Review Article

Father Thomas Stephens’ Kristapurāṇa

Philippe Bornet
Université de Lausanne, Switzerland
Philippe.Bornet@unil.ch


Father Nelson Falcao, from the Don Bosco Salesian Society, published in 2012 a full English translation of Thomas Stephens’ (1549-1619) Kristapurāṇa. Falcao’s work fills a real gap, since no integral English translation was previously available. This work, along with a translation of the same text in modern Marathi,¹ is a continuation of a preliminary translation achieved in the framework of a doctoral work undertaken at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, a Roman Catholic University in Pune, about Thomas Stephens’ theological views.² This large volume (about 11,000 verses and 1804 pages) is the fruit of many years of work and includes an edition of the text accompanied by a rich set of documents, notes and theological considerations.

Before coming to the present work, a few words about the Kristapurāṇa are in order. The Kristapurāṇa is a complex and intriguing document redacted in a kind of Marathi reminiscent of the classical works of the Vaiṣṇava saints

¹ N. Falcao, Phādara Thomas Stīphanskṛta Khristapurāṇa: Purāṇa 1 va 2, Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications 2009.

Jñāneśvar (1275-1296) and Ekanāth (1535-1599). Mirroring different issues and perspectives, it can speak to a wide span of scholarly interests. It first represents a creative rewriting of Biblical material in the idiom of the Marathi Vaiṣṇava devotional literary tradition and is an important witness to the dynamism of early modern Marathi literary and religious cultures. Secondly, it can be studied against the background of Jesuit activities in South India and their strategy of *accommodatio*, soon to become in the center of heated polemics — with the controversy over the Malabar rites, R. Nobili’s (1577-1656) activities in Madurai and the production of documents such as the so-called *Ezourveda*. In a slightly broader framework, the *Kristapurāṇa* is a vital document to understand early stages of the process of a ‘globalization’ of conceptions about religion — a process that has often been identified with encounters in the colonial period but which goes back much earlier. Finally, the *Kristapurāṇa* can be considered under a Christian (or Vaiṣṇava) theological lens, as an early example of intercultural or interreligious ‘dialogue’.

This edition and translation is based on two manuscripts in Devanāgarī script kept in the archives of School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. The documents (labelled respectively ‘Ādi Purāṇ’ and ‘Deva Purāṇ’) have been collected in Goa by William Marsden (1754-1836), an Orientalist better known for his activities in Indonesia who constituted a large collection of books and manuscripts, later donated to King’s College. In 1923, the documents caught the attention of the American Justin E. Abbott (1853-1932), a former missionary in India and the author of important works about Marathi medieval saints such as *The Poet-saints of Mahārāṣṭra* (1926-1935), a translation of Mahipati’s (1715-1790) *Bhaktavijaya* in eleven volumes. Abbott compared the documents with another version (see below) and argued that this handwritten Devanāgarī version was the earlier one. He noted in particular the absence of terms directly imported from European languages (Portuguese) present

6 J. E. Abbott, ‘The Discovery of the Original Devanagari Text of the Christian Purana of Thomas Stevens’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 2/4 (1923), 679-683, in particular p. 679: ‘A Portuguese original, translated and transcribed in Roman characters, has been conjectured, but not a Devanāgarī original. A comparison of the two texts side by side furnished the indisputable proof that this manuscript containing the Devanāgarī text is the original