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Book Review: *Debating 'Conversion' in Hinduism and Christianity*

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tragic if in exploring Indian Christian theology against the backdrop of Hindu thought (or vice versa) we forgot the flesh-and-blood Hindus and Christians who continually intersect through the blood, sweat, and tears—and hopes—of everyday India, just as it would be facile if in investigating their mundanity we neglected the scriptural resources that they themselves often draw upon in their quotidian

negotiations. Bauman is to be thanked for giving us a volume that directs us towards the elusive middle way through our academic insularities.

Ankur Barua
University of Cambridge

***Debating 'Conversion' in Hinduism and Christianity.* By Ankur Barua. London: Routledge, 2015, x + 217 pp.**

ANKUR Barua is Lecturer in Hindu Studies in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge (U.K.), and has written extensively on Hindu-Christian dynamics (including, multiple times, within the pages of this journal). As the title suggests, the volume considers debates about the nature, utility, and desirability of conversion (and the political implications of these debates) both *intra*-religiously (i.e., within Hinduism and Christianity) and *inter*-religiously (i.e., between Christians and Hindus).

When it comes to the *intra*-religious debates, the author provides considerably more information from the Christian side. For example, after two introductory chapters, Chapter Three focuses on the historical relationship of Christian missionaries to the ideology and politics of empire. Chapter Four discusses the development of Christian representations, constructions, and evaluations of “Hinduism.” The focus of Chapter Five is on the vexing question of caste within Indian Christianity, as well as the relevance of that question to debates about conversion, both within Christianity and in the context of

Christians’ debates with Hindus (about agency, “allurement,” etc.). And Chapter Seven gives treatment to changing understandings of mission and debates about “inculturation” (or “interculturalization”) among Christians, and how Hindus have received these changing Christian evangelistic views and strategies.

These chapters are all sensitively written, and are particularly successful at highlighting the diversity, development, and complexity of Christian views about such matters. For the sake of balance, however, one wishes that the author had included somewhat more about Hindu reflections on these topics in and of themselves, where relevant, and not primarily—as is the case—in the context of their *reactions* to what Christians and colonial figures do (or have done). For example, it seems to me a particularly fine opportunity was lost in Chapter Seven to deal more thoroughly, for the sake of comparison, with *Hindu* “missions,” “missionaries,” and “missiology,” as Reid Locklin and others have recently done. These chapters are also a bit more dependent on well-known secondary source material, and

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as such, are a bit less original and current than the others.

Where Barua's work is particularly impressive and original is in his treatment of the theological and philosophical foundations of Hindu-Christian debates about conversion. Many authors—e.g., Sarah Claerhout, Jakob de Roover, and even I—have made the point, in various ways, that Hindu-Christian debates about conversion and the desirability of evangelism are grounded not merely in disagreements about the nature of conversion, but in fact derive more fundamentally (and importantly) from disagreements about the nature of religion itself—what it is and should be. Barua addresses such topics in an innovative fashion, and more thoroughly, in my view, than has so far been done. Indeed, it is this argument that runs most strongly and cogently through the pages of the volume, and especially in the two introductory chapters, Chapters Six and Eight, and the Conclusion. To give just one example, Barua argues convincingly that one's evaluation of conversions motivated by "material" considerations will be affected by one's understanding of whether the "spiritual" life includes or does not include within it the material, which is necessarily related to one's more fundamental presuppositions about the integration (or lack thereof) of body and soul (93-94).

Barua also directly addresses the important topic of "tolerance," as it pertains to Christian evangelistic efforts, and dispenses quickly with the fiction that Hinduism is somehow inherently more "tolerant" than Christianity, rejecting along the way the accusation often thrown at Christians by contemporary proponents of *Hindutva*, that to criticize

another's religious belief from a particular foundational standpoint is itself an arrogant, intolerant, and imperial act. Barua does so in part by demonstrating that Hindu theological and philosophical thought is just as much as its Christian equivalent based on certain *a priori* truth claims from the perspective of which it critiques, evaluates, and hierarchizes other faiths.

Because of this, Barua wishes to draw our attention away from the question of which religion is more tolerant, and focus it instead on *how* and *why* Hindus and Christians are (differently) tolerant. He himself explicates this topic with a clarity and precision I have not seen before, and repeatedly shows how Hindu and Christian views of tolerance are related to their broader metaphysical assertions. For example, Hindu conceptions of karma and transmigration incline them both to adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the religion of a person's birth and to eschew the "apocalyptic anxieties that have sometimes shaped Christian orthodoxy's encounters with the 'religious alien'—based on the theological view that the eternal salvation of the individual depends on the finite stretch of one (earthly) lifetime" (8).

My use of the shorthand reifications of "Hinduism/Hindu" and "Christianity/Christian" in this context perhaps obscures another of Barua's strengths, which is his attention to multiple forms of both Hindu and Christian thought. That said, it should be noted that on the Christian side, Barua's attention skews mainstream liberal Protestant and Catholic. The contemporary forms of more aggressively evangelistic Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity that are growing rapidly in India and that tend more regularly than their mainstream coreligionists to

demonize and denigrate Hinduism (and that thereby reverse the general movement of Christian evangelistic thought towards more irenic approaches to non-Christian faiths) are, as I have argued in my own work, affecting the debate about conversion in India in significant ways. Yet the views and impact of such Christians are considered only in a few lines on the last pages of the book. Nevertheless, this should be taken as a mere statement of fact, not a judgment; to criticize Barua for having a limited focus, as all scholars necessarily do, would be to unfairly criticize him for not riding what is currently my particular hobby horse.

In the end, *Debating 'Conversion'* is a unique and important contribution to the study of

Hindu-Christian relations. Its more general, historical sections and chapters would be accessible even to undergraduates, and could provide a useful summary of extant material in that context. Its more theological and philosophical material will be of interest particularly to scholars and graduate students who work on related topics, though the presentation of even this material is such that it may not be beyond the grasp of advanced undergraduates.

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***A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not One.* Anantanand Rambachan. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015, xi + 230 pages.**

IN my view a key challenge for Religious Studies today is to show its scholarship to be relevant to major problems facing the world. One such challenge is to mine the theology of religious traditions for justice and the overcoming of oppressive structures in society. Anant Rambachan takes on this challenge for the Advaita Vedanta tradition, within which he is both a practitioner and a scholar. He recognizes that other non-dual and dualistic Hindu traditions will begin from different theological presuppositions than Advaita and produce different ethical conclusions—resulting in a rich intra-Hindu conversation. And the Hindu views on topics such as justice for women, homosexuals, children, caste, and the earth need also to engage with knowledge

from secular social science on how the world can achieve justice. In this book, Rambachan's focus is on Advaita and is two-fold:

First, to offer an interpretation of Advaita that does not trivialize the world, but establishes its value and meaning in relation to *brahman*. Second, to retrieve core guiding values that we must bring to our...response to issues of contemporary concern.

Rambachan's earlier works *Accomplishing the Accomplished*, and *The Advaita Worldview* established his own interpretation of Advaita Vedanta theology. His aim in this book is to build on those earlier discussions by