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# 2000-2002 Book Awards

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## 2000-2002 BOOK AWARDS

**EVERY** three years, the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies honors a recent work in the field with the Society's book award. This year, at the Annual Meeting of The American Academy of Religion, the Society honored Corinne Dempsey's *Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India* (Oxford 2001). Along with Dempsey's work, three of the finalists for this year's award are reviewed below: Francis X Clooney's *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford, 2001), Thomas Forsthoefel's *Knowing Beyond Knowledge* (Ashgate, 2002), and Peter van der Veer's *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, 2001). What is so exciting about these four books is that they reveal the remarkable breadth and depth of the field. Each book not only introduces new material with which to think about the project(s) of Hindu-Christian studies, but also develops creative new methods for thinking about (and with) Christianity and Christians, and Hinduism and Hindus in a variety of disciplinary contexts including anthropology, history, theology, philosophy of religions, and religious studies. This diversity in the disciplinary contexts in which Hindu-Christian studies is now pursued, and the very high quality of work in the field suggests that like the books reviewed here future projects will continue to challenge our understanding of Hindu-Christian studies while also making remarkable and important contributions to it.

***Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India.***  
Corinne G. Dempsey, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, xiii + 213 pp.  
[Reviewed by Paul Younger]

Reading *Kerala Christian Sainthood* is like lingering over an exquisite piece of tapestry in the front hall of a Hindu/Christian studies museum. The tapestry is hung in the front hall – and one needs to read this book – because the community about which it is written is the largest and oldest community of Christians in India. One lingers over the tapestry – and rereads the entire book a couple of times – because the author over and over again picks up a thread of the central story and takes it off to the side and weaves a fascinating discussion of orientalism, feminism, institutional vs. local (popular?) religion, canonization politics, or ethnography. When the side stories start to fascinate you as much as the central story, you start to realize that the artist really has you at her mercy. It is almost as if the artistry and scholarly care the author shows has won her the right to continue to pull out threads and expand this tapestry indefinitely, but the excess never happens. One comes away from the tapestry aware of the artistry of the author, but also newly aware that there are many perspectives that are a necessary part of understanding the religious life of these people.

The Syrian Christian community of Kerala traces its origin to the ministry of the Apostle Thomas in the First Century of the Common Era. Thomas is said to have preached to the learned Brahmans, and founded seven churches in what appear to be the major commercial cities of the day. By the Fourth Century somewhat better historical records describe how Thomas of Cana established a church structure linked with the Chaldean Orthodox Church based in eastern Syria or modern Iraq. By the Ninth Century the local king honored both the Jewish and Christian communities and presented them with copper plates (which are still cherished) granting them a long list

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of special privileges. Over the next seven centuries this community must have made up almost half of the population in some of the districts of central Kerala, and while they continued to be concentrated in the commercial centers there is also evidence that they continued their contacts with Brahmans and kings and in some cases served in a military capacity and were closely associated with the Hindu military caste or the Nairs.

When the Portuguese arrived in the Sixteenth Century this very local community (still labeled "Syrian") was faced with a crisis in determining its ecclesiastical affiliation. The Portuguese Roman Catholic officials received permission from the Vatican to allow the Syrian liturgy to be used within a Roman Catholic context, but some of the Portuguese archbishop's initiatives were not appreciated by the local community. Nevertheless a majority of the community settled into being the Syrian-Malabar Church within the Roman Catholic fold, while others sought in a variety of ways to preserve their eastern Orthodox identity, and some of them have linked themselves with bishops in Baghdad and Damascus while others have continued under local autonomous bishops.

Dempsey presents this complex history in a short introduction, because she wants to get on with ethnographic explorations of what the religious life of these people is like today. Her central thread is "sainthood" because that gives her an opportunity to ask people all sorts of questions about their religious life, and the great variety of cultural vocabularies they use to talk about it without anyone trying to build a system or define a set of boundaries. Her abhorrence of systems and boundaries is eventually discussed as clearly and honestly as everything else, but readers who have a theory in the back of their head about how Hinduism and Christianity should interact might find it useful to put it aside when these conversations in Kerala begin.

The first extended conversation is about "foreignness". This thread of conversation starts as many do with an odd visit Dempsey made with a couple of local nuns to the legendary Kurisumala monastery at the very top of the Kerala mountain range. (This reviewer, like thousands of other pilgrim visitors, also made the climb up those hairpin turns because the founder of the monastery, although a Belgian priest, has lived there now for almost fifty years, and with a group of local monks has developed a liturgical form which is deeply indebted to both Syrian and Hindu worship traditions.) Dempsey told the revered monk that she was studying the cult surrounding the deceased nun, Alphonsa, who is a candidate for sainthood. He replied (I trust with a twinkle in his eye) "I wish you lots of luck finding anything Indian about her devotion—it's been entirely Romanized." Suddenly the foreignness issue was everywhere, as the foreign ethnographer tried to measure the (long suppressed) foreignness of the monk, and his argument that the cult of sainthood in question was a foreign religious phenomenon. The heroic role in this little anecdote was reserved for the elderly Indian nun present who simply shrugged and laughed at the pretension of these foreigners who presumed they could tell what a local cult owed to similar foreign phenomena.

This thread is soon embedded in a careful discussion of Said's Orientalism and the way his early analysis of the colonial era's creation of the Other had failed to take into account the ways in which the colonized might be able to give themselves agency by twisting the orientalist language around. Dempsey presents us with all sorts of voices within the Alphonsa cult which do precisely that as they use Roman Catholic language to show that the austere life and suffering of the "Indian" Alphonsa stand up against the materialism of the "Western" Other. Dempsey is tempted to see this as something like James Scott's idea that marginalized communities sometimes use "hidden transcripts" to challenge the

dominant culture, but ends up preferring to see the situation in Homi Babha's language as an example of the richly ambivalent language of "hybridity".

Having shown that "Alphonsa acts as antidote to 'the West' by representing Kerala Christian inversions of orientalist categories," Dempsey goes on to place the "foreignness" issue on another level by launching into a discussion of the long-established Saint George cult which is deeply embedded in the wider culture of Kerala. Elements of this cult could almost certainly be traced to the Syriac *The Acts of St. George* and to the patron saint role St. George played in both Portugal and Britain, but to many people in Kerala the cult seems totally indigenous and is popular with a great variety of Christians and many Hindus. Here too Dempsey would have liked to find people who could explain how there was cultural choice and a sense of agency in the way this powerful cult makes use of cultural symbols with foreign links. In this case, however, the cult tradition seems to be an ancient one, and may never have had very close ties with church leadership or with elite and explicit forms of cultural leadership. The functionalist argument she often hears is that a saint who slays snakes is a very welcome presence in the snake-infested environment of Kerala, and the structuralist argument offered by a retired professor that St. George is very much like the action-oriented Hindu deities who fight off evil in many forms, do little but push aside Dempsey's question about the "foreignness" of this cult. In the end the St. George cult becomes the bedrock example of a hybridity that goes back for many centuries. "The many-layered antics of Kerala's St. George cult over the centuries express the fact that these Indian Christians have, in their own way, held their ground against the same colonial and postcolonial 'others' as have their Hindu neighbors."

Having finally put aside the issue of "foreignness", Dempsey turns her attention to the ways in which religious issues are

discussed within Kerala. With an abundance of examples she quickly shows that it is considered socially correct for different religious communities to participate in one another's religious rituals. Both Hindu temple festivals and Christian church festivals often require that a leading family from the other religious community perform some symbolic act before the festival may begin or before a new church or temple may be built. These relations are usually described by "Sibling Stories" in which the saint of the church and the deity in the neighboring temple are described as brother and sister, sister and sister, or brother and brother, with stories detailing their friendship and their rivalry.

Within this interlocking institutional structure, individuals have both cultural and religious choices to make as they seek help with their life or what Dempsey calls their "calamity management". Saints are not primarily spiritual models to emulate, but sources of power one can appeal to in difficulty. Dempsey is not willing to jump to the conclusion that this pattern of worship should be interpreted as a borrowing from Hinduism, and presents evidence that something like it is found in many other parts of the Roman Catholic world as a "local" religious practice, even though it is usually not approved of by the institutional church.

In a final detailed examination of Alphonsa's cult Dempsey brings all these threads together. As a simple Clarist nun who spent much of her brief life (1910-1946) ill and in bed this Indian female seemed to have little chance of being a candidate for sainthood when she died. The schoolchildren who adored her were sure that her gravesite would help them manage the "calamities" of their life, and it was not long before adults got similar results. In spite of the severe Clarist habit in which her image is clothed and the European color of her skin, the stories of her healing power center on a Muslim boy, and an important medium who invokes her presence is a

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Hindu teenaged girl. Because the religious expectations and affiliations in the cult of Alphonsa are so clearly "Indian," it was a bit of a surprise in 1986 when the Pope visited Kerala and raised her status on the long road to possible canonization as a saint. As they have for centuries the Syrian Christians of Kerala made good use of this foreign contact, but the cult of Alphonsa remained a Syrian Christian religious phenomenon, deeply embedded in Kerala culture and quite independent of the canonization process.

***Hindu God, Christian God. How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions.*** Francis X. Clooney. Oxford University Press, 2001, viii + 209 pp. [Reviewed by Bradley Malkovsky; see the longer review of this book in *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin* 15, 2002, pp. 55-58.]

Here one of the leading voices in the Hindu-Christian theological encounter, a professor at Boston College, shows the many ways Hindus and Christians past and present have employed reason in articulating the intelligibility and plausibility of their own doctrinal positions while seeking to refute alternative views as unreasonable. In doing this Clooney finds enough similarity in the way reason is used across religious boundaries for him to advocate not only serious theological conversation between Hindus and Christians but even mutual intellectual accountability. The author, a Roman Catholic, states, "I do not presuppose that the Christian versions of positions considered here are superior to the Hindu alternatives. Other theologians may wish to make the case for a judgement of that sort, but they will first have to join an interreligious, comparative, dialogical, and confessional conversation in which some of their peers, to whom they are answerable, are Hindu." (p. 28) The methodological outcome will be a constructive theology, one that is faithful to its home tradition but at the same time widened, deepened and

challenged through the reasoned critique and enrichment offered by the other while striving to become a theology more comprehensible to the outsider in its articulations.

After arguing in chapter one the need to broaden Christian theological reflection to include the work of those outside one's own tradition, Clooney spends the next four chapters in the heart of his book examining how Hindus and Christians and even some Buddhists have addressed central theological and philosophical issues through reasoned argument. In taking up such major themes as the cosmological argument for God's existence, the nature and activity of God, the possibilities of divine embodiment, and the relation of reason to revelation, Clooney retrieves the thought of an impressively wide array of thinkers. He places Naiyayikas, Saiva Siddhantins, Mimamsakas and Vedantins of various stripes in conversation with the most influential modern Christian theologians. Everyone's voice is important, their position well reasoned and worthy of a hearing. And so the author concludes in his final chapter (six) that in today's new pluralistic situation we all have everything to gain by overcoming attitudes of superiority and condescension and opening ourselves to others. One learns to rethink an initial position in light of the reasoned insights of others. This does not mean, as Clooney points out, that reason will easily sway one to shift theological allegiances or to negate one's dearly held convictions about deity or divine activity. But it does mean that we must take seriously the truth claims of others when reflecting on the great mysteries of our own faith.

Clooney's book is the definitive study on the role of reason in the Hindu-Christian doctrinal encounter. It also helps to overcome simplistic and sweeping assessments of what "Hinduism" is by unveiling the richness and complexities of Hindu thought. It is therefore indispensable reading for those interested in method,

history of religions and comparative theology.

***Knowing Beyond Knowledge.*** Thomas A. Forsthoefel. Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002, xi + 199 pp. [Reviewed by Parimal G. Patil]

Thomas Forsthoefel's *Knowing Beyond Knowledge* is, in many ways, an intellectual descendent of the "Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions" conference series that took place at the University of Chicago Divinity School from 1986-1992. The nine international conferences in this series brought together philosophers, theologians, historians of religion, anthropologists, and area specialists to try to define and practice a properly comparative approach to the Philosophy of Religions. The work that has since been published by SUNY press in the "Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions" series, points to the variety of ways in which this project has been interpreted. Forsthoefel's work is yet another interpretation of this project, and a welcome one at that.

*Knowing Beyond Knowledge* is concerned with the epistemic value of religious experiences and the extent to which "external" socio-cultural and doxastic factors affect the "internal" cognitive content and epistemic status of such experiences. Forsthoefel approaches this issue by using conceptual resources from Anglo-American epistemology -specifically the religious epistemologies of Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, two contemporary Christian philosophers- to interpret and understand the epistemology of experience in the work of "classical" Advaita Vedantins such as Sankara (8<sup>th</sup> CE) [Ch. 2] and his successors Suresvara (9<sup>th</sup> CE) and Padmapada (9<sup>th</sup> CE) [Ch. 3]; a contemporary Advaitin, Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) [Ch. 4]; and a Visistadvaitin, Ramanuja (11<sup>th</sup> CE) [Ch. 5]. In addition to discussing the work of these Hindu teachers, Forsthoefel situates their work, and his own

questions, in the history of scholarship on religious experience [Ch. 1], and very interestingly also uses his analysis to discuss contemporary socio-cultural aspects of Vedanta [Ch. 5, and throughout].

Forsthoefel argues that although external "mechanisms" such as text, tradition, and teaching shape both Advaita and Visistadvaita religious experiences, the extent to which they do so is very different. According to Forsthoefel, in Visistadvaita, an external "network of exegetical, ritual, and institutional practices," along with "the entire constellation of Vaisnava *sadhana* (religious practices), including all the intellectual, affective, and conative training implied by *bhakti* (devotion to God)," constitute the specific causal conditions that make a specifically Vaisnava experience of God possible. The specificity of the external doxastic practices (and nature of the metaphysics that supports them) is understood by Forsthoefel to transfer, at least in part, to the epistemic value of the experience produced by them. On the basis of this specificity, Forsthoefel argues that the "externalist epistemology of (Visistadvaita) religious experience renders it local and less universalist; this tradition is decisively indexed to Tamil culture and does not migrate well as a universalist movement. This explains, in part, why few Westerners who are not scholars are drawn to it as part of their 'spiritual quest' (177)". As Forsthoefel sees it, the externalism of Vaisnava religious epistemology ties it to a relatively local set of doxastic practices and institutions and accounts both for the specificity of the "saving experience" that is shaped by it and for the localism of Visistadvaita communities. According to Forsthoefel, it is therefore only relative to such local doxastic communities that beliefs based on such experiences could have *prima facie* justification (within the epistemological framework that he favors).

Forsthoefel also claims that unlike in Visistadvaita, in Advaita, it is "internalism" that is dominant. In classical Advaita, for

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example, Forsthoefel argues that the metaphysics of non-duality, the saving experience which is/of *Brahman*, and the importance of introspection, strongly suggest that religious experiences are theoretically and primarily supported by an "internalist epistemology." The non-dual metaphysics that makes such experiences possible and the ways in which the content of such experiences is accessed are, in an important sense, internal to the subject. Forsthoefel notes, however, that as in Visistadvaita, an "interwoven (and external) process of text, tradition and teacher" still "locks early Advaita into its local context," and thus limits the extent to which Advaita religious experiences, and their epistemic status, can be generalized. There is, in Forsthoefel's view, a tension between the theoretical, philosophical internalism of classical Advaita and its practical, doxastic externalism. On the basis of this, Forsthoefel argues against the Neo-Hindu assertion that Sankara's Advaita can be the basis for a universalist religious program. In contrast to classical Advaita, however, Forsthoefel argues that the contemporary Advaita of Ramana Maharsi is "decisively internalist and (therefore) universalist." Ramana Maharsi's radical non-dual metaphysics -that there is nothing but the Self- and his view that the realization of the Self's innate freedom can only be accessed by oneself, through introspection, transcends, according to Forsthoefel, the complex of text, tradition, and teacher that serves to restrict and particularize classical Advaita. According to Forsthoefel, by decontextualizing and "relativizing" traditional religious practices and institutions, Ramana Maharsi was able to create a "form of Advaita that transcends the social and cultural settings of South Asia." From this analysis, Forsthoefel concludes that there is very strong link between internalism and universalism and, more specifically, that since Ramana Maharsi's Advaita is less tied to local doxastic communities than classical

Advaita, it can better support a religious program in which the content and epistemic status of religious experiences are defined without reference to a doxastic community that is restricted by either geography, demographics, or religious tradition.

Readers of this journal may be surprised to discover that a book such as Forsthoefel's is considered to be a work in Hindu-Christian studies, particularly since "Christianity" does not appear to be present in it. In choosing to read Hindu texts in terms of concepts that were developed by Christian philosophers to justify specifically Christian beliefs, and by then modifying those concepts in light of Hindu texts, Forsthoefel's work serves as an example of a kind of reflective, inter-religious, and comparative reading that should be considered a proper part of Hindu-Christian studies. In *Knowing Beyond Knowledge*, the work of contemporary Christian philosophers is brought into conversation with that of Hindu philosophers of religion and theologians, not only to illuminate both but also to add to our understanding of a shared Hindu-Christian concern with the epistemology of experience. Such a "broad comparison" (i.e., a comparison that is not based on historical or traditional connections) between what is Christian and what is Hindu is based on an identified similarity of concern, and is used by Forsthoefel for "narrow comparisons" between various Hindu theologies. The results of these narrow comparisons are then used to argue for philosophical positions that Forsthoefel thinks are binding on both Christian and Hindu tradition e.g., the idea that epistemic internalism supports universalism, that metaphysics and epistemology of religious experience cannot be separated, and that beliefs formed on the basis of religious experiences can be *prima facie* justified and therefore have epistemic value.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Forsthoefel's work is his commitment to consistently drawing out both the cognitive

and social implications of the epistemology of religious experience and his sustained effort at trying to relate the two. In Forsthoefel's work, the philosophy of religions, intellectual history, and social history work to illuminate each other, thus providing a compelling method for thinking about Hindu-Christian studies and taking it into the future.

***Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain.*** Peter van der Veer. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, x + 205 pp. [Reviewed by Leslie C. Orr]

In this book, Peter van der Veer's aim is to show "that religion has been crucial in the formation of national identity not only in India but also in supposedly secular and modern Britain" (p. 3). He seeks to offer "alternative ways to look at familiar problems and material" (p. 13) by tracing parallels and networks of interaction between the forms and roles of Christianity and Hinduism as these emerged within the imperial framework of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His effort is to write an "interactional history" - going beyond "the complacency of national histories" (p. 11), or "global history" with its economic focus, or comparative efforts in which civilizations are treated as discrete and essentialized entities, or views of colonialism which posit the unidirectional impact of colonizer on colonized.

In his first chapter, van der Veer invites us to reconsider the concept of secularization, demonstrating that the credit for the creation of a public sphere in which liberal, reformist ideas could be debated in the emerging nation-state should not be attributed to the state itself or to the Enlightenment values of science and reason, but rather to newly formed religious groups in Britain, beginning in the late eighteenth century, the evangelical and missionary societies, and in India, some decades later, the Hindu religious organizations which

sought to counter the influence of Christian missions and of a colonial state perceived as Christian. In Chapter 2, "The Moral State," van der Veer shows how such religious groups and those that emerged later in the nineteenth century in both Britain and India employed a religious discourse and responded to the religious "other" in creating a nationalist consciousness that was closely linked to notions of moral mission and religious universalism. The third chapter examines the parallels and interchanges among Western secularists, spiritualists, and Theosophists, on the one hand, and members of the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Ramakrishna Mission, on the other, who shared not only an anti-Christian vision, but a commitment to scientific rationality and social activism. Chapter 4 explores the role of religion in the construction of masculinity in the imperial context, with the emergence of "muscular Christianity" in Britain and a parallel shaping of body and character through newly emerging Hindu institutions and practices. In the fifth chapter, van der Veer describes the use of Orientalist methods by Indian scholars to produce a national heritage based on Hindu texts, in the production of critical editions of the Epics and in the project of seeking archaeological evidence to establish their historical facticity. The last chapter is an examination of the deployment of race science by British administrators and Hindu nationalists, among others, in the construction of the concepts of caste, moral character, and Aryan identity.

Van der Veer lays out his arguments and evidence clearly and methodically. He admits that the materials he has brought together have a fragmentary character, but in fact the book has considerable coherence, and the juxtaposition of chapters on various themes, as well as the shuttling back and forth between India and Britain, itself builds up a compelling case. The author's tone is admirably moderate, as he engages fairly and interestingly with the ideas of other

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scholars, and avoids judgmental characterizations of either Hindu actors in his interactional history or the too-easy Orientalist, missionary and colonial targets (he may be forgiven, I think, for describing Madame Blavatsky's writing as "almost unreadable mythologizing" - p.143). Van der Veer is persuasive in his argument that the period he surveys is one in which profound shifts occurred in the location and significance of religion in both India and Britain. This is not only of historical interest, but is of major importance to our understanding of how the study of comparative religion - and the very definition of religion - took shape in the course of this same period. He skillfully shows both the continuities with religious and political realities of earlier times in India and Britain as well as the continuing relevance of this history to the post-colonial

context - although, inexplicably, he fails to recognize the radical historical revisionism of recent times when he claims in his discussion of Aryan origins that "this story of invasion and racial history is fully accepted in India still today" (p. 142). Van der Veer does us a great service in showing the centrality of religion in the history of encounter between Britain and India. If this is not a novel notion for those who have studied the colonial period in India, van der Veer certainly makes an original and substantial contribution by highlighting the significance of Christianity for Britain's emergent national and imperial identity and by showing the intimate connections between the religious dynamics of Britain and India.