

Methodists Encountering North Indian Religions in the 19th century

Arun W. Jones, Emory University

I start with a scene from contemporary India. In the holy city of Banares in North India, on the second Saturday of every month, a group consisting of thousands of low caste and indigent Hindus, 85% of them women, gather at a Roman Catholic *ashram*. These are *Khrist Bhaktas* or Christ devotees,¹ and they have come together to worship the god Jesus, who is portrayed on a 12-foot billboard in the center of the ashram wearing a gold and white tunic, standing with outstretched arms. Under his portrait are written in Hindi the words of Matthew 11:28, “Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” Beneath the billboard stands the abbot of the *ashram*, an Indian Roman Catholic priest with long hair and thick beard, uncannily resembling the deity poised above him. For an hour the Swami offers instruction to the *bhaktas*, peppering his talk with accounts of healing from the lives of the *bhaktas* before him, with an occasional “hallelujah.” Then follows a time of testimonies about healing, where one by one devotees give witness to occasions of trial and deliverance. Normally timid village women flock to the microphone to thank the Lord for deliverance from cancer, spousal abuse, and lack of money, and for peace of mind. Five hours into this religious festival another holy man or *sadhu*, appropriately bearded and saffron-clad, marches into the center of the crowd holding a large monstrance in the shape of a wooden cross. He, too, is a Roman Catholic priest. The *sadhu* reaches the dais, holds up and moves the cross in a semicircular manner so that the crowd can take *darsan*, and receive the spiritual power emanating from it. The cross is put in place; the *bhaktas* begin to sing vernacular hymns known as *bhajans* in adoration of their god. After six hours in which worship, prayer, testimony, instruction and veneration have occurred, the *bhaktas* receive a final blessing.

The *Khrist Bhakta* movement in Banaras is one contemporary manifestation of long-term, if not always constant, religious interactions between various forms of devotional Christianity and of the *bhakti* movement in North India. My own work examines one such interaction, albeit a markedly different one: the interface between evangelical Christianity and various North Indian *bhakti* groups in the middle of the 19th century. I argue that this evangelicalism in some important ways resembled Indian religious communities that were spawned over centuries by the *bhakti* movement, and therefore came to occupy the space in the religious terrain that had been prepared and circumscribed by these indigenous groups.

Much has been made of the way in which new Hindu religious movements of the nineteenth century copied, or at least heavily borrowed, their tactics and even self-understandings from Christian missionaries and missions. Two famous examples of such movements are the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj. In this study, however, I want to reverse the perspective, and demonstrate how American Presbyterian and Methodist missionary evangelicalism in its first generation exhibited significant similarities to certain Indian religious “sectarian” *bhakti* movements that lay beyond the pale of Christianity. Because it (unwittingly) mirrored and even mimicked certain salient features of these movements, North Indian Christian evangelicalism brought over by American missionaries found itself operating on the same ground, or the same space, as they did.

A few clarifications are in order. First, by claiming that evangelical Christianity and *bhakti* movements shared certain similarities, I am not asserting that the two religious phenomena are essentially the same. Joel Robbins has warned against placing “such thoroughgoing stress on the continuities between Christian and indigenous ideas that they

produce accounts in which Christianity is represented as syncretized to such an extent that it is in reality nothing more than traditional religion tricked up in new clothes.”²

Secondly, Indian Christians are crucial to my argument, because they are the ones who knew the religious terrain of North India the best. Through their everyday living (to borrow from Michel de Certeau) they decided what sort of presence Christianity could be and would be in North India.³ The third clarification has to do with the generational aspect of this study. First generation converts enter a new religion in terms that make sense in the old one, as Andrew Walls and Joel Robbins have argued. Since the focus of this book is on the first generation of missionaries and Indian Presbyterians and Methodists, I would argue, along with Walls and Robbins, that the connections for the Indian converts at least to the already existing religious traditions of North India would be strong.

Finding Space

On May 25, 1835, Alexander Duff, the first missionary of the Church of Scotland to India, delivered a highly acclaimed lecture to its General Assembly, entitled “The Church of Scotland’s India Mission.” He began by narrating the typical experience of a young missionary to India, the land where “130 millions of idolaters live,” the land that “seems to be the chief seat of Satan’s earthly dominion; and . . . the grand theatre of his wildest revels.” The missionary goes forth “fired with inextinguishable zeal, and charged with the overtures of mercy” so that the gospel of Jesus Christ may be made known. He lands in Bengal, learns the language and “having, in his own estimation, thoroughly mastered it, he eagerly issues forth to make known his proclamation.” At first things go well – people pay him attention. And then something untoward occurs: “speedily he is disturbed out of his pleasing reverie. The flow of his discourse may be roughly interrupted by someone in the crowd boldly challenging him.” He finds out that

these challengers are Brahmins, “the uncontrolled leaders of the people.” Moreover, “if you are unable to cope with them, your authority goes for nought, and your religion is thrown into contempt.” Thus you, the missionary discover that you are forced to deal with the Brahmins’ demand for evidence of your authority, and “contrary to your original design you are now driven from the *direct* announcement of your message—you are *literally driven* to entertain the previous question of evidences.” You, the missionary try one tactic after another to answer the Brahmin: nothing works. “You are now reduced to the lowest degree of helplessness.”⁴

What interests us here is Duff’s depiction of the missionary’s movement from one space to another on the Indian social and religious landscape. The missionary arrives as conqueror. However, the missionary is quickly “literally driven” to a place not of his choosing, but of his opponent’s choosing. In this space he cannot deal with the counterthrusts of his Indian challengers, and he ends up completely helpless. Duff’s solution to the missionary’s plight, a solution which he develops in the rest of his lecture, is meant to return the missionary to the space of conquering hero. However, in reality this never happened: missionaries were constantly forced to occupy spaces that were consigned to them by the political and religious powers that were dominant in the areas where they were operating.

As the foregoing account of Christian missions indicates, I have found it very helpful to think in spatial terms when trying to recreate imaginatively the story of American Protestant mission in 19th century North India.⁵ And in this project of historical reconstruction I have learned much from Edward Soja’s *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, which in turn draws on the work of the philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre.⁶ According to Soja, in the study of human activity, space itself needs to be given serious consideration along with history and sociology. He argues that “a growing community of

scholars and citizens has, for perhaps the first time, begun to think about the *spatiality* of human life in much the same way that we have persistently approached life's intrinsic and revealing historical and social qualities: its *historicality* and *sociality*.⁷

Spatially speaking, Soja follows Lefebvre and argues that all space is produced – it is not an inert medium in which history and sociality occur.⁸ “[A]ll social relations become real and concrete, a part of our lived social existence, only when they are spatially “inscribed.”⁹ Given this understanding of space, Lefebvre and Soja think of Firstspace as the physical space in which we live; this is called “perceived” space. Secondspace is space as imagined, conceived in the mind, and thus is termed “conceived” space. Thirdspace is called “lived space,” which “can be described as a creative recombination and extension [of Firstspace and Secondspace], one that builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the “real” material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through “imagined” representations of spatiality.”¹⁰

Thirdspace, as we come to find out, means a great deal of things – it is “a purposefully tentative and flexible term,”¹¹ but at its source is a desire to break away from thinking in binaries. Rather the third is an Other, “*L’Autre*” which draws critically on the first and the second, the binary, but then adds something more (something Other) so as to create new possibilities and options for thinking and acting.

Thirdspace refers not only to actual space but also to social space.¹² This is a space of openness, where new ideas, practices and (political) allegiances are conceived and tried out.¹³ It is a place of experimentation, where we seek “to find more flexible ways of being other than what we are while still being ourselves, of becoming open to coalitions and coalescences of radical subjectivities, to a multiplicity of communities of resistance, to . . . ‘the anarchy of difference.’”¹⁴

While Soja is concerned with social and political identity, I have found his idea of Thridspace fruitful for thinking about religious identity as well. Religious communities that occupy a Thridspace both borrow and critique the prevailing religious dichotomies (caste-outcaste, Hindu-Muslim, Christian-heathen) and provide a place where persons can experiment and play with new religious identities. It is my argument that *bhakti* movements and then Christian evangelicalism occupied such a religious Thridspace.

One other characteristic of Thridspace is that it both embraces and questions marginality, in order to accept it, reject it and go beyond it. In the context of North India, there have been any number of marginal religious communities that both recognize their marginality yet also cultivate new ways of thinking and living that both embrace and challenge their marginality. Such communities have typically gathered around Hindu *gurus*, Sufi saints, and more recently even Christian missionaries.¹⁵ At their best, they have lived in an open Thridspace combining and going beyond their social marginality and their self-perceived centrality.

There were a number of different ways in which religious movements constructed and occupied space in 19th century North India. First of all there were, of course, physical spaces: temples, shrines, mosques, *dargahs*, churches, chapels, preaching stations, river banks or *ghats*, as well as *maths* and missionary compounds with dwellings, hostels, schools, and worship spaces set up by and for religious persons.¹⁶ At times the physical spaces were a quarter in a village or city: a *basti* or *mohullah* in North India. But these physical spaces were merely one aspect of religious space. Communities lived and practiced their religions adjacent to one another, with various types of official and unofficial interactions occurring all the time. In so doing, they inscribed their stories and histories – to borrow again from Michel de Certeau – onto their physical, intellectual, social and religious landscape.¹⁷ They also circumscribed certain social

and religious spaces for themselves, in relation to other social and religious groups operating around them.

When Christian evangelical missionaries arrived in North India in the late 18th and early 19th century, they believed that their religion could take the space occupied by Hinduism and Islam, dislodging these traditions from their central position in Indian society. Yet even with the backing of high officials in the British government, Christianity as a newcomer to the Indian scene had to take a space at the margins.¹⁸ However, these margins were teeming with religious life, life that daily spilled over and affected the acknowledged religious centers of North Indian society. The margins were, in fact, centers of their own, Thirdspaces of religious possibilities, operating in critical dialogue with various orthodoxies. It was in this religious Thridspace, prepared and populated by Hindu *bhakti* movements, that the evangelicalism introduced by American missionaries was compelled to pitch its tents. The choice of this particular Thridspace was not, however, simply a matter of political necessity. If that were the case, missionary Christianity could have cleared and occupied some space of its own. Rather, missionary inspired evangelicalism occupied the space created by “sectarian” movements because it shared with them some crucial similarities.

Bhakti and Evangelicalism

There are four important areas in which *bhakti* movements and evangelicalism shared characteristics. One was theological, a second in the area of religious expression, a third in reformation, and a fourth in social formation.

In terms of theology, while there are great differences between them, both evangelicals and *bhakti* movements looked to and worshiped a single divine savior. For evangelicals, of course, this savior is Jesus. For various *bhakti* sects, their devotion would be either to a

particular god or goddess, their *ishtadevata*, or to a pure apprehension of the divine, which eschews all representations of the divine in the phenomenal world.¹⁹ The most popular proponents of the latter view were Kabir and Nanak, the latter being the founder of what has become known as the Sikh religion. Below are examples of hymns and *bhajans* which bring out the theology of *bhakti* poets and evangelicals. The first is a song poem of Kabir, a 15th century “saint” who refused to worship God in any manifestation, so he used the sound “Ram” to refer to God. The second is a song poem of Mirabai, a Rajput princess of the 16th century who so devoted herself to Krishna that she considered herself married to him, much to the dismay and ire of her in-laws. The third is a hymn of Isaac Watts, and the fourth a hymn of Charles Wesley.

Brother, where did your two gods come from?
Tell me, who made you mad?
Ram, Allah, Keshav, Karim, Hari, Hazrat [all divine names]—
so many names.
So many ornaments, all one gold,
it has no double nature.
For conversation we make two—
This *namāz* [Muslim prayer], that *pujā* [Hindu worship],
this Mahadev [name of Shiva], that Muhammad,
this Brahma, that Adam,
this a Hindu, that a Turk,
but all belongs to earth.
Vedas, Korans, all those books,
those Millas and those Brahmins—
so many names, so many names,
but the pots are all one clay.
Kabir says, nobody can find Ram,
both sides are lost in schisms.
One slaughters goats, one slaughters cows,
they squander their birth in isms.
(Kabir)²⁰

Sister, I had a dream that I wed
the Lord of those who live in need [i.e. Krishna]:
Five hundred sixty thousand people came
and the Lord of Braj was the groom.
In dream they set up a wedding arch;
in dream he grasped my hand;

in dream he led me around the wedding fire
and I became unshakably his bride.

Mira's been granted her mountain-lifting Lord:
from living past lives, a prize.
(Mirabai)²¹

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home!
Under the shadow of thy throne, still may we dwell secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.
(Isaac Watts)²²

Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high.
Hide me, O my Savior, hide,
Till the storm of life be past,
Safe into the haven guide;
O receive my soul at last.
(Charles Wesley)²³

The marked differences in style and substance between Christian and Hindu devotionalism are evident even in translation. However, the theological similarities are also apparent. One of these is a devotion to a particular god. In this respect the evangelical focus on Jesus Christ provides a link to *bhakti* devotion to an *ishtadevata*. A second similarity is that this god is not simply a divine being, but the personal savior of the devotee. The divine savior is described in many ways in the hymns above: as a loving companion (such as husband), as a refuge in life's difficulties, as the almighty ("mountain-lifting Lord") or indestructible one. In Kabir, Ram's greatness is told by negation: the divine is not what religious authorities say, but is far beyond these "isms."

The songs of *bhakti* and evangelical "saints" point to the second broad similarity between the two subtraditions within Hinduism and Christianity, and that is that both may be described as "heart religion." If religion is conceived of as having intellectual, practical, and affective

dimensions, “heart religion” emphasizes the affective side of religion. The passions of Kabir, Mirabai and Wesley in the hymns quoted above are quite distinct in their expression. Yet the passions are there, notably visceral, grandly exposed to the audience. In Watts, the passion is subdued, but powerfully present nonetheless.

Third, there is a reformist impulse in both *bhakti* and evangelicalism. This reformation is both theological and social. In the realm of theology, both subtraditions criticize impediments put up by religious authorities which prevent the devotee from approaching the divine. Jack Hawley notes that “the *bhakti* poets seem united in their conviction that one must cultivate personal experience as a way to approach God; hence they downplay and often ridicule the preoccupations of ritual religion.”²⁴ The *bhakti* tradition also criticized the institution of caste and the construction of gender in Hinduism. The poets are famous for establishing communities in which people of all castes, and women as well as men, could join and devote themselves to the divine. Similarly, 18th and 19th century Protestant evangelicalism stressed the importance of a personal relationship with God, which meant that evangelicals often severely criticized formalism in Protestantism and especially Roman Catholicism’s high view of ritual in the Christian’s approach to God. Evangelicals were also famous for their deep concern for the poor in society, especially as the Industrial Revolution was creating severe economic and social upheaval in England and parts of America.

Finally, both *bhakti* and Protestant evangelicalism stressed the formation of distinct religious communities in which the appropriate religious devotion could be practiced, cultivated and developed over time. In the *bhakti* tradition, two broad categories of religious communities emerged in the 16th to the 18th centuries: these were *sampradayas* and *panths*. Evangelicalism also stressed the formation of communities of the faithful. In the Reformed tradition, Puritanism

was the most powerful communal movement in the English speaking world, while Methodism was founded on small groups of dedicated Christians meeting together for mutual edification. Thus both the *bhakti* and evangelical movements formed and nourished religious communities where their particular beliefs, practices and emotional and spiritual expressions could be regularized and cultivated. Because of these similarities, Christian evangelicals found that they interacted religiously far more often with people associated with *bhakti* movements than with Indians from other more orthodox traditions. 19th century Methodists and Presbyterians were residents in the religious Thridspace created by the *bhakti* movements of North India.

¹ *Bhakti* is the practice of devotion, often associated with a particular divine figure. The term “suggests sharing in and partaking of an intimate loving relationship with a deity.” *Bhakta* refers to the person who is the devotee. Kerry San Chirico, “Between Christian and Hindu: Khrist Bhaktas, Catholics, Hindus, and the Negotiation of Devotion in the Banaras Region” (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of California, Santa Barbara, 2012), 50.

² Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 30.

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xii-xvi; Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and its Other* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 157.

⁴ Alexander Duff, *The Church of Scotland’s India Mission* (Edinburgh: General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1835), 1-4; emphasis in the original.

⁵ For historical imagination, Paul Kollman. For history as story, see William Cronon, “Storytelling,” *The American Historical Review* 118:1 (February 2013):1-19.

⁶ I am grateful to Rebekka King for introducing me to this work.

⁷ Soja, 2.

⁸ For a helpful summary of Soja’s *Thridspace*, see Liv Ingeborg Lied, “Another Look at the Land of Damascus: The Spaces of the *Damascus Document* in the Light of Edward W. Soja’s Thridspace Approach,” in Jonathan G. Campbell, William John Lyons and Lloyd K. Pietersen, ed., *New Directions in Qumran Studies* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005):105-108.

⁹ Soja, 46.

¹⁰ Soja, 10, 6.

¹¹ Soja, 2.

¹² Soja, 62.

¹³ Soja, 106, 107.

¹⁴ Soja, 117.

¹⁵ To what extent different communities can actually escape their severe oppression as marginal groups is a question that cannot be definitively settled, but varies from place to place and time to time.

¹⁶ A *dargah* is a Sufi shrine, often built over the grave of a Sufi saint. The *math* is literally a group of buildings, with some land attached, where various devotees of a movement live, and where religious activities such as worship and study occur for all those associated with the sect, whether or not they live in the *math* itself.

¹⁷ See Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and its Other* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 176-179.

¹⁸ The story of the spread of North Indian Islam is in some ways quite similar, and other ways quite different. See the work of Richard Eaton.

¹⁹ For an excellent summary of *bhakti* sects in North India, see John Stratton Hawley, "Hindi Religious Traditions," *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition*, Vol. 6 (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Thomson Gale, 2005), 3983-3988.

²⁰ Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh (Delhi: Motilalbanarsiass, 1986), 50-51.

²¹ John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 125.

²² *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 117.

²³ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 479.

²⁴ Hawley, "Hindi Religious Traditions," 3985.