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Book Review: The Subhedar’s Son: A Narrative of Brahmin-Christian Conversion from Nineteenth-Century Maharashtra. By Deepra Dandekar

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statements such as “Oneness is not a theory to be tested against reality,” and the author’s own admission that “I do not question the truth of oneness in this book” (12)—claims that uncomfortably pit the ideology of Ethics against its method. James and pragmatism make few appearances in Ethics, and Engels’s insistence that oneness is the true reality severely complicates the book’s alleged commitment to the pragmatic method of evaluating ethics based on their practical consequences and the fallibility of their “truth.” The ethics of oneness that Engels (finally) provides in the conclusion to the book are not treated pragmatically; they are pronouncements to cultivate the sense of oneness Engels has repeatedly emphasized throughout Ethics. Precisely how these ethical pronouncements should, could, or even can be manifested in everyday concrete experience—especially in a pluralistic context—is unfortunately obscure.

Despite its methodological looseness and philosophical generalizations, the work’s most valuable academic contribution is its attempt to appreciate Emerson and Whitman beyond merely their Transcendentalist context, proffering a more global interpretation of these two famous American writers. Ethics will appeal to interdisciplinary readers interested in alternative views of Emerson and Whitman that do not rely exclusively on canonical readings; Americanists and American Studies readers who often wrestle with the definition of “American” in a pluralistic, global age; and non-specialists interested in the intersection between literary study and ethics. Engels is very good at stitching the ideological threads among the Gita, Hindu philosophy, and their reception in Emerson and Whitman, even when the often impressionistic and elliptical insistence on oneness and the ethics it is purported to cultivate begin to overtake the discussion. This enthusiasm can often overshadow the historical and philosophical scholarship while highlighting Engels the person. But then a book about ethics is, of course, about persons and their multifaceted and inevitably complex interactions with one another.

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THIS absorbing volume consists of two distinct, though related parts. The center of the book is the annotated translation of a Marathi novel, entitled The Subhedar’s Son, written in 1895 by the Rev. Dinkar Shankar Sawarkar, the son of a Marathi Brahmin convert to Christianity. The novel describes in a semi-fictional manner the long process by which the author’s father came to embrace the Christian faith: why and how he became a convert against the wishes of his Brahmin family and caste. Preceding and following the translation are introductory essays and a conclusion to the novel by the translator, Deepra Dandekar, who is a direct
descendant of the author (he is her great-grandfather) and a multifaceted researcher of South Asian society and religion, working in Berlin. This review will deal first with the novel itself, and then with Dandekar’s scholarly and personal ruminations on it.

For a conversion story, one of the interesting aspects of the Marathi novel is that, as Dandekar notes (xxxiv), Christianity does not enter the picture until the reader is almost halfway through the narrative, which relates a family history. Sawarkar employs this long view in order to present Christian belief and practice not as an abrupt change or major deviation (as his kinfolk would claim) in a Marathi Brahmin’s life, but as a logical next step in its development which had begun generations before his birth. The conversion is, indeed, a logical one. It is not the result of some extraordinary intervention or experience, but the intellectual realization, gained through conversations with Christians, that the Christian understanding of life, which leads to particular religious dispositions and practices, makes most sense to the convert who is facing insuperable crises. Such an apprehension of Christianity adopts and adapts the Scottish and evangelical Anglican Protestant missionary presentations of the faith in India in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The novel opens with a war scene from the (third) battle of Panipat in 1761. A Marathi Brahmin, the protagonist of this section and a spiritual and intellectual ancestor of the convert, is rueing the overconfidence and revelry of the Marathi army and its sizeable retinue as the Marathas prepare to battle the “Muslims.” As the readers of the novel are well aware, the Marathas were defeated in that battle. The protagonist thus is portrayed as wise and perspicacious, unlike his fellow Marathi warriors, knowing that his side is headed for disastrous defeat (64). As Dandekar points out, the moral of the story, and consequently of the novel, is that the true (Marathi) Brahmin is not necessarily the one that follows the rest of his kinsmen and clansmen. Moreover, the Brahmin who is correct in his behavior and understanding of life is not necessarily the one who agrees with his own people. By implication, the lonely Christian convert can be the true Marathi Brahmin. Through fascinating sequences of alternating narrative and dialogue, the reader is led through the biographies of significant persons from the convert’s past: persons whose lives and decisions would be critical in the unfolding of the convert’s own life. Three interweaving themes are constantly played out in this prehistory of the convert: morality, correct understanding, and life’s unpredictable circumstances. While the last cannot be controlled—one does not know what good or bad fortune, such as the birth of children or a swimming accident, will come – one can control one’s behavior and morality, and one can learn from wisdom what are the right and wrong ways to view and inhabit the world. In fact, the convert is the one who is able, through his Christian belief and practice, to face and conquer bad fortune through his moral behavior and correct understanding. The “subhedar’s son” refers to the author’s father, Shankar Nana, who became a Christian on April 1, 1849 after many years of anguish caused in large part by his family. Shankar Nana’s father was a subhedar or land-owning noble and military leader in the service of the Peshwa of the Maratha Empire.
Deepra Dandekar both introduces and reflects deeply on the novel which is a part of her family heritage. Instead of trying to downplay or avoid her personal, existential entanglement with the work, she forthrightly invites the reader into her intellectual journeys and struggles as she tried to understand the novel on its own terms, and in terms of the Marathi Brahmin family which produced it. She begins the volume with an essay which introduces the novel itself, first locating it in the world of 19th and early 20th century vernacular Christian writings, then explicating the novel itself, and finally providing a translation of Shankar Nana’s own account of his conversion to Christianity. The next essay provides the social context of the novel, especially illuminating the dynamics between various Indian and Western Christians at the time. This essay is followed by “Multiple Narratives in the Novel,” which teases out some of the major themes running through the work. The final introductory essay is entitled “Shankar Nana, Parubai, and the Author, Dinkar Shankar Sawarkar,” and delves into the biographies of the three individuals who were instrumental in the composition of the novel. The essay explores, among other matters, how different generations of Christians view the first convert’s turn to Christianity. A brief “Afterword and Concluding Thoughts” ends the whole volume.

While an adequate summary of Dandekar’s many rich inquiries and insights is not possible here, a few will simply be noted. First is the observation that Dinkar Shankar Sawarkar was both a deeply committed Christian in the mission churches of his time, and also strongly critical of British colonialism. Unlike contemporary scholars who wrestle with the connections and contradictions between imperialism and the western missionary movement, Sawarkar used the Christianity introduced and even managed by western missionaries as an instrument for condemning the British conquest and rule of India. Second, Dandekar explores the nature of Brahmin conversion, noting that it does not fit into current paradigms of conversion which focus almost exclusively on Dalit conversions. Her startling (and persuasive) conclusion is that Brahmins converted for the very same reasons that Dalits did—for a host of different reasons, including the deep conviction that Christianity responded meaningfully to their lives’ crises in ways that their natal religious tradition did not. Third, while the novel itself does not dwell on the issue of gender, it is an issue that Dandekar raises herself, noting how women are portrayed in the novel when they do make brief appearances. For Sawarkar, and many other Indian Christian authors, Christianity provided relief and opportunities to women that were not available in the Hindu societies from which they came. This was especially true of strict Marathi Brahmin clans. Finally, Dandekar engages the issue of caste, which looms large in many analyses of Hindu society, but is not a prominent theme in the novel itself. Helpfully, Dandekar does not spend time either attacking or defending her Brahmin forebears. Rather, she locates them in the larger social context of Protestantism in Western India, which held in its embrace Indians from the complete spectrum of Indian castes and classes, as well as western missionaries. While Brahmins were undoubtedly leaders in the Indian church, they were also discriminated against by European missionaries. In sum, The Subhedar’s Son is a fascinating portrayal of religious conversion to
Christianity by a second-generation Indian Christian leader, and Deepra Dandekar’s meditations on this historical novel greatly increase our knowledge and understanding of Indian Protestants during the British imperial era.
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Two approaches are typically represented in the programs of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies: the historical/ethnographic and the theological/philosophical. Untouchable Bodies, Resistance, and Liberation bridges the two sides of the conversation, setting the bar for future ethnographic contributions to comparative theology. This groundbreaking project offers “a comparative theology of liberation from a Dalit perspective” (49). Its tightly reasoned argument unfolds in nine chapters, organized into three parts.

Other comparative theologians have challenged the discipline’s prioritization of texts and called for greater attention to lived experience and religious practice. Joshua Samuel has delivered. Part 1 draws together the relevant disciplinary threads. The introduction provides a nuanced and up-to-date survey of theories of caste, untouchability, and Dalit resistance, culminating in the case for attending to embodied religious experience at the margins of social structures as a source of comparative theology. Because written theological sources overwhelmingly center caste communities, he turns to ethnographic and anthropological research in South Indian Dalit communities as a means “to supplement and critically enhance the information available through existing literature” (24). This interweaving of sources has the effect of drawing upon multiple sites to inform a constructive argument.

The result is a splendid example of a comparative theology of liberation, integrating elements of both Hindu and Christian Dalit liberation theologies. It explicitly counteracts the “lingering Euro-Christian centrism, indifference to the agency of faith communities, and re-inscription of unjust hierarchical structures” that often haunt comparative theology (34). The project represents the best of a new generation of Dalit theology. It refuses to reify religious boundaries in defense of the liberating power of Christianity. It deftly considers the impact of colonization and avoids the binarism between oppressor and oppressed characteristic of early Dalit liberation theologies. Recognizing the persistence of pre-Christian Dalit religious elements, it also resists fixed or unitary approaches to Dalit identity. Its search for emancipatory resources stays close to the complex, lived realities of the people, particularly the Paraiyar community.

Chapter 2 guides the reader through the complicated shift from reading texts to “reading bodies.” Echoing Judith Butler, Samuel...