Introduction

This is a study of religion as a source of change and dynamism in the complex societies of southern India. Its main concern is with the large indigenous populations of southern India (the present-day states of Tamilnadu and Kerala) who came to identify themselves as Muslims and Christians and have therefore been tagged with the label of religious ‘convert’ groups. But this is an unsatisfactory term. It has sometimes implied that the coming of the major ‘conversion’ religions must obliterate all pre-existing beliefs and social ties amongst its new affiliates, and that the study of so-called convert communities tells us little or nothing about the supposed mainstream cultures of the non-European world.  

Alternatively, some authors have seen ‘convert’ groups as people struggling to be free of ‘pagan’ superstition and the supposed disabilities of caste, but irredeemably mired in them. This study seeks to challenge both of these assumptions by asking what religious conversion really meant in south Indian society over the last three centuries. What kinds of meetings and interactions occurred when practitioners of the so-called world religions encountered the values and cultural norms which already prevailed in south India? How much adaptation took place, and at what point did the followers of new doctrines and new divinities perceive themselves as members of separate ‘communities’?

Of course both Islam and Christianity teach monotheism and the spiritual equality of all believers; there seems little room here for accommodation and synthesis. But was this really so? What we shall see is that in practice the two religions were capable of being radically reshaped to suit the needs of a society which revered pantheons of fierce goddesses and warrior heroes, and a social system which came increasingly to emphasise hierarchies of caste rank and inherited status. The result of these interactions was a rich array of cults, sects and confessional attachments, a process of mixing and borrowing which created remarkably sophisticated and cohesive new manifestations of Christianity and Islam. These were fully fledged and historically dynamic religious

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1 For a view of converts as persons who had ‘excised themselves from the trunk of Indian society’ see S. Arasaratnam, Christianity, Traditional Cultures and Nationalism: The South-Asian Experience (Jaffna, 1978), p. 11.
systems; furthermore the new traditions soon became authentically ‘Indian’ and are certainly not to be dismissed as alien implants from Europe and the Middle East. It follows then that south India’s versions of Islam and Christianity are worth investigating, partly in their own right, as a means of adding to our understanding of the culture and social history of the subcontinent, and also for what they reveal about the wider society.

This is not a ‘history of events’ in the conventional sense. It is necessarily selective, both in terms of chronology and geographical span. It is not a history of belief or doctrine so much as a study of religious practice and changing social relationships. It is not a traditional history of churches, European missions and religious conversions, and it is not intended as an exhaustive overview of all Muslim and Christian ‘convert’ groups under the rule of south India’s indigenous kings and chieftains, or in the period of European colonial supremacy. The book does seek to show that religion must be seen in its broader social context if we are to make any gains in our understanding of south Asian history. Most of the so-called convert populations to be examined here became people of great strategic and commercial importance in the states and kingdoms of Tamilnad and the Malabar coast. Such people – merchants, courtiers, military men, religious notables – all played a key role in the rise and expansion of south India’s most dynamic new realms, and so in this work the story of their ‘conversion’ and the development of their religious culture leads on to an exploration of the complex links between religion and political power in south Indian society.

Indians have long perceived the power of divine beings as a particularly awesome form of the power which was claimed and exercised by kings and would-be rulers. The deity’s shrines are seats of sovereign power; the reigning lord can not command his subjects unless he is able to control and expand his own network of sacred ‘kingly’ shrines. This study will show that in much of south India the shrines and divinities of the so-called convert groups were indispensable resources to the region’s aspiring warrior lords. It did not matter that most of these rulers and their subjects observed forms of worship which we would now describe as Hindu; formal boundaries and orthodoxies were of little importance compared with the transforming sacred energy which was held to reside in these sites, and which could convey its powers of healing, destruction and sovereignty to all comers, regardless of affiliation or origin. This too is an important theme of the book. There are no fixed or ‘traditional’ identities in south Asia. Neither caste nor religious and communal affiliations can be seen as static or immutable, as part of the established ‘ethnographic reality’ of the subcontinent. Those who came to identify themselves, sometimes briefly and sometimes more permanently, as Christians or
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Muslims, were not ‘converted’ from a fixed social order defined by ‘traditional’ Hindu religious orthodoxy and the ‘traditional’ rigidities of an established ‘Hindu’ caste system.

For this reason the book begins with an attempt to describe south India’s indigenous religious and social order in a way which does not assume the existence of an all-pervading ‘Hindu’ culture and ‘Hindu’ caste system. It then seeks to explain how new states and kingdoms began to take shape in this dynamic and heterogeneous society in the period before the rise of the European colonial powers. The rest of the volume explores the way in which south Indians adopted and fashioned themes derived from Islam and Christianity to their own social and political needs, examining the forms of belief and practice which linked new groups of professing Muslims and Christians to the wider society, and discussing the political landscape in which these Indian manifestations of the ‘conversion religions’ took root. Chapters 2 to 6 discuss these topics in relation to south Indian Islam; chapters 7 to 11 explore the development of south Indian Christianity. In both sections the book also asks how the rise of European colonial power affected the form and content of south Indian religion. It traces the fate of pre-colonial courts and ruling groups in which the so-called converts had risen to prominence; it also describes the transformations which overtook these populations as the older warrior-ruled kingdoms broke down and colonial rule began to create new forms of caste rank and communal affiliation amongst the region’s professing Muslims and Christians. The book then uses the experience of Christians and Muslims as a window through which to view the emergence of modern south India and its reactions to colonialism.

Religious conversion in anthropology and history

The subject of Christian conversion and the experience of convert groups in colonial societies has been explored in several recent anthropological studies. Historical writing on Indian religious conversion has concentrated on surface events, on the beginnings of missions and the foundation of churches and mosques. This book, however, has received an important stimulus from recent anthropological works. The most sophisticated of these have shown how groups of non-Europeans have adapted the teachings of western churches for their own purposes, and have ‘captured’ and used the persons and authority of missionaries and other bearers of colonial culture to enhance their own forms of social organisation and royal power. This has been part of a wider effort to understand the response to colonialism from the point of view of colonised peoples, and to show that many subject groups were able to
create 'strategies of resistance' which allowed them to incorporate and transcend the intrusive impact of the trader, the missionary and the colonial administrator. There have also been attempts to reconstruct the society and world view of these groups in their own terms; it is no longer assumed that history begins for such people only after they are absorbed into the 'encompassing structures' of colonial culture and the world economy.

Jean Comaroff's study of the Tshidi people of the South Africa/Botswana borderland argues that this group should not be seen as passive victims of the colonial experience. The book describes the emergence of the flamboyant twentieth-century 'spirit churches' whose adherents '[appropriate] select signs of colonial dominance, turning historical symbols of their oppression into dynamic sources of transcendence'. There is also an historical account of the Tshidi's first encounter with British Protestant missionaries in the early nineteenth century. This missionary enterprise was made to serve the interests of the Tshidi and their chiefs. Far from being manipulated and transformed by these foreign churchmen, the Tshidi engaged the missionaries in a complex form of material and symbolic exchange in which chiefs and foreigners conferred legitimacy upon one another; for a time, the missionaries became the junior partners in a relationship which served the interests of the local Tshidi élite.

In *The Hidden Hippopotamus*, Gwyn Prins comes to similar conclusions about the Lozi people of the former colonial territory of Northern Rhodesia (modern-day Zambia). Here too a group of European missionaries assumed that they would take the initiative in their dealings with the chiefs of a supposedly simple subject people; according to the conventional view of the colonial experience, the impact of these Europeans' values, ideologies and material resources would bring about a fatal weakening of the subject group's social and political order. What actually happened, says Prins, was that the Lozi king Lewanika (1878–1916) transformed his first encounter with the missionaries' leader into an irreversible ritual of subordination. This hapless foreigner was tricked into performing an act of sacrifice at a great royal shrine, and the missionary who was potentially a threat to the ruler's authority was made over into a royal asset and incorporated as an affiliated subject within the domain of the king's magical sovereignty.

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3 Ibid., pp. 22–34.

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These two works fall into a larger category of ‘ethnohistorical’ studies which have sought to understand the process of so-called ‘radical culture contact’ in the colonial and post-colonial eras. ⁴ For instance, Marshall Sahlins has produced an anthropologically informed reconstruction of the death of the eighteenth-century explorer Captain Cook. Cook died at the hands of the Hawaiian islanders who had originally welcomed and revered him as an incarnation of the sacrificed god–king Lono. To Sahlins, these events are intelligible only in relation to the islanders’ own perceptions of religious and royal power. Far from seeking to fight off a potential coloniser or a likely destroyer of their ‘traditional’ social order, the Hawaiians had incorporated Cook into the mythical structures of their own society. Cook himself had acquiesced in this transformation, had allowed himself to be received, posed and adorned as the god, and was killed only because he and his companions had unintentionally violated the expected sequence of events in the islanders’ enactment of the Lono myth. ⁵ In another ‘ethnohistorical’ work, Sahlins describes a series of missionary evangelising campaigns in early nineteenth-century Fiji. Here too the missionaries became appurtenances of divine kingship, and decisions about whether to become converts were taken by Fijian chiefs on the basis of complex judgements about the viability of their moral authority and about their potential advantages in war and inter-regional political conflicts. ⁶

South Asian anthropologists have produced relatively little work of this kind, with the exception of recent studies by R.L. Stirrat and David Mosse. ⁷ Mosse’s sophisticated and provocative study uses ethnographic and historical data to describe the changing social organisation of a ‘religiously plural’ Hindu–Christian village in southern India. The work

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explores the way in which Christianity ‘has become embedded in the indigenous social and religious order’ of this locality and its surroundings. It also describes the role of the village’s Roman Catholic church in the articulation of a local scheme of caste rank and precedence, and shows how its sacred pantheon has been formed out of a complex interpenetration of Christian and Hindu cult traditions. In addition, Mosse deals with the way in which European missionaries participated (both willingly and unwillingly) in the creation of this elaborately ‘indigenised’ form of popular Tamil Christianity.

Most historical writing on conversion and convert communities in south Asia has been concerned with very different issues. On the one hand there has been great interest in the conversion of individuals, particularly during the early phase of Christian evangelism in India. This has resulted in part from the attempt by Christian missionary organisations to create a tradition of epic history for themselves and for the fledgling Indian churches which they were seeking to lead and develop. This has meant that the history of Christianity in India was widely portrayed as the history of the mission organisations themselves; such works have concentrated on the heroic striving of their early church leaders, and on the key individuals who were first ‘won for Christ’ by these hardy pioneers. At the same time this focus on the individual convert has deeper roots in the history of Christian belief itself, going back to early Christian notions of conversion as epistrophe, a fundamental change or ‘turning about’ of mind and heart resulting from a deep personal awareness of Christ and a consciousness of individual sin.

It was this individualist view of religious conversion which inspired the various northern European movements of Protestant evangelical ‘revival’. In the nineteenth century these groups expressed the drive for personal salvation through a call for radical social activism; this was often realised through the founding of overseas missionary organisations, many of which developed close links to the British colonial authorities in India. As a result most historians who have adopted this mission-centred approach to conversion have sought to analyse the motivations of

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individual converts; such work has usually assumed a complete mental and spiritual divide between the individual convert and the beliefs and traditions of the wider society from which he or she is thought to have been removed.\textsuperscript{12}

In contrast there are other accounts of Indian Christianity which have concentrated on the so-called ‘mass movements’ through which large numbers of Indians underwent a collective or corporate conversion to Christianity after having made contact with one of these European missionary groups. Here ‘conversion’ is seen not only as an individual act but as a social process; an attempt is made to understand the social context in which the conversions have taken place. However, such works have concentrated on nineteenth-century mass movements and on groups, especially members of low and ‘untouchable’ castes, who were converted by Protestant evangelical missionaries. Most of these studies have overlooked the importance of the large-scale mass conversions which took place during much earlier periods of Roman Catholic missionary activity in India. As a result they have explained religious conversion in terms of the ideologies of social egalitarianism and social improvement which are supposed to have gained currency in the age of British colonial rule. It has been assumed that conversions took place as a means of escaping the social ‘disabilities’ which were experienced by people of low standing in a static and hierarchically ranked caste society. Like their missionary patrons, these converts are supposed to have aimed at the creation of a separate and ‘modernised’ social order in which ‘conscience’, public worship and socially generated ideas of charity replaced ‘traditional’ Indian principles of status and inherited spiritual worth.\textsuperscript{13}

This book takes an altogether different approach. Its chapters on south


Indian Christians concentrate on groups who did not opt out of the indigenous moral order; on the contrary, the behaviour and social organisation of these converts continued to reflect perceptions of caste rank, ‘honour’ and ritual precedence which were shared throughout the wider society of the two regions. (For a discussion of these concepts see below, p. 35.) Such groups did not necessarily receive Christianity as a consequence of European colonial domination, and again it must not be assumed that European expansion was the sole historical force affecting Christian converts or the wider society of south India. These people did see themselves as Christians and were recognised as persons of distinct and separate religious identity. Even so they were not identified as an isolated ‘minority’ community cut off from the rest of the south Indian population so much as a Christian sect or caste within that society, and one which retained many critical south Indian notions, particularly those which concerned the nature of divine power and the supernatural.

What did conversion mean for such groups, and what determined the depth and nature of their relationships with other communities around them? The first of the Christian groups to be considered here are the St Thomas Christians of Kerala, a Malayalam-speaking population whose Christian identity dates from before the sixth-century AD. These Indian Christians were clearly not a product of western European evangelising. For many centuries before the rise of the colonial powers, they were accepted as a community of high caste rank within the elaborate schemes of social and ceremonial precedence which were presided over by local kings – that is by rulers who would now be described as orthodox Hindus. This position was guaranteed by the group’s rights of participation in prestigious Hindu religious ceremonies, and these bonds survived intact as long as the region’s powerful warrior kingdoms retained their independent suzerainty. By studying this ‘convert’ population, it is possible to trace the changing links between political and religious power in south India, to ask how far these relationships were altered by the expansion of European colonial power, and like Mosse, to explore both the intentional and unintentional interweaving of Hindu and Christian cult worship.¹⁴

The second Christian group to be discussed are the Tamil-speaking Paravas of the Coromandel coast, and as in the case of the St Thomas Christians, their case raises important questions about the relationship between ‘converts’ and the wider religious culture of south India. As clients and protégés of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, the

¹⁴ As elsewhere in the text, ‘Hindu’ is used to denote forms of worship which would now be seen as belonging to the traditions of formal theistic Hinduism.
Paravas became professing Roman Catholics in one of the earliest of the corporate or mass conversions to take place in India under the aegis of the colonial state. These people too retained many of the distinctive features of their earlier social and religious life. Once again, Christianity was not a barrier which separated the group from the rest of the society; instead it provided them with a new code of behaviour, a ‘caste lifestyle’ which ordered their marriage patterns and domestic ritual practices like that of any other south Indian caste group. The Paravas were deeply influenced by the policies and pronouncements of their European priests and missionaries, but these foreigners soon realised that, for the Paravas, they were not all-powerful purveyors of religious truth, and that their teachings were being modified to suit the society and indigenous sacred landscape in which the Paravas made their home. The consequence of this was a form of interaction which recalls the developments described by Comaroff, Prins and Sahlins. The Paravas were determined to manage and transform the power of their foreign priests, and to adapt this power to support the strategies of their own indigenous status system. What then were these strategies? At what level and why did the community maintain connections with their non-Parava neighbours? What finally was the meaning of conversion for this ‘convert’ group?

Finally the book takes a group of Christian communities in the dry interior of Tamilnadu and studies the evolution of their religious and social life in the late seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In these hinterland regions neither Tamil Hinduism nor Islam had assumed the ordered hierarchical form characteristic of the more populous settled rice-growing and coastal lands. Here shifting and informal groups of devotees gradually formed around the veneration of Christian cult saints and charismatic Christian holy men. Such people were initially absorbed into the practices of indigenous religion; like the Hindu devotional or bhakti sects to which they were related, these early cult groups tended to become an established part of the region’s sacred networks if they succeeded in attracting the patronage of the region’s powerful Hindu warrior chieftains.

Once again we see that religion and the history of ‘convert’ groups is best discussed in relation to the organisation of state power in south Asia. In this hinterland country Christianity became a religion of sect and warrior, adjusting once again to the cultural traditions and social organisation of the people amongst whom it took root. Thus in each case, a study of the nature of Christian converts leads ultimately to a closer investigation of the wider society, but from an angle that emphasises change, the creation of tradition and the lack of any pre-ordained teleology in the creation of an indigenous south Indian religious tradition.
Saints, Goddesses and Kings

It cannot be assumed that Christianity was bound to fail in south India, or that south Indians were necessarily and from some ancient period ‘Hindus’ in the sense in which the term is understood today.

The meaning of conversion in the Muslim world

As for Christianity in the subcontinent, there has also been extensive anthropological work on south Asian Islam, much of which has sought to place the subcontinent’s Muslims within a broader social context. It has been shown, for example, that Indian Muslims have developed their own distinctive manifestations of Islam, and that this has involved a fusion of Hindu and Muslim ‘folk’ worship with the practices and teachings of the high or ‘orthodox’ Islamic tradition.\(^{15}\) Recent work on Muslims in Nepal has also illuminated the complex accommodations which have taken place as the practice of Islam has been adjusted to fit the particular milieu in which it has taken root.\(^{16}\) Above all, scholars who have dealt with the Indian inheritance of Sufism, the Islamic mystical tradition, have shown that the development of Sufi devotional worship with its associated shrines, cult saints and teaching orders was a phenomenon which helped to make Indian Islam particularly responsive to changes in Hindu society and polity.\(^{17}\)

Among the historians, those who have studied India’s distinctive regional cultures have established that the practice of Islam and many of the popular mentalities which supported it were shaped and moulded by the ‘folk’ and ‘elite’ religion of the wider Hindu (or non-Muslim) society. Richard Eaton has done pioneering work of this kind on Muslim society in the Deccan, the Punjab and Bengal.\(^{18}\) Using popular Bengali ballads

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