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Book Review: Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India

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composer and activist as her main example of liberation theology, Sherinian's work makes a specific intervention: illuminating not only a denigrated form of music, but bringing much needed attention to the practice of the arts as vital to political and spiritual liberation. As she points out, the lived performance of music can be experienced as a form of freedom in itself, a point typically overlooked in accounts of liberation theology, yet nonetheless central to James Cone's insight that "to sing the spiritual was *to be free*" (qtd. 59). The centrality of direct experience is also important to this book's second major contribution: its attention to the ethnographer's own impact and subjectivity in the fieldwork context and its clear endorsement of advocacy anthropology. These dimensions of advocacy and self-reflexivity in Sherinian's

ethnographic methodology lead to the work's final major contribution, namely, its attempt to incorporate biography. Though some may question if the book's strategy of focusing on Appavoo doesn't veer too far towards "tribute", in my view at least, and as Sherinian states, the focus on the individual here is itself a necessary corrective to views of Dalit individuals who function mainly to represent a group (59). More theologically, as Appavoo says about his own Christian guru (108), it is only through an embodied human individual that the divine—and thus, this ethnomusicology as theology—can become real.

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***Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India.* By Sarbeswar Sahoo. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018, xviii + 203 pages.**

PENTECOSTALISM and Politics of Conversion in India draws upon several years of periodic ethnographic fieldwork among the Bhils of southern Rajasthan, and particularly among those who have converted to Pentecostal Christianity. The volume opens with chapters on the growth of Pentecostalism in the region, the nature of conversion, and issues of gender, and then concludes with two chapters on Hindu-Christian conflict and anti-Christian violence. Sahoo's thesis, in his own words, is that the "ideological incompatibility and antagonism between Christian missionaries and Hindu nationalists provide only a partial explanation for anti-Christian violence in India" (7). A more complete explanation, Sahoo suggests, would include factors such as "competing projects of conversion of both Christian missionaries and Hindu nationalists,

the politicization of identity in relation to competitive electoral politics, and the dynamics of the (BJP-led) development state" (7).

That last point, on the dynamics of development, is worth highlighting. One of the things that makes this work particularly rich is the fact that Professor Sahoo's earlier research was on development, and especially on the *competing* development projects of different religious communities among the Bhils. As Sahoo shows in the Bhil context, and as is true elsewhere, development projects are often initiated for the very purpose of securing the loyalty or sympathy of those served. This purpose adds a layer of complexity and competition to interreligious interactions, and contributes, in Sahoo's view, to their volatility.

Sahoo is among a very small number of scholars who have studied Pentecostalism in India, and an even smaller number who have looked closely at the political implications of this form of Indian Christianity. That alone makes this book a unique and valuable contribution. In addition, however, Sahoo has a broad range of related literature (on Indian Christianity, on conversion, on nationalism and politics, on development, etc.) at his fingertips, and regularly brings his own research into conversation with that literature, drawing upon it, testing it, and applying its insights to his own work.

One of the scholarly debates with which he regularly engages concerns the nature of conversion. Two competing explanations for conversion to Christianity in India are dominant at both the popular and scholarly levels. While these explanations usually reflect the bias of the people articulating them, they are united in presuming that most converts have been lower-caste and/or impoverished. The first common explanation is that lower-caste Christians convert for equality and dignity that they cannot find within their own Hindu tradition. The second is that they convert for the economic or social advancement they can achieve by making use of Christian educational, vocation, and medical services. Sahoo's work among the Bhils confirms my own intuition that whatever may have been the case in the past, the vast majority of those who convert to Christianity in India today, and particularly those who convert to Pentecostalism, do so in the wake of a miraculous healing. As one of Sahoo's informants remarks, "in tribal society, a small miracle is a big thing; it increases people's *astha* (faith), in Christ and they begin to visit the church..." (37). The occasionally *temporary* nature of these affiliations with Christianity—those who cease to be healed

within Christianity are liable to look elsewhere—demands that we think about conversion as a process rather than a momentary act, a process that does not in every situation lead to a deepening of faith, but at least in some cases leads to *deconversion*.

It is interesting, in this regard, that Sahoo's Christian informants themselves have begun to distinguish between "believers" or "followers," on the one hand, and "converts," on the other (74). Followers, according to Professor Sahoo, are those who have "become disenchanted with [their] earlier belief system and have experienced a spiritual and religious transformation and transition in their lives" (76). Many have received baptism, but, in Professor Sahoo's estimation, "The only reason why they have *not* followed the legal means of conversion is the fear of persecution and the legal disadvantages that will follow their conversion..." (76). While these legal matters do indeed prevent many Indian Christians from openly identifying as such, I do also suspect at least a few of these "followers" might avoid formal conversion not only because of a fear of persecution and the legal disadvantages of conversion, but also because of the primacy of healing in their religious behavior and choices, that is, because of an efficacy orientation that leads them to affiliate with the community where they find healing and prosperity, and also encourages them to shop around, as it were, in search of it.

Historically, one of the points of contention between Hindus and Christians on the issue of conversion is—to use language borrowed from Reid Locklin—that Hindus have generally conceived of conversion as conversion "up" (that is personal transformation within one's own tradition) whereas Christians have tended in the modern era to conceive of conversion as conversion

“over,” that is, conversion marked by a complete and transformative shift in identity from one community to another. This contention lies at the heart of Gandhi’s assertion (and complaint, when speaking to Christian missionaries) that it was better to encourage a person to advance spiritually within their own tradition than to convert them to one’s own. My sense, however, is that Indian Christians have in recent decades begun to think a bit more like Gandhi in this regard. As Kerry San Chirico and others have shown, for example, *Yeshu bhakt* (Devotees of Jesus) and *Khrist bhakt* (Devotees of Christ) movements have recently proliferated in India. In these movements, non-Christians are welcome to come and have a transformative spiritual encounter with Jesus like they might with any non-Christian deity, but, importantly, *are not encouraged to convert in the sense of formally becoming Christian*. They are, in essence, encouraged to convert “up” but not “over.” One finds this new way of thinking primarily among mainstream Catholic and Protestant Christians, however. The last place one would expect to find it is among Pentecostals, because Pentecostal theology has historically tended to encourage a complete rupture with the non-Christian past at the moment of conversion (the reality,

of course, is always much messier). In light of this, one of Sahoo’s most interesting discoveries is that even Pentecostal conceptions of conversion seem to be shifting, such as in the words of one of his interviewees, Madam Mary, who, according to Sahoo, “pointed out that real conversion is not about *dharma parivartan* (change of religion) or acceptance of Christian baptism; it is rather about *jeevan parivartan* or total transformation of life” (72). Whether this decreasing emphasis on a formal change of religious affiliation is a result of the influence of Hinduism or a response to the challenges that come with formal changes in religious affiliation (e.g., social resistance and hostility, a loss of reservation benefits) is a more difficult question to answer.

Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India is the work of an intelligent and thoughtful interpreter with excellent scholarly instincts, a knack for lucid prose, and a very broad and wide-ranging grasp of the relevant scholarly literature. It is eminently readable and would be accessible even to an advanced undergraduate audience.

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***Khrist Bhakta Movement: A Model for an Indian Church? Inculturation in the Area of Community Building.* By Cyril J. Kuttiyanikkal. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2014, 377 pages.**

THE Khrist Bhaktas can be found in and around Roman Catholic spaces of the Banaras region. These “devotees of Christ” are mostly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). They are majority women, though male numbers are increasing. And they regularly seek the ministrations of Indian

Missionary Society (IMS) priests, nuns from various orders, and fellow Khrist Bhakta and lay Catholic *aguas*, or catechists, who travel to scores of local villages fanning out of Matri Dham Ashram like ripples on water. On the second Saturday of each month, thousands of Khrist Bhaktas can be found at the ashram