

The Oxford Encyclopaedia of South Asian Christianity

Roger E. Hedlund, Jesudas Athyal, Joshua Kalapati, Jessica Richard, and Mylapore Institute for Indigenous Studies, eds. *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of South Asian Christianity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. 2 vols.: 762 pp. Rs 2,950 (about US \$55.00). Hardcover. ISBN: 0198073852. Also available as an e-book through *Oxford Reference: Oxford Quick Reference Online*.

The *Oxford Encyclopaedia of South Asian Christianity* (*OESAC*) provides an insider's guide to church history on the Indian sub-continent, plus the neighboring countries of Afghanistan and Burma and the island nations of Sri Lanka and the Maldives. In a region with religious majorities of Hindus, Buddhists, or Muslims, one can easily overlook the presence of over twenty-six million Christians belonging to more than twenty "denominations." British India and Burma are well known in the West as the object of the church's mission beginning with William Carey's arrival in Northeast India in 1793; fewer know of the Danish mission begun in 1706 or of the work of the Portuguese Franciscans as early as 1504. Those outside the world ecumenical community may not know that South Asian Christians now have national leadership in evangelism, missions, social and medical services, and theological education. They certainly merit their own encyclopedia that "documents the presence and contribution of Christianity as part of the history and culture of the South Asian region" (xvi). They have also taken responsibility for its publication.

As Chief Editor, Roger Hedlund, a "teaching missiologist," resident in India since 1974, recruited a team of South Asian scholars and church leaders to serve either on its editorial board (seven), as country or regional editors (thirteen), as topical or South Asian consultants (twenty-nine), or as members of the advisory board (fifty-three). Twenty-four international consultants and eight encyclopedia staff provided leadership to the project. The plan called for 1,100 articles by more than 600 authors. Types of articles include geographical, biographical, historical, institutional, ecclesiastical, topical, and "ground-level saints."

The entries for each country offer a good starting point for examining the *OESAC*. India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar), and Pakistan receive the most attention because of the British and Catholic missions to those countries during the colonial period. But even the smallest countries — Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives — have a history of Christian presence, if not influence, as does predominantly Muslim Afghanistan. These regional articles follow the general pattern of geography, secular history, religious context, the extent of religious freedom, and Christian contributions to culture (generally language development and literature). Except for those with the smallest Christian presence, each country has at least two articles — one documenting Protestant history and churches, another documenting Catholic history and churches. The alphabetical arrangement keeps a country's entries together if the heading begins with a form of the country's name. More helpful is the system of cross-references indicating where else the word or phrase appears as a heading in the encyclopedia. By following these cross-references, the reader can identify the shorter biographies and institutional histories important to that region.

As the largest country, with the largest Christian population and the longest Christian history, Christianity in India comprises the bulk of the two volumes. However, the article on India itself is only two pages long since most of the historical information is found in separate articles on thirty-three of the thirty-four Indian states and territories, as well as the cities of Calcutta, Chennai, and Delhi. Like the country studies, the articles on the states vary in length, focus on the history of Catholic and Protestant missions (and in the southern states, the arrival of the earlier Thomas/Nestorian/Syrian branches of Christianity), mention important Christian institutions located in the state (with cross-references if necessary), and have a brief bibliography for further study. No other country receives, nor requires, such detailed treatment.

A third approach to the presentation of Christianity in specific countries is by denomination — for example, Baptists in India, Baptists in Pakistan, and Baptists in Sri Lanka. Anglicans, the Assemblies of God, the Catholic Church, Church Missionary Society, Church of God, Lutherans, Methodists, Salvation Army, and Seventh-Day Adventists are among those with entries for separate countries, although usually no more than three or four. Since 1947, several Protestant denominations have come together to form national churches, such as the Church of South India, the Church of North India, the Church of Pakistan, and the Church of Bangladesh.

The rise of national churches in the post-colonial period has led to a generally accepted division of church history in South Asia: the earlier missionary period when most of the leadership came from outside of the region and the current period when leadership comes from within the region, with western personnel serving as consultants, advisors, or partners. From the mission period, one finds familiar names from Catholic and Protestant missionary history: Roberto de Nobili, Francis Xavier, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, and others of similar prominence. The *OESAC* also includes less well-known missionaries, including educators and doctors, who built on the work of those who came first. Often they are the same ones who established schools, seminaries, and hospitals that continue today (e.g., Ida Scudder and the Christian Medical College, Vellore). From the mission period, one also finds the names of early converts (e.g., Aaron, the first ordained Protestant pastor). To identify persons in this category, one must scan by their birth and death dates while distinguishing between western and non-western surnames.

The “church period” of Christianity in South Asia has more biographies of nationals than of Westerners. Not many of these persons are known outside the region, although they may be found when reading other works. For example, from one list of twenty-four modern church leaders given in a recent historical survey of India, twelve had biographical entries, including Vedanayakam Azariah, J. Russell Chandran, Pandipeddi Chenchiah, K. T. Paul, and M. M. Thomas. Since several of the educational and medical institutions listed had their beginnings in the missionary period, their articles also include a few paragraphs about recent developments and current projects. Other types of institutional entries from this period include national mission agencies, research institutes, and social welfare ministries. The introduction mentions the inclusion of Christian martyrs, but there is no separate list. However, the index has an entry “Martyr/Martyrdom” that gives page references to thirty different articles. A few of the references are only to the word “martyr”; Graham Staines, an Australian missionary killed in 1999, is among those who has a whole article devoted to his witness.

Topical articles, those not limited to specific places, person, events, or institutions, comprise about ten percent of the *OESAC*'s total content. Here most western readers will find a common ground. Many of the articles can be clustered into seven groups. Those discussing the other religions of the region provide an objective summary of its tenets, the history of its interaction with Christianity, and possible bridges for interreligious dialogue. A

few articles discuss aspects of Christian theology, again drawing out those with special meaning for Christians in South Asia as well as to educate South Asian readers. For example, “Kingdom of God” traces the biblical teaching and implications for the church as an antidote for synchronism and basis for ministry and mission. In a similar way “Holy Spirit/Pneumatology” traces the Christian teaching but also summarizes the ways Indian Christian theologians find connections with Hindu philosophy. The article “Indian Christian Theology” summarizes recent trends and developments. Other articles cluster around the themes of enculturation, minorities, missions, and social issues.

How well does the *OESAC* conform to Ranganathan’s “Five Laws of Library Science”? First, it is available for use. Although published in India, it has been imported to the west and is available at a reasonable price from smaller booksellers. Second, it is available to every reader with online access as part of the online *Oxford Reference: Oxford Quick Reference* collection. At this site (<http://tinyurl.com/SouthAsianChristianity>), one can search within the work by keyword and view the entry name and about three lines of text at no charge (the publisher offers both institutional and personal subscriptions). Third, this book will have its readers. Those in South Asia will read it to learn more about the roots and contributions of Christianity in their country. Those outside South Asia with an interest in World Christianity will read it to learn how Christianity can flourish outside a Eurocentric culture. Fourth, with the *OESAC*, readers can save time in their research, although future editions could be improved by including a hierarchical topical index, a timeline, and maps. A few cross-references point to blind entries, either because the heading was not used or the article was not available for publication. One potential time saver is the above-mentioned keyword searching available online. Fifth, the *OESAC* aids in a library’s growth. Acquiring titles listed in Robert Frykenberg’s twelve-page “Bibliography on Christianity in South Asia” or Chandra Mallampalli’s five-page article titled “Historiography and Bibliography: South Asian Christianity” will for years to come fuel the growth of special collections that support the new discipline of World Christian studies.

Libraries whose readers would only occasionally do research in this area can still serve their students well with the recent *Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (which has a better treatment of the tradition about the Apostle Thomas in India), *Dictionary of Global Theology* (which has an academic treatment of more theological and cross-cultural themes from South Asia), or *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*. Those with strong missions programs will want to purchase or subscribe to this work and open for their readers a portal to the vibrant world of South Asian Christianity.

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