

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: Between, Behind, and Beyond the Lines

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Indian Christianity may well be as old as Jesus Christ himself. Church tradition and legend trace the beginnings of Indian Christianity to the evangelical works of St. Thomas—one of the twelve disciples of Jesus—who arrived in southwest India in 52 C.E. According to the 1991 census of India, nearly 19.6 million Indians or 2.3 percent of the country’s population claim to be Christians (Heitzman and Worden 1996, 170). Though spread throughout the country, major concentrations of Christians are found in the south Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the western state of Goa, and the tribal belt of Bihar and Assam. In comparison with other minority religious groups, such as Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains, who constitute 1.9 percent, 0.8 percent, and 0.4 percent of the total Indian population respectively, the numerical and institutional strength of Indian Christians is significant (119–20). While there is ample—even abundant—scholarly interest in non-Christian religious traditions of India, the heritage and strength of Indian Christianity is little reflected in scholarly literature. This book represents an attempt at bringing some balance to this equation.

Another way in which this volume attempts to provide balance is in its presentation of Christianity from a “popular” perspective, one that stands outside institutional prescription. Most studies of Christianity in India, until recently, have focused on the historical, colonial, missiological, and theological dimensions, leaving out the experiences and expressions of the people on the ground. An important corrective offered by popular expressions and practices is that they challenge commonly constructed distinctions and power relations between Hindu and Christian, elite and local, East and West, and

indigenous and foreign. The volume's subtitle, *Riting Between the Lines*, evokes this challenge.

Popular Indian Christianity indeed takes us to "messy" terrain in which religious identities, borders, and authority are not concrete and absolute, but often fluid and subject to negotiation. Yet this "mess" seems only discernable from the backdrop of institutional, universalizing formulations of identity, boundary, and authority, not from the perspective of the practitioner. A common reaction to this perceived discrepancy has been to relegate popular Christian traditions to the realm of aberration or sideshow. Yet we feel it is important to take seriously the ways in which local traditions offer coherence and meaning to practitioners in ways that complement and, in some significant instances, supplant institutional modes. By retrieving popular practice as a vital and viable part of the Christian package, this volume adds depth and breadth to our understanding of Christianity as a whole and wrests ourselves from possible inclinations to treat it (or its denominations) as an agreed-upon, centralized, monolith.

Distinguishing local Christianities from institutional prescriptions, often giving rise to intrareligious tensions and promoting interreligious solidarity, is the tendency for the former to formulate leadership, ritual, and meaning based on immediate, earthly concerns such as health, wealth, and human dignity.<sup>1</sup> In some instances, these concerns reflect devotees' seemingly precarious position as Indian Christians: as natives who adhere to an ostensibly foreign system, and as Christians who practice amid a Hindu culture. More often than not, local practices work to validate such seemingly "mixed" identities, giving them cultural continuity and coherence. Grassroots Christians experience in these practices, as Michael Amaladoss puts it, "the roots of their own identity as a people. They show that religion is for the people, not vice versa" (1999, 272). This attention to earthly concerns and enactment of complex identities partially explain the tenacity and resilience of local practices in the face of institutional disdain and constraint.

The volume is arranged in three sections that reflect broad themes having to do with issues of identity, healing, and alternative models of leadership reflected by popular religious practices. Although these themes drive the formation of the volume's three sections, they play out throughout the entire volume to differing degrees. The first section, "Festivals and Rituals: Forging Hybrid Christian Identities," illustrates the role of public religious expressions and tackles the issue of identity most directly. Joanne Waghorne describes chariot processions during Tamil Christian festivals as expressing and celebrating layers of shared Hindu-Christian practice and symbolism, historically and currently promoted by devotees in spite of clerical disapproval. While virtually identical in design, Hindu and Christian chariots artistically

mark crucial differences as well; such practices stake boundaries between traditions but do so differently than institutionally mandated. Selva Raj's first essay likewise notes how north Indian Santal Catholics articulate their layered tribal, Hindu, and Christian allegiances through their enactment of ritual. Raj argues that ritual's reflection of complex identities and relationships offers an important type of interreligious dialogue, one that organically emerges from the lived experiences of the laity. In her discussion of the Velankanni shrine in Tamil Nadu, Margaret Meibohm demonstrates how some Indian Christians perform pilgrimage as a means for integrating disparate aspects of their complex identities. Focusing on Mumbai (Bombay) Christians, predominantly westernized urbanites, Meibohm argues that their annual participation in the Velankanni festival helps them to integrate and assert the indigenous, Indian side of themselves and their tradition. In this section's final essay, Selva Raj describes shared practices at the St. John de Britto shrine in Tamil Nadu. He argues that shrine activities, enlivened by both Hindu and Christian devotees and largely removed from clerical expectation, create a liminal space that transcends religious distinction. De Britto not only offers healing and fertility to his pilgrim devotees, but a welcome transgression that proves redemptive.

It is important to note that ethnographic data in these essays suggest that the process of identity formation does not entail the demonization or domination of others—both indigenous and foreign—but rather their juxtaposition and merging. As such, public festivals and rituals are a resource for creating complex, vibrant expressions of Indian Christian identity. In addition, ritual performances like these also serve as vehicles and mediums for dialogue between Indian Christians and their Hindu neighbors, a model that radically differs in form and efficacy from those adopted by institutional religion and its leadership. This “dialogue on the streets,” implied by the essays, is indeed a dialogue of rituals, a dialogue in action, and an ecumenism of the laity.

The second set of essays, “Saints and Wonderworkers: Healing Disease and Division,” focuses on the role of healing in local Christian contexts to illustrate the tensions between lay spirituality and institutional prescription. In Corinne Dempsey's study of three Christian saint shrines in Kerala, she notes how one “saint” garners his powers from demons; another's claim to fame is the healing of a Muslim boy; and a third “Christian” saint is, in fact, Jewish. Drawing pilgrims of all faiths to these shrines are the saints' reputations for miracles, not particular religious allegiances; local religious delineations are more tied to efficacy than to creed. Richard MacPhail describes a Tamil Catholic woman, Philomena, who acts as a medium between her burgeoning clientele and the Virgin Mary. Her typically Indian mediumship and its supporting rituals mesh religious distinctions and provide access to saints and the spirit

world. Philomena's healing practice and charisma, free from priestly intervention, challenge traditional authority structures in such a way that they provoke disdain and censorship from local church leaders. Mathew Schmalz introduces us to a self-appointed Catholic charismatic healer, Jude, who works in north India with clients of all religious backgrounds. Schmalz points out Jude's ingenious strategies and improvisations that blend north Indian Hindu conceptions and perceptions into Christian discourses on healing. Jude's practice simultaneously preserves his Christian identity and guarantees his ministerial power.

The volume's final section, "Visionaries and Missionaries: Redefining Religious Authority," examines alternative forms of leadership within the realm of Protestant Christian practice. Distinct from Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, Protestant traditions typically steer away from religious syncretism and thus do not test the parameters of hybrid affiliations. This does not mean, however, that local Indian Protestant traditions do not pose their own kind of challenge to structures set by religious elites and foreign missionaries. Eliza Kent writes about a Tamil lay woman, Muttammal, who restructures the gendered and classed power relations of the Church of South India (CSI) to enhance her own spiritual powers and authority. Using the highly valued "text" as her vehicle, assimilating its meaning to the local landscape and culture, and using it in ways that highlight her skills, Muttammal ministers to a nonliterate population for whom her style and message have particular meaning and power. In John Webster's essay, he argues that the shaping of Christianity in India, typically seen through the eyes of missionaries, can be understood differently when viewed in light of the lived experiences of Indian Christian converts. Comparing missionary strategies in Delhi, 1859–1884, he notes how British Baptist leaders strategically promoted low-caste Chamar members' abilities to form and build the Delhi Church. As clergy quickly discovered, Chamar-led open-air *basti* (settlement) services, involving lively singing and dancing, had a far greater impact on the growing Church than did staid Sunday services or intellectualized bazaar preaching. Zoe Sherinian concludes this section with the music and theology of CSI priest-composer, James Theophilus Appavoo. Under his visionary leadership, Dalit (oppressed) Christians in Tamil Nadu attempt to redefine traditional power relations. Deliberately non-Western and nonelite, Appavoo's choice of musical style signifies a break from and resistance against established religious and social power structures. Drawing upon realities embedded in the lives of Dalit Christians, Appavoo aims, through music and liturgical innovation, to help them reclaim their voice and sense of dignity. The central themes in this collection of essays have been artfully captured and eloquently framed in Wendy Doniger's Foreword and Vasudha Narayanan's Afterword. In her Foreword, Doniger, who has developed a new interest in the study of

popular Christianity in India, sets the stage by positioning the volume within the context of contemporary post-colonial critique. In her Afterword, Narayanan reflects on the essays from the perspective of a Hindu scholar and highlights three distinct types of Hindu responses to the diverse Christianities in India.

As these essays demonstrate, popular Christianity in India is neither homogenous nor uniform but essentially plural and diverse, formed by era, region, caste identity, and local earthly and spiritual need. In significant ways this plurality reflects the pluriform cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious landscape of India. It is therefore both legitimate and appropriate to speak of many popular Christianities in India. As such, these essays not only broaden and alter the scope of Christianity, but challenge normative scholarly and religious understandings. This is reminiscent of recent debate over the category “Hinduism.” In part, the debate stems from the fact that “Hinduism” is a somewhat contrived term, originally applied by outsiders to denote indigenous religious practices in India.<sup>2</sup> More related to the issue at hand, Hinduism is a problematic term because it is not a centralized entity containing universally agreed upon texts, teachings, and traditions. In the interest of accuracy as well as in an effort to avoid privileging any particular brand of Hinduism as authoritative (typically Sanskritic or Brahmanical), some scholars have taken to referring to the tradition in the plural as “Hinduisms” or “Hindu traditions.”<sup>3</sup> In light of the essays in this volume, if we are to acknowledge intrareligious diversity through a plural label, it seems consistent to think about Christianity/ies in the plural as well. On the other hand, it would be equally consistent to use the singular when referring to any major religious tradition, as long as we understand that all contain diversity in spite of moments when they appear, or wish to appear, unified and centralized. In either case, and most importantly, to concern ourselves with Hinduism’s multiplicity up against a taken-for-granted Christian singularity is misleading at best.

Scholars have recently had much to say about the ways Christianity has been used as the measuring stick against which missionaries and European- and North-American trained scholars identified and gave value to—or devalued—“religion” outside the Christian domain (Asad, Balagangadhara). While this phenomenon stems largely from nineteenth- and early-twentieth century colonial chauvinism, with its antiritualistic, belief-centered bent, it nonetheless continues to influence the field of religion and the comparative study of religion today (Smith 1987, 100). As a result, non-Western others have traditionally been viewed through lenses that understand Christianity—and therefore the category “religion” more generally—as textually oriented, based on belief and doctrine rather than practice. To fit the mold, Hinduism, for example, has largely been constructed through its relationship to ancient and elite texts that may have little meaning for the majority who today think of themselves as Hindu.<sup>4</sup> This is true

of Indian Christianity as well. It is quite telling that those scholars of religion who study popular traditions have typically limited themselves, until very recently, to non-Christian expressions. The study of popular Christianity has largely been the domain of anthropology.

One way to remedy this bias is to develop an alternative measuring stick, to expand the categories that drive the enterprise of labeling and comparison to include non-Western and nonelite constructions, including those that inform popular Christianities. A means for this kind of reformulation, implicitly expressed throughout this volume, is to change the fodder from which we engage our study. When we physically move the location of comparative religious studies to the ground and, in the case of India, to shared terrain, then fodder for comparison and intra- as well as interreligious dialogue becomes organic events that emerge from human needs and lived experiences. When viewed from this new terrain, the question as to whether or not a practice, event, person, or community is or claims to be Christian or Hindu (for example) may be difficult if not impossible to answer. Yet this is precisely why such a shift is important. When the center is decentered, the lines once drawn may no longer apply. Perhaps it's time for some new lines.

## Notes

1. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty writes about how ritual provides a response to human suffering whereas, in the face of such real life issues, religious philosophy seems inadequate (1976: 9).

2. This is an important point to consider when thinking about the history of religious traditions and of colonialism in India. Indeed, some have chosen to use the term "Sanatana Dharma" in place of Hinduism when describing their own religious practices and beliefs. Yet, in many ways, "Hinduism" does indeed exist, adopted by a good many contemporary Indians and others in a variety of ways. Responding to what many feel to be an ideological dilemma, T. N. Madan insists that "it is futile and rather pedantic to insist on the artificial character of modern Hinduism, as if all reality were not socially constructed" (179).

3. The tentative way scholars of religion use the term Hinduism is comically portrayed by Donald Lopez, who says that scholars of Hinduism can be distinguished from experts on other religions "by their overdeveloped pectoral muscles, grown large from tracing quotation marks in the air whenever they have mentioned 'Hinduism' for over the past ten years" (832). For further discussion of this issue, see Larson and Frykenberg.

4. Max Müller himself was disappointed with many of the Hindu rituals he witnessed in India. He encouraged students of Hinduism to study the ancient texts in order that they might distinguish "between what was the doctrine of the founders and their immediate disciples, and what were the afterthoughts and, generally, the corruptions of later ages" (20).

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