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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...
describes the construction of Dalit bodies as abject “bodies that don’t matter” (57), the performative nature of Dalit identity, and the caste and gender and norms that discipline Dalit bodies. Samuel reclaims the Dalit body as sacramental—a locus for experiencing the presence of Christ, crucified and risen. He then arrives upon the comparative category that will center the analysis to follow. Following Robert C. Neville’s method of framing comparison through “vague categories,” Samuel identifies “divine possessions,” trance-like states with certain typical bodily movements and communications. Though different in Hindu and Christian Paraiyar contexts, the category creates parameters in which to read Dalit bodies.

Part 2 devotes two chapters each to Hindu and Christian contexts. Chapter 3 frames Dalit religion within Hinduism and discusses the ambivalent role of Goddess possession in relation to empowerment of Dalits. Chapter 4 turns to ethnographic data for a closer look at types of possessions, preparation and experience of possessions, and various interpretations of them. Samuel finds elements of resistance to caste (and, to a lesser extent, patriarchy) in the verbal, physical, and spatial manifestations of these possessions. Chapter 5 traces Dalit Christianity from its origins through recent trends in Dalit theology (a valuable survey in itself). Chapter 6 reviews “Holy Spirit possessions” in Christian Dalit communities, attending to the role of praise singing as preparation, the bodily reception of the Holy Spirit with glossolalia and exuberant movement, and believers’ interpretations of these experiences, as well as the importance of the Bible and sacraments in instilling a sense of divine presence. Samuel briefly touches on Marian possessions. Although this phenomenon could be fruitfully expanded in conversation with other recent ethnographic work in Hindu-Christian studies, his focus on the Holy Spirit strengthens the book as an original contribution to the field.

Part 3 bears the fruit of the comparison. In response to Christian interviewees’ ambivalence, Samuel probes the extent to which divine possessions empower resistance to caste oppression. In chapter 7, Saba Mahmood’s critique of liberal and secular notions of liberation as social change assists Samuel in claiming “alternative and creative counter-discourses of agential assertion, subversion, and liberation” in divine possessions (191). The anthropological and ethnographic analysis highlights a non-dichotomous relation between the spiritual and material, particularly in relation to Paraiyar understandings of healing. Possessions in both Hindu and Christian contexts afford opportunities for Dalits to speak up; to move their bodies and assert their humanity; to experience catharsis, communal memory, and healing; and to reclaim physical spaces.

In chapter 8, Samuel asks what theological sense can be made of this comparative data. Having recognized the liberative aspects of divine possessions, he identifies these moments in terms of kairos, “viz. those opportune and optimal moments when God’s empowering and transformative intervention is experienced at its best” (205). Applying Paul Tillich’s well-known exposition, Samuel observes several important features of kairos that apply to divine possessions: divine initiative/grace, a role for human agency, momentary or fragmentary occurrence, and the importance of the community’s hope and resistance in history.
Christian theology typically views such occurrences “in relation to the great Kairos, the Christ event”; however, Samuel (with Tillich) argues that transformative divine power also operates in non-Christian contexts, “perhaps in different ways” (213).

Samuel’s comparative work both applies and transforms the category of kairos. In contrast to the expectation—as seen after the first world war and in South Africa—that kairos entails a society-wide shift, the ambiguity in Dalit possessions illustrates Tillich’s observation that kairotic moments are not always ultimate or accepted broadly by society. This subtler, perhaps deeper, power affirms the value of oppressed bodies and may even recognize them as sacramental. Samuel claims that this “more realistic and promising” interpretation opens to a plurality of kairoi and makes every moment “‘optimal’ for resistance and transformation” (217).

In sum, this Dalit comparative theology of liberation, with its richly textured picture of Hindu and Christian Dalit religious experiences, is a much-needed contribution. It moves beyond text-centered comparative theology and provides an excellent theoretical defense—and example—of the need to embrace experience through ethnographic methods. Samuel also brilliantly demonstrates how comparative theology can proceed in cases where the traditions compared are not tightly bounded (i.e., either Hindu or Christian) but involve fluid identities or the practices of multiple traditions.

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