

Tim Allender. 2024. *Empire Religiosity: Convent Habits in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 304 pp. Hb.: £85.00. ISBN: 9781526159106.

Book review by

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It is no easy task to write a history of women religious and their material culture in relation to “the long footprint of Roman Catholicism in India” during both the colonial and postcolonial eras. Historian of empire Tim Allender admirably rises to the many challenges of sources and methodology precisely because he understands that “knowing” a subject, especially one as under-researched as that of Catholic women missionaries in India, requires, in his words, “unobtrusive interdisciplinary approaches” as well as a dual micro and macro lens. His *Empire Religiosity*, published as part of the “Studies in Imperialism” series by Manchester University Press, may be regarded as a sequel to his award-winning *Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820–1932*. It constitutes yet another compelling exploration of the colonial mentalities that shaped, and were shaped by, European women living in British India over more than a century. The study’s scope is both broad and narrow in nature, extending the temporal framework of analysis beyond the colonial period into the post-colonial era, while focusing intently—and exclusively—on the subject of Catholic women religious. At the heart of his multi-layered analysis is tracing the life journeys of a host of Sisters, mostly from Ireland, and trying to understand more deeply how they navigated the tumultuous transition from a colony to an independent state. In contrast to their Protestant counterparts and the majority of Europeans employed in former colonial government institutions, these women “stayed on” in India, as Allender emphasises, engaging in work both within and beyond the established race and class divisions. What has enabled their durability? The book shows how over the six-generation-long history of their presence in the Subcontinent, they had localized enough for the nationalist elites not to see them as an aberration in the religious-

ly diverse social tapestry of a newly independent India. The book's alternative perspective is derived from the observation that "[t]hese women religious [had] occupied a space in a mostly Protestant empire, yet remained separate from it." The intricate ramifications of their fundamental liminality—"their intriguing interplay with empire"—is what the book sets out to critically examine. The author conducts this examination with erudition and stylistic aplomb, constituting an essential contribution to a long-overdue multidisciplinary inquiry.

In pursuit of depth, Allender limits himself to female Roman Catholic religious orders located in north-central and northeast India, with a pronounced emphasis on Loreto, a female teaching order that arrived in Calcutta in 1841 from Ireland. In fact, *Empire Religiosity* is noteworthy as the inaugural academic history of this seminal Catholic female religious congregation in North India, and unquestionably the first substantial academic research into the actions and influences of predominantly Irish (as well as other European, but not English) Roman Catholic sisters in India over the past 165 years. This includes a Slovene nun who accompanied the future Mother Teresa from Yugoslavia via Ireland to India in the late 1920s, and who evolved a divergent mentality on poverty with her medical work in remote Morapai (Bengal). In summary, the focus is on "a different kind of missionary in India," as Allender asserts, "with different dynamics to explore" (9).

The dearth of reliable textual evidence, particularly for the earlier period, poses a significant challenge for the kind of non-partisan, non-hagiographic history the author seeks to produce. To address this dearth of evidence, the author has opted to augment his archive-driven and oral-history approach by incorporating creative interpretations of visual and spatial cues. This integration of visual studies and the semiotics of space into the historiographer's repertoire enables him to delve deeper into the hitherto marginalized personal narratives of numerous Loreto women, many of whom immigrated to India at a tender age and spent the entirety of their lives in the Subcontinent.

Allender's research is focused on the trajectories created by Catholic women religious as they related to local Indian and Eurasian populations, and as they connected transnationally with outside influences. The narrative is replete with detailed descriptions, starting with Loreto's perilous beginnings, when a significant proportion of young, inexperienced women did not survive the physical and mental toll exacted on them by the transition to a wholly unfamiliar, and culturally disparate, country. The author meticulously chronicles the trials and tribulations endured by these women as they fought for their hard-won position in the face of patriarchal societal norms, the influence of the

Church, and the attitudes of local bishops. For example, they were forced to provide medical care to women suffering from venereal disease in a Lock Hospital in Calcutta in the 1840s by a local bishop, who sought to flaunt their benevolence as part of his conversion tactics. This was at a time when their efforts were still concentrated entirely on establishing schools. Faced with the operational logic of the masculine raj, characterized by its top-down, racialized state policies in addition to the prevailing church patriarchies, they were compelled to navigate multiple authorities as they sought to bring Western learning and medical education to Indian girls. The women in question, however, were not passive instruments of those in positions of higher authority; rather, they were active agents in their own right. A notable and underappreciated consequence of their actions was the attainment of new cross-cultural and cross-racial proficiencies resulting from their direct interactions with underprivileged communities and emergent middle classes. Most importantly, these competences were then passed on to the male congregants of their church.

Allender also provides a detailed account of Loreto's expansion as one of the pre-eminent teaching missionary orders for women in India. This reputation was established relatively swiftly and has been maintained to this day. The decision to enrol daughters of prominent Brahmo Samaj families in Loreto rather than the Brahmo Samaj's own schools was indicative of their nascent respect, despite the fact that the path to winning the trust of upper- and middle-class Indian families was all but straight.

The narrative oscillates between micro and macro perspectives, offering the reader fascinating insights into "a convent view" of all the major political events from the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, encompassing the so-called Great Revolt of 1857, the contentious 1905 partition of Bengal, India's attainment of independence in 1947 and the violent aftermath of its Partition. All along, the individual lives of the Loreto Sisters are intricately woven into the broader fabric of the Catholic presence in British India, which successfully transitioned into the post-colonial era.

The development from initial conversion objectives to more culturally accommodative, Indian-specific mindsets in both pre- and post-Independence India, however, was not unopposed or immediate. Allender does not hesitate to disclose the more sinister aspects of their "success story", citing substantial evidence from various written private and public sources. This evidence demonstrates how, at various points in their internal evolution, they contributed to the broader colonial project, including its eugenic agenda and the "scientific" constructions of race. The most severe of these collaborations pertains to the "child-rescue" tactics and the taking of "orphans", i.e. children from chronically

poor families, at key orphanage, education and dispensary sites between the 1890s and 1930s. The question of whether these children would have survived the missionary intervention is, of course, one that can only be speculated upon. While Allender is unquestionably critical of child-rescue approaches, he nonetheless identifies positive scenarios with regard to the education of destitute and trafficked girls by women religious and other non-governmental organizations in more recent decades. The final chapter's discussion of the contributions of the late Sister Cyril Mooney offers an apt and compelling illustration of these women's efforts to establish new autonomous spaces of action and making a difference.

Allender's approach reflects a tendency to be sympathetic to a fault, albeit with an unwavering commitment to empirical evidence. Moreover, his work is characterized by a discernible, and refreshingly unapologetic, reflection of his own positionality as a white Protestant male. With a meticulous attention to nuance, he avoids both the tendency to laud and the inclination to censure the complex protagonists of the volume at hand, whom he ultimately refers to as "the strange products of empire." Instead, he concedes to "an alluring introspectiveness" that was intrinsic to the prolonged period he dedicated to composing the book. This introspectiveness was informed by innovative cross-disciplinary methodologies, aimed at uncovering hitherto overlooked female players in the global histories of empire and the countervailing currents of thought that lay behind their contributions. Emphasizing the paradoxical intertwining of loyalty and dissent, Allender modifies the critique of postcolonial thought in ways that is truly refreshing and should guide future histories of the past.