

DANAM CONFERENCE 2008 SESSION CICDT

Theme: **Issues of Conversion in Christian and Dharma Traditions**

Organizer: **Chad Bauman**, Butler University

Presiding: **Kusumita Pedersen**, St. Francis College, NYC

Panelists: **Chad Bauman**, Butler University, **Francis X. Clooney**, Harvard University, **Rita Sherma**, ITBB & Taksha Institute

Respondent: **T. S. Rukmani**, Concordia University, Canada

PANEL PROPOSAL

This panel will examine the complexities surrounding the hot button issue of conversion that often become sidetracked in the emotionalism that often attaches itself to the subject. *Does the Divine Physician Have an Unfair Advantage?* looks at the Niyogi Committee report and will discuss the notion of "allurement" (then, and to some extent now). The focus of *Ambedkar Buddhist Evangelism in Central India* will be on the Ambedkar movement and its efforts and strategies in Central India with particular emphasis on its two-fold role in terms of both religious evangelism and political activism. *Theologizing Conversion: the 17th-18th Century Jesuit Example* argues that a theological perspective can help clarify kinds of conversion efforts, which can then be judged separately. The early Jesuit tradition is one that, though strongly evangelical, maintains a clear focus on transparency and dialogue, and is worth examining for its insights. *A Hindu Missiology?* explores the idea of a Hindu missiology grounded in contemporary realities and insights, and argues that a systematic theologically based Hindu missiology holds both promise and danger for the future evolution of the Hindu tradition(s).

ABSTRACTS

Chad Bauman, Butler University

Does the Divine Physician Have an Unfair Advantage?

Conversion to Christianity has become one of the most politically charged acts in contemporary India, and the issue of "allurement" is central to the controversies surrounding it. The paper will explore the idea of allurement, or "fraudulent" conversions, in the context of medical mission work in the 1950s, drawing upon the Madhya Pradesh state government-sponsored Niyogi Committee report on Christian missionary activities (1956) and my own archival and field research in the Central India. After doing so, the paper will interrogate the very notion (and rhetoric) of allurement as it is used in contemporary conversion debates.

Francis X. Clooney, Harvard University

Theologizing Conversion: the 17th-18th Century Jesuit Example

It is certainly important to examine the historical and societal concrete features of tensions related to conversions, and it is clearly true that we cannot resolve problems related to conversions merely in the abstract. Nevertheless, a theological perspective can help distinguish different kinds of conversion efforts and their underlying motives, which can then be judged distinctly. This paper offers a single extended example of a theological rationale and strategy for conversions. The old, pre-17873 Jesuit missionary tradition in India, as known from Latin and Tamil treatises,

shows itself to be a highly energetic evangelical tradition – but one that is also highly idealistic, in the sense that it eschews violence, sees itself as respecting and preserving cultural values, and puts a high priority on open exchange, honest questions, and reasoned conclusions. The impression at least is that conversions should occur only on a case-by-case basis, since education is required before a decision to convert can be made. This model of evangelization, however it may be assessed, is nonetheless quite different from models that propose forced conversion, “rice” conversion, secret conversion, or a strategy of fierce public diatribes against Hinduism. Whether the treatises adequately describe the situation on the ground, and whether the ideal of learned reflection is meant only for the educated (Brahminical) elite, are two questions that will also be considered.

Rita Sherma, ITBB & Taksha Institute
A Hindu Missiology?

Hindu missiological activity, though not always systematic, can be traced back to the early history of the Vedicization of the Khmer civilization, the Champa empire of Vietnam, the Dayak Hindu cultures of Borneo, the Srivijayan kingdom of Sumatra, among others. Later, there are theological trends that contain missiological elements, evinced particularly in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition. The modern era has seen the emergence of neo-Vedantic missiological efforts, and in more recent times, there have been efforts by various guru lineages to establish international outreach organizations. Nevertheless, there is certainly no overarching crystallized, theologically grounded Hindu missiology. Theoretically, it can be argued that this is not even possible as there are countless theological schools in Hindu dharma, each with distinct ontologies, epistemologies, theological anthropologies, and moksha-tattvas. Taken to its logical extreme, such a stance can be used to question the validity of the category of “Hinduism” itself. At the same time, however, there are contemporary attempts to develop overarching theological rubrics that can at least serve as heuristic devices to understand and at the same time, “pin down” what is meant by “Hinduism.” These efforts are taking place particularly in diaspora communities. It is certainly possible to move from such general theological frameworks to more systematic theologies, which could then give rise to more systematic “overarching” missiologies as well. Are such efforts authentic or false to the Hindu tradition(s)? Is such a missiology possible? If so, would it be enriching to the Hindu dharma or would it endanger it?