

## Book Review

**Lalsangkima Pachuau and Allan Varghese Meloottu, eds.,**  
***Christians and Christianity in India Today:***  
***Historical, Theological and Missiological Assessments***

Reviewed by J. N. Manokaran

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This book is a collection of articles by different authors and edited by Lalsangkima Pachuau and Allan Varghese Meloottu. As the title states, the book is an attempt to assess the status of Christians and Christianity today. The book has 17 articles arranged in four sections: Historical Dimensions, Theological Dimensions, Social and Cultural Dimensions, and Missional Challenges.

### **Part 1: Historical Dimensions**

The history of Christianity in India could be divided into four springs: 1) Thomas and Syrian Christianity, 2) Portuguese Catholics of the fifteenth century, 3) European Protestant missions, and 4) Charismatic movements. Available evidence of maritime trade routes between West Asia and South India explains the arrival of Thomas, one of the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, coming to India in 52 CE. While some, centuries later, were converted by administrative pressures of Portuguese Catholics, later many were converted by conviction by the preaching of the gospel by Franciscans from 1517 to 1539. “Francis Xavier’s presence among the Paravas of Tamil Nadu (who were considered as low caste) is one of the early missionary examples of attempting to truly inform the natives of the catholic beliefs and practices beyond mere colonial impositions” (12). Francis Xavier worked with the lowest, and Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) worked among Brahmins, the highest. European Protestant missions began on 9 July 1706, when Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Pluetschau arrived in Tranquebar. They established churches in Cuddalore (1717), Chennai (1726), and Tanjore (1728). “For the Protestant missionaries, education and church planting went hand in hand” (15). Dalits were given access by the Protestant missionaries to study in the schools. As the Bible became readily available in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam, a wave of reformations and revivals emerged. Those developments laid a strong foundation for an indigenous church in India.

Three matters deserve special attention when considering North India. First, that region is India’s most challenging mission field. Second, North India is home to the most persecuted Christians. Third, it is home to vibrant and growing forms of Christianity today. Archaeological evidence shows the presence of the Church in North India centuries ago: Udaypur (a small village in Madhya Pradesh) had a church in the eleventh century. Akbar welcomed Christians, listened, but did not take baptism. Christian mission in Agra flourished, and Jesuits reached up to Lahore. Later Mughals like Shah Jahan (1628) persecuted Christians. Shivraj Mahendra makes an interesting observation regarding caste within the church: “This was in sharp contrast to missions in the South where a lenient attitude toward the caste system existed.” Perhaps, the better growth of the church in South India has been partly due to accommodating the caste system within the church. Regarding persecution in North India: “Most police officers belong to anti-Christian

groups affiliated with the Sangh family. They just watch while the Christians are beaten, violated, and their properties vandalized. Being a Christian in North India has never been so difficult in history” (38-39). As in the missionary era when the persecuted believers were relocated to the mission compounds, today they should be temporarily relocated into theological seminaries. He asserts: “In most villages, there is at least one pastor and a small Christian fellowship or a house church” (41).

There is a brief history of Christianity in Northeast India from the perspective of identity and transformation. Lalsangkima writes: “Their worldviews have been Christianized so much that most of them have closely related Christianity with their sense of ethnic identity” (50). Out of envy non-Christians make allegations that Christians have corrupted the culture, as converted Christians are more educated and economically developed. The author states that, among all people groups, the first converts diligently evangelized their own people.

Robert Eric Frykenberg comments about Christians in Kerala: “Hindu in culture, Christian in faith, Persian or Syrian (orthodox) in doctrine, ecclesiology, and ritual” (64). Protestant missions emphasized the equality of all humans and education as a means of mission. There are many IICs—Indian Initiated Churches. “The missionaries believed that every Indigenous Christian should be able to read the Scripture in their tongue” (87). The contribution of Bible women has been enormous. Many mass movements from lower castes were a quest for a new identity.

## **Part II: Theological Dimensions**

There is a move from contextualization of Christian theology to theologizing in context. There are many highly anthropocentric theologies: Dalit theology, Tribal theology, Feminine theology, etc. These theologies created a paradigm shift from victimhood to active assertion of rights. Hermeneutics continues to adapt itself to meet the needs of the readers and hearers by drawing meaning for a particular context, for example interpreting texts grounded on the existential realities of the tribal people, land, society, culture, belief system, polity, economic psyche, and so on. Inadequacies of, and dissatisfaction with, the historical-critical approach led to the development of new hermeneutical methods.

Jose Philip writes, “Apologetics for the most part is understood as rationally establishing the veracity of the Christian faith” (135). He speaks of four aspects of apologetics: context, canon, community, and Christ. New Testament apologetics consist of miracles, fulfilled prophecy, and personal testimony of eyewitnesses. At the same time, Jesus did not appeal to a faith devoid of knowledge: “The goal of Christian apologetics, then, is the glory of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, its resources are the Word and the Spirit, and its reward is the salvation of souls” (145).

There have been hymns translated from English and German. The singing of Psalms could be seen in a few languages. The Church in India has used four kinds of songs: Western, classical, folk or tribal, and light music. Many missionaries organized singing bands and mass movements. One globally popular song actually originated in Meghalaya: “I have decided to follow Jesus.”

## **Part III: Social and Cultural Dimensions**

One pioneer of Indian nationalism was a Christian: Womesh Chunder Bonnerjee. There were several others listed by the author including Krishtodas Pal. In 1888 women attended the Indian National Congress. Of the ten delegates, three were women: Pandit Ramabai, Mesdames

Triumbuck, and Shevantibai M. Nikambe. Anti-Christian propaganda seeks to eradicate the contribution of Christians to the nation, but Christians being patriotic will continue doing good.

One chapter is on identity and talks about social duality. By self-definition, self-perception, and self-consciousness, some Christians self-present themselves as Hindu followers of Christ. On the other hand, the lower-caste converts see themselves as liberated. Yet there are Dalit converts who have several disadvantages: belonging to a minority religion; discrimination in the church; discrimination in society; and, detachment from their caste because of a change of faith.

#### **Part IV: Missional Challenges**

In this section, four missional challenges are addressed: gender inequality and domestic violence, human trafficking, disability discourse, and a mental health crisis. Domestic violence in Christian homes is not acknowledged by Christian leaders in India. The church should escalate teaching, training, and counseling to address the issue in the church and society. Human trafficking has to be handled by three approaches: protection, prosecution, and prevention. The church could offer to the disability discourse the following: the gospel; mutuality, friendship, and acceptance as characterized by the triune God; service and advocacy, using connections at local, regional, and global levels; and, mobilize resources and expertise. There is a concern regarding the cultural beliefs, stigma, and existence of non-medical models of engaging with mental health. Indian Christians simply think it is a lack of intimacy with God, a specific sin, or demonic influence. The model of walking alongside is for creating space to engage: creating safety, entering, engaging, acknowledging, validating, recapturing the role of emotions, and making meaning and redirection.

#### **Conclusion**

In this book, all the contributors have done their best to focus on the status of Christians and Christianity in India today. There are noteworthy articles with keen insights, analysis, and interpretation. The book has some constructive historical information about the contribution of Christians to the nation, but the discussion needs more elaboration with interpretive analysis, not just description. Regarding the missional challenges, only four social issues are addressed; several areas, including the challenge of reaching contemporary India, are neglected. In general, *Christians and Christianity in India Today* is a valuable book for Christian leaders in India and those interested in India.