

Ideal Wealth/Ideal Poverty: Multiple South Indian Christianities

This paper is intended for the panel on “Indian Christianities, Integral Mission and Economies.”

The aim of this paper is, firstly, to illustrate two differing approaches to money and other material resources within South Indian Pentecostalism and, secondly, to place these within the larger framework of South Indian Christianity by discussing the less conspicuous but still central role of money within mainline Protestantism in the region.

Two churches in Bangalore exemplify the opposing approaches to private economy that exist within Pentecostalism in India, one idealising wealth and emphasising this-worldly blessings, the other idealising poverty and teaching abstention from material goods. These examples relate to the much discussed issue of the role of economy in Pentecostal churches, especially in those leaning towards the so-called “prosperity gospel.” In mainline churches such as the Church of South India, which I take as an example here, the role that money plays may be less immediately visible, but it is not necessarily less important. In this paper I will analyse some aspects of the practical and ideological meaning of money in the Church of South India as well as in Pentecostal churches, using ethnographic examples from Bangalore and Andhra Pradesh.

The analysis will be centred on the different economic ideals present in Pentecostal and CSI churches and on the relationship between official ideals and economic practices. Questions discussed will include attitudes towards wealth, poverty, and generosity, and the role of formal and informal economies in these churches.

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