

The Complexity of Conversion: Mapping “Mormonisms” in India

2015 marked an important milestone for two branches of Mormonism in India. Both celebrated 50 years of continuous mission work on the sub continent. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), the largest branch with a world wide membership of over 15 million has a scant 12,000 members in urban “centers of strength” in India, while Community of Christ (formerly RLDS), whose world wide population is roughly 250,000 has 14,000 who affiliate with the church in its tribal village congregations. This paper will take a comparative missiological look at two branches of Mormonism in India through the lens of conversion. The term “conversion” is fraught in India where Christians are, at times, a persecuted minority in a post-colonial era. Hindu nationalists defend their right to prevent religious and cultural change and to preserve their longstanding religious traditions. They are keen to look for evidence of coercion and cultural imperialism in religious conversion. Drawing on oral history research and participant observation in these two branches of Mormonism we can begin to understand the experience of indigenous Mormons in India and the meanings they give in their “conversion stories.” LDS church leaders in India have begun to question the use and the meanings of the term conversion and yet the pivotal change associated with religious conversion remains an important identity marker in the life of an LDS Christian as evidenced in oral history narratives. Additionally, examining the differing responses to mission and conversion in these two branches of Mormonism reveals how the complexity of conversion has affected policies, growth and indigenization in these two “Mormonisms.”