connoted other practices of gender seclusion, such as veiling. Consistent with Orientalism's feminization of Hindu and Muslim society, it served as a powerful, gendered metaphor for what missionaries regarded as South Asia's uncolonized interior spaces. A key feature of missionary practice from the early nineteenth century, zenana work referred to the mixture of evangelism and instruction in domestic arts and reading that Christian missionary women engaged in during visits with women in elite Hindu and Muslim homes. Although British churchwomen's role in the zenana

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[3] Statement of Social Principles Adopted by the Methodist Federation for Social Service, 1908; Methodist Women in War Work, 1910–1930; Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, 2604-3-7:07, General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. The generally progressive effects of Christian conversion – educational advancement, a richer civic life, self-sufficiency, spirituality – were noted by Hume 1894.

[4] Oldham 1914: 131–142; 150. See also Cramer 2004; Hill 1985.

[5] 'Dr. Pentecost on Women's Work in India', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 25,6 (1894), 101–103; Hume 1894.

[6] Chakrabarty 1996; Chatterjee 1989; Chatterjee 1993; Hancock 2001; Jayawardena 1995; Murshid 1983; Nair 1996; Uberoi 1996.

[7] Satthianadhan 1998a; Satthianadhan 1998b.

mission has received considerable scholarly attention, my investigation of American participation sheds light on their relatively understudied roles and contributes to pragmatic approaches to conversion, by attending to the ways that the transnational circulation of the rhetoric of the zenana – its spatial, material and embodied dimensions especially – framed contemporary understandings and practices of conversion. I am interested, particularly, in the letters, reports, and essays of Grace Stephens, the Anglo-Indian superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Zenana Mission from 1886–1919. While few conversions were attributable to zenana work, the model persisted among American Methodists as a device for framing the embodied and material dimensions of Christian conversion and subject-formation and Grace Stephens' activities in Madras were hailed specifically as demonstrations of the success that the zenana mission could yield. In this article, I use Grace Stephens' writing as a lens to examine the ways that the conversionary capacities of zenana work – located in its pragmatic and embodied dimensions – were represented in the Methodist imaginary.

Pragmatic approaches to conversion

The materiality of Hindu praxis, exhibited in its ritual transactions and its attention to images and figural representations, is often contrasted with the separation of matter and spirit thought to pervade Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. The materiality that characterizes Indian Christianities, in styles of worship, dress and representation is treated as an effect of the Hindu context – it is deemed to represent the vernacularization of the Renaissance and post-Reformation forms of Christianity introduced by Eurowestern missionaries. In this article I argue that, rather than being an effect of Hinduism, it represents the uneasy confluence of and dialogue between the competing materialities of *both* Hindu and Christian praxis.

The conversionary dynamic of Protestant traditions has often been theorized using linguistic models. Susan Harding, for example, describes conversion as an internal dialogue that culminates in the substitution of one language for another.[8] Within Protestantism, language is the privileged medium by which humans come to know and share in God's divinity and this perspective, drawing on the Platonic and Hebraic suspicion of imagery, has tended to shape scholarship in ways that have occluded attention to the spatial and material media by which Protestant Christianities are enacted.[9] Increasingly, however, historians of Christian-

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[8] Harding 2001: 57.
[9] McDannell 1995: 8–13.

ity are attending to the pervasiveness and persistence of its material dimensions and, using the theoretical and methodological tools of visual culture, media studies, architecture and art history, and ethnography, are exploring religion's materiality comparatively.[10]

Colleen McDannell observes that the material culture associated with religion is infused with and acts as a carrier of values, ideas, and sentiments.[11] It comprises artifacts (humanly produced objects), landscapes, architecture and art, and the human body, both in its capacity to represent cosmological domains and moral principles and in its service as a vehicle of religious identity, practice and communication. She argues that making sense of popular religious expression requires attention to Christianity's materiality, for example, the valuation of medals and scapulas by Roman Catholics, the centrality of family bibles in the domestic culture of Victorian Protestants, Christians' emotional attachments to religious prints, relics and other memorabilia, and even the commercial circulation of artifacts such as prayer cards and lawn ornaments.[12] The recognition of Christianity's material dimension, moreover, offers an opportunity to reframe its entwinement with colonialism and global capitalism in ways that do not reduce religious expression and affect to reflexes of capitalism, but treat them as part of core dynamic of production, exchange, consumption systems that formed infrastructure of colonial expansion.

To an important extent, some of these insights have already made their way into South Asian scholarship. While not explicitly theorizing the material mediation of religion, attention to the corporeal and pragmatic aspects of Christian conversion can be found in colonial historiography and in ethnography. Feminist historiography, for example, has analyzed gendered bodies as media of a Christian imaginary and the colonial modernity that it portended.[13] Conversion, in this context, is understood as a dynamic ensemble of embodied practices, artifacts and social spaces in which Hindu and Christian elements intermingled. Some of this scholarship has aimed to illuminate gendered, sexualized and racialized dimensions of colonialism as these have unfolded in processes of Christian conversion and practice.[14] Other works, using ethnographic evidence, have dealt with vernacular Christianities, especially the 'Hinduization' of Christianity in South Asian contexts.[15]

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[10] McDannell 1995; Morgan 2005; deVries 2001.

[11] McDannell 1995: 2.

[12] McDannell 1995: 18–57, 67–102.

[13] Burton 1994; Haggis 1998; Hill 1985.

[14] Haggis 1998; Hill 1985; Kent 2004.

[15] For example, Busby 2006; Mosse 2006.

Pragmatic approaches to conversion would be enriched, I contend, by expanding the scope to include the material mediations through which the two religious traditions interacted. By examining the work of American missionaries and southern Indian converts through the lens of material religion, I aim first to understand the spatio-material and embodied contexts of conversion and ritual praxis in which gendered and racialized Christian modernities were mediated. And in dealing with the role of American missionaries in shaping Indian Christianities, I hope to contribute to our understanding of the genealogy of Christian traditions in India.

My presentation begins with a brief overview of Protestant missionization of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, highlighting the roles played by Methodists and the imbricated discourses on Hindu domesticity and femininity – captured in the trope of the zenana – that propelled their work. I then move to a discussion of how the zenana, in spatial and material terms, figured in the process of Christian subject formation, looking at prescriptive discourses that American and Anglo-Indian Methodists produced. I follow with an analysis of the processes that the zenana mission entailed – both the materiality of zenana work in India and the transnational circulation of material artifacts and persons that sustained that work – using Grace Stephens' writings as principal sources. As this article represents an early stage in my research on this topic, I will end with provisional observations and questions, rather than fully formed conclusions. My sources include missionary periodicals (mainly *Heathen Woman's Friend*, later renamed *Missionary Woman's Friend*), missionaries' letters and reports, and the memoirs, essays, novels authored by missionaries and by Indian Christians.

"Woman's work for woman": American Methodist missions in Southern India

Several centuries of Christianization efforts in southern India had preceded the arrival of Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century. The establishment and diversification of Christian sects, such as the Syrian, Thomist and Jacobite traditions, dated from the early centuries of the common era. By the early seventeenth century, Roman Catholicism was well established in conjunction with Portuguese exploration and settlement of the eastern and western coasts of the peninsula. It was only in the early eighteenth century that Protestant missionization began, with the 1706 establishment of the German Lutheran mission at Tranquebar, the location of the Dutch East India Company's fort and factory. Other

denominational missions followed a century later (from 1813), when the British East India Company amended its charter to allow for proselytization and mission education in its territories. These efforts were led by English evangelicals, including members of the Church Missionary Society and Wesleyan Methodists, both of whom established bases of activity in Madras.[16]

Three years after the Company opened its settlements to missions, American Congregationalists, under the auspices of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions established missions in Ceylon and, in 1835, in Madurai. Other American denominations, including Methodists, established mission boards and women's auxiliaries around this time as well, spurred by evangelical revivals during the first half of the century. It was not until 1856, however, that William Butler, an American affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal Church (North), established an independent mission station in the northern Indian town of Bareilly. This was followed by increased activity, independently and in cooperation with British organizations and the American Board, in a number of northern and central Indian locales and in the southern cities of Madras and Bangalore. This included the Tamil Methodist Church, founded in Vepery following the revival of 1874, which had been led by William Taylor.

Over the latter half of the nineteenth century, the expansion of Protestant missions in India were supported by and, in turn, helped nurture the women's missionary movement in the U. S. The first organization, the interdenominational Women's Union Missionary Society, was founded in 1861 and other denominational boards followed, including, in 1869, the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. During 1880s, several mission institutes were established in the U. S., offering training in Biblical studies, mission history, and practical fields such as home economics and nursing.[17] Denominational and interdenominational women's societies flourished and provided financial and material support for the work of women missionaries and, by 1890, women constituted about sixty percent of the total American mission force, with the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, itself, supporting about fifty missionaries in India by the end of the nineteenth century.[18] Many of the societies maintained publication divisions, which were responsible for the preparation of tracts and

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[16] Methodist Churches were established in Royapettah (1819), Black Town (1822), St. Thomas Mount (1829).

[17] The most important Methodist institute was the Chicago Training School for City, Home and Foreign Missions.

[18] Robert 1996: 130.

reports, as well as a raft of periodicals, which mixed travelogue-type accounts with reports on mission life, educational features and administrative notes. By the 1920s, the women's mission movement had contracted, due to the rise of conservative, self-styled fundamentalisms within American Protestantism. With that, support for foreign missions diminished sharply. With a drop in recruits and the absorption of women's boards by the general denominational governing boards, the women's missionary movement soon came to a halt.

With this general historical outline in mind, we can take a closer look at *how* American women participated in mission. Paralleling their roles in other Protestant sects, Methodist women initially entered the mission field as wives of ministers and evangelists. Many had prepared for missionary life through seminary education, though their ability to fully immerse themselves in the work of mission stations was limited by their domestic duties. Women entered the field as full-fledged missionaries (evangelists, teachers, medical missionaries) only in the 1860s, supported by newly formed women's boards and in response to concerns about the plight of women in 'Oriental' religions (Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, as well as Shinto and Confucian sects), whose degradation was felt to be emblematized in customs such as foot-binding, child-marriage, and gender seclusion practices.

India held a special attraction for evangelical women. Its "religious standards" reportedly ensured that the "deepest degradation of womanhood" persisted.[19] The wife of India's first Methodist Episcopal missionary, Clementina Butler, felt that missionary women were necessary for Indian women's progress and was one of the founders of the Woman's Foreign Mission Society.[20] She nonetheless credited her husband with having spurred this movement, noting in her memoir that he had "received a 'glorious vision' that he should take in girls orphaned during the uprising and that Methodist women should organize to educate the orphans and do mission work among Indian women secluded in zenanas."[21]

From the early nineteenth century, the zenana had been a key trope in missionary discourse. Women missionaries sought first, to puncture Orientalist stereotypes that depicted the zenana as a space of debauched luxury and expose it, instead, as a light-deprived prison that bore no resemblance to a true home.[22] This remained a persistent theme, with one

[19] Montgomery1910: 56.

[20] Robert 1996: 126.

[21] Butler 1929.

[22] 'Professional Visit to a Zenana of a High-Caste Brahman', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 1,10 (1870): 2–5; Page 1887: 121–124; Page 1888: 183–185; Butler 1903: 135–136. This strategy was common among other Protestant denominations; a Congregationalist

writer exclaiming in 1907 that even in wealthy households, "the rooms are *bare,* the cement floors are uncovered. There are no pictures, no books, no family gatherings! A house you see, not a home."[23] Secondly, they meant to proselytize within the zenana. The seclusion of Hindu and Muslim women, coupled with their importance in maintaining and transmitting religious traditions within the domestic sphere, made it imperative that special efforts be made to convert women in order to effectively Christianize the subcontinent. Methodists and other activist Protestants developed a rubric, "woman's work for woman", for this model.

During the 1880s, the zenana mission was further systematized among American Methodists through the introduction of deaconess training, following a model popularized earlier in Germany. Deaconesses were women committed to lives of service, mainly in the cities of their home countries and abroad. Influenced by the home economics movement in the U. S. and in keeping with Methodism's activist theology, they combined evangelism with the delivery of medical, educational and social services. Deaconesses received training in both Bible studies and in relevant social, medical and applied sciences (e. g., nursing, home economics) and, like Catholic nuns, they remained unmarried and wore a distinctive uniform.[24] By 1900, there were forty deaconesses working in India, twenty-one of whom were from the U. S.[25] The remainder comprised Indian and Anglo-Indian Bible women, teachers and evangelists. Several of India's more prominent Methodist missionaries were deaconesses, including Isabella Thoburn, the American founder of Thoburn College, Lucknow, and Grace Stephens, the Anglo-Indian who headed the Methodist Episcopal Zenana Mission from 1886–1919, whose work I explore further below.

The years between 1870 and 1920, therefore, were marked by an acceleration in women's missionization and by active institution-building. American Methodist women, with the support of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, established mission stations across India (Lucknow, Calcutta, Cawnpore, Bombay, Moradabad, Bareilly, Naini Tal, Pithoragarh, Madras and Bangalore), most of which were affiliated with or adjacent to existing mission stations. In those locations, they maintained

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missionary stated that the disheveled sitting room in one wealthy home "would have shamed a very negligent housekeeper at home." Sisson: 1872.

[23] Denning 1907.

[24] See also, 'The Value of Women's Work and Influence', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 13,3 (1881): 61–62; Page 1887; 'Reform in Hindu Homes', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 23,4 (1891): 81–82; Fisher and Maskell 1898; 'Bishop Thoburn on Deaconess Work in Southern Asia', *The Deaconess Advocate* 15 (1899): 9.

[25] Thoburn 1899.

orphanages, schools and clinics, trained native evangelists, catechists and Bible women, and carried out house-to-house evangelization under the rubric of zenana work.

The remainder of this article deals with the activities that zenana work comprised as well as the means by which the zenana, as trope, was deployed and circulated in accounts of conversion. I begin with the role that the mission station landscape played in this work.

Mission stations and domestic modernity

Mission stations were headquarters for the day-to-day work of missionaries, as well as object lessons in Christian domesticity.[26] Missionary periodicals regularly featured articles about day-to-day activities at the stations and about their construction and expansion. In Tamil south India, Methodist women maintained their principal mission station, the Methodist Episcopal Zenana Mission, in Madras city. Like other stations, the Madras mission was a space of Eurowestern civic and material culture within a cityscape that was a checkerboard of colonial and indigenous settlement spaces. Erected in Vepery, one of the city's original residential suburbs and long a home to European and Anglo-Indian families, the complex abutted other Christian institutions including Doveton College, the London Mission, the Wesleyan Mission House, and the Tamil Methodist Church.

Over the 1880s and 1890s, under Grace Stephens' supervision, the Madras Zenana Mission station was expanded from a residence-cum-office to a complex that accommodated educational activities and an orphanage. By 1899, with support from the Baltimore and Northwestern Branches of Women's Foreign Missionary Society, a spacious compound of six buildings had arisen.[27] It included two reception areas for those members of the public seeking assistance; one, Bethesda, served poor and low-caste visitors and the other, Nicodemus, was reserved for higher status persons. Soon after its completion, Nicodemus also served as a residence for high-caste Christian converts. The Baltimore Memorial housed mission offices and work spaces, while the fourth structure, a Deaconess Home, served as a missionary residence. The last two build-

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[26] Montgomery 1910: 160. See also, Bruce 1874. The "object lessons" afforded by native Christian homes were of equal importance: 'Social Settlement Element', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 26,4 (1895): 110.

[27] 'Dedication of Mission Buildings at Madras' in Eugene Smith, ed. *The Gospel in All Lands*. New York: Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1900): 178–179.

ings provided space for the orphanage (the Harriet Bond Skidmore Memorial) and nursery. Outside the complex were the modest brick cottages of The Colony, built as homes for Indian Christians employed by or affiliated with the mission.

With its bungalow-styled structures and spacious gardens, and its proximity to other Christian institutions, the complex demarcated a built environment of vernacular Christian modernity that resembled other, contemporaneous mission stations in Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Bungalows, European adaptations of Bengal's rural architectural forms, had long been emblems of colonial hybridity throughout the British empire.[28] The local Christians in whose hands much of the stations' daily operations lay were also hybrid in matters of clothing, language, domestic practices and frequently racial affiliation. Indeed, consistent with other racialized institutions of colonialism, American missionaries opined that, despite their "suspicious, sensitive, vain, untruthful and extravagant" character, mixed race persons, Anglo Indian and Eurasian, were more effective agents of Christianization because of their cultural and linguistic affiliation with the indigenous populace.[29] The supervising bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in South and Southeast Asia, William Oldham, lamenting the one hundred million souls "untouched" by Christianity, advised missionaries:

> Eurasians are the connecting link between foreign missionaries and the heathen world. The quality of your assistants greatly influences the effectiveness of your missionaries. The Eurasians have a far-reaching influence.[30]

The mission's Anglo-Indian superintendent, Grace Stephens, typified the ambiguity of this racialized category. With her Western clothing and reliance on English, she signaled her identification with the white American and British Methodists who helped maintain the mission, thereby reinforcing its Eurowestern character. She, as well, distanced herself from Indian Christians, whom she usually described in letters and reports as

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[28] King 1995.

[29] 'English Work,' 'India, 1908–1913' Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, 2604-3-5: 04, 05, General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

[30] Oldham Typescript, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, 2604-3-5: 04, General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. 'India, 1908–1913', Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, 2604-3-5: 05, General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. Similarly, the Women's Home Missionary Society of India was founded in 1905 "to rouse the Eurasian and Anglo-Indian community in India to a sense of duty and privilege to give the Gospel message to the heathen." 'The Home Missionary Movement of India', *Missionary Woman's Friend* 37, 11 (1905): 396–397.

"natives". Like other missionaries, she described "native" homes and religiosity with metaphors of darkness and "natives", themselves – if not given to trickery (as was the case of Brahman priests) – as "child-like". She remarked often on adult women's love of toys, such as dolls, for example.[31] Stephens, nevertheless, strategically *dis*-identified with her American and British sponsors in other instances. She routinely designated herself "India's Own" in her official communications and wrote that she "had been called by God to be a missionary in my own land."[32] She also used familial terms to categorize her relations with the other Indian Christians associated with the mission, referring to herself as the "mother" of the large mission "family." Photographs encapsulate this ambiguity, typically showing her in Eurowestern dress, seated, and surrounded by standing Indian Christians – men, women and children. Her hybridity was thus a matter of strategic acts of identification and dis-identification with different racialized categories, rather than a matter of syncretism or stable recombination.

A starker demonstration of the racial dynamics of the colonial missionary enterprise can be seen in the ways that missionaries monitored and commented upon the bodies of converts. Eliza Kent has written extensively about the cultural logics of dress and other kinds of self-fashioning among the low caste Bible women in the Madurai area who were charged with much of the day to day work of evangelization.[33] The high-caste female body was also a signifier, especially for western audiences. Pandita Ramabai is a well-known exemplar of this phenomenon. A less familiar (and more unsettling) case was that of a Brahman convert, Sooboonagam Ammal, who toured the U. S. with Grace Stephens in 1900 and 1901. I discuss Grace Stephens' account of the conversion, presented in her book, *Sooboonagam Ammal*, in greater detail below. Here, it is sufficient to note that although Sooboo, as she was known, was taken to the U. S. to testify to the "splendid work" of the missionaries, she remained in these reports virtually voiceless – quite unlike Pandita Ramabai, who produced a substantial corpus of letters, articles, and essays. Sooboo's conversion was re-presented in the U. S. not with her own words, but by her repeated performance of the hymn that she reportedly sang when she had been publicly baptized in Madras (1895), "Jesus, I my cross have taken." She signified less the outcome of an engagement with Christianity than the *possibility* of conversion, her

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[31] For example, Stephens 1903: 305–307.

[32] Missionary Roll Call, Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, Mission Bio Reel, entry 2179: Grace Stephens. General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

[33] Kent 2004: 150–163.

unadorned body conveying Christian personhood through the absence of the jewels and substances of Hindu womanhood.

Distinctions of race, gender and status were entangled, similarly, in the mission's character as a social space. The Madras station, like others, was intended as an exemplary Christian home (albeit headed by a woman) whose cleanliness and rationalized time-discipline would educate neophyte Indian Christians about the flaws in own homes and lifeways and the promise of Christian modernity. The object lessons of the mission station were also meant to encourage a particular form of respectability in behavior, dress and marriage customs, which had come to be associated with a Christianized bourgeoisie.[34] This is apparent in the Mission's separate reception sites for elite and poor visitors and in its architectural plan – a Eurowestern core surrounded by a perimeter of mediating space made up of habitation sites of Indian Christian villagers. Thus, despite the critique of caste hierarchy that missionaries often proclaimed, the space of the mission often materialized and preserved the inequalities of status and class. It was, in short, an island of Christian modernity – a refuge, laboratory and classroom where new forms of Christian domesticity could be displayed and enacted, where missionaries themselves could be protected from the sources of moral and physiological contagion that they perceived around them, and where edifying contrasts between the zenana and the Christian home could be drawn.[35]

Transformation from within

If the mission station was an emblem of a Christian future, the 'Oriental' home was crucible in which corrupted tradition had to be encountered and subdued. Indeed, as I have implied, the object of the missionary's attention not just the woman but woman within space of the home. Missionaries in India recognized temples as equally 'corrupt' but, with the memory of the 1857 Rebellion still fresh, realized that they were not penetrable without significant resistance and possibly violent consequences. Admittedly, temple precincts were preferred as sites for public evangelization because of the density of commercial and social life that they anchored and missionaries attentively documented temple rituals in letters and reports.[36] It was in homes, however, where the incremental,

[34] Kent 2004: 9–12, 127–129.

[35] For example, 'Kolar', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 27,2 (1895): 32–33.

[36] For example, Butler, 'Idols and Shrines in India', *Heathen Woman's Friend*, 1, 3 (1869): 19–20; 'The Holy Rivers of India', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 1,10 (1870): 87–88; 'Worship of Siva', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 2,4 (1870): 44–45; 'Brahmins at Prayer',

sustained work of Christianization was undertaken, and domesticity that furnished the tropes of proselytic rhetoric.

American Methodist women, like most mid-nineteenth-century Americans, understood homes to be generative spaces of (always-already racialized) nationhood and maintained that women exerted influence on society through Christian homes, as mothers and "queens of the house."[37] The domestic world of the white middle classes illustrated a sphere of feminine influence and nurture capable of yielding the masculine citizens and soldiers of the nation. In these intimate spaces of modern Christian aspiration, the fruits of technological progress were yoked to a racialized worldview, framed by millennialist teleology. For, though cloaked in sentimentality, homes were laboratories in which promises of modernity could be implemented – in scientific home management, social settlement work and even architectural experiments.[38]

Seen through this lens, the key to Christianizing 'heathendom' lay in transforming the domestic sphere – creating spaces of Christian modernity whose positive contagion, exerted in hygiene, mothercraft, companionate marriage, education and Christian piety, had the power to cure heathen society of its moral and physiological ills. Indeed, while missionaries targeted the zenana in effort to penetrate and rework caste and Hinduism, colonial authorities, social reformers, and nationalists also sought to map and reorganize domestic space and its gendered subjects and relations.[39] While such practices were formalized in home science education in the 1910s, they buttressed mission practice and discourse from its outset. And the trope of the zenana continued to be deployed as metonym for 'Oriental' corruption in missionary discourses over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, encouraging donations and spurring young American women to commit to missionary life.

Zenana work

Given their understanding of the zenana as an icon of heathendom, it is no surprise that missionaries identified zenana work as a critical feature of South Asia's mission field. For their part, Methodist missionaries in India wrote confidently about the influence that Hindu and Muslim

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Heathen Woman's Friend 4,7 (1872): 389–390; 'Jagganath Temple', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 17,12 (1886): 293–295; 'Goddess Kali', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 20,1 (1888): 1–3.

[37] Beecher 1869.

[38] Hayden 1981.

[39] Hancock 2001.

women exerted in the home, even while asserting that they were 'trapped,' and 'oppressed' by doctrines that were both internalized by women and congealed in the oppressive space of the home, itself.[40] The zenana, in this sense, was not a neutral container, but served as the spatial referent for the 'heathen woman' and the corrupt traditions, mores and material artifacts, including spaces of domestic worship, that formed the constitutive matrix of womanhood. The zenana work prescribed for missionaries comprised home visits and zenana parties – social gatherings for local women held in makeshift zenanas in missionary compounds.

Madras city was home to one of the late-nineteenth century's foremost proponents of the zenana mission, Grace Stephens, who was lauded in Methodist publications as a model for Methodist activism. In 1891, an anonymous author in *Heathen Woman's Friend* described the efforts of Stephens and her sister, Mrs. E. Jones:

> Their period of service is not comparatively long, but they have contrived to compress within it results that others would have needed many long years to achieve. Christian sympathy and patience is the only witchcraft they employ to gain access to the hearts of the women of Hindu households, who everywhere receive them with open arms. ... caste, that adamantine chain which binds a Hindu hand and foot, and which it is though only a giant can break, is being shivered to pieces by the quiet teachings of Miss Stephens ...[41]

The author rhapsodized about the outcomes of Stephens' zenana work: the greater consideration shown by husbands toward wives, improved child-rearing, and the abandonment of superstition. Their efforts yielded only a handful of actual conversions, however. Rather than emphasizing outcomes in terms of conversion, therefore, Stephens and other zenana workers reported on the numbers of homes visited. She began in the mid-1880s with fourteen homes; in 1891, she mentioned having two hundred zenana pupils; and, by 1895, it was estimated that five hundred zenana women were regularly visited by her and her workers.[42]

Zenana work – geared to upper castes – never yielded large numbers of conversions, with mission historian Helen Montgomery judging it, in 1910, to have had "disappointing results"[43] Much more success in numbers of conversions had been achieved through schooling and other kinds of social settlement work among working classes and those designated as untouchable.[44] Despite this, as well as some missionaries' deep misgivings about its costs in time, money and labor, the zenana mission

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[40] Hume 1894; Montgomery 1910: 45–81.
[41] 'Reform in Hindu Homes', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 23,4 (1891): 82.
[42] Stephens 1886: 116–118; Stephens 1891: 50–52; Rudisill 1905: v.
[43] Montgomery1910: 110.
[44] Kent 2004: 16–19.

persisted, often in the hands of local Bible-women. To consider why this was the case, I shift to a discussion of the rhetoric of the zenana, and its illustration of the constituent processes and material signs of conversion.

Opening the zenana

Missionaries understood zenana work as both behavioral and material transformation and usually described it using spatial metaphors: the zenana, 'dark,' 'window-less,' 'prison-like' was to be 'opened' through missionary labors, its inmates brought into sensory contact with a 'light-filled' exterior world. The incremental changes wrought by zenana work, initiated by comparisons of domestic activities and personalized interaction, constituted a standard conversion narrative and provided the warrant for continued investment by mission boards and auxiliaries.

Zenana work in Madras began in 1863 with the efforts of Anna Satthianadhan, an Indian Christian who had married into that well-known Indian Christian family. Satthianadhan's daughter-in-law, the writer Krupabai, provided a fictional characterization of the transformative effects of zenana work in *Saguna*, describing how one Hindu woman's (Radha) initial resistance to the visits of missionary women gradually gave way before the persuasive power of Christianity:

> Radha, busy at her work, would scarcely notice them at first, but afterwards she took pride in showing them what she knew in the way of cooking, and would make them taste her different preparations, and was gratified at their praise. Soon she was induced to visit them in return, and was in a bewilderment of joy of seeing so many queer looking nice things in the bungalow. The pretty fancy work caught her attention at once, though she never would have anything to do with reading. "Those are magic letters", she would say, shaking her head, "and Christianity is tied in the books". ... Her mind was often troubled and she had secret misgivings regarding her belief in shastras and idols. ... She also noticed the transforming effect of Christianity on her husband. His gentleness, kindness, and patience unconsciously set her thinking ... Gradually she succumbed to the strong influences of Christianity.[45]

As Satthianadhan's account suggests, comparisons, implicit and explicit, between 'heathen' and 'Christian' homes lay at the heart of zenana work. Missionaries themselves engaged in such comparisons in their letters and reports. More important, they also encouraged elite women to make such comparisons by exposing them to elements of Christian modernity. Krupabai Satthianadhan gave voice to such comparisons in her writing. In *Saguna*, she provided ample testimony about the object lessons of the

[45] Satthianadhan 1998b: 61.

missionary home and its materialization of desirable personhood and way of life; she testified, also, to the disclosure of divine agency in natural landscapes.[46]

As Satthianadhan's novelistic account implied, it was quotidian efforts that set the stage for Christian subject-formation. During zenana visits, ostensibly to teach women reading and needlework, missionaries described their own 'Christian homes,' they sang hymns, witnessed and sometimes read from bibles or tracts. They often attempted to leave bibles and tracts in these homes because numbers distributed were indices of missionary success.[47] It was not simply the quantity of bibles in circulation that mattered, however; missionaries also recognized the *agency* of bibles in process of conversion. The possession of a bible, in the first place, signified Christian personhood (e. g., as suggested by the moniker, 'Bible-woman') and converts' deep emotional attachments to their bibles were frequently reported in missionaries' letters.[48] Secondly, bibles and other tracts were invested with capacities to trigger action. The Women's Foreign Missionary Society Annual Report of 1908–1909, for example, describes a Brahman being diverted from his intention to renounce by the accidental acquisition of a page of a Christian song book: "he purchased a powder to dye his white garments yellow. The tradesman wrapped the powder in a piece of paper, formerly a page of a Christian songbook; the Brahman read the song. Not understanding it, he sought a missionary for explanation and by the truth of the song was led to 'peace, perfect peace'."[49]

The issue of the agency of non-human actors in the process of Christian conversion can be explored further by returning to Grace Stephens' paradigmatic account of high-caste conversion, *Sooboonagam Ammal*, which I introduced above. This text merits attention on account of its capture of the materiality of conversion, figuring it as a series of

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[46] Satthianadhan 1998b: 62, 70 f., 139.

[47] Badley 1889; Stephens 1890: 222–224.

[48] For example, Thomas 1870; 'Another Zenana Convert', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 2,11 (1871): 121–122.

[49] 'Fortieth Annual Report of the Women's Foreign Mission Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1908–09', Baltimore: Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1909): 8. 'Annual Reports, 1891–1940' Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, 2598-2-5: 03, General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. Congregationalist missionaries similarly reported "remarkable instances of conversions by means of a Bible or part of one, accidentally obtained. One poor man begged for the whole Bible saying that the scrap he held in his hand, which contained little more than the verse, 'the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin' had done him more good than all the books he had ever read." 'Plan of Study', *Light and Life for Women* 10,3 (1880): 113.

substantive exchanges (among human and non-human actors) in the course of which both the Hindu body and domestic space were replaced by Christian counterparts.

The narrative began by contrasting Hindu and Christian bodies and homes. The moral etiquette of the Brahman household, anchored by the seclusion of women and sustained by spatial and behavioral boundaries was captured in Stephens' allusions to the "severe lessons" learned during her visits. She reported on the visual barriers that prevented her from seeing kitchens, the behavioral norms of commensality that restricted her sharing of meals, her confinement to homes' outer, mediating spaces during visits, and the various prohibitions on physical contact with her hosts.[50]

The book's opening also conveyed the hybridity of Stephens own racialized identity. She sought identification with her American readers by signaling her discomfort with Hindu domesticity. She presented other facts, however – details of Hindu ritual praxis, as noted above – that distanced her from that readership. She underscored the strength of Sooboo's dedication to Hindu lifeways, for example, by describing her desire to be "sealed" or branded (a form of body modification among some Brahman communities), and by references to the various, "magical" powders with which she marked her body, to her endowment of a village temple and to the numerous "idols" and "pictures" that she worshipped.[51] In these passages, Stephens displayed an easy familiarity with phenomena introduced to shock American readers, in keeping with her self-proclaimed status as "India's Own".

Having established the materiality of Hindu religiosity, Stephens anticipated Sooboo's conversion, rendering it as an embodied and spatialized process:

> As we think of all this young life and all these things, and see her now in our home, we wonder if she can be the Sooboonagam Ammal of the past. No more fasting days and nights for salvation! No more bathing in seas and rivers to be saved from sinful pollution! No more the visiting of temples, nor the drinking of holy water! No more the giving of large sums of money for prayers to the priests and temples! No more the sacred powder and marks of worship on face and arms! No more the lighting of lamps, the penance, and all the rites prescribed by heathen priests! No more the proud, lofty look, the look of disdain and contempt for a Christian! No more the "touch-me-not" Brahman! But now our Sooboonagam sings most touchingly ... "Come to Jesus", ... "Nothing but the Blood of Jesus" ... "Jesus, I my cross have taken" ...[52]

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50 Stephens 1896: 2–5.
51 Stephens 1896: 14 f., 20.
52 Stephens 1896: 20 f.

With the contrast between Christian and Hindu lifeways illustrated, Stephens continued with a step-by-step account of Sooboo's conversion. She framed it as a transfer between two morally charged domestic spaces – Sooboo's Hindu home and the Christian domesticity of the mission compound. The seeds of Christianization, we learn, had been planted with a bible that had been left in Sooboo's home in course of zenana work.[53] We are told that she lost her desire for "idol worship", her rejection finally sealed by an omen, a scorpion's presence among deity figures.[54] Following several visits to the mission compound in 1894 and 1895, Sooboo experienced a catharsis – leaving behind her possessions (clothing, jewelry, idols, pictures), she fled to the compound where Stephens' extended Christian "family" was celebrating Christmas. She announced that she had come as "God's Christmas gift" and presented Stephens with a power-laden token of her commitment:

> She now took from her person the only thing she did bring, and gave it to me. It was the little metal box containing the sacred powder given by the priests as a sign that she had been sealed by them, and which ... she had to wear always about her person. In giving me this box, with the powder, she said she gave up her all – caste, heathenism, idolatry, everything.[55]

Sooboo then took up residence at the mission compound. Her family meanwhile mourned her departure and, when she confirmed her intention to leave, Stephens reported that they performed a funeral for her, using an effigy fashioned from clay. Once she became a resident in the mission compound, Sooboo was publicly baptized and took up work as an evangelist and teacher. In her new home, she dutifully served her Christian "family", carrying out household tasks and, more important, providing in her person an emblem for the success of zenana work in India and abroad.[56]

The "Blessed Magnet", as Stephens called Sooboo in recognition of her supposed influence on other women, resided for several years in the Nicodemus House on the mission compound. Sooboo, though consumed by her devotion to Jesus, retained (we are told) the "child-like" but nonetheless "superior" demeanor that missionaries attributed to zenana women. She also continued to live and work in partial seclusion – occupying the designated zenana house on the mission compound and traveling to homes in a carriage, accompanied by a "protector." Some ten years after the events described in the book, there were reports that

[53] Stephens 1896: 22 f.
[54] Stephens 1896: 25, 28.
[55] Stephens 1896: 43, 46–47.
[56] Stephens 1896: 103.

Sooboo left the compound to return to her family, though the references in Methodist periodicals and publications are almost non-existent.

Sooboo, who remained largely voiceless in the account, represented what Stephens claimed were hundreds, if not thousands, of "secret Christians", women, she said, who retained the outward trappings of Hindu identity but who had surrendered to Christianity in their hearts. For example, in an 1887 report, Stephens described viewing a family's *pūjā* room during one of her zenana visits and reported, with satisfaction, that the women had given flowers to the workers after having offered those flowers to the deity.[57] Stephens interpreted a standard act of redistribution of *prasāda* as a sign of the women's disregard for the ritual. This anecdote may be indicative of a misinterpretation on Stephens' part, but based on her familiarity with Hindu ritual, it is more likely a rhetorical strategy. If, in effect, any Hindu woman could be a secret Christian, then any act of Hindu practice could justify zenana work, even without the quantifiable evidence of a public conversion.

Stephens also used the narrative to elaborate on one of the important aspects of material Christianity and its constituent processes – the resignification of Hindu artifacts as Christian. These exchanges occurred from the first appearance of the bible in Sooboo's home to the cathartic moment when she relinquished her box of "powder" to Stephens. This theme was reiterated in the supplemental portions of later editions of the book, in which Sooboo's success as a zenana worker was hailed.[58] Like Stephens, she managed to acquire a "trophy", a photograph of a priest, probably a Sankaracarya. This image had been gifted to her by one of the legions of secret Christians that zenanas were claimed to harbor. Ironically, the photograph depicted one of Sooboo's own relations – her mother's brother – thus indexing the distance she had come from Hindu to Christian.

In other writings, Stephens detailed the materiality of Christian conversion in more general terms. She described secret Christians' reluctance to allow catechisms and bible portions to be placed near their domestic altars.[59] In another article, she described the death and burial of a zenana convert who had chosen to remain in her home, rather than join the mission station "family". After intervening to make sure that "nothing of marks of the Devil were put on her", she observed that Christian workers laid the woman's body on the home's verandah.[60] Stephens maintained that the corpse's presence was morally beneficial: "It was

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[57] Stephens 1887: 286–287.
[58] Stevens 1905: 118.
[59] Stephens 1890a: 222–224.
[60] Stephens 1890b: 248.

good for them to come and see that Christian body" for it opened the hearts of that "heathen family."[61] And, recognizing that conversion necessitated the exchange of Hindu artifacts for Christian, she described the baptism of a Hindu priest in this way: "... as he stood for baptism I washed the hideous 'Swami marks' from his brow; and on removing his priestly yellow garment, Mrs Rudisill gave him a 'white robe;' I now have many of his sacred, priestly belongings."[62] Another article, "A Remarkable Conversion", described the exchange of "magic books" for bible that marked a renunciant's conversion to Christianity.[63]

As already noted, it was difficult to assess the efficacy of zenana work, as conversions were few and secret Christians were difficult, if not impossible, to tabulate accurately. Perhaps to justify its continuation, a more readily quantifiable operation was introduced to supplement one-on-one home visits. This was the zenana party. Here, again, Stephens acquired a reputation as the foremost proponent of this type of missionary endeavor.[64]

Zenana parties were introduced in 1891 to bring local Hindu and Muslim women to mission stations.[65] A temporary 'zenana' was fashioned, using curtains and existing architectural features, and women were entertained there with contests and games, gift distribution and snacks.[66] While hymns were often sung and prayers offered, the event was not a religious service in any explicit sense; the intent was, rather, to expose elite women to the Christian modernity that suffused the domestic world of the mission compound.

Just as zenana visits introduced Christian artifacts into Hindu homes, the parties also involved transfers of material artifacts. Stephens' parties were held as adjuncts to the mission's Christmas celebrations, and served as occasions to convey Christian religious principles and tie them to material objects and to a gift mode of exchange. These events, moreover, constituted a nexus for exchanges that were transnational in scope. chapters of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society in the U. S. assembled Christmas boxes that were sent to the mission stations. Dolls and harmonicas were among most coveted items; supplies for sewing and needlework projects, such as scissors, thimbles, needles, crochet hooks, and ribbons, were also included.[67] During the parties these artifacts, along

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[61] Stephens 1890a: 249.
[62] Stephens 1896: 105.
[63] Stephens 1895a: 96.
[64] Montgomery 1910: 113.
[65] The first reference that I found was Ninde 1891: 159–161.
[66] Ninde 1891: 159–161; Stephens 1891.
[67] 'What to Send to India', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 19,12 (1888): 328; Hughes 1889; Stephens 1891; Stephens 1893: 3–5; Stephens 1895b: 5–6; Stephens 1903: 305–307.

with bibles, were awarded as gifts for recitation and singing. And, although artifacts of Christian domesticity were distributed, the party also offered opportunities for the display of the Hindu artifacts in Stephens' collection.[68]

The numbers of attendees, usually in the hundreds, were remarked upon in mission reports.[69] These numbers, like those of bibles and tracts distributed and homes visited, provided indices of the efficacy of the Christian mission. And, while numbers of secret Christians were unverifiable, the accounts of the parties helped sustain the trope of the secret Christian with their claims that such parties nurtured the faith of the many secret Christians who were among the guests and that the parties helped plant the seeds of Christian conversion in others.[70] Despite their exclusivity, the parties were also asserted to be "caste levellers." Stephens maintained that the women who visited the compound on these occasions mingled freely and without regard for the behavioral restrictions that ordinarily obtained. This she presented as evidence of the inroads that Christian modernity was making.[71]

If artifacts of U. S. domesticity were imported for zenana parties, there were also material artifacts of Hinduism that circulated outside the mission field. The Hindu artifacts that converts relinquished as signs of transformation were, in some cases, presented by missionaries to their sponsors and supervisors as religiously-charged souvenirs. In 1894, a Mrs. E. P. Stevens described the Christian conversion of a Tamil renunciant named Appaswami, attributing that transformation to books that Grace Stephens had given him. Convicted of his sin, he "surrendered to Miss Stephens ten books on magic, one magic slate, three books written on sacred leaves and bound by sacred thread, and was then baptized." She quoted Stephens's letter: "I wish you could have seen Appaswami as he brought the books to me and seen him as I put the Holy Bible in his hand as an exchange."[72] Despite the books' considerable monetary value, Stephens initially elected to keep them, "as a sacred trust", but later reconsidered and implored Mrs. Stevens to accept them as signs of Christianity's advancement in India.

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[68] Stephens 1893.

[69] 'Twenty-third Annual Report of the Women's Foreign Mission Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church', Baltimore: Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1892, in 'Annual Reports, 1891–1940', Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, 2598-2-5: 03, General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

[70] Stephens 1895b: 5–6.

[71] Stephens 1895b: 5–6.

[72] Stevens 1895a: 96.

Grace Stephens also enclosed lithographs and cloths, metonyms of the Hindu domestic interior, in some letters to her supervisors. A letter to Dr. North, dated December 1, 1916, included a lithograph of the Jagannatha, Balarama and Subhadra, produced by Ravi Varma Press, as an enclosure: "I am enclosing in this a worshipped paper. Think of the people worshipping a thing like that and what it means now for them to have a place of their own erected for God."[73] In another letter to North, dated August 17, 1917, she wrote, "I am sending you a handkerchief used by the Hindoos here, with the gods and goddesses on it. Just think of a handkerchief like this being used in America!"[74]

Personalized interactions such as these were complemented by activities that incorporated a wider public. The zenana was kept alive in Americans' imaginations through embodied practices in the United States. An article in *Heathen Woman's Friend* described zenana parties being held to "stimulate more zeal in our work."[75] American women, dressed in saris, hosted these affairs at which returned missionaries spoke about zenana life. These activities were meant, like many of the study assignments carried out by auxiliaries, to have a pedagogical thrust, which they did by enabling an active and material imagination of the mission field. There were, as well, other portable icons of the zenana that enjoyed transnational circulation. More than twenty years before Stephens sent Hindu souvenirs to her American supervisors, another missionary, Rev. Thomas Craven, prepared photographic prints of Hindu and Christian women, which emphasized their contrasting dress and demeanor. One, a "Hindoo woman of the middle class" is "robed in full costume, displaying the abundance of ostentatious ornaments on her forehead, fingers, and toes as well as in her nose." The other picture was presented as a contrast to Hindu decadence: it was, he wrote, "a sweet, modest, intelligent face of a Christian ... convert ... from the upper ranks of Hindoo society." He urged Americans, be they merely collectors of curios or those interested in advancing the cause of foreign missions, to decorate their homes with these pictures:

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[73] Letter from Miss Grace Stephens to Dr. North, December 1, 1916. 'Mission Correspondence, 1912–1949', Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, 1113-1-1, General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. On the reverse of the lithograph, Stephens had written, "The three greatest gods in India. Brahma in the centre, Vishnu and Siva on the sides. This paper has been worshipped by the people."

[74] Letter from Miss Grace Stephens to Dr. North, dated August 17, 1917 'Mission Correspondence, 1912–1949', Records of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, 1113-1-1, General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

[75] Reed 1895: 64–65.

> We would like to know of a set of these photographs being in every American home. They cannot fail to contribute ... to an abiding interest in the people of India. Wherever they [the pictures] go, they will furnish a reply to such as say there are no good results from foreign missions.[76]

Zenana work (parties and visits) and its circulating icons thus were key features that sustained the potency of India in the missionary imaginary. The zenana was represented as the matrix in which Hindu materiality and womanhood were inextricably bound together and, as such formed dynamic core of the interlocked systems of caste and Hindu religiosity. Despite gaining few converts or even being able to measure their efficacy, accounts of the interior world of the zenana and missionaries' incremental penetration of it remained staple features of letters and reports. These narratives were complemented, as well, by the circulation of material and visual artifacts within and outside mission field, all of which helped sustain Americans' emotional, moral and financial investments in Indian missions.

Conclusion

It is apparent, from this brief overview, why the zenana claimed the imaginations and affective commitments of American Protestants. The zenana's status as a metonym for what missionaries described as 'heathendom' is affirmed in the frequency and content of articles in missionary periodicals and in the letters, reports and essays of both American missionaries and Indian Christians. These sources reveal missionaries' understanding of upper-caste Hindu women's bodies as media through which Hinduism and caste were continuously regenerated and sustained. At the same time, both their resistance and submission to Christianity were also framed in embodied terms. These broadly shared perspectives were focused and intensified by Methodism's pragmatic and activist orientation. Methodist women missionaries' evangelism was accompanied by efforts to reorganize and reform Hindu domestic spaces through the incremental changes associated with zenana work and by modeling Christian domestic order in their own residences and institutions.

I have suggested in this article that American Methodists' zenana mission in India, both its conduct and its representation in missionary discourse, persisted despite its cost and low conversion counts because of its power as a rhetorical trope. Grace Stephens' writings were particularly

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[76] 'India Photographs', *Heathen Woman's Friend* 14,8 (1883): 182.

influential. Her accounts repeatedly invoked the image of the zenana as a space in which the material signs of Hinduism and Christianity were locked in battle and in which secret Christians awaited salvation. Indeed, within this frame, any Hindu whose home had been entered by missionaries could be interpolated as a secret Christian. It could be argued that this simply served to justify the continuation of the mission station in Madras and to enhance Stephens' own reputation. There is more to this, however. Her attention to the material signs of conversion encoded principles of material Christianity that I argue were deeply entwined in the Methodist imaginary. The artifacts of Christian modernity – bibles, tracts, hymnbooks, needlework tools – were understood as agents in their own right, with the power to penetrate the resistant sheath of Hindu custom. The artifacts of Hindu religiosity (rendered as 'tradition' in relation to Christian modernity) could, in turn, be resignified as "trophies", collectibles that embodied the transformative effects of conversion and represented the 'others' against which American Methodists framed their own Christian subjectivities. If social settlement work among poor and low-caste communities yielded greater numbers of converts, zenana work yielded the most potent icons of conversion – "magic powders", books, pictures, and "idols" – and, more important, gave missionaries access to Hindu women who were thought to be the fulcrum on which caste and Hinduism rested.

Insights about the pragmatics of conversion can be gained through these accounts. Existing models of Christian conversion have emphasized its linguistic dimension and treat Christian subjectivity as an interior, psychological state. In this article, building on recent scholarship on material Christianity, I have focused instead on material media of Christian subject formation, suggesting that conversion be considered as a process comprising material exchanges and embodied performances that rely on, reproduce and rework gender, racial and class codes. Conversion may be a matter of translation, but it is also a matter of *matter*, of materiality – of artifacts, landscapes, and buildings, as well as the bodies of its human emblems and agents. Bibles, songbooks, domestic space and accoutrements (from embroidery tools to pianos) comprised the material and performative matrix of colonial Christianity and mediated the encounters between Christian and Hindu persons and institutions. This perspective offers a useful supplement to scholarship on the linguistic dimensions of conversion. It also problematizes the cultural and racialized hybridity sometimes attributed to converts by framing their self-presentation as temporally unfolding (and reversible) strategies of identification and dis-identification, reliant on material and performative media. As such, conversion may be theorized, following generally on

Judith Butler's work, as an embodied performance that is situational, transactional and negotiated and that contributes to the formation and sedimentation of relational subjectivities, be they associated with gender, race, class and / or nation.[77]

The picture of the colonial missionary project that I have outlined in this article invites further questions both about the materially mediated interactions between different religious traditions in colonial contexts and, more specifically, about the ramifications of the American missionary presence in India. How do the material transactions and exchanges documented in Indian Christianity compare with those of other missionary encounters, in Africa, East and Southeast Asia, and the Pacific? What insights about colonial expansion and power might be yielded by attention to material religiosity? How did American Protestant denominations influence the formation of Indian Christianities? Did American Protestant missionary practice intersect with emerging discourses on racial identity and difference in the U. S.? In India? These are questions that I can gesture toward at this point, but they may be worth further examination as we consider the manifold ways in which colonialism in South Asia brought about the reworking of the material organization of everyday life.

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[77] Butler 1993; Butler 1997.

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