



January 2008

## Book Review: "Christian Inculturation in India"

Corinne Dempsey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dempsey, Corinne (2008) "Book Review: "Christian Inculturation in India"," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 21, Article 17.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1416>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact [cbauman@butler.edu](mailto:cbauman@butler.edu). For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

## BOOK REVIEWS

***Christian Inculturation in India.*** Paul Collins. Liturgy, Worship, and Society Series. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Press, 2007. 234 + xvii pp.

PAUL Collins' *Christian Inculturation in India* is a far-ranging, multi-faceted look not only into the process and state of Christian inculturation in India, but also offers hard questions and a range of implications surrounding the inculturation project. Collins gives excellent coverage of historical, denominational, and philosophical approaches to inculturation; he does not explicitly privilege any particular approach while describing the range and contour of issues, yet, in the end, he does give the last, compelling say to an approach that I must admit I was pleased with, though I was left wishing he had injected this work into the discussion much earlier.

Collins lays the groundwork for his discussion with the chapter, "Cultures, Commerce, and Colonies: The Export Factor," an investigation of culture and power intertwined with the spread of Christianity. After offering classical theological definitions of culture he moves into the history of power and politics, casteism and colonialism, that have invariably accompanied Christianity's spread. The issues of caste and colonialism indeed resound throughout the book, issues that Collins feels must be addressed before inculturation can be a viable operation.

The second chapter, "Redefining Identities: Landscapes and Imperatives to 1963," reviews the history of Christian imperatives toward intentional inculturation. Collins is careful to note how this imperative was part of a two-way flow that came most insistently from Indian Christians. Collins describes early Christian approaches to inculturation by highlighting a number of international church and missionary councils and gatherings around the turn of the century. Debates that shaped issues of inculturation were primarily in regards to the uniqueness of the Christian message as well as responses to a decolonizing world. Parallel

Indian narratives -- most particularly the Brahma Samāj and the Indian independence movement -- are, as Collins argues, narratives that fundamentally influence, shape, and direct international conversations. By the outbreak of World War I, Indian Christians were questioning basic western Christian assumptions and had begun shaping an agenda for an indigenous church and theology. Collins observes that while the need for inculturation was "keenly perceived" in India as early as the late 19th century and rapidly gained momentum, it was not until the 1980s and early 1990s that the Anglican Communion and the World Council of Churches became "focused and clear sighted about this need and task" (62).

Chapter Three, "Whose Values; Which Cultures? The Effects of Local Theologies," reflects upon the practical application of and responses to inculturation debates described in the previous chapter. Here he offers a good overview of various approaches to inter-religious dialogue, both Hindu and Christian, and argues that "the methods relating to interreligious dialogue between Christian and Hindu traditions are rooted as much in a movement in Hinduism as they are in any movement in Christianity" (67). Again, Collins notes the importance of a two-way flow in this process, seeing a plethora of Indian influences -- ranging from Vivekananda to Ramakrishna Mission to Bishop V.S. Azariah, to name just a few -- counterbalancing international councils and conferences. He argues that the Brahma Samāj as well as the Gandhian ashram movement helped instigate the Christian Ashram movement. Crucial for this discussion, however, is the Dalit critique of Brahmanical practices, symbols, and language associated with Christian inculturation. In response to Dalit critiques that inculturation "emerges from the Enlightenment imperative towards categorization,

## 72 Book Reviews

commodification, and also colonialism," Collins raises important questions: "who initiates change, and upon what basis?" (93). He finishes the chapter by supportively citing Michael Amaladoss' appeal to a dialectical and natural process of inculturation, one that involves the local church community, not the elite.

The following two chapters flesh out the conversation by offering examples of inculturation within architecture and ritual, using examples from Syrian Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. Collins finishes both chapters with the all-important Dalit critique. Along the way, he marks an important distinction between "unintentional" and "intentional" inculturation, between locally and spontaneously generated practices versus ones that are imposed from the top down.

Chapter four, "Art, Architecture, and Topography: Temples and Churches in South India," begins with an argument for the importance of inculturated "Indian" architecture that does not articulate colonial power structures. This raises a question looming over the question of inculturation as a whole: What constitutes Indian culture or "Indian-ness?" Collins lists five possibilities: The Harappa Civilization, the Aryan, Dravidian, and Adivasi/tribal peoples, and the Dalits. Reflected in the range of histories supported by these groups, the quest for Indian-ness as a goal for inculturation invokes more than cultural and regional diversity but contentious issues of power-play, values and justice, as well. In Collins' descriptions of unintentional inculturation in the Syrian church architecture and design, he does an admirable job detailing some of the striking features of Hindu-Christian overlap. In comparison with this unintentional inculturation of ancient Keralite Syrian structures, not much can be said of the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. His section on intentional inculturation includes some excellent photos and examples from a range of traditions.

Chapter five, "Rites and Rituals: *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi?*" offers a good overview of Syrian Christian unintentional inculturation having to do with life-cycle rites and festival processions. The segment on Roman Catholic unintentional inculturation, however, is a short,

nondescript paragraph. This represents not only a gaping hole in Collins' otherwise excellent treatment of inculturation; it does not square with what seems to be his final opinion on the matter. Descriptions of intentional inculturation mostly have to do with liturgical adaptations in a variety of denominations. The chapter finishes by presenting Dalit ritual as an implicit critique of mainstream inculturation. Collins includes Sathianathan Clarke's reflections on the importance of taking Dalit ritual seriously as a crucial de-sanskritization requiring an openness to non-Christian traditions and to the ritual contributions of local communities and congregations.

Collins begins his final chapter, "Imperatives for a New Agenda," on this same note. He asks, "Is inculturation an aspect of evangelization? Or is it an expression of dialogue and encounter with the 'religious other'" (168). The answer emerges in his discussion of an ongoing tension between those who continue to insist on proselytizing and those whose broader vision of mission includes, as Collins words it, "a common quest of God." This latter position is supported by Sathianathan Clarke's view of inculturation as attending to the often unspoken, symbolic expressions of local and, particularly, subaltern communities. Collins underlines this appeal with Selva Raj's proposed "Dialogue on the ground" that is "often in opposition to and defiance of institutional norms and ecclesial prescriptions...a dialogue is a world of rituals rather than the sophisticated world of theological concepts and categories" (185-186).

Although not stated explicitly, it is clear that Collins agrees with Clarke and Raj, to whom he gives the last word. Raj's work indeed richly describes that which Collins posits we must take seriously. It therefore seems odd that his very short, generic paragraph on unintentional inculturation among Indian Catholics makes no mention of Raj's ethnographic abundance. If one did not read the book to the end, one might wonder if Collins chooses not, in fact, to take this kind of inculturation seriously.

Corinne Dempsey  
University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point