Alexander Henn

Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity.

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This is a passionate and honest book in its approach and contents. And it is worth reading for that very reason. Henn's account is at its best in the detailed anthropological and ethnographic descriptions of his chosen—and obviously much cherished—field: Goan village culture, embedded into a landscape dotted with the *ganv-devata* (village gods), in permanent, if uneasy, cohabitation with Christian saints, crosses, and shrines. Today, as Henn admits, the rural terrain is, increasingly incorporated into towns and semi-urban places, but the dualism, or rather unity, or “double occupancy” (63) of the two religious presences continues to define a specifically Goan religious and social landscape, as he points out in his final chapter on syncretistic wayside and urban shrines. Placed in both central and liminal locations, in marketplaces, borders, bridges, and crossroads, these Hindu and Christian markers of space and affiliation are the visible surface of a thick and complicated history of religious encounter, starting in sixteenth-century Portuguese colonial territory and continuing into the present, post-colonial Indian state.

The ambition of the book is nevertheless larger than a simple eternal-present ethnographic description of Hindu-Christian religious syncretism (a notion that Henn both espouses and handles with care) as practiced today in Goan rural localities. His task is therefore infinitely more difficult because he chose to take a thorny path of providing the *long-durée* history of the encounter between Christianity and Hinduism, and how its intermingling left traces in the contemporary ritual enactment of the “ludic night ritual Jagar” that “simultaneously honors the Christian Trinity and an array of Hindu Gods” (5).

In the first chapter, a history of “Vasco da Gama's Error” (mistaking a Hindu temple for a church and the Hindu goddess for the Virgin Mary), is discussed against the background of European, principally Portuguese and Italian, sixteenth-century chronicles, missionary reports, travel accounts, and existing secondary scholarship (which Henn finds somewhat unsatisfactory). The question he tackles is why Europeans first perceived similarity between “gentile” religious practices and their own, and how they ultimately rejected this “gentilism” as no religion at all, but simple paganism or idolatry, and a “work of the devil.”

In the second chapter, Henn considers the Portuguese war on non-Christian images through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in comparison and juxtaposition with the contemporary iconoclastic strife in Europe between Protestants and Catholics. His major insight is that the violence wrought on

the “pagode” (a name for both a temple and its idol) in fact ensured the survival of the memory of the pre-Christian divinities that had inhabited the place. The third chapter deals with a similar and parallel problem. Just as the manuscripts with idolatrous content were condemned to be destroyed (more said than done) by the church authorities, the missionaries—Jesuits in particular—produced a library of Christian literature as a replacement. These catechetical writings, some of which were printed in Goa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, adapted Indian literary genres, such as *purāṇas* and *bhakti* poetry, to Catholic texts. The replacement was so successful in its mimetic violence that some of the works entered the Marathi canon. In this chapter, Henn overemphasizes (in this reader’s view) the power of the Jesuit hermeneutics to “destroy or suppress the Hindu originals” (79), and fails to discuss the vital role of Indian informants in the composition of these catechetical pieces.

All in all, in the two “historical” chapters, the author is torn between two tasks. One is to condemn Portuguese colonial violence, specifically as exercised through proselytizing and forced conversion while, at the same time, he wants to nuance this by showing that Goans had agency in this encounter as well, and that the encounter ended in syncretism and in long-term engagement between Hindus and Catholics. Although this historical part is important, it reads at times as potted history, with some material mistakes in dates (the arrival of the printing press and the Inquisition, for example) and editorial failings—such as first stating that St. Francis Xavier’s tomb was in the cathedral, and then correctly placing it in the basilica of Bom Jesus.

Entitled simply as “Ganv,” the fourth chapter, the longest in the book, is an excellent read. Henn not only describes Goan villages (*ganv*) with obvious affection, but also collects fascinating stories from the archives and from his own perceptive ethnographic research over the course of ten years (c. 2000–2010). Henn is clearly interested in “local religiosity” and the way in which it crystallizes around embodiment and *praxis*, as a syncretistic intersection between Hindus and Catholics. The fifth chapter, and the central piece of the book, recounts the history of the ritual called “Zagor (or Jagar)” (from *jāgr*, the Sanskrit word for “wakefulness”). According to Henn, this ritual was not only incorporated into certain Catholic para-liturgical sequences as a part of Jesuit *accommodatio*, but also survived in the ritual of the “re-converted” Hindu caste of Gaude. Zagor withstood late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Portuguese efforts to dismantle it, and remained a central communal festivity, even playing a role in the re-Hinduization of the Goan “core” or “old conquest” area in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Keeping the deity “awake,” that is to say, responsive to a devotee’s needs—is, according to Henn, the role of the Zagor ritual, which itself becomes a symbolic node of the Goan people’s

“awakeness” (and resistance) and, one may say, rootedness in *bhakti* and play (in Sanskrit, *lila*) all through their precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial history. By preserving communal (ritual) memory, Zagor is directly connected to Gaude’s cultural survival. After a brief discussion of syncretistic wayside shrines in urban areas or along major routes, Henn concludes the book with a rather quick synthesis of how the religious encounter that started in Goa in the context of Portuguese colonialism fits into the more than three-centuries-old debate on what constitutes religion (in the singular and the plural) and how it also engages with more recent debates over “modernity.”

However, in its quest to unmask and avoid scholarly “essentializing,” against which this book fights valiantly, what has been thrown out the front door creeps back in through the rear window. The kind of combination of anthropological and historical approaches employed in this book is certainly necessary, given the object of the study: Hindu-Catholic encounter from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century). For this reason Henn uses different lenses and captures different scales of the phenomena. “Bricolage” is of course perfectly acceptable, at least after Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *apologia* for using this kind of eclectic (do-it-yourself) method; however Henn’s search for Goan syncretism as *sui generis* resistance re-introduces the old essentialist idea of Hinduism as a “sponge.” After a microscopic study of village culture with fascinating details, the author’s account of a literary, “urban,” “elite,” and Catholic Goan experience is less satisfying from both historical and anthropological perspectives. In spite of these *lacunae*, from this reader’s point of view, the book is a useful contribution to the study of Goan religious history.

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