

# Writing the History of Indian Christianity: A Review Essay

Chandra Mallampalli

This volume presents a compilation of essays written from 1978 to 2011 by John Webster, a dedicated scholar of Indian Christian history. Webster draws upon a lifetime of research and interaction with South Asians as he narrates different approaches to the study of India's Christian communities. Eschewing a disengaged church history written mainly for seminarians or missiologists, Webster connects Indian Christian history to issues addressed more widely in the history of modern South Asia, including nationalism, caste, subalternism, postmodernity, and gender. Webster's own important contributions to Dalit studies equip him to set Christian history against a larger thematic canvas. Indeed, the chief contributions of the book lie in (1) its capacity to narrate the historiography of Indian Christianity to multiple audiences, (2) its inclusion of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Syrian Christian studies, and (3) its balance of details and broader themes.

Webster's relationship to many audiences—Indian and Western, secular and Christian—enhances the breadth of his treatment of Indian Christianity. His essays address both methodological and substantive topics with thoroughness and insight. At the same time, each essay reflects issues that concerned the author at the time of its writing, which accounts for the greater focus on some issues than on others.

The early section of the book describes a transition in historiography from Eurocentric models (28) to those more influenced by Indian nationalism (43–53). This discussion includes pre-nineteenth-century studies of Catholic and Syrian Christian missions, early and late nineteenth-century Protestant histories, and the emergence of histories "told by Indians." We often forget that old books are often still worth consulting, a point that Webster's summaries demonstrate. John William Kaye's *Christianity in India* (1859), for instance, addresses the 1857 Rebellion and its implications for ties between missionaries and the British Raj. While previously missionaries had viewed British rule as providentially ordained to promote the Christianization of India, Kaye uses history to argue for religious neutrality on the part of the Raj. Despite his plea, a tone of Protestant/European triumphalism persisted through much of the nineteenth century. This is evident in attitudes ranging from the anti-Catholic polemics of James Hough (1839) to the expansionist vision of M. A. Sherring (1875).<sup>1</sup>

The literature surrounding the 1857 Rebellion (or Sepoy Mutiny, as it is often called) is a matter that warrants considerable attention, perhaps more than Webster's book affords. Writers have tended to assign an enduring place to Christians in the historiography of modern India.<sup>2</sup> Christians, Protestant missionaries

in particular, were those who attacked and interrogated Indian culture and religion. Through inflammatory preaching and tracts that exposed the deficiencies of Hinduism and Islam, Evangelicals awakened anti-British sentiments; and when those sentiments reached their boiling point, Indians engaged in their "first war of independence." Regardless of how much of this narrative one accepts, one cannot deny the role of cultural and religious factors in various accounts of the Rebellion. The Rebellion, it appears, figures more prominently in the historiography of modern India than it does in that of Indian Christianity. Given this disparity, we should perhaps consider whether the historiography of Indian Christianity should not cast its net more

broadly so as to place discussion of Christians in India more fully within the wider stream of India's national history and not limit the field to histories of Indian Christians alone.

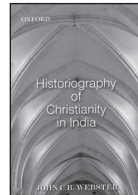
Amid the political climate of the twentieth century when Indians were fighting for home rule, Christian history writing became centered less on foreign missions and more on the Indian church. In *The Cross over India* (1952), which Webster refers to as "the first Indian nationalist history of Christianity" (46), Rajaiah Paul highlighted, as did many other writers of his day, the importance of Indianizing the church. Paul's less scholarly history was followed by studies by P. Thomas (1954) and K. Baago (1969), who also addressed the indigenous heritage of Indian Christians.<sup>3</sup> While much historical reflection during the twentieth century is found in the books Webster discusses, it is worth pointing out that the early twentieth century produced periodical literature of a very high order. In journals such as *Christian Patriot*, *Young Men of India*, *Harvest Field*, *Catholic Leader*, and *Examiner*, Indian Christians "rethought" their heritage by differentiating themselves from Western theologies and denominational structures.

Beyond his treatment of key works on the history of Christianity in India, Webster includes chapters that address the issues of women and Dalits. Among his more theoretically engaging chapters is "Women of Amritsar through Missionary Eyes" (115–40). At issue is whether missionary perceptions of Indian women reveal more about the perceivers than the perceived. This chapter offers an interesting compromise between postmodernist discourse analysis (which concentrates on the perceiver) and a critical use of missionary sources to reach valid conclusions about the actual plight of India's women. Drawing from his own area of expertise, Webster also devotes a chapter (182–218) to the field of Dalit Christian history, focusing on its integration into Christian history more broadly. Encompassing studies from the early twentieth century to the present, this chapter points out the more pervasive focus on Protestant over Catholic Dalits, and a stronger effort, especially in recent works, to highlight the agency of Dalits in shaping their own histories, especially in relation to upper castes and political authorities (215). This focus on agency is in step with contributions of the "subaltern school" of Indian historiography.

On the whole, Webster's chapters describe works centered on the colonial heritage of Indian Christianity and the gradual

## Historiography of Christianity in India.

By John C. 4ZI ~~Webster~~  
Delhi: Oxford Univ. Bd  
2012. Pp. x, 273. Rs 725 / "& ž



Chandra Mallampalli is Associate Professor of History, Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California. His books include *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2004) and *Race, Religion, and Law in Colonial India* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

—mallampa@westmont.edu

movement toward autonomy. He captures this transition well in his treatment of nationalist writings, as well as in the interventions of the Church History Association of India (176–77). The movement away from “foreignness” is certainly a vital aspect of the historiography. And yet, by situating the literature in relation to Eurocentric beginnings and lenses, he perforce extends less attention to more recent developments, for instance, those that might better situate Indian Christianity in relation to an emerging world or global Christianity. While the former studies highlight a quest for an Indian identity for the church (as opposed to one derived from the West), the latter would draw attention to the salience of independent, Pentecostal, or populist movements that are globally networked and not necessarily defined by the tropes of postcolonialism. In fact, a growing trend in historiography is a movement toward an emphasis on cultural interaction and global connections. Examples of this orientation can be found in *Studies in the History of Christian Missions* (Eerdmans), a

hugely successful series of books coedited by Brian Stanley and Robert Frykenberg. Several contributions to this series address not only the more recent context of Indian Christianity but also the rich legacy of cultural interaction, translation, and knowledge production associated with Christian history.<sup>4</sup>

At a time when studies of world Christianity are heavily focused on African, Latin American, or Chinese case studies, Webster’s welcome book sheds light on the unique contributions of South Asian scholarship to the study of non-Western Christianity. Had it addressed the changing face of the global church more intentionally, its content could have been carried to a greater degree by these newer scholarly currents. Still, Webster’s patient, detailed treatment of a huge swath of literature concerning India’s Christians presents scholars of Christian history with an invaluable resource for the study of Indian Christianity and for drawing comparisons to literatures from other world contexts.

## Notes

1. John William Kaye, *Christianity in India: An Historical Narrative* (London: Smith Elder and Company, 1859); James Hough, *A Reply to the Letters of the Abbe Dubois, on the State of Christianity in India* (London: L. B. Seeley and Son, 1824); and M. A. Sherring, *A History of Protestant Missions in India from Their Commencement in 1706 to 1871* (London: Trubner and Co., 1875).
2. See, for instance, R. C. Majumdar, *Sepoy Mutiny* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1957), 26–33; P. C. Joshi, ed., *Rebellion 1857: A Symposium* (New Delhi: People’s Pub. House, 1957), 21–24; William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 57–81; David Washbrook, “Popular History versus Academic History: William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857*,” in *Revisiting 1857: Myth, Memory, History*, ed. Sharmista Gooptu and Boria Majumdar (New Delhi: Lotus Collection, Roli Books, 2007), 3–26; and Jyotirama Sharma, “History as Revenge and Retaliation,” in *1857: Essays from Economic and Political Weekly*, comp. Sameeksha Trust (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2008), 123–32.
3. Rajaiah D. Paul, *The Cross over India* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1952); P. Thomas, *Christians and Christianity in India and Pakistan: A General Survey of the Progress of Christianity in India from Apostolic Times to the Present Day* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954); and Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969).
4. See, for instance, Michael Bergunder, *The South Indian Pentecostal Movement in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). Other works that address the interactive history of South Asian Christianity include a cluster of books and articles on Pandita Ramabai, a high-caste convert to Christianity; Daniel Jeyaraj, *Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, the Father of the Modern Protestant Mission: An Indian Assessment* (New Delhi: ISPCK and Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, 2006); and Judith M. Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg, eds., *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India’s Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Hinduism and Christianity are two of the thriving religions in the world today. Both religions help make up vast amount of worshiper all over the world. ...Unit 6 DBQ When thinking about the history of the world, one must always consider that merchants as well as trade have played an immerse role in shaping the world as it is today. They are responsible for many of the cross-cultural interactions that we have had in the past. Christianity and Islam, the two predominant religions of the world today, have both grown and spread through merchants and trade also. These two chief religions both have attitudes towards merchants and trade that have either developed or decreased overtime. Margin Review Questions Q. Read More. 8777 Words 36 Pages. Essay Sample: I. The Beginning of Christianity in India "The Tradition of St. Thomas and Bartholomew The Christian church in arose out of the events described in the. It is impossible to present the history of the Church in India up to the 16th century as a connected history is lacking sufficient material. After ninety two years from the death of Apostle Thomas, India and Malabar without priests, having only believing women and men. The possibility of a glimpse at the early Indian Church is suggested by a passage of Eusebius and of St. Jerome. According to Eusebius, Pantaenus is said to have gone among the Indians, he found the gospel according to Matthew which had left by Bartholomew after preaching the gospel, among them. Christianity: Essays on Understanding" George Pati. Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>. Part of the Religion Commons. Pati: Book Review: "India and the Indianness of Christianity: Essays on Understanding". Book Reviews 71. Gunnel Cedarlof's essay cognizant of myriad Indian Christian argues that, unlike the other Protestant churches, perspectives (pp. 239). For this archival information for those interested in Lutheran mission the late-nineteenth and early conducting research in the history of Christianity twentieth century romantic and nationalistic idea in India. of volk became central in their work and gave the idea of an indigenous Christian nation.