

H-Net Reviews

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Pradip Thomas. *Strong Religion, Zealous Media: Christian Fundamentalism and Communication in India.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2008. xvii + 207 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-81-7829-834-4.

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Commissioned by Gene Mills (Florida State University)

The Global Benny Hinn Road Show

The introduction to this important book bristles with discontent. The object of the author's wrath is an assortment of fundamentalists ranging from the Taliban to Christian Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals who make the world unsafe or uncomfortable for non-fundamentalists. The setting for this study is the city of the author's birth, Chennai (Madras), in South India. This makes the book of special interest to me since I lived for more than twenty years in this city. The author's resentment appears to stem from the rise of new forms of Christianity different from the traditions of his youth. On the one hand he would like to respect the vigorous spirituality of the new churches, on the other he describes them as viral and divisive. According to Pradip Ninan Thomas, it is time for the mainstream churches to rejoin the Christian fundamentalists. Presumably the author intends to shock the mainstream church from its inertia.

My encounter with Pentecostal-Charismatics contrasts with that of the author. As a non-Pentecostal, mainstream evangelical I have preached in their churches and taught in their theological institutions. Thomas apparently views Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity as a threat to the ecumenical movement. He speaks of dialogue between the Vatican and the WCC, but does not mention the fact of ongoing Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue. The author is understandably exercised about the American capitalist culture of prosperity (p. ??). But I

disagree with his conclusion that this is the driving engine behind the expansion of Pentecostalism in India. Pentecostalism has a much earlier history in India not linked with the current health and wealth gospel.

Nevertheless, as Thomas points out, deviant representations of Christianity have appeared in India, imported from the West, mainly from United States, through the medium of television. Televangelists are the leading culprits—among them Pat Robertson, Sister Angelica, Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyers, Kenneth Copeland and others preaching an alien materialistic and capitalistic consumerist creed under the guise of a Health and Wealth Gospel of Prosperity. Indian counterparts include K. P. Yohanan (Gospel for Asia), Dhinakaran, (Jesus Calls), Sam Chelladurai (Apostolic Fellowship Tabernacle), Manickam Prakash (South India Soul Winner's Association) among others. The insensitivity of these and other purveyors of Christian television in India, who routinely claim the Indian nation for Christ (p. 85), create a backlash from Hindu religious nationalists, resulting in violence and persecution against Christians by Hindutva extremists.

Thomas is an authority on the role of media in communication. Citing Lumen 2000 and the Joshua Project as evidence, Thomas believes that Christian fundamentalists, like Islamic fundamentalists, constitute a global *umma* bent on global conversion and offering monetary and other incentives for individuals and communi-

ties to convert. This revisionist restatement of Christian brotherhood I believe to be false, and it should be corrected. Many converts suffer greatly for their faith and merit our compassion, not our criticism. Nevertheless, lack of sensitivity and respect toward Indian cultures and beliefs is a legitimate concern expressed throughout this book. Other positive points include a critique of consumerism (pp. 83-84), identifying television as a barometer (and conduit) of change (p. 84), a much-needed critique of religious television (pp. 93-94), assessment of popular culture from the West (p. 99), and appreciation for local cultural diversity (p. 100).

The author's propensity for generalization raises several questionable points which require explanation or correcting. For instance, "Fundamentalists have an explicitly political agenda" (p. ??). The statement may be partly true but partly false. The example given of Franklin Graham riding into Iraq aboard a U.S. tank (168) certainly conveys a political message, but this need not necessarily apply to all other fundamentalists. Even so, Thomas also has a political agenda, i.e., "the need to regulate religious broadcasting in the interests of maintaining religious harmony" (p. 184). Some statements are incorrect and require rebuttal. For instance, contrary to the author's assumption (p. 71), foreign missionaries are not found in any large number anywhere in India. Failure to define terms results in contradictions and misuse of categories. For instance, to use "Pentecostalism" as a term "to denote all the churches that are not normally recognized as part of the mainstream" (p. 71) is meaningless, and violates established uses of the term. Frequently used terms such as "Charismatic," "evangelical," "mainline," "mainstream," "neo-Pentecostal," and "Pentecostal" require definition and differentiation. For example, the Assemblies of God are a well-known major Pentecostal denomination, yet they are referred to as "Neo-Pentecostal" (p. 94). Several times the author implies an alliance of convenience between Christian televangelists (e.g., Benny Hinn) and Hindu religious nationalists (such as Shiv Sena) involving an exchange of money for political support (pp. 95, 122). If true, this should be carefully documented and exposed as the gravest of compromise

with the archenemy of Christianity in India. Thomas names organizations which serve as conduits "for vast amounts of funds" into India. "Political connections are necessary for the expansion of neo-Pentecostal churches in India" (p. 122).

Whether one agrees or disagrees with all of Thomas's assessments, the public image of a distorted Christianity is a serious issue calling for correction. Thomas is to be appreciated for issuing a call for accountability. Financial scandals and moral failures among well-known televangelists set an unfortunate pattern for new independent churches. "Problems related to accountability are legion in the new churches. While the Church of South India (CSI) and the Catholic Church in India have had their share of financial scandals, there are checks and balances in place that act as a deterrent to a cleric who has his eye on the parish finances. Such a system of accountability is just not there in many of these new churches" (p. 122). Thomas's description of Benny Hinn's Festival of Blessings—"the global Benny Hinn road show" (p. 162)—is a masterful exposé. Cited by the *Indian Express* as "the world's most dubious trader in religion" (p. 157), Hinn's distortions of the gospel are a shameful caricature of historic Pentecostalism. Forget everything else: this chapter is worth the price of the book.

Pradip Ninan Thomas, the author of this important book, is an associate professor at the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Queensland in Australia and vice head of the Participatory Communication Research Section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) at the University of London.

Strong Religion, Zealous Media should be required reading for Pentecostal and Charismatic leaders East and West if for no other reason than self-examination, but hopefully also for open discussion and debate with the author. The book is important for theological institutions, whether Pentecostal-Charismatic or mainstream Protestant, Catholic, ecumenical, evangelical, or independent.

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