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Book Review: A Matter of Belief: Christian Conversion and Healing in North- East India

K. C. Zubko
UNC Asheville

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thinking and its pervasiveness in our quest for modernity.

Roselle M. Gonsalves
University of Calgary

***A Matter of Belief: Christian Conversion and Healing in North-East India.* Vibha Joshi. New York: Berghahn Books, 2012, 298 pages.**

DO not let the title fool you into thinking that *A Matter of Belief* consists of theologically splitting hairs. This well-researched anthropological and archival study of contemporary practices of healing that draw from both traditional Naga-Angami and Christian spheres of influence should perhaps be titled a matter of *practice*, rather than belief. Joshi's work is the fruit of intermittent fieldwork since 1985 on traditional healers in an area that is often closed to researchers due to violent upheavals from internal rifts between Naga political groups seeking different forms of independence and external tensions with at first British, and later Indian governments. Her work utilizes interviews with informants, as well as historical records, including missionary letters, officer tour reports, and the work of her main interlocutor, J.H. Hutton, a civil servant turned anthropologist who wrote a definitive study of the Naga peoples in 1921. As not many people are versed in Naga history, Joshi begins with a concise primer of the complex relationships between religious worldviews (Angami animism and various forms of Christianity), politico-military entities and the current revival of Naga culture as a detailed backdrop before launching into her main argument that is of interest to scholars of global Christianities, South Asia, and global health.

The primary position of this book centers on a critique of anthropological assessments that blame Christianity for wiping out traditional animist religious forms (52) or that oversimplify Angami religion as “syncretic”(3). Instead, Joshi asserts a more fluid picture of religion, as explored at its intersection with healing practices. The author insightfully frames Angami Christian and non-Christian practices as “two broad alternating streams of discourse, one masking the other but at different times and in different guises” (3), rather than as a bifurcated either/or scenario. The Angami are statistically 90% Christian (4), and have been significantly influenced by educational and medical missions beginning with Baptists, but also Catholics and various Revival denominations. What is missing, Joshi astutely notes, is an examination of the “agency of the ‘transporter’ and that of the recipient, and the criteria for selection – who selects, and what is being selected” (7) when it comes to understanding the formation of Naga Christian identity and practices. Joshi makes a compelling case that the lens of healing provides a particularly beneficial, multi-dimensional window into Angami understandings of self-selection of various Christian and animist elements as determined in each context.

For example, in chapter 4, Joshi focuses on healers who claim various religious orientations, and fit into different Angami categories of healers, such as herbalists and necromancers. Various understandings of how spirits or God (Ukepenuopfü) intervene or provide the gifts of healing have some common threads that cut across these practitioners no matter their faith, but there are important distinctions. In one instance, a healer who converted to Christianity indicated that 2 of her 3 spirit helpers converted as well (134). This information adds to Joshi's larger presentation of how Christianity is experienced by human as well as spirit relations across families that have unusually mixed religious affiliations. It is common for human-spirit families to be composed of a variety of sects, from Kruna (animist) to Pentecostal, Baptist, and others as chosen by individual preferences of healing modalities attributed to each sub-system.

While female healers are featured along with male healers, in much of the book there is a curious lack of gender specific analysis. While this may not be the focus for the author, the fact that in major sections of the study, such as the male-centered annual renewal festival of Sekrenyi, in which the author was not allowed to attend all of the rituals as a female (105), and descriptions were based on male informants' experiences (106-110), the question remains as to what the women were doing. When there were a few women newly included in a procession, how recent was the change and why (114)? Further, the analysis could be expanded to include a deeper consideration of the prayer work of women in Baptist and Catholic churches (236-7), and the role of *lie-thou-mia*, a type of Pentecostal "nun" who is

unmarried, gives up property and prays full-time (226). What unique alternative perspectives could hearing the voices of any of these women provide?

Joshi's overall style emphasizes a more top-down analysis, with information densely compacted under the scholar's voice, rather than letting informants speak directly in the text throughout the chapters. Regularly interspersed quotes, rather than embedded paraphrases of what "one informant said" might perhaps provide more agency for the informants own words to take the lead in the analysis. There are a few lengthy case studies, as well as informative notes that help provide a window into those voices that leave the reader wanting more of what is mostly hidden by its placement in the endnotes or subsumed under analysis. Having curated exhibits and written books on Angami textiles, Joshi's expertise in material and bodied cultures could have been woven into this work even more, beyond the mention of Christian vestment designs (196), to fill in some of the unvoiced cultural aspects, and would have complemented the strength in her attention to how bodied movements redefine Angami spaces on a yearly basis in the festival of Sekrenyi (107).

In sum, this book offers insight into the complex ongoing negotiations of cultural, religious and political identities among contemporary Angami-Naga. The focus on healing is a perceptive way to neutrally cut across all these factors and allows for Joshi to highlight a primary concern of the Angami-Naga themselves on the healing of the individual body and soul as extended to the healing of Naga society at large (223). It is a powerful research direction to explore the events led by church organizations that aim at

mending the trauma caused by political struggles and acts of vengeance, even though these mediation efforts are not yet completely successful. As Joshi rightly notes, this reconciliation work could benefit from understandings of “pluralistic healing” as exemplified in her work, and not just the tools

from any one religion. This constructive pluralistic conclusion is one that would be advantageous to any ongoing work in conflict transformation.

K.C. Zubko
UNC Asheville

Hindu Perspectives on Evolution: Darwin, Dharma, and Design.
C. Mackenzie Brown. London and New York: Routledge, 2012. xii, 276 pp.

THIS book confronts the relationship between science and religion from a Hindu perspective. It begins with an assessment of the six traditional Hindu schools of philosophical thought against the background of the purely materialist Cārvāka view. The middle part of the book surveys 19th and early 20th century thinkers who were in dialogue with the emerging modern scientific discourse and ideas espoused by Darwin. The third part of the book examines the prevailing attitudes held by 1000 Hindus queried by the author through a Survey Monkey poll created in consultation with practicing Hindus and social scientists.

The Vedas and the Upaniṣads include speculations regarding the physical form and purpose of the universe. The Vaiśeṣika school posits nine eternal substances (*dravya*) that comprise reality. Nyāya advances systems of logic to better understand nature. Sāṃkhya expands the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika analysis to 25 factors (*tattva*) with increased emphasis given to perceptual processes. Sāṃkhya also introduces the teleology of freedom. Yoga provides methods of attaining that freedom. Mīmāṃsā remains agnostic on the possibility of

freedom, maintaining a doctrine of eternity that relies on ritual to establish and maintain harmony. Vedānta sees the universe as emerging from a consciousness that is fundamentally united yet differentiated, giving birth to both nondual and theistic systems of belief. Brown posits that the Vedāntins believe that mark of this consciousness can be found in the world and characterizes their belief system as one of intelligent design with the exception of Ramanuja who ascribes to a more organic model that allows for the ongoing active presence of God-consciousness.

Rammohan Roy employed the design argument to assert that the presence of God could be found in all things, vindicating the Hindus against charges of idolatry. Similarly, Debendranath Tagore ascribed to what Brown refers to as an "intuitive theism." Keshab Chandra Sen learned about Darwin's theory of evolution while in England in the 1870s and taught about a harmony between science and religion, suggesting that religions themselves evolve. Dayananda Saraswati advanced a view of "modern Vedic creationism" that largely