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## Jonathan D. James. *McDonaldisation, Masala McGospel and Om Economics: Televangelism in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 2010.

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**Jonathan D. James. *McDonaldisation, Masala McGospel and Om Economics: Televangelism in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 2010.**

Between the years 1987 and 1989, an estimated 100 million people watched one or more of the seventy-eight episodes of the Indian public television station serial production of the Hindu religious epic, the *Ramayana*. Many Indians who viewed the program (especially those who identified themselves to researchers as “Hindu”) claimed to have taken “*darshan*” (i.e., “glimpsed the divine”) while viewing the televised *Ramayana*. *Darshan*, or the act of seeing and being seen by the object of one’s religious devotion, is a traditional Hindu form of worship that involves the use of images, icons, relics, statues, paintings, posters or other *murtis* (i.e., “forms/symbols”) of the divine. New modes of communication, formerly radio but also, increasingly, television and internet, are being adapted for religious ends and, in some cases, are supplementing traditional forms of worship to meet the needs of Indian “religious consumers” as television viewers. In his book *McDonaldisation, Masala McGospel and Om Economics: Televangelism in Contemporary India*, Jonathan James surveys how the originally American phenomenon of televangelism has expanded into a globally significant market force with dramatic implications for religious life in modern India.

The widespread appearance of televisions is fairly recent in Indian history. Despite its slow start, by 2010, there were some 550 channels broadcast in India onto as many as 63,000,000 television sets. Out of every 1,000 Indians, currently approximately 62.3 own a television set. There are just over 39 million cable subscribers in India; some 38.5 per 1,000 Indians subscribe to cable television. The use of satellite technology in India can be traced to the 1990 Gulf War, when networks like CNN began delivering hourly updates of the U.S.-led allied war on Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. Likewise, the admixture of religious programming, televangelism, missionary pursuits (Christian and otherwise), international media relations, and the “virtual” reinvention of traditional cultural and religious activities and identities are important considerations for understanding contemporary India. For those interested in the academic study of religion in modern India, the rise of religiously-focused, international television programs and TV networks, and the blending of savvy media productions and religious missionary activity is currently an under-studied but important area of scholarship. One frequently cited example of the impact of new media on religious conflict, often euphemistically referred to as “communal conflict” or “communalism” in India, is the serialized production of the *Ramayana* and its after effects, (i.e., the ongoing conflict around the issue of the *Babri Masjid* (Babar’s mosque) and the *Ramjanmabhoomi Mandir* (the Hindu temple commemorating the god Ram[a]’s birthplace, said to be located in the same spot) in Ayodhya.

Another example of an agent of religious change in modern India, (albeit significantly less studied than the national screening of the *Ramayana*), is the proliferation of satellite evangelism, international Charismatic Christian television programs, and the impact that these developments are having on indigenous Christian churches, Hindu-Christian relations, actual communal interactions, and Hindu responses to charismatic television programming. James is to be commended for bringing this little-studied area to the attention of the scholarly community. In his monograph, James seeks to demonstrate that:

Charismatic televangelism, with four 24-hour networks propagating an American blend of Christianity, with alien practices and perspectives, has indeed changed India’s cultural and religious mediascape. The plethora of American televangelistic programs and the marketing techniques that accompany them have influenced local Charismatic televangelists and even

Hindu televangelists to adopt some of the new assortment of communication technologies in sophisticated ways. Worship has become another form of entertainment. The medium indeed has become the message. (205)

In the introduction to his book, James provides the context out of which his research arose. Through his attendance and participation in missionary conferences in South Asia over the past decade, James has “observed the changing shape and form of Christian ministry” in India. For James, these changes were symbolically captured in a February 2004 event called the “Festival of Blessings.” Although American-based Charismatic televangelist Benny Hinn had not previously visited the Indian subcontinent, some “20,000 volunteers, a 1,000 member choir, 32 giant TV screens, an enclosure for 17,000 sick and disabled people, and parking facilities for 100,000 cars” were all orchestrated in Mumbai’s Bandrakurla Complex to allow a reported 4.2 million people to participate in a three-day meeting, the largest crusade to date of Hinn’s church. James cites the most important factor for the significant attendance at the “Festival of Blessings Crusade” as being the fact that “Hinn’s huge Florida-based Church entity had been broadcasting his healing and teaching programs through satellite television to India for at least six years before he set foot on Indian soil” (xvii). Hinn, who broadcasts his TV show in over 200 countries worldwide, is but one example of a new trend in which Charismatic televangelists have entered the global arena by means of new technologies. James states that the aim of his book is to “investigate the influence of Charismatic televangelism in urban India” among two primary groups, namely the “Protestant Church” and the “Hindu community.” To do so, he engages in four main research settings: “Televangelism,” “Charismatic theology,” the “Christian church in India,” and the “Hindu community.”

In chapter one, James states the object of his study as an attempt to capture the impact of televangelism on “Hindu-oriented society,” saying:

A new phenomenon is taking place in India today: televangelism. Propelled primarily by the global charismatic movement, televangelism is shaping India’s airwaves, producing two strands of programs that I term metaphorically as ‘McDonaldisation’ and ‘Masala McGospel,’ following studies by Ritzer (1993) and Drane (2001). I term Hindu televangelism, a consequence of satellite technology and Charismatic televangelism, ‘Om Economics.’ I paint these three pictures of televangelism in India with a broad brush, relying on my ethnographic research, content analysis, and the relational-descriptive analysis which I call the historical-comparative framework. (1)

While he admits to painting with a “broad brush,” readers with a background in the history of religions may be distracted by James’ overly generalized presentations of “Hinduism” and “Christianity.” James quotes early twentieth century sources to arrive at an “essence” of “modern Hinduism” (though the sources from which he quotes are missionary texts from 1912 and 1935). The “essence” of “Hinduism” for James is found in H.P. Griswold’s 1912 article from *The Biblical World* entitled “Some Characteristics of Hinduism as a Religion,” which James quotes at some length:

The essential element in Hinduism, then, is not belief, but social organization. This fact explains why it is that the Hindu finds fault with the Christian missionary, not the preaching of Christ in India, but only for baptizing. It is the disruption of the Hindu social system rather than a change of belief, which is feared . . . . In Hinduism, more fully perhaps than even in Orthodox Judaism, religion embraces the whole of life. One explanation [for] this is that the separation which has been made in the West between social custom and religion

has never taken place in India . . . ; hence, Christianity and Hinduism touch common life differently. The principle of Christianity is ‘Whether ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God’ (1 Cor. 10.31). But the principle of Hinduism is ‘Whether ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all according to fixed rule and established custom.’ Liberty prevails in Christianity; legalism, in Hinduism. This explains why . . . Hindus . . . seem at first sight to be so religious. It is because their religion consists so largely in the punctilious performance of an elaborate body of religiously consecrated customs touching every detail of life. (12-13)

Like “Hinduism,” the “essence of Christianity” in the modern world is, according to James, highly “syncretistic” because it draws from “many sources, including cults” (21). James indicates that terms such as “hybridity,” “syncretism,” “bricolage,” and “creolization” have been used widely in post-colonial discourse on “religion.” One should note here, however, that much recent work coming out of the field of religious studies and anthropology/ethnography refuses to chase after the red herring of the “essences” of “world religions” like “Hinduism” or “Christianity.” These religious traditions, or better, diverse amalgams of religious traditions, differ sufficiently from one another such that their reification into singular, unified “essences” is to be avoided as an over-simplification from a historical-critical perspective (It is this historical-critical perspective that James indicates he intends to model in his book, yet in his opening and closing chapters, James himself falls prey to the very sort of oversimplification he decries).

If James is guilty of essentializing “Hinduism” and “Christianity” in his opening chapter, the second chapter presents a much more clearly historicized and contextualized assessment of televangelism within the framework of Charismatic Christianity. James opens chapter two by reminding his readers of the major shift in demographics that typifies Christianity today. In the contemporary world, Christians from the “global south” (Africa, Asia, South America) now outnumber the populations of Christians in the historical Christian strongholds of Europe and North America. The largest Protestant Church in the world is not located in Los Angeles, London, or Sydney but rather in Seoul, South Korea. Furthermore, the upsurge in numbers of self-identifying Christians in the global south trends toward evangelical or charismatic forms of Christianity. Televangelism is a phenomenon that is historically connected with evangelical Christians. James attempts to provide some clarification, saying: “The term ‘evangelical’ refers to the body of Protestant Christians who claim to adhere to the historic and biblical understanding of the Christian gospel” (37). This does lead one to wonder whether the reader is being invited to envision Christians who would *not* make this claim. Indeed, since so many varieties of Christians past and present would claim to adhere to the “historic and biblical” understanding of Christianity, further clarification is needed here. For James, evangelical Christians are those who affirm the following “fundamental beliefs”: (a) the sufficiency of the Bible; (b) the sufficiency of the person of Christ and “his work on the cross”; and (c) the “need for conversion through faith and the active demonstration of the gospel in evangelism and social service” (37). These beliefs are said to be “fundamental” rather than “incidental” to evangelical Christianity. Doctrines such as the divine inspiration of the Bible, the deity of Jesus Christ, and the resurrection of Christ are historically rooted in Black American culture (Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism or the Charismatic movement are historically related, and later on page 58 in note 2, James indicates that for this book, the Charismatic movement and Pentecostalism are treated as one). In chapter two, James introduces his readers to what he calls the “Full-Circle Accommodation Assertion.”

Building on anthropologist A.F.C. Wallace's important 1956 "Revitalization Movements" article, James seeks to demonstrate that the "introduction and growth of Hindu televangelism just after the introduction of Charismatic televangelism in India suggests that Hindu televangelism is yet another example of the revitalization movement within Hinduism" (24). The thesis of James' full-circle assertion is that "Hinduism (from India) influenced the USA over a period of years . . . [and that] the influence was felt in the Transcendentalist Movement, New Thought, and the Human Potential Movement[s], which, in turn influenced the Charismatic movement (neo-Pentecostalism). Now, the Charismatic movement is impacting India through transnational television and a full-circle has been reached . . ." (57).

In his chapter entitled "Interpreting Charismatic Televangelism: Hindu Leaders and the Contested Nation," James interviewed thirty respondents from "urban India" from the two cities of Mumbai ("Bollywood") and Hyderabad (a leading center for Charismatic television and Indian headquarters of the Christian Broadcasting Network or CBN). It is in this chapter that the author displays some slippages between his stated goal of merely conducting ethnographic research on the impact of (frequently used interchangeably with phrases such as "interpretations of" or "perceptions of") Christian televangelism in India and his secondary (or, perhaps, primary) goal of safeguarding the mission work of authentic Christianity in India. The author shifts from collecting and surveying statements made in the context of field research to offering advice to Christian leaders (in India and abroad) regarding how best to avoid the global-local ("glocal") propagation of a watered-down, "syncretistic" and "churchless Christianity" made up of "television converts" who are shallow, materialistic Hindus-cum-Christians (176-177). According to James, "Hinduism" is inherently "syncretistic" by nature. One unwanted result of Charismatic televangelism in India is the "new form of 'Christo-Hinduism,' a fusion of Hinduism and Christianity that flourishes outside of the established churches. This "popular Christianity" attracts uncritical, "anonymous Christians," all of whom lack "training, commitment, accountability, and Christian maturity and discipleship" (177). This "virtual reinvention of Christianity" (190) represents the globalization of a "specific brand of Christianity—the Charismatic faith . . .," says James. He continues, explaining:

I have referred to this global brand of Charismatic Christianity in India as McDonaldisation because it represents an expression of global Charismatic Christianity mediated in its generation and construction by the particular grammar, logic, and identity of global Charismatic Christianity. Likewise, the 'glocal' brand of Charismatic Christianity has been termed Masala McGospel because global Charismatic Christianity is producing a form of cultural fusion—blending the global (American) logic, grammar, and identity with Indian components. (189-190)

In the contemporary world, James says, it is increasingly difficult to find any "pure," "unadulterated," or "pristine" religion, untouched and unaffected by outside cultures and traditions. From a historical perspective, all of the world's major religions are "syncretistic." It is therefore not particularly helpful for James to label "Hinduism" as an "inherently syncretistic" religion. Religions are rarely as "pure" and unmixed as their members would like to think they are; indeed, there is no such thing as a *non*-syncretistic religion. It is in his discussion of the inherent theological dangers of "syncretism" that James clearly betrays his theological concern for the future development of "Christianity" in India. In his penultimate chapter, James lists several negative consequences of the new Indian Charismatic television on the "Indian Christian community" as well as on the individual "Christian worshipper," asserting that

. . . the McDonaldised version of televangelism . . . presents a standard consumer gospel, bereft of cultural linkage to India and adds fuel to the fire with its insensitive treatment of Hinduism and the local belief systems, calling them ‘heathen’ and ‘demonic.’ This, when added with televangelism’s pro-US stance and the open agenda of ‘winning souls,’ has greatly intensified the contestation on a community level . . . . I believe the mediation of Charismatic televangelism has affected the individual worshipper in several ways. First, the sacred act of worship has now been reduced to a series of choices in the supermarket of Christianity, with the worshipper in the role of consumer . . . ; the worshipper’s experience of worship is associated with entertainment, spectacle, and even ‘worldliness,’ . . . [and] Christian worship, which traditionally was a communal experience, is shifting to a more privatized mode, where the worshipper may pray for ‘individual blessings,’ call the toll free number on the screen for prayer, and donate online to various televangelism ministries. Furthermore, the worshipper does not have to feel bad about not attending a physical church, for he or she can now believe without belonging. (199-200)

Likewise, James bemoans what he calls “the collapse of the Biblical world view,” which, to his mind, has been facilitated by Charismatic televangelism. He says, a “reinvention of Christianity” in terms of a “theology of power” and a “theology of wealth and healing” is packaged and presented for global consumption as the “prosperity gospel.” James’ primary concern in writing the volume comes through clearly in passages such as these. As director of the mission organization Asia Evangelistic Fellowship (AEF International), James, like the organization he directs, is in the business of “sharing the Gospel and planting churches” (for more here, see the organization’s website, on which James also sells a “praise and worship” CD of ten original songs, entitled *Exalted*). James does not restrict his research to mere historical analysis or even to expanding existing ethnographic understanding. Rather, his concern is clearly with rescuing the state of missionary work in South Asia. History and ethnography serve merely as means to an end, namely, the findings from these fields of study or research areas should be brought to bear in the recruiting and training of Indians for Christ. James laments the fact that global televangelism is creating “consumer worshippers” rather than the ideal Christians that James has in mind, i.e., “worshippers consumed with God.” This book is written by a missionary for other missionaries; as such, it may not appeal to academic historians, anthropologists/ethnographers, or Indologists (aside from those who may wish, for instance, to study the work of missionaries and, thus, opt to read James’ book as an example of primary source data on modern missions in South Asia). For those like James who are interested in seeing a “return to historical roots missiology” so as to re-establish the “pre-colonial pattern” of spreading the gospel in India, *McDonaldisation, Masala McGospel and Om Economics: Televangelism in Contemporary India* may be of considerable interest.

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