

Abstracts, Panel 43
“Christians, Cultural Interactions, and South Asia’s Religious Traditions”
Richard Fox Young (Princeton Theological Seminary, USA)
Chad M. Bauman (Butler University, USA)

Morning Session I: 9:00-11:00

Theme: Acculturation, Translation, and Religious Change

1. Torkel Brekke (University of Oslo, Norway)

God in the Flesh

The doctrine of incarnation has been part of Christian theology since the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which formulated the classic doctrine: in brief, Jesus is the eternal son of God, fully God and fully man. In this paper, I will explore how William Carey and his English Baptist associates attempted to convey this idea through their translations of the Bible and through debates with local people in Bengal, both Muslims and Hindus. During the first years of missionary work in India it became clear to Carey and his companions that the Christian teachings of God and Christ was an issue that was difficult to make potential converts understand. The problems inherent in conveying the idea of God who became flesh for the purpose of suffering and dying was partly a problem of translation. There were no natural words to pick from Bengali, or other Indian languages, to render to concept of incarnation. Some scholars of Christianity in India have claimed that the classical Hindu concept of *avatara* made it possible for early Christian missionaries to convey the idea of incarnation. However, this was not an option explored by Carey and his associates. Closely linked to the problem of incarnation was the issue of virgin-birth, and here, too, the missionaries found it hard to produce translations that made sense to locals. None of the standard words for virginity in the Bengali language conveyed the sense needed to give the right “Christian flavour” to the translations. These problems produced long and heated debates between missionaries in India and in Britain. This paper will use mostly unpublished letters and booklets from the early 1800s illuminating these problems.

2. Xavier Gravend-Tirole (University of Montreal, Canada, University of Lausanne, Switzerland)

What Happened to the Indigenization Movement within the Catholic Church in India?

When the Vatican II Council assessed religious freedom and significant recognition of different cultures and religions, some creative renewals in the indigenization movement were already vibrant in India. Yet, the Council gave a new breath to different experiences, so that, in the 70-80s within the Catholic Church, different experiences thrived in terms of Catholic ashrams, Indian liturgy, *intra*-religious dialogue, etc.

Roughly since the 90s, however, the movement progressively run out of steam. But to what extent exactly? This paper aims at exploring different factors that can explain why indigenization became problematic for some, while still relevant for others. On the one hand, socio and political reasons will be examined: How Hindu nationalism (BJP, RSS) has played a role in quenching desires to Indianize the Church, for instance? How the hybrid results of an Indian-Christian Church may have troubled institutional and/or religious identities? Is indigenization – and its former counterpart, inculturation – part

of a crypto-colonialism? On the other hand, theological issues will also be investigated: How the strengthening of the bond between dialogue and mission by the Magisterium has influenced indigenization? How theological endeavor to explore religious pluralism got impacted by dogmatic obstructions? Or how theology of religions plays – or not – an important role in defining to what extent indigenization can take place? How, finally, some new trends, such as Dalit and tribal Theology, are also displacing energies from cultural issues to socio-political conflicts?

The study of such topic will help, I hope, to understand issues around identity politics, and evaluate how a particular Church is able – or not – to loose terrain, religiously speaking, and encounter some deep transformations.

3. Matthias Frenz (Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes, Bonn, Germany)

Religious tourism, the urban middle class and Christianity in India

In India the so called middle class has rapidly grown in recent years. Typical representatives of this section of society live in urban areas, they are globally well-connected, and their life-style is by and large inspired by images of 'western modernity'. Increasing numbers of middle class families are able and willing to spend time and money for extensive travels within their country and abroad. Their demand has created a market for inner-Indian tourism. One segment of this market is concerned with the religious heritage of the sub-continent. Magazines, travel agents and religious institutions promote religious tourism aiming at the Indian middle class. While guiding their customers with package tours, travel advice and fixed time schedules the organizers have a normative influence on the religious landscape. At places of pilgrimage with a long history of receiving and catering for a traditional clientele, religious tourism poses a new challenge. The paper assesses the current market for inner-Indian religious tourism with a focus on places of Christian worship. I investigate the encounter between traditional pilgrimage and 'modern' tourism, the cultural frictions and accommodation processes. I am particularly interested in the consequences for local Christian practices and the perception of Indian Christianity within the larger religious landscape.

4. Miriam Benteler (Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany)

Godparents, the Mother's Brother, and the Concept of Affinity among the Latin Catholics of Coastal Kerala

In 1971, Stephen Gudeman notices that the institution of godparenthood, based on Catholic church dogma, exists in "dramatically variant forms." Variations have until now, as the use of the term *compadrazgo* indicates, mostly been studied in the context of South/Middle America or South/South East Europe, but do of course also exist in other parts of the world. Among the Latin Catholics of Kerala (South India), who converted in the 16th century, godparents fulfill, from baptism onwards, particular gift giving and ceremonial roles in the life-cycle rituals of their godchildren, especially at their marriage. In contrast, the mother's brother, who has a prominent position in the gift exchange of other castes in South India, holds among the Latin Catholics no particular role in the life-cycle rituals of his sister's children. It thus seems that the role of the mother's brother in gift exchange has been replaced by the institution of godparenthood introduced among the Latin Catholics at the time of conversion. However, while the mother's brother is the

first and foremost affine, and his gifts express a diachronic dimension of affinity, the institution of godparenthood lacks such an intergenerational aspect. Based on fieldwork in a village of coastal Kerala, the paper explores the specific form the Christian institution of godparenthood takes among the Latin Catholics, relates it to the mother's brother complex and analyses its implications for the South Indian concept of (diachronic) affinity.

Morning Break: 11:00-11:30

Morning Session II: 11:30-13:00

Theme: Ethnographic Perspectives

1. James Ponnaiah (Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, India)

Taking the Cross and Walking from Subalternity to Modernity

This paper, based on fieldwork done in a South Asian Dalit village, Pallipatti, in Dharmapuri District of Tamilnadu, analyses the significance of religious practices centered around the Christian symbol of cross. By giving unique importance to the veneration of cross during Lent, the marginal people of this village read into cross surplus of meaning by identifying their experiences of pain, suffering and marginality with that those of the marginal Jew, Jesus. By enacting the passion-event of Jesus (through a play called *Masatra Ratham*, meaning 'Innocent Blood') *not during Lent/Holy Week* (official period of commemoration of passion and death of Jesus) *but after Easter*, they move the discourse on the suffering of Jesus to another conceptual locus – from the plane of defeat and loss to the plane of victory and gain – to locate it within the wider picture of the resurrection and post-resurrection experiences of their triumphant deity, Jesus. In doing so, they exercise their subaltern agency, in very subtle and invisible ways, to find the passion experience of Jesus meaningful only when they can see its relevance within the context of Jesus' defeat over it in resurrection through the celebration of which they can identify their own defeat of marginalization in the unjust caste structure through the project of modernization. Since the subalterns of this village obtained social ascendancy through various benefits of modernization such as educational and employment opportunities, the paper argues that modernization should be viewed as a key factor in bringing about the surplus of meaning to the symbol of cross in contemporary South Asian Dalit Christianity.

2. Kerry PC San Chirico (University of California, Santa Barbara, USA)

Between Christian and Hindu: Fresh Perspectives from the Field in Uttar Pradesh

This paper offers a fresh report on a religious community in eastern Uttar Pradesh that belies easy categorization. These "devotees of Christ" hail mostly though not exclusively from low-caste Hindu backgrounds, but can be found in Catholic spaces in a major city and its surrounding villages. For multiple reasons revealed in the paper members of the community are not being baptized by Catholic priests, leading to an unknown future not merely for these adherents, but for Catholicism in North India. The very indeterminacy created by the reluctance of Catholic priests to baptize these devotees makes their future less predictable – and more interesting. This paper examines a few of the many issues raised by the existence of such a group. Their status, existing between self-designated

Christians, Dalits, and caste Hindus, allows us to interrogate fixed notions of religious identity while explicating the beliefs and practices of religious communities living in this singular time of Hindu nationalism, economic liberalization, and the rise of low-caste political mobilization. Moreover, the existence of such a community offers clues regarding the shape of Christianity in North India in the forthcoming decades. It is suggested that equally valid perspectives exist regarding fruitful ways to interpret the identity of this community, not the least of which is as a contemporary, if surprising, example of Hindu *bhakti* and vernacular Hinduism.

3. Ashok Kumar Mocheria (Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay)

Merging Caste with Congregation: Lutheran Christianity in Coastal Andhra, South India

The present paper attempts to explore a unique relationship between caste and the Lutheran church in Coastal Andhra, South India. In the first section, the paper deals with organizational changes the Mala caste (an ex-untouchable caste) has undergone after embracing Lutheranism. These organizational changes had an immense impact on their social relations with other castes as well as amongst themselves. In such a social context, it would be important to explicate the reasons behind the emergence of the Lutheran church as a single caste-church and socio-structural and politico-economic factors which facilitated such a development.

In the second part, the paper highlights the unique role played by Sangham (a newer expression of Caste Panchayats in village Andhra), which is at the centre of Lutheran church administration at present. Further, it also narrates how and by what means Sangham managed to bring about unification between the caste and congregation – organizational and socio-political interests of both these institutions are being strongly intertwined. One of the major focuses of this paper is to highlight how caste is exercising its customary power through Sangham in order to retain people in the fold of Lutheranism. This paper also provides a few recent cases of ex-communication to demonstrate that caste is in defense of Lutheranism. In the final section, the above mentioned aspects would be theoretically contextualized against the backdrop of Lutherans' lower caste origins, social stigma in everyday life, and their struggle against structures of social domination.

Afternoon Session I: 14:00-15:30

Theme: Caste, Tribe, and Conflict

1. Georg Pfeffer (Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany)

A Comparative Account of the Socio-Cultural Context of Christians in the Punjab and Christians in Western (Predominantly Tribal) Orissa.

Christianity in the Punjab must be understood as an aspect of a specifically regional caste system as is dominated by landholders. Since the 1860s, a mass movement towards Christianity affected one of the lowest castes, being also one of the largest, though this trend of the socially mobile members was followed by similar mass conversions to Islam and Sikhism. At the partition of the province in 1947, Muslim members of this caste in India, as non-Muslim ones in Pakistan, could turn to Christianity in order to remain in their homes. During the past six decades, the external pressures upon the minority

community coincided with internal sectarian controversies that also involved the control over postcolonial church property.

In highland western Orissa, conversion to Christianity coincided with the colonial invasion and transformation of a tribal society. In some northern districts, a massive industrialization that included the large-scale immigration of non-tribal lowlanders uprooted the given system of local authorities and left missionary institutions as a haven for the dispossessed indigenous people. Further south, the transformation of the tribal system remained very gradual and the conversions relatively few in number. In some local 'pockets', landholding cultivators became Christians who are administratively defined as *Scheduled Tribes*, in others their clients termed as *Scheduled Castes*. Under the growing external impact, this differentiation has gradually developed into antagonism and communal violence in some areas.

A comparison of the two Christian communities in different contexts is likely to indicate basic differences between organizational structures and value-ideas of caste and tribal society.

2. Chad M. Bauman (Butler University, Indianapolis, USA)

The Inter-Religious Riot as a Cultural System: Globalization, Geertz, and Hindu-Christian Conflict:

Anti-Christian violence has been on the rise in India since the end of the 1990s. At Christmas, in 1998, for example, mobs attacked Christian tribals in the state of Gujarat, burning dozens of houses and places of worship and threatening bodily harm. And a year later, Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young boys were famously immolated in their vehicle by an anti-missionary mob. Then, in the last days of December, 2007, riots broke out between *dalit* (formerly untouchable) Christians and their tribal Hindu neighbors in the state of Orissa. In the four days of fighting, Hindu (and some Christian) rioters injured or killed dozens of people, desecrated or destroyed around forty Christian institutions, and burned down hundreds of houses, both Hindu and Christian. The violence produced a refugee crisis affecting three thousand people, and just when the last of these refugees began returning home eight months later (in August of 2008), a second, more violent, and more widespread round of rioting began.

While Hindu-Muslim violence in India has received a great deal of attention from scholars like Asghar Ali Engineer, Paul Brass, and Stanley Tambiah, Hindu-Christian conflict remains relatively understudied and undertheorized. Moreover, much of the extant literature is either overtly biased or lacking in nuance. There is therefore a dearth of useful, scholarly material on the topic, which I hope in some small way to ameliorate with this paper. In particular, the paper will attempt to account for the alliance of upper-caste Hindus with low-caste/tribal groups in the violence against Christians. An alliance of these communities would seem unlikely, given their historical antagonisms, yet their cooperation was a feature in both the Gujarat and Orissa riots. (Whether or not that cooperation was organized or intentional is another matter, of course.) The paper will argue that this cooperation originates in the multifaceted effects of globalization, a socio-cultural process which effects upper-caste groups and lower-caste/tribal groups differently, but which in all of these contexts, though for different reasons, makes violence against Christians seem (to some) an attractive response. If this is true, then, I

will suggest, we must acknowledge that there is something *cultural* about communal riots, that they do *cultural work*. The paper will describe that work with reference to the theories of the late anthropologist, Clifford Geertz.

3. Gulfishan Khan (Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India)

Christ and Christianity in the Mughal Court Culture

The academic collaboration between the Jesuit Father Jerome Xavier (1549-1617), and an Indo-Mughal nobleman 'Abd al-Sattar bin Qasim remains a unique event in the history of interfaith dialogue during the pre-modern era. The results of this unique intellectual enterprise held under the aegis of the Mughal court and embodied in a number of key Persian texts as yet remain unexplored. Therefore, the paper focuses exclusively on the same hitherto unstudied rare Indo-Persian works, which included a biography of Jesus Christ entitled *Mir'at al-Quds* (Mirror of Holiness) or *Dastan i Masih* (Life of Jesus), and the Lives of the Twelve Apostles called *Dastan-i-Ahwal-i-Hawariyyun*. Additionally, a third text *Ahwal-i-Farangistan* (An Account of Europe) also called *Samarat al-falasifah* (The Fruits of Philosophers), of Abdus Sattar, a work on the history of the ancient Roman Empire, and the Greek sages and philosophers, derived chiefly from Portuguese and Latin sources, reveals purely intellectual concerns to understand Christianity in its historical and intellectual perspective. The knowledge so produced under the syncretic Mughal court environment was readily assimilated, albeit not uncritically as shown in the contemporary historical and biographical works and more especially *Majalis-i-Jahangiri*, a lively record of the nocturnal discussions of the Mughal Emperor Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir with his courtiers and the Jesuits, by the same chief intermediary figure between the Jesuits and the Mughal court, Abdus Sattar bin Qasim.

Afternoon Session, II: 16:00-17:30

Theme: Historical Perspectives

1. Richard Fox Young (Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, USA)

Jesus the Carpenter-Heretic: A Second Look at a Buddhist Tale of Conversion, Perversion, and Subversion from 18th-Century Colonial Sri Lanka

During the waning years of Dutch domination over the island, a variety of stories were kept in circulation that evinced Sinhalese Buddhist resistance to the Dutch Reformed Church, to which the vast majority of the coastal population belonged. 'Civil Rite' Christians secured their civic rights by deferring publicly to the hegemonic power of The VOC (Dutch East India Company) and its *predikaants* (chaplains) who baptized, sacramentalized marriages, taught school, and preached to 'captive' audiences in Sunday services. Privately, however, the Sinhalese regaled themselves with stories, humorous and horrific, about Christianity as an affliction conjured up by Mara, the Tempter, Evil personified.

Some ten years ago, I helped edit and annotate one such collection of Sinhalese stories (with G.S.B. Senanayaka, the main translator), which we published in Colombo (1998) under the title of *The Carpenter-Heretic*. The main story tells of a Jesus who was evicted for criminal conduct from Portugal and wandered the world until he came to Lanka where he made disciples from people of the marginal castes, taught them to eat flesh and drink alcohol. Apprehended by a virtuous Buddhist king, Jesus was executed

(twice, to emphasize his deadness), and then buried deep in the ground under tons of rubble (to rule out the possibility of post mortem survival as a resurrected, living being).

In our first reading, the work of Bruce Kapferer, *A Celebration of Demons* (1991) was especially helpful for its interpretation of kingship in relation to Sinhalese Buddhist cosmology. While this still holds good, in this presentation I will draw on the recent work of Alan Strathern, *Kingship and Conversion in Sixteenth-Century Sri Lanka* (2007). I find Strathern's concept of "transcendentalist intransigence," which he identifies with Sinhalese Theravada, helpful. I worked with the 18th century, Strathern with the 16th; he with the Portuguese and Catholicism, I with the Dutch and their Reformed Church. I will argue that the initial encounter, the first aggravation of Buddhist conscience, informs the latter, and that a new reading of *The Carpenter-Heretic* may enrich our understanding of this complex text.

2. Hephzibah Israel (JNU, New Delhi, and Birmingham, UK)

Authority, Patronage and Customary Practices: Protestant Devotion in Colonial South India
The complex dynamics between Protestant missionaries, Protestant converts and Protestant church congregations in the Tamil-speaking areas of South India at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century point to important issues of authority and patronage in disputes over religious rituals and practices. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the congregations of Tanjore, Madras and Palayamcottai actively resisted the authority of Anglican missionaries on various issues that they termed as 'interferences' in the religious life of the community. In particular, conflicting notions regarding what forms of Tamil devotion were acceptable as Protestant focused on a long drawn-out quarrel over the writing, singing and performative context of Protestant Tamil devotional songs.

Focusing on the protests lodged by the congregations of Tanjore and Madras, and in particular the letters of Vedanayaka Sastri (1774-1864) the foremost Protestant poet of this period, this paper examines two related issues. One, the paper will analyse Protestant poets' harnessing of Tamil bhakti traditions for Protestant use by studying particular images of devotion that recur in their poetry. The paper will examine how Protestant poetry written by converts, and performed outside regular church services, disrupted conventions of devotion by straddling the two religious traditions of Protestant piety and Tamil Bhakti. It will examine how by bringing forms of devotion from the Tamil Bhakti traditions into the Protestant context, Protestant poets were forging local religious, linguistic and community affiliations that undermined the missionary ideal of a universal Protestant subject.

Two, my paper will compare the reception of this poetry by the missionaries on the one hand and the Protestant Tamil community on the other. While the missionaries were suspicious of this body of literature that borrowed so freely from Hindu poetry, the congregations have celebrated the writing of this poetry. By conferring elaborate awards and titles on Sastri and voicing allegiance with his poetry, these congregations were also declaring to the missionaries that they were the real patrons of Protestant poets. The paper will thus analyse the signalling of their allegiance to the laws of customary

practice in Tamil society as opposed to the scriptural authority quoted by Protestant missionaries.