



Book Review

Kerry P.C. San Chirico. (2023). *Between Hindu and Christian: Khrist Bhaktas, Catholics, and the Negotiation of Devotion in Banaras*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. xxii+331. Price: \$99.00. ISBN 9780190067120.

Ehud Halperin
Associate Professor
Department of East Asian Studies
Tel-Aviv University, Israel
Email: udihal@tauex.tau.ac.il

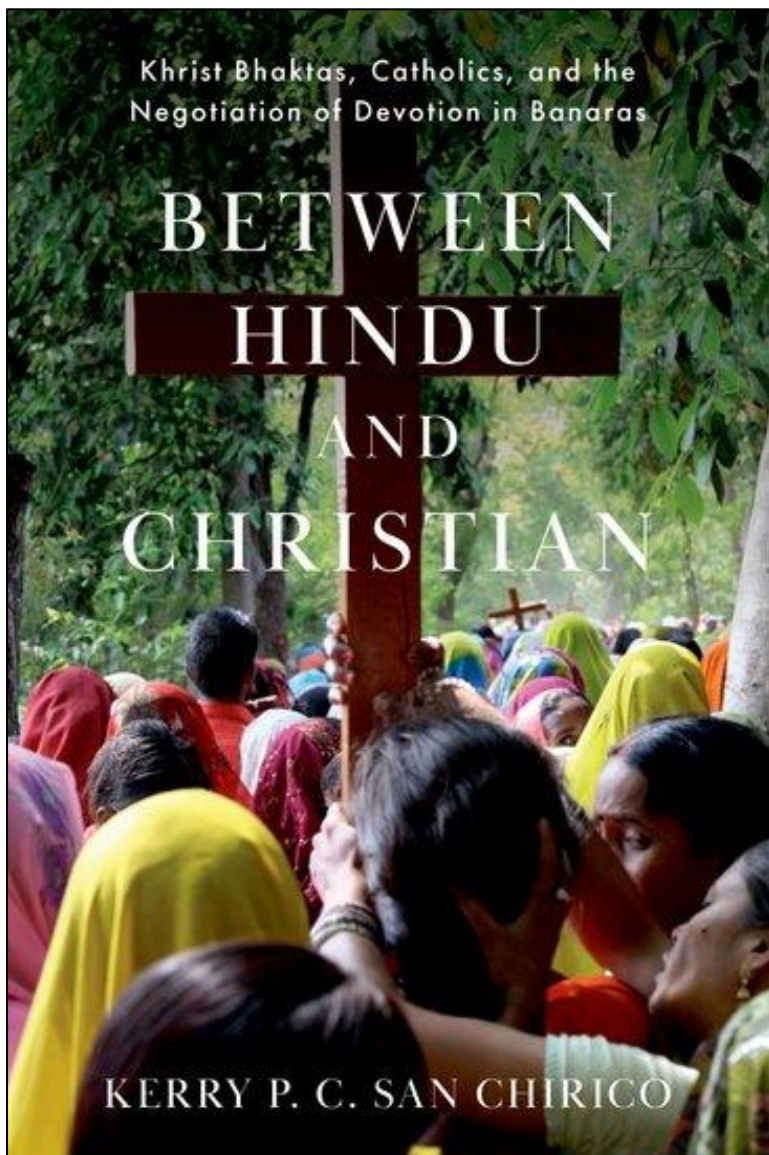


Image 10.1: Jacket Cover. (Source: Oxford University Press / public domain).

Kerry San Chirico's book, "*Between Hindu and Christian*," tells the story of the unique community of Khrist Bhaktas ("devotees of Christ"), whose religious lives centre around the Matra Dham Ashram ("Abode of the Mother") in Varanasi which belongs to the Catholic Indian Missionary Society (IMS). The group, consisting of thousands, mostly unbaptized Dalit female members does not lend itself to easy, clear-cut categorization. In a deeper sense, this is the driving question of this monograph – who are these Khrist Bhaktas? And in what contexts should this question be explored and answered? During field research spanning almost a decade (from 2009 to 2010, with several additional visits up to 2017), San Chirico participated in the Ashram's daily activities and festive events. He spoke to the clergy and lay devotees, explored the nearby villages where members resided, and gathered ethnographic data presented in this book.

To support and better situate his findings, he has accompanied his research with a useful survey of the history of Christianity in India and the more particular legacy of the IMS and the Matra Dham Ashram in Varanasi, as well as helpful presentations of related theological, socio-political, and economic issues. This turns the book into a rather rich study that nicely juxtaposes accounts of lived realities against

the background of both Christian and Hindu traditions that prove to be indispensable for the task at hand. Drawing on the metaphor of *sangam*, a confluence of rivers, San Chirico sets out to explore the many streams that feed into the historical and ongoing formation of Khrist Bhaktas. The issues at hand, as I describe below, are many. Still, at least in my reading, San Chirico establishes three major goals for the book, which he indeed accomplishes.

The first goal is a straightforward descriptive one. San Chirico aims to introduce the community of Khrist Bhaktas to a readership that is unaware of its existence, let alone its practices, beliefs, and other defining characteristics. In doing so, he provides a historical background to the institution and the individuals involved in its establishment and operation; a description of its main location and the Matra Dham Ashram's architecture, functions, and ongoing development, along with accounts of its daily routines, activities, and festive occasions. San Chirico bases his description on interviews with leaders and key members of the Ashram, exploring their biographies, worldview, and experiences, as well as their hopes and fears. By the end of the book, one gets a good sense of this group, and especially appreciates its uniqueness within the Indian socio-religious landscape. The second goal, explicitly stated throughout the book in various ways, is to achieve a nuanced understanding of Khrist Bhaktas. To do this, San Chirico examines them against several key backgrounds ("streams" feeding into the *sangam*): First, he examines the broader context of Christianity, focusing on Catholicism and Charismatic Catholicism, and their expressions in India. Second, he delves into Hinduism, emphasizing core concepts like *dharma* and *shraddha* as well as practices such as *darshan* and *prasad*. He also examines popular lived Hindu traditions, contrasting them with the more Brahmanic Sanskritic ones, and highlights the role of *bhakti* devotionism as a key framework for understanding Khrist Bhaktas. Third, San Chirico examines social and communal issues, in particular those of caste and Dalit politics, to provide a comprehensive understanding of Khrist Bhaktas within the broader societal context. Fourth, he discusses Varanasi as a geographical and cultural region, illustrating its importance as the heart of Hindu India and its influence on Khrist Bhakta identity and practices. Juggling these perspectives is challenging, just like in real life. However, San Chirico skilfully navigates these frameworks. While these themes naturally blend occasionally, he keeps calling attention to this analytical division, making it easier to grasp the different factors at play. The third goal of the book is to address its central question: how do we classify Khrist Bhaktas in terms of their religiosity? Are they Christians? Are they Hindus? Or are they something else altogether? As the title suggests, San Chirico argues that Khrist Bhaktas exist somewhere in between. Throughout the book, as our understanding of Khrist Bhaktas deepens, we are encouraged to further embrace their fundamental 'in-betweenness'. The question becomes even more nuanced: are Khrist Bhaktas a hybrid Christian-Hindu community, or perhaps a Hindu-Christian one? Or in other words, even if understood as manifesting a sort of religious liminality, do they lean towards one tradition over the other? Admittedly, this is a tough question to answer, and I wrestled with it myself as I read through the book. San Chirico thoughtfully addresses this question in the book's conclusion.

The book opens with a thick description of a *mela* (festive gathering) that is held at the Matra Dham Ashram on the second Saturday of every month. As this choice of words (*mela*) immediately attests, San Chirico places us right away into a ritual world that centres on Yesu (Jesus) and Mata Mariyam (Mother Mary) but is at the same time infused with Hindu concepts and practices. *Bhajans* (hymns) are sung, *darshan* is sought and *daan* (offerings) of rupee coins is made. Standing under a twelve-foot billboard of Christ, "the *ācārya* or abbot of Mātṛ Dhām, Swami Anil Dev ... offers instruction for an hour with Dharmaśāstra, or Scriptures, in hand" (p. 1). Thus, from the very start, we realize that while the gathering celebrates key Christian figures, "the practices (modes of encounter, bodily gesture, etc.) encountered at Mātṛ Dhām are largely Hindu" (p. 4). This, San Chirico argues, calls for 'Indic' interpretation of

Khrist Bhakta identity, namely, an interpretation of this form of local Christianity that acknowledges and is willing to accept, at least to an extent, a certain level of its Indianization and Hinduization. The rest of the introduction provides necessary general background on the Khrist Bhaktas, and the nature of the fieldwork done by the author among them. Chapter 1, *At the Confluence of Rivers: Situating the Khrist Bhaktas*, and chapter 2, *More Streams at the Saṅgam: Indian Christianities, Īsāī (Christian) Banaras, and Subaltern Liberations*, can be largely seen as a single unit. While chapter 1 delves into the Hindu context, providing a history of Varanasi, known as ‘The Heart of Hindu Civilization’, as also a centre for the proliferation of other religions and religious identities (Buddhism, Islam, Sufism, and Sants), the chapter also examines *bhakti* devotional traditions and their resonance within the practices of Khrist Bhaktas. Additionally, the chapter offers a brief analysis of the distinction between vernacular and Brahmanic forms of Hinduism.

Chapter 2 then surveys key moments and developments in the history of Christianity in India from its foundation with the Thomas Christians in 4th-century South India to its relative heyday under British rule. The general argument presented in these 2 chapters is as follows: Khrist *bhakti* proves to be well-suited to the needs of Dalits. The latter seek emancipation from caste inequality and Brahminic religious practices, values, and deities, as well as political power (especially since the 1990s). Christianity, to begin with, addresses many of these concerns. It brings with it a new deity. Yesu, being non-Hindu, Khrist *bhakti* advocates for (an anti-caste) social egalitarianism, with its presence in the Banaras region making it readily available. As such, Christianity offers a departure from Brahminism. But this goes even further as the Christianity practiced by Khrist Bhaktas is heavily influenced by *bhakti* traditions. This flexibility, San Chirico argues is enabled by ‘inculturation’ – the “Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council’s stated commitment to share its message in ways corresponding with the local culture” (p. 10). This *bhakti*-fication of Christianity aligns itself with the Dalit cause even more, as it, like other *bhakti* traditions, produces its followers in terms of a ‘public’, a self-aware group that seeks the democratisation and popularisation of religious practices and the relaxation of caste hierarchies. It is in this regard that Khrist Bhaktas are an Indic, in-between religious group, their goals and practices aligning with Hindu *bhakti*, even as their deity and governing institution are that of the Catholic Church.

Chapter 3, *Ādi Kahāniyān (Origin Stories): A History in the Telling* sets out to demonstrate the beginning of the Khrist Bhakta movement and how it is rooted “in activities of the IMS priests and seminarians, beginning in the 1970s, coupled with the advent of the Catholic Charismatic movement in the region in the early 1990s” (p. 84). Such activities, held among low-caste Hindus living in the area’s villages blended different elements: social (offers of financial help in the form of micro-loans), Christian (prayer and hymn singing), and Hindu (especially performance of *aarti* and the distribution of *prasad*). This work led to an increasing number of villagers getting involved in the Ashram regularly in a process characterized by a rather common pattern: a village person struggles with health problems, alcoholism, and family strife; his family encounters an IMS worker who offers assistance and invites them to attend prayer meetings at the Matra Dham Ashram. There, the village person’s family members begin to pray and hear readings from the Bible. Eventually, a dramatic turnaround takes place in their lives, marked by recovery, reconciliation, business success, and improved social standing for the family. This compels them to share their story and spread the word about the transformative power of the Ashram, which encourages additional villagers to join in as well. According to some accounts, a significant community breakthrough took place during a convention in 1993, in which Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians also participated. This brought hundreds of needy villagers to the convention. Seeking healing and guidance, they flocked to the Matra Dham Ashram, marking the birth of the Khrist Bhakta as a movement.

In chapter 4, *An Encounter with the Light of Truth*, we meet Satya Prakash, who is identified by several devotees as ‘the first Khrist Bhakta’. His personal story in the form of an elaborate interview very much resembles the pattern presented above. Only Satya Prakash is a bit different since he eventually chose to be baptized. This turns him into what he and others call a *mool vishvaasi* (a root believer), which amount to about 10% of all Khrist Bhaktas. Several elements are highlighted in Prakash’s narrative like the hybrid language he employs, speaking, for example, about *paap* and *punya*, sin and merit that is characteristic of what San Chirico calls the Hindu “karma language” (p. 109). The modelling of his life narrative is based on the scriptural trope of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), of a sinful son who comes to his senses and makes his way back to the father. The defining event which made Prakash decide to be baptized entailed a proof or *pramaan* that he asked for and got, of the existence of the Lord, though such demands are usually discouraged and criticized within Christian contexts. Another element is the extent of exclusivity that Prakash grants Yesu *masih* and the following chapters tilt towards arguing that this exclusivity could constitute a defining factor for Khrist Bhaktas. Underlying this elaborate discussion with and about Prakash is the question of his identity. Is he indeed, and if so in what sense, the ‘first Khrist Bhakta’? Or maybe he has gone even further and turned into a real Catholic? Or could it be that in some ways he still remains a Hindu? As per the general stance of the book, while these questions are elaborately explored, the answer is left to the reader to decide.

Chapter 5, *The Substance of Things Hoped For: Viśvās in the Kali Yuga and a Worldview in the Making*, continues to intimately present readers with the biographies of specific Khrist Bhaktas. This time we meet Malini, a late middle-aged devotee, “a self-effacing force of nature who, as an *aguā*, or ‘animator,’ can be found traversing the area to minister to fellow bhaktas and to any others who will listen” (p. 132). From Malini, we learn a bit of ‘Yesulogy’, of how Jesus is perceived in terms that are both Christian (Son of God, Savior) and Hindu (*avatar*, *muktidaata*). We learn about Malini’s and the preference of others to talk of their faith in terms of *vishvaas* or belief, a term that is often used in non-religious contexts, in contrast to *shraddha*, which is closely related to Hindu devotionalism. Malini sees herself as the lord’s *dasi* (slave) and that much of the vocabulary and sentiment that underlies her relationship with Yesu is deeply influenced by Gaudiya Vaishnava theology. Malini too, thus, emerges as an in-between figure – “her devotion is ‘Christian’ in the sense of absolute devotion to Yesu, but in her sensibility, in her manner of understanding how a deity communicates to a devotee, and how one then responds in return, she is, well, Hindu” (p. 132).

Chapter 6, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen (Through the Things That Are): Kindling Presence, an ‘Abundant Place,’ and the Stuff of Salvation*, attends “to the embodiment and materiality of developing Khrist Bhakti in Banaras” (p. 179). Thus, for example, we learn how women press their heads to the cross during circulations performed on all the Fridays of Lent, as a way of merging with Christ’s body (an excellent interpretation which is regrettably offered only in a footnote instead of in the text itself). In another example, we realize how pervasive the practice of call and response is, wherein participants are requested to close their eyes and repeat words uttered by particular Khrist Bhaktas, priests, or nuns, in the hope of inducing inner transformation. The chapter is rich with detail and related background discussions, but its main argument is harder to identify. What I take to be the main point of chapter 6 is that while, on the one hand, the practices surveyed are not essentially different from those of Hindu *bhakti*, the interpretational framework offered to devotees for giving meaning to these experiences is identifiably Christian. San Chirico draws on Tanya Luhrmann’s concept of ‘faith framing’, which in this context means the “taking people’s experiences and interpreting them through a particular Christian matrix of interpretation” (p. 264). This is exactly what seems to happen during religious performances in the Matra Dham Ashram, namely an attempt to reframe *bhakti*-related experiences in the hope of transforming participants and “of creating a

special kind of self, which... given the centrality of the Bible to this space,” San Chirico calls “a biblical subject” (p. 190).

Chapter 7, *The Shape of Things to Come: Imprudent Prognostications on Khrist Bhakta and Indian Catholic Futures*, explores the possible futures of Khrist Bhaktas. Given the in-between nature of the community, and the religious as well as socio-political forces working around and through them, as well as diverse other available options, the road ahead remains unclear. San Chirico analyses these different available paths, weighing each from multiple perspectives, and making each sound quite plausible, until we move on to the next one, which replaces it. Here too, things remain open, and only the future will reveal the road that is eventually taken.

The conclusion wraps up the book by returning to its core question, namely, where exactly, on the spectrum between Christianity and Hinduism, do Khrist Bhaktas stand. San Chirico reveals what should become clear to readers by now, that Khrist Bhaktas “do not fit so easily into religious categories as long as we see those categories as necessarily mutually exclusive, that the categories are themselves unstable and often unrepresentative on the ground, and that this community, as anomalous, provides us interesting vantages through which we might see in new, different, and differing ways” (p. 261).

Throughout the book, San Chirico is candid and thoughtful in his writing, openly sharing his own deliberations and the challenges he faced during his research, both practical and intellectual. He provides ample space to specific individuals, such as Malini, Satya Prakash, and Anil Dev, to speak for themselves, often quoting long conversations, and allowing readers to form their own thoughts before delving into his side of the analysis. However, it was also on this front that I found myself wishing for more. The book, I felt, could have benefited from presenting additional voices, particularly those of other ‘lay’ Khrist Bhaktas, even if briefly and only on specific topics. For instance, in chapter 3, where the common pattern underlying the narratives of newly joined members during the emergence of the community is discussed, there is a dearth in the voices of those members that had actually joined during that period. While in the next chapter, we get an elaborate account of Satya Prakash, ‘the first Khrist Bhakta’, we hear mostly from the Ashram’s fathers and nuns. Hearing additional testimonies, even if brief, and the nuances accompanying them, could have shed more light on how things looked from the perspective of villagers. Another example is in chapter 6, where we learn about the women who touch their heads to the cross in *bhakti*-like behaviour. It would have been insightful to know what these women actually think about the new statue of Mary and how they explain why worshipping her was so important to them. More generally, I would have been interested in hearing a range of answers to questions like “Is Yesu different from Hindu gods?” “If so, how?” and quite directly, even if somewhat unfairly, “are you a Hindu or a Christian?” While the book does a great job in providing in-depth accounts of several individuals, I would have liked to get a better sense of the ‘general view’ on certain topics.

Another particular issue that could have been explored further relates to a central characteristic of the embodied performance that is encouraged at the Ashram. San Chirico repeatedly mentions that the audience is directed to close their eyes in contemplation. This stands in stark contrast to a key aspect of Hindu worship, especially *bhakti*, which encompasses the act of *darshan*. The reciprocal gaze between deity and devotees lies at the heart of Hindu worship and is, therefore, a sort of antithesis to what is encouraged here. Could this represent another defining issue that distinguishes Christianity from Hindu *bhakti*, akin to the matter of divine exclusivity? I found myself pondering whether the call to redirect the religious gaze from the external world to the internal one, might carry more significance and weight than San Chirico acknowledges. This call appears to promote not just a reframing of an embodied performative experience but also an attempt to forge an entirely new type of

experience—one that depends more on the cultivation of the imagination than on the honing of the senses. What do practitioners themselves think about this? Do they perceive this practice as exceptional? Do they ascribe any special meaning to it? I am confident San Chirico would have many insightful comments on this matter, and I wish he had addressed it more explicitly in his book. However, considering the broad scope of the book, it is inevitable that some topics receive lesser attention than others. Nonetheless, San Chirico does an excellent job in addressing many of these topics. I would end by saying that this book would be of interest to those interested in both Hinduism and Christianity, in popular religion, and in the relations between practice and theology, socio-politics of religion, and, of course, inter-religious encounters, South Asian religions, and the History of religion in India.