

of Serib (which extended further north), and have a religion which displays continuities with neighboring groups. But the present day Thakali have constituted themselves as an ethnic group only through the changing contexts of political affiliation and immigration over the centuries. Vinding denies that this development is due to the formation of the nation state (p. 389), as it started already before. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the foundation of the Nepalese monarchy has had a strong impact on the Thakali's cultural self-definition.

Vinding's book is indeed the most comprehensive study of Thakali society and identity available at present, and it surely will be a standard source for some time. But especially the account of religion remains sketchy, and so there is still ample scope for further studies.

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Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief. By GAURI VISWANATHAN.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. xx, 328 pp. \$16.95 (paper).

Gauri Viswanathan's central argument, set forth in a dense display of literary erudition, is that conversion, as a subversion of secularizing (and nationalizing) state power, is one of the most destabilizing political events in the life of any society, an event that alters social patterns and challenges notions of belief as a form of communal assent to normative standards. Conversion, from her perspective, is "an interpretive act," something "transgressive" that belongs within the domain of cultural criticism. As a departure from the "fold," it threatens social cohesion "as forcefully as if beliefs had been turned into heresies" (p. xi). As a form of resistance against enforced conformity, it attempts to impose definitions of identity upon hapless, marginalized minorities. In exposing the limits of modernity and secularity, it questions discourses over basic "rights" (whether "civil" or "political" or simply "human"). In her attempts to link "the inexhaustible scope of meanings attached to conversion" and their location "at the nexus of both spiritual and material interests" (p. xvii), Viswanathan finds that conversion has more to do with the "worldliness" of religious belief than with matters of final authority or universal verity. Ultimately, for her, belief and conversion are political events—this-worldly acts of defiance, forms of rebellion having this-worldly consequences. So seen, conversion as dissent can also be perceived as an exercise in forms of "transgressive" resistance (pp. 178, 241). This "subjective" aspect, in our day, attracts attention among those who relish postmodern forms of "discourse analysis."

Throughout her study, Viswanathan attempts to combine two parallel, interconnected, and seemingly contradictory processes—the liberation of persecuted minorities in England and the cultural domination of peoples subjected to British rule—which she sees as parts of a common larger project of secularizing (and "Anglicizing") national-cum-imperial ("colonial") consolidation. To make her case, she intersperses insightful if sometimes speculative chapters on her general theme with a separate chapter devoted to each of four specific "conversion" narratives of noteworthy individuals: John Henry Newman (to Catholicism), Pandita Ramabai (to Christianity), Annie Besant (to Theosophy), and Bimrao Ambedkar (to Buddhism). Her perception of the anomalous and contradictory relationship between a "dislocation and exile" (p. 88) of India's Christians from the Hindu identity which underpinned

the Raj and the legal binding of India's Christians to chains of Hindu customary law, a state action which undermined the radicalizing impact of conversion, is extremely insightful, even if implications are not taken far enough.

Yet, for all its sophistication and brilliance, this work also suffers from limitations. For the disciplines of history or theology, it is not sufficiently critical, rigorous, or thorough—not reliable in handling evidence, nor in contextualizing events. Ever since the secularizing (or nationalizing) of Church properties under Henry VIII, those who have represented the forces of religious (Protestant) dissent have never been the opponents of secularization. Indeed, despite civil exclusion in Britain, dissent has contributed to the building of the modern secular state, as also to religious toleration and neutrality as settled principles of statecraft—in Europe, Britain, and America, as also in India. Thus, Newman's ostensible "conversion," from an already marginalized Anglo-Catholicism to Roman Catholicism, involved no radical change in religious convictions, as such. Ramabai's conversion, conversely, involved much more than a passing encounter with Anglican domination by the sisters at Wantage. Her life-long quest, stemming from the shunnings, sufferings and starving death of her parents, brought a never-ending sequence of continuous, ever-deepening spiritual experiences. No mention is made of her second or evangelical conversion to Christ as her personal Lord, nor of her third or Pentecostal conversion to the Holy Spirit as her charismatic "Blessing"—encounters which led Ramabai progressively further along a path from unitarian inclination to trinitarian monotheism. Throughout her life, Ramabai also remained a Hindu and a Brahman, in her culture, her language, and her outlook. The ambiguities, therefore, of what "Hindu" might have meant, then and now, are something which Viswanathan could have explored more deeply. Especially fascinating, for this reviewer, is the narrative of Besant, with its delving into her religious thinking. While much can also be said for the study of Ambedkar, it is surprising that more leading authorities and sources, such as Eleanor Zelliot, were not consulted. Such oversights leave one wondering about what other authorities and sources might be missing.

Finally, in the end, the question of who or what was "outside the fold" remains unanswered. Since none of these individuals seems ever to have been truly "inside the fold"—since they had been "outsiders" for almost all their lives—one is never quite sure exactly how far this metaphor can be taken. One can see how, in a time when scholars of different ideologies and methodologies and perspectives are increasingly embroiled in searing debates over differing perceptions about historical events, resort to a metaphor as a heuristic substitute for precise definitions or hard evidence is so appealing. (Other heuristic devices, such as "marginality" or "imagined community," can have the same kind of appeal.) Yet, what is involved in truly "religious" conversion, as distinct from "political" alienation or deliberate changes of affiliation, still remains to be more satisfyingly explained. Virtual exclusion of serious religious discourse within the academy remains largely undiminished.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA

Architecture of Siam: A Cultural History Interpretation. By CLARENCE AASEN.
New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. 366 pp. \$85.00 (cloth).