



2019

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Recommended Citation

Sahoo, Sarbeswar (2019) "Caste, Conversion, and Care: Toward an Anthropology of Christianity in India," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 32, Article 3.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1729>

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Caste, Conversion and Care: Towards an Anthropology of Christianity of India

Sarbeswar Sahoo

Abstract: This paper critically examines Nathaniel Roberts' book, *To be Cared For*. It argues that by discussing the "unique moral problems and cultural contradictions" that surround the everyday life-world of low caste Dalit Pentecostals in a slum in Chennai, Roberts provides a rich ethnography of caste, Christianity and care in India. In particular, the book makes several contributions: first, it provides a nuanced, *contextual* understanding of the "pluralities" of Indian Christianities; second, contrary to Gandhian view of "religion as spirituality", it shows (by questioning the hierarchy of the religious world) how materiality or worldly benefits occupy a central role in the life-world of believers; third, it discusses "pastoral innovation" and shows how Pentecostal pastors are constantly innovating new ways of interpreting and reinterpreting doctrines to address the everyday social problems and anxieties of believers, and also how pastoral innovation needs to be understood in the context of pastoral competition and rivalry; and finally, it discusses a notion of belonging that goes beyond territoriality and religious affiliation and shows how "relationality", shared values, and real/imagined connections are essential to

belonging. Discussing these four aspects, what the paper shows is, how through careful observation and in-depth ethnographic narratives of everyday religiosity and morality of the slum dwellers, Roberts makes an important contribution to the anthropology of Christianity in India.

PENTECOSTAL Christianity is one of the fastest growing religions of the world and has spread to almost all nations. A 2004 data source mentions that there are 135 million Pentecostals/Charismatics in Asia, 80 million in North America, 141 million in Latin America and 38 million in Europe (Anderson, 2004: 123). This shows that Pentecostals are concentrated largely in the global south and in India their numbers have grown significantly. According to another data source, India now has the fifth largest number of Pentecostals in the world behind Brazil, the United States, China and Nigeria (see Burgess, 2002:118). Given this, one may ask: what is the nature of Pentecostalism and amongst whom is it spreading? What does it offer to people that has made it so popular compared to "mainline" churches? While Pentecostalism has a much longer history, its beginning is generally associated with the

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Azusa Street revival (Los Angeles) of 1906. Although in the early American culture the Pentecostals defied socio-cultural and racial segregation and brought both African Americans and whites to worship together, it was generally considered a religion of the poor. However, over the years, with the spread of Pentecostalism to other classes and races of American society, such commonplace generalization that “Pentecostalism as a religion of the poor in America” has been successfully challenged (see Jones, 2009: 508).

Unlike America, in the Indian context, Pentecostalism has developed as a religion of the poor and it continues to appeal to the lower castes, tribes and other marginalized groups and communities, even though it includes people from other social strata. In Rajasthan, Lukose (2009) and Sahoo (2018) have shown how Pentecostalism has emerged as predominantly a tribal religious movement. While for Lukose Pentecostal conversion has created a new, empowering identity for tribals, Sahoo shows how divine healing and miracles have played a major role in tribal conversion to Pentecostalism. Broadly, in the North Indian context, Abraham (2011: 102-103) notes, “major Pentecostal growth has been among tribals, Dalits and lower caste people, i.e. groups experiencing social ostracism, caste cruelty, utter poverty, various illness and demonic possession.” The narrative is no different in the southern Indian context. As Nathaniel Roberts’ book, *To be Cared For*, shows, “Christ loved the poor” and Pentecostalism has emerged as a slum religion professed by *Pariahs*. The *Pariahs* are untouchables who have experienced “caste-based slavery” and “systematic dehumanization” (pp.2-3). In this ethnography, Roberts dwells deeply on the everyday life-world of low caste Dalit Pentecostals who live in a slum, which he calls

Anbu Nagar, in northern Chennai, and he discusses the “unique moral problems and cultural contradictions that structure their existence” (p.5).

The Dalits living in the slum identified themselves as “the poor” and pointed out that the “outside” world belonged to the (upper) caste people. While the slum is marked by poverty, hardship and suffering, “the rich” and “the privileged” dwelled in the outside world. Remarkably, it is not the wealth of the outside caste people that troubled the poor, even though they felt that “they and others like them were being unfairly treated” (p.34); for them, the most important question was: Why don’t the rich *care* about the poor? What makes people not care about and ignore the sufferings of fellow human beings? Addressing this, Roberts provides a rich ethnography of caste, Christianity, and care in India. In particular, the book gives in-depth accounts of how people maintain social relations – for example, gender solidarity through debt relations, effects of the supernatural in community life, how community boundaries or conceptions of self and the other are maintained, and how myth is used by Dalits in conceptualizing their relationship with the dominant caste society. I will not be able to examine all these aspects in this paper. However, what I show is that by providing thick ethnographic narratives of everyday religiosity and morality, Roberts makes an important contribution to the anthropology of Christianity in India.

Anthropology of Contextual Christianities of India

In an article published in *Religion Compass* in 2008, Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins note that anthropology of Christianity is a newly emergent field. The development of this sub-discipline “was impeded until recently by

anthropology's theoretical framing and empirical interests" (p.1139). Especially, anthropology had a problematic relationship with Christianity, which was largely preoccupied with the question of modernity. This, however, did not mean that there existed no ethnographic or descriptive work on Christian traditions. Rather, most recently "there has been a concerted call from anthropologists for their discipline to consider seriously the possibility of routinely putting the religion of Christian populations at the center of ethnographic accounts" (p.1140).

Beginning in the 1950s until today, Indian anthropologists and anthropologists studying India (including sociologists) have primarily been interested in issues of tribe and caste. Indian universities also rarely offered courses on anthropology/sociology of religion. One reason for this could be the postcolonial trajectory of the Indian nation-state. During the colonial period and in partition, India witnessed significant inter-religious communal violence. Considering the destructive effects of religion, the Indian state in the postcolonial period somewhat distanced itself from religion and followed a modern, secular model of nation building. This was reflected in curriculum of the universities, which even continues today. As Singh, Goel, Bhattacharjee and Bhattacharyya (2019) rightly note, in India, sociology was preoccupied with the question of (secular) modernity, which encompassed economy and politics; religion was relegated to the domain of unmodern and primitive, hence excluded from the scope of study. Though anthropology (supposedly the study of primitive societies) studied the so-called "primitive" tribal societies and culture, it hardly included any discussion of religion.

Studies on religion, especially Christianity, were majorly written from a theological

perspective. With the exception of a few, such as Rowena Robinson and David Mosse, there have been very little detailed ethnographic accounts of Christianity in India. Most of these studies discussed "Indian Christianity" and its cultural uniqueness in comparison to the West because of its association with caste. Although caste remains a major underlying theme of Roberts' book, what is interesting, however, is the way he deconstructs the category of "Indian Christianity" and provides a nuanced, contextual understanding through the discussion of pluralities/internal diversities of "Indian Christianities" (see Bauman and Young, 2014).

For Roberts, the importance of "context" is vital; it plays a major role in making sense of a concept. I will call this "conceptual contingency" – that concepts have multiple meanings and their meanings are context dependent. This is clearly visible when Roberts discusses what religion, morality, care, and truth mean to the slum population and how their meanings are different in other contexts. Discussing slum Christianity, Roberts notes that while rituals and beliefs of Pentecostalism are the same world over, what is important is why these mattered to people in a particular socio-historical context. Why people follow these beliefs; how they reinterpret them and apply them into their lives to make sense of or give meaning to their social world. In a sense, through such contextualization, Christianity becomes indigenized/localized and acquires multiple meanings. Furthermore, Roberts also discusses the contextualized meanings of sin and salvation. Contrary to the common understanding, slum Christians see salvation not as a spiritual state or related to the other world; for them, it is closely attached to their everyday experiences of suffering in caste; while sin is interpreted as inequality, salvation

is seen as being saved from caste sufferings and achieving equality.

Furthermore, Roberts also shows how categories of “the poor” and “the rich” can have contextual meanings. For him, although these are “class” categories, they are highly embedded in “caste” relations. When slum people (who self-identify as “casteless”) refer to the non-slum people as “the rich” or “the privileged” they basically meant the (upper) caste people. Through such categorizations the slum people create a homogenized view of “the poor” and “the rich.” In contrast, Roberts uncovers the inherent heterogeneities and diversities. Moreover, he also shows how caste is very much present and absent at the same time in the everyday lives of people in the slum. One point, however, that is central to the relationship between caste and Christianity in India (as a majority of converts are Dalits) is the question of affirmative action (known in India as the reservation system), which the book does not deal with very much.

While affirmative action policies allow tribal (Scheduled Tribe) converts to have benefits of reservation, it denies the same to low caste Dalit (Scheduled Caste) converts. The Supreme Court has, on many occasions, rejected the Dalit Christian demands for reservation on the basis of the Constitution Order, which “expressly prohibits reservation benefits for anyone other than Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists” (Sen, 2010:122; see also Sahoo, 2018: 43-46). A majority of Dalit Christians have therefore decided to not officially convert, as it deprives them from the benefits of reservation. Instead, they practice and “live the life of a Christian” (*followers*) in their everyday lives. Considering this, the Hindu nationalists have argued that this is a deliberate attempt on the part of Indian Christians to keep their numbers low in the census, which has resulted in the rise of

“crypto Christians” or secret Christians (see Kent, 2011) who receive double benefits, from the church as well as the policies of reservation. While it may be true that a majority of these slum dwellers lack the required educational qualification to avail government benefits of reservation or the church is not in a position to provide financial support to its members. Moreover, it could also be true that even though these members are receiving double benefits, it is not enough to lift them out of the poverty and marginality of the slum. Given this, it is not clear from Roberts’ account whether slum Christians are official converts or just followers of Christian faith and belief system. It would have been better to have a brief discussion on this in the book.

Agency, Materiality, and Ethicality in Conversion

In the theoretical literature, discussions on conversion have broadly centered on two strands of literature. First, the question of continuity and rupture (Robbins, 2003; Engelke, 2004) – whether conversion marks “a complete break with the past” (Meyer, 1998) or there is a “persistence of the past” (Keane, 2007) beliefs, practices and rituals. In a sense, it refers to whether conversion could be seen as an “event” or a “process” (Berger and Sahoo, 2020). Second, [multiple] modes and motivations for religious conversion (Robinson and Clarke, 2003; Berger and Sahoo, 2020) – this particularly raises questions about “agency” of the individual and motivations centering on whether conversion happened because of material inducements or “real” spiritual transformation.

Roberts does not deal much with the former; he discusses the latter by examining the state level anti-conversion laws and how ambiguities associated with concepts like

force, fraud or inducement have made conversion as well as lives of converts difficult. In fact, as per these laws, every conversion could be categorized as fraudulent. Additionally, these laws, ironically known as the Freedom of Religions Act, have made special monitoring provisions in cases of Dalits, women and children. By doing so, this law has denied them agency and freedom, assuming that they are incapable of making their own decisions. In a similar manner, Gandhi also denied agency to Dalits by arguing that Dalits convert to Christianity not because of spiritual reasons but because of material benefits. Due to their poverty and marginalization, Dalits are incapable of taking rational decisions. As he noted, “the poor Harijans have no mind, no intelligence, no sense of difference between God and no-God” (p.146). For Gandhi, religion is essentially a *spiritual* matter; worldly affairs have no place there. He therefore strongly opposed conversion, for he believed that Dalits can be easily lured into conversion for worldly benefits.

Roberts contrasts the Gandhian view of “religion as spirituality” with the slum understanding of religion. In doing so, he asks: what does it mean to follow a religion or being a believer? Discussing the everyday beliefs and practices of the slum population, of both Hindus and Christians, Roberts questions the hierarchy of the religious world, especially between spirituality/truth and materiality, and shows how materiality or worldly benefits occupy a central role in the life-world of believers. According to him, “neither Christianity nor Hinduism, as practiced in the slum, emphasized any sort of otherworldly telos” (p.9). The people of Anbu Nagar valued gods and worshipped them primarily for the worldly benefits and protection they provided. In fact, it was very important for them to be

“getting it right” when it came to choosing gods – the relative potency and responsiveness of gods played a vital role in this regard. In the slum, there were stories, lived experiences, testimonies, and everyday talk about which gods are responsive and which god to turn to when someone is experiencing a specific problem. For example, in the slum, Christ was known to be the god who loved the poor and the weak; but most specifically, he was considered to be the lord of women who “specialized in helping women with their marital and household problems” (p.204). Thus, for slum dwellers, gods existed mainly to help people; worshipping gods “for God’s sake,” according to them, is “just another way for rich people to show off – a way of bragging about the fact that they had no problems in their lives” (p.166).

Does this then mean that people in the slum convert to Pentecostalism for worldly benefits? In particular, how do we explain the conversion of women who constitute a large majority of converts within Pentecostalism? According to Hefner (2013: 11), in the global south, women make up the majority of Pentecostal believers. In Indian context, Bauman (2015: 82) notes that in Pentecostal churches, women constitute almost 70 per cent of congregants. In Anbu Nagar around 85 to 90 per cent of the converts are women. The question is: why do such a large number of women, compared to men, convert to Pentecostalism? While studies in the global context have discussed the expression of women’s agency, domestication of men, and establishment of gender equality as some of the reasons that, in the Indian context, Roberts argues that the reasons why women convert to Pentecostalism and stay as believers are: (1) intensity of pastoral care – the way pastors listen to women’s problems and constantly innovate novel methods of interpreting and

reinterpreting the Bible to shape and give meaning to women's struggles, inter-personal sufferings, and everyday needs, and (2) creation of a moral community of women through prayer networks. Unlike Hindu women, who remain atomized at a moral level, Christian women build a sisterhood to share responsibility as well as to protect their interests and rights in the context of abusive husbands and non-slum caste people.

In addition, faith has also helped believers "construct an internal value system, making social living cohesive and impacting the most important events in ordinary lives by laying down the dos and don'ts" (p.167). Such dos and don'ts enforced by Christianity resulted in what Hefner (2013: 9) calls "ethical subject formation". The "pre-conversion privileges of men are represented as sins and misdeeds indulged at the expense of their female partner and children" (Hefner, 2013: 10). This is particularly visible in the context of the prohibitions imposed by Christianity on (male) believers who are required to give up drinking, smoking, and other temptations. Even in some cases, men's willingness to spend on roadside snack food was resented by women. While these entire moral disciplining of men attracted women to Christianity, it brought several unintended consequences. Men's everyday lives and choices became heavily restricted; they also often felt victimized by the prayer network's sisterhood as it asserted women's rights to be cared for and not exploited within the domestic sphere. As a consequence, men drifted away from Christianity, while women remained.

Religious Innovation and Entrepreneurship

What role does religion play in the lives of ordinary people, particularly in a period marked by rapid social and economic change? Does religion provide some meaning or offer

some solution to manage one's social life? Based on a large-scale study, Loskota (2017) discusses how communities are "innovating" religion and creatively addressing the everyday problems of believers. For Loskota, religious innovation "does not mean creating something entirely new or a new form of revelation"; instead it refers to "a creative way of problem solving" – "the reassembling of different things to meet the contemporary challenges". Similar to Loskota's idea of religious innovation, Roberts, discusses "pastoral innovation" in the context of Anbu Nagar. He shows how Pentecostal pastors are constantly innovating new ways and methods of interpreting and reinterpreting doctrines and textual practices to relate them to the local contexts as well as to address the everyday social problems and anxieties of believers and provide them with some kind of coping mechanism. For example, though people in the slum experienced extreme poverty, hardship and suffering, their suffering was made tolerable by comparing it with Christ's suffering that served a purpose. Slum Christianity assured people that "they were not just life's losers but the 'dear children of God'" (p.227). With this, people were able to embrace their suffering willingly as it made them "Christ-like".

However, one may ask: why were the pastors in Anbu Nagar so innovative? Roberts argues that pastoral innovation needs to be understood in the context of pastoral competition and rivalry. For him, pastors treated each other as innovative and energetic rivals and competition among them was intensified by:

The lack of supervening ecclesiastic authority to regulate or coordinate church-building efforts or to provide slum pastors with a measure of financial support and therefore of security in the

face of the inevitable fluctuations in the congregational donations on which their livelihood depended. An even more significant source of interpastor competition, however, was a demographic bottleneck in which new converts were in short supply (p.195).

The rate of success of pastors thus depended on their innovative individual leadership qualities (or *charisma*), cultural creativity and testimonies of followers; the successful ones emerge as “religious entrepreneurs” (Lauterbach, 2016) and establish their “pastoral power” by owning churches and having their own congregations. In fact, slum Christianity is overtly pastor-centric and churches are very often an extension of pastor’s personality. As Roberts notes, “[p]astors themselves emphasized their own role in channeling divine agency as central to Christ’s work on earth, even to the extent of giving the impression that it was their own spiritual powers – cultivated through ceaseless prayer and fasting – that shielded their congregations from supernatural attack and ensured collective well-being” (p.185). Such impressions were necessary because the challenge for the pastors is “not merely to attract but to *retain* a congregation” (p.195); people remain associated with a church as long as the pastor is able to offer solutions to their problems. The moment a pastor failed to do so, it leads to “pastor-hopping” (p.201) and change of church membership. Not just the pastors, gods were also dropped when they do not do what the worshippers hoped or did not respond to repeated prayers. Thus, in order to retain their congregation and to not allow them to lose faith on the power of Christ, pastors continuously innovated and reached out to people through pastoral care.

Politics of Belonging and Care

In recent years, there have been debates and controversies regarding “who belongs to the (Indian) nation” and “who does the nation belong to”. We have repeatedly heard that “Muslims should go to Pakistan; they do not belong here”. The question of belonging, especially when it comes to national belonging, is closely linked to the concept of (sacred) geography (sacralization of the territory) and religion. According to Hindu nationalists, religion and nation are inseparable and religious identity forms an integral part of defining the Indian nation. For them, India is the land of Hindus as they consider it their fatherland as well as holy land. In contrast, although Muslims and Christians see India as their fatherland, their holy land lies somewhere else outside the sacred geography of India. Hence, Hindu nationalists considered Muslims and Christians to be “culturally alien” and not part of the Indian (Hindu) nation. In so doing, the Hindu nationalists provided “an exclusive, extremely radical and uncompromising form of nationalism and citizenship, which maintained that India, that is Hindustan, is a land of Hindus, and its identity is embodied in Hindu culture and civilization” (Sahoo, 2018: 134).

Contrary to the Hindu nationalists’ imagination of the Indian nation, Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of India was based on religious pluralism and harmonious co-existence of all communities. For Gandhi and for the Congress, “the Indian nation is to be defined according to territorial criterion, not on the basis of cultural features” (Jaffrelot, 2007: 4). The Hindu nationalists, however, rejected Gandhi’s universalistic idea of the Indian nation and opposed his politics, as they believed that Gandhi was overly supportive of the minority cause. In fact, because of this, a supporter of

Hindu nationalism killed Gandhi. While this ideological opposition between Gandhi and Hindu nationalists is well known, what is less known is how Gandhi played a major role, although indirectly or perhaps unconsciously, in the spread of Hindu nationalist ideology by opposing religious conversion. In chapter four, titled “Religion, Conversion, and Nationalist Frame”, Roberts, drawing on historical and contemporary debates, demonstrates the conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar and shows how Gandhi manipulated the situation in favor of Hindus by going on his “fast unto death”. This resulted in not just the Hinduization of Dalits, but also nationalization of Hinduism.

Furthermore, Roberts discusses a notion of belonging that goes beyond territory and religious affiliation; it does not mean sharing the same identity (p.28). For Roberts, one may share a common identity, but in terms of “relationality” they may be distant. Thus, for him, “relationality”, shared values and real/imagined connections are essential to belonging. This is evident in the context when he discusses the way slum (Pentecostal) Christians relate to (a) the Catholics, (b) outside non-slum caste Hindus, and (c) the (imagined) foreigners. In relation to the Catholics, slum (Pentecostal) Christians feel very distant; they are not able to relate with the Catholics in terms of beliefs, practices, rituals and methods of worship. For them, Catholics are “the other”, even though they belong to the same religion. In fact, they argue that the Catholics have more in common with Hindus than Christians.

Central to the book’s argument is the relationship between the slum Christians and the outside non-slum caste Hindus. For them, the caste people, even though they are fellow Indians and share the same national identity, do not *care* about “the poor” slum people. They

are selfish, mean, greedy, cold, heartless, and full of false pride; they have “no love” for others. In fact, the slum people argue that the caste people even have no love for their own children as they do not care for their children’s happiness and force them to do things against their will. They wondered how could “the rich” behave in such a manner, as the attribute of “care” is central to being human. The poor, by contrast, identified themselves as being caring, warm, and affectionate. According to them, in India, only the poor love and care about others. The question is: why is this the case? Roberts finds the answer in caste. He argues that for the slum dwellers, the rich are rich not because of their wealth, but of their caste. The slum people *cared* about others because they were “casteless” and the rich did not because they practiced caste, and as a consequence, they did not even look at, pay attention to, love, show affection, sympathize, help, or give aid to the poor (p.78). In a sense, “ignoring” and “refusing to acknowledge” were the quintessential moral characteristics of the rich caste people.

In contrast to the rich caste people of India who in a sense rejected humanity by refusing to *care* about the poor, the rich foreigners were found to be “benevolent”. This confirmed the slum people’s assumption that it is not wealth, but the practice of caste that makes people not care about others. What makes foreigners benevolent is that they like to help people and treat everyone equally (p.77); they are better able to understand the plight and suffering of the poor. In fact, they argue that the foreigners and the poor share the common values of care and humanism than the rich nationals who are selfish and not able to empathize with the lives of the poor. The slum people argue that this impulse of the foreigners to help others in need “was not a specifically Christian impulse...but a basic

human one” (p.17) and this connected them to “global humanity” (p.79).

One of the ways foreigners connected with and cared about the global poor was by sending money to help them. However, in the Indian context “foreign money” was viewed with suspicion. Roberts argues that in the “national discourse” (pp.7, 118) and among the “national elites” (pp.8, 118) it was believed that foreign money is being used for promoting conversion (“monetized proselytism” – p.13) and anti-national interests, and undermining national culture/autonomy. While Roberts mentions of national discourse and national elite, he does not define them properly. According to him, national discourse refers to the ‘writings and other publicly available communications conveyed in India’s lingua franca, English’ (p.118). He cites the works of English educated journalists and scholars such as Neena Vyas and Gauri Viswanathan to explain his argument that foreign money is used for promoting proselytization and anti-national activities. However, I am not very convinced with Roberts’ definition of the national discourse and national elites. Generally speaking, in India “the elites” refer to the English educated intellectuals and liberal middle class who promote liberal democratic values and protect the interests of minorities. The English educated journalists and scholars that Roberts cites in the book and refer to as “national elites” will be better classified as sympathizers of Hindu nationalist discourse rather than the nationalist discourse. I will note that Roberts confuses them to be the national elites. Contrary to Roberts’ argument, the national elites have been long accused by the Hindu nationalists of being “too liberal” – in fact, they criticize the elites as “pseudo-secular” or “sickular” for not speaking against conversion and minority appeasement. Broadly, the elites have been tolerant of

conversion because of the constitutional values of religious freedom and citizenship rights. The forces that deemed “foreign money” as a threat to national culture and autonomy are not the national elites but the conservative Hindu nationalists who aim to make India a Hindu nation. It is therefore useful to make a clear distinction between the “national discourse” or “national elites” on the one hand and the “Hindu national discourse” on the other. This is because I believe the Indian national discourse is still guided by the values of democracy and secularism.

Conclusion

As discussed above, Roberts’ book provides an excellent ethnographic account of the everyday social and cultural life of Hindus and Christians in Anbu Nagar. The book skillfully demonstrates how the everyday social world of ordinary people is made meaningful and/or how the tacit dimensions of social life of the slum population is understood and interpreted. This paper discussed four aspects of the book which contribute significantly to the literature: first, it provides a nuanced, *contextual* understanding of the “pluralities” of Indian Christianities; second, it shows (by questioning the hierarchy of the religious world) how materiality or worldly benefits occupy a central role in the life-world of believers; third, it examines how Pentecostal pastors are constantly innovating new ways of interpreting and reinterpreting doctrines to address the everyday social problems and anxieties of believers; and finally, it shows how “relationality”, shared values, and real/imagined connections are essential to belonging and the idea of care. Caring, as Roberts notes, is about being human, and to be human is “to be profoundly and irreducibly connected with others,” both morally and materially (p.17). Thus, by discussing the

“unique moral problems and cultural contradictions” that surround the everyday life-world of low caste Dalit Pentecostals in a Chennai slum, Roberts provides a rich ethnography of caste, Christianity and care in India.

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