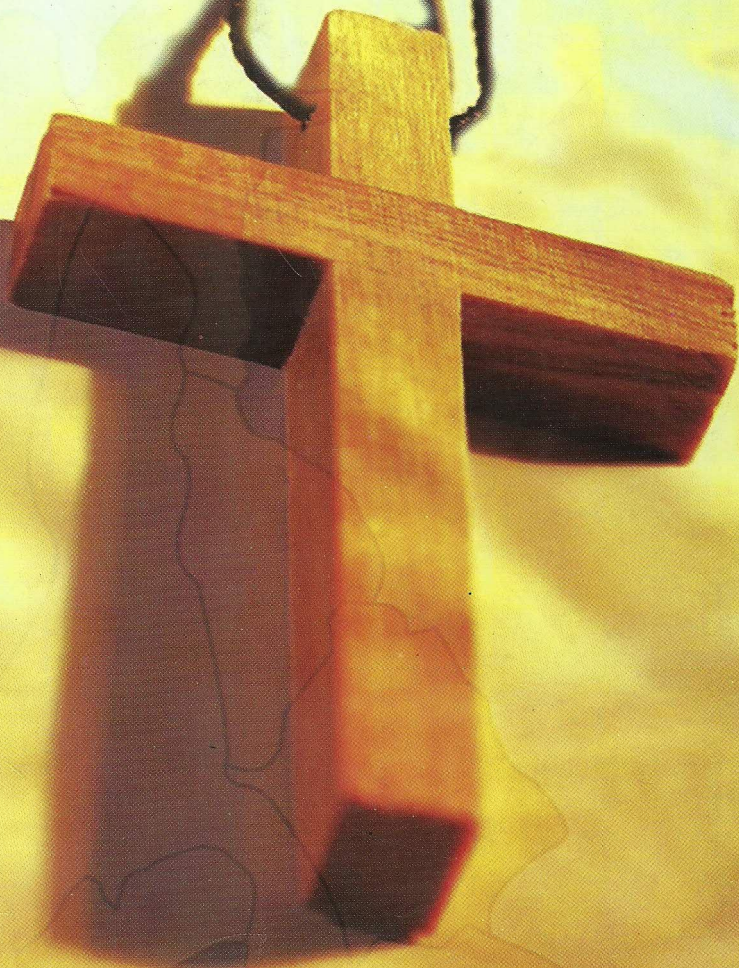


*Edited by*

**T.B. Subba**

**Joseph Puthenpurakal**

**Shaji Joseph Puykunnel**



# Christianity and Change in Northeast India

CHRISTIANITY AND CHANGE IN  
NORTHEAST INDIA

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## About the Editors

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**Preface**

Undoubtedly, Christianity has been the single most important catalyst in the lives of millions of tribes living in Northeast India today. However, the appreciation of the role that Christianity has played in the region has seldom been made from a regional or cross-cultural perspective, as has been done in this book. Nor has its role been a matter of debate between the missionaries and social scientists working on the same communities of tribes in the region. As a result one often gets a truncated picture of its contributions.

The tribes of the region have come a long way from the time they first came in contact with the missionaries. The changes that have taken place in their material culture, cultural beliefs and practices in particular are quite revolutionary. Although it may be wrong to give the entire credit to (or blame) the Christian missionaries for the above changes the tendency in many available literature has been to do so. It requires a huge methodological exercise on the part of social scientists to show what is due to Christianity and what is not, and what is due to it directly and what indirectly. But the idea of this book is not to map the spheres of Christian influence, nor is doing so easy because its sphere cannot be mapped on the basis of the people who are converted. Its influence goes beyond those who are Christians, although one may at times wonder how Christian are some Christians.

The book has emerged out of the idea of having a dialogue between the missionaries and social scientists working on the tribes of Northeast India. Such a dialogue somehow evaded them for long pushing themselves towards two opposite directions. They obviously felt more secure within their own circles and did not consider it useful to enter into a dialogue with each other. A few friendly academicians would be invited to the missionary conferences and vice versa. The situation was never allowed to go out of hand. It was for the first time in October 2007 that almost an equal number of missionaries and social scientists came together to debate

the role of Christianity among the tribes of the region. At this conference several social scientists got the opportunity to criticize the works of missionaries as well as appreciate them. The missionary participants also got a chance to explain their positions which are more often misunderstood than understood.

For making all this possible the editors of this volume are thankful to many institutions and individuals without whose help this volume would not have seen the light of the day. Those we are most grateful to are : Dr. M.M. Jacob, the former Governor of Meghalaya; Prof. Pramod Tandon, the Vice-Chancellor of North-Eastern Hill University; His Grace Archbishop Dominic Jala, Archbishop of Shillong; Fr. Joseph Almeida, Provincial of the Salesian Province of Guwahati; and Fr. Sebastian Karotemprel, the President of the Organising Committee for their patronage and guidance towards holding the national seminar on "Cultural Change among the Tribes of Northeast India" on 26-28 October 2006 on which the present volume is based.

We are also grateful to the following institutions which funded liberally and made it possible for us to organize the seminar and bring out this volume: Indira Gandhi Rastriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal; Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata; Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi; and the North Eastern Regional Centre for the ICSSR at Shillong.

We are also obliged to our contributors for their patience and perseverance in responding to our editorial queries and suggestions, and to Sri Ashok K. Mittal of Concept Publishing Company for bringing out the volume in record time. Needless to say that the authors are responsible for their views expressed by them and the editors for any editorial lapses that would have remained unattended.

Shillong  
July 2008

T.B. Subba  
Fr. Joseph Puthenpurakal  
Shaji Joseph Puykunnel

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## Introduction

Christianity is a movement rather than a "religion". It arose from the frontier between East and West and its roots penetrated directly into almost all the earlier civilizations and cultures. To speak about its impact on thinking, social life, arts and architecture, education, medical care and innumerable other services during the past twenty centuries and more would call for several volumes. The task becomes more challenging when one realizes that theologically speaking Christianity is not the sum of empirically observable Christians, their opinions and their accomplishments, and that the Christian message is not identical with any particular culture. It rather claims to have the energy to transform all cultures.

With this brief introduction of Christianity we highlight some of the significant events in the long history of Christianity that have impacted history itself. The first major change in Christianity was introduced by Paul by opening it up to non-Jews. This was the first authentic "enculturation" of Christianity. The impact of Christianity on the Greco-Roman world, the Germanic tribes, and the cultures of the Persian world, and later on, the Byzantine culture could form a section by itself. The list of names of prominent teachers and thinkers of the first five centuries who have laid the foundation for later reflections is a long one. Outstanding among them is Augustine of Hippo (354-430), a towering intellectual and moral figure, a genius of humanity. His autobiography *The Confessions* and his first theology of history *The City of God* are world famous. A few of the other luminaries are: Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), the father of scholasticism; Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) who renounced his wealth to follow Christ and who set in motion the "Franciscan Spirit," and Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) and his extensive writings on Philosophy and Theology. Martin Luther (1483-1546), an inwardly tormented monk who became a great religious leader and reformer; Ignatius of Loyola (1495-1556), a crippled soldier of no great

importance, transformed into a potent single individual who pumped fresh enthusiasm into the church society in the sixteenth century and whose influence under the name "the Jesuit spirit" continues to transform individuals and institutions around the world; John Wesley (1703-1791), an Anglican priest and founder of the Methodist movement and a great preacher; Don Bosco (1815-1888) the Teacher and Friend of the Young who at present through a group of nearly 450,000 persons spread over 130 countries in all the continents renders services in the field of education, youth organizations, agriculture and technical schools, computer centres, etc. especially for disadvantaged young people.

Mother Teresa of Kolkata, an icon of service to life, known all over the world for her loving and selfless care of the poorest of the poor was one of Christianity's eminent ambassadors in today's world. The name of Mother Teresa reminds us of thousands of religious orders of women and men who across the centuries have helped to make significant changes in the lives of peoples everywhere through education, medical care, cultivation of fine arts, socio-economic welfare programmes, and publications. Some of the Protestant denominations are particularly known for their creative and untiring efforts to spread the Bible and thus affect the lives of millions of people across the globe. In India we remember William Carey (1761-1834), the founder of the Baptist Missionary Society, who reached Kolkata in 1793 and who worked in Serampore (Bengal) from 1799 to get the Bible translated into as many local languages as possible. In the world of fine arts one can recall Michelangelo who completed the Sistine Chapel Ceiling at the Vatican (1512), Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* (1662), John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederic Handel for their well known compositions such as *The Passion according to St. Mathew* (Bach) and the *Messiah* (Handel).

It would be too long to cite here Christianity's impact on socio-economic systems such as liberalism (which advocates unrestrained freedom for the individual), capitalism (that stands for private ownership of capital and organization of economic activity towards maximum profit), feudalism (that exploited the serfs) and socialism (characterized by the supremacy of state) is in order here. However, some important teachings are found in the Encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII (15 May, 1891), *Mater et Magistra* of John XXIII (15 May, 1961), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 December, 1987) and *Centesimus Annus* (1 May, 1991) of John Paul II. To these must be added the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) which deals *ex professo* with the nature of

the church, human person, the family, the social order, the role of the state, justice and economic well-being, poverty and charity, environment and international community.

Of particular mention in the area of Protestant thinking is Calvinism's linking material success with the possession of virtue and the promise of salvation. According Max Weber (1864-1920) it provided impetus to the growth of industrial capitalism. His analysis of the relation between religion and social organization is explained in his most significant work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1958). In this Weber differs from Karl Marx (1818-1883) who understood capitalism as the result of changes in the mode of production.

Deeper level changes were effected by Christianity by the spread of democratic values, respect for the human person, the abolition of slave trade, the gradual disappearance of "headhunting", the growth of a sense of "voluntarism" such as the Student Volunteer Movement (1886), etc. Here we ought to mention the long line of "missionaries" of Catholic, Protestant and other churches to every corner of globe who shared with people Christianity's essential teachings.

Limiting ourselves to Asia and India we may note that several Protestant and Catholic writers have contributed towards a deeper reflection on Christianity's spiritual dimension. They are, for example, Forrester Patton, Murray Rogers, Jules Monchanain, Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda), Bede Friffiths, Francis Acharya, Krishna Mohan Banerjee, Brahmabadab Upadhyay, Sadhu Sunder Singh, M.M. Thomas, Paul Devanandan, Russel Chandran, Stanley Samartha, D.S. Amalorpavadass, Raimundo Panikkar, George Soares-Prabhu, Aloysius Pieris, Felix Wilfred, M. Amaladoss, etc.

It is noteworthy that several Indian Christians like Jerome D'Souza, H.C. Mookerjee were members of the Constituent Assembly and who contributed towards its debates, especially on the rights of minorities and on fundamental rights.

One cannot forget the contributions made by eminent Christian scientists. The list would be too long. Here are a few of the more outstanding ones: Nicholaus Copernicus (1473-1543) who introduced the heliocentric world view, Astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who defended heliocentrism, Isaac Newton (1643-1727) scientist and mathematician, geologist Adam Sedgwich (1785-1873), Michael Faraday (1791-1867) the English physicist and chemist who discovered electromagnetic induction that led to electric dynamo and motor, the American inventor Thomas Edison (1847-1931),

who gave to the world the carbon filament lamp, Gregor Mendel (1822-1884) the father of modern genetics, Teilhard de Chardin, Palaeontologist and philosopher involved in the discovery of the so-called Peking Man, etc.

At this point we may insert a long list of Christian writers who have contributed to literature of different kinds in European languages as well as in regional and local languages. Limiting ourselves to North-East India, we can only refer to a 28-page article by George Plathottam "Contribution of Christianity to Languages and Literature" (and two responses to it by J.S. Shangpliang and Archana Barua) in *Impact of Christianity on North-East India* (Puthenpurakal ed., 1996). The volume is an overview of Christianity's impact on North-East India from different perspectives—theological, historical and socio-cultural, developmental, and case studies. The four position papers (by Barrister Pakem, Thomas Menampampil, Sebastian Karotemprel and Patricia Mukhim) are of particular significance.

This brings us to a brief presentation of the papers in this volume. The volume has five sections. The first section titled "Concepts" has four articles two of which are by social scientists (T.K. Oommen and A.C. Sinha) and two by missionaries (Archbishop Menampampil and Sebastian Karotemprel). The first article is actually the keynote address. The first section of this article deals with the various approaches to understand culture, its basic dimensions, etc. The second section deals with Northeast India and the author's comments on the three major perspectives called assimilationist, isolationist, and acculturationist. He also discusses cultural monism, cultural subalternism, cultural pluralism and cultural federalism as four major views on culture change. In the third section he discusses three dual processes, that is, displacement and accretion, pluralisation and hybridization, and traditionalisation and modernization. In brief, the keynote truly covers most of the conceptual issues related to culture and culture change in India in general and tribes of Northeast India in particular. What is left conceptually or historically in this keynote is taken care of by A.C. Sinha in the second article.

Archbishop Menampampil's main argument in the third article is that in today's Northeast the speed of change is more than the speed of reflection whereas ideally it should have been the other way round so that culture change could be guided properly. But since the desirable is not happening a lot of undesirable changes are taking place in the region that are threatening the long term values like commitment to the common good and respect for other's uniqueness. He finds the communities in the

region at crossroads and pleads for more reflection. Fr. Karotemprel also regrets that the multi-layerity of human identity is ignored today and the world is moving towards a reductionist and fundamentalist kind of identity that negates the very humanity. He provides thought-provoking definitions of identity, culture, cultural change and Christianity in this article.

The second section is titled "Christianity and Northeast India: Regional Perspectives". Although the whole book deals with Northeast India this section has been proposed here to highlight the regional perspectives of social scientists and missionaries.

The first article in this section is by Amaresh Dubey and Veronica Pala, who demonstrate with the help of statistical evidence based on data collected by the National Sample Survey Organisation in 1983 and 1999-2000 that Christianity has played a positive role in fostering literacy among the tribes of Northeast India. The next article by Walter Fernandes and Gita Bharali pick up the issues of the difficulties the tribes of this region are facing as a result of adopting formal legal system without abandoning the customary laws. They show how this interface has affected tribal culture and identity, specially their class and gender relations. Francis Kulirani in the next article argues for the need of the missionaries to extend their support to the tribal efforts to preserve their heritages. Fr. Kanjamala in the following article seeks to find answer to why the tribes of the region, who are otherwise Christians, are poorly integrated with Indian nationhood. He lists out several obstacles to their integration like tribal attitude towards external exploitation and domination, sense of alienation and deprivation, "cultural separatism", politics of identity, etc. He also emphasizes on the role of the churches in fostering integration in the region.

In the same section, Fr. Barnes Mawrie demonstrates how Christianity has played the most important role in the genesis and spread of socio-political consciousness among the tribes of the region. In the same vein, Rev. Snaitang shows, through the activities of various missions and churches, that Christianity has played a very important role in the development of language and literature, spread of educational and health services, and providing relief and rehabilitation services in times of crises. The last article in this section by Fr. George Plathottam deals with the relationship between language plurality, biodiversity and ethnicity in the region. He argues that the region would be much better off if primary and secondary education could be provided through mother tongue and if the minority linguistic and ethnic groups received the attention they deserve.

Section III deals with "Christianity and Tribes in Northeast India: Community Perspectives" where we have brought together papers highlighting community perspectives on individual tribes of the region. The first article in this section is by Rev. Nongbri. He discusses the role of Christianity in the development of Khasi language and literature, particularly through the adoption of the Cherrapunjee dialect as the standard language of the Khasis and the Roman script in lieu of Bengali script. Cecile Mawlong, in the next article, takes a critical view of the role of the missionaries in eroding the rich megalithic tradition of Khasi-Jaintias and notes with appreciation the recent efforts of the Catholic Church to revive the same. Amena Passah in her article deals extensively with the contribution of the Christian missionaries to health-care services in Khasi-Jaintia hills, especially in challenging situations due to the stiff resistance shown by the local people to accepting western medicines and medical practices in the early years of their contact. The next article in this section, written by Rekha Shangpliang, shows how deeply immersed are Khasi traditions in nature and how their dependence on nature is threatened today due to indiscriminate deforestation going on in their habitats.

From the Khasi-Jaintias we move to the Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh. A Tagin himself, Ashan Riddi discusses the various strategies adopted by Christian missionaries to convert the Tagins and the consequences of their conversion on their kinship and systems of reciprocity. The next article by Sarit Chaudhuri is also on Arunachal Pradesh. He takes up the case of Wanchos and explains the various endogenous and exogenous factors responsible for their conversion into Christianity and the positive as well as negative consequences thereof. In the third article in this section, Kedilezo Kikhi discusses the case of a group of Angami Nagas who are called Southern Angamis by outsiders but who would like to call themselves Zounuo-Keyhonuo people. The focus of his article is the institution of marriage. He looks at continuity as well as change in the same and the factors responsible for both. Then the section moves on to Manipur and the two tribes chosen by P. Venkata Rao and M. Kennedy Singh are Maring and Aimol, who according to the authors had an old connection with the Meiteis of the Imphal Valley, but who moved away from the latter after Manipur became a state of India. The last but perhaps theoretically one of the most interesting articles in this section is authored by Sajal Nag. He demonstrates through numerous examples that there is a strong link between disasters like famines after bamboo flowers and waves of revivalism and mass conversion of the people into Christianity in Mizoram.

Section IV is titled "Christianity and Women: Gender Perspectives" and has four articles on women and by women. The first article by Tejimala Gurung Nag deals with the role of women missionaries in the successful spread of Christianity in Northeast India. She shows how through girls' education they could reach where the men missionaries had no access. The next article by Sister Lotsuro deals specifically with the role of Catholic women missionaries like Salvadorian Sisters, Loreto Sisters, and Catechist Missionary Sisters in bringing about socio-cultural change among the tribes of the region, especially in the fields of education, health care and spread of the Christian faith. Lucy Zehol's article is on the role of Christian women belonging to Khezhakenoma village of Nagaland in changing the status of women. She particularly notes how they have been successful through their church and youth activities to bring freedom, education, new outlook, new personality and so on without much affecting their clan organization and calendar of festivals. The last article in this section is an essay on the role of missionary wives in evangelical work in Northeast India. Suryasikha Pathak, the author, also brings in a biographical bend in her article by focusing on the life and works of one particular such woman, Mrs. P.H. Moore.

We as editors of this book would certainly think that this is one of the most contemporary and exhaustive works on the theme and would further like to believe that we have moderately achieved our fundamental objective of doing this book, which was to have this book as a healthy dialogue between Indian social scientists and missionaries working on Northeast India, to learn from each other's knowledge and experiences, and to explore a common ground to serve the tribal societies of the region better. It is for our readers to judge whether or not we have been able to achieve anything.

**T.B. Subba**

**Fr. Joseph Puthenpurakal**

**Fr. Shaji Joseph Puykunnel**

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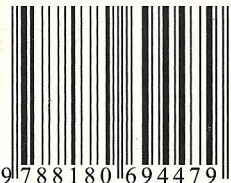
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