



## Book Review

Chandra Mallampalli. (2023). *South Asia's Christians: Between Hindu and Muslim*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xvi+368. Price: \$29.95. ISBN: 9780190608903

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Chandra Mallampalli's *South Asia's Christians* provides a concise and insightful overview of nearly 2 millennia of history of Christianity in South Asia. It focuses primarily on India, without neglecting the trajectories of Christian communities of different denominations in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. The book thus covers a vast geography and chronology to provide students and specialists alike with reliable information, astute interpretations, and a thoughtful genealogy of the present of Christianity in this part of the world. *South Asia's Christians* is also the first volume of the Oxford Studies in World Christianity, and includes an introduction to the series written by its first editor (pp. xi-xiv), the late Lamin Sanneh. Mallampalli engages with the paradigm of world Christianity advanced by Sanneh in an open and critical way. He recognizes that, in the South Asian context, the focus on translation/ translatability and the agency of local converts can be particularly helpful in countering the Hindutva rhetoric of converts as passive recipients of favours that lead them to choose Christianity and abandon their ancestral faith (p. 14). At the same time, he sees the need to articulate the importance of global (institutional, Western-oriented) and local dimensions behind the spread of Christianity in South Asia as well (p. 14). He also emphasizes the non-obvious nature of the *local*: South Asian culture and society, in particular, diverse, multi-layered, and segregated across caste lines (p. 15).

After offering the reader a balanced overview of the debates on world Christianity, Mallampalli opts for a holistic approach, partly inspired by Koschorke's polycentrism (p. 16). The book is further dedicated to Eric Frykenberg, the great historian of Protestant Christianity in colonial India and the author of another recent history of Christianity in South Asia (2008). Mallampalli's synthesis differs from Frykenberg's work, which is more encyclopaedic in nature, by its tight narrative, which revolves around 2 specific lenses of interpretation. The first is the importance of the plural religious context for understanding the trajectories of Christianity in South Asia. As the book's subtitle announces, and as the various chapters of the book articulate, South Asian Christian identities are better understood by locating them between Hinduism and Islam. The second thread running through the book is a nuanced analysis of conversion, taken seriously as an intimate as well as a social and political choice, along the lines of the classic work by Gauri Viswanathan (1998). This second thread, related to reasons articulated in the introduction about why South Asian Christianity is an important phenomenon and object of study, is particularly evident in the various subsequent chapters, as we will see in a moment. First, Mallampalli argues that the existence of Christian communities in India from the precolonial period demonstrates the long history of South Asia's connections with the wider Indian Ocean world. Second, Christians contributed to the modern development of India's long-standing forms of public debate and controversy (p. 11). For South India, a similar argument has been made by the late anthropologist Bernard Bate (2021: 20-23). Finally, and perhaps more importantly, while Christians have participated in the constitution of the Indian national identity and the articulation of nationalism and religion, they have also been cast as the 'other' against which national discourses has been constituted. Unlike Islam, Christianity has often not been

seen as a local religion by Indian nationalists, beginning with Gandhi. Thus the study of South Asian Christians compels us to examine the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion at work in the historical and contemporary process of identity-making.

After a short but dense introduction, the book is divided into 9 chapters, roughly chronologically arranged. The first 3 chapters focus on the precolonial period, with a fourth thematic chapter on the early encounters between Europeans and South Asian religions. This is followed by 5 chapters focusing on the colonial and postcolonial periods. However, and this is one of the strengths of the book, Mallampalli is never afraid to explore the links between past and present and the chains of causality that link precolonial and contemporary Indian history. The first chapter begins with the oldest Christian community in South Asia, the Syrian Christians or St. Thomas Christians of Kerala, whose origins, according to both local and Western traditions, date back to the time of the Apostle Thomas. Mallampalli analyses the content of the apocryphal work known as *The Acts of Thomas* (pp. 19-24), showing its interest as well as the difficulties in accepting it as a historical narrative. However, he doesn't mention the most important available documents for the history of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala outside of the oral tradition, namely the Kollam Tarisappalli copper plates (9th century), which may contain mention of an earlier set of Thomas of Cana copper plates (Perczel 2006, Devadevan 2020). More generally, in this chapter, as in all the chapters on precolonial history, one rarely gets a sense of the available sources and thus of the difficulties inherent in studying these periods of Christian presence in South Asia. Still, this chapter is important in the economy of Mallampalli's book because it foregrounds the presence of non-European Christianity in India. It also introduces the issue of caste at the outset and outlines its importance for understanding Christian trajectories in India by exploring how Thomas Christians were assimilated into the elite circles of Kerala, thus providing scholarship with a model of a high-caste Christian group.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide an overview of the early Catholic presence on the subcontinent in 2 very different settings, the Mughal court of Emperor Akbar and rural South India. In analysing the Jesuit mission at Akbar's court, Mallampalli stands at the intersection of religion, diplomacy, and conversion to explore the relationship between Portuguese colonial power and the Islamic Mughal Empire. He emphasizes the relative marginality of Portuguese-sponsored missionaries in the world of 17th-century northern India, as well as the impossibility of an encounter between Akbar's inclusive views of religion and the Jesuits' exclusive views (p. 56, p. 61). Chapter 3 deals with the Jesuit missions in southern India and the strategy of social and cultural adaptation they employed there. Mallampalli draws on the work of Susan Bayly (1989) and Ines Županov (1999), who each describe from their own perspectives – historical anthropology of South India and mission history, respectively – how such Jesuit strategies of accommodation went hand in hand with forms of religious encounter and even syncretism. Mallampalli offers a refreshing and persuasive view on such encounters, well summed up in the final sentences of this chapter: “Often, superficial similarity in religious practice is accompanied by contestation over power, authority, doctrine, and sacred space. If accommodation is a fact of history, so are assertions of difference” (p. 88). Still, being far from his area of expertise, these chapters rely on existing scholarship. The biases of Mallampalli's anglophone references explain the gaps in his bibliography on Indian Catholicism, with works by towering 20th-century Jesuit scholars – Léon Besse, Georg Schurhammer, Joseph Wicki, Savarimuthu Rajamanickam – being absent. Portuguese historiography is also absent, especially Ângela Barreto Xavier's important oeuvre on conversion in Goa.

Chapter 4 similarly provides readers with an overview of early modern European understanding of the plural context of South Asia and the Christian presence alongside Hindus and Muslims. It shows the role of missionaries in the (pre)history of Orientalism, and how the image of

India in-the-making helped to shape the place of Christianity within it. This chapter successfully crosses the confessional (Catholic-Protestant) divide; however, Barreto Xavier and Županov's *Catholic Orientalism* (2015) could have offered the book clues to compare the 2 Christian processes of knowledge production. The chapter could also have gone further in rethinking the role of the popular figure of Pietist missionary Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg. Surprisingly, Mallampalli seems to agree with some confessional scholarship that Ziegenbalg "was neither a racist nor a colonialist" (p. 116), without reminding readers that he was on the payroll of the King of Denmark. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the entanglements of Christian mission, colonialism, and modernity in 19th-century India. They offer a lively synthesis of this important period of change, including some primary sources that provide a coherent narrative of the colonial period and its postcolonial present. Chapter 5 focuses on issues of education, rhetoric, and preaching in the Protestant context. In demonstrating the emergence of a public sphere of religious controversy, Mallampalli also shows that Christian attacks on Hinduism and Islam provoked reactions that led to reforms in both fields, and concludes by proposing the hypothesis of Protestantism for assessing the broader impact of missionaries in South Asia (pp. 140-42). Chapter 6 follows the trajectories of some upper-caste converts to Protestantism, since the exceptional sources associated with the lives of these privileged individuals provide us with a key to understanding the complexities of conversion, "the identity crises faced by converts, especially their anxieties about being in-between" (p. 145).

The last 4 chapters of the book deal in a sensitive and insightful way with some key modern phenomena that have shaped South Asian Christianities. In chapter 7, Mallampalli discusses mass conversions among the most destitute sections of the population, the Dalits and the tribal community. He focuses on 3 different regions here – Andhra Pradesh, the Northeast (Nagaland and Mizoram), and the Punjab – and the unexpected trajectories of mass conversion that took place there. The section on the Nagas and Mizos is particularly effective in showing the role of local agency and social structures, and the presence of multiple political relationships – with the colonial power, with independent India, and with neighbouring Buddhist Myanmar – in terms of the decision to convert (pp. 172-174). As an aside, this also provides students with tools to understand the recent 2023 violence in the region. The issue of mass conversion touches on some of the same questions about elite conversions, but from an opposite perspective: When is conversion authentic? Who is a true Christian, and does the new religious identity affect social status? Chapter 8 analyzes the 'othering' of Christians during the period of national uprising and independence in India (with a sustained reflection on the figure of Gandhi), Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Comparing their different paths to independence and asking the uncomfortable question, "Whose country is 'one's own' and who would be excluded?" (p. 212), Mallampalli shows how Christians became an 'alien' minority in different ways, as the principle of cultural and religious homogeneity would come to underpin many anticolonial nationalisms that laid the foundations of Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist majority states "that marginalized those rendered minorities upon independence" (p. 212). Chapter 9 creates a diptych with chapter 7 by discussing the issue of Dalit conversion, and showing how their struggle for conversion became part of a larger struggle for social uplift and liberation. This chapter tackles the issue of Christianity and caste head-on by discussing the issue of affirmative action for Dalit Christians and their lack of access to government assistance granted to backward classes through reservations (pp. 234-238). The government's position is that caste is not a Christian institution – which is true in theory but not in practice, with many Christian converts belonging to backward communities and retaining that affiliation even after conversion. This highlights the issue of multiple, often conflicting identities that characterises the lives of Christians in South Asia. Mallampalli accurately identifies such contradictions, and fissures, along with their historical constitution.

Finally, the recent phenomenon of the growth of Pentecostal churches in India is the focus of chapter 9, the last in the book. In this chapter, Mallampalli explores local and transnational factors that make Pentecostalism so successful in South Asia, especially in the context of growing anti-Christian violence (p. 255-56). He draws attention to the cross-class and cross-caste nature of the Pentecostal message, as well as its emphasis on tangible experiences of the supernatural through gifts of the Spirit, including healing and speaking in tongues. This makes the comparison between Pentecostalism and early modern forms of Christian conversion an interesting avenue for future research. Healing and possession powers have always been at the centre of Catholic activity in Tamil Nadu (Sébastien 2004), although it is equally true that the non-mediated nature of Pentecostalism makes this phenomenon *sui generis*. These last chapters, dealing with contemporary issues, provide the readers with a lucid synthesis that, to the best of my knowledge, does not exist elsewhere in the same form. While I have pointed out some bibliographical gaps and problems in the book's chapters, especially those dealing with the precolonial period, these omissions – almost inevitable in a book of this kind – do not detract from its overall coherence and effectiveness. On the contrary, the historical chapters have their place in articulating the long history and genealogy of the phenomena examined in the later sections.

In conclusion, this is an important book that will be useful to the general public – but especially so to students and specialists of India. It teaches them (us) the long and complex history of Christianity in the region, and the way it has been historically constructed as the 'other' to pave the road towards contemporary discourse. It also teaches us the importance of Christianity, and religion more generally, in the social and political life of backward groups trying to negotiate their role in colonial and postcolonial India against the backdrop of the rise of Hindutva. Indeed, one could even say that this is a brave book that speaks calmly but frankly about the difficulties of being a Christian in South Asia, about violence and marginalization, and about the importance of looking at its diverse Christian community and its long history as a mirror for understanding South Asian history that is especially relevant today.

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