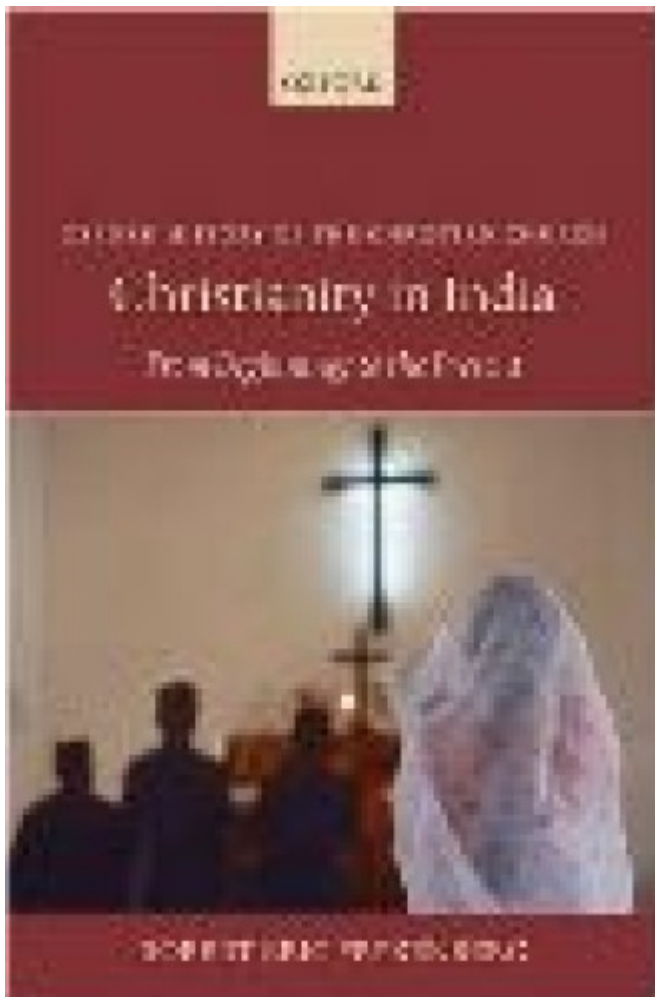


Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present

reviewed by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present

Robert Eric Frykenberg
Oxford University Press

Robert Frykenberg is a brave man. He attempts to trace the whole story of the Christian experience in India over a period of 1,900 years and through a vast territory that comprises many cultures and languages. Although Christianity is a minority faith in India, it may have as many as 40 million adherents there—a figure comparable to the number of Christians in most of the larger European countries. And the faith there is stunningly diverse; in the Indian context, how could it be otherwise? “There is almost no form of Christianity that has ever existed in the world—ancient, medieval or modern—that has not entered and that does not still thrive somewhere within the [sub]continent.” Amazingly, given the scale of the task, Frykenberg succeeds wonderfully, with a book that is richly informative on countless aspects of Indian history quite apart from its contributions to the study of Christianity.

Even describing the enterprise suggests the formidable problems of historical writing that Frykenberg faced. Just how do you organize the material in a way that gives fair treatment to each wave of Christian activism, to Protestants and Catholics, to foreign missionaries and native believers, to devotees of liturgical formality and advocates of charismatic freedom? Given the available sources, his account must lean toward more modern times: roughly, the past 200 years of the story account for 60 percent of the text.

Conveniently, and to the benefit of readers not familiar with the contours of Indian history, Frykenberg divides his material into chronological sections reflecting successive waves of Christian influx and expansion: the Thomas Christians of the early centuries; the Portuguese Pfarangi Catholics of the Counter-Reformation; British and northern-European Pietists and evangelicals from the 18th century onward; the great age of the British Raj, which united the whole subcontinent under common political rule; and finally the independent India that emerged after 1947. The publisher should also be congratulated—for providing an admirably clear and very useful series of maps, to which most readers will need to refer quite frequently.

In order to avoid cutting his recent (post-1800) tale off from its deeper Indian roots, Frykenberg identified strong themes that run across the centuries. One potent theme is regionalism, which I admit is my own flawed and anachronistic term. To speak of regions implies that we should see the great territories of bygone years as mere parts of a larger India, rather than as the free-standing states and empires that they once were in their own right. But if we grant the word, Frykenberg is

exceptionally good at identifying regional traditions within Indian Christianity. His intimate knowledge of the country gives him an acute sensitivity to local distinctions, so the separate narratives never merge into one shapeless mass. The material on southern India and Tamil cultures is superb, particularly the chapter offering a southern perspective on Indian unity under the Raj and its religious implications.

Across the centuries, India has often posed a critical question for the whole concept of missionary enterprise. How Indian should Indian Christians be? At no time has there ever been a serious prospect of India becoming solidly Christian, or even of Christians becoming more than a minority with some selected pockets of strength. Christians would have to live amid India's dominant religions and cultures, however starkly those religions' and cultures' assumptions conflicted with Christian traditions.

Any faith that lives long enough with minority status must at some point face the problem of going native. Yes, you want to be a good guest in your new home, but not so good that you end up becoming indistinguishable from the host family. In the Indian context, the question of over domestication has often led to conflict between successive Christian movements, as new arrivals demand that earlier-established churches abandon the accommodations they have reached with local society. For the ancient Thomas Christians of southern India, for instance, the arrival of European colonizers led to bitter schisms and to the persecution of those who would not conform to the newer aspirations. Frykenberg's account of the imposition of European Catholic notions on one of the world's oldest Christian communities is heartbreaking, and readers discover that Anglicans later repeated many of those earlier Catholic mistakes. For all we learn about Christian achievements in India, there is no shortage of examples here to provide ammunition for the harshest critics of missionary colonialism. The liberating glories of Christianity often ran up against the proud constraints of Christendom.

Another critical question was what Christians should do about caste. At different times, especially with the Catholic missions of the 16th century, missionaries have been tempted to preach to the elites, to rajahs and Brahmins, and Christians had to accept the caste system in order to present themselves as high-status teachers of wisdom. Other Christian leaders—eventually the great majority—preferred to throw in their lot with the poorest, with the people of low caste or none, the *avarna*, and with the despised tribal peoples on the fringes of society, the *adivasi*. Frykenberg properly devotes one substantial chapter to “Avarna Christians and Conversion

Movements” and another to “Adivasi Movements in the North-East.” As far as we can tell, it is among those groups that Christianity in India has its future. That alignment guarantees future conflicts with an orthodox Hindu majority determined to defend its own concept of a national faith. As Frykenberg shows, native Christians have long had to struggle against the opposition of a suspicious “Hindu Raj.” Such pressures have intensified dramatically with the rise of Hindutva extremism since the 1970s.

But it would be wrong to focus so largely on conflict. Through most of its history, Indian Christianity has known nothing of persecution, and believers have commonly served as interpreters and go-betweens connecting diverse cultures. Frykenberg is particularly insightful on the role of evangelical Christians as what he calls missionary *dubashis*, or conduits of information between civilizations. In education above all, Christians have given abundantly to India. Time and again, Frykenberg stresses the role of schools and educational foundations, which have appealed to all levels of Indian society. Even today many hard-line advocates of Hindu supremacy send their children to elite Christian schools, where, it is believed, they will receive the best possible start in life.

If India shaped Christianity, Christianity has done a remarkable amount to shape India, and Hinduism itself. Without the presence of Christianity and the sense of competition that it offered, modern Hinduism would never have been reshaped by its own great reform movements during the 19th century. Nor, perhaps, without the need to compete with the missionaries’ New Testaments would Hindus have so avidly identified the *Bhagavad Gita* as the concentrated one-volume summary of their faith.

Throughout the book, Frykenberg makes effective use of individual biographies to illuminate wider trends, as with the story of the high-caste Christian convert Pandita Ramabai. Ramabai, a feminist and social activist, was “one of the very greatest women in India’s history,” and Frykenberg unabashedly supplies a detailed 30-page account of her sensational career, which gave Westerners a fleeting hope of the conversion of the whole of India—a threat that mobilized Hindus like Vivekananda to refurbish and reinvigorate their own religion.

While *Christianity in India* is a dazzlingly rich account of a very complex story, one point will perhaps stand out most in the reader’s mind: the fundamental Indianness of a faith that has endured and flourished in that land for so many centuries—much longer than Islam. Such a record makes nonsense of attempts by Hindu ultras (and

by some Western academics) to assign the religion to the tainted heritage of European imperialism. This is an Indian story of Indian people, of Indian successes and failings.