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The Emergence of Authenticity Talk and the Giving of Accounts: Conversion as Movement of the Soul in South India, ca. 1900

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INTRODUCTION: AUTHENTICITY TALK, PAST AND PRESENT

This paper analyses the events that first instigated "authenticity talk" in colonial Madras, talk that now permeates postcolonial Indian public and legal-administrative languages. A recent ordinance passed by the government of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu (erstwhile Madras) illustrates this discourse nicely. The 2002 Tamil Nadu Anti-Conversion Ordinance forbids religious conversions it deems "fraudulent" or "forced," as well as those brought about by worldly "temptation." Undergirding this law is a concept of authentic conversion as the free movement of an individual, immaterial soul: any conversion that might have been otherwise motivated is thereby deemed not only inauthentic, but by this law, illegal. Conversion thus conceived is itself founded upon the idea that the self must be autonomous; thus religion ought to be freely chosen, not brought about by coercion. Also implicit in official language is the contention that a poor Dalit could be tempted with particular ease to embrace a new faith by the promise of material rewards. This law, along with almost identically worded counterparts in several other

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Indian states,[1] has been the target of astute critics, whose focus has been on the Hindu majoritarian political projects that foster support for them.[2] In this essay I take a different tack, endeavoring instead to provide an account of the conditions under which the paradigm of conversion on which such laws depend emerged.

I begin with a treatment of missionary activity in colonial South India in the latter half of the nineteenth century in order to provide the discursive context in which talk of authentic conversion emerged. I then show in what ways that emergence was linked to the conversions of Pariahs (as Dalits were then known). Pariah conversions, I argue, wrought very distinctive transformations in relations between Pariah bondsmen and their masters, altering in certain critical respects the balance of power and the distribution of authority. And for reasons I describe below, public objections to these transformations came to be largely couched in the language of authentic conversion.

The paradigm of conversion whose historical emergence in colonial India this paper tracks is well-known to students of Protestantism, and is founded on conceptions of inwardness that social theorists like Charles Taylor have described as essential to the self of Western modernity.[3] With respect to formerly colonized peoples, the quintessentially modern self that is found in the official discourses of projects of postcolonial states is most often ascribed to the forces of colonial capital and missionary activity.[4] But by attending more closely to the local conditions of the emergence of this paradigm in South

[1] For instance, the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act 2003; the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Ordinance 2002; the Rajasthan Freedom of Religion Bill 2006; the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act 1967 (revamped in 2006); the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act 1968; the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act 1978; and the Chhattisgarh Freedom of Religion Act 1968. For criticism, see South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre, "Anti-Conversion Laws: Challenges to Secularism and Fundamental Human Rights," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, 2 (2008): 63–73.

[2] An excellent example of this kind of writing is the South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre paper cited in note 1; for a review and analysis of arguments concerning conversion in postcolonial India, see Sebastian C. H. Kim, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India* (New Delhi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 and 2005). In an important paper, Nathaniel Roberts adduces evidence to argue that India's anti-conversion laws are not adequately accounted for in the existing literature, which, focusing on the Hindu majoritarian politics that the laws overtly serve, conceives of these laws as abrogating secular principles. Against this, Roberts demonstrates that these laws in fact rest on arguments that are fundamentally secular in character; "Ethnographic Knowledge and the Government of Religion," paper presented at the University of Virginia, 20 Mar. 2009.

[3] See for instance, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[4] A touchstone of work in this vein is John and Jean Comaroff's sweeping two-volume study, *Of Revelation and Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 and 1997). A more recent and highly sophisticated account of similar transformations is Webb Keane's *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007); and his "Sincerity, 'Modernity' and the Protestants," *Cultural Anthropology* 17, 1 (2002): 65–92.

India I pose a more specific question, namely, under what circumstances are *particular* selves called upon to divulge their putatively secreted contents in order to demonstrate their autonomy and authenticity? For this demand is not made of all subject-citizens with equal insistence.

HEAVEN-SENT BLESSINGS, EARTHLY REWARDS

Protestant missionaries in South India in the mid-nineteenth century were faced with an apparently insurmountable difficulty: the stolid indifference of most Indians to the Christian message.[5] India, indeed, was renowned as a particularly barren mission field. While there were occasional instances of outrage against missionary evangelism at other times and places in colonial India, in rural Madras, there was little to be found.[6] For our purposes, what is most important is what missionaries identified as the *basis* of this indifference: a Methodist missionary voiced the consensus on this question in 1882 when he worried that it was a challenge to "awaken among Hindus a consciousness of sin" since "many … do not … believe in the freedom of moral action …[or in]

[5] My use of the generic term "Protestant missionary" requires explanation. First, Roman Catholics did not become actively involved in problematizing conversion in this way in the South Indian public sphere in the late nineteenth century, for this was, after all, primarily a Protestant conception of conversion. Thus they do not figure here despite their importance to a broader history of Christianity in South India. Second, the extent to which I differentiate among Protestant mission societies has been driven entirely by the question of how mission activity shaped the discourse on the authentic conversion of Pariahs in the 1890s in Madras. Although theological and missiological differences abound with respect to some matters, these differences had little impact on missions' theoretical or practical approach to the Pariah at this particular time, roughly 1880 to 1915, an approach which they developed in an ecumenical space. With respect to the Pariah and a number of other matters, Protestant missionaries, especially the Anglophone missionaries who comprised the largest subgroup, developed their concepts in concert at frequent interdenominational conferences and in shared periodicals, and they often acted in concert as well. Through interdenominational organizations they passed resolutions on pastoral policy to which all member missions were, in theory at least, pledged to adhere. With respect to the issue of Pariah conversion, the archives of the following societies between roughly 1870 and 1920 have proved most pertinent: The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (London), The American Arcot Mission (New Brunswick), The Free Church of Scotland (Edinburgh), and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (Oxford, UK).

[6] Nate Roberts' Ph.D. dissertation, "The Power of Conversion and the Foreignness of Belonging: Domination and Moral Community in a Paraiyar Slum" (Columbia University 2008), in appendix I and especially on pages 263–69, contains a useful typology of what occasioned opposition to Christian conversion in India: (1) opposition to the rare conversion of high-caste students at mission-run schools in urban centers; such high-caste urban responses to Christianity in Madras are described in G. A. Oddie's "Constructing Hinduism: The Impact of the Protestant Missionary Movement on Hindu Self-Understanding" (in R. E. Frykenberg and A. M. Lowe, eds., *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003]); (2) opposition concerned with the preservation of a Hindu majority in the context of political representation (see John Webster's discussion of "the politics of numbers" in *Dalit Christians: A History* [Delhi: ISPCK, 1992]); and (3) opposition to interference with labor relations in the countryside, which is the concern of this paper. What I examine in this essay is the predominant rural reaction to evangelization, since we are concerned here with the backdrop of Pariah conversion, an overwhelmingly rural phenomena.

personal responsibility."[7] It was exceedingly difficult to preach to rural Indians of the soul's defilement and the need for its salvation, then, because among this population the requisite concern with spiritual well-being upon which such preaching depends appeared to missionaries unnervingly absent. The problem, it seemed, inhered in Indian languages themselves. As a fellow Methodist explained while reporting on preaching tours:

> The most common words used in preaching convey an entirely different idea to that which the preacher wishes to enforce.… For instance the word translated salvation, *raksane*, simply means, to the majority of the people, food and clothes.… *How difficult it is to lead people to see an ethical meaning in a word which has hitherto had none.* On going to the Boy's School one morning, I found the teacher, a heathen man, expounding [the passage] "Blessed are they that mourn" [from the Sermon on the Mount].… His interpretation [was], "Those people who have plenty of sorrow are sure by and by to grow very rich." In … [Kannada] … the word Blessed is *bhagyawantanu* which means to everybody a rich man and the teacher, like others, *had got no higher idea of blessedness*.[8]

In short, Indians' marked lack of interest in matters of the soul was ascribed to a failure to recognize a distinction that was essential to nineteenth-century Protestantism: that between spiritual and material rewards.[9] "Higher" forms of blessedness promiscuously mingled with lower ones in the moral worlds of Indians, even Indian converts. And just as these obstacles to conversion inhered in language, they structured the very organization of the everyday: an additional source of missionary concern was that agrarian Indian life rarely afforded the privacy required for *personal* prayer and reflection, the surest method for the recognition of the ultimacy of the soul.

But these barriers to proper conversion were not the only ones. The other barrier—equally indicative of a failure to distinguish and hierarchically organize material and spiritual realms—was what missionaries viewed as the irrational native attachment to caste practices. For a manner of demurral they heard with mechanical regularity was, "Christianity *sounds* very good—what you're *saying* is indeed true—but becoming a Christian means becoming a Pariah."[10] "Pariah" was here used in its most generic sense to mean despised

[7] Rev. J. Paul, "How to Awaken amongst Hindus a Consciousness of Sin," *Harvest Field* (1881–1882): 210–12.

[8] Rev. H. H., "At Work," *Harvest Field* (1881–1882): 113–14 (my emphases).

[9] I have discussed missionaries' attempts to refine this distinction on the basis of their Indian experiences, in "Spiritual Slavery, Material Malaise: 'Untouchables' and Religious Neutrality in Colonial South India," *Historical Research*, 83, 219 (Feb. 2010): 124–45. Later anthropologists would also aver that Indians made little of this distinction: see McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden, "Toward an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems," in David Kenneth, ed., *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1977), 227–38. See also note 12, below.

[10] The Tamil preacher G. D. Barnabas recorded with phonetic precision the following rustic retort in a village in North Arcot District: "Āmaiyyā, nīṅka colṟatu cari, [āṉā] kiṟistoṅka āyiṭṭāc cāti keṭṭupōvutē," "What you're *saying* is indeed true, but we cannot convert to your

outsider, a status it was believed would accrue from sharing food and socializing with missionaries, and even more with actual Pariahs, unfree laborers of the lowest castes, given that Pariahs were increasingly associated with Christianity in the popular mind, for reasons I will describe presently. A source of great frustration to missionaries, then, was that opposition to the acceptance of Christianity was not primarily to the truths it conveyed.[11]

From this very brief schema of evangelical experience in nineteenth-century South India I want to make two claims. First, South Indians did not imagine, as Protestant missionaries did, an *essential* distinction between the spiritual and material benefits that might accrue from worship.[12] Second, the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity in the southern Indian bazaar did not, at least at this stage, primarily take the form of doctrinal argument, because the terms necessary for such a debate were not widely accepted by missionaries' Indian interlocutors. To statements of Christian truth, Indians responded not with alternative truths but with reference to forms of social propriety and obligation for which such arguments were irrelevant.

Missionaries interpreted these references by means of the category "caste," for which, by the mid-nineteenth century, there were well-worked out and widely disseminated theories, all of which shared the premise that caste was indissociable from the Hindu religion; caste had been discovered as the necessary social matrix of Hinduism.[13] This interpretation, perhaps

religion—becoming a Christian means spoiling our caste." *Vētiyār Viḷakku*, Mar. and Apr. 1917, Christian Literature Society Archives, Chennai.

[11] There are some exceptions to this general characterization, though specifically doctrinal opposition in South India was very sporadic and occurred only in urban locales: Geoffrey Oddie, "Anti-Missionary Feeling and Hindu Revivalism in Madras: The Hindu Preaching and Hindu Tract Societies, 1886–1891," in Fred Clothey, ed., *Images of Man: Essays on Religion and Historical Process in South Asia* (Madras: New Era, 1982); and Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (Vienna: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, 1981). Arguably the most important source of doctrinal opposition elsewhere in India was the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist organization founded in the 1880: see Kenneth Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th Century Punjab* (Delhi: Manohar, 1976). Indian touring preachers complained occasionally of "native sophists" who debated them on philosophical matters for sport, but an audience member who had been pulled into debate was far more likely to quickly eschew doctrinal issues in favor of an irrefragable observation: "Why listen to him? He's gone over to the Pariahs."

[12] This is of course not the same as saying such a distinction was entirely foreign. Something recognizably parallel, involving normative claims about how and why spiritual rewards are superior to material ones, can be found in Indian oral and written literature. But to posit purely spiritual motives as superior to material ones is not to deny the *legitimacy* of the latter, let alone to exclude them from the realm of genuine religiosity. A more detailed exploration is outside the scope of this paper, but a useful overview of the issue can be found in C. J. Fuller's *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 70–72.

[13] On the history of Protestant conceptions of caste, see Duncan Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India* (London: Curzon,

reassuringly, convinced the missionary that what he was struggling against was indeed another *religion*. If the members of so-called higher castes dominated and mistreated the Pariah, this was not fundamentally a feature of agrarian political economic arrangements, in which the Pariah served as hereditarily unfree laborer, but only an extreme form of the popish ritualism and irrational obsession with bodily purity which marked Hindu (caste) society. Yet, as I will argue, it is precisely the distinctive political-economic features of Pariah subordination—the status of the Pariah as something more than just the extreme pole of ritual prejudice—that make sense of the emergence and specific articulation of authenticity talk in South India.

SERVITUDE, REAL AND IMAGINED

Though entirely erased from popular memory today, the names for particular "untouchable" caste groups in South India, like Pariah and Palla, were used interchangeably by Tamils with the terms *āḷ* and *aṭimai*, meaning slave.[14] Slavery was officially abolished in British India in 1843, over the strong objections of India hands, who argued that agrarian servitude was so integral to the functioning of the economy that its summary abolition would be impracticable.[15] An effective compromise was made whereby the export and import of slaves was largely halted, while local forms of agrarian servitude were not. Use of the *word* "slavery" by officials would invoke reprimands from higher-ups, but the actual conditions officials described with respect to Pariahs remained the same.[16] Landowners, too, eventually learned to avoid speaking of their Pariahs as slaves in dealings with the state, preferring the tropes of "debt" and "contract." No doubt a gradual transformation was underway in agrarian labor relations in the nineteenth century, but it did not follow a linear trajectory from status to contract.[17] Thus as late as 1918, eighty-odd

1980). For an account of what these conceptions meant in practice, and especially with respect to the pastoral care of the Pariah, see my, "Spiritual Slavery."

[14] This erasure results from over half a century of Dravidianist political ideology, which has been very successful in promulgating a vision of Tamil society as an undifferentiated non-Brahmin mass. On the interchangeable use of caste names and words for slave, see Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India* (Delhi: Manohar, 1992 [1965]); and Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Religion, Caste and Welfare in Modern India* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming 2013).

[15] Kumar, *Land and Caste*; Nancy Cassels, "Social Legislation under the Company Raj: The Abolition of Slavery Act V of 1843," *South Asia*, n.s. 11, 1 (1988): 59–87; Benedicte Hjelje, "Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India in the Nineteenth Century," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 15, 1 & 2 (1967): 77–87.

[16] Board of Revenue Proceedings 617, 6 Sept. 1889, Tamil Nadu State Archives. On the fact that speaking of slavery post-abolition was strongly discouraged amongst officials, see also Indrani Chatterjee's "Slavery, Semantics, and the Sound of Silence," in Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton, eds., *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 287–315; and Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*.

[17] *Pace* historical accounts that have all too often uncritically accepted the new language of contract at face value: see, for instance, Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor*

years after the official abolition of slavery, we find landowners still referring to their Pariahs as *aṭimaiyāḷ*, slaves, and unselfconsciously explaining to government officials that, yes, these *aṭimais* were indebted, but that they were most definitely *not* free to leave even if they did, in some unlikely event, manage to pay off their debts and thereby terminate the putative contract.[18]

The latter half of the nineteenth century, when mass conversions of Pariahs to Protestant Christianity reached great proportions, was a period in which market-related transformations placed extreme stress on the agrarian economy, with famine a frequent occurrence. This period leaves us with records that vividly disclose what traditional forms of servitude entailed, and what they did not. While colonial officials alleged that traditional servitude in India came with the silver lining of support for laborers during slack seasons, this reassuring assumption has little basis in fact. Indeed there is a wealth of largely ignored evidence against the familiar depiction of Indian servitude as a relatively benign institution, tempered by cultural mores in which masters recognized their own responsibilities to the welfare of their dependents.[19] Pariahs were the first to suffer the effects of famine, since they never earned enough to build up their own stores of grain, and their lack of savings was compounded by the loss of employment. The Methodist missionary William Goudie, stationed in Chengalpattu district just north of Madras city, described this situation in a letter home in 1898:

> Some villages have nothing to call a harvest, and the [Pariahs] are … going hungry. In other villages the harvest is not a total failure, but is scanty, and the caste people[20] who usually employ Pariah labour for harvesting are this year banding together to help each other reap their fields without cost.… In other villages again where Pariah labour is in demand the caste people who usually pay in kind are this year taking into account that

Servitude in Colonial India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Jan Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); and his *Beyond Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Both stress the transformations wrought by the colonial state's new legal enframing of bondage. I have argued, rather, that substantive change came slowly, and did not coincide with the official abolition of slavery; see *The Pariah Problem*, chs. 1 and 4.

[18] Board of Revenue Proceedings 106, 29 May 1918, cited in Government Order (Revenue) (GOR) 2941, 12 Aug. 1918, 28, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

[19] As Dharma Kumar shrewdly notes, "The issue [of the laborer's rights] would be raised presumably only when there was a failure of crops, and it would be precisely at times like these, when his rights were most needed, that they were most insecure"; *Land and Caste*, 191–92.

[20] A terminological clarification: although Pariahs and other untouchable groups comprise castes in the sense of endogamous descent groups, it is also possible to refer to them as outcastes, in the sense that they are deemed outside the rankings of respectable castes. Therefore "caste people" means those other than Dalits. Like the English word "status," then, which can mean both simply any condition whatsoever, but also an elevated condition, caste can refer to those people belonging to any endogamous group but also to those other than untouchables belonging to the respectable or "clean" castes. This ambiguity is present in Indian languages as well in the term which caste most often translates, *jāti*.

grain is selling at double the normal rates and are giving accordingly. Let us not be too hasty in blaming them. It is probably what a large number of English employers would do, but again … the Pariah labourer['s] … stomach does not, unfortunately, adapt itself to the rise and fall of price levels. [And elsewhere] it is reported to me that the [caste peasants] are using their influence with the petty revenue officials to delay the opening of [famine] relief works until they have completed their harvest labour on especially cheap rates.[21]

Observations like these call into question the notion that Indian masters and slaves were bound together by a tradition of mutual duties and obligations. This was an idea articulated in its modern form and popularized by British officials with a vested interest, initially, in portraying Indian slavery as exceptional and therefore exempt from empire-wide abolition, and later justifying colonial negligence of laborers in favor of protecting the interests of their elite Indian tax-payers. Recent histories of labor in India follow the colonial archive in contending, with remarkably little evidence, that the transition to capitalist agriculture severed a once mutualistic relation between laborer and master.[22] Yet the representations of "mutual duties and obligations" no more straightforwardly disclosed social reality than did that of "labor contracts."

If Indian servitude did not entail a system of mutual duties and obligations, what were its distinguishing features? I restrict myself to those germane to this paper, namely those that became arenas of struggle in the late-nineteenth-century period of mass conversion. A number of practices secured the delimitation of the Pariah as outside of society proper. Linguistically, the term *tamiḻaṉ* itself, "*Tamilian*," referred only to caste Tamils, and not to Tamil-speaking untouchable castes (a fact that, like the erstwhile interchangeability of "slave" and untouchable caste names, is nearly forgotten today).[23] They

[21] Goudie to Rev. G. W. Olver, Tiruvallur, 3 Mar. 1898, 3–4, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

[22] Such views may be found in, for example, Tanika Sarkar, "Bondage in the Colonial Context," in U. Patnaik and M. Dingwaney, eds., *Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India* (New Delhi: Sangam Books, 1985), 97–125; Prakash, *Bonded Histories*; Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation*.

[23] This meaning of *tamiḻaṉ* was still openly acknowledged in the Tamil Lexicon published by the University of Madras in 1924–1936. Eighteenth-century examples of this usage can be found in Ananda Ranga Pillai's diary: *The Private Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai, Dubash to Joseph Francois Dupleix, Governor of Pondicherry: A Record of Matters Political, Historical, Social and Personal, from 1736–1761*, J. Frederick Price and K. Rangachari, eds. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1984). Missionaries, too, record this form in many places in ways that make clear that the distinction between *tamiḻaṉ* and *paraiyaṉ* was a self-evident one to native speakers. One example appears in a series of transcribed interviews with native Christian mission workers: on the topic of caste, one catechist, defining himself as *Paraiyar*, speaks of sitting in the church separate from the "Tamils": *Inquiries Made by the Bishop of Madras Regarding the Removal of Caste Prejudices and Practices within the Native Church of South India; Together with the Replies of the Missionaries and Native Clergy Sent Thereto* (Madras: Christian Knowledge Society, 1868). It is precisely against the dominant assumption of a mutually exclusive relationship between *tamiḻaṉ* and *paraiyaṉ* that the late-nineteenth-century Dalit intellectual Iyotheedas' historical reconstructions, which were designed to prove that Pariayars were not only Tamils but in fact the *only genuine*

dwelt in enforced segregation in ghettos (*cēri*) outside the main village, and marks of positive social status were forbidden them. These included such things as wearing shoes or shirts, building a solid house or other permanent structures, and any other signs of wealth or privilege—signs that were at once marks of dignity and blessedness, as the missionary analysis of the Kannada word *bhagyawantanu*, meaning both blessed and rich, reminds us. And while others might fall into the state of landless laborer in colonial Madras, only Pariahs were actively prevented from owning land.[24]

Pariah indiscipline was prevented and punished by an equally variegated arsenal. Tactics used by landowners extended from routine physical punishment and intimidation to gentler methods like the financial sponsorship of Pariah lifecycle rituals. But among the most essential of the landed caste master's techniques was his control over the sites on which his Pariah bondsmen lived as well as the land surrounding them on all sides. Insubordinate laborers could find their own small gardens flooded or trampled by a master's herds, and they themselves threatened with eviction and unemployment, a devastating sanction given that Pariah families had no independent means of livelihood. It was in the context of a threat to these forms of servitude that authenticity talk first came to be employed by Indian elites against challenges presented by Pariah conversion.

MASS CONVERSION, MORAL TUTELAGE, MENDACITY

Dramatically altering the painfully slow addition of names to the baptismal register that characterizes the mid-nineteenth century, the indifference of Indians to Christianity described above became a thing of the past by the 1890s. While missionaries had not sought out the lowest strata of society, hoping instead to secure the masses by first capturing those they saw as social leaders[25]—Brahmins and other elites—missionaries unexpectedly found themselves besieged by Pariahs. Although many missionaries suspected hunger alone drove these conversions since several spectacular instances occurred around the great famine of 1876–1878, in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century South India overall, mass conversions of Pariahs correlate very poorly with

Tamils, assume their unique force as counter-memory; on the internal dynamics of Iyotheedas's discourse, see Gajendran Ayyathurai, "Foundations of Anti-Caste Consciousness: Pandit Iyothee Thass, Tamil Buddhism, and the Marginalized in South India," PhD diss., Columbia University, 2011.

[24] Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*.

[25] This theory of conversion, commonly associated with Jesuits, was widely adopted by Protestant missionaries in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century, though it was later abandoned once mass conversions were in full swing. Among Jesuits, it was carried to its logical extreme in South India in seventeenth-century Madurai by Roberto de Nobili, who donned the garb and adopted the habits of local Brahmins. See Vincent Cronin, *A Pearl to India: The Life of Roberto de Nobili* (New York: Dutton, 1959).

times of distress such as famines or epidemics.[26] Indeed, the period between 1889 and 1895, which saw a great number of mass conversions in South India[27] as well as the birth of authenticity talk, was not markedly more disaster-prone than the years that succeeded or preceded it.

What is a "mass" conversion? As the adjective suggests, Pariah conversions were distinctive both in the vast numbers who converted, and in that missionaries were approached, and baptism demanded, by groups or representatives of groups rather than single individuals. Conversions were initiated, to reiterate, by Pariahs themselves, not by missionaries—contra popular perceptions then as now—and in fact most Pariahs who approached a local missionary had never before had any personal contact with him.

In striking contrast to high caste converts, who were individually won after months or even years of careful tutelage and argumentation, or who were often products of mission schools in urban centers, Pariah converts did not come with any prior knowledge of Christian doctrine. As the Report of the Free Church of Scotland's Madras Mission explained to its readers at home:

> When the Pariah … comes under Christian instruction, we must not make the mistake … of thinking that the work of his evangelization has been completed. As a matter of fact it is only about to begin. We are so accustomed in the West to regard the religious life of the soul as an individual personal matter that we are apt to consider all those who are participators in such movements … to Christianity as having undergone an experience analogous in some way to what we call "conversion." [But] the village Pariah comes to us with all the darkness of the past centuries of ignorance enshrouding his soul.…[28] He is willing to learn and surely that is a great matter.… But the … building up of Christian character … has yet to be done.[29]

Evident here are several missionary preoccupations critical to the story we are tracing. The Pariah cannot undergo "what we call conversion." By virtue of the

[26] Dick Kooiman convincingly makes this argument, analyzing data from mass movements in historical proximity to the Great Famine: "Mass Movement, Famine and Epidemic: A Study in Interrelationship," *Modern Asian Studies* 25, 2 (May 1991): 281–301.

[27] The following works provide detailed accounts of such movements in South India and elsewhere: Hugald Grafe, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. IV, Part 2: Tamil Nadu in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1990); Sundararaj Manickam, *The Social Setting of Christian Conversion in South India* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977); J. W. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India: A Study with Recommendations* (New York: Abingdon, 1933); John Webster, *Dalit Christians: A History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1990).

[28] In this missionaries concurred with the views of Indian elites, for whom the Pariah's ignorance was legendary. Gandhi, some decades later, would lament the ignorance underlying untouchables' conversions to Christianity, asking the missionary Rev. John Mott, "Would you, Dr. Mott, preach the Gospel to a cow? Well some of the untouchables are worse than cows in understanding. I mean they can no more distinguish between the relative merits of Islam and Hinduism and Christianity than can a cow" (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 64 [New Delhi: Government of India, 1941], 240–41). When some balked at the parallel, Gandhi stood by his analogy, retorting that Hindus viewed the cow as sacred.

[29] Editor, *In and Around Madras, Being a Report of the Mission Work of the United Free Church of Scotland in the City of Madras and in the Surrounding District of Chingleput for 1913–14*. (Madras: Methodist Publishing House), 9.

very fact that they occur *en masse*, Pariah conversions cannot be the "individual personal matters" with which the missionary and his readers are familiar, and which constitute authentic conversion. The search for a solution to the problem of the Pariah's incapacity to undergo a genuine spiritual transformation—one that might lead him to "freely" choose Christ—was a frequent topic of missionary debate, and the gulf between the vast numbers of nominal Christians as against the "true converts" who spiritually lived a life in Christ was unceasingly lamented.

But it was not simply the social as opposed to individual nature of these acts of conversion that rendered them deviations from the proper form. The primary reason missionaries gave for the Pariah's incapacity to convert spiritually was that Pariahs' very poverty made it *impossible* for them to convert for reasons of conscience alone: "[In the Pariah,] bodily and spiritual misery are so closely connected that they can scarcely be separated.…"[30] In short, the Pariah posed a challenge to the dichotomous analysis of the world into spirit and matter, and in so doing became the very paradigm of inauthentic conversion. For this reason their inner state was to be scrupulously examined and reexamined for harboring "temporal interests." And yet, since such interests were virtually ineliminable, missionaries needed to attend to them: as one missionary explained, the threat of temporal interest underlying Pariah conversions to Christianity meant, "[The Pariah] feels his external [i.e., material] distress at first much more than his spiritual, and if we wish to help him only in his spiritual need … there may be the risk of his turning away from us as merciless hypocrites."[31] Thus if missionaries feared holding out the worldly temptations that might produce "rice Christians," they also envisioned themselves as without choice in the matter.[32] The seemingly intractable problem of Pariah materiality, itself rooted in a de facto enslavement missionaries along with colonizers were loath to acknowledge, resulted in a proliferation of discourse on the dualism between spirit and matter, and how to manage cases where it appeared to be absent.[33] The Pariah thus brought into much sharper relief the more

[30] J. Kabis, "Should Legal and Financial Help Be Given to Pariahs?" *Harvest Field*, Oct.–Nov. (1897): 361–73, 415–22; originally presented at the Madras Missionary Conference, Aug. 1897 (Bangalore, United Theological College Ecclesiastical Archives), 368. I discuss Protestant missionaries' analysis of the Pariah's condition, as well as the missiological limits on attending to it, in "Spiritual Slavery."

[31] Ibid.

[32] It is noteworthy that although the epithet "rice Christian" in particular, and more generally the sentiment it expresses, are common features of the rhetoric of high-caste Hindu anti-conversion activists, it in fact originated amongst missionaries themselves as a term of abuse directed at rival missions.

[33] Protestant missionaries concerned with the authenticity of conversion responded in practice in a variety of ways to the problem of Pariah poverty. Most adopted piecemeal measures of relief, putting in place, for instance, relief camps at famine times and providing medical care when funds from home societies made this possible. For some missionaries (Adam Andrew of the Free Church of Scotland and William Goudie of the Wesleyan Mission, for example) and in

general consensus that prevailed regarding the fabled absence of such distinctions in Hindu society, and it became common to identify Pariah poverty with an inability to make choices based solely on spiritual considerations.

As noted above, Pariahs were not usually the targets of evangelism. Rather than hearing of Christianity from a missionary, Pariahs most often heard of its benefits from a relative or friend in a neighboring village, which indeed would have been plain to see: a school house for the children, and a small but solid whitewashed church building in the midst of thatched huts. The leader of a Pariah *cēri*, the segregated area of the village in which Pariahs lived, would then approach the missionary with a request, often for a school, and a teacher to live in their midst. These conversations could take on a distinctly strategic, even legalistic, quality: thus the Reverend E. C. Scudder, of the Reformed Church of America, in reporting on the evangelistic work undertaken in northern Madras in 1898, wrote: "Several villages [of Pariahs] have offered to come over … [in exchange for] two buildings and a helper per village.…"[34] Missionaries, for their part, viewed schooling as pertaining to the soul, and hence a legitimate part of missionary work, rather than as providing a form of material advantage. With respect to the Pariah, we must recall that a ubiquitous feature of domination was the prohibition on bearing signs of status: a built structure was a particular privilege, and in the late nineteenth century, a school would be anomalous anywhere—even most caste children did not yet attend school. A whitewashed schoolhouse or chapel (one-room and thatch-roofed though they were) in a *cēri* of huts built of tatties and twigs dramatically altered a landscape otherwise dominated by the built structures of the caste people's quarters, and unsettled a system of subordination in which the denial of status symbols to the Pariah was central.

Once a schoolhouse had been established, a mission helper would encourage careful attention to hygiene and promote new habits of dress among Pariah converts. As with the architecture of the Pariah ghetto, new dress was a significant challenge to the distinction normally maintained between Pariahs and their caste superiors—it did not simply, as missionaries believed, express universal norms of cleanliness and decency. In mission schools, Pariah children might be given simple uniforms, and the fortunate graduates of such schools who became "native helpers" of missions would also be provided with clothing. More generally, converts were instructed to bathe frequently, given haircuts,

some missions, this evolved into a more systematic conception of "social Christianity." The American Baptists' vision of this is recorded in John. E. Clough's *Social Christianity in the Orient: The Story of a Man, a Mission and a Movement* (Macmillan: New York, 1914). Andrew was instrumental in inaugurating a government scheme for the provision of wasteland to landless Dalits, though the scheme was relatively small in scope. See Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*, ch. 3.

[34] Rev. E. C. Scudder, "Report of the American Arcot Mission of the Reformed Church of America, 1898, 7–8, United Theological College Ecclesiastical Archives, Bangalore.

and required to maintain utmost modesty in dress. For missionaries, neat and modest clothing was an outward sign of inner discipline. The improvements they effected in this regard were described by them only as marking the inculcation of proper personal habits, unmindful as they were of the fact that hierarchical relations stipulated that the Pariah laborer appear *abject* relative to his master—that personal habits are also essentially social. Pariahs' threadbare clothing was an essential component of their subjugation: Pariah men were expected to wear only a loincloth while working, and, when wearing a waistcloth, it generally had to be worn above the knees; similarly, a Pariah woman's sari had to be worn high enough to expose her calves and even, sometimes, her knees. "High" caste men and women, by contrast, wore waistcloths or saris that fell past the ankles and covered most of their feet.[35]

A Pariah wearing a caste man's clothing or the westernized attire of urban elites was treated as an insurgent, and often with violence. And yet missionaries, it is important to emphasize, never intended to encourage Pariah insubordination; to the contrary, they cautioned each other, and their converts, against upsetting Pariahs' masters. They simply hoped, as one missionary nicely put it, to "raise [the Pariah] *in* his social state, and not *out* of it."[36] Their intention was not to eradicate the heathenish practices of caste, but to strip them of their Hindu excrescence and cull their rational core: a class hierarchy.[37] And time and again they found themselves having to reprove Pariah converts for contumacy.

So vexing was the sight of a Pariah in anything other than a loin cloth that as late as 1923—by which time the cause of reforming caste was well-established on the nationalist agenda—the nationalist newspaper *Swadharma* published a poem ridiculing a Pariah's adoption of Western dress as a species of imposture. (This was, *nota bene*, the very same style in which the elite Madras nationalists who ran the paper were themselves dressed.) This instructive poem, entitled "Ramaswamy becomes Ramsay" read in part as follows:

> Ramaswamy drew breath,
> In a parcherry [*paṟacēri*, a Pariah ghetto] of Madras.
> His father was a third rate cook,
> His mother—she cut grass.

[35] Similar issues regarding caste and dress have been explored in Robert Hardgrave's, "The Breast-Cloth Controversy: Caste Consciousness and Social Change in Southern Travancore," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 5, 2 (1968): 171–87. He describes missionary efforts to make "low" caste Nadar women converts in Travancore (now Kerala), who traditionally went topless, cover their breasts as "high" caste women did.

[36] Rev. J. M., "Our Native Christians," *Harvest Field*, 1863–1864: 203.

[37] Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*, ch. 2. My argument runs counter to the prevalent view that missionaries opposed caste on the basis of a commitment to equality. See, for example, G. A. Oddie, *Hindu and Christian in Southeast India* (London: Curzon, 1991), 161. The sympathy and kindness of ardent missionary social reformers should not be confused with a proposal to alter unequal labor relations.

Ramaswamy guiltless grew
of clothes—except—oh yes,
He wore an anklet and a rag,
But you'd hardly call that dress.
A zealous cleric then there came
On pariah converts bent,
And to his little Mission school
was Ramaswamy sent.

Then clothed in Christian cap and coat
He learned a fair amount;
In fact he soon his appa [father] helped
To cook his cook's account.
He studied at the Mission School
Right up to Failed Matric,
Then got a writer's post so felt
His costume should be chic.

He therefore … donned a collar and tie,
Then added a waistcoat and a watch with trousers by and by…
Then came a pair of socks inside his shoes…
The chrysalis burst, the butterfly
Ignored his parcherry set
And now, "one Mr. Ramsay" dwells/ A swell—in Padripet.[38]

This newspaper styled itself a leader on issues of social reform—its masthead loudly proclaimed its commitment to "the Labour Movement" and "Social Re-construction"—and did in fact often write eloquently on the travails of the poor Pariah. That this scorn nonetheless appeared in it reveals how Indian elites, even those committed to caste reform, remained unselfconsciously, subtly committed to a vision of Pariahs as best suited to agrarian servitude, and of the missionary as their corrupter.[39] Yet while Pariahs in Western dress were on one hand the dupe of a "zealous cleric," they were equally dishonest pretenders, ignoring the "parcherry set" from which they sprang, and using education only for the thievery proper to Pariahs as a caste. And while the cultivated urbanite's response to the dressed-up Pariah might be the penning of acerbic verse, other, more violent reactions illustrate the sense in which new dress was construed as insurrectionary. It was common for well-dressed Pariahs to be attacked and beaten; in one village in 1910, for example, a Pariah was assaulted for carrying a parasol, his clothes and umbrella wrested from him. When the victim went to report this violation in a court, the

[38] *Swadharma*, 9 July 1922: 138 (Poem credited to *The Madras Times*, n.d.). The name of the neighborhood of swells, Padripet, is a snide reference to the luxurious lifestyle of European missionaries, most commonly referred to in Tamil as "padre" (*pātiri*).

[39] On the link between the modern notion of authenticity and heritable social class, see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

Tamil magistrate dismissed it with brutal candor: *Nī vaḻakkattiṟku virōtamākak kuṭaippiṭittuccen̲ratu tappitamen̲ru kēcaittaḷiviṭṭārām* ("Your holding an umbrella, by going against custom, is itself a violation: case dismissed").[40]

I have used these examples of building and dress to underscore how compliance with missionary directives cannot be understood as only conformity with Christian law on the part of converts. That is to say, the practices of Pariah converts were not only attempts to "internalize," with more or less success, Christian ideals. To assume so would leave unanswered why some forms of Christian practice were adopted with enthusiasm, while others were not. Let me turn to a final example in order to emphasize this point, an example of a Christian ideal that, unlike personal hygiene and school-going, missionaries had little success in instituting: truthfulness.

With the kind of inwardness missionaries endorsed came a concern with sincerity, for the inner citadel in which one was expected to regularly commune with God was deeply obscured from the view of others, and must therefore be brought to light and shown to be in alignment with the faith that one expressed in social forms of worship.[41] A *sine qua non* of their duty as far as missionaries were concerned, therefore, was to train converts to value the truth and to regard lying as a serious sin. New Pariah converts, for their part, doubted that this was a valid or necessary component of Christianity, as depictions like the following make clear:

> Scores of village [Pariah] Christians … will be found who think there is no harm in telling lies occasionally. Even intelligent persons have told us that, though they tell lies everyday, they always confess them before going to bed and obtain Divine forgiveness!… It is a common thing to meet people who seem totally unaware of the fact that repentance and the forsaking of sin is absolutely essential to salvation.… Their argument is, "…We believe that Christ died on Calvary. Does not the Bible say, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.' That is enough for us. Let us alone and do not teach new doctrines about the need for repentance and holiness.…" I have known Tamil Catechists and Schoolmasters [to] … undermine the teaching of Repentance by telling the people, behind our backs, "This is new doctrine. Who can bear it? How can it be possible for a man to live without telling lies sometimes? And as for forsaking the love of this world, that is a preposterous demand."[42]

These converts argued that it was impossible either to forsake the world (and thereby embrace a life directed only at the perfection of the spirit as missionaries would want) or to refrain from lying.

But this was not simply because converts were unable to accept that lying was sin. Rather, for Pariah converts, there were serious obstacles in the way of reconciling Christianity's moral teachings with the demands made upon the

[40] Ayothee Thassar, *Oru Paica Tamiḻaṉ* 3, 41 (23 Mar. 1910), republished in *Ayōttitācar Cintaṉaikaḷ*, G. Aloysius, ed. (Palayamkottai, TN, India: Folklore Resources and Research Centre, St. Xavier's College, 2003), 28.

[41] See Keane, "Sincerity."

[42] Rev. T. Walker, "Spiritual Life in the Indian Church," *Harvest Field*, 1901–1902: 452.

Pariah laborer by the master-cum-creditor. Morals, after all, are expressed only in social relations, and the moral code of the missionary had consequences in the social world of the Pariahs and their masters. Thus one Pariah woman came to the Reverend William Goudie in tears, torn between the opposed expectations of the missionary and an angry creditor: "I cannot enter the Christian church. I cannot keep your law. You forbid lying and we cannot live without lying. We are in debt and we have constantly to promise to pay 'to-morrow' when we know we cannot do it."[43] Goudie rejoiced at these tears, for to him they signaled "the dawn of a new moral sense" in the heart of the recent convert. Yet if, when lies were expected of an indebted Pariah—"Yes, *swami* [lord], the money will be in your hands tomorrow"—she chose instead to speak plainly—"In truth, I cannot say when I will repay you"—this would signal not only the "dawn of a new moral sense," but a mutinous violation of expected patterns of deference.

What I have emphasized in this section is that Pariahs' alliances with missionaries produced Christians who may be equally described as striving to meet the demands of Christianity that missionaries had laid out, but also as engaged in distinct projects involving the transformation of labor relations, in which the *selective* adoption of Christian practices was an essential component. At the same time, missionaries increasingly offered novel forms of support to the Pariahs, such as ensuring that law courts and the police would not unfairly target them at the behest of their masters. And perhaps most important of all, though falling outside the purview of the present argument, missionaries took the concerns of the Pariah to state officials, thereby inaugurating a welfare regime that in many respects is still in effect today.[44] The most potentially revolutionary aspect of state intervention in Pariah servitude was the suggestion, mooted by officials and missionaries, to settle Pariahs on mission-managed farms outside the control of their erstwhile masters. It is no surprise, given all that I have described, that landowning castes came to view Christian missionaries with increasing animosity; what I will focus on below is the language they used to cross swords.

AUTHENTICITY AND STATUS: LANGUAGES OF OPPOSITION TO CONVERSION

The problems missionaries posed to the caste elites who employed Pariah labor had begun to command the attention of the native press by the end of the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth. They brought with them novel ways of publicly talking about the religion of Pariahs and their conversion to Christianity. The single most important innovation in this regard was

[43] Rev. W. Goudie, "The Awakening of Spiritual Life in Infant Village Churches," *Harvest Field*, 4th series, vol. 10 (1899): 209.
[44] Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*, chs. 2 and 3.

the adoption and dissemination by Tamil publicists of the Christian idea that religion should be rooted in an autonomous spiritual realm, and that conversion was only legitimate when motivated by the spirit. It was in this context that the trope of the "authentically spiritual conversion" first assumed the place that it enjoys today in the parlance of anti-conversion polemicists and legislators.

First consider an example of what objections to missionary-Pariah alliances looked like *prior* to the emergence of this new language. In the early 1890s, the *Hindujanasamskarini*, a Madras monthly, commented thus on missionaries' suggestions to government that Pariahs be settled on their own lands: "[Regarding] the proposal of the Christian missionaries for Pariah colonization … [we believe] the object of the missionaries is to deprive the high-caste people of their privileges and lower their status and rank and [we regret] to observe that.… collectors are aiding them in this matter. [We also] warn … the high-caste people to be on the alert and watch with jealous attention the attempts of the missionaries."[45]

While the paper cautioned readers as to the dangers of Pariah-missionary alliances, there was, significantly, no talk at this time of Christianity being a menace to Hinduism—no talk, that is, of a conflictive encounter between religions—but only of missionaries posing a threat to caste. Caste was here figured as the "privileges," "status," and "rank" that high castes enjoyed, and which, as we have seen, specific practices of Pariah converts directly challenged. Conversion, and the relationship of a specific kind of selfhood to the legitimacy of religion, had not yet become an element of remonstrance against missionary activity.

But when, beginning around 1895, the state began to entertain the idea of founding Pariah agricultural settlements under missionary management, *The Hindu*, Madras' leading daily, protested in a decidedly different vein. Now it inveighed against what it described as the shameless "purchase" of converts, the beguilement of Pariahs for whom the offer of land was so tempting that they could not be said to be exercising real choice: "We cannot understand how Government is justified in giving up large tracts of land to Christian missionaries for being used as bait to draw Pariahs into the Christian fold.… [H]is object is to inveigle the Pariahs into the Christian fold.… [The] Christian missionary dangles before [the Pariah] worldly temptations of a kind he cannot resist."[46] *The Hindu*'s editorial had taken on, as if it were a matter of universal concern, a Protestant theological norm—ironically, while opposing Christian proselytism—and Tamil newsmen pronounced the search for social or material betterment, and authentic religious conversion, to be fundamentally incompatible. *The Hindu* likewise accepted the conception of individual autonomy

[45] *Hindujanasamskarini*, Madras Native Newspaper Reports, fortnight ending 15 Apr. 1894.
[46] *The Hindu*, 23 Feb. 1903, cutting in D146, United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Archives, Rhodes House Library, University of Oxford.

that underwrote Protestant concern with genuinely spiritual conversion and motive, explaining that Pariah conversions were illegitimate because they were compelled from without by "temptations" rather than originating authentically from within: "[The] movement [amongst Pariahs] comes, not as a reform movement from within, but as a social revolt initiated on purpose from without. … The Missionary … knows that where Christ fails to draw, the temptations of the world can be powerful.… [He] thus offers to the hitherto resolute Pariah … temptations.…"[47]

Like missionaries who feared Pariahs' material misery threatened their ability to make authentically free religious choices, this organ of native opinion contended that poverty made Pariahs uniquely susceptible to worldly temptation, and that it was this (and not any legitimate desire for a better life) that was leading to a "social revolt" against landed interests. What is important to observe is that, at this moment when authenticity talk first emerged, the native press's critiques of missionary proselytism freely ranged from the problems it caused for landowners to its alleged production of inauthentic converts. For it was still perfectly acceptable, in a way that it is not today, to treat the former as valid grounds for complaint. The leap from one to the other—from complaints about inauthentic religion to criticism of the proposed Pariah settlements as a threat to the agrarian order—was made with what today appears as disarming frankness:

> Government['s] … *agricultural policy* [i.e., giving lands to missionaries for Pariah settlements] *is disastrous to the ancient religion of the country and to its ancient social system. The Hindu caste society has always had below it a casteless population as its dependency.*… Why does [the Government] readily comply with the Christian Missionaries' request for uncultivated land?… The Government must … be aware that they are thus promoting a great *agricultural* revolution which will prove ruinous to the country. When the Pariahs break loose from their ancient moorings, that will certainly raise the agricultural wages in the country … [which will] bring ruin and disaster upon the land-holding class.… The efforts of Christian Missionaries are operating against the Interests of our country, its races and its social system.[48]

Reverends Adam Andrew and William Goudie, the most prominent missionary advocates of the Pariah's cause in Madras—for by the mid-1890s the Pariah had attained the status of a public problem—wrote responses to the editorial which were published in the missionary-friendly *Madras Mail*. Andrew pointed out that the amount of land given to missionaries for the purpose of Pariah settlements was tiny, hardly the makings of a revolution, and that it was given not to induce non-Christian Pariahs to convert, but to allow those that were already Christian to provide for their own livelihood: "Indeed, it was because the [Pariahs] had become Christians, and were under our pastoral care, before ever we thought of beginning a Settlement scheme for them, that

[47] Ibid., my emphasis.
[48] Ibid., first emphasis mine, second in original.

induced us to do something to improve their condition."[49] Andrew also pointed out that the majority of missionary educational institutions, the costliest of missionary endeavors, in fact primarily benefited caste Hindus. "It surely shows a narrow contracting of mind to criticize the little that is being done for the poor [Pariahs], when Missionaries are doing so much for the moral and intellectual uplifting of the higher classes of Hindus!"[50] Andrew and Goudie thus contested every charge *The Hindu* brought forth save one: while denying that missionaries offered worldly inducements to Pariahs, Andrew admitted, "Those who do come over have often mixed motives, no doubt.…"

Not surprisingly, then, the rejoinder that appeared in *The Hindu* concentrated, above all, on the importance of motive to true religious conversion, even as it echoed missionaries' own judgment that Pariahs' poverty rendered them virtually incapable of the pure spiritual motives required for their conversions to be authentic. References to the importance of the Pariah to the agrarian order had all but disappeared:

> We, Hindus, have no prejudice against Christianity, or Christians.… Nor do we object to conversions to Christianity *when due to intellectual and spiritual conviction.*… [But the] Pariahs, *especially*, have not the least chance of knowing what Christianity … can really mean for themselves and their future. In most cases, conversions are due simply and solely to worldly motives.… We have not asserted—and it is not necessary for our purposes to assert—that Pariahs become Christians only when receiving land. It is doubtless quite true [as Goudie asserts] that, "in the vast majority of cases" land is given to Pariahs who are or who become Christians. But anyone who knows human nature must know that this will act as a direct temptation and bait for the acceptance of Christianity.[51]

The objection was not to conversion per se, *The Hindu* henceforth insisted, but only to *inauthentic* conversion.

Elites in Madras city, many of whom were absentee landlords, thus developed a new way of speaking, protesting missionary evangelism of the Pariah on the basis of a conception of true religious belief as one characterized by the movement of an individual soul. This conception was a staple of nineteenth-century Protestant missiology, although perspicuous missionaries in India had begun to question this paradigm of conversion on the basis of their Indian experiences. They preferred to hope Pariahs, eminently docile, could be taught the right motives *subsequent* to baptism. High caste Indians, for their part, had not hitherto concerned themselves with Pariahs' motives, let alone with assessing whether they were sufficiently "spiritual." Yet, beginning around 1903, Madras' elite became scrupulous inspectors of the inner world of Pariah converts, their apparent lack of "spiritual conviction," and their subsequent vulnerability to worldly "temptation."

[49] Adam Andrew, Letter to the Editor, *Madras Mail*, 26 Feb. 1903.
[50] *The Hindu*, n.d. (ca. between 27 Feb. and 5 Mar. 1903), cutting in D146, United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Archives, Rhodes House Library, University of Oxford.
[51] Ibid., first emphasis mine, second in original.

This concern, importantly, was not confined to English-language papers like *The Hindu*. The Telugu *Sasilekha* (published in Madras city) wrote, "Missionaries obtain large tracts of land on *darkhasts* [leases] and distribute them for cultivation only among those who, imbibing their teaching, become converts. … [This] will *induce* Panchamas [Pariahs] and others to become converts."[52] The largest circulating Tamil daily in Madras, *Swadesamitran*, questioned for its part "the propriety of Government assigning lands on *darkhast* [lease] to European missionaries.… [Missionaries] only let them to such of the poor natives as are willing to embrace Christianity, and thus seek to propagate their own religion in this country."[53] While vernacular accounts such as these perhaps did not have the same urbane fluency as *The Hindu* in speaking of authentic conversion, the high-minded charge of buying converts had abruptly become a *cause célèbre* throughout the native press.

CONCLUSION: ACCOUNTING FOR THE RELIGIOUS SELF

> In the case of most objectors, who desire victory rather than truth, we find it most satisfactory to put them at once on the defensive; and most of them are glad to retreat before they have committed themselves very deeply. Sometimes, however, we come across men who are very chary about being driven into that attitude.… One evening, a Brahmin logic chopper, a very old acquaintance, came up to us as we sat on the rocks in the river bed, and a discussion began. Pursuant to our usual tactics, [we] soon assumed the aggressive by saying, "You talk largely of Brahmins; now what is a Brahmin?" But our friend was not to be outdone in fencing, and he replied, "There is a previous question to that which I must beg you to answer. What is *what*?"
>
> ——Rev. H. H., a Wesleyan, describing verbal duels with defenders of Hinduism in rural South India, 1881.

When subjects are constructed in terms of interiority, it becomes possible to demand that that interior be exposed to judgment by being rendered exterior. In the language of moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, such a self is *accountable*.[54] MacIntyre points out, in this regard, that the self as we today conceive it is widely understood as a narrative self, a self that can coherently describe the arc of its progression from past to future. That self becomes accountable—its motives may be discerned and actions judged—according to the plausibility of its narrative self-description. Missionaries in South India, indeed throughout the colonial world, were agents *par excellence* in propagating this conception of selfhood, and the demand for accountability with which it goes hand-

[52] *Sasilekha*, 27 Feb. 1903, Madras Native Newspaper Reports, week ending 7 Mar. 1903, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

[53] *Swadesamitran*, 2 Apr. 1903, Madras Native Newspaper Reports, week ending 11 Apr. 1903, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

[54] *Three Rival Modes of Moral Inquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990); *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007 [1984]).

in-hand. And as the epigraph reminds us, missionary activity consisted very largely in relentless efforts to make Indians disclose themselves.

Yet this essay has argued that distinctly unequal demands were placed on different subpopulations with respect to when, by whom, and how effectively self-disclosure was sought. Some selves were—and still are—required to produce narratives, to make themselves accountable, with an enforceable rigor that is absent in other cases. The epigraph illumines this fact. The old Brahmin could playfully call the missionaries on their relentless insistence that others give account, deploying his own traditions of public debate: verbal "fencing," as the Brahmin's missionary interlocutor put it. The Brahmin could parry. Pariah selves lacked the social and political entitlements that would permit them to do this, even while the stakes for them were immeasurably higher.

The postcolonial state, too, zealously scrutinizes the Pariah self, having adopted for this purpose the Protestant metaphysics of the self. The missionary's peculiar notion that genuine religion finds its sole legitimacy in a discrete spiritual sphere has thus found its most enthusiastic proponents in missionaries' and Dalits' bitterest enemies. For anti-conversion polemic, espoused by politicians from Gandhi to today's Hindu right, as well as by arms of the putatively secular state, relies on this Christian ideal in order to deem Dalit conversions illegitimate for their inevitable worldly entanglements. Moreover, while the inordinate concern with the authenticity of conversion assumed public importance at precisely the moment that Pariah-missionary alliances threatened landowners in the countryside, awareness of this striking correlation is entirely absent from the public discourse in which authentic conversion is so central today.

Historians of the postcolonial world must therefore supplement accounts of the rise of modern selfhood produced by social theorists like Taylor and MacIntyre with careful attention to which forms and elements of modernity took root in the colony and why. Accounts of postcolonial modernity that find the source of the modern self in portmanteau categories like "colonialism" risk obscuring the fact that the postcolonial Indian self, as instantiated in anti-conversion law as well as in the anti-conversion polemics of Gandhi and of his successors in the Hindu right, was forged in efforts to regulate the lives and labor of agricultural bondsmen. Insofar as the form of modern selfhood I describe is central to postcolonial India's political modernity, the particular forms this modernity has taken cannot be separated from a legacy of caste domination and from ongoing efforts to perpetuate it.

Abstract: In 2002, the Indian state of Tamil Nadu passed a law that illustrates the centrality of what may be called "authentic religious selves" to postcolonial

Indian statecraft. It banned religious conversions brought about by what it termed "material allurement," and it especially targeted those who might attempt to convert impoverished Dalits, descendants of unfree laborers who now constitute India's lowest castes. Conversion, thus conceived, is itself founded upon the idea that the self must be autonomous; religion ought to be freely chosen and not brought about by "allurement." Philosophers like Charles Taylor have provided accounts of how selfhood of this kind became lodged in the Western *imaginaire*, but how was it able to take hold in very different social configurations, and to what effect? By attending to this more specific history, this essay brings a correlated but widely overlooked question to center stage: under what distinctive circumstances are *particular* selves called upon to actively demonstrate their autonomy and authenticity by divulging putatively secreted contents? In colonial South India, I will argue, the problem of authentic conversion only captured the public imagination when Dalit conversions to Christianity in colonial Madras threatened the stability of the agrarian labor regimes to which they were subject. And today, as in nineteenth-century Madras, it is Dalit selfhood that remains an object of intense public scrutiny and the target of legal interventions.