



January 1996

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### Recommended Citation

Scott, David C. (1996) "Forest and Village: Popular Hindu-Christian Encounter," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 9, Article 11.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1133>

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# Forest and Village: Popular Hindu-Christian Encounter

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THE REALIZATION THAT what is commonly spoken of as Hinduism is in reality an elite Brahmanical religion is so ubiquitous that there is no need to argue the point here. Similarly, Christianity has generally been understood in terms of classical Western theological and philosophical thought. This being the case, it is hardly surprising that until relatively recently what has been understood as the encounter and interaction of Christianity and Hinduism has been, in fact, an encounter and interaction of what we might speak of as the elite great traditions in both religious systems. Yet the fact remains that in India approximately 75-80% of the Christian community do not come from the high caste or elite stratum of Indian society. Indeed, many of us have for some time now been astounded by the extent to which attempts to document and understand the encounter and interaction of Christianity with Hinduism in India, including the *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin*, have concentrated almost exclusively on the interaction of the classical theological and philosophical elements of the Christian tradition with similar elements of the Hindu tradition.<sup>1</sup> Hence this all too brief review of some efforts to document and understand the encounter and interaction of Christian and Hindu popular religiosity<sup>2</sup> in India. Further, my concern is to urge more frequent and significant attention to the ubiquitous local popular contexts and expressions of Hindu-Christian encounter and interaction.

For the purpose of this review, the

material dealing with efforts to document and understand the encounter and interaction of Christian and Hindu popular religiosity in India may conveniently be divided into two clusters – studies whose basic concern is the life and mission of the Church in its encounter with its environment, and those whose perspectives are those of the social sciences, especially social anthropology.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, the two clusters exemplify two different perspectives on “local culture”, which probably are not really distinct alternatives.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, a culture which is enduring, coherent, and identifiably non-Christian is perceived as incorporating and shaping mission Christianity, submerging Christian theological and social distinctiveness into a shared popular religious culture. On the other hand, the very idea of a separate and coherent local culture is rejected in favour of a view of culture as a series of processes that construct, dismantle, and reconstruct cultural materials. For example, Protestant fundamentalism in Madras incorporates local and North American elements into an urban class culture of resistance in relation to the middle-class dominated church establishment.<sup>5</sup>

Though there are several studies which could be included in cluster one,<sup>6</sup> time and space limitations permit an all too brief review of only two books which report rather extensive investigations. The first, *Church and Shrine: Intermingling Patterns of Culture in the Life of Some Christian Groups in South India*<sup>7</sup> is the work of a

missionary bishop, Carl G. Diehl, whose knowledge of South India is impressive.<sup>8</sup> The second is a study of *Village Christians and Hindu Culture*<sup>9</sup> by P. Y. Luke, an Indian Christian, at home in the geographical and cultural territory of the study, and John B. Carman, whose personal experience in India and scholarly expertise need no introduction here.

Basically, both studies have as their primary objective an understanding of "the interrelatedness of a church and its environment in a 'missionary situation'". The perspective of these studies is determined, therefore, by a search for signs of life and growth among the Christian communities investigated. Such signs were sought in the response of village Christians "to the pressures of their (traditional) environment and to the (Christian) traditions which they have both inherited and in one way or another made their own". The concern is with "features in their mode of living that mark them off as Christians". Even if village Christians continue to be "integrated in various forms of social strata and organizations, at times or in certain aspects they ought to stand out separately". If not, there is genuine apprehension about "the continued existence or integrity of the Church". Both studies suggest remedies, based on theological reflection, for situations deemed unacceptable from the Church's point of view.

Very briefly but I hope not inadequately stated, the studies found that in spite of the social separation in the larger village context, Christians, who generally belong to outcaste groups,<sup>10</sup> had a good deal of interaction with villagers of other castes. Their distinctiveness was not clearly evident; what they were as Christians appeared closely linked to who they were as participants in village society. Like other distinctive groups in the village, Christian community existence had two sides: one separate and distinctive; and the other at one with the rest of the village. Their existence as Christians involved what the authors

recognized both "as an expression of Christian faith" and of what appeared to the investigators a continuation of traditional village religious culture.<sup>11</sup>

The reasons given by Christian informants for popular Hindu customs being found among Christians may be arranged in three groups. First, there was the influence of predominantly Hindu surroundings, including the weight of kinship and friendship. Not only is it difficult for adult converts to change their customs, especially in times of crisis, the unity of family and village are important considerations for many. Largely, this was due to the Christians' thorough involvement in the inter-caste society of the village and the inter-village community within a particular caste. "There is not a single Christian in these villages who does not have many Hindu blood relations and 'in-laws' in nearby villages." (Diehl, p.161) The second had to do with personal desires - to enjoy good food and sweets, and generally participate in the joy and merriment of Hindu festivals. A number of Christians found Hindu ceremonies efficacious in promoting personal and family well being. The third general reason was perceived as a lack of education, in other words, an inability to read the Bible and a lack of "true knowledge that they are a people set apart and chosen by the Holy God", as one local informant put it to Diehl (p.161). "The teachers and pastors who have been appointed to look after the congregations do not do it properly and so Christians take part in the customs of the Hindus."

Nevertheless from the authors' perspective significantly, the *object* of the average Christian's belief seems to have been more distinctive than his/her conduct.

... the Lord Jesus is accepted by villagers in general as being one of many "swamis" and no distinction in quality is made between "Yesuswami" and any of the other "swamis", including the Muslim saints. Jesus is one among many such powerful

"lords". Yet even the "average" Christian, whose ideas about the Christian God are very vague and considerably influenced by Hindu beliefs, feels that through his membership in the Christian community he is especially related to this particular Swami, Jesus Christ, and many Christians feel that their "Lord", above the village goddesses and yet closer at hand than the vague supreme deity Narayana, is a powerful helper in time of trouble and a source of blessing. Neither the village Christian nor his non-Christian neighbours see much that is "distinctive" in his personal Christian name, but both of them recognize a very real and distinctive power in "the name of Jesus". (Luke & Carman, p.202)

Therefore, the authors conclude, because Christians have such a "low wall of protective Christian 'culture'" around them, Hindu influence easily penetrates the Christian community, but the same absence of a protective wall makes it relatively easy for Christian influences to filter through to the others. Luke and Carman (p.236ff) are prone to enquire "whether this is not more than a sociological fact, whether it is not an indication of the way God deals with His Church". Indeed, the authors are convinced that the challenges of the village Christians' environment likewise combine a real threat to the continued existence or integrity of the Church with a magnificent opportunity for a creative and faithful response.

Our second cluster of studies is constituted of articles whose basic perspective is primarily that of the social sciences. Again, constraints on space and time force me to limit my consideration,<sup>12</sup> and so I make a somewhat arbitrary choice of articles by the social anthropologist David Mosse, whose experience in and knowledge of India are considerable.<sup>13</sup>

While some recent studies of Christianity in South Asia emphasize the persistence of local tradition, others focus on its transformation by global processes.<sup>14</sup>

Mosse's work is based on the general premise that "local Christian traditions exist at points of intersection between 'local' cultures and the wider religious and political forces of 'global' Christianity" ("Catholic Saints", p.301). As in the earlier studies cited above, Mosse also discerns the dual world of village Christians. He perceives it, however, as a dual moral world in which village Christians have constantly to reconcile the demands of a universal Christian faith with the continuing demands of caste, kinship, and the management of impurity and misfortune. Indeed, in his studies, Mosse discovered a variety of Christian cults to saints and the dead, cults to Hindu deities, and a range of specialists – exorcists, astrologers – both Christian and Hindu who offer services for the management of misfortune.

Significantly, it is in this area of "pragmatically oriented" religious action, centring on the saints, rather than the transcendent "salvation oriented" religious action, centring on the priest and the sacraments of the Church, that Mosse finds the continuities between popular Catholic and Hindu conceptions to be strongest.<sup>15</sup> He indicates contrasting contexts in which, on the one hand, Hindu and Christian divinity are hierarchically incorporated (along the model of caste society), and on the other where Christianity excludes and opposes that of Hinduism. Parallel contrasts exist between contexts in which, on the one hand social life is ordered by hierarchical relations of caste, and on the other those where caste is abandoned, for example at a Christian shrine; or between the observance of pollution taboos in relation to birth, death, or menses on the one hand, and their abandonment within the church on the other; or between the observation of astrological impediments in, for example, determining appropriate days and times for weddings or journeys, and the ignoring of all such impediments on Christian holy days which provide an overriding auspiciousness for weddings, journeys, etc.

Mosse's analysis is, then, that the popular religious beliefs and practices of Christians, including non-Christian elements such as interaction with Hindu divinity, constitute a meaningful symbolic world – one which is only rendered fully intelligible with reference to a symbolic order which village Christians share with their Hindu neighbours. At the same time Christians are also members of a wider Church which brings a distinctive type of religious thinking and practice. Mosse's argument is that Catholics in rural Tamil Nadu have not, in fact, been isolated from the processes of "globalization", but that these have been ordered in a distinctively south Indian way. In particular, he suggests, the intersection of the "local" with the "global" is implicitly represented in indigenous terms – expressed metaphorically in the relationship between the hierarchical and relational social world of the "village" and its opposite, the "forest", or wilderness world of essences, of absolutes, and of transcendent values – a way that allows an accommodation of potentially contradictory belief and practice.

### Notes

1. The truth of this assertion, as far as Christianity is concerned, is evident, for example, in the now classic *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Madras: CLS, 1963, by Robin Boyd. Even the recent work of the younger Indian Christian theologian M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, does not manifest an awareness of the concern. That a paradigm shift is in process, however, is evident by the work of another young Indian Christian theologian, Sathianathan Clarke. In his work entitled "Christ as Drum: A Constructive Proposal for Indian-Christian Theology" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 1995), Clarke argues that traditional Indian Christian theology is in fact an "instrument of ideological co-option" and hence is "non-representative of the social

- intercourse" of the entire Indian community.
2. I suppose that everyone knows the phenomena referred to when speaking of popular religiosity: pilgrimages, devotions, sacred times and places, ritual and ascetic practices, symbols, and so forth. Terms such as "local" or "vernacular" are used with reference to the cultural matrix of these phenomena. The term "folk", drawn from Redfield's folk-urban continuum, is commonly used to describe this genre of religiosity, but it is too easily mired in complexity and controversy that is not germane to our present concern, particularly in the context of the German Indological agenda. (See Sheldon Pollock, "Deep Orientalism", in: Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994). Hence, I abandon its use here.
  3. This is not at all to suggest that the concerns of the social sciences are missing from the first cluster of studies.
  4. David Mosse, "Catholic Saints and the Hindu Village Pantheon in Rural Tamil Nadu", *Man*, (N.S.), 29.2, 1994, p.302.
  5. Lionel Caplan, *Class and Culture in Urban India: Fundamentalism in a Christian Community*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.
  6. See, for example, Kaj A. Baago, *The Movement Around Subba Rao: A Hindu Christian Movement around Subba Rao of Muniapalle of Andhra Pradesh*. Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1968; S. Estborn, *Our Village Christians: A Study of the Life and Faith of Village Christians in Tamil Nadu*. Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969; and P. Solomon Raj, *A Christian Folk Religion in India*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1986.
  7. Uppsala, 1965. Diehl's study is primarily limited to the frequency and reasons why Christians visit Hindu temples/shrines, which he interprets in terms of Christians coming "into the sphere of Hindu gods". From this point Diehl expands the scope of his discussion to the even wider question of what happens "when Christianity finds its way into a village in India".
  8. See e.g. Diehl's doctoral dissertation published under the title *Instrument and Purpose: Studies on Rites and Rituals in*

- South India*. Lund: Gleerup, 1956, which serves as background for his present work.
9. London: Butterworth Press, 1968.
  10. The nature of this "belonging" is, of course, extremely complex and not adequately discussed in either study.
  11. For instance, according to Luke and Carman (pp.190-1) "one important instance of this dual character, with its 'both-and' attitude, is the fact that most Christians have two names". Prior to receiving a Christian name at baptism, they had a non-Christian (usually Hindu) name. It is this earlier name that most use, "except in the presence of the evangelist or presbyter ... Some Christians, especially in congregations without adequate Christian nurture, when asked their Christian name, would answer, 'I do not know; the evangelist knows' or 'Which name? Is it the name in your religion, or the name which my parents gave me?'"
  12. Among the many available resources, the following are a few examples: Susan Bayly, "A Christian Caste in Hindu Society: Religious Leadership and Social Conflict Among the Paravers in Southern Tamilnadu", *Modern Asian Studies*, 15:203-34; Lionel Caplan, "Popular Christianity in Urban South India", *Religion and Society*, 30:28-44; Sathianathan Clarke, "Christ as Drum: A Constructive Proposal for Indian-Christian Theology", Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 1995; Walter Fernandes, "Caste and Conversion Movements in India", *Social Action*, 31:261-90; A.T. Fishman, *Culture, Change and the Underprivileged: A Study of the Madigas in South India under Christian Guidance*. Madras: The Christian Literature Crusade, 1941; Robert E. Frykenberg, "The Impact of Conversion and Social Reform Upon Society in South India during the late Company Period: Questions Concerning Hindu-Christian Encounters, with Special Reference to Tinnevely", in C.H. Phillips and M.D. Wainwright (Eds.), *Indian Society and the Beginnings of Modernization, c. 1830-1850*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1976; Rajappan Immanuel, *The Influence of Hinduism on Indian Christians*. Jabalpur, M.P.: Leonard Theological College School of Research, 1950; Jose Kanannaikil, *Christians of Schedule Caste Origin*. Indian Social Institut Monograph Series No 10, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1983; N. Koshy, *Caste in the Kerala Churches*. Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 196; S. Manickam, *The Social Setting of Christian Conversion in South India: With Special Reference to the Harijan Communities of the Mass Movement Area 1820-1947*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977; Murray Milner Jr, *Status and Sacredness: A General Theory of Status Relations and an Analysis of Indian Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994; Geoffrey A. Oddie, "Christian Conversion among non-Brahmans in Andhra Pradesh, with special reference to the Anglican missionaries and Dornakal Diocese, c. 1900-1936", in: G. A. Oddie (Ed), *Religion in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times*. London: Curzon Press, 1977; David D. Shulman, *The Hungry God*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993; R.W. Taylor, "From Khadi to Kavi", *Religion and Society*, 24.4 (1977): 19-37; Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978; Gauri Viswanathan, "Coping with (Civil) Death: The Christian Convert's Rights of Passage in Colonial India", in: Gyan Prakash (Ed.), *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
  13. Mosse's fundamental research and analysis appeared as "Caste, Christianity and Hinduism: A Study of Social Organisation and Religion in Rural Ramnad", unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1986. Since then he has produced several articles, among them: "Catholic Saints and the Hindu Village Pantheon in Rural Tamil Nadu", *Man* (N.S.) 29.2 (1994): 301-32; "Idioms of Subordination and Styles of Protest Among Christian and Hindu Harijan Castes in Tamil Nadu", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (N.S.) 28.1 (1994), 67-106; "The Politics of Religious Synthesis: Roman Catholicism and Hindu Village Society in Tamil Nadu", in: Charles Steward and Rosalind Shaw (Eds.), *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. London: Routledge, 1994; and "Honour, Caste and Conflict: The Ethnohistory of a Catholic Festival in Rural

Tamil Nadu (1730-1990)", in: *Christianisme et Islam en Milieu Hindou: Pratiques et Débats*. Paris: Centre de l'Etude de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud, 1995. These provide a useful variety of perspectives and indicate possibilities for such studies.

14. For instance, Susan Bayly's study, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, stresses the assimilation of mission Christianity into prevailing indigenous south Indian religious system. By contrast Lionel Caplan's analysis of the

spread of North American fundamentalism in Protestant Madras (*Class and Culture in Urban India: Fundamentalism in a Christian Community*) emphasizes the way in which vernacular Christianity articulates national and transnational political and religious processes.

15. Mosse is at pains to insist that this functional distinction between "transcendent" and "pragmatic" religion (Mandelbaum), which he insists is not present in the Hinduism of rural Ramnad, does not imply a distinction between the religion of the literate elite and that of the masses.