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Book Review: Possessed by the Virgin: Hinduism, Roman Catholicism, and Marian Possession in South India

Claire C. Robison
Bowdoin College

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Possessed by the Virgin: Hinduism, Roman Catholicism, and Marian Possession in South India. By Kristin Bloomer. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 352 pages.

KRISTIN BLOOMER'S *Possessed by the Virgin* is an ethnographic study of Marian possession in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Bloomer focuses on the experiences of three women: Dhanam, Rosalind, and Nancy. All three are Roman Catholic and from non-elite class or caste backgrounds, marking their experiences both as women who exercise sacred authority in a largely patriarchal context and as religious minorities who occupy precarious positions in relation to India's Hindu majority and dominant upper caste minority. Bloomer draws attention to how possession unsettles different kinds of hegemony, parsing out the dynamics of women's agency in contexts of both affirmation and condemnation by local authority structures. This study will be of wide interest to specialists in South Asia, Indian religions, global Christianity, and gender studies. Bloomer's electric style adeptly communicates the complexities of gender, agency, and power in religious communities. Although suited to a postgraduate audience due to the study's length and level of detail, it would be compelling and accessible to use—in whole or part—in classroom settings for advanced undergraduates.

Bloomer's study excels in its textured ethnographic descriptions. It is also grounded in a sustained theoretical analysis of how South Indian forms of Marian possession interact with three forms of hegemony: patriarchy, in its particular Tamil contexts; orthodox Roman Catholicism; and Brahmanical Hinduism (21). Bloomer contends that Dhanam, Rosalind, and Nancy are engaged in antihegemonic structures that challenge the status quo while also colluding

with some of the same hegemonic structures that their practices threaten, using a range of "tools" from these systems—including gods and goddesses, deity and spirit possession practices, Mary and the saints, and exorcism rituals (19). Bloomer notes that the valuation of authenticity is central to these practices—in some cases alongside performances of middle-class success, educational attainment, or rising socioeconomic status (86). Additionally, in highlighting tensions between grassroots, popular devotion and the legitimating Church, Bloomer examines notions of authenticity as bestowed or withheld by the often male-gendered Catholic theological orthodoxy. However, in these practices of possession and healing, authenticity is ultimately grounded in individual relationships between devotees and the women who embody this healing power of Mary. The power in their Marian possession experiences is particularly salient in regard to the loss of a child or the negotiation of leverage in situations of domestic abuse. Through grappling with suffering, they enable a transformation in the minds and bodies of those who seek their help.

In South India, as throughout many global Catholic contexts, Mary is revered in a multiplicity of forms, tied to particular characteristics and sites. Prominent Tamil forms of Mary, such as Velankanni Mātā, are the starting point for the experiences of Dhanam, Rosalind, Nancy. But Marian possession engenders new forms, even new names. Bloomer highlights Our Lady Jecintho, a local form of Mary christened through Rosalind's possession experiences and later experienced by Nancy. In resonance with the

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work of A.K. Ramanujan, Paula Richman, and others on the multiplicity of Rāmāyaṇa narratives, Bloomer's attention to the multiplicity of Marys for South Indian Catholics conveys an important point about the fluid, multifaceted nature of religion. Bloomer's subjects share, with their larger Tamil Hindu surroundings, terms such as *bhakti* and *prasadam*, as well as idioms of drowning in the love of God and spirit possession, rendering their Marian possession legible to Hindu and Catholic devotional frameworks. In the geographic surroundings and devotional worldviews of some Marian devotees, Hindu and Christian deities are in competition. Yet this contestation speaks of intimate proximities as well; not only geographical proximities of predominantly Hindu and Catholic villages, but also the multi-religious character of many South Indian families, such as Nancy's, in which relatives identifying with Catholic and Hindu live under the same roof. This marks Bloomer's study as an important contribution to the study of South Indian Christianity in practice.

A number of themes emerge in Bloomer's ethnographic descriptions and analysis. I will focus here on the theme of embodiment, as it undergirds central aspects of Catholic doctrine and practice and is central to Bloomer's analysis of hegemony and agency in South Indian Marian possession. Invoking a history of scholarship (E. Valentine Daniel, Isabelle Nabakov), Bloomer describes Tamil notions of embodiment as fluid and permeable, inflecting local possession events (58). Bloomer examines the "somatic semantics" of such possession, noting that Dhanam's "capacity to make room for Mātā" as well as non-Catholic deities and spirits "*in her own body*" (206) renders her charismatic challenge to the authority of the Roman Catholic church's institutional structures as

palpably somatic. Drawing from Catherine Bell's work on the "ritualized body," Bloomer fleshes out the significance of these possession events in the social and religious spheres, as in Rosalind's corporeal invocation of the authority of Jesus through washing priests' feet, an act echoing Jesus' actions and ordinarily permissible exclusively by men (72). By cultivating their own bodies as a "home of Mātā," these women buck the need for male priests and the Vatican as mediators between the devout and the Divine. Prayer meetings and healing sessions center on a female authority structure not possible in orthodox Roman Catholic churches. Bloomer contrasts their somatic experiences of Marian possession with the "authorized male-gendered trinity and the fourth-century Vatican doctrine" (116), contending that women such as Rosalind, Nancy, and Dhanam "flesh out" the "hole" created by the systematic dehumanization and desexing of Mary by the many-centuries' development of Vatican orthodoxy. However, taking a cue from Saba Mahmood's critique of a binary model of agency as one of subordination and subversion, Bloomer conveys the complexity of her subjects' agency. Nancy "must" maintain an "ambivalent relation" to power and agency in order to claim social power as a young, unmarried woman in Tamil society (98). All three women's practices compete with but also bolster local Roman Catholic parishes.

Bloomer's writing style is clear and relatable, imbuing her ethnography with a richness of presence. She reads Tamil Marian devotional practices in relation to local Hindu and village worship and transnational Pentecostal influences, as well as adjacent to the Marian devotion in her own Charismatic Catholic upbringing. Her meticulous scholarship is supported by extensive

expository footnotes, as well as in-text explanations of technical or region-specific terms that may be unfamiliar to a broader audience. Possessed of a free-flowing narrative style, the work defies the structure of conventional academic writing. It unfolds instead with a focus on gradual character development and plot lines that showcase Bloomer's training as both an ethnographer and a literary writer. While this style makes it challenging at times to identify the structural direction of each consecutive chapter, it imbues the work with an enthralling character. Bloomer's rich descriptions of everyday moments and defining events absorb the reader with the interest of a novel while remaining deftly tied to her analytical framework.

This brilliant study is a substantive contribution to the growing body of ethnographic literature centered on women as living religious authorities, wielding their power at the margins of established religious orthodoxies. Moreover, this study is of critical importance to discussions of methodology among ethnographers of religion. Bloomer highlights the complexities of conducting an ethnography "as a friendly researcher," "a potential skeptic," and a "tall, unmarried

farangi" (206) with the resources to travel internationally and conduct research. Effectively voicing the "ambiguities of being a witness" (55), she charts a path for articulating, in a "relationship of reciprocity" (206), the experiences of women and men whose lived realities radically differ. A methodical reflexivity is also built into the study's structure. Drawing from the Tamil Caṅkam poetic conventions of the *akam* ("inner") and *puram* ("outer") modes of expression for love and politics or war respectively, Bloomer highlights the inherently subjective, dialogic nature of describing religious experiences. Her subheading system draws from the multivocal *akam* poetic mode, an approach that emphasizes the ethnographer's subjectivity as well. Moreover, Bloomer's candor in relation to her research process conveys the fundamental challenges of conducting ethnographies of religion in the first place, summarized aptly in a question that arose during one Marian possession event: "How do you interview the Mother of God?"

Claire C. Robison
Bowdoin College

***Hagiography and Religious Truth: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions.* Edited by Rico G. Monge, Kerry P. C. San Chirico, and Rachel J. Smith. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016, xv + 265 pages.**

JEFFREY J. KRIPAL of Rice University sets the stage for *Hagiography and Religious Truth*. In his powerful forward, he reminds us that religious phenomena are, for lack of a better word, *real*—we experience them, they transform us, and they defy all reductionist interpretation. They are what they are, not *less* (xiii-xv). Therefore, conclude our editors,

the best strategy to understand religious phenomena (saints, in this instance) is *not* to explain them away through materialist, psychological, or sociological strategies. The best way to understand them is through comparison, placing saint into relationship with saint, across times and traditions, in order to elicit their *more*. Such comparison