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Dalit Theology and Indian Christian History in Dialogue: Constructive and Practical Possibilities

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Abstract: In this article, I consider how an integration of Dalit theology and Indian Christian history could help Dalit theologians in their efforts to connect more deeply with the lived realities of today's Dalit Christians. Drawing from the foundational work of such scholars as James Massey and John C. B. Webster, I argue for and begin a deeper and more comprehensive Dalit reading and theological analysis of the history of Christianity and mission in India. My explorations—touching on India's Thomas/Syrian, Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal traditions—reveal the persistence and complexity of caste oppression throughout Christian history in India, and they simultaneously draw attention to over-looked, empowering, and liberative resources that are bound to Dalit Christians lives, both past and present. More broadly, I suggest that historians and theologians in a variety of contexts—not just in India—can benefit from blurring the lines between their disciplines.

Keywords: Dalit theology; history of Indian Christianity; caste; liberation



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1. Introduction

In the early 1980s, Christian scholars in India began to articulate a new form of theology, one tethered to the lives of a particular group of Indian people. Related to liberation theology, postcolonialism, and Subaltern Studies, Dalit theology concentrates on the voices, experiences, and aspirations of India's so-called “untouchables”, who constitute the majority of India's Christians. Since these beginnings nearly forty years ago, Dalit theology, along with Dalit studies more broadly (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016), has become well-established in the Indian academy and in international ecumenical conversations (Peacock 2020, pp. 117–18).

Even with these forms of growth and acceptance, however, many leading Dalit theologians acknowledge and lament that the theological movement has failed to gain traction “on the ground”, in Indian congregations and communities. Peniel Rajkumar, for instance, notes the “practical inefficacy of Dalit theology” (Rajkumar 2010, p. 1). Further, the editors of a volume on Dalit theology in the twenty-first century hold that Dalit theology has failed to meet in meaningful ways with Dalit Christians, who, nevertheless, display vitality in their life together. These scholars suggest that “Dalit Christians can save Dalit theologians, and cause theology to live more abundantly . . . ” (Clarke et al. 2010, p. 14). Some “second-generation” Dalit theologians, in light of this critique, have sought to engage more directly with Dalit life and practice, instead of privileging textual analysis or theoretical discourse, which can be distant from Dalit realities.

This article focuses on the problem identified above: How can Dalit theology better join with and serve Dalit Christians in their concrete lives? One part of a potential “solution”, I suggest, involves a closer yoking of Dalit theology and Indian Christian history. More specifically, drawing from the foundational work of scholars in the Indian context, I argue for and begin a deeper and more comprehensive Dalit reading and theological analysis of the history of Christianity and mission in India. Such explorations reveal the persistence and complexity of caste oppression throughout the history of Christianity in India, and they simultaneously draw attention to over-looked, empowering, and liberative resources that are bound to Dalit Christians lives, both past and present. My aim, in line with the

theme of this journal issue, is to blur the lines between theology, mission, and Christian history in India, to let these “fields” inform one another, and thus to gesture toward the ways in which such an approach enriches the work of both historians and theologians. For their part, historians stand to gain a much fuller picture of Christianity in India, one animated by Dalit actors as much as by foreign missionaries and high-profile, high-caste converts. Dalit theologians may likewise benefit, as this historical attention grounds their theological work in the lived experience of Dalit Christians and creates possibilities for contemporary theological work to be more practically efficacious.

It is important to note at the outset that I am neither Indian nor Dalit, but rather a North American who is an interested outsider and advocate for Dalit dignity and equality. (My connection with and interest in India, dating back over fifteen years, is based on time spent living and working in Kerala, involvement in a partnership between Lutheran church bodies in Andhra Pradesh and Minnesota, and current academic work.) Accordingly, my project here is a *conversation with* Dalit theology, not Dalit theology “proper”. It is, therefore, obviously up to Dalit Christians and Dalit theologians to decide for themselves whether my call for a greater integration of Dalit theology and history is useful. Aside from this important question of practicability, however, there are at least two ways in which my work has relevance. First, contemporary Dalit theologians have sought to build alliances with non-Dalits in order to give and receive insight and support. While it remains vital for Dalit theology to be shaped by and for Dalit people, Dalit theologians hope their efforts can link with other currents and communities, as well. “[N]o longer do we construe ‘Dalit’ as a closely guarded marker of either an ontological or biological identity. Rather, ‘Dalit’ is projected as an open and dynamic affirmation of brokenness that invites solidarity from others . . . ” (Clarke et al. 2010, p. 13). In this article, I intend, in some small way, to accept that invitation to solidarity and to extend the invitation to others. Second, as alluded to above, my attempt to intertwine the study of theology, history, and mission in India can be transferred to contexts outside South Asia. With this sort of extended “case study” of India, I hope to reveal how work at the intersection of theology and history can be fruitful for both academics and living religious communities.

2. Setting the Context: Dalit Identity and Theology

Before delving into various significant periods of Indian Christian history, it is necessary to describe the contours of caste and Christian theology in India. This background material illumines something of the lived reality of Dalits, as well as the opening within Dalit theology for more robust engagement with history.

2.1. Caste and Dalit Identity

Running throughout this study and all considerations of Christianity in India is the ancient, evolving, and enduring caste system of India (Flood 1996, pp. 58–61; Rajkumar 2010, pp. 3–22). “Caste”, from the Portuguese *casto* and *casta*, refers to the division of Indian society into fixed, ranked, and endogamous groups of people. The English term combines the meanings of the indigenous words *varna* (literally “color”, referring to four broad categories based on social function and purity) and *jati* (based on the word for “birth”, referring to thousands of smaller groupings within and outside the four *varnas*). While the origins of the structure are much debated, the *Purusha Sukta*, an oft-cited passage from early Hindu scriptures, succinctly accounts for these societal tiers by means of a cosmological myth:

When they divided the [primal] Man,
Into how many parts did they divide him? . . .
The Brahman [Brahmin] was his mouth,
The arms were made the Prince [Kshatriya],
His thighs the common people [Vaishya],
And from his feet the serf [Shudra] was born.

(*Rig Veda* X, 90:11–12; translation from Zaehner 1966, pp. 9–10)

Conspicuously absent from this four-fold scheme are approximately 16% of India's citizens. These marginalized persons have been variously referred to as *avarnas* (non-caste or outcaste), *harijans* ("children of God"; Gandhi's preferred term), scheduled castes (per the Indian constitution), and untouchables. "Dalit", which means "broken", is a Marathi term derived from Sanskrit. Popularized through the Dalit Panther movement of the 1970s (Murugkar 1994), it is the self-designation commonly chosen today by persons who identify with this group. In this article, I use the term "Dalit" somewhat broadly to refer to low-caste and outcaste persons throughout the broad sweep of Indian history, even though such usage is somewhat anachronistic, given that the term was not widely-used until more recently.

Dalits neither were nor are a monolithic group. Today, some of them have experienced upward social mobility (Naudet 2008), and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit political entity, has attained considerable power in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state (Jaffrelot 2012, pp. 93–95). Further, caste dynamics in India are not static, as the forces of modernization, secularization, and urbanization have all played a role in changing—and, in some ways, mitigating—the effects of caste.

That said, Dalits past and present generally share the experience of being regarded as polluted and contagious and thus of being excluded from many aspects of social and religious life (Shiri 1997). Dalits continue to be subjected to astonishing rates of violence, with police responses often marked by indifference and contempt (Roy 2016, p. 21; Frado et al. 2009, p. 2). Dalits who seek legal recourse have faced vigilante attacks by caste persons and have been forced to ingest human excrement (Razu 2013, p. 361). On a national scale, Dalits who are Hindu, Buddhist, or Sikh are eligible for affirmative action benefits in education and employment; however, due to the power of Hindu nationalist ideology (Nussbaum 2007; Bhatt 2001), Dalits who are Christians or Muslims are denied these same benefits, as Islam and Christianity are commonly considered to be foreign religions and spheres within which caste prejudices are not operative Indian church communities, however, are stained by casteism. South Indian congregations, for instance, have been riven by divided sanctuaries and cemeteries, with caste Christians objecting to integrated spaces (Mosse 2012, p. 2).

2.2. Christian Theology in India

Given the history of caste in India, it is little surprise that the earliest expressions of "truly Indian" Christian theology came from upper-caste Indians, not from Dalits. In fact, the term "Indian Christian theology" is typically used to refer to the theological writings of upper-caste Indians who sought to interpret Christianity through the religious and philosophical concepts of classical Hinduism. This theological movement is often traced back to the early nineteenth-century Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) and is closely associated with the Indian nationalism movement, though it continued well beyond Independence in 1947. Some of the thinkers in this tradition, including Roy, were highly critical of caste, but because of the desire to unify Indians for the sake of independence and cooperation, Indian Christian theology has given scant attention to Dalit differences and concerns. On account of this, theologian Sathianathan Clarke, a committed advocate of Dalit liberation, has characterized Indian Christian theology as "non-dialogical and non-representative of the symbolic interaction of the whole community" (Clarke 1998, p. 35).

Dalit theology responds directly to this exclusion of Dalits in Indian society, church life, and theological discourse. Though it contains considerable diversity, Dalit theology is unified in its proclamation of Dalit dignity, its focus on Dalit experience, and its work toward de-stigmatization, non-discrimination, and full participation in community life. The roots of Dalit theology are usually traced back to 1981, when Arvind P. Nirmal gave an address at United Theological College in Bangalore (now Bengaluru) entitled "Toward a Sudra Theology", which paved the way for the movement (ibid, p. 45). In the course

of the years that followed, Nirmal and his contemporaries constructed Dalit theology around a series of principles (see, e.g., [Nirmal 1992](#)). First, there is a fierce critique of the Brahminization and Sanskritization of Christianity (i.e., a privileging of elites and a reliance on Hindu texts historically denied to Dalits), which preserves the integrity of the caste system, thereby (re)marginalizing Dalits. Second, Dalit theology seeks to address the reality of social, economic, and political injustice. To this end, Dalit Christians in the 1970s engaged with liberation theologies, including Marxist forms originating in Latin America. Third, Dalit theology is determined to be truly indigenous, not an imposition from without. Accordingly, though Latin American liberation theology supplied some assets for addressing material realities, its Marxist analysis was found wanting in the distinctive context of Indian society, primarily because of the differences between class and caste. Early Dalit theology thus proceeded on the basis of methodological exclusivism, attempting thereby to avoid assimilation into dominant traditions (*ibid.*, p. 301). This exclusivism meant that Dalit theology was to be based on Dalit consciousness or the historical and contemporary experiences of Dalit people, especially their pain and suffering. Nirmal gave vivid and disturbing examples of such consciousness: “If my Dalit ancestor tried to learn Sanskrit or some other sophisticated language, the oppressors gagged him permanently by pouring molten lead down his throat. My Dalit mother and sisters were forbidden to wear any blouses, and the *Sa Varnas* [caste Hindus] feasted their eyes on their bare bosoms” (p. 303). Collective memories and traumas like these are at the center of the Dalit theological movement.

Second-generation Dalit theology has upheld this core orientation, but it has also engaged in self-critical reflection. Recent Dalit theology, for instance, critiques the binarism, identitarianism, and Christian-centrism in some Dalit theological work ([Samuel 2020](#), pp. 42–49). Dalit theologians note the problems associated with a simplistic “oppressor-victim” framework, especially given the “intra-caste” prejudices and discrimination that exist within and between Dalit groups. Dalit identity, then, is no longer construed as strictly defined and fixed, but rather as fluid and “in-between” ([Peacock 2020](#)). Such fluidity of identity allows—or even compels—an opening of Dalit theology to pre- and non-Christian voices and sources. By connecting to these additional realities, Dalit theology hopes to be a public theology that embraces its religiously plural context and furthers liberation for all subjugated people ([Patta 2019](#)). These second-generation shifts tie into the elusive goal named at the beginning of this article, namely, Dalit theology’s desire—often unrealized—for practical efficacy and organic connection with Dalit Christian lives.

2.3. *Dalit Theology’s Relation to the History of Indian Christianity*

How might attention to the history of Indian Christianity further these aims of contemporary Dalit theology? Before considering this question directly, it is vital to examine the ways in which this history has and has not factored into various Dalit theological texts. In doing so, my point is not to suggest that all Dalit theological work must foreground historical matters. Indeed, Dalit theology is richer for its methodological diversity, and the Dalit theologians whose work I consider are well-aware of the limitations of their chosen approaches. However, especially because of the stated desire to ground their theology in Dalit people and experiences, it is noteworthy that much—even a majority of—Dalit theology has only connected with Indian Christian history in a limited way. (The lack of engagement goes both ways: An important historian of Indian Christianity has noted with disappointment that in India, as elsewhere, the disciplines of history and theology often talk past one another ([Webster 2012](#), p. 64).) In a seminal essay, for instance, Nirmal emphasizes “historical Dalit consciousness [as] the primary datum of a Christian Dalit Theology”, but he focuses more on biblical history and theological loci than on concrete Dalit experiences ([Nirmal 1992](#), p. 302). When he touches briefly on Indian Christian history, he begins with the mid-nineteenth century, thereby truncating severely a much fuller narrative (*ibid.*, pp. 298–300). Further, as others have noted ([Rajkumar 2010](#), pp. 64–68), Nirmal’s emphasis on Dalits’ and Christ’s pathos experience ([Nirmal 1992](#), pp. 305–6), however

warranted, runs the risk of glorifying suffering and encouraging passivity. This risk is heightened because Nirmal's historical recollections largely overlook moments of liberative experience and Dalit agency. In a later work concerning Dalits and theology, with a focus on pre-Christian Dalit religion and religious symbolism, Sathianathan Clarke likewise gives a restricted view of Indian Christian history. He provides a valuable section on the history of theology in India, but his discussion serves primarily as background, not as a subject of theological reflection in itself (Clarke 1998, pp. 37–45). Peniel Rajkumar, in a book seeking to shape Dalit ethical practice through a reading of synoptic healing stories, dedicates more space than Clarke does to historical discussion and covers a wider expanse of history, but Rajkumar's treatment is similarly bracketed and not deeply integrated into his theological reflection (Rajkumar 2010, pp. 25–40). More promisingly, in his recent theo-ethnographic exploration of divine possessions, Joshua Samuel addresses Dalit Protestant history in South India, and he offers some rich insights regarding conversion and agency, while also calling for further study of and reflection on little-known Dalit figures in Indian Christian history (Samuel 2020, pp. 127–41). However, historical matters still play a secondary role in his project, and, as he notes, his scope is limited by region and denomination.

For a fuller integration of theology and history in India, one can look to the work of James Massey and John C. B. Webster, whose instincts and efforts undergird the present project. Massey, a Punjabi Protestant and one of the pioneers of Dalit theology, paid considerable attention to Dalit history in his voluminous corpus (e.g., Massey 1991, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2013), and he consistently wedded history and theology (e.g., Massey 1997b, pp. 62–80). In a book chapter titled "History and Dalit Theology", Massey briefly narrated his own autobiography as one source for theological reflection, which anticipates the sort of integration of history, theology, and action that I seek to flesh out here (Massey 1997c, pp. 163–67). Massey, however, tended to skip over large stretches of Indian Christian history. He looked closely at ancient Hindu roots of Dalit identity, modern Protestant missions, and twentieth-century caste realities, but he glossed over Thomas/Syrian, Catholic, and Pentecostal history in India. Webster, a North American historian deeply invested in Dalit issues, has also gestured to the theological and practical implications of Dalit Christian history (see especially Webster 2012, 2009). He writes, "I have come to see the role of the history of Christianity as a kind of group therapy; as helping Christians rediscover their collective past; and through that, their identity as a people; and thereby, restoring to them some of their self-respect which they have lost by believing so many half-truths about themselves" (Webster 2012, p. 80). Here Webster underscores how historical work is not only for the academy, Christian or secular, but for Christian communities seeking healing and empowerment. Webster's intriguing musings, though, are more suggestive than complete, and they gesture toward the need for further theological application and development. Considered together, Massey and Webster point to the necessity and significance of theology and history moving out of disciplinary silos and into a mutual endeavor for the sake of Dalit Christians and others.

3. Reading Indian Christian History for Dalit Theology and Life

The second section of this paper walks through and reflects on selected layers of Indian Christian history. My approach is decidedly more longitudinal than it is intensive. I touch on aspects of nearly two millennia, offering a "Dalit theological" reading of four major streams of Indian Christianity: the Thomas/Syrian tradition, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Pentecostalism. Obviously, given the limitations of space, my overview overlooks a great deal of material and sacrifices many details. However, the advantage to this relatively macroscopic approach is that it demonstrates how Dalit lives and concerns are implicitly and explicitly present throughout the broad span of Indian Christian history, not merely in more recent chapters, such as the mass conversion movements of nineteenth-century South India, which have already received considerable attention (e.g., Oddie 1997; Gladstone 1984; Forrester 1980). My methodology also affirms and begins to address some of Webster's important observations in his essays on the historiography of Christianity

in India, such as the relative lack of attention to Dalit Christian history in non-Protestant contexts and the need to relate Dalit Christian history to other layers of Indian Christian history (Webster 2012, pp. 188, 217). Of course, I also hope that my wide-angle, non-exhaustive approach will incite further exploration, both in terms of historical details and actionable “theological commentary” on these events, texts, figures, and dynamics.

3.1. Thomas/Syrian Christianity and Dalits

The Thomas or Syrian churches, primarily concentrated in the southern part of the country, are the oldest Christian communities in India. For Dalits, this segment of Indian Christianity is often regarded as the most antithetical to its concerns. While there is truth to this assessment, there are also elements in the history of Thomas Christianity—especially its founding narratives—that can converge with the Dalit desire for liberation, inclusion, and flourishing.

There has been much debate about the historicity of claims that the apostle Thomas, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, brought the gospel to southwestern India in 52 C.E. Historically verifiable or not, however, the deeply held legacy has been and is highly formative for Thomas Christian identity through the centuries. Thomas is said to have made significant inroads among caste Hindus, which was part of the reason for his eventual martyrdom at the hands of Brahmin opponents in Mylapore (part of modern-day Chennai), as tradition holds. One thread of the tradition lists the caste composition of the Christian community established by the apostle: 6850 Brahmins, 2800 Kshatriyas, 3750 Vaishyas, and 4250 Shudras. No “others”—Dalits or *Adivasis* (indigenous tribal peoples who, like Dalits, have experienced oppression and exclusion)—are named (Frykenberg 2008, p. 100).

This caste pattern holds in ensuing centuries, for which more solid historical evidence exists. In the mid-fourth century, for instance, seventy-two upper-class Jewish Christian families from Mesopotamia, led by Thomas Kinayi, arrived in southwestern India, where local leaders granted them substantial privileges and standing (ibid., pp. 107–10). Thanks in large measure to their business acumen, many of these South Indian Christians came to enjoy an elevated social ranking somewhere between the Kshatriya and Vaishya castes (p. 113). As such, it was hardly surprising that Thomas Christians, faced with a wave of Dalit conversions to Christianity in early nineteenth-century Travancore, stood with local Brahmins and Nairs (a Kshatriya group) in opposing the movement, even violently (pp. 227–28). This posture, though, was not altogether fixed. In 1888, for instance, one branch of the Thomas tradition, the Mar Thoma church, established an evangelistic association that explicitly aimed at outreach to lower-caste persons. Converts tended not to be fully integrated into established congregations, but some still opted to stay within the Thomas Christian church (p. 249). Today, the various Thomas churches of South India are still composed primarily of socially elevated members who occupy positions of relative privilege, despite their minority status in comparison with Hindus and Muslims (Koshy 2014). Though these denominations are by no means the largest Christian bodies in India, because of their lineage, wealth, and status, they wield disproportionate influence.

Despite the generally high-caste profile of Thomas Christianity, its history, especially in the hagiographical accounts of its founding by the apostle, contains resources that may serve Dalits in meaningful ways. The apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, a Syriac text traceable to fourth-century Edessa, relates the story of how a resistant Thomas was sent by Christ himself to bring the gospel to India (see the translation and commentary in Klijn 2003). The second “act” of the book (chp. 17–29) narrates how Thomas, “sold” by Jesus as a “slave”, came to India with the merchant Habban, where the disciple was charged with building a palace for King Gundaphar. When the king left the region, having given Thomas considerable funds for the construction project, Thomas used the money to minister to the poor and suffering, thus building a “palace in heaven” for the king. To the suffering he said, “May your Lord give you rest, to whom alone is the glory; for he is the nourisher of the orphans and the provider of the widows, and he ministers unto all those who are afflicted” (ibid., p. 64). Upon learning how Thomas had used the funds, the king was predictably

angry, and he made plans to flay and burn the apostle. Thomas, however, was saved on account of the king's dead brother returning from heaven to tell the monarch about the magnificent palace in heaven that belonged to the king.

Similar narratives are preserved in a variety of sources that originate in South India itself, including the *Thomma Parvam* ("Song of Thomas"), which is actively used today by Thomas Christians for worship and ceremonial purposes (Frykenberg 2008, pp. 98–102). In addition to telling the story of Thomas's conflict with the king, the *Thomma Parvam* also records the apostle's miraculous healings and exorcisms of those suffering from afflictions. These South Indian sources speak further of the conflict between early high-caste Christians and adversarial Brahmins. Certain Brahmins, for instance, ceased using a particular temple water tank after it had been used for apostolic baptisms, since they considered Thomas, his converts, and their actions to be unclean and polluting. Ultimately, Thomas was martyred at the hands of Brahmins for his refusal to participate in sacrificial rites to the goddess Kali.

Read through the lens of Dalit life, these Thomas narratives have potential to connect with Dalit Christian lives and to enrich Dalit theology. Of course, in some respects these sources do not further Dalit liberation and dignity. For instance, they make no mention of Dalits, and they emphasize the proud lineage and high standing of Thomas Christians. Additionally, the heavenly palace constructed by Thomas for the king could be interpreted as a privileging of spiritual life after death, as opposed to this-worldly concerns, which Dalit theologians accentuate. On the other hand, this hagiographical assemblage of Thomas stories also points to care for the poor, resistance to authority, and healing, all of which dovetail with Dalit commitments. Like Dalit activists, Thomas defied the will of secular and religious leaders, which endangered and finally ended his life. By standing with the poor through the reallocation of wealth and courageous solidarity, Thomas showed a preference for those on the margins of society. By healing those with various maladies, Thomas acted to restore the suffering and to bring about abundant life in concrete and immediate ways. By dying at the hands of the Brahmin elite, Thomas signaled that those who share his faith cannot acquiesce to destructive caste structures. Finally, at a methodological level, it is significant that these South Indian Thomas narratives are actively embodied in religious practices of Indian Christians. By attending to the role of "legends" and liturgies, Dalit theology can come closer to Indian Christian life and expand the resources for doing theology in world Christianity (Phan 2008).

3.2. Catholicism and Dalits

Since Vasco de Gama's arrival in modern-day Kerala in 1498, Roman Catholics have had a significant presence in India. Today, Catholics (of various rites) are the largest Christian group in India, and in contrast to Thomas and Syrian communities, their ranks include a significant proportion of Dalits (Frykenberg 2008, pp. 375–76). From the very beginning, Indian Catholic history is ambivalent with respect to caste. Even so, Dalit readers of Indian Catholic history can find resources for the promotion of agency and transformation, especially in the dynamics of collective conversion.

Jesuit missionaries arrived in India at the dawn of the sixteenth century, establishing contact with both ends of the caste scale (ibid., pp. 137–41). The earliest Jesuit work was among people who were comparable to today's Dalits. On the southeastern coast, a group of lowly fishing people, the Paravars, converted to Christianity through the Portuguese, initially for political reasons. The seafaring Paravars faced threats from Arab sea power and Nayaka land power, so they turned to the Portuguese for strategic protection. Years later, Francis Xavier (1506–1552) and his partners nurtured the faith of the Paravars through diligent ministry, which led other Dalit subcastes to seek baptism. The largest of these groups was the Mukkavars, another fishing community: 10,000 of them were baptized at the end of 1544. Even with their deepening Christian understanding and practice, these fishing clans preserved many social and religious elements of their pre-Christian life, as seen in their use of processions, images, and music.

A century after the conversion of the Paravars, Italian Jesuit Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656) began his work in the city of Madurai in modern-day Tamil Nadu. Nobili focused his efforts on the Brahmin caste, adopting certain Brahmin practices for himself and permitting the continuation of select Hindu customs among converts: the wearing of the sacred thread and saffron robes, the avoidance of beef and alcohol, the pursuit of Vedanta philosophy. As part of this strategy, missionaries to the Brahmins could not serve lower-caste Indians; for that a different set of missionaries was needed (Rajkumar 2010, p. 27). Central to this strategy of accommodation was Nobili's distinction between religion and culture, with caste relegated to the latter, which provided the conceptual framework whereby caste could be preserved within Christianity. Anthropologist David Mosse characterizes this influential move as both secularizing Brahminism and Brahminizing Christianity (Mosse 2012, p. 7). Like Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) in China, Nobili faced opposition, with critics calling his practices unacceptably syncretistic, but his impulses have profoundly influenced expressions of Indian Christianity through the centuries, as seen in the discussion of “Indian Christian theology” above. Nobili's method of seeking the conversion of upper-caste Hindus shaped the work of later missionaries, many of whom imagined a “trickle-down” effect from such an approach, with lower castes eventually following the lead of their social superiors. Even for those who ministered among the low castes, like Francis Xavier and his Portuguese predecessors, caste was often maintained as a means of group conversion and was assumed to be a concrete given of the Indian context, not to be challenged.

Caste tensions have persisted in Indian Catholicism through the centuries, with different groups of Catholic missionaries either rejecting or respecting caste divisions (Frykenberg 2008, pp. 376–78). In 1744, Pope Benedict XIV decreed that all Indian Catholics, regardless of caste, should go to the same mass and take the same communion. Such unity, however, has not uniformly been displayed. For example, in 2008, Dalit Catholics in Eraiyur, Tamil Nadu, demanded a separate parish after having endured exclusion from the church choir, a divided cemetery, and segregated seating at mass (Mosse 2012, p. 2). Responding to such protests in ecclesial and societal spheres, Indian Catholic bishops have, in recent decades, issued statements to denounce caste-based discrimination and to promote Dalit equality and dignity (Lourduswamy 2013, pp. 196–202). Further, in March of 2009, the archbishop of Chennai publicly confessed the sin of enduring caste-based discrimination: “We have done this injustice to thousands and thousands of our own people. We have damaged a community” (cited in Mosse 2012, p. 1). Indian Catholic responses to caste continue to evolve, as seen in the inclusion of Dalit theology in some seminaries, Catholic contributions to a Dalit Bible commentary (Massey 2013, p. 77), and a growing list of writings from a Catholic Subaltern perspective (e.g., Gonsalves 2010).

Within this sketch of Indian Catholic history, communal conversion particularly warrants theological exploration. Conversion—with its multiple valences, transformative power, ambiguities, and open-endedness—is a potent phenomenon in general, and in India's current political climate, marked by *Hindutva* (or Hindu nationalism), it is especially so (Iyadurai 2018; Shah 2018; Kumar M. and Robinson 2010; Frykenberg 2008, pp. 478–82; Sharma 2003, pp. 102–7). Viewed macroscopically, sixteenth-century group conversions to Catholicism are part of a long, multi-directional, influential, and ongoing tradition of conversions in the subcontinent. Mahavira and Siddhartha Gautama led groups of Indians into new religious traditions in the sixth through fourth centuries BCE, and Jainism and Buddhism have subsequently altered the character of Hinduism (Flood 1996, p. 76). Religious conversion has continued to be a vital force in India, not only for Christianity, but also for Islam and Buddhism, as with the high-profile conversion of B. R. Ambedkar and millions of Hindus to Buddhism in 1956. Examining Catholic conversion in this broader frame may enable Indian Christian history to relate more meaningfully to Indian history in general, a shift called for by Webster (2012, p. 81).

Considered more closely, early instances of communal conversions to Catholicism yield theologically rich possibilities for collective action, resistance, liberation, and spiritual life. In the South Indian examples recounted above, Dalit communities used conversion to

demonstrate and enhance their agency in Indian society and beyond. The sixteenth-century Paravars leveraged conversion in order to strengthen their position vis à vis two formidable adversaries. By allying themselves with the Portuguese, they disrupted existing power structures and opened new opportunities for flourishing. While this partnership brought significant religious, political, and economic change, it did not represent total discontinuity with their past. As they converted as a group, the Paravars were able to preserve vital social structures and to incorporate long-standing spiritual practices into their new Christian faith and practices. Moreover, their conversion was an unfolding, progressive event that led to later advocacy for rights within their new religious community. For instance, Mukkavar Catholics appealed to Rome for their own bishop in the early twentieth century, and other low-caste Catholics fought for the right for clerical education and ordination, a substantial step for people steeped in a culture where only Brahmins could be religious leaders (Frykenberg 2008, p. 378). In this way, Dalit Catholics have arguably begun to effect something of a conversion of broader Catholic and Indian life. Through their gradual “entry” into and appropriation of Catholicism, Paravars and Mukkavars have compelled the Indian Catholic church to acknowledge and resist its casteist attitudes and practices. This process is far from finished, but the descendants of Paravar and Mukkavar converts (who far outnumber descendants of Nobili’s high-caste converts) embody endurance, faithfulness, collectivity, and hope (ibid.)

3.3. Protestantism and Dalits

The eighteenth century marked the beginning of a third major phase in Indian Christian history: Protestantism. In diverse ways, western Protestant missionaries both perpetuated and resisted caste. Despite this ambivalence, however, individual Indian Christians from low-caste backgrounds played remarkably significant roles in the establishment and expansion of Indian Christian communities. Histories of Indian Protestantism have commonly emphasized the work of foreign missionaries and relegated indispensable Indian figures to a separate section of the text, if they have included the latter at all. The sketch I offer below attempts to blend together the labor of foreign and Indian ministers and thus to reveal something of the mutuality and interconnectedness of their efforts. By studying the overlooked lives of these gifted and consequential Indian Christians of the past, Dalit Christians today may find inspiration and guidance for their own social, political, and religious initiatives.

The German Lutheran Pietist Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719), together with Heinrich Plütschau (1676–1747), arrived in Tranquebar under the patronage of the Danish king in 1706. Like Nobili, Ziegenbalg was an attentive student of Tamil culture who made contacts among scholars. However, Ziegenbalg diverged from his Catholic predecessor by investing in basic literacy for common people and lowlier communities (p. 149). By doing so, Ziegenbalg and his colleagues developed a large cadre of Indian Christian leaders, whose work was pivotal for the spread of the Christian movement.

One Indian Protestant who was shaped by Ziegenbalg’s work—and who, in turn, built on it—was Rajanaiken (1700–1771; also spelled Rayanayakkan or Rajanaikkan) (Jeyaraj 2009, pp. 30–39; Massey 1997c, pp. 161–63). Rajanaiken was a professional soldier and the grandson of a Roman Catholic. He became acquainted with the Tranquebar mission when he was sent to that region to take care of crops, and while there he bought a copy of Ziegenbalg’s Tamil translation of the New Testament, which he studied with great interest. Returning to his home in Tanjore, an area that had been closed to missionaries, Rajanaiken persuaded the king to permit the entry of European mission personnel. Tanjore became an important base of Protestant missionary work, and the foreigners expressed an interest in ordaining Rajanaiken, who had already become an evangelist. Due to his low-caste status as a Paraiyar, however, the missionaries determined that he would not be well-accepted by other Indian Christians and accordingly ordained a higher-caste Christian, Aaron. Despite this snub, Rajanaiken persisted in his ministry. Surviving monthly work reports witness to the creative and effective ways in which Rajanaiken translated the gospel, earned the

respect of Christians and non-Christians, and dedicated himself to the training of younger colleagues. As Daniel Jeyaraj writes regarding Rajanaiken and other Tamil Lutherans, “their interaction with the common people, their attempts to indigenize the Christian message, and above all their attempts to live the 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). Indians like Rajanaiken, then, did not only follow and support European leaders; rather, these native Christians also went ahead of the foreigners and created possibilities for westerners and themselves.

Rajanaiken’s work in Tanjore laid the foundation for the celebrated German missionary Christian Frederick Schwartz (1726–1798), who worked in South India for nearly half a century. His greatest accomplishment may have been his formation of a number of Indian “helpers”, who became prominent leaders themselves. These leaders—such as Vedanayakam Sastriar, Sathyanathan Pillai, Chinnamuttu Sundaranandam David, and Maharasan Vedamanickam—preached and worked in Tirunelveli and Travancore, where astonishing Christian growth occurred in the closing years of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the next (Frykenberg 2008, pp. 158–68). Notably, the bulk of the growth occurred among low-caste people, who understood the Gospel to promise both spiritual and social liberation. As a result, the new converts successfully advocated for social reforms, such as an end to various forms of slavery, and formed mutual aid associations for the flourishing of their communities. Another German, C.T.E. Rhenius (1790–1838), followed the lead of these low-caste Christians in his work in Tirunelveli (*ibid.*, pp. 249–57). Breaking missionary precedent, he construed caste as a religious matter that was to be contested on Christian grounds, not a “mere” cultural form that could be accommodated by Christian workers. Further, in an act that eventually led to British leaders of the ascendant Church Missionary Society (CMS) removing him from his post, he trained and ordained seven Indian men whose capacities were desperately needed in a burgeoning church. Though this ordination conflict was primarily based on differences between Lutheran and Anglican polities, not on the caste status of the Indian ministers, Rhenius’s position still reflected a strong investment in and reliance on indigenous leadership.

Indian Protestant history should not be idealized, as if it unequivocally rejected caste. It did not. Due to their desire to please upper castes, as well as their own contempt and condescension, some Protestant missionaries were reluctant to “count” Dalit conversions as legitimate, and they provided Dalit education more to “civilize” Dalits than to empower or liberate them (Samuel 2020, pp. 131–37; Viswanath 2014). However, as the overview above shows, this Protestant history also points toward a genuine Indianization—and even Dalitization—of Christianity of India. In the back-and-forth work of Europeans and Indians, Dalit lives improved and Indians took the reins as primary agents for the transmission and interpretation of the faith. Concluding his chapter on western Protestant missionaries, Frykenberg observes, “Christians in India, in the end and by common consensus, could not be anything but profoundly Indian. It was they who appropriated new cultures and convictions. It was they whose conversions turned previous ways of life upside down, even if only for themselves” (Frykenberg 2008, p. 168).

Like those before it, this phase of Indian Christian history contains meaningful resources for contemporary Dalit theology and life. In an immediate way, Rajanaiken and other low-caste leaders are motivating figures whose stories encourage positive self-regard and emulation. Of deeper interest, though, is the *way* in which low-caste Indian Protestant leaders worked. Drawing from Frykenberg’s analysis of early Indian Protestantism, one can characterize Protestant missionaries, both foreign and Indian, as *dubashis* (*ibid.*, pp. 142–43, 165–68). The term, which literally means “two-language agents”, can be variously rendered as “translators”, “interpreters”, and “go-betweens”. Frykenberg employs the word to highlight the ways in which Protestant Christians facilitated communication that occurred simultaneously at two levels (among both elites and lower classes) and in two directions (between east and west). Through this gradual work, *dubashis* built infrastructure

that eventually—often only after the passage of generations—bore fruit through the work of later Christian workers, who were almost entirely Indian.

This *dubashi* model is potentially useful for Dalits. First, it gestures toward the slow and difficult work of communication and network building that is necessary for transformation. Dalits, of course, are already involved in this process through, for example, global ecumenical partnerships and domestic alliances with those seeking justice for women and *Adivasi*/tribal people. In the midst of this important work, Indian Protestant history underscores the importance of Dalit *dubashis* continuing to work among ordinary people, not exclusively in the academy or in international organizations. Second, at a more theoretical level that fits with current Dalit theological discourse, 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 (Peacock 2020). Matters of identity, of course, are practical as well as theoretical. The story of Rajanaiken shows how he was not reducible to a single, simple identity: here was a low-caste soldier who also studied Scripture, changed policy, evangelized, and mentored younger generations, even in the face of continuing caste discrimination and religious persecution. Likewise, Dalit *dubashis* today may not be able simply to break free of caste realities, but they can press the boundaries and, in the long term, effect meaningful change. Third, the *dubashi* framing of Dalit work and identity has theological dimensions that fit with Dalit Christian faith and priorities. The *dubashi* concept aligns, for example, with Christian themes of reconciliation between divided groups (Eph 2:14), transformation through the renewing of minds (Rom 12:2), and new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Further, it points to Christ as the true *dubashi*, in that he speaks the language of God and humanity, moves between diverse human communities, and works patiently in and through others in order to accomplish God’s purposes (1 Cor 3:6). In all of these ways, then, *dubashi* imagery helps to link Dalit theology and lived Dalit experience.

3.4. Pentecostalism and Dalits

In the early twentieth century, another vital Christian movement—Pentecostalism—emerged in India. Scholars have given increased attention to this movement’s history and theology, but Indian Pentecostalism, especially outside South India, still warrants further study. Like all forms of Indian Christianity, Pentecostalism has struggled with caste dynamics, but it has also produced possibilities for Dalit well-being. For the purposes of this study, I highlight the ways in which Indian Pentecostal history has potential to enrich Dalit theology and life by witnessing to the powerful, liberating, and expansive work of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecostalism was global from its beginnings, with India, as much as Azusa Street, a key area of origin (Hedlund 2011; Thomas 2008; Bergunder 2008). Charismatic revival broke out in the Welsh Presbyterian missions of northeast India, in what is now the Indian state of Meghalaya, in 1904, two years before William Seymour’s better-known revival in Los Angeles. In 1906, Mukti Mission in Kedgaon, Maharashtra, which was founded by the famous convert Pandita Ramabai, experienced an outpouring of the Spirit in its prayer meetings. The young women of the mission, members of various castes but all survivors of great suffering, “exploded into loud and joyful outbursts of sight and sound” (Frykenberg 2008, p. 408). Even though Ramabai and the mission did not, in the long term, remain associated with the Pentecostal movement, these events were highly influential for the movement in India, as they brought conversions, consecrations to Christian ministry, and many visitors who carried the fire of revival elsewhere. Kerala, in the far southwest of the subcontinent, became a primary base for the Pentecostal movement. American Pentecostal missionary George Berg came to Kerala in 1909, and four Pentecostal churches were established in the state by the 1920s. In the early part of the ‘20s, most converts to Pentecostalism were from Dalit backgrounds, which drew the interest of two Dalit leaders, Poykayil Yohannan and Vellikara Chodi (or simply Choti). Ultimately, however, these leaders opted not to join the Pentecostal church because Pentecostal leadership was quickly

“Syrianised”, i.e., dominated by Thomas Christians who migrated into the movement (Thomas 2008, p. 28). In this way, early Indian Pentecostalism came to reflect the caste structures of established churches (Bergunder 2008, pp. 29–30). These caste dynamics have resulted in intra-church conflict and division. For example, in 1972, the Church of God, a mainline Pentecostal body, split into the Church of God in India (Kerala State) and Church of God in India (Division), which represent, respectively, Dalit and Syrian constituencies (Thomas 2008, p. 316). Even with the formation of separate Dalit Pentecostal churches, Dalits generally remain underrepresented in Pentecostal leadership, and histories of Indian Pentecostalism tend to overlook the contributions of Dalits (ibid., p. xiv)

One important Dalit Pentecostal leader was Ramankutty Paul (1881–1945; also known as P. Paul), a Hindu convert to Christianity and founder of the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission, which later changed its name to The Pentecostal Mission (Pulikottil 2011; Bergunder 2008, pp. 286–87). Paulson Pulikottil suggests that Paul’s conversion and church founding were inspired by the influential reform movement of Sri Narayana Guru, a Hindu leader in Paul’s native state of Kerala who worked to create alternative religious and public spaces for Ezhavas, the caste group to which Guru and Paul belonged, and to break the Brahmin monopoly on Hindu religious life. What Guru did for Kerala’s Hindu community (fighting for temple access for Dalits, bringing “high caste” deities into Dalit religious spaces), Paul did for Pentecostalism, as he established a self-sustaining and self-governing ecclesial organization that has propagated itself in numerous countries throughout the world. The Pentecostal church body Paul formed is distinguished for being the first Dalit-led Pentecostal denomination in India, and it has sought to incorporate various castes in its membership and leadership. (Along with these achievements, however, there have been significant theological controversies and leadership disputes within the denomination, especially after Paul’s death (Bergunder 2008, pp. 41–44).)

In important ways, the story of Ramankutty Paul dovetails with V. V. Thomas’s work on Dalit Pentecostalism. Thomas shows that Indian Pentecostalism is not monolithic and that its history (as well as its current manifestations) should not be viewed solely as a spiritual revival, but also as a socio-political movement. He points, further, to several strong affinities between Pentecostalism and Dalit experience and identity, four of which I mention here (Thomas 2008, pp. 348–80). First, Dalit Pentecostalism was a movement of the poor who sought holistic liberation. Many Dalits saw Pentecostalism as powerful source for new identity and upward mobility. Second, Pentecostalism resonated with pre-Christian Dalit history and culture. It did so especially with its pattern of worship, which allowed for emotional expression, the beating of drums, and ecstatic experiences (cf. Samuel 2020, pp. 88–91, 150–57). Third, the ethos and structure of Pentecostalism facilitated communal participation and ownership. The barrier between pastoral workers and the rest of the church was low, as all believers were equipped and commissioned to preach and evangelize in their daily lives. Fourth, Pentecostalism fit with Dalit life in its use of orality and narrative. Rather than privileging written texts, to which Dalits had historically been denied access, Pentecostalism created a space for ordinary, struggling people to give voice to their daily lives through testimony and prayer. In this space, the oral word could convey the sacred as well as or better than the written word, and thus Pentecostals could resist dominant-based, Brahmin-controlled “literate religion” (cf. Clarke 1998, pp. 146–57). Summarizing this interplay between Pentecostalism and Dalit life, Thomas writes, “Pentecostalism in its liberative process bestowed dignity, freedom and self-esteem for the oppressed [Dalits] as the children of God. The Dalits were able to reshape Pentecostalism in an innovative form while meeting their aspirations of both spiritual and temporal life” (Thomas 2008, p. xv). Dalit Pentecostalism, then, reveals once again low-caste Indians’ creative appropriation of a religious movement for the sake of individual and communal survival and growth.

This sketch of Indian Pentecostal history relates quite directly to Dalit theology and Dalit Christian life. In theological terms, Indian Pentecostal history emphasizes the power and movement of the Holy Spirit. Of course, historians are justified in not using such

explicitly theological language or frameworks (Webster 2012, p. 81), but Dalit theologians and Dalit Christians are not constrained in the same way. An understanding and appreciation of the Spirit, informed by Indian Pentecostal history, serves Dalit aims on several fronts. First, the Spirit's boundary-breaking freedom enables Dalits to see divine presence in pre-Christian history and among non-Christians. This allows Dalit Christians to embrace and preserve elements of their past and also to collaborate with Dalits and others across religious lines, which is critical in the pluralistic context of India. Second, the Spirit's indwelling empowers wide participation in the life of the church and community. If the Spirit could use a humble group of "mere Galileans" to speak with power and to launch a movement on the first Pentecost (Acts 2), then the same Spirit can do something similar in and through Dalit people. As many Dalit theologians note, Dalit—and human—flourishing comes about through the involvement and inclusion of all people, not through the control of an elite cadre of leaders. Third, the Spirit infuses Dalit theology and Dalit Christians with manifold gifts, imparting passion, urgency, endurance, and hope. Indian Pentecostal history pulses with emotion, experience, and desire, and these affective qualities can form a vital link between Dalit theology and Dalit Christian life. Dalit theology remains rooted in practical matters to the extent that it, through the work of the Spirit, is not a stagnant academic exercise but is rather inflamed with indignation, energy, commitment, faith, and love.

4. Conclusions

In this article, I have considered ways in which Dalit theology and Indian Christian history can work in tandem in order to connect more meaningfully with contemporary Dalit Christians and to develop a more complete picture of the history of Christianity in the subcontinent, especially with respect to Dalits. Though some cooperative efforts between theology and history have been undertaken, there is much room for further exploration. As we have seen, Indian Christian history, in its great duration, diversity, and complexity, weaves together caste oppression and resistance, Dalit suffering and Dalit strength. Even though my treatment only skims the surface of this history, it still names several liberative resources arising from four major periods of Indian Christianity. Thomas Christianity offers hagiographic accounts of the apostle Thomas, who courageously served the poor and defied elites. The annals of Indian Catholicism show how collective conversion by lower castes can sustain and strengthen marginalized communities, while also influencing the larger society and church. Early Indian Protestant history illumines the vital role and example of low-caste *dubashi* Christians who moved between different spheres, built partnerships, and effected long-term transformation. Finally, Indian Pentecostal history evokes the activity of the Holy Spirit, who inspires ordinary women and men, enlivens them with divine gifts, and transgresses boundaries in order to unite diverse people for the common good.

By examining Indian contexts in this way, I have sought more broadly to challenge the neat separation of the history of Christianity and theology and to suggest the productive potential of a deeper mingling of history and theology for both academic and practical purposes. Perhaps it is fitting, then, to end by suggesting that at least some historians and theologians would do well to see not only missionaries but also themselves as *dubashis*. Instead of staying within a single disciplinary division, *dubashi* scholars can move between various spheres, learn and translate different languages, develop a hybrid identity, and accompany those who labor for freedom and dignity. Dalit Christians, past and present, can lead the way into such work.

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