



November 2014

Book Review: *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity*

P. J. Johnston
University of Iowa

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



Part of the [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnston, P. J. (2014) "Book Review: *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 27, Article 12.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1584>

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. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS*

Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity.
Alexander Henn. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013, xi + 214 pages.

ALEXANDER Henn's *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity* proposes the initially counter-intuitive thesis that before there was religion, there was syncretism. Before the advent of the world religions paradigm in Europe and its pluralization of "religions," the prevailing conception of "religion" was singular, Augustinian, and largely co-extensive with the institutional ritual practices of the Catholic Church. Operating from this premodern conceptuality, the earliest Portuguese explorers when encountering the religious traditions of India for the first time were unable to recognize a distinction between Christian Self and Indian Other whenever there were sufficient similarities to Christianity. Vasco da Gama even went so far as to worship a goddess as the Virgin Mary inside a temple he believed was a church. Rather than being a mistake he speedily discovered and abandoned, Da Gama continued to read "Hindus" as if they were "Indian Catholics" and their practices as manifestations of Christian religion, doing so more out of the peculiarities of his premodern paradigm of categorizing religious difference than blindness to what he was observing. The earliest generation of administrators after Da

Gama largely followed his conceptual assimilation of Indian religion to Christianity – if not to the extent of actually worshiping gods and goddesses, at least to the extent of explaining similarities between Christianity and Indian religion in terms of theological expedients such as original revelation. This conceptual assimilation of elements of Indian religion to Christianity allowed "syncretistic" ritual forms to develop from the local population's experimentation with Christianity and to be initially tolerated by the Portuguese authorities. The concept of "Christianity" and "Hinduism" as separate and mutually-opposed "religions" which could not "mix" did not develop until later, and was itself largely a product of protracted cultural negotiation between native South Asians and Europeans in the colonies. In other words, before there was "religion," there was "syncretism," or the traffic of religious practices between communities on the supposition that "Gentile" religion was not necessarily alien to Christianity, and *vice versa*.

Henn's first chapter narrates the initial moment of cultural encounter between Portuguese and Indians in Goa, describing the assimilationist hermeneutical strategies of Da

* In the 2013 issue of the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* Steven Rosen was mistakenly listed also as Swami Suryadas in the review of his book, *Christ and Krishna: Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges* (2011). The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* regrets this error.

112 Book Reviews

Gama and the first generation of Portuguese administrators. Chapter Two describes how subsequent Indian and European iconoclastic controversies associated with the Wars of Religion altered the political and theological landscape globally, shifting the definition of “religion” in a “confessional” and “semiotic” direction in which text would be increasingly prioritized over ritual and image and impermeable boundaries could be imagined to exist between “religions” on the basis of their ideological differences. During this period, the Council of Trent instituted the Goa Inquisition, charging it with the clarification of boundaries between Christianity and Indian “idolatry” and the suppression of “idolatrous” rites and customs, leading to the punishment of Indian Catholics who “reverted” to pre-Christian practices and a violent campaign of religious suppression. Although the Goa Inquisition could be described in part as an effort to eliminate “syncretism,” Indian deities who might otherwise have been annihilated survived by being reinscribed as Christian saints, deepening syncretism even as the authorities attempted to destroy it. Chapter Three discusses the ambivalent legacy of the Christian Purāṇas and the Jesuit strategy of *accomodatio*, the effort to translate Christian belief into native literary forms while reinterpreting certain aspects of Indian religion as “cultural” and permissible for Christians. While this could be understood as a gesture of understanding on the part of the Jesuits, Henn argues that usually occurred in the context of simultaneous suppression of the Indian materials on which the Christian Purāṇas were modeled, making *accomodatio* arguably more a matter of replacing indigenous religious traditions with close Christian replicas than

preserving Indian religions. Chapters Four, Five, and Six draw upon more than a decade of ethnographic work in Goa, Maharashtra, and Karnataka to document and explain contemporary instances of Hindu-Catholic syncretism such as wayside shrines which incorporate both Hindu gods and Christian saints in the same ritual site and the so-called Jagar ritual in Goa (an all-night ludic ritual calling on both the Catholic Trinity and Hindu gods that serves as a kind of dramatic palimpsest of Hindu-Christian interaction since the arrival of the Portuguese in India). Henn argues that it is the centrality of the concerns of the *ganv*, or village, for Goan religion which unites Hindus and Christians in the same ritual space while preserving separate religious identities. In his conclusions, Henn examines Portuguese and Konkani records from the colonial period to fine-tune the standard scholarly history of the world religions paradigm offered by Smith and Masuzawa, demonstrating that the colonial encounter in Goa was decisive for the pluralization of religion, the differentiation of Hinduism from Christianity, and the development of the world religious paradigm. In the end, Henn applies his theoretical analysis and ethnographic findings to argue for a thoroughgoing rehabilitation of syncretism as an analytical category, arguing that “syncretism” distorts both premodern and contemporary religion far less than the standard world religions paradigm, which is implicitly based on post-Reformation Christianity and fits other religions into an uncomfortable “procrustean bed.”

Henn's argument remains within the standard presuppositions of secular religious studies, and leaves potentially interesting

theological issues that arise from his work unexplored. If the modern analytic concept of “religion” is a crypto-Christian theological projection without remainder and distorts non-Christian material, as Henn implies, wouldn't the more economical options have been either to abandon the category altogether or else revert to an arguably less problematic premodern theological concept of “religion”? This criticism is a quibble, and primarily of interest to Christian theologians. Henn's overall thesis is intelligent and well-argued, and should be persuasive for its intended audience. Henn's attention to ethnography and resolve to let the lived practice of Hindu

and Catholics inform scholarly representations of their traditions is noteworthy, especially in a work so dense in theory. Contemporary disciplinary interest in the world religions paradigm and the genealogy of particular “religions” within religious studies should make this an important, persuasive, and enduring work for its primary audience, as well as engaging reading for Christians and Hindus interested in learning from a painful moment of cultural encounter.

P.J. Johnston
University of Iowa

Hindu-Christian Epistolary Self-Disclosures: ‘Malabarian Correspondence’ between German Pietist Missionaries and South Indian Hindus (1712-1714).
Translated, Introduced and Annotated by Daniel Jeyaraj and Richard Fox Young. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013, xvi+349 pages.

THIS book is the product of research carried out by two eminent scholars: Daniel Jeyaraj from Liverpool Hope University (UK), and Richard Fox Young from Princeton Theological Seminary (US). Jeyaraj has been doing research on this topic for about two decades and has published two books, *Ziegenbalg's Genealogy of the South Indian Deities* (2003) and *A German Exploration of South Indian Society* (2006). Richard Fox is an acknowledged scholar in Hindu-Christian relations, both historical and theological, as evident in his work, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskritic Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (1981).

This book is all about the series of correspondences that took place between the

Tamil Hindus and Danish Christian Missionaries of Tranquebar in the early eighteenth century. Although this book is basically a work of translation, it is distinguished in many ways, making it uniquely different. 1) It is the very first complete English translation of all ninety-nine Tamil Letters along with authors' (Ziegenbalg and Gründler) footnotes. Other available works by Philipps (1717, 1719), Grafe (1972), Liebau (1997, 1998) are either paraphrases of select few letters or essays on the importance of Tamil Letters, and had left out the important corpus of the footnotes written by the European missionaries. Since the footnotes contain comments and assessments of the missionaries on the views and the worldviews of the Tamils, they bear witness to