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Indian Christian Historiography from Below, from Above, and in Between.

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that he had been waiting for thousands of years in the darkness for that moment of illumination in which he would finally be known" (308). *Man* was too near to us to be seen as the strange creature that he is. If the academic study of religion has a more difficult time letting go of *religion* than *Man*, it is understandable. After all, *religion* is twice as old and, perhaps, twice as dear. Nevertheless, until we come to see "the very idea of religion" as an object of knowledge that we have fabricated with our own hands—as an artifact that is made rather than *found*—all the history in the world will not save us from ourselves.

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Indian Christian Historiography from Below, from Above, and in Between

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India and the Indianness of Christianity: Essays on Understanding—Historical, Theological, and Bibliographical—in Honor of Robert Eric Frykenberg. Edited by **Richard Fox Young**. Studies in the History of Christian Missions. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009. xi + 283 pp. $45.00 paper.

A Social History of Christianity: North-west India Since 1800. By **John C. B. Webster**. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007. xiv + 410 pp. $55.00 cloth.

India and the Indianness of Christianity is a festschrift for Robert E. Frykenberg, whose widely praised dissertation, published as *Guntur District, 1788–1848: A History of Local Influence and Central Authority in South India* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), employed what an early reviewer referred to as "grass roots history" (4) to question the assumption that India was during the colonial period in any simple or unquestionable way "under" the Raj. The Raj itself, Frykenberg would later provocatively claim, was an "*Indian* institution" (4) because it was mediated and accordingly modified, translated, altered, and sometimes even eviscerated by the Indian *dubashes* ("bilinguals" or "interpreters") who were employed by the British to execute its functions.

Frykenberg matters to historians of Christianity because, beginning in the mid-1970s, he began to write about Indian Christians.[1] When he did so, he adopted the same approach as in his earlier work, writing "bottom up" histories of Indian Christians focusing on how they mediated, translated, and altered the message to which they had been introduced by missionaries. What the possibility of applying similar methods to the study of imperial and Indian Christian history should make clear is articulated succinctly by Chandra Mallampalli, one of the volume's contributors: "Debates that have preoccupied historians of the Raj—local versus central power, indigenous agency and resistance versus colonial power, cultural imperialism, and so forth—find many parallels within the history of Indian Christianity" (144).

Frykenberg's methodological approach to Indian Christianity resembles that pioneered by Andrew Walls (and later popularized by Lamin Sanneh) in the context of Africa. As Walls might put it, with agreement from Frykenberg, the Christianization of India also entailed the Indianization of Christianity. Christianity, therefore, regardless of what its critics might say, is an *Indian* religion. The very comparability of Walls, Sanneh, and Frykenberg is telling; despite the fact that he worked for almost his entire career in the University of Madison's South Asian Studies program, Frykenberg has been more open to learning from self-consciously Christian scholars, and more candid about his own Christian commitments than is currently fashionable in the secular academy.

More controversial than his openness to insights emerging from self-consciously Christian scholars, however, has been Frykenberg's frequent criticism of (and refusal to employ in any significant way) the theory-laden historiographies of postcolonial and subaltern studies.[2] Frykenberg's criticism of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies historians like Gauri Viswanathan appears to derive less from their academic concerns—after all, much of Frykenberg's work is focused on the postcolonial and the subaltern—than from his suspicion that what one might call their "master narratives" blind them to the complexity of the stories they seek to tell.

Interestingly, Frykenberg himself has been accused of perpetuating his own master narrative. In *Imperial Fault Lines*, for example, Jeffrey Cox includes a discussion of the work of Frykenberg and others under the heading, "The Providentialist Master Narrative."[3] His main concern appears to be that scholars like Frykenberg overstate the distinction between missionaries and

[1]As he continues to do; his most recent monograph is *Christianity in India: Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2]On this, see Arun W. Jones, Review of *Christianity in India: Beginnings to the Present*, by Robert E. Frykenberg. *Church History* 78, no. 4 (December 2009), 947–49.

[3]Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818–1940* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 11–13.

imperial "military officers, government officials, merchants, and scholars," and by doing so obscure the many ways in which missionaries were "implicated in systems of imperial coercion and control."[4]

There is no doubt that Frykenberg's influence has inspired a significant number of Western scholars working on Indian Christianity to shift their scholarly gaze away from missionaries—the traditional focus of Western histories of "Indian Christianity"—and toward Indian Christians themselves. That influence is nowhere more obvious than in the Eerdmans series edited by Frykenberg and Brian Stanley, "Studies in the History of Christian Missions," which includes a number of important edited volumes and monographs on Indian Christianity. As Cox wryly notes in a review of my own book, which appeared in the series, many of the authors who contributed to it seem oddly, despite the series title, rather uninterested in missionaries. The problem with this, Cox contends, is that an overemphasis on Indian Christians and processes of "indigenization" ends up concealing important ways in which "missionaries and Christian converts alike worked together to invent a new form of Christian identity, one that cannot be understood if one relies too heavily on the binary labels indigenous and foreign."[5]

In arguing for the distinctiveness and significance of his own approach, Cox occasionally oversimplifies Frykenberg's work, and that of those who are part of what we might call the Frykenberg "school" of Indian Christian historiography. However, it *is* true that Frykenberg's method has been appealing to many scholars precisely because it exposes the inadequacies of earlier histories of "Indian Christianity" (which were often just Eurocentric missions histories *masquerading* as histories of Indian Christianity). Unfortunately, in the process of reacting against one inadequacy, scholars in the Frykenberg school risk introducing another. As Mallampalli puts it in this volume, "As much as such perspectives from below offer a corrective to Eurocentric interpretations of Indian Christianity, they run the risk of minimizing the very real impact of the foreign hand on the minds of converts and the direction of Christian movements" (148). If Frykenberg's research and that of those who were influenced by him helped swing the pendulum of Indian Christian historiography away from missionaries and toward Indian Christians themselves (at times going a bit too far, perhaps), then research like that in Cox's *Imperial Fault Lines*, which provides a thoughtful and nuanced analysis of Western missionaries at work in British India, may swing it back again to a more fruitful equilibrium.

[4]Ibid., 12.

[5]Jeffrey Cox, Review of *Christian Identity and* Dalit *Religion in Hindu India, 1868–1947*, by Chad M. Bauman. *American Historical Review* 115, no. 2 (2010), 527.

Mallampalli's chapter in *India and the Indianness of Christianity* achieves something like the equilibrium just described. Drawing upon the research that informed his compelling monograph, *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863–1937* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), Mallampalli analyzes the effects of the late nineteenth-century Indian judiciary on Indian Christian identity. In a variety of intriguing decisions adduced by Mallampalli, the South Indian court system refused to recognize claims made by Catholic Christians based on traditional caste norms governing inheritance or the interaction of higher and lower castes because those norms were deemed by the court to be un-Christian. In so doing, the judiciary undermined some of the "accommodative tendencies of Catholic movements" (149) and imposed upon South Indian Christian the socio-religious norms of European Christianity. As Mallampalli asserts, an overemphasis on this kind of history from the "bottom up" would obscure the very real ways in which Indian Christian identity was also formed, at least to a certain degree, from the top down.

Richard Fox Young's own chapter, "Empire and Misinformation," strikes a similar balance. In his characteristically delightful prose, Young narrates the story of one Parthepat Raghaviah Acharya, an early nineteenth-century Teleguized Maratha Brahmin and member, in various capacities, of the British administrative apparatus, who "stepped into the public arena to contest India's orientalization [especially at the College of Fort William in Calcutta] by offering, civilly and collegially, to fill in the information" (69) the British lacked about Indian law and cultural practices such as *sati* (suttee). Among other approaches, Raghaviah argues in correspondence with British figures that "Hindu" law was historically quite diverse, so diverse, in fact, that there were within it ample resources to justify reform. In many ways, by focusing on a Hindu figure who critiques and attempts to correct imperial ideas about Hinduism, informed and prejudiced as they were by British Christianity, Young straddles and fruitfully combines Frykenberg's interest in both Indian colonial and Indian Christian history, and demonstrates the potential of Frykenberg's approach to contest "historiographies that characterize the production of colonial knowledge as if it were made in Britain, imposed form above, and passively accepted" (79).

Similarly sophisticated historical chapters contributed to the volume by Daniel Jeyaraj, Avril Powell, and Geoffrey Oddie focus, respectively, on the "interdependence" (26) of missionaries and Indian Christians in Tranquebar, the work of a Muslim convert named 'Abd al-Masih (ca. 1769–1827) associated with the Church Missionary Society in Agra, and the way that the largely upper-caste Hindu pundits who taught Indian languages to missionaries influenced missionary understandings of "Hinduism." All of the historical chapters in *India and the Indianness of Christianity* are deeply

rooted in the archives of British imperial and missionary institutions. This rootedness in the archive is also, of course, one of Frykenberg's legacies, and justifies the inclusion in this volume of two bibliographic chapters on relevant archival sources, one by Rosemary Seton on resources located in the United Kingdom, and the other by Martha Lund Smalley on North American archives.

A chapter by Wilbert Shenk argues that the ecumenical proclivities of Western missionaries drove them not only to work across Western denominational lines, but also to cooperate with the "ancient churches," that is, the Eastern Orthodox churches of India, the Middle East, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. Along the way, Shenk occasionally indulges in more theological judgments, such as when he accuses certain missionaries of espousing a "defective ecclesiology" (57). The chapter fits uncomfortably in this volume, but not because of its theology. While the names of famous missionaries and missionary supporters like Xavier, Carey, Schwartz, Buchanan, Francke, Boehm, and Ziegenbalg parade peremptorily across the pages, the chapter pays hardly any attention at all to the actual Indians with whom these missionaries interacted. For reasons that should be clear from the early paragraphs of this review—it is actually this kind of history, not Frykenberg's, that I think of when I hear the term "providentialist"—the inclusion of Shenk's chapter in this festschrift makes little sense unless one understands it as a testament to Frykenberg's willingness to hear and learn from historians and scholars who write self-consciously from a Christian perspective, or to what Young has more recently called Frykenberg's theological "enthusiasms,"[6] as indeed it may have been intended.

In an even more explicitly theological chapter, John Carman asks whether Christian theological "assessments of Hinduism should be left to Indian Christians" (235). He concludes, after some discussion, that "there are good reasons for keeping [them] international" (236), and then seeks, in the chapter, to contribute to the conversation. Unfortunately, though there is in this chapter the tantalizing news that new work is coming from Carman, much of it covers ground already well traversed by Carman's earlier work,[7] and there is disappointingly little acknowledgement of the more recent and incredibly sophisticated research of comparative theologians like Francis Clooney and John Thatamanil.

[6]Richard Fox Young, "World Christian Historiography, Theological 'Enthusiasms,' and the Writing of R. E. Frykenberg's Christianity in India," *Religion Compass* 5, no. 2 (2011): 71–79.

[7]See, for example, his dissertation on the Vaishnava Hindu theologian Ramanuja, published as *The Theology of Ramanuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), and his *Majesty and Meekness: A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).

John C. B. Webster, author of *A Social History of Christianity: North-west India since 1800*, shares Frykenberg's aversion to the language of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies; while there is in this book a great deal of keen observation, there is very little *theory* indeed. Webster's monograph is a regional history, and on the very first page he defends his approach. Regional history, he argues, recognizes that "Christianity functions primarily at the local and regional levels," and that "national developments" have "different regional impacts and responses" (1). "At the same time," Webster continues, "regional history forces the historian to move beyond the history of a particular Christian mission, institution, or type of work . . . in order to gain a vision of Christianity as a whole within a specific locale. Depth and comprehensiveness are often incompatible goals. Regional history may offer the best way of achieving a good measure of both at the same time" (1). The region analyzed in the book includes most of what today lies between India's Delhi and Pakistan's Peshawar, a region that is culturally and religiously distinct in many ways, not the least of which is that in many parts of the region Muslims and Sikhs were as prevalent and influential as Hindus.

A Social History of Christianity is also, as the title implies, a *social* history, and Webster's methodological choice derives from his impression that the "internal dynamics" of the Christian community "have been shaped far more by social and political realities than by missionary designs" (12). Accordingly, the chapters of the book are organized by chronological era, each focusing on the relationship of the Christian community to the social changes that define the era, for example, the arrival of missionaries, the growth of British influence, low-caste social discontent, religious reform, the independence movement, Partition, and so forth.

One of the recurrent themes of the book is how, in the early period (1800–1857), foreign missionaries were very often providing "some very interesting answers to questions about personal guilt and the life after death [that] nobody was really asking" (73). The missionaries attempted, somewhat unsuccessfully, "to draw their Indian audiences into [their own] way of thinking" (61). Indeed, some of their earliest tracts were simply vernacular translations of "basic Western Evangelical preaching" (61). As a result of this and other factors, according to Webster, the Christian community in the Northwest grew quite slowly during its earliest years, boasting fewer than two hundred members by 1857, and being nearly wiped out by the anti-European and anti-Christian violence of the Indian uprising that same year.

The pace of Christian growth quickened considerably after 1873, when a conversion movement began to develop among rural, lower-caste Chuhras, resulting in over 100,000 converts by 1918. As a consequence, the

Northwestern Christian community "was changed from a tiny, literate, and progressive urban community into a much larger, predominantly illiterate, poor rural community" (168). By 1918, however, the social influence of the Northwestern Christian community had reached its zenith. Though the possibility of conversion to Christianity continued to have social effects in the region—forcing Hindu reform movements, for example, to address the marginalization of lower-caste Hindus—the growing strength of the independence movement undermined and sidelined the Christian community, which was now increasingly suspected of having mixed loyalties (205).

Early parts of Webster's long penultimate chapter on the Northwestern Christian community in Independent India discuss the effects of Independence, Partition, urbanization, lower-caste political assertiveness, and India's new constitution on Northwestern Christians, and to great effect. The chapter also briefly—but only briefly—discusses the growing activity and strength of evangelical and pentecostal Christians in the region. Webster admits, early on in the book, that to be able to manage the amount of material at hand he was forced to employ a "majoritarian bias," that is, to concentrate more on the "historic missions" than the "relative latecomers" (15). That choice makes sense for the pre-Independence period, but in the post-Independence era the focus on older Christian communities prevents Webster, perhaps, from sufficiently covering the evangelical and Protestant groups whose prominence and importance in the region has grown exponentially in recent decades.

The book concludes with a very useful summary of the many ways in which Northwestern Christianity was distinct from that in other regions. In contrast to Christianity in southern India, for example, Northwestern Christianity never made inroads "among locally powerful groups" and, therefore, never had a "solid local power and economic base" (361) as it did in the south. Though Webster highlights several other ways in which Northwestern Christianity is (and was) distinctive, throughout the book he resists the temptation to simplify his narrative by generalizing about the region. Most of the chapters, for example, discuss urban and rural Christianity separately, and point out the differences (and tensions) between high- and low-caste Christians, and even (in some cases) between male and female Christians.

The great strength of Webster's social history is the way it depicts the Indian Christian community in conversation with social and political developments of the time. Many of the most significant of these developments had to do with British imperialism, so the relationship of missionaries and Indian Christians to British administrators and their policies figures prominently in the book. In *Imperial Fault Lines*, Cox accuses Webster's earlier text, *The Christian Community and Change in Nineteenth Century North India* (Delhi: MacMillan of India, 1976), of perpetuating, along with the work of

Frykenberg, the "Providentialist master narrative."[8] Curiously, Cox includes with his accusation neither comment nor justification, and my own reading of *The Christian Community and Change* is much more positive. But even more than in *The Christian Community and Change*, in *A Social History of Christianity* Webster attends quite closely to the diverse and changing relationships of missionaries and imperial officials, focusing on the rise and eventual decline (after 1880) of what Stanley Brush has called the "Evangelical Entente" between missionaries and evangelically minded imperial administrators (6). Webster is also admirably attentive to the effects of more local and internal developments on the Indian Christian community (and vice versa), and this attentiveness balances out his concern with British imperialism.

If there is a weakness of this kind of regional social history, it is that the lives, actions, and motivations of individual actors get lost. To reverse the old idiomatic phrase, in such histories, one sometimes cannot see the trees for the forest. Very few Indian individuals are mentioned by name in the book, and fewer still are given flesh and blood. Even Sadhu Sundar Singh, most famous among Northwestern Indian Christians in this era, receives only half a page of coverage. If the major risk of "ground up" histories like those inspired by Frykenberg is a lack of attention to the ways in which individual actors are influenced and constrained in their actions by a variety of social forces beyond their control (familial, local, imperial, and otherwise), the most obvious risk of social history is that those same individuals get lost altogether.

That said, it bears mentioning that all historiography requires choices, and all methods have their advantages and disadvantages, their potentialities and their liabilities. If Indian Christian historiography is to proceed productively, it will do so by bringing diverse methodologies into conversation with one another. As Young puts it in his aforementioned review of Indian historiography, "A dispute over who gets to sit at the head of the Christian table is most likely to resolve itself in dialectic, recombining Indocentrism with Eurocentrism, such that the one becomes less Euro-exclusive and the other more Indo-inclusive."[9] The result of such dialectic would surely be greater than the sum of its parts.

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[8]Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines*, 88.
[9]Young, "World Christian Historiography," 74.