

November 2013

## Book Review: *Dalit Theology and Christian Anarchism*

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### Recommended Citation

Locklin, Reid B. (2013) "Book Review: *Dalit Theology and Christian Anarchism*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 26, Article 15.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1554>

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specific historical and cultural contexts. In fact, throughout the book, Mosse is impressively sensitive to local particularities, pointing out how the historical and political processes he describes advance differently in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, or in Alapuram and other villages, or in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, or in Catholic and Protestant contexts.

This sensitivity points to what is perhaps the greatest strength of the book, and that is its productive juxtaposition of historical and ethnographic research. Readers in search of more strictly historical resources may prefer the broadly South Indian-focused work of

Susan Bayly, or Ines Županov’s research on the early Jesuit missions. And Mosse himself has authored a number of more purely ethnographic studies. But Mosse’s combination of thick description with *longue durée* historical coverage, his equal facility with anthropology and the archive, with—among others—Pierre Bourdieu and Marshall Sahlins, is what makes *The Saint in the Banyan Tree* a unique, and uniquely successful book, and one with provocative theoretical implications.

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***Dalit Theology and Christian Anarchism.* Keith Hebden, Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2011, 171 pages.**

THE fruit of Keith Hebden’s doctoral studies at the University of Birmingham, as well as his field work in Karnataka and Gujarat, *Dalit Theology and Christian Anarchism*, attempts to address what Peniel Rajkumar has labelled the “polemic binarism” endemic to Dalit and many other forms of liberation theology (2). That is, liberation theologies tend to set one class of persons against another—in this case, Dalits against mainstream Hindus—in an attempt to reform or revolt against the dominant regime. Such theologies, Hebden contends, miss the central issue: namely, the intrinsic violence and systemic oppression of the modern nation-state against all classes of persons subject to it. Hence, the need to reformulate Dalit theology from within a more consistently anarchist framework, which seeks out “alternative forms of voluntary organization” (8) as a way of

subverting national identities and liberal governments.

The argument proceeds in three major movements. In the first three chapters, Hebden establishes a context for his study, drawing on Leo Tolstoy, Walter Wink and Jacques Ellul to define Christian anarchy (ch. 1), rereading modern Indian history in terms of the “Missionary God” of the British colonial project and the “Vedic God” of Hindu nationalism (ch. 2), and diagnosing the failure of the Indian church to address questions of caste oppression and violence – particularly in the context of the 2002 violence in Gujarat (ch. 3). The key problem, he suggests, is the homogenization of both Christian and Indian identities according to a false logic of universalization. The next two chapters turn first to such early 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian

missionaries as Henry Whitehead, Bernard Lucas and John S. Hoyland (ch. 4) and then to the thought of M.K. Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar (ch. 5) to trace out alternative patterns of thought and political engagement. The final section turns from this historical narrative to synthesis and constructive theology. Ch. 6 offers a thick description of Dalit patterns of political resistance, as revealed in the movement's theology, fictional and autobiographical narratives, and worship. Ch. 7 recontextualizes these traditions in light of anarchist thought, drawing particular attention to themes of plurality and "foreignness." Ch. 8 concludes the volume with a portrait of Christ as a foreigner to every principality and power and a call for the Christian church to "subvert the accusation of foreignness and use it to proclaim the kingdom of God as an alternative to national identity" (155).

Hebden insists that the only way forward in the contemporary political crisis is a path of nonviolence, voluntary organization at the local level and solidarity across boundaries of caste and class. Such an approach is both described and, to an extent, modeled in the text itself, as Hebden deftly discerns threads of oppression and resistance that cut across Christian and Hindu traditions, rather than between them. A good case in point is the discussion of Gandhi and Ambedkar in chapter 5. On the one hand, Hebden critiques a too-simplistic portrait of Ambedkar as an ally of Dalit resistance and Gandhi as an oppressor. In the case of the former, Ambedkar fought for Dalit rights, yet his conversion to Buddhism replicated Christian and Hindu ideological constructs and thus re-founded the oppressive cult of the state. In the case of the latter,

though Gandhi was an advocate of both the Indian state and a modestly reformed caste system, the logic of Satyagraha ultimately deconstructs both of them from within. "Nationalism," Hebden writes, "did not fit comfortably with Gandhi's sense of duty or Ambedkar's sense of justice and yet neither saw their way out of the lure to power" (105). In this way, they mirror precisely the deep ambivalence of Christian missionary theologies outlined in the previous chapter. The goal, then, is not to choose one religious tradition or one nationalist hero in place of another; instead, it is to engage all of them, to subvert their appeals to "statist" violence, and to discover deeper patterns of solidarity and liberation.

So far, so good. Very good, in fact. Yet, the implication of the work as a whole is also that one discovers the key to such deeper patterns in what are ultimately Western rather than Indian thinkers: Tolstoy, Wink, Ellul and even Hebden himself. Hebden seeks out a theology that is both *for* and *of* Dalit experience, and he emphasizes themes of plurality and locality. There is no reason to doubt his intention in this regard, and it is well borne out in the particular, Gujarati, Maharashtri and Tamil narratives that he draws out in chapters 3 and 6. Nevertheless, his descriptions of Dalit identity end up sounding rather homogenized—Dalits are, he suggests, "naturally anarchic and nonviolent" (154)—and his own recommendations are apodictic: "The *only* way to subvert the language of nationalism is for Dalits to return to the pre-colonial concept of bounded, corporate and localised identity . . ." (157, emphasis added). Even allowing for the flourishes of academic prose, anarchism emerges here as an ideological

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construct similar to the nationalist project itself, exported from modern Europe and supported by a romanticized vision of pre-modern India.

The book suffers from a few other difficulties, not least a rather significant number of typographical and grammatical errors and Hebden's own abrupt, sometimes repetitive style. Its ideological character is, however, most crucial. Readers are advised to attend carefully to its excellent analysis, but to set its repeated exhortations to one side. Most useful, perhaps, are the necessarily local and particular experiments in anarchism mentioned in passing along the way, including

Tolstoy's farm, Vinoba Bhave's Sarvodaya movement, and (via S. Clarke) Dalit Paraiyar drumming practices. Such lived examples do not provide a coherent ideology for reconstructing Dalit theology as such. Yet, they may actually be more effective in inviting readers of all classes and cultures to imagine alternative ways of living within and beyond the structures of the liberal nation state. And this, in turn, would seem to represent the larger and most important goal of Hebden's study.

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***Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways.* Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Vinod Peacock, eds. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010, viii + 302 pages.**

THE volume, *Dalit Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, is a useful update helping the reader to track the progress of Dalit theology since the nineteen – eighties, seeing areas like self-empowerment that have come to the fore and lacunae that still need to be fulfilled. The theological movement has become more sophisticated, more reflexive, and even more methodologically demanding of those within its ranks. The non-specialist reading a bit between the lines, looking for old names and new, can discern with some effort where all of this might be heading, and the editors have framed the articles in a helpful way.

The good news is that Dalit theology has not died like a romantic dream, but has gained

strength. The injustices of global capitalism are now even clearer, the corruption of officials more blatant, and importantly, the patriarchy and the damage done to Dalit women more publically noted and protested as women begin to speak in their own voices, and world news media and specialized internet sites, and human rights advocates, pick up and relay the gruesome details in seconds. This recalls a phrase often chanted at protests, “The whole world is watching”; and the world is indeed comprehending, at least to some small degree. Hindu nationalism emerges as an even uglier force, and attacks on Christians and Muslims become more and more of an embarrassment in a nation which has made economic strides