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Review: Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India

Chad Bauman

Butler University, cbauman@butler.edu

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oversimplification, omission, self-contradiction, and circularity of logic as to seriously weaken its conclusions.

The absence of a precise equivalent for “religion” in other cultures is taken to establish the absence of any equivalent, but Dubuisson’s recognition of universal processes of narrative world formation restores a universal functional equivalent of “religion.” The suggested substitution is only an improvement if “religion” is restricted to a very specific Christian theological understanding, which has long been marginalized in the academic and social scientific study of religions. This is one of the circularities of Dubuisson’s argument. His scornful attitude can be maintained only by neglect of, for example, the fact that worldview analysis (Ninian Smart, Worldviews: Cross-Cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs [Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1995]) as a corrective to theological determination was implied by Edmund Husserl’s understanding of weltanschauung, was specifically proposed by Smart (in Worldviews), and was further developed by William Paden (Religious Worlds [Boston, 1988]). None of this receives mention in Dubuisson’s proposal of “cosmographic formation.” If “religion” is not entirely restricted to this narrow, theologically determined concept, then translating non-Western cultural practices into “cosmographic formations” is an imposition no less distorting than translating them into “religions,” and it is no more likely to give access to “the human condition such as it is” (199).

Only by ignoring all scholarship that belies his portrayal can Dubuisson maintain his stereotype of the Western academy as an homogeneous institution in which “no doubts, no reservations are expressed” (54) concerning the existence of religion in this narrow sense in most, if not all, human cultures. But what of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (The Meaning and End of Religion [London, 1963]) or Russell McCutcheon (Manufacturing Religion [New York, 1977])? Dubuisson’s scorn for the Western academy is unrestrained: “Of all human phenomena, the most essential is that of life. Academia therefore takes no interest in it” (208).

Dubuisson anticipates criticism and attempts to disarm it by suggesting that “feverish resistance” to his work will result from the desire to retain the concept of religion with all the privileges that it confers on the West along with the theological implication that “religion” has a supernatural source (200). However, the book’s thesis that what we call religion is a human behavior susceptible to natural description and explanation is not seriously disputed in the field. Its attack on Western imperialism and cultural hegemony would be seen as laudable by most scholars. The book could enlighten those who believe religion to be an entity in res sent by a divine being or Western scholarship to have been uniformly altruistic and rational. Others should read it with reserve.

BRYAN RENNIE, Westminster College, Pennsylvania.


In this beautifully written volume, Eliza Kent discusses the effect of conversion to Christianity on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Indian attitudes about (and treatment of) women. Converting Women’s most controversial claim, which is nonetheless one for which Kent provides ample evidence, is that this effect was not always, from the perspective of modern Western feminism, a positive one. Rather, Kent argues, conversion to Christianity entailed in many cases the restriction of women’s spheres of activity and influence.
In the three chapters of part 1, Kent sets the scene by discussing the history of Christianity in the region, the emergence of the Christian women’s missionary movement, and, finally, the various attempts by members of the Nadar (formerly Shanar) caste, on which much of *Converting Women* focuses, to claim for themselves a more respectable social position.

The interaction of missionaries and Indians, both Christian and Hindu, produced what Kent calls a “discourse of respectability” (4). This discourse was dialogical, in the sense that both missionary and indigenous gender ideologies were involved in its development. Nevertheless, the most innovative of Kent’s assertions is that there was in fact an astonishing degree of convergence on matters of femininity among (1) local elites, (2) upwardly mobile Indian Christians, and (3) foreign missionaries. Each of these groups privileged in their women behaviors that exemplified “restraint, containment, and orderliness” over those that suggested “lack of self-control, spontaneity, and chaos” (9).

Lower-caste women in South India, as in other parts of the subcontinent, generally enjoyed a greater degree of mobility and a wider sphere of influence than their high-caste counterparts. For example, lower-caste women frequently worked with their husbands in agricultural fields or on palm plantations (the Nadars’ traditional occupation was toddy tapping). Moreover, lower-caste communities had fewer restrictions on divorce and remarriage than did elite Indian groups.

But these greater “freedoms” were in fact a mark of their low status. The ability of a community to control its women and to protect their honor, especially in terms of sexuality, was an index of their social status—the greater the ability to control and protect, the higher the status. The Victorian preference for monogamy and female domesticity, influenced as it was by the notion of “separate spheres,” therefore tracked relatively closely with elite Indian notions of ideal womanhood. Despite (or perhaps because of) their lower-caste roots, Indian Christians generally accepted elite Indian articulations of desirable femininity. Therefore, Kent suggests, their willingness to restrict the mobility and conjugal rights of women must be seen not only as an acceptance of missionary norms but also, and perhaps more importantly, as an attempt to assert a higher social status according to indigenous criteria.

The economic standing of formerly lower-caste Indian Christians had improved dramatically, making such a claim of higher status possible and plausible. (This economic improvement rested in part on the professionalization of Christian men, which incidentally allowed for and even encouraged the domestication of Indian women.) Christianization therefore resembled, Kent argues, the process of Sanskritization, studied so well by M. N. Srinivas and others, whereby a community that has gained economic and/or political status adopts the deities, beliefs, practices, attitudes, and mores of the locally dominant caste in order to assert its higher ritual and social status.

The assertion, common at the time and in many subsequent histories of Christian missions in India, that Christianity “liberated” Indian women is therefore, Kent argues, incomplete. The problem is that those making the assertion employ what I have elsewhere called an “asymmetrical assessment” and judge the “progress” of Indian Christian women by comparing them with upper-caste Indian women (among whom practices such as purdah, prohibitions on divorce, and enforced widowhood were widespread) rather than with other lower-caste Indians (among whom those same practices were virtually unknown).

In separate chapters, Kent discusses the effects of the ongoing “discourse of
respectability” on Indian Christian notions of domesticity, conjugalit, y, and sartorial style. Much of the material is innovative, and even when Kent discusses familiar material she brings to it a fresh perspective. For example, in chapter 5 Kent revisits the well-known nineteenth-century “breast cloth controversy,” during which lower-caste Indian women began covering their torsos—a right they had traditionally been denied—in a manner like that of local upper-caste women. According to prevailing cultural norms of the time, women and men both were expected to leave their chests exposed in front of deities, rulers, and members of higher castes. So while missionaries interpreted the breast cloth as a sign of modesty, local elites viewed it as an affront. Historians have generally asserted that the controversy was about status—who had it and who got to decide?—but Kent suggests that it may have had more to do with the desire of Indian Christians to indicate to others, particularly higher-caste men who sometimes assumed droit du seigneur with regard to lower-caste women, that Indian Christian women were off limits.

Kent’s analysis rests on a thorough investigation of archival and published materials, and the story she tells is both engaging and convincing, if perhaps of necessity—since the period under investigation lies just beyond the reach of oral history—skewed slightly toward the kind of elite and literate Christians who tend to show up in and produce such materials. Nevertheless, Converting Women is an impressive and important piece of research that should be on the shelves of anyone interested in conversion, gender, Indian Christianity, or South Indian social history.

CHAD M. BAUMAN, Butler University.

NORGET, KRISTIN. Days of Death, Days of Life: Ritual in the Popular Culture of Oaxaca. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xii+319 pp. $67.50 (cloth); $27.50 (paper).

Kristin Norget, an anthropologist at McGill University, presents a fine study of Mexican popular religion, focusing on the rites surrounding death in a humble urban community in Oaxaca, capital of the eponymous state. Her book describes and explores details of these rituals, their importance to the people, and how they manifest local philosophy and spirituality. She delivers a responsible ethnography and a vivid portrait of the community.

Norget discusses national and local, historical and contemporary notions of the Mexican subject and various iterations of “imagined community,” including national stereotypes and archetypes by Mexican intellectuals. She considers how race, class, and gender influence the self-identification of individuals and groups, analyzing the politics underlying what people say and how they live. The material reaped from her interviews exemplifies her stated intention to interpret and reflect on what she observes; she seems to have guided her informants skillfully to ponder their words and deeds.

She also exposes and examines efforts to define “the Mexican,” rooting her analysis in history, literature, popular-culture “texts,” and published studies. A key thread in that definition includes Mexicans’ attitudes toward death. She conveys how Oaxacans “use ritual and festivals and other sites of commemoration to affirm a relation to a past, a future, and a present community and to mark themselves off as members of a distinct community” (13). Her respect for her informants is patent, including in her consideration of how they rely