Monitoring and Measuring the Ineffable:
Religious Sisters and the *Adivasi* Peoples in Assam

Bidisha Saikia & Kevin Bales

Abstract

We present an analysis of the work of Religious Sisters in Assam, India. They are involved in anti-slavery/anti-human trafficking work, as well as driving fundamentally feminist, economic equality, and human rights agendas within the wider communities in which they live. Their work resembles that of Non-Governmental Organisations, but unlike most NGOs, the Sisters tend not to: produce annual reports, carry out evaluation exercises, prepare grant proposals, or set 'key performance indicators'. This raises three questions: firstly, while the voluntary sector increasingly requires monitoring and evaluation, what are the methods the Sisters use to achieve social change? Secondly, the Sisters are not trained NGO employees, so what skill sets do they bring to the work? Thirdly, how effective is their work by their own assessment and outside evaluators? We identify six philosophical/spiritual orientations that shape their working practices and a methodology of accompaniment – living directly with those the Sisters work to support in change. While there are no educational/training certifications, there is a *rite de passage* that every woman must accomplish – the recognition of a divine calling to service and the encompassing commitment of a vocation.

Minority Converts in a Majority Church:
Bunong Encounters with Protestantism under the Khmer Republic (1970-75)

Catherine Scheer

Abstract

Conversion to Christianity among Southeast Asian highland minorities has been recurrently interpreted as a way of joining a valorised religion that distinguishes converts from often-Buddhist ruling majorities and sometimes as a means of adopting a 'modern' way of life. Neither of these explanations, however, seems to appropriately describe the situation of Bunong highlanders who turned to Christianity in Cambodia's capital in the early 1970s. Under the pro-American regime of Lon Nol (1970-75), these spirit-practising inhabitants of the margins were brought to Phnom Penh to enrol in the national army. Khmer majority preachers visited them and led them to integrate themselves into the Khmer Evangelical Church. As light is shed on the astonishing trajectories of these Bunong recruits, it becomes possible to reflect upon what 'entering Christianity' meant for them. They were few in number, but the particularities of their experiences highlight the importance of an unprejudiced approach to Southeast Asian highlanders' conversions.

Minority Vulnerability in South Asia and China: Towards a Post-nationalist Imagination

Chandra Mallampalli

Abstract

In recent years, a global tilt toward rightist majoritarianism has made Muslim and Christian minorities of Asia more vulnerable to violence and displacement. China's program of "de-extremification" among the Uyghurs, Myanmar's military operations against the Rohingya, and Hindutva-inspired violence in India illustrate strong-handed homogenizing impulses, even by governments that profess to embrace diversity. By examining these different contexts through a common lens, it becomes possible to recognize recurring patterns and think beyond the nation-state as the only framework for addressing minority vulnerability. After comparing Muslim and Christian vulnerability across a variety of Asian contexts, the essay explores the possibility of "Islamo-Christian" solidarity in the face of majoritarian violence. This new alignment defies a longstanding imperialist framework, whose geopolitics pits a Christian West against a Muslim other. It also embraces an ethic of empathy that transcends the language of "religious freedom" – a principle arising from the same geopolitics that manufactured majority-minority distinctions to begin with.

Steep Path toward a Synodal Church: An Indonesian Case

Wilibaldus Gaut

Abstract

Analyzing a recent case of the church's involvement in a geothermal project in Wae Sano, Flores, Indonesia, from an ecclesiological point of view, this article aims to demonstrate one formidable obstacle to the realization of the vision of a synodal church. While many theological reflections following Pope Francis's pronouncement of the notion of 'an entirely synodal Church' have led to the conclusion that synodality is the *modus vivendi et operandi* of the church that best represents the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II, the practice in the field can show otherwise. In the case under discussion, the failure to practice synodality is caused by the ecclesial hierarchy's preference to listen more to the civil authority and other involved institutions at the cost of neglecting the voices of the grassroots community. From the perspective of synodality, it is the voices of ordinary people and their actual experiences that should take precedence.

Soldier Saints, Missionaries and the Mountains: Nostalgic Piety, Military Theology and Material Memory in Eastern Himalayas

Dechen Dolkar Bhutia
Namrata Chaturvedi

Abstract

This paper intends to contextualise the life of Christianity in British India through the developments in military theology in the late eighteenth and through the nineteenth century that put forth the image of the ‘soldier saint’- a true Christian soldier, British in blood and in faith. This discourse intensified after the military turned civilian Indian rebellion of 1857 which was immediately coloured in Christian vs heathen terms, and following which, the spiritual needs of Christian soldiers came into focus with the East India Company. The deaths, rituals and continued traditions of burial of the Christian soldiers, officers, and civilians have been marked through some prominent cemeteries and war memorials in India. While studies of these sites of memory have focused on the graves, tombs, and memorials in parts of north, west and south India, the frontier region of northeast India has remained outside the focus of most studies. This paper has chosen the eastern Himalayan territories comprising Sikkim and Kalimpong that fall on or near the Silk route to bring attention to the history of territorial aggression and the resulting material memory of lesser-known cemeteries and memorials Further. This paper analyses lesser discussed fiction to bring into focus the region's human geography. This paper recognises the need to study inter-religious relations through materiality and afterlives of Christianity in India that was shaped to a large extent by the soldiers-both British and native, and the chaplains, gravediggers, priests and nurses and caregivers whose lives are recorded in the memory of death. By doing so, this study hopes to bring new dimensions to the study of Christianity in India with the inclusion of the materiality of religion, the postcolonial gothic imaginary and military theology.

Shaping the Role of the Church as Transformer of Society: Exploring Chinese Theology and Transformative Theological Education in the Chinese Context

Wenjuan Zhao

Abstract

This article explores, from a theological standpoint, the growing concerns about the role of the church and how it may contribute to society without compromising Christian beliefs. It deconstructs some views favoring Western theology and reconstructs a Chinese theology in the Chinese context to argue how the church should be shaped and how transformative theological education could help the church achieve its goals. Given the Chinese context, this article proposes that theology be described as a way of thinking about God and His relationship with the world and a way to witness to Jesus Christ, allowing the church to present itself from its very origin as a political body—a *polis*—a community that offers an alternative political methodology to influence society. To influence Chinese society, the church must apply both transformative theological education and theological praxis.