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## Book Review: *Constructing Indian Christianities: Culture, Conversion, and Caste*

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of males; and many Biblewomen raised their children as they conducted their church vocation. One is left to ponder, among other things, just how unconscious these subversive activities were. And what was their influence on broader society? on Dalits who never converted? on Western missionaries who never had the kind of access granted to their

indigenous sisters? on women's roles among Telugu-speaking Christians to this day? Such questions lead inevitably, thankfully, to further research.

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***Constructing Indian Christianities: Culture, Conversion, and Caste.* Edited by Chad M. Bauman and Richard Fox Young. Abington, UK: Routledge, 2014, xxiii + 264 pages.**

**CONSTRUCTING** *Indian Christianities*, ably edited by Chad Bauman and Richard Fox Young, problematizes conventional approaches to understanding Indian Christianity. As the title of the volume makes clear, the essays collectively portray Christianity in India as pluriform and thereby challenge theories that deploy univocal or tightly bounded categories and tropes. The ten chapters of *Constructing Indian Christianities* are organized around three interrelated questions: who and what is an Indian Christian; whose religion is Indian Christianity; and can Christianity be Indian. Taken as a whole, the essays included in the volume provide a number of oblique and profitable entries into considering Indian Christianity *in situ* as very much part of the complex dynamics of Indian life.

The first section, "Who and What is an Indian Christian?", is composed of three well-executed ethnographic vignettes that are part of larger studies. Miriam Bentler considers "Spiritual Parenthood" among Kerala's Latin Catholic community and examines how Southern European and South Indian kinship

systems have together developed and changed in interesting ways. Kerry San Chirico raises questions about conversion as a conceptual category in his consideration of North India's Khrist Bhakta movement, which is composed of Hindu devotees of Christ who remain unbaptized. Ashok Kumar's piece rounds out the section by discussing how Dalit Christians in Andhra Pradesh have responded to governmental discrimination by interlocking caste and congregation. The essays in this section present their ethnographic data clearly and concisely, which makes their theoretical points all the stronger.

The four essays in the second section, "Whose Religion is Indian Christianity?," range broadly. Gulfshan Khan examines the discourse surrounding Catholicism at the Mughal Court and maintains a complex discussion that concludes by arguing that it was not only the Quranic understanding of Jesus that prevailed in Agra but also that which substantively drew upon Jesuit sources. In "Authority and Patronage: Protestant Devotion and the Development of the Tamil Hymn in Colonial

South India,” Hephzibah Israel focuses on the work of Vedanayaka Sastri and argues that Sastri’s devotional poetry expressed Tamil Lutherans’ identity as a Protestant community while simultaneously keeping them in contact with their Tamil bhakti heritage.

While Israel calls our attention to a specific historical example of “inculturation,” in the next chapter Xavier Gravend-Triole presents a broad narrative of how Christian ashrams have attempted to adapt to Indian culture. Most helpful in Gravend-Triole’s discussion is the consideration given to challenges to the Christian ashram movement by Dalit theologians whose work also “indigenizes” Christianity--albeit on very different terms. The second section concludes with James Ponniah’s fascinating discussion of the significance of the “passion play” for Dalits in a village in Tamil Nadu.

In the third and final section, “Can Christianity be Indian?”, the essays assume a more polemical tone, which is appropriate given the subject matter under discussion. Georg Pfeffer’s contribution, “Times of Trouble for Christians in Muslim and Hindu Societies in South Asia,” compares and contrasts Christian experiences in Punjab and Orissa and focuses on the state’s failure, in both contexts, to promote “mutual tolerance.” In the next chapter, Chad Bauman considers anti-Christian violence through the lens of Clifford Geertz’s widely cited theory of “religion as a cultural system.” In arguing vigorously for the continuing relevance of Geertz’s work, Bauman develops a nuanced interpretation of anti-Christian violence as generative of a lived “world” that is more “consonant with the world as imagined” (207). The final chapter, “Studied Silences,” co-

authored by Richard Fox Young and Sunder John Boopalan, takes aim at Rajiv Malhotra and the Hindu-American diaspora’s discomfort with Dalit Christianity’s “Indianness.” In arguing that Dalit theology deserves “a turn at the microphone in public square debates,” the authors present a much-needed critique of contemporary discourse surrounding Christianity and Indian identity.

*Constructing Indian Christianities* is a volume that has much to teach specialists and non-specialists alike. Among its many distinguishing qualities, the most salutary aspect of the volume is how the essays collectively foreground Dalit experiences and concerns. While the authors usually confine their comments and critiques to specifically Indian dynamics of religious identity, I would also add that much of what passes for Hindu-Christian dialogue in American academic contexts could take Dalit voices more seriously. However, in spite of the volume’s impressive breadth, it could have given more attention to charismatic and Pentecostal forms of religiosity—such as Kerry San Chirico discusses in reference to the Khrist Bhatkas—as forms of indigenization and liberation for many Dalits. But the helpful afterwords by Anne Monius and Rowena Robinson do serve to contextualize and extend the specific articles in relation to broader themes in the study of South Asian religions. Because of this, the specific case studies in the volume are also quite accessible to readers who seek to begin their engagement with the dynamic diversity of Indian Christianities.

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