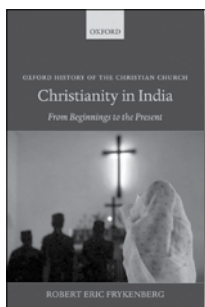


Book Reviews

Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present, Oxford History of the Christian Church, by Robert Eric Frykenberg (Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 564 + xxxii)

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



This magnificent scholarly work will be definitive for the study of Christianity in India for many years to come. It deals with the broad sweep of developments rather than the minutia of names and dates. Its first 100 pages set the stage for understanding the complexity of Christianity in India, both past and present, before embarking on an analysis of the early St. Thomas traditions.

The preface outlines a fundamental point that is essential for any true understanding of India or Christianity in India.

...more often than not Christians within India can be seen as being rooted within the history of distinct ethnic communities, each different from the next. These are distinct peoples that have not or do not, as a rule, intermarry or even interdine outside of their own community, and often do not share many common memories or traditions. "Caste" is the catch-all concept that has long been used to capture what is a uniquely indigenous, if not Indic (or Sanskritic) legacy, in this particularistic sense. "Birth," in Sanskrit, is *jāt*; and *jāti*, the Sanskritic term for "caste," its most precise or accurate indigenous equivalent. Wherever one turns there seems to be no escaping this phenomenon or its consequences. It lies at the very bedrock of an entire civilization and all its manifold cultures, and subcultures. The result, for Christians, has almost always been that they have tended to carry "dual identities" or have become manifested as possessing "hybridized" cultural features; moreover, since all ethnicities are ranked, by degrees, into respectable and non-respectable, or polluting, categories or *varnas* (or "colors"), various Christian communities are also fitted into some category and ranked, whether they like it or not. In this respect, Christianity in India merely reflects the entire country and its multiplex antiquities and legacies—which are very difficult to escape. (pp. vii-viii)

The preface closes with the author confessing how humbling such a study is and how much is still to be learned.

Chapter One introduces Christianity in India. Illustrating its complexity (and demonstrating that his study cannot possibly be exhaustive), Frykenberg suggests that

As far as can be determined, there is almost no form of Christianity that has ever existed in the world—ancient, medieval or modern—that has not entered and that does not still thrive somewhere within the continent (aka subcontinent). (p. 5)

Two further introductory chapters follow, entitled "Contextualizing Complexity." Chapter Two takes a look at the lands, peoples and social structures of India. This, of course, raises the issue of caste, under its proper Sanskrit designation as *varna* (color/category/class) *ashram* (stage of life) *dharmā* (duty).

Actually, there had never been any single place in all the continent of India where the idealized social structures of *varnashramadharma* actually existed, except in the imaginations of the Brahmins who had invented the system. This apparent contradiction, or discrepancy, confused Europeans many centuries ago. It still causes confusion. . . . In a continent comprised of perhaps some 2,000 to 3,000 distinct castes, each ethnically exclusive, names of actual castes and opinions about relative ranking orders can be remarkably different. (p. 49)

The particular situation of south India is noted:

The caste system of the south never really consisted of more than three classes of castes: (1) Brahmins, numerically very small but remarkably influential; (2) Non-Brahmins, including small Baniya (Vaishya) trading communities, who have ruled the land since ancient times and have remained powerful; and (3) Untouchables or "Outcaste" people who remained more heavily concentrated in Madras (i.e. Tamil Nadu), Kerala and Andhra than almost anywhere else. (p. 50)

Chapter Three, the third introductory chapter, closes with the exhortation that failure to understand the complex contexts of India while considering Indian Christianity "is to court enormous misunderstandings and overly simplistic notions" (56). Unfortunately, both are far too prominent today and this book provides a vital antidote.

The chapter on the Thomas traditions is one of the most insightful in the book. From a purely historical point of view it concludes,

... the historicity of apostolic origins rests upon conjectural or uncertain evidence. Yet, large measures of circumstantial and corroborative evidences are such that the plausibility, if not possibility, of historicity cannot be entirely or lightly dismissed. (p. 114).

But the cultural context provides the true setting for understanding the tenacity of Thomas stories.

Thomas Christians of India have themselves tended to fashion their own full rich heritage of historical understandings in ways comparable to how such understandings of ancient India were long fashioned by virtually all other elite communities within the Indian continent. Each community, from out of its own store of cultural and material resources, sought to preserve its own oral traditions, its own epic historical narratives (*itihāsa-purānas*), and its own narrative genealogies or lineages (*vamshāvalis*). (p. 92)

The British Raj followed the principles that had governed Indian political developments from time immemorial; the British Raj “was as much Indian as it was British”; one can even say that it was Hindu.

Next, an extensive chapter introduces Roman Catholic missions and the related political power struggles rooted in European rivalries.

Among movements known to have occurred, the most famous was the conversion of fishing communities, Paravars and Mukkavars, along the shorelines. For the Paravars, this event was as political as it was a “spiritual” event. This proud and venturesome seafaring folk engaged in fishing, pearl diving, trading and piracy. Threatened by Arab sea power and Nayaka land power, they turned to the Portuguese for “protection.” They then adopted the Christian faith in order to strengthen bonds of mutual obligation. (pp. 137-138)

Protestant missions are then introduced with an indigenous term for the missionary: *dubashi*. *Dubashis* are two-language people, brokers, mediators, cultural go-betweens.

The central argument of this chapter is this: that the functions and roles of *dubashi* Christians, whether they were Europeans or Native Indians, were—essentially, inherently, and intrinsically—infrastructural. This means that, despite rhetorical claims to the contrary by adversaries of Christian missionary movements in India, their task was always relatively humble. (p. 166)

...it is also important to note that few if any actions that turned different local communities in the direction of Christian faith, including Evangelical/Pietist Christian faith, can be attributed directly to efforts made by foreign missionaries themselves. Time and time again, as we shall see described in more detail in other chapters, infrastructures that missionaries helped to build served this purpose; but usually only after a period of thirty to fifty years’ incubation. Then, an explosion of spiritual energy among local Christians would inspire local leaders to bring the new message to their own people and to do so in their own native (mother) tongue. (p. 167)

Chapter seven is one of a number of interludes in the book that provide extensive background information, this one on the political logic of India and India’s unification under the British. The political realities of Indian life, which play over into many machinations involving Christianity in India, are summarized in two principles (this quotation from chapter 2; these principles are fleshed out in chapter 7).

This [political] logic is bound within the concepts of *mandalanyāya*, of the “logic of circles” or “spheres,” and *matsyanyāya* or the “logic of fish.” The first logic relied upon reasoned diplomacy for the building of alliances and consensual links between entities of relatively equal strength, while the second was a formula for relations between political entities of inherently unequal strength, which relied upon predatory action and raw force... (pp. 54–55)

There is quite an extensive account of the development of Madras as the great British city, and then of its neglect

(corruption playing a major role) as Calcutta and later Delhi became the center of British power (pp. 194ff). Frykenberg’s central point is that the British Raj followed the basic principles that had governed Indian political developments from time immemorial; the British Raj “was as much Indian as it was British” (p. 204); indeed one can even say that it was Hindu (cf. chapter 10).

A chapter outlining the *āvarna* (“outcaste”) conversion movements in south India follows, demonstrating the principles quoted above from page 167. One of the most striking chapters of the book then follows on, “Missionaries, Colonialism and Ecclesiastical Dominion.” There are four sections to this chapter. The first covers some of the conflicts in Kerala as Anglicans moved to take control over Thomas Christians. The second recounts the remarkable story of Karl Rhenius, a Lutheran missionary from Prussia who was in the midst of the remarkable conversion movements taking place at that time among a number of caste groups in Tamil Nadu. Long-standing Anglican and Lutheran cooperation ended with an Anglican takeover as Rhenius was dismissed for not being sufficiently Anglican in his theology or ecclesiology. In outlining this conflict, Frykenberg makes an important point noted elsewhere in his book as well, that indigenous Christian opinions, surely the most important viewpoints on many matters, remain almost impossible to discern:

The fact that more is known about missionary protests and government policy should not blind us to the possibility that much of what really happened still lies hidden from the gaze of historians. (p. 257, 266)

The third conflict was over caste. The Lutheran missionaries had considered caste a social system not entirely unlike the European feudal system with its nobility and peasantry. Bishop Heber of the Church of England had agreed, but his successor as Metropolitan Bishop of India, Daniel Wilson, laid down the law against any type of compromise with caste in the church. In Frykenberg’s words,

Stigmatized Vellalar [middle caste] Christians, referred to disparagingly in missionary records as “Tanjore Christians,” found themselves marginalized and oppressed. (p. 159)

The Vellalar Christians had a heroic leader in the poet Vedanayakam Sastriar.

Vedanayakam, on behalf of Thanjavur [Tanjore] Christians, accused missionaries of committing four cruelties; (1) tampering with Tamil Scripture, replacing old versions with their own; (2) forcing integration of all Christians into one caste,

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and excommunicating from the Eucharist all who refused to comply; (3) prohibiting flowers for festive celebrations such as weddings and funerals; and (4) removing Tamil lyrics and Tamil music from worship services. (p. 261)

Finally, Frykenberg gives us a broad analysis of the dual identity of Indian Christians which sheds light on the caste conflict and Vedanayakam's position.

All Christians, whether high caste or low caste or aboriginal/tribal (*varna*, *āvama*, or *adivāsi*) in origin, tended never to shed their distinctive identities based on "birth" or *jāt*. . . This meant that virtually all Christians tended to identify themselves as much by birth, caste and community as by church, denomination, or theological outlook. . . Since missionaries from abroad were alien and since no movement could ever occur that was not conveyed by a local agent in that local agent's own "mother tongue," no local Christian community or congregation ever escaped encapsulation within its own ethnic, hyphenated, hybrid identity—the paradox of representing both parochial and universal claims. (p. 263-264)

Frykenberg's objection to the Anglican intrusion into caste arrangements in traditionally Lutheran south Indian churches is clear. This must not be taken to mean that he approves of caste prejudice in the church; how much caste prejudice was actually present is difficult to discern since imperial decrees against accepted behaviors precluded all sensible discussion. But such decrees did not destroy, in fact hardly dented, caste realities. To this day, dual identities remain a reality and a matter of central concern in Indian Christianity.

Chapter ten introduces the birth of the construct of Hinduism and the complexities of government and church interaction in light of a growing "Hindu" identity.

What is now called "Hinduism" was a product of collaboration between noble Native or Indian ("Hindu") and European (Farangi, Parangi, or Pfarangi) scholarly and political figures in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. "Hinduism" was neither a British, nor a "colonial," nor even an "Orientalist" construction in any dismissive sense; nor was it a missionary invention. Rather it was the by-product of cultural explorations, and socio-political accommodations, before and during the early Raj. High-caste, mainly Brahmin pandits played as decisive a part as anything done by scholars from the West. . . codifying an emerging single system of quasi-official orthodoxy. Meanwhile, as the syncretistic and tolerant, pseudo-political ideology brought various religious systems of India together under the imperial umbrella of "Hinduism," the Company's own governments, on advice from Brahman servants, took over management of all *pukka* religious endowments and temples, thereby inadvertently putting every local "Hindu"—i.e. Native—religious institution under a single, overarching

structure of guardianship. Thus, by fiat, was a vast array of "Hindu" institutions that were welded together within the imperial apparatus gradually reified under the name of "Hinduism." (p. 269)

Four broad thematic chapters lead to the conclusion of the volume. "Elite Education and Missionaries" shows how extensive problems in administering India led to the development of an educated elite needed to rule the country, with major missionary collaboration. This tended to divide the missionary force, some focused on rural populations and some on educating the urban elite. "All missionaries tended to reflect and represent the social distinctions of classes within British society from which they had come" (p. 327). William Carey gets barely more than passing notice in this chapter; his significance in world mission history far exceeds his impact on Indian Christian history.

A chapter on "Catholic Renewal and Resurgence" includes some interesting observations of ecclesiastic power and caste. A happy (?) solution was found to one aspect of the caste problem in the church in Kerala;

. . . it was not until the last Portuguese Bishop of Cochin retired in 1952 that some animosities between high-caste and low-caste Christians were resolved: two dioceses were formed, with a bishop of appropriate birth for each. (p. 378)

This broad summary of caste in Indian Christianity is striking indeed;

Perhaps the biggest and most ceaseless and continuous of all ongoing arguments and conflicts, bringing about divisions and mutations among almost all Christian groups in India, regardless of whether they were Indians or Westerners, Catholic or Evangelicals, Anglicans or dissenters, Mar Thoma or Syrian, conservative or liberal, has continued to swirl around issues of caste and culture, ethnicity and "acculturation." Since it is difficult to find any time in the history of Christians in India when this was not a burning issue, this both remained and still is *the* enduring problem for *all* Christians in India. (p. 376, italics original)

A chapter introducing some of the striking "Trophies of Grace" from high caste communities focuses on Pandita Ramabai, of whom Frykenberg says "her critics never realized that Ramabai saw herself as both Hindu *and* Christian" (p. 403, italics original). Another eight remarkable figures are briefly noted before Frykenberg closes his chapter with this observation and question;

. . . most of the much publicized "Trophies of Grace" that served as interpreters between Christianity and non-Christian

India gradually melted away and disappeared, leaving hardly any community and scarcely a trace, except for their writings and writing about them that still continues to be published. Who can say whether and when any more of such "Trophies of Grace" will arise or gain such prominence? (p. 418)

A final thematic chapter outlines developments in the tribal (*adivāsi*) areas of the far northeast of India. The concluding chapter has a summary of major points touching again on many of the issues highlighted in this review, then an epilogue which notes five important new developments with brief commentary on each:

... some developments during the last half-century, especially during the past twenty years, need to be touched upon briefly, or described in enough detail to indicate their significance for the history of Christianity as a whole. Among these are the rapid rise and expansion (1) of Pentecostalism; (2) of indigenously led Christian movements or indigenously organized missionary movements; (3) of indigenously mounted opposition movements, especially militant Hindutva, Hindu nationalism, together with increasing persecutions and martyrdoms resulting therefrom; (4) of Indian forms of secularism and/or secularization; and finally (5) of increasingly pervasive and influential forms of what some call "churchless" Christians within societies of India, if not South Asia as a whole. (p. 464)

A book of such importance and brilliance deserved a better closing paragraph. This is an essential volume to read and digest for all who want to truly understand Christianity in India today. **IJFM**

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