“Conversion” Religions and Multi-Religious Entanglements in South Asia (8th to 19th c.): Contexts and Perspectives

25 avril 2019
Salle 737 - 54 boulevard Raspail 75006 Paris

Journée d'études organisée par Ines G. Županov
Religious conversion and coexistence are concepts at the forefront of contemporary political debates in the subcontinent. Political actors are currently mostly busy wielding distinctions such as indigenous vs. foreign and playing a dangerous game of exclusion and assimilation. Our one-day conference gathers together senior and junior scholars working on a common project which explores a longue durée history of practices and concepts when religious plurality thrived in one of the most travelled maritime regions of the world: the Indian Ocean and south India. From antiquity until the late eighteenth century, this region was a crucial link in a unified world economy and maritime culture. It was also the theater of encounters and circulation of religious actors, objects and ideas between the Mediterranean and West Asian Messianic religions - which we are accustomed now to call, with a Muslim term, Abrahamic - and Indian religious traditions and philosophical systems. We are in particular interested in multi-religious community formation and its effects on political dynamics in the region. State-building, development of new or refurbished local cults, the flowering of multilingual literary forms were only some of the consequences of the early modern political and cultural innovations directly linked to a certain degree of socio-religious mobility created in the multi-religious context of the immediate pre-British colonial period. The hardening of communal boundaries however started also precisely at this moment, and the colonial rule only quickened the creation of “fixed” social and religious categories of caste and religion. In the process the category of Abrahamic religion (Christian, Muslim, Jews) slipped through the British colonial knowledge grid into a “western”, non-Indian religion and thus conceptually unworthy of studying in the “area studies” context. Through this move a whole range of pre-colonial knowledge forms were left invisible and discarded. The final assault on multi-religiosity came from the 19th century revivalist/nativist and purifying efforts of the social and religious reformers who thus tried to cut down inter- and intra-religious networks in the name of ancient history, immobile orthodoxy and new ideological constructs of nation-state and Hinduism.

* This conference is part of the project “MESSIANIC” which will be submitted as an ERC synergy proposal in November 2019

Individual presentation format: 25 min + 15 min discussion
25 April 2019

9:00 | Welcome Breakfast

9:30 | Zoé Headley (CNRS, CEIAS) Welcome Address
Ines G. Županov (CNRS, CEIAS) Introduction

9:45-10:25 | Istvan Perczel (CEU, Budapest)
A new perspective on the ninth-century Christian copper plates: the testimony of the indirect text tradition

10:25 - 11:05 | Radu Mustață (CEU, Budapest)
Entangled literary genres: Jesuit accommodatio and Syriac paideia in Malabar, in the times of the Synod of Diamper (1599)

11:05-11:20 | tea/coffee

11:20-12:00 | Ophira Gamliel (Theology and Religious Studies, University of Glasgow)
Coastal Judaism of the South Asian Cosmopolis: Transregional Networks, Continuities, and Change 1200s-1700s

12:00-13:00 | lunch

13:00-13:40 | Manu V. Devadevan (Indian Institute of Technology at Mandi)
Religious Encounters in the Context of Changing Systems of Knowledge

13:40-14:20 | Mahmood Kooria (Leiden University)
Matrilineal and Oceanic Encounters: Indic-Abrahamic Entanglements in Premodern Southwest India

14:20-15:00 | Torsten Tschacher (FU, Berlin)
Translation, Islam, and the Formulation of ‘Religious’ Difference in Early Modern South India

15:00-15:15 | tea/coffee

15:15-15:55 | Carsten Wilke (CEU, Budapest)
The Archives of the Goa Inquisition: State of the Research

15:55-16:35 | Margherita Trento (University of Chicago)
Tamil Catholic literature between polemic and accommodation, 16-18th centuries

16:35-17:15 | Deepra Dandekar (Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin)
Translating ‘Mahar’ as ‘Meek’

17:15-18:45 | General Discussion
Entangled literary genres:

Istvan Perczel (CEU, Budapest)

A new perspective on the ninth-century Christian copper plates: the testimony of the indirect text tradition

The hitherto neglected indirect text tradition of the Kollam copper plates permits us to formulate a new hypothesis concerning the provenance not only of the Kollam copper plates but also of the Thomas of Kana copper plates. This indirect tradition has never been properly taken into consideration in the scholarly literature. Two transcripts of the Kollam copper plates are extant. Francisco Roz got made a transcript of the entire document by a certain Itimani Kattanar into Garshuni Malayalam script in 1601. The transcript is extant in MS BnF syriacque 186, foll. 127-130. Later, John Baptist Mulredo of St. Teresa, bishop of Varapuzha (1714-1750), got a transcript in Grandha or Ārya eḻuttu of the original Veṭṭeḻuttu, which was interpreted by a certain Mattai Kattanar from Angamaly in poor Portuguese for the French traveler Anquétil du Perron in 1758. Then, du Perron translated the Portuguese interpretation of Mattai Kattanar into French and included it in his travelogue in the introduction of his translation of the Zend Avesta (The story is related in Anquétil du Perron 1771: clxxi-iv and the French translation is on pages clxxv-vii). The Ārya eḻuttu transcript has not been found to date. A study of this hitherto neglected indirect tradition permits us to establish 1) that we have, or can reconstruct, the missing part of the Kollam copper plates and the missing part of the Thomas of Kana copper plates, too; 2) that the Kollam copper plates are not the original document issued in 849 CE, but a copy thereof, kept by the Christian community together with the Thomas of Kana copper plates and that the copy of the Thomas of Kana plates, which was translated into Portuguese, had belonged to the same set of plates as the copy of the Kollam copper plates; 3) that the famous signatures in Kufic Arabic, Pahlavi and Judeo-Persian were not authenticating the Kollam plates but the copy kept by the Christians; 4) finally, this indirect tradition permits us to date the Thomas of Kana copper plates, which are later than the Kollam copper plates, although they had been dated to 325 CE by the common tradition of the local Christians. This new perspective has an immeasurable bearing on the early history of the Abrahamic communities on the Malabar Coast, which should be rewritten accordingly.

This is just a case study concerning perhaps the most important document of the Abrahamic traditions from Kerala, in the Middle Ages, definitively the earliest in India. Yet, this new perspective shows what is needed for solving the riddle of such a document: it can be done only through the collaborative team-work of a wide range of experts, our project will be the first to gather together. We need, first of all, Indian Tamil/Malayalam epigraphists: the basis for this work being the one made by Raghava Varier and Kesavan Veluthat, recently published in Malayalam; second, we need a specialist of Garshuni Malayalam and of the early colonial history of the Christians in Kerala: that's me; third, we need specialists of Middle and early New Persian, Arabic and Judeo-Arabic; finally we need to read the Portuguese colonial documents and, incidentally, the French of Anquétil du Perron. The dating and redating of the document(s) need again special expertise, which only Kesavan Veluthat and Raghava Varier has, while the Garshuni text has to be transcribed for them by those who know Garshuni. As the context is that of the Pandya-Cera wars of the 9th century, we need the combined expertise of specialists familiar with the history of the entire Tamilakam, including present-day Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Finally, all this should be brought into one synthesis. Only thus can we expect to decipher the enigma of one of the most important documents of medieval South Indian history. Due to the complexity of the material dealt with by the whole project, this case study has a paradigmatic value for the entire research that we are proposing.

Radu Mustață (CEU, Budapest)

Entangled literary genres:

Jesuit accommodatio and Syriac paideia in Malabar, in the times of the Synod of Diamper (1599)

During the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries, the Syriac literary heritage of the Malabar Christians shifted itself from a standard Eastern Syriac ("Nestorian") canon of texts to a Catholic post-Tridentine literary output in Syriac, a fusion of Western (Latin) and Middle Eastern (Syriac) sources and elements. Postulating the model of a Syriac cosmopolis, my paper will analyze the literary networks of the community of the Malabar Christians, as mirrored in the production of Syriac texts undertaken by the Catholic missionaries and their Indian Syriacist pupils. The period under investigation is around the time of the Synod of Diamper (1599), a turning point in the ecclesiastical history of Malabar. The synod marked the Portuguese’s attempt to impose Tridentine Catholicism on the Malabar
Christians and ordered to correct their Syriac books according to Catholic Orthodoxy or burn them as heretical. My presentation will focus on the relationship between (1) collections of sermons and (2) liturgical poetry, since these two are entangled literary genres: occasionally Syriac homilies (translated from Latin or composed on the spot by Catholic missionaries) were replicated in liturgical poetry and they show the chains of transmission of Syriac knowledge from Catholic teachers (especially Jesuits) to their Indian students. Such relationship between literary genres is particularly true about prose compositions coming arguably from the Syriacising circles of Francisco Roz, the first European Bishop of the Malabar Christians (1601-1624) and pieces of Syriac poetry belonging to his Indian disciple Alexander the Indian/Kadavl Chandy Kattanar (1588-1673). The groups of texts under discussion show the transfer of knowledge from both the Latin West and the Syriac-speaking Middle East that created a new theological literary culture for the Malabar Christians, as an expression of the Jesuit missionary principle of *accommodatio*. Source analysis of such texts allows one to dive into various aspects of the ecclesiastical and confessional life of the Malabar Christians, and into the cross-cultural encounters between them and the Catholic missionaries.

**Ophira Gamliel (Theology and Religious Studies, University of Glasgow)**

**Coastal Judaism of the South Asian Cosmopolises: Transregional Networks, Continuities, and Change 1200s-1700s**

The presentation will examine the textual evidence in Malayalam, Arabic, Hebrew, and Judeo-Arabic sources for Jewish-Muslim partnerships in the Indian Ocean maritime trade networks of the modern period. I will demonstrate the transregional connections with the ports of Yemen and West Asia maintained since the eleventh century by the trade Diasporas of Muslims and Jews on the Malabar Coast, also known as Māppilas (indigenous) and Paradešis (foreigners). I will then argue that these connections were disrupted by the Portuguese expansionist strategies in the Indian Ocean, resulting in the realignment of religious networks that distanced Jews from their centuries-old trade alliances with Muslims. Additionally, I will demonstrate the emergence of Judeo-Christian trade alliances based on shared myths of lost kingdoms that were forged in the early modern Western Mediterranean and that served the interests of European expansion in South Asia from the early modern period onwards. In this I seek to relocate South Asian Jews, and in particular Malabar Jews, in the context of cosmopolitan port towns, and their literary and religious production in the context of continuity and change in maritime Indian Ocean trade.

**Manu V. Devadevan (Indian Institute of Technology at Mandi, HP)**

**Religious Encounters in the Context of Changing Systems of Knowledge**

From the sixteenth century, there emerged new trends in the structure of knowledge in South India. David Shulman has identified the development as involving the appearance of nature as an observable category, leading to the production, in a wide range of texts, of descriptions and representations that bordered on the realistic and ethnographic. He has characterised it as a civilisational shift in the realm of imagination, a hypothesis that has far reaching ramifications for our understanding of historical processes in South India since the sixteenth century. This development provided a new context and orientation for several historical developments, including religious encounters. In this new intellectual scenario, religious systems came to be appreciated, inter alia, as systems of knowledge that was not limited to the esoteric or the metaphysical, but had practical implications. I want to explore this proposition by examining the structure of knowledge embodied in the Keralolpatti tradition and how it informs the legend of Islam's encounter with the brahmanas of Kerala, recounted in this influential tradition.

**Mahmood Kooria (Leiden University, the Netherlands)**

**Matrilineal and Oceanic Encounters: Indic-Abrahamic Entanglements in Premodern Southwest India**

The origin of matrilineal system has been a matter of long debate in the academia with social anthropologists, philosophers, archaeologists, feminists and linguists making claims on the prevalence of the system in prehistoric communities. Going beyond an obsession with search for origins, rarely historians have studied the premodern histories
of the existing matrilineal communities. In this paper, I engage with the matrilineal communities of the Indian Ocean littoral with a focus on the context of southwest India. The matrilineal system was one of the most convenient ways for the Indian Ocean trade. In their transregional journeys, maritime itinerants stayed in one place for months or even a year, depending on the variations in monsoon. During this period they consummated marital relationship with the local communities. These marriages were enabled through the existing matrilineal practices in which men always could come and go while the women stayed home and owned the property. This economic and social stability of women provided them upper hand in economic and personal choices and in the marriages they could and did move freely. The marriage was a flexible bondage and divorce was not a big deal.

From Southeast Asia to Southeast Africa, the matrilineal praxis has been prevalent in several Islamic communities, but in the west coasts of India it historically existed among Hindus and Muslims and to some extent Jews and Christians made use of the system. Although the layers and degrees of the praxis vary historically from community to community and place to place, we can observe two important features shared among the communities: the matriline and matrifocality. While the lineage and inheritance regime constituted central elements of matriline, the residential pattern defined matrifocality. On the basis of some fragmentary but significant evidences on the matrilineal praxis between 1200 and 1800 CE in southwest India among Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities, I explore the nuances of conversion and incommensurability across religions. I investigate how the praxis benefited the oceanic mercantile system of southwest India as well as the dispersal of Abrahamic religions which often interpreted as significant domains of patriarchy and patriline.

**Torsten Tschacher (FU, Berlin)**

**Translation, Islam, and the Formulation of ‘Religious’ Difference in Early Modern South India**

That a relationship between processes of translation and religious conversion exists, seems like a truism. The role of missionaries in translating religious texts and the importance of such translation for the spread of new religious ideas have long been the focus of attention for historians of religion. However, what has been inadequately considered so far is that establishing stable equivalences between the vocabularies of two languages actually serves as precondition for enabling conversion. Put differently, by establishing two sets of discourses or practices as equivalent through the process of translation, conversion is made conceivable in the first place. The attention paid to translation by Christian missionaries in the early modern period (16th-18th centuries) was thus a necessary precondition for effecting conversion. To do so, missionaries had to determine what was religious but simultaneously incommensurable with Christianity (e.g., the notion of rebirth), what was commensurable but misdirected (e.g., notions of a supreme creator-god), and what was not religious to begin with, and hence unproblematic (e.g., in this period, ‘caste’). In creating these equivalences, missionaries participated in the creation of the meta-discourse of ‘religion’ that led to the identification of a diverse set of ‘religions’ and their distinction from ‘the secular’ by the 19th century. This meta-discourse has often been identified as peculiar to ‘modernity’. However, in this presentation, I will argue that similar meta-discourses existed in early modern South India and to a certain degree predated the arrival of European Christianities. The attempts to formulate Muslim ideas in local languages are one case in point for the establishment of equivalences and the concomitant production of universal categories that could be applied across ‘religious’ boundaries. While it may be problematic to assume that these discourses formulated a local concept of ‘religion’, they provided a basis for universalizing European ideas of ‘religion’ in the region during the colonial period.

**Carsten Wilke (CEU, Budapest)**

**The Archives of the Goa Inquisition: State of the Research**

From 1560 to 1812, the Kingdom of Portugal maintained an Inquisitorial tribunal in Goa in order to repress deviance from Catholicism in its possessions along the coastlines of the Indian Ocean and the Chinese Sea. Not unlike the tribunals of the Holy Office on the Portuguese mainland, its initial vocation had been to enforce orthodoxy on the “New Christians,” that is, the descendants of the Portuguese Jews forcibly baptized in 1497, many of whom had immigrated to the “Estado da India.” However, after some decades, the large majority of those sentenced by the Goa Inquisition were members of
the local population who had converted from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or Syrian Christianity and who were accused of practicing their ancestral traditions in secret. During its existence, the Goa tribunal tried more than 16,000 defendants, nearly three-quarters of them being crypto-Hindus.

The hair-raising report by the French physician Charles Delon (1687), which became a best-seller of the Enlightenment, has long been the major source on the Goa Inquisition; and it remains so until this day, due to the unfortunate loss of archival sources. After the suppression of the tribunal in 1812, its archives were transferred to the Viceroy, who requested from the Price-Regent, then residing in Rio de Janeiro, a license to destroy this controversial mass of papers with the exception of a small sample of files.

The annihilation of these archives deprives scholars of what must have been an immensely rich source on the religious, cultural, social, and economic conditions of Portuguese Asia. Historians and archivists have made considerable efforts to locate fragments and copies of archival material that survive around the world. The National Library of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro has rediscovered, catalogued, and digitized the nine volumes that were exempted from destruction. Since the European archives of the Portuguese Inquisition have been entirely preserved, the National Archives of Lisbon contain correspondence, reports, and some thirty entire trial records that were sent from Goa. Manuscript registers of autodafés and defendants are in possession of the National Library of Lisbon, the most precious among them being the huge ms. 203, in which the inquisitor João Delgado Figueira has summarized 3,800 trials that the Goa Inquisition conducted until 1623. Some source material has been gleaned from the Archivio della Congregazione della Fede in Vatican City, the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu in Rome and the Historical Archives of Goa in Panaji, India, but these and other holdings need further exploration.

My overview of scholarship will start with the pioneering works of António Baião (1949) and Anant Priolkar (1961), as well as the research undertaken by I.S. Révah and Charles Amiel at the Collège de France. I will then present the contribution of Ana Cannas da Cunha, José Alberto Tavim, Ângela Barreto Xavier, and Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço at the University of Lisbon, review publications by Giuseppe Marcocci (University of Oxford) and Glenn Ames (University of Toledo, Ohio), and finally focus on the Digital Humanities projects directed by Bruno Feitler (University of São Paulo, Brazil), who has produced a database of the Figueira manuscript. These scholars’ methodological approaches shall be compared and contextualized within recent trends in the religious history of early modern colonial empires.

Margherita Trento (University of Chicago)

Tamil Catholic literature between polemic and accommodation, 16-18th centuries

Catholic missionaries to the southernmost regions of India began to write Tamil catechisms and accounts of the lives of the saints already in the late 16th century. From that moment onwards, translation — broadly conceived as the transposition of texts from Latinate Christianity into Tamil, as well as the composition of original Catholic works in Tamil — remained a crucial concern for the missionaries and for their converts. As a result, by the early eighteenth century Catholic literature in Tamil developed into a large corpus encompassing both missionary and indigenous literature in a variety of genres. In the first half of this paper, I will offer a brief sketch of the contours of this corpus as it emerged over two centuries. The second part of the paper will focus on one important tension animating Tamil Catholic literature from its inception, namely the tension between polemics and accommodation. How to persuade Tamil readers of the superiority of the Christian message by using locally appropriate vocabulary, style, genres, and literary topos, while at the same time rejecting all “pagan” beliefs usually associated with that literature? My argument will be that in the eighteenth century, both these rhetorical modes were still crucial, but also underwent deep transformations in comparison with the previous century. On the one hand, the efforts at cultural and literary accommodation became more sophisticated, and expressed a social and cultural project that was shared by missionaries and their catechists and lay helpers. On the other hand, the polemical focus of Tamil Catholic literature slowly moved away from the world of Hindu beliefs and practices and began to focus on the competing Protestant beliefs, practices, and institutions, which were by then spreading in South India thanks to the work of Lutheran missionaries. The implications of this shift are important, I believe, also to understand the way Catholicism positioned in relationship with colonial and protestant modernity in the following centuries. The second section of the paper will be based especially on two works by Jesuit missionary Costanzo Giuseppe Beschi (1680-1747), the epic poem Tēmpāṇi — especially the cantos that stage debates
between Catholics and Hindus—and the Luttēriṉattiyalpu, a ferocious satire on Luther and his followers directly aimed at Lutheran missionaries in Tranquebar.

**Deepra Dandekar (Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin)**

**Translating 'Mahar' as 'Meek'**

The Church Mission Society (CMS) was one of the first to establish roots in rural Maharashtra (Nasik) in the beginning of the 1830's, soon after the Charter Act permitted missionary evangelism in India. And Nasik was an important choice for the mission society, since it was an important pilgrimage center for Hindus especially Brahmins, whom missionaries considered 'heathen'. Establishing the mission and penetrating rural Marathi, upper caste society however, presented missionaries with tremendous obstacles. It was only with tedious effort that CMS became an institution, as houses that were homes to missionaries became combined with schools, orphanages and churches. The chief instrument of the mission was however, not its private-public buildings but its evangelical activities: public scripture reading, teaching, and the task of Christian education. The reading, writing, and teaching of Christian vernacular texts distributed and sold as didactic literature, had translation at its centerfold. The mid-19th century hence saw an enormous boom of vernacular Christianity, effected by the translation of missionary texts from the United Provinces and Bengal (written variously in English and Bangla) into Marathi. I present one such translation made by Mrs. Caroline Farrar (wife of influential CMS missionary Rev. Charles Pinhorn Farrar), at the Nasik CMS in 1830. Though a lot has been written about original texts that were translated, and about their life as translated objects, translations by themselves have been inadequately theorized due to the cross-cutting nature of the various vernaculars involved. Mrs. Farrar's translation of Mary Martha Sherwood's "The Ayah and Lady" (1822) into the Marathi "Chamatkarik Goshti" (miraculous tales) is one such salient example of the Ten Commandments, explained through the story of a recalcitrant Muslim Ayah (domestic servant), who is gradually convinced of Christianity by her benevolent and righteous Lady, or Memsahib. The success of "Chamatkarik Goshti" at the Nasik mission lay not in its original, but in its translation. As Mrs. Farrar translated concepts surrounding Christian meekness in caste-terms, replacing meek with Mahar (one of the lowest castes of Maharashtra), she transformed the CMS's success-strategy as a pro-lower caste and anti-Brahminical enterprise. Given the Brahmanical nature of Nasik, where lower castes and adivasis especially suffered caste oppression, this translation had piquant implications for the mission. Reprinted many times and constituting one of the popular-most textbooks taught at the CMS mission school in Nasik, it attracted many Mahar converts, who were enabled to view themselves with dignity as meek, proto-Christians. By extension, the Ayah was translated into the mold of elite and upper caste Hindus and Muslim converts from the region, who gradually became convinced of Christianity. And Memsahibs like Mrs. Farrar became translated as pious and frail women of stature, who suffered heathen excesses like stealing, licentiousness etc. While Mrs. Farrar didn't die in real life, like the Lady in Sherwood's story, her translation of "Ayah and Lady" into "Chamatkarik Goshti" produced her in the role of a martyr, who soldered on despite the possibility of death. It is therefore the success of Chamatkari Goshti at the Nasik mission, that allows me to suggest the importance of translation in writing the success of the earliest rural missions of Maharashtra.