

Proposal for 14th Assembly of the INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MISSION STUDIES on “Conversions and Transformations: Missiological Approaches to Religious Change”

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Beyond Mimicry and Replica: Continuity and Discontinuity in South Indian Pentecostal Conversion

In the last century, and according to the spread of Christianity across cultures and geographical areas, the intercultural encounters between religious traditions influences, mutual borrowings and mixes between Christianity and other religious traditions are frequent. Here borrowing and mixing present a creative and ‘lived’ critique of important Christian theological questions and concepts such as conversion, translation, and meaning and significance of other religious traditions.

The traditional way of studying indigenous Christianities is to view them as extensions of Western theology and Western Church history beyond the West. Often this has led to a focus on the mission history of Christianity where Christian missionaries have been active agents of acculturation and change, or it is asked whether indigenous theological understandings are orthodox enough or conversions sincere. This approach, however, seems unsatisfying in the current liminal state of Christianity.

The perspective in this article is therefore in a certain sense opposite: Rather than viewing and attempting to understand non-Western Christianity as an extension of (what is claimed) to be a well-known Christianity sociologically or theologically, this study attempts to study indigenous Christianities – that is, South Indian Pentecostalism – ethnographically and on its own premises. This is done through focus of one individual’s conversion story as documented in diary entries, interviews and observation. In this way, the fact of a lived religious life becomes a starting point for a better understanding the significance of these indigenous Christianities not merely as mimicry or extensions but as contextual.

In other words: Rather than trying to trace attempts to transplant a replicated European or North American form of Christianity in South Asia, my focus is reciprocal and therefore more adequate when trying to discover continuity and discontinuity in Christian conversion cross-culturally and inter-religiously.