

## CONSTRUCTIVE AND PRACTICAL POSSIBILITIES FOR DALIT THEOLOGY AND INDIAN CHRISTIAN HISTORY DIALOGUE

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**ABSTRACT:** To better understand the daily reality of today's Dalit Christians, Dalit theologians should investigate integrating Dalit theology with Indian Christian history. I argue for and initiate a deeper and more extensive Dalit reading and theological analysis of the history of Christianity and mission in India, drawing on the foundational work of academics like James Massey and John C. B. Webster. Caste oppression has persisted and evolved throughout Christian history in India, and my research reveals the importance of Dalit Christians having access to empowering and liberative resources that have been overlooked in the past and the present, both historically and today. Historians and theologians in a wide range of situations, not only India, can benefit from dissolving the boundaries between their fields.

**KEYWORDS:** Dalit theology; history of Indian Christianity; caste; liberation

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Some Indian Christian intellectuals started to define a new theology, one that was tied to a specific Indian group's life in the early 1980s. It is a branch of liberation theology, postcolonialism, and Subaltern Studies that focuses on the voices and experiences of India's "untouchables," who make up the bulk of India's Christians. Almost forty years after these first beginnings, Dalit theology and Dalit studies have grown well-established in the Indian academic community and in worldwide ecumenical dialogues (Peacock 2020, pp.117–18) in India.

Many prominent Dalit theologians admit and regret that the theological movement has failed to achieve momentum "on the ground" in Indian congregations and communities, despite these signs of expansion and acceptance. Peniel Rajkumar, for example, argues that Dalit theology is "practically ineffective" (Rajkumar 2010, p. 1). Despite this, the editors of a book on Dalit theology in the twenty-first century believe that Dalit theology has not been able to connect meaningfully with Dalit Christians. They claim that "Dalit Christians may save Dalit theologians, and cause theology to live more abundantly via the power of Dalit Christianity" (Clarke et al. 2010, p. 14). While some Dalit theologians have responded to this criticism by focusing more on Dalit life and practise rather than textual study or theoretical discourse that is often disconnected from the reality of Dalit life and practise.

This article aims to address the issue raised in the previous paragraph: When it comes to serving the needs of the Dalit community, what can Dalit theology do to help? I believe that bringing Dalit theology and Indian Christian history together more closely might be an element of a "solution." More particular, I argue for and initiate a deeper and more complete Dalit reading and theological study of the history of Christianity and mission in India, drawing from the foundational work of Indian historians. Caste oppression has persisted and evolved throughout Christianity's history in India, but these studies also highlight the many ways in which Dalit Christians have been empowered and liberated by their faith both in the past and in the present. An important goal of mine is to blur the boundaries between theological and missionary activity in India, and to show how this approach enhances both

historians and theologians by allowing these two areas to communicate with one other. Historians should expect a more complete image of Christianity in India, one that includes both Dalit players and high-profile Western missionaries and converts from other castes. Similarly, Dalit theologians may benefit from this historical focus, as it helps root their work in the lived experience of Dalit Christians and offers opportunities for present theological work to be more effective.

My identity as a non-Indian, non-Dalit, and non-Dalit advocate should be made clear at the beginning.

Based on my time spent living and working in Kerala, as well as my engagement in a cooperation between Lutheran church organisations from Minnesota and Andhra Pradesh and scholarly work, I have always been fascinated by India. As a result, my goal is to have a dialogue with Dalit theology rather than to study Dalit theology in its purest form. Dalit Christians and theologians must determine for themselves whether or not my plea for better integration between history and theology is worthwhile. However, there are at least two ways in which my work has importance beyond the matter of practicality. At the same time, non-Dalit theologians have been reaching out to Dalit theologians for guidance and support. While it is critical that Dalit theology be formed by and for Dalit people, Dalit theologians believe that their efforts can connect with other currents and groups as well. Since neither an ontological nor biological identity can be tightly guarded any longer, the term "Dalit" has lost its significance to us. As an open and dynamic affirmation of brokenness, "Dalit" invites people to join in a shared journey of healing and recovery from their own brokenness. p. 13 (Clarke and colleagues 2010). Through some tiny manner, I aim to embrace that offer to solidarity and to spread the invitation to others in this post. As previously said, my endeavour to tie together the study of theology and history with missions in India may be used in other parts of the world. I believe that by focusing on India as a "case study," I may demonstrate how interdisciplinary research in theology and history can benefit not just academics but also active religious groups.

## **2. SETTING THE CONTEXT: DALIT IDENTITY AND THEOLOGY**

In order to understand Indian Christian history, one must first understand the parameters of caste and Christian doctrine in the country. In addition to providing context, this background material sheds light on the lived reality of Dalits and the potential for deeper historical involvement within Dalit theology.

### **2.1. CASTE AND DALIT IDENTITY**

The old, changing, and ever-present caste structure of India is a recurring theme in this research and in other analyses of Christianity in India. India's social structure is referred to as "caste," which comes from the Portuguese *Casto* and *Casta*. *varna* (literally "colour," referring to four main groups based on social function and purity) and *jati* (derived from the word for "birth," referring to hundreds of smaller groupings inside and outside the four *varnas*) are combined into one English phrase. The *Purusha Sukta*, a well-known chapter from the early Hindu scriptures, briefly explains these social levels by referencing a cosmic myth:

Approximately 16 percent of India's population is missing from this four-fold strategy. According to Gandhi's chosen phrase, "children of God," these disenfranchised individuals have been variously referred to as "avarnas," "scheduled castes," and "untouchable," among other terms. "Dalit," which translates to "broken" in Marathi, is a Sanskrit word. Individuals

who identify themselves as members of the Dalit Panther movement in India's 1970s are often known as "Dalit Panthers" (Murugkar 1994). However, I use the word "Dalit" in this article to refer to low-caste or outcaste people throughout the history of India, even if this usage is rather archaic, considering that the phrase wasn't commonly used until the 1990s.

The Dalits are not a single, homogeneous community. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit political party, has gained great prominence in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, and some of them have seen upward social mobility (Naudet 2008). To make matters even more complicated, the impacts of caste on Indian society have changed and even lessened as modernisation, secularisation, and urbanisation have taken hold.

As a result, Dalits throughout time have been marginalised and ostracised because of their belief that they are filthy and contagious (Shiri 1997). Incredibly high rates of violence against the Dalits persist, and police reactions are frequently characterised by apathy and contempt (Roy 2016, p. 21; Frado et al. 2009, p. 2). Dalits have been subjected to vigilante assaults by caste people and forced to eat human faeces in order to pursue legal action (Razu 2013, p. 361). Despite the fact that Dalits who practise Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism are eligible for affirmative action benefits in education and employment, Christians and Muslims are denied these same benefits because these religions are considered to be foreign and spheres where caste prejudices are not operative in India's Christian and Muslim communities. Dividing shrines and graves in South Indian congregations has led to caste Christians objecting to integrated areas (Mosse 2012, p. 2).

## 2.2. CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN INDIA

When it comes to "really Indian" Christian theology, higher caste Indians were the first to voice their beliefs, not Dalits. The phrase "Indian Christian theology" really refers to the theological works of upper-caste Indians who tried to explain Christianity through the religious and philosophical notions of ancient Hinduism. Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) is typically credited with launching this doctrinal movement and is often connected with Indian nationalism. However, this movement lasted long after the country gained independence in 1947. Since the urge for Indians to unite for independence and collaboration has made Indian Christian theology less concerned with Dalit distinctions and concerns, some intellectuals in this tradition have been critical of caste. As a result, Dalit liberation theologian Sathianathan Clarke describes Indian Christian theology as "non-dialogical and non-representative of the symbolic interplay of the entire society." [source] (Clarke 1998, p. 35).

This marginalisation of Dalits from Indian society, the church, and theological discourse is addressed directly by Dalit theology. Dalit theology is linked in its assertion of Dalit dignity, its focus on Dalit experience, and its efforts for de-stigmatization, non-discrimination, and full participation in communal life, despite its substantial variation. It is believed that Arvind P. Nirmal's 1981 lecture at United Theological College in Bangalore (now Bengaluru) entitled "Toward a Sudra Theology" laid the groundwork for the Dalit theological movement today, however this has not been proven beyond a reasonable doubt (ibid, p. 45). Later, Nirmal and other Dalit theologians built their theology on a set of ideas they developed throughout the years (see, e.g., Nirmal 1992). As a start, there is an outspoken opposition to Christianization that tries to perpetuate the caste system while marginalising Dalits (i.e., giving privilege to elites and relying on Hindu texts that have historically been denied to Dalits). To solve social, economic, and political inequity is a central concern in Dalit philosophy and religion. To this purpose, Dalit Christians in the 1970s turned to liberation theologies, such as Latin American Marxism. In the third place, Dalit theology is committed

to be authentically indigenous, and not an imposition from outside the community. Although Latin American liberation theology provided some practical resources for addressing material concerns, its Marxist analysis was lacking in the unique setting of Indian culture, mainly due to the distinctions between class and caste. Consequently In order to prevent integration into mainstream traditions, early Dalit theology followed a methodological exclusivism (ibid., p. 301). As a result of this exclusivism, theology based on the realities of Dalit people, especially their anguish, had to be founded on Dalit awareness or Dalit history. "If my Dalit ancestor sought to study Sanskrit or any other advanced language, the oppressors gagged him permanently by pouring molten lead down his neck," said Nirmal, giving vivid and horrifying examples of such consciousness. "The Sa Varnas [caste Hindus] feasted their eyes on the naked bosoms of my Dalit mother and sisters" (p. 303). In the Dalit theology movement, these kinds of experiences and traumas are central.

The essential direction of second-generation Dalit theology has been retained, but it has also engaged in self-reflection. Critics of Dalit theology, for example, have argued against binarism, identity fetishization, and Christian-centeredness in some of theological work by Dalits. According to Dalit theologians, a simplistic "oppressor-victim" narrative is problematic because of the "intra-caste" biases and discrimination that occur both within and amongst Dalit communities themselves. As a result, Dalit identity is no longer viewed as a rigidly defined and fixed concept, but rather as fluid and "in-between" (Peacock 2020). As a result of this identity flexibility, Dalit theology is more open to pre- and non-Christian sources and perspectives. Dalit theology aims to be a public theology that accepts its religiously multiple setting and advances liberation for all enslaved people by connecting to these extra realities (Patta 2019). When it comes to Dalit theology's aim for practical efficacy and an organic link with Dalit Christian lives, these second-generation developments connect to that elusive ideal.

### **2.3. DALIT THEOLOGY'S RELATION TO THE HISTORY OF INDIAN CHRISTIANITY**

A contemporary Dalit theology's goals could be furthered by looking at the history of Indian Christianity. This question must first be examined in terms of how it has and hasn't been addressed in Dalit theological works. My aim here isn't to imply that every Dalit theology work must have an emphasis on historical context. In fact, Dalit theology is richer because of its methodological diversity, and those Dalit theologians whose work I evaluate are well-aware of the limitations of the techniques they employ. Due to their professed goal to anchor their theology in Dalit people and experiences, it is remarkable that much—even the majority—of Dalit religious thought has only had a minimal connection to the history of Christianity in India. ( Both parties are affected by a lack of interest: It has been remarked with dismay by an eminent historian of Indian Christianity that the disciplines of history and theology sometimes talk over one another in India as well as elsewhere. When Nirmal writes that "historical Dalit consciousness [is] the basic datum of a Christian Dalit The-ology," he's emphasising biblical history and theological loci rather than specific Dalit experiences in a significant work (Nirmal 1992, p. 302). A far more comprehensive account is severely condensed when he discusses Indian Christian history, which he does just briefly (ibid., pp. 298–300). Even if Nirmal's focus on the pathos experiences of Dalits and Christ (Nirmal 1992, pp.305–6) is justified, as others have remarked (Rajkumar 2010, pp.64-68), it carries the risk of praising pain and fostering apathy. In addition, Nirmal's historical recollections primarily omit liberative experiences and the agency of Dalit people, making this risk much greater. On the other hand, Sathianathan Clarke's subsequent work on Dalits and theology concentrates on the pre-Christian Dalit religion and religious symbolism. The history of Indian theology that Clarke presents is instructive, but it is not a matter for theological study

in and of itself. (Clarke 1998, pp. 37–45). However, Peniel Rajkumar's approach of the issue is equally marginalised and not substantially incorporated into his theological discourse (Rajkumar 2010, pp. 25–40), despite Rajkumar's attempt to build Dalit ethical practise through a reading of synoptic healing stories. Moreover, in his recent theo-ethnographic exploration of divine possessions, Joshua Samuel examines South Indian Dalit Protestant history and offers some rich insights into conversion and agency, as well as a call to study and reflect on little-known Dalit figures in Indian Christian history (Samuel 2020, pp. 127–41). However, he acknowledges that his reach is restricted by geography and denomination, and that historical considerations play a secondary part in his mission.

The work of James Massey and John C. B. Webster, whose intuitions and efforts underpin the present research, can be used to better integrate theology and history in India. One of the first pioneers of Dalit theology, Punjabi Protestant theologian Massey (e.g., Massey 1991, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2013) gave substantial attention to Dalit history in his extensive corpus (e.g., Massey 1991, 1994, 1997a). A book chapter headed "History and Dalit Theology" by Massey (Massey 1997c, pp. 163–164) briefly told his own narrative as a basis for a theological reflection, which predicts the kind of integration of history, theology and action that I attempt to fill out here. Many sections of Indian Christian history were left out of Massey's work. For the most part, he focused his attention on the Dalit's ancient Hindu origins and current Protestant missions, but he neglected to mention Thomas/Syrian, Catholic, and Pentecostal histories. Dalit Christian history has theological and practical consequences for Webster, a North American historian with a keen interest in Dalit concerns (see especially Webster 2012, 2009). This is what he says: "I've come to consider the history of Christianity as a type of group therapy; helping Christians find their collective past and identity as a people, and restoring some of their self-respect that has been lost by believing so many half-truths about themselves" (Webster 2012, p. 80). For Christian communities seeking healing and empowerment, Webster stresses the need of historical research. Intriguing reflections, however, hint at the need for additional theological application and growth. Combined, Massey and Webster argue for the importance of theology and history working together for the benefit of Dalit Christians as well as other people.

### **3. READING INDIAN CHRISTIAN HISTORY FOR DALIT THEOLOGY AND LIFE**

The second portion of this article focuses on Indian Christian history and examines various aspects of it. In contrast to other researchers, I take a more long-term strategy. With a focus on the Thomas/Syrian tradition, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Pentecostalism—four important streams of Indian Christianity—I propose a "Dalit theological" understanding of almost two millennia of Christian thought in India. In order to fit everything in, I had to make some concessions. But the advantage of this approach is that it shows how Dalit lives and concerns are present throughout the long history of Indian Christianity, not only in recent chapters like the mass conversion movements in nineteenth-century South India, which have already received much attention (e.g., Oddie 1997; Gladstone 1984; Forrester 1980). Methodologically, my approach also affirms and begins to address some of Webster's critical findings in his essays on the history of Christianity in India, such as the relative lack of attention paid to Dalit Christian history in non-Protestant contexts and the need to connect Dalit Christian history to other layers of Indian Christianity (Webster 2012, pp. 188, 217). However, I hope that my wide-ranging, non-exhaustive approach will inspire additional research of these events, texts, characters, and dynamics, both in terms of historical data and actionable "theological commentary" on these things.

### 3.1. THOMAS/SYRIAN CHRISTIANITY AND DALITS

The earliest Christian groups in India are the Thomas or Syrian churches, which are found mostly in the southern region of the nation. In the eyes of Dalits, this element of Indian Christianity is frequently considered the most hostile to their concerns. While this evaluation is correct, there are components in the history of Thomas Christianity—especially its founding narratives—that might combine with the Dalit quest for emancipation, inclusion, and flourishing.

Thomas, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, is said to have evangelised Southwestern India around 52 CE, a claim that has sparked a great deal of controversy. It doesn't matter if the deeply held tradition can be historically verified; it has had and continues to have a significant impact on Thomas Christian's identity over the ages. Legend says Thomas made substantial advances among caste Hindus in Mylapore (modern-day Chennai), which may have contributed to his final murder by Brahmin opponents there. The Christian community founded by the apostle had a caste structure like this: 6850 Brahmins, 2800 Kshatriyas, 3750 Vaishyas, and 4250 Shu-dras, according to one legend. Adivasis and Dalits (indigenous tribal groups that share Dalits' history of persecution and marginalisation) are not included as "others" (Frykenberg 2008, p. 100).

In subsequent centuries, there is more reliable historical evidence to support this caste arrangement. There were seventy two upper-class Jewish Christian households from Mesopotamia in southern India in the fourth century who were given great privileges and position by the Indian authorities (ibid.).... Many of these South Indian Christians achieved a social status halfway between the Kshatriya and Vaishya castes mostly due to their entrepreneurial prowess (p. 113). When faced with a flood of Dalit Christians in Travancore in the early nineteenth century, Thomas Christians joined with local Brahmins and Nairs (a Kshatriya tribe) to resist the migration, even violently. This position, however, was not completely stable. Mar Thoma's evangelistic association in 1888 was specifically designed to reach out to lower-caste members of the Thomas tradition. New believers were not always welcomed into established churches, but some chose to remain in the Thomas Christian denomination (p. 249). South Indian Thomas churches are still dominated by upper-class members despite their minority status in relation to the Hindus and Muslims of the region (Koshy 2014). Despite the fact that these faiths are not the largest Christian groups in India, they exert disproportionate influence because of their ancestry, money, and prestige.

Despite its high-caste reputation, Thomas Christianity has a rich history, particularly in the hagiographical narratives of the apostle's founding, that might be of use to Dalits. Syriac manuscript from the fourth-century Edessa period, the Acts of Thomas, tells the tale of how Christ sent a sceptic named Thomas to India to bring the gospel (see the translation and commentary in Klijn 2003). When Thomas was sold as a "slave" by Jesus, he travelled to India with merchant Habban to work on the palace of King Gundaphar. The second "act" of the book (chp. 17–29) tells the story of this journey. Having been given enormous cash for the construction project by the king, Thomas utilised the money to help the destitute and suffering, thereby erecting a "palace in heaven" for the monarch. The hurting were comforted by his words: "May your Lord give you peace; because he is the nourisher of the orphan and the supplier of the widow, and he ministers to all those who suffer" (ibid., p. 64). Thomas's use of the wealth enraged the King, and he made arrangements to shave off and burn the apostle's head. Thomas, on the other hand, was spared when the king's deceased brother returned from heaven to inform the monarch about the king's splendid castle in paradise.

In addition to the ThommaParvam ("Song of Thomas"), which is still used today by Thomas Christians for worship and ceremonial reasons, there are a number of other texts that include similar accounts. Aside from Thomas's battle with the monarch, the ThommaParvam also chronicles the apostle's miraculous healings and exorcisms of individuals who are afflicted. Early high-caste Christians and antagonistic Brahmins fought each other in South Indian sources. When a temple water tank was used for missionary baptisms, some Brahmins stopped using it because they saw Thomas, his converts, and their deeds as blasphemous and filthy. For refusing to engage in the sacrifice ceremonies to the goddess Kali, Thomas was killed by the Brahmins.

These Thomas narratives have the ability to connect with Dalit Christian lives and deepen Dalit theology when read through the perspective of Dalit living. Of course, these resources don't accomplish much to further the emancipation and dignity of Dalits. There is no mention of Dalits, and Thomas Christians are elevated to a position of honour. It is also possible to read Thomas's construction of the king's heavenly castle in terms of a preference for spiritual life beyond death, as contrast to the concerns of this world that Dalit theologians emphasise. This hagiographic collection of Thomas stories, on the other hand, shows a concern for the poor and opposition to authority, all of which are Dalit ideals. His life was threatened and eventually terminated by defying the authority of both secular and religious officials, just as Dalit activists. Thomas shown a preference for people on the periphery of society by siding with the poor via the redistribution of wealth and bold solidarity. Thomas worked to alleviate pain and bring about a more abundant way of life by curing persons who were afflicted with various diseases. Thomas' death at the hands of the Brahmin elite showed that individuals who share his religion cannot accept caste hierarchies. As a last methodological consideration, it is important to note that the South Indian Thomas narratives of Indian Christians are actively practised. Dalit theology can benefit from deeper ties to Indian Christian life and more access to theological materials throughout the world by paying attention to the function of "legends" and liturgies (Phan 2008).

### 3.2. CATHOLICISM AND DALITS

A large Roman Catholic population has existed in India since the arrival of Vasco de Gama in modern-day Kerala in 1498. As the biggest Christian denomination in India, the Catholic Church (of several rites) now includes a substantial number of Dalits, unlike the Thomas and Syrian churches (Frykenberg 2008, pp. 375–76). Caste has been a contentious issue in Indian Catholicism from the beginning. Even yet, the dynamics of collective conversion may be a useful resource for Dalit readers of Indian Catholic history in promoting agency and transformation.

In the early sixteenth century, Jesuit missionaries came in India and made contact with people from all walks of life (*ibid.*, pp. 137–41). The first Jesuit missionaries worked among people who are today's Dalits. It was initially for political reasons that a tribe of impoverished fishermen, known as the Paravars, turned to Christianity on the southern coast of Brazil. Paravars looked to the Portuguese for strategic protection in the face of Arab maritime might and Nayaka land force. Many years later, Francis Xavier (1506–1552) and his associates worked hard to maintain and grow the faith of the Paravars, leading to the conversion of other Dalit groups. In 1544, 10,000 Mukkavar fishermen were baptised, making them the biggest of these tribes. Even as they grew in their understanding and practise of Christianity, these fishing clans maintained many aspects of their pre-Christian culture, such as their use of procession, pictures, and song.

The Paravars were converted a century ago. Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656) was an Italian Jesuit who began his service in the modern-day Tamil Nadu city of Madurai. As a result, Nobili focused his efforts on the Brahmin caste, embracing some Brahmin rituals and allowing converts to continue certain Hindu customs: the wearing of the holy thread and of the red robes, the avoidance of meat and alcoholic beverages, the pursuit of the Vedanta philosophy. Brahmin missionaries couldn't assist lower-caste Indians as part of this approach; a distinct set of missionaries was needed for this purpose (Rajkumar 2010, p. 27). Nobili's separation between religion and culture, which assigned caste to the latter, was important to this accommodation approach since it provided the philosophical basis for the preservation of caste inside Christianity. Brahminizing Christianity and secularising Brahminism were two of the most significant developments in the history of India, according to the anthropologist David Mosse (Mosse 2012, p. 7). There was resistance to Nobili's ideas like Matteo Ricci in China (1552–1610). But as the preceding study of "Indian Christian theology" illustrates, his ideas endured and have had a significant impact on manifestations of Indian Christianity for decades and centuries. Some of the later missionaries who followed Nobili's example hoped that a "trickle-down" effect would lead to lower castes ultimately following the lead of their social echelon. Many missionaries, like Francis Xavier and his Portuguese forbears, worked among the lower classes in India and maintained a rigid view of caste as a tool of evangelization, one that could not be questioned.

Different groups of Catholic missionaries have either rejected or respected caste differences in Indian Catholicism over the years (Frykenberg 2008, pp. 376–78). All Indian Catholics, regardless of caste, were ordered by Pope Benedict XIV to attend the same mass and receive the same sacrament in 1744. However, such a unity has not been consistently demonstrated. Dalit Catholics in Eraiyur, Tamil Nadu, wanted a separate parish in 2008 after enduring exclusion from the choir, a split cemetery and segregated seating at mass, among other things (Mosse 2012, p. 2). In recent decades, Indian Catholic bishops have released declarations denouncing caste-based prejudice and promoting Dalit equality and dignity in response to similar demonstrations in the church and society. "We have done this injustice to thousands of our own people," the archbishop of Chennai said in March of 2009, referring to caste-based prejudice. Damage has been done to the community" (cited in Mosse 2012, p. 1). There is a growing list of Catholic literature from a caste-based viewpoint in India, as evidenced by the inclusion of Dalit theology in several seminaries, Catholic contributions to a Dalit Bible commentary, and more (e.g., Gonsalves 2010).

Community conversion is a topic that necessitates a theological investigation in this historical sketch of Indian Catholicism. In the current political climate in India, which is characterised by Hindutva (or Hindu nationalism), conversion is an especially potent phenomenon, with its multiple valences, transformative power, ambiguities, and open-endedness (Iyadurai 2018; Shah 2018; Kumar M. and Robinson 2010; Frykenberg 2008, pp. 478–82; Sharma 2003, pp. 102–7). Group conversions to Catholicism in the sixteenth century can be seen as part of a lengthy, multi-directional, important, and continuous subcontinental heritage of conversions. During the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, Mahavira and Siddhartha Gautama led groups of Indians into new religious traditions, and Jainism and Buddhism have since shaped the nature of Hinduism itself (Flood 1996, p. 76). It is not only Christianity, but Islam and Buddhism that have benefited from religious conversion in India, as demonstrated by B. R. Ambedkar's high-profile conversion to Buddhism in 1956 and the subsequent conversion of millions of Hindus. This larger perspective on Catholic conversion in India may help Webster's plea for a more meaningful connection between Indian history and Christian history in India come to fruition (2012, p. 81).



Theologically rich possibilities for social action, resistance, emancipation, and spiritual life emerge when early communal conversions to Catholicism are thoroughly examined. Dalit groups in South India utilised conversion to show and increase their agency in Indian society and abroad, as the instances above illustrate. When faced with two formidable adversaries in the sixteenth century, the Paravars used conversion to their advantage. By forming an alliance with the Portuguese, they were able to upend established power structures and create new ones. A profound theological, political and economic shift was brought about by this collaboration yet it was not a complete break from their history. Together with their newfound Christian religion and practises, the Paravars were able to retain and assimilate long-standing social and spiritual institutions after their conversion. Furthermore, their conversion was a gradual process that eventually led to advocacy for human rights within their new religious group. Many low-caste Catholics pushed for clerical education and ordination in the early twentieth century; this was an important step for individuals who were raised in a culture where only Brahmins could be religious leaders (Frykenberg 2008, p. 378). As a result, it might be said that Dalit Catholics have begun to influence the wider Catholic and Indian communities. They have forced the Indian Catholic Church to face and reject its casteist attitudes and practises through their progressive "entry" into and absorption of catholicism. The descendants of Paravar and Mukkavar converts (who outnumber the descendants of Nobili's high-caste converts) exemplify perseverance, fidelity, collectivity, and optimism in this process that is far from accomplished (ibid.)

### 3.3. PROTESTANTISM AND DALITS

Protestantism was the third main phase in Indian Christian history to begin in the eighteenth century. Protestant missionaries from the West perpetuated and fought against caste in many different ways. Despite this ambivalence, low-caste Indian Christians made major contributions to the growth and development of Indian Christian congregations. When writing about the history of Indian Protestantism, historians tend to focus on the activity of foreign missionaries and exclude the contributions of important Indian people, if they include them at all. I've attempted to depict the reciprocity and interdependence of the actions of the Indian and foreign ministers in the drawing that follows. Dalit Christians can draw inspiration and advice for their own social, political, and theological endeavours by studying the lives of these forgotten Indian Christians of the past.

It was under the Danish king's support that German Lutheran Pietist Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719) and Heinrich Plütschau (1676–1747) came in Tranquebar in 1706. In Ziegenbalg's case, like in Nobili's, he was a well-connected academic who took an active interest in Tamil culture. Ziegenbalg, on the other hand, departed from his Catholic predecessor by investing in literacy programmes for the poor and marginalised (p. 149). That's why the Indian Christian leaders that Ziegenbalg and his colleagues built up were so important to the expansion of Christianity in India.

Rajanaiken (1700–1771; sometimes called Rayanayakkan or Rajanaikkan) was one Indian Protestant who was shaped by Ziegenbalg's work and who, in turn, expanded on it. In addition to his military service, Rajanaiken was the grandson of a Roman Catholic. It was when he was in the Tranquebar mission area taking care of crops that he learned of the Tranquebar mission and purchased Ziegenbalg's Tamil New Testament, which he read in depth. It was Rajanaiken who urged Tanjore's King to open the doors of Tanjore to European missionaries upon his return from exile in the city. Evangelist Rajanaiken had already become an ordained minister in Tanjore, and international missionaries showed an interest in

ordaining him. To avoid being rejected by other Indian Christians, the missionaries ordained a higher-caste Christian named Aaron instead of Paraiyar because of his low-caste position. However, Rajanaiken refused to give up on his mission. Rajanaiken garnered the esteem of Christians and non-Christians alike for his imaginative and successful methods of gospel translation, as seen by the monthly work reports that have survived. A Tamil Lutheran missionary, Daniel Jeyaraj explains, "tried to indigenize the Christian message, their interaction with the common people, and above all... their attempts to live ideals that they had been preaching resulted in the origin of new congregations, especially in places where the European missionaries could not go" (Jeyaraj 2009, p. 40). So, Indians like Rajanaiken didn't only follow and assist European leaders; rather, these native Christians went ahead of the foreigners and created opportunities for both westerners and themselves.

Christian Frederick Schwartz (1726–1798), a German missionary who served in South India for over half a century, was inspired by Rajanaiken's efforts at Tanjore. Many of the Indian "helpers" he trained ended up becoming significant leaders in their own right. VedanayakamSastriar, Sthyanathan Pillai, ChinnamuttuSundaranandam David, and MaharasanVedamanickam were some of the leaders who worked in Tirunelveli and Travancore in the late 1700s and early 1800s, where remarkable Christian expansion happened. This rise was mostly driven by those of lower socioeconomic classes who saw in the Gospel a promise of both spiritual and social liberty. New converts successfully fought for social changes, such as the abolition of slavery, and founded mutual help societies for the growth of their communities as a result of their conversion. When it came to his work in Tirunelveli, C.T.E. Rhenius (1790–1838), he followed in the footsteps of these low-caste Christians (*ibid.*, pp. 249–57). For the first time in missionary history, he viewed caste as a religious issue, rather than just a cultural one that might be accepted by Christians. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) finally removed him from his job after he trained and ordained seven Indian men whose abilities were sorely required in a rapidly expanding church. Rhenius's attitude, despite the fact that this ordination dispute was essentially founded on divisions between Lutheran and Anglican polities, yet demonstrated a deep investment and dependence on local leadership.

The history of Indian Protestantism should not be glorified, as though caste was abolished. It didn't happen at all. Some Protestant missionaries were reluctant to "count" Dalit conversions as valid because of their desire to satisfy upper castes, as well as their own scorn and condescension (Samuel 2020, pp. 131–37; Viswanath 2014). It's clear from the above timeline that Indianization—and even Dalitization—of Christianity in India goes hand in hand with Protestant history. Dalit lives improved and Indians assumed the lead in the transmission and understanding of the faith as a result of European and Indian cooperation. Christian missionaries in India "could possibly be anything but genuinely Indian," Frykenberg concludes his chapter on western Protestant missionaries. They were the ones who assimilated foreign cultures and beliefs. The only people whose lives had been turned upside down by their conversions were themselves (Frykenberg 2008, p. 168).

For Dalit theology and living today, this period in Indian Christian history has a lot to offer. Low-caste leaders such as Rajanaiken and others inspire good self-images and emulation via their experiences. What's more interesting is how the leaders of the low-caste Indian Protestant community functioned. It is possible to define Protestant missionaries, both foreign and indigenous, as *dubashis* based on Frykenberg's description of early Indian Protestantism (*ibid.*). The phrase "translators," "interpreters," and "go-betweens" are all acceptable renderings of the term "two-language agents," which literally means "two-language agents."

According to Frykenberg, Protestant Christians were able to allow contact on two levels (between the upper and lower classes) as well as in two directions (between east and west). Dubashis created infrastructure throughout time, but it wasn't until later Christian employees, who were virtually completely Indian, took over that the fruits of their labours began to bear fruit.

It is possible that the Dalit community could benefit from this dubashi model. As a starting point, it suggests the long and arduous process of communication and network creation that is required for the transmission of data. This is already happening, of course, in the form of global ecumenical coalitions and local alliances with those seeking justice for women and indigenous people. Indian Protestant history understates the importance of Dalit dubasis working among ordinary people, not just in the academy or international organisations, in the midst of this significant project. Second, this model supports a dynamic Dalit identity that is not fixed in eternal caste structures but is actively moving, evolving, and influencing in the "in-between" spaces present in the encounter of different people and communities, which fits with current Dalit theological discourse. This model (Peacock 2020). Of course, issues of identity are both practical and theoretical. The narrative of Rajanaiken demonstrates that he was more than just a low-caste soldier: he studied Scripture, influenced policy, evangelised, and taught newer generations, despite ongoing caste prejudice and religious persecution. Although they may not be able to completely break free of caste reality, Dalit dubashis of today can push the boundaries and, in the long run, achieve genuine change. Dubashi conceptualization of Dalit work and identity includes theological implications that suit Dalit Christian faith and values. For example, Christian themes of reconciliation, change, and new creation may be found in the dubashi notion (Eph 2:14; Romans 12:2). (2 Cor 5:17). Christ is the genuine dubashi because he speaks the languages of God and mankind, travels between different human groups, and works patiently with others to fulfil God's objectives (1 Cor 3:6). It's in this sense that dubashi iconography serves as a bridge between Dalit spirituality and everyday Dalit life.

### **3.4. PENTECOSTALISM AND DALITS**

Pentecostalism, another important Christian movement, originated in India in the early twentieth century. Pentecostalism in India has received a lot of attention in recent years, but the movement's history and theology are still worthy of additional study. Though it has wrestled with caste dynamics, Pentecostalism in India has also generated opportunities for Dalit well-being. Here, I show how Indian Pentecostal history has the potential to deepen Dalit theology and living by showing the Holy Spirit's tremendous and liberating action.

Both Azusa Street and India were important birthplaces for Pentecostalism (Hedlund 2011; Thomas 2008; Bergunder 2008). In 1904, two years before William Seymour's more famous revival in Los Angeles, a Charismatic revival broke out in the Welsh Presbyterian missions in northeast India, in what is now the Indian state of Meghalaya. One of Maharashtra's best-known Christian converts launched the Mukti Mission in 1906 and witnessed an outpouring of the Holy Spirit during prayer gatherings. They "exploded into loud and exuberant explosions of sight and sound" among the young ladies of the mission, who were all survivors of immense sorrow (Frykenberg 2008, p. 408). Even though Ramabai and the mission were not associated with the Pentecostal movement in the long term, these events had a significant impact on India's Pentecostal movement because they resulted in numerous conversions, ordinations to the Christian ministry, and visitors who brought the fire of revival to other parts of the country. For decades, Kerala served as a key basis for the Pentecostal movement in India. George Berg, an American Pentecostal missionary, arrived in Kerala in

1909 and helped build four Pentecostal congregations by the 1920s. Poykayil Yohannan and VellikaraChodi, two Dalit leaders, were interested in Pentecostalism in the early '20s because of the large number of Dalit converts (or simply Choti). Pentecostal leadership was swiftly "Syrianised," i.e. dominated by Thomas Christians who migrated into the movement, therefore these leaders ultimately decided not to join the church (Thomas 2008, p. 28). Thus, early Indian Pentecostalism reflected the caste hierarchies of the established churches (Bergunder 2008, pp. 29–30). Church strife and divisions have arisen as a result of these caste dynamics. A mainline Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God, separated in 1972 into the Church of God in India (Kerala State) and the Church of God in India (Division), which represent Dalit and Syrian communities, respectively (Thomas 2008, p. 316). Although Dalit Pentecostal churches have been established, Dalits remain underrepresented in Pentecostal leadership and the histories of Indian Pentecostalism tend to neglect their contributions (ibid., p. xiv).

P. Paul, a Hindu conversion to Christianity who founded the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission, afterwards known as The Pentecostal Mission (Pulikottil 2011; Bergunder 2008, pp. 286–87), was a prominent Dalit Pentecostal leader (1881–1945). As the Hindu reformer Sri Narayana Guru, who belonged to the same caste as Paul and Guru, worked to create alternative religious and public spaces for the Ezhava community in Paul's native state of Kerala, Paulson Pulikottil argues that Guru and Paul were both influenced by Sri Narayana Guru's reform movement. A self-supporting and self-governing church organisation that has spread around the world is what Paul achieved for Pentecostalism what Guru did for Kerala's Hindu community (working to provide Dalits access to temples and to bring deities of the "higher caste" into Dalit sacred spaces). The Dalit-led Pentecostal denomination that Paul founded in India is the first of its kind in the country, and it has made an effort to include people from other castes in its membership and leadership. Though the denomination has achieved great things, there have also been substantial doctrinal issues and leadership disagreements following Paul's death.

According to Ramankutty Paul's account, V. V. Thomas's work on Dalit Pentecostalism has a lot in common with this one. According to Thomas, the past and contemporary manifestations of Indian Pentecostalism should not be understood only as a spiritual revival, but rather as a socio-political movement in their own right. They are not. Pentecostalism and Dalit experience and identity have a number of significant connections, four of which I'll highlight here (Thomas 2008). To begin, Dalit Pentecostalism was a poor people's movement that aimed for total freedom. One of the most effective sources of new identity and upward mobility for Dalits was Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism also had a strong influence on Dalit history and culture before Christianity arrived in the subcontinent. As a result of its worship style that included emotional outpouring, the banging of drums, and euphoric experiences, it was able to do so. Third, Pentecostalism's ethos and structure fostered community ownership and engagement. All Christians were prepared and commissioned to preach and evangelise in their everyday lives, therefore there was little separation between pastoral workers and the rest of the church. Dalit life was suited to Pentecostalism because of its emphasis on oral and narrative storytelling. While Dalits were previously denied access to written materials, Pentecostalism established a forum for regular people to speak about their everyday experiences via witness and prayer. As a result of this, Pentecostals were able to challenge the dominant, Brahmin-controlled "literate religion" (cf. Clarke 1998, pp. 146–147) in this region. "Pentecostalism in its liberative process gave dignity, freedom and self-esteem for the oppressed [Dalits] as God's children," Thomas argues in summarising the relationship between Pentecostalism and Dalit life. Re-imagining Pentecostalism in a new way allowed

the Dalits to realise both their ambitions for spiritual and material well-being" (Thomas 2008, p. xv). In other words, Dalit Pentecostalism is another another example of how low-caste Indians have creatively appropriated a religious movement for the sake of their own personal and collective well-being.

This brief history of Indian Pentecostalism has a lot to do with Dalit theology and Christian practise among the Dalits. Pentecostal history in India stresses the power and action of the Holy Spirit in theological terms. History is justified in not utilising such overtly theological terminology or frames (Webster, 2012, p. 81), but Dalit theologians and Dalit Christians are not limited in the same manner (Webster, 2012). Dalit goals can be served by a better knowledge and appreciation of the Holy Spirit, based on Indian Pentecostal heritage. Because of this spirit's ability to transcend religious boundaries, non-Christians and pre-Christians alike can experience God's presence. Dalit Christians may conserve and work across religious boundaries, which is crucial in the multicultural culture of India, by embracing and preserving aspects of their heritage. Second, the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life makes it possible for that person to actively participate in the church and community. Since "ordinary Galileans" were used by the Holy Spirit on the first Pentecost (Acts 2), then Dalit people may also speak with power and begin a movement by the same Spirit (Acts 3). It is the active participation and inclusion of all people—not just a select few—that is essential to the flourishing of Dalits and humanity at large, according to a number of Dalit philosophers and theologians. Lastly and most importantly, the Spirit gives Dalit theology and Dalit Christians a variety of gifts, such as a sense of urgency, tenacity, and optimism. Emotion, experience, and desire may be used to connect Dalit theology to Dalit Christian practise in India's Pentecostal past. Dalit theology is grounded in the real world in such a way that it is not only a dry academic exercise but rather is infused with passion, zeal, commitment, faith, and love, thanks to the activity of the Holy Spirit.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

On order to better understand the history of Christianity in the Indian subcontinent and, in particular, the experiences of Dalits, I looked at how Dalit theology and Indian Christian history may complement one another. Even if there have been some joint efforts between theology and history, there is still a lot of ground to cover. As we have seen, caste oppression and resistance, Dalit pain and Dalit power are intertwined in Indian Christian history. There are various liberating materials to be found in Indian Christianity's four primary periods despite the fact that my treatment only scratches the surface. According to Thomas Christianity, a hero is worshipped for his bravery in serving the poor and defying the powers that be. Less-privileged groups can be strengthened while simultaneously having an impact on the wider community and the church, as shown in the history of Indian Catholicism. Low-caste dubashi Christians played a crucial role and set an inspiring example in early Indian Protestant history by moving between diverse domains, forming alliances, and bringing about long-term change. Indian Pentecostal history also conjures the Holy Spirit, who empowers and unites the many peoples of the world for the common good by infusing them with divine talents and bridging cultural divides.

I have attempted to question the clean division between the history of Christianity and theology and to highlight the fruitful possibilities of a deeper mixing of history and theology for both academic and practical reasons by analysing Indian settings in this way. As a conclusion, perhaps some historians and theologians might benefit from seeing themselves as dubashis. Scholars in the dubashi tradition are able to move between different fields, acquire and interpret other languages, build a hybrid identity, and follow people who are fighting for

freedom and dignity rather than being confined to a particular discipline. We may learn a lot from the past and current Dalit Christians.

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