


September 2016

## The Grace of God and the Travails of Contemporary Indian Catholicism

Kerry P. C. San Chirico

Villanova University, [kerry.sanchirico@villanova.edu](mailto:kerry.sanchirico@villanova.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Comparative Philosophy Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Hindu Studies Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#), [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Intellectual History Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [Other Anthropology Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Regional Sociology Commons](#), [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), [Rural Sociology Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [Sociology of Culture Commons](#), [Sociology of Religion Commons](#), and the [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

San Chirico, Kerry P. C. (2016) "The Grace of God and the Travails of Contemporary Indian Catholicism," *Journal of Global Catholicism*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 3. p.56-84.

Available at: <http://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc/vol1/iss1/3>

---

# The Grace of God and the Travails of Contemporary Indian Catholicism

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Special thanks are here offered to doctors Chad M. Bauman and Kamal Kapadia for their valuable feedback on this essay.

KERRY P.C. SAN CHIRICO

## The Grace of God and the Travails of Contemporary Indian Catholicism

### Introduction

The story of Catholicism in contemporary India may be told in many ways. Like Catholicism the world over it is neither monolithic nor static. Over nearly a quarter century I have found myself in Catholic spaces throughout a country not particularly known for its Catholicism: From the celebration of Epiphany or “Three Kings Feast” in the former Portuguese colony of Goa on India’s west coast, to a center in Kottayam, Kerala wherein Catholic Thomas Christians seek to keep their Syriac patrimony alive; from the so-called “mother house” of Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity in Kalighat, Kolkata, to an āśram on the fringes of Varanasi or Banaras, the purported “heart of Hindu civilization” where a novel low caste Hindu-Christian devotional community develops; from a meeting of thousands of dappled charismatic Catholics on the outskirts of Mumbai speaking the common Pentecostal language of raised hands and hallelujahs, to a more subdued Saturday evening Mass in Secunderabad, Telengana where the “passing of the peace” means the palms-together nāmasté gesture that Westerners associate with the end of their yoga practice. Like nodes across a body’s central nervous system, Indian Catholicism—the majority Christian communion in a nation of perhaps 60 million Christians<sup>1</sup>—can be mapped by the intersections of institutions, shrines, churches, histories, and peoples across South Asia. Though certainly not as vast as those of Hindu or Islamic traditions, they are not insubstantial—even as some, particularly in north India, remain tenuous and emergent.

The noted Harvard scholar of Islam, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, was wont to stress that in his many years of study he never met an “Islam,” though he counted

---

<sup>1</sup> Taken together, Protestants (including Pentecostals), represent the majority of Christians in India, but the Roman Catholic Church is the largest single ecclesial body.

many Muslims his friends. “I’ve never met a Buddhism,” I tell my students, “but I know many Buddhists; I’ve never met Christianity personally; I do, however, know many Christian persons.” Smith (and I) are making the rather banal point—and banal points often bear repeating—that words like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity (*christianisme* in French) are necessary abstractions, whose use can blind us to the truth that religions are, at the very least, constituted by so many living and breathing persons long before the identification of a discrete “ism.”<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I demonstrate the challenges faced by Indian Catholicism, particularly as it seeks to adapt to and in contemporary, post-colonial India through the process or program of what is called inculturation, a self-conscious program of adaptation to Indian religion and culture. Since Indian Catholicism is constituted by so many irreducible persons-in-relation, I focus on one in whose life we may chart something of the inculturation movement and the Catholic tradition as it is found in one region, in one rather long and rich lifetime connecting two centuries. Since it is true that no man is an island, to tell his story is to tell a broader one that takes us beyond one region and, in fact, beyond the Indian subcontinent to tell one of many stories constituting a global religious tradition.

Svāmī Īśvar Prasād is a priest of the indigenous Indian Missionary Society or “IMS.”<sup>3</sup> A late octogenarian, his story begins where Christianity began in southern India, in the state of Kerala, where Christianity was born in as early as the first century through St. Thomas and as “late” as the fourth.<sup>4</sup> I met Īśvar

---

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Islam is the only world religion that named itself.

<sup>3</sup> Sanskrit: स्वामी, a male teacher.

<sup>4</sup> St. Thomas legendarily arrived on the Malabar Coast in the year 50 following common Arabian Sea trade routes. Having founded several churches, he was martyred on the outskirts of modern-day Chennai. Legend turns to verifiable history in the fourth century when a Thomas of Cana arrived with “Syrians” who within a short period were adopted into the caste structure of Malabar society, occupying a place with upper caste Nāyars. And so it bears mention that the first Christianity of India came not from Europe, but from Syriac-praying Christians of the Middle East whose ties to Syria and Persia—that is, to the Syrian Orthodox and Chaldean Churches—survive to this day. With the arrival of the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century, however, the fortunes of the Thomas Christians changed. An initially mutually beneficial relationship soured as Portuguese hegemony increased. In 1599 this eastern church was forced to accept the yoke of the Bishop of Rome at the Synod of Diamper. Five decades later thousands rebelled, rejecting the imposed Tridentine theology and practices, swearing to return to their original traditions. But when the dust finally settled, the majority of the original Thomas Christians remained committed to the Roman Church if not necessarily to all of Latin theology and practice. The result was not merely a new Latinized “Syro-Malabar” liturgical rite, but an ancient community divided into more than one Christian communion. With each new colonial dispensation, the Thomas Christians were fractured still further, so that today they can be found in Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches throughout India. While they are certainly the minority of Indian Christians, they constitute the elite of Indian Christianity. Īśvar Prasād is a Thomas Christian raised in a pious Syro-Malabar Catholic home in Kottayam, Kerala. For a critical presentation of what can be known about the early Thomas Christians, as well as a historical explication of the Diamper Synod, see George Nedungatt, ed. *The Synod of Diamper Revisited* (Rome: Kanonika 9, 1999).

Prasād in Kurukshetra, Haryana in March 2011, site of the famed internecine battle at the heart of the epic Mahābhārata, known as the place where Kṛṣṇa sang his eternal Gītā to Arjuna. The priest founded Bhārat Mātā (Mother India) Āśram in the 1990s. I journeyed there as part of my broader project to understand a religious movement centered at another āśram he had guided from 1982-1993. Īśvar Prasād is famous for being a leader in the Indian Catholic inculturation movement. We spoke for several hours over two days. In what follows, I share excerpts from our conversations in which we discuss his early life in Kerala, studies and experiences that led him to a commitment to inculturation, and his response to critics of inculturation within the Indian Catholic Church and persistently among Hindu nationalists. It was a rich encounter, as I hope this essay reveals. I share such large segments of our conversations so that the reader gathers a sense of Īśvar Prasād as a person and discerns issues that this essay might not directly address. I seek also to shine a light on those elements of contemporary Indian Catholicism that might otherwise go unnoticed. These elements include the relative parochialism of various Christian communities prior to Indian Independence, the self-fashioning of an “Indian” identity in a nationalist age through Catholic missionary work and overseas education, and how present constructions of Christianity and Hinduism lead to many of the seemingly intractable tensions existing today when the traditions interact (and shape themselves through interaction) on the ground. The golden thread throughout the essay, like that of our protagonist’s life, is inculturation and the issues that inculturation evoke in Catholic India, particularly in north India. For much has been written telling of inculturation/indigenization theory, arguing its merits or failings. In the following pages, I seek to show not only how inculturation is understood by one of its chief Indian architects, but also how and why it came to be so central to one person’s life’s work. By doing so, I seek to demonstrate concretely the process of inculturation at work through Īśvar Prasād and the many people with whom he has interacted, lived, and served.

## Inculturation in Roman Catholic India

Inculturation and indigenization are technical terms not unlike the more familiar “enculturation” or “acculturation” of sociology. For those involved in a work that gathered momentum after the Second Vatican Council, it involves translating Hindu symbols into a Catholic context bound by the semantic whole of ritual, often liturgical ritual.<sup>5</sup> Following Catholic usage, Gravend-Tirole defines inculturation emically as the process “whereby Christians, most of them theologians, attempt to incarnate Christian thoughts and traditions within an

---

<sup>5</sup> Mathew N. Schmalz, “*Ad Experimentum*: Theology, Anthropology and the Paradoxes of Indian Catholic Inculturation,” in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. Michael Barnes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 161-180 (available: [http://crossworks.holycross.edu/rel\\_faculty\\_pub/9/](http://crossworks.holycross.edu/rel_faculty_pub/9/)).

indigenous system of world representation.”<sup>6</sup> There is a less fancy way to express this project more negatively—that is, to strip Indian Catholicism of its Western garb, literally and figuratively, so that Indian Catholicism can be understood positively as Indian to Indians for Indians. Christianity might have initially come from western Asia, but because of its connection to colonizing empires, it is today more commonly associated with colonialism and the West. Once a strong, albeit niche, force in the Indian Catholic Church, the drive for inculturation waned in the new century. If there is a movement that has effectively taken its place, it belongs to charismatic Catholicism. The reasons for the shift are many, but for our purposes we can mention a few salient ones: beyond translation of the Mass into the vernaculars following Vatican II, acts of religio-cultural translation were largely the purview of Indian Catholic elites operating out of āśrams throughout India. Catholics on the ground, however, were far less concerned with this project. After all, some 80 percent of India’s Catholics hail from Dalit<sup>7</sup> and low-caste backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, their concerns are of the more pragmatic variety. Moreover, in an age of Dalit uplift, many reject the pre-occupations of elite Indian Christianity, arguing against bringing Catholicism closer to the Brahmanical or Sanskritic Hinduism held responsible for their long subjugation.<sup>9</sup> By the late 1980s, Dalits began entering religious orders, particularly the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), in greater numbers, and their “subaltern” social justice concerns displaced those of the previous generation. Finally, in this hierarchical church the fortunes of inculturation are inevitably tied to the predilections of particular bishops; not all have been supportive.

As we will see, like many of his generation, Īśvar Prasād’s sense of vocation was not merely fueled by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, but by the yearnings of an incipient nation-state seeking to free itself from a Western imperial power, and in the process to develop its own composite identity from the many identities that constitute the diverse peoples of South Asia. The advent of the priest’s order is tied to the advent of the Indian Republic, whose Nehruvian “tryst with destiny” began at midnight on August 15, 1947. Thus, the concerns

---

<sup>6</sup> Xavier Gravend-Tirole, “From Christian Ashrams to Dalit Theology—or Beyond: An Examination of the Indigenization/Inculturation Trend within the Indian Catholic Church,” in *Constructing Indian Christianities: Culture, Conversion, Caste*, eds. Chad M. Bauman and Richard Fox Young (New Delhi: Routledge 2014), 110-137. Gravend-Tirole’s essay is especially helpful for providing the genealogy of the term and project in context, and outlining present critiques of both by Dalit theologians.

<sup>7</sup> Hindi: दलित, a name popularized in the twentieth century meaning “oppressed, pushed down.” *Dalit* has replaced the term “Untouchable” to represent those that were traditionally outside caste Hinduism, considered ritually polluting, and thus living on the margins of Hindu society. The legal designation for Dalit is “Scheduled Caste.” Mahatma Gandhi re-christened Untouchables “*Harijan*,” “children of God,” a term rejected by many as condescending, particularly those for whom the *Mahār Dalit* activist and legal scholar. B.R. Ambedkar is a hero.

<sup>8</sup> This figure is even higher in northern India.

<sup>9</sup> See Mathew N. Schmalz, “Dalit Catholic Tactics of Marginality at a North Indian Mission,” *History of Religions* 44 (November 2005): 216-251.

pre-occupying the ministry of this particular IMS priest reflect the confluence of individual religious commitments, early shaping experiences, and broader processes of colonialism and de-colonialism with which the Roman Catholic Church interacts and, in its own way as a global institution with thousands of local presences, influences.

Born October 25, 1927, Īsvar Prasād takes us to the beginning of IMS in the mid-twentieth century. Six years before Indian independence, Father Gasper Arsenius Pinto, a fiery Catholic from Mangalore in southern India, arrived in Varanasi animated by a dream that had long occupied Protestant missionaries since the nineteenth century: to convert Hindu India through the conversion of the city understood to be at the geographical center of the tradition. Unlike those earlier Protestant missionaries, however, Pinto and the order he founded had no interest in spreading a Westernized gospel. As is the case with many charismatic founders, his own creation could not keep him. He was turned out of the IMS only a few years after its establishment, although he never left his adoptive city. Nevertheless, the commitments of inculturation in the process of evangelization remained. And this commitment endures to this day, along with a commitment to inter-religious dialogue and social justice, additions to the IMS charter reflecting changes in the wider Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II and the subsequent influence of liberation theology.<sup>10</sup> As one might expect, the goals of evangelization, inculturation, inter-religious dialogue, and social justice do not necessarily form a seamless garment. In fact, speaking with various IMS priests, one discerns a real tension regarding the aims of a Society whose reach remains relatively small: 162 priests and brothers in India's Hindi belt, 238 students "in various stages of formation,"<sup>11</sup> with administrative centers, or provinces, in Varanasi and New Delhi.

## From Kottayam to Rome

Īsvar Prasād was a kind of witness at the creation of his country and religious order. His recollections reflect how much has changed in India and Indian Catholicism in his lifetime. Here he explains how he embarked on this vocation from childhood:<sup>12</sup>

Svāmī Īsvar Prasād [Hereafter SIP]: The founder of that time [Gasper Pinto] had sent a circular, challenging the young men of India to reflect why, after 2,000 years of Christianity in India, we are still microscopic minority, whereas in other countries Christianity started much later and the whole country had become Christian and all that. What could be the reason? There could be

<sup>10</sup> The Indian Missionary Society, *Constitutions of the Indian Missionary Society* (Christ Nagar, Uttar Pradesh), 1999.

<sup>11</sup> "The Indian Missionary Society," accessed May 19, 2008, <[http://ims.org.in/gen\\_abtus.htm](http://ims.org.in/gen_abtus.htm)>.

<sup>12</sup> Svāmī Īsvar Prasād, interview with author, Bhārat Mātā Āśram, Kurukshetra, Haryana, March 2011.

very many reasons. One thing was that the Christian message was not presented in the proper way as a fulfillment of a need for the people here. Something had been imposed. Europeanism. I was from the very beginning very much opposed to the way Christianity was presented. I was a Syro-Malabar Christian, belonging to the oriental church. Everything was about us. I have seen a European for the first time when I was 18 years old. . . .

Kerry San Chirico [Hereafter KSC]: This was Syro-Malabar rite.

SIP: And I thought only Syro-Malabar Christians are Catholics.

KSC: Really? So the Syrian Orthodox

SIP: So they were different. But still we never thought about them. The Latins, low. And all others, no value.

KSC: Did you say, “The Latins, low”?

SIP: They were coming from the low caste. We had nothing but contempt in our mind toward them. . . . They were actually the fisher folk and were considered people of very low origin. See, this mentality, today no, but this mentality is inborn in every Indian. He is very forceful about his origin and the group of people to whom he belongs. And he is adamantly thinking that his people [are of greater value.] It was out of ignorance, out of lack of exposure to reality.

KSC: How did you break away from this mentality?

SIP: This idea of mission work. In the beginning it was not appreciated. And they [local people from his community] thought—do you want a story?

KSC: Yeah.

SIP: This deacon, the first deacon in the Syro-Malabar [community] to be a missionary. He applied to be accepted as a missionary in a missionary diocese in Visakhapatnam.<sup>13</sup> So he was taken enthusiastically there. And his mother and parents were very,

---

<sup>13</sup> An ancient seaport city on the Bay of Bengal in the modern state of Andhra Pradesh, some 1,400 kilometers from Kottayam.



very sad that he was going to be a priest for the Syro-Malabar rite. So one day his mother was sitting and crying and one neighbor said, “I feel sad for you, but I am in the same boat. For example, your son by going out to become a missionary has spoiled your reputation. My daughter is taking to a very bad life has spoiled my name.” So that was the kind of thinking of people at that time. . . . The first mission, interest came around 1943-44 like that. . . . At that time nobody bothered whether they were Latins or Syrians.

A few points bear mentioning here. First, despite hailing from a community whose history stretched back to the early years of Christianity, by the early twentieth century the divisions between the Thomas Christians was such that they did not interact, and actually knew very little of each others’ communities. So immersed in his own *jāti* (here I am intentionally using the common word for subcaste), he thought that only members of his Syro-Malabar rite were genuine Catholics. Of course, they weren’t. The “Latins” he refers to are not Portuguese descendants, but lower-caste Catholics who were converted through the ministrations of Latin-rite Europeans whose missionary work followed the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century. The disdain of which he speaks, this “mentality,” reveals the casteism that was a regular feature of Indian society and the Church. And while it has lessened since his childhood, like racism in the United States, it continues. In the history of Christianity in India over the last five centuries, the promise of freedom from caste oppression looms large. Yet it is a promise that has never delivered in full, leading many to speak of Dalit Christians as “twice alienated.”<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly enough, the activities that brought Īsvar Prasād out of this parochial mindset was missionary work in the new India: “At that time, nobody bothered whether they were Latins or Syrians.” Finally, we may note the critique, offered by Pinto’s circular, of the small size of Christianity throughout South Asia. It’s a common lament. Pinto, the IMS founder, was himself born into an ancient Christian family, originally converted from Saraswat Brahmins.<sup>15</sup> Within generations, the Thomas Christians, known also as Nāzrānī (those who follow the Nazarene, Jesus), were incorporated into the local caste system. And from an early period, they became a non-missionizing community, thoroughly at home within Kerala society, having adopted local Hindu rules of endogamy and commensality. As Prasād explains, “I was a Syro-Malabar Christian, belonging to

---

<sup>14</sup> See Kottapali Vilsan, *The Twice Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians* (Ann Arbor: Booklinks, University of Michigan, 1982). For a collection dealing with issues concerning Dalit and Indian tribals in modern India, see Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur, eds. *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> It says something of the community’s caste consciousness and pride that it would remember Hindu caste origins more than fifteen hundred years after conversion.

the oriental church. Everything was about us.” The comparison of a missionary priest to a morally wayward daughter reflects this insularity.

Moving first to Rome, then to Banaras would begin to change that for Īsvar Prasād. His new religious order was in its infancy, like the nation itself.

KSC: How did you find out about the IMS because you were very early on? It was at that time that the IMS began. Why the IMS [and not] the Society of Jesus or some other order?

SIP: It was a new thing. At that time the national movement was going on. Everything Indian, everything Indian. India should be Indian; India should be given to Indians, and we were fired with this imagination. So this was very strongly [felt] to me. Before that I had my elder brother. He was very enthusiastic about mission work. He joined the IMS. There was an advertisement in the papers that there was a society starting in Banaras. . . . So my brother joined. We were very much attached to each other. . . . Finally, I was drawn there.

KSC: How old were you?

SIP: Nineteen.

One can see how Christian commitment, kinship ties, missionary zeal, and nationalist fervor could lead a gifted young person out of his comfortable environs, to the chagrin of family members. For many of his generation, born to be the last generation of the British Rāj, activist politics occupied young strivings. For this young Keralite, it was that plus the promise of the Christian gospel. After all, the purported aim of both involved types of freedom. In the person of Mahatma Gandhi, as in the lives of many involved in the freedom struggle, the political and spiritual were of a piece. Why then not for him?

IP: My enthusiasm was that we had no past to guide us on how to go about and all that. So when we came out as missionaries the whole world is open to you, find your own way. So we were trying to find our own way—no model to follow, nobody to imitate.

Today’s IMS seminarians study in northern India during a decade of preparation that takes them into the study of local languages, European and Indian philosophies, theology, and practical ministry. Without the institutions that he himself would later help to develop, Prasād was sent to study in Rome from 1956-1961. Experiences there would have their own lasting impact:

SIP: At that time my idea was I’m a Catholic seminarian. So all seminarians are the same; all are Catholics. I had friends who were Italians, French, Germans. But have [they] their own groups. When

I would go to the Italians, they speak about Garibaldi, about their all their culture, their big music, this and that. When I was with the Germans, they had their own culture. And I found myself unaccepted everywhere. Out of place. So if I told that I want to join them, they would ask me, “Do you know Mahatma Gandhi?” “Do you know yoga?” “Can you fly in the air?” All kinds of things they’d heard about India [begins to laugh]—and I did not know anything. I thought to be a Catholic seminarian what one needed was to be a Catholic. But I did not find a Catholic anywhere. I found only small groups of people who belonged to a particular country, particular culture. So that brought to me this awareness that if I want to be accepted in Europe or anywhere I would be accepted only as an Indian, not as a non-Indian. So in this world Catholic doesn’t exist. In concrete is a Catholic belonging to a particular culture and group who should know his culture—so the people would appreciate you more. You are conversant with your own traditions and all that. So that gave me the interest in Indian music; that gave me the interest in so many other things.

KSC: Like what?

SIP: History, our own history. And then people would come with their doubts, questions, and everything to me. I should be able to explain things nicely. I started reading a lot of books. But I decided to communicate, I started specializing in all this. So slowly that gave me a cultural identity. . . . And then I started associating myself with the Indian embassy, which had a lot of propaganda, documentaries and all that on India. I used to bring my friends and show them this, and all are enthusiastic to know more about India and all that. And getting Indian books. My table was always full of this literature.

KSC: So you became a kind of ambassador.

SIP: I was an ambassador. No doubt. Even today I remain that.

There was a very interesting incident. See there in Rome we had to put on this black cassock, a black cassock and Roman collar, and also a hat—[for] seminarians, you know? So we had to go to the university walking a little, about ten-fifteen minutes on foot. So I

had these Camaldolese<sup>16</sup> seminarians with me. We are going. They are all fair looking people. I was a dark person, but I forgot that I am even dark. I am one with them. One day I came out of the monastery, I opened the door, there was an Italian lady standing there with a small, poor child. The child saw me and screamed aloud, “Mama Mia!” “My goodness,” I said. Immediately I came back, I looked at myself in the mirror and I found a strange figure with this dark [skin] and black cassock and with this hat and all that, and shoes and all that. No wonder the child got frightened. [Laughing]. So sometimes with my frequent association you are missing out on identity. I used to forget that I am an Indian.

I picked up Italian pretty well. I could converse as they do. So all that the differences are slowly disappearing. Sometimes small, little children come to me and quietly—very cunning, you know?—rub their hands on me, and see if the color would come out. I’m a painted man. “Chocolat.” [Laughing]

Aside from the European parochialism found in cosmopolitan Rome, aside from entertaining anecdotes about Italian children unaccustomed to people of color (“Chocolat!”), striking is the way issues of identity came to the fore for this young man when faced with such stark cultural difference. At a little more than twenty years old, he came to believe that the only way forward was not in seeking to efface his cultural and ethnic difference—that was apparently impossible in a country where skin tone was a marker for otherness—but rather to lean into the difference. And here that meant becoming a representative Indian, conversant with its history and traditions as represented principally in texts. He had gone to Rome to be educated for the priesthood; he returned a self-ordained cultural representative. Here we witness a broader process at work whose ubiquity can blind us to its modern novelty. That is, in an age of nationalism, Īsvar Prasād determined that he must become not a representative Syro-Malabar Catholic or Eastern rite Catholic, not a Keralite or Malankara, not a south Indian, but an Indian, a citizen of a country now imagined as single, unitary, and representable to the world and to Indians themselves through discrete cultural institutions, specialists, and media.<sup>17</sup> His horizon is expanding, but through the encounter with the other of the West and with what Liah Greenfield calls “particularistic nationalisms.”<sup>18</sup> In order for Prasād to find a place he had to be an Indian, as

---

<sup>16</sup> Camaldolese are part of the Benedictine family of monks and nuns, formed in the eleventh century.

<sup>17</sup> See Milton Singer, “The Cultural Pattern of Indian Civilization: A Preliminary Report of Methodological Field Study,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15:1 (Nov. 1955), 23.

<sup>18</sup> See Liah Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

much an Indian as the Germans were German and the Italians Italian. Universality was arrived at through concrete particularity.<sup>19</sup>

In Īśvar Prasād's telling, the word Catholic does not mean some sort of lowest common denominator tradition shorn of cultural particularities. That would be impossible, for religion is always culture-bound. Neither does it imply a European Catholicism (a powerful normative particularity) with pretensions of universality—that is, a parochial tradition with a big ego—the long held and oft propagated belief that to be properly Catholic is to be European and vice versa. Rather, for Īśvar Prasād, Catholicism is constituted by so many regional and cultural Catholicisms the world over bearing an integrity in their own right. There is no Catholicism in the abstract, he argues, only particular cultural forms wherein the same gospel is proclaimed through various mediated cultural symbols. Recall his words, “But I did not find a Catholic anywhere. I found only small groups of people who belonged to a particular country, particular culture.” He looked in the mirror and saw the strangeness of the image looking back at him. His response was to embrace his constructed particular Indian identity, now construed after Independence as an imagined community (Benedict Anderson) stretching from Kashmir in the north to Kanyakumari in the south. This construction was aided by the Indian embassy, their programs and “propaganda.” Critics (one thinks of much postcolonial scholarship) might reject being the representative anything. Significantly, looking back sixty years, Īśvar Prasād describes this as a responsibility to be fulfilled. Of course, one could disagree with his assessment. For example, one could argue that it was precisely the shared Catholicism—the sameness—that focused his attention on the many differences separating him from the other seminarians. But this is not what impressed the young man. One could ask, “Whence the unity of the tradition?” I'm sorry I didn't.

## From Rome to Mathura to Banaras

Of course, every former seminarian will acknowledge that there are situations on the ground that seminary simply cannot prepare one for. For Īśvar Prasād, that was the actual condition of Christians living in Mathura, the ancient birthplace of Kṛṣṇa, where he began his ministry upon returning from Italy in 1961. These experiences taught their own lessons.

SIP: There I learned lot: How a missionary should work. There I learned how a missionary should not work. I had about a thousand Christians in the village where I was in charge. Not a single one is convinced of Christianity. Not a single one. I can tell you that. Nobody bothered about Mass, sacraments, nobody bothered about

---

<sup>19</sup> It appears to me that this Indian identity, to match the various European identities—note that the seminarians were not denominated “European”—can be as shackling as liberating. To have a voice is to don a national identity; but it might also preclude other identities. Apparently, this was not a concern for the priest.

community prayers or anything. They were only interested in when their ration comes from abroad. Whenever the ration comes, people would be crowding into the church to get a share of that. I found that [for them] Christianity has no meaning at all.

KSC: Was this from missionary work done by the Canadians? Who were the priests there?

SIP: This was the style of work at that time in India practically all over the missions. The ration was coming and distributing.<sup>20</sup>

KSC: So when Gandhi-ji spoke of “rice Christians,” huh?

SIP: This was literally rice Christians. So then from there I had one or two years there.

Īsvar Prasād explains that he had become “successful” in the sense of imparting the faith to local baptized Catholics. “People were getting a little more interested,” suggesting that the local Catholics were now participating in the ritual life of the church and perhaps expressing its ethical norms. Word reached a monsignor who invited him to take over a ministry in Varanasi.

SIP: So he wrote to me: “Come, or I am going to close down this station. But if you come, I’ll give you a chance. See what you can do.” I said to write my superior general and get his permission. If he writes and invites me, I will come. So the superior general wrote to me and said, “Do come.” So I left and went to Banaras. I went to this particular association which was given, which was going to be closed down. I went and took the baptismal register and I found plenty of people baptized, especially children, with all these German names and all that. What actually had happened was that there was “heidenkind”<sup>21</sup>—that is, a pagan child. You get 25 rupees as a gift, from benefactors, provided we give the name they propose. So the brothers<sup>22</sup> were there, they filled this register with all these German names.

---

<sup>20</sup> The practice he is here describing involved receiving Rupees 25 for each baptism from overseas. In return, the baptized would receive rations doled out from the mission station. This common practice led to relationships of dependency with the foreign missions and served as inducements towards conversion of the poor to the Catholic Church. In Īsvar Prasād’s telling, their connection to the Catholic Church was therefore tenuous.

<sup>21</sup> A strict translation is “child of pagans.”

<sup>22</sup> These were German Franciscan brothers who initiated Catholic missionary work in Banaras earlier in the century.

The German brothers, Franciscan brothers. They were very zealous people. They two were sent here. They both were fighting. [Laughing]

KSC: This was in the 1960s.

SIP: It was in 1963. At that time the anti-Christians used to send out circulars, [saying] for each baptism the Christians are paying them. But it wasn't exactly a lie. The mission church would get [overseas funding]. Money would come to the common house.

KSC: So there was truth to this charge.

SIP: Yeah.

KSC: And so what happened to all those little children?

SIP: So I started studying. I'm enquiring into this. [I saw] a number of baptisms. I called the catechist. There was a catechist. I asked, "Where are these people." Āre, sab baḍhe ho gāye hain. Śādī bhī ho gāye, bhī hongā. Girjā main kabhī nahin ātā. (Oh, it has grown. There have been marriages, there will also be marriages. They're not coming to church.)

KSC: So they get baptism, they may get marriage, they never come to church.

SIP: See, there was also a defect in language. The missionaries were not able to communicate very much with the people. And secondly, greed was very much predominant for those people who come to church. When they are in the church campus they are all *pakkā* (genuine) Christians, the moment you got out of that, they are all Hindus.

KSC: The name changes.

SIP: Not even names. Because if they have a Christian name, nobody knows.<sup>23</sup> [Laughing]

---

<sup>23</sup> The town is Kotwa Narayanpur, Ballia District, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, some 130 kilometers northeast of Varanasi.

So the young priest arrives fresh from seminary and is startled by both missionary practices and the nominal state of the Dalit Catholics in the town. We will soon explore the results of charges of forced conversion and inducements to conversion in contemporary India in relation to the Catholic inculturation project. But with regard to weak Catholic commitment exhibited by Īsvar Prasād's flock, we may here point out that this remains the bane of missionary Catholics—that is, the perceived tenuousness of Catholics' connection to their church in Hindi-belt India. I write “perceived” because we need not accept only the priest's side of the story. Extreme poverty was the norm throughout much of village India in the mid-twentieth century. One can hardly fault poor people on the margins of society for availing themselves of resources accessed through a ritual of initiation introduced by people associated with colonial power. For Īsvar Prasād, a middle class Keralite, for German Franciscans, and for Mahatma Gandhi who was dismissive of “rice Christians,” there may exist a separation between the material and the spiritual. The poor do not share this luxury, leading to all kinds of negotiations that can simply appear as cynical dissimulation. Vernacular Hinduism is marked by so many transactions between subcastes and between humans and deities through which mundane and transcendent concerns are addressed. One can therefore understand why material transactions with the local mission house were understood in these terms. After all, both sides were getting needs met: the German Franciscans wanted converts they were willing to pay for within a colonial environment rife with asymmetrical economic and political power relations; the Dalits wanted the identity that attachment to a Western religion conferred along with the material benefits that went with it.

But what of those Catholics who Īsvar Prasād had come to see as authentic in what he said had been transformed into a “model mission”? What was the nature of their commitment? How did it affect his understanding of missionary work? Finally, what might the answer tell us about the process by which religious identities are delineated? The priest explained,

When I came to the mission in [the city of] Kotwa Narayanpur and started working there, one experience of mine helped me very much deepen my conviction. . . . I had baptized a family of about 25 members. Grandfather grandmother, father, son and all those people together, about 25 are there. I was pretty fond of this family. I used to help them out and all that. And they remained very much attached to me. What happens psychologically is since we don't have a natural family of ours when we have some converts, those families become our families, eh? We feel a kind of special love and concern for them.

Every Sunday for Mass I would wait for the coming of these people. Twenty-five people, they would fill the church. One Sunday nobody came. Nobody came. So after Mass I was



reflecting on this, What happened today? I was walking up and down. Then I found the eldest son of this particular family running across the field, walking hurriedly with a bucket in his hand. So I sent my catechist: “Ask him why they did not come to church today.” And so the catechist went and met him.

“Why didn’t you come to church today? Father [Īsvar Prasād] is very much worried. He waited for you and you never came. . . .”

And he [the son] replied, “Māfī mangnā, hamārā nām par. Hum log pakkā Īsāi hain, ham log Īsāi dharm kā kabhī choḍenge nahin.” Is līye ne āyā kal śām ko mere ghar main koī bhūt ā gāyā, pret ā gāyā. (Forgive us. We are true Christians. We will never desert the Christian dharma. Because yesterday evening a ghost came into my house.)

[The catechist replied,] Voh to thīk hai, to kyon ne āyā? (That’s fine, but why didn’t you come?)

[The son replied], “Mā-bāp ke bīc main, gālī gālā ucā ladāi aur bacce bartan daṛne śuru kiyā. Sab janjat ho gāyā” (“Mom and dad were at each other’s throats fighting. And the kids started running around with pots and pans. Everything’s a mess”). . . .

[The son therefore asks himself] So what to do? I am going with this bucket of milk to one *maunī bābā*. . . .<sup>24</sup> When I go to the *bābā* I carry something. I will go there, present our problem, and he will give some advice and that will solve our problem. Then we will come to the church.

SIP: Now this came to me as a big shock. Because I thought these people were mine. They had become Christians. Very faithful at communion, confessions, prayer and all that. Now when a real spiritual need came, they didn’t come to me.

KSC: They went to the *bābā*.

SIP: The *bābā* there. Because the *bābā* alone is qualified to advise them. And they would come to me to get money for their boarding children, for dress for them, for some ration or this or that, but for

---

<sup>24</sup> An ascetic who has taken a vow of silence, often sought for advice. Those in need make an offering, write down their problems, and receive a response in writing.

any spiritual thing, no one was coming. Then I reflected on me: This is meaningless for me. I did not come here to distribute rations. I did not come here to distribute clothes or anything. I came to give them Christ, but I'm a failure. They come only for this.

So I had a companion priest, a local man. I discussed [this] long with him. I asked him, "What do you think? What is the reason why the people are not coming to us?" He was a local priest, knowing the mentality of the people much better. He told me, "Father, why should they come to us? What do we have to give them? Now for example, we dress like gentlemen, nice blue shirt and pants and all that. And we eat like anybody else—eat all vegetarian and non-vegetarian and all that. We don't pray, we may be praying privately. Nobody knows we are praying people. We don't maintain silence. These are all signs of a holy man. Our people have discovered nothing in us. So until something we do to change our lifestyle don't expect people to come to us for spiritual help."

It was very sound advice the young man gave me. Because that convinced me also. I was thinking in the same line. Then we sat together discussing what should we do. So many proposals came. One thing was first of all was that our appearance might be changed. That means, Let's take to simple, ordinary dress. Let us take up simple, ordinary dress. *Samnyāsa* dress I did not want. Like Hindu *samnyāsīs*.<sup>25</sup> I didn't want to be identified with them.

KSC: Why not?

SIP: Why not? Precisely because apparently it is all externals. The internal thing comes out very little—little by little. And secondly, that is identified with this and that and all that.

KSC: So different Hindu practices and customs. Is that what you mean?

SIP: There are some Hindu practices and customs which Christians cannot accept.

---

<sup>25</sup> A *samnyāsī* is one who has formally become an ascetic by renouncing the world. A *sādhu* is a more generic term for an ascetic.

KSC: Like? What do you think?

SIP: Now, for example, Untouchability—a part of Hindu tradition, the caste system, belonging to a group of people. Somebody is great because he is born in that particular caste. These are unchristian things. Inequality [is] brought into us not because of our karma but because of our birth. So therefore I wanted to be called a *saṁnyāsī*, *sadhu/saṁnyāsī*. Even now I like [those names] very much, but I didn't want to be confused if I am a Christian. If I am at all accepted, they should accept me as a Christian *saṁnyāsī*. That is the thing that came to me. That came strongly to me. Even today I remain that way.

KSC: So an *Īsāī saṁnyāsī*.

SIP: Yes, an *Īsāī saṁnyāsī*.<sup>26</sup>

Now, for example, see this *mālā* (prayer beads). I have the *rudhrakṣana mālā* here. The *mālā* is actually a Hindu *mālā*. But onto that I have added a cross. . . .

KSC: Hm. It sounds very much like *deNobili*.<sup>27</sup>

SIP: Ah, those external things are something like *deNobili*. I didn't have the *janeū*. *DeNobili* had a Brahmin *janeū*<sup>28</sup> bead. I have this *mālā*, a sign of a *saṁnyāsa*. At the same time a cross, a sign of Christianity. . . . Somebody one day was in the city, got curious with my *mālā*. *Āp Īsāī hain? Hum log mālā pehne. Mālā to mein pehntā hun. Āre, yeh to āpkā crus hain? Yeh bhi pehnte āp? Hum yeh bhi hain. Hum yeh bhi hai. Hum Hindu bhī hain. Hum Christian bhī. ("You are a Christian? We [Hindus] are wearing the rosary. Oh, this is your cross! This also you wear? I wear this; you wear this.*

<sup>26</sup> *Īsvar Prasād* has no problem with *saṁnyāsīs* per se, only with being misidentified as a Hindu renunciant. Here he is anticipating the charge that Catholic priests are inappropriately imitating Hindus, trying to be something they are not.

<sup>27</sup> *Roberto deNobili* (1577-1656), an Italian Jesuit missionary priest who, controversially, adopted the dress and lifestyle of a Hindu *saṁnyāsī* during his ministry in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. He is considered a pioneer among Christians dedicated to various forms of Christian accommodation to other religions and cultures.

<sup>28</sup> The *janeū* (Hindi: जनेऊ) is a consecrated thread. The *janeū* ceremony, or Sanskrit *upanayanam* (उपनयनम्), is the childhood rite of investiture for caste Hindus (Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and Vaiśyas) whereupon the child takes on the *janeū*, which is generally worn around the shoulder and draped diagonally across the chest, resting on the waist.

We also wear this. We also wear this. We are also Hindu. We are also Christian.”) Simply that gave a new insight for that fellow there. I am not a foreigner here. At the same time I live my life like any other Indian. So that way.

Then habitual eating of meat, fish and eggs, done by priest and nuns is completely un-Indian. The Hindus eat meat. Some of them even eat beef. Some of them, not all. But not openly. But the Hindu *saṁnyāsīs*, they never eat meat. They never eat meat. So when I speak to people about vegetarian diet and everything I am not imposing it on anybody. The ideal food in India is vegetarian. Because Indian thinking demands [that] what you eat is what you become. If you are taking to drink frequently and you are taking to meat frequently you develop also tendencies in your life counter to your dedication in life.

KSC: This would be *himsak* (violent) tendencies, no?

SIP: Yeah, would be *himsak*. But, if you are a *saṁnyāsī*, then the ideal thing would be you should be vegetarian.

KSC: *Pakkā śākāhārī* (Genuine vegetarian).

SIP: *Pakkā śākāhārī*. People should know that. It would be a big scandal if the people see [a *saṁnyāsī*] eating [meat].

KSC: This family you were speaking about, this large Catholic family that you baptized. They eat meat.

SIP: Yes.

KSC: *Phīr bhī* (still) they expect their holy people to be *śākāhārī*.

SIP: Definitely. [That’s] part of renunciation. When you take up *saṁnyās* [renunciation]. You give up luxurious food. And this thing is not understood by our people. Nor by our bishops. Nor by our priests. Nor by our sisters. The biggest consumers of meat and fish in India in generally are priests and nuns. But generally nuns are much more modest in their food. They generally eat vegetarian food. But meat is no problem. Whenever they get a chance, they eat meat.

Rather than focus here on the shifting consciousness of Īśvar Prasād as he became convinced of the distance between him and his flock (“I thought they were mine.”), or the consequent way he sought to remedy that distance by simplifying his appearance, adopting a vegetarian lifestyle based on expectations attached to Hindu renunciants, and to adapting certain symbols suggesting an Indian identity constantly elided as Hindu, I would rather here attend to the unstated assumptions revealed by the experience. Note that for Īśvar Prasād, employing the “Hindu bābā” is an index of Christian commitment wherein the family’s conversion is understood to be lacking. While Prasād interprets this as personal failure, for the family, as for most Hindu villagers, sudden fighting and familial discord is interpreted as a sign of the sure presence of a ghost, a *bhūt* or *pret*. Seeking assistance from a bābā is a common local response to a widely perceived problem, as common for a Hindu villager as would a trip by others to a pharmacy for medicine. It would seem that in the family’s reckoning there exist working spheres of influence. One goes to the Catholic priest for certain reasons: Īśvar Prasād mentioned what he denominated as “material”—rations, money, clothing. But he also provides something else: a sacramental system promising benefits accompanying one in this life—and for every stage of it—into the next. Curiously, he does not see this a “bringing Christ,” for according to Catholic sacramental theology, Christ and transformation “in Christ” is the center of the sacramental life. How did this Dalit Catholic family intuit that their Catholic faith and its representative would be unable or unwilling to assist them with their crisis? What was it about their Catholic catechesis suggesting differing spheres of practice? Did they think their young priest would be unsympathetic? Why?<sup>29</sup>

We might also highlight something that could easily go unnoticed: the process whereby boundaries are being created in which certain skills or technologies (belonging to the bābā) are denominated “Hindu” and others “Catholic Christian.” Determined to be outside proper Catholic practice, indigenous Hindu practices are taught to be rejected by *pakkā Īsāī*, genuine Christians. Here, then, we have a case of traditions being co-created in relation (here in contradistinction) to the other in a religiously pluralist environment based on contemporary notions of Catholic orthodoxy. In this instance, the boundaries are being created or reinforced from the Catholic side, but they will likely be

---

<sup>29</sup> I am here avoiding an interpretation that would posit the Catholic sphere as focused on transcendent concerns and the indigenous on practical ones. Indeed, there is overlap, and one doubts if this spiritual-material dichotomy is operative for these Catholic converts. In the priest’s telling some fifty years after the event, it seems the Catholic family is quite content with their newfound *dharma*—they just have a sense of the spheres of life for which they avail themselves of various therapies. I am struck by the operative categories of spiritual and secular at work in Īśvar Prasād’s ministry. If it is true, as anthropologist Peter van der Veer argues, that these categories are birthed together in modernity, then this priest is himself a purveyor of that modernity. That is interesting because Catholicism is often presented as a kind of pre-modern holdout and not as a bearer and purveyor of “the modern.” The truth is more complicated. See Peter van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

reinforced from the other side as well. This process is nothing new in India, as elsewhere. Many of the religious categories taken for granted today are a product of the British imperial period, which drew on the previous Mughal dispensation.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the identity of “Hindu” has long been defined negatively until it was consciously formalized in law. So, for example, according to Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, a Hindu is one who is neither a Muslim nor a Christian. And as in that legal sphere, so too in other ones—in villages where Indian Catholic missionaries are at work, denominating their beliefs and practices in relation to those of others. In short, there are ongoing processes at work lending legitimacy to these identities that are never completely fixed but always in fluctuation. The fixity of these identities disappears when seen on the historical horizon. They take on their forms based on the activities of various human actors in time and space and are reified (so it seems) by law and other socio-cultural spheres. To return to inculturation in light of these processes, we may also understand inculturation or indigenization as necessarily involving a process dependent on the ongoing negotiation of religions and cultures in relation to one another. One could argue that the very creation of presumed categories like religion and culture developed as part of ongoing indigenization—that which is self-consciously constructed, but more commonly done tacitly as part of daily life.

We should also note almost in passing the unstated assumption by the priest that there is no sphere outside the Catholic purview. Like other “great” religions, Catholicism is a totalizing system of meaning and practice that must necessarily be able to subsume or include all aspects of human life. This is never wholly successful, of course, but the drive towards universality is significant for those systems with universal ambitions. Moreover, the unease evoked by a lack of fit, or the presence of some surfeit or anomaly, can cause a kind of crisis, here seen in the tradition’s representative, a young Īśvar Prasād, who bears within himself notions of legitimate Christian dharma, e.g., the spheres of proper Christian practice and belief, that when apparently rejected is understood as a personal failure.

### Critics, Within and Without

Īśvar Prasād, a Sanskritic name that can be translated “Grace of God,” is not this priest’s given name. I never learned the name he was given at birth. One is not supposed to ask about the prior life of a (Hindu) renunciant, so perhaps that is why I never thought to ask. Typically, male Syro-Malabar Catholics are born with names like Anthony, Thomas, Joseph, and Augustine. Surnames are often Portuguese or Malayali, like d’Souza or Panikkar, reflecting the birthplace of most Catholic religious up to this point as well as the history of Catholicism in

---

<sup>30</sup> For an astute examination of the way these religious identities were developed in relation in the British period, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

western and southern India. At their consecration, however, IMS priests, commensurate with their inculturating commitment, are given these more Sanskritic names. I am happy to personally know *Svāmīs Abhiśiktānand* (the bliss of Consecration), *Dilrāj* (King of the Heart) and *Deen Dayal* (Compassionate towards the Poor). My own studies would never have been possible without the assistance and friendship of one *Svāmī Premrāj* (King of Love) who I would accompany during his ministrations in Banaras. These new names tell their own story. While Hindu-ish and Sanskritic they still reflect certain Christian attributes—or at least those shared by Hindus and Christians. But as with present notions of inculturation, there are also real limits, borders over which one cannot pass. One will never, for example, meet a Father Krishna or Sister Parvati. There is an intentional indeterminacy or vagueness about these Hindu-ish monikers. Even Īśvar Prasād’s present āśram—“Bhārat Māta Āśram—is a case and point. It is the common name for Mother India, sometimes associated (through another Hindu/Indian nationalist elision) with the Goddess. But for those with Catholic ears to hear, it connotes the Virgin Mary. This ambiguity strikes many Hindus as disingenuous. One person’s inculturation is another’s cynical attempt to convert people out of their native traditions. One’s inculturation is another’s colonialism.

In the years since Indian Independence, criticism of Christian proselytization has only increased, leading to explicit anti-conversion laws in many Indian states. In general, these laws prohibit conversions due to “force, fraud, or inducement.”<sup>31</sup> Force or fraud may be relatively easy to police, but what exactly constitutes an inducement?<sup>32</sup> Does no-strings-attached elementary education amount to an inducement? Is wearing clothing associated with Hindu asceticism and calling oneself “svāmī” an allurements? Here we can see how these laws might affect the ministry of Īśvar Prasād and his order. While conversion laws do not exist in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, there are continual moves to legislate them there and nationally, particularly now that the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, rules from the center. All this creates a level of hostility and fear among Christian laity and clergy, and suspicion among the general Hindu populous.

One of those convinced of Christian duplicity in the aims of inculturation is the late Hindu nationalist Sita Ram Goel. In *Catholic Ashrams: Sannaysis or Swindlers* (2009, [1988]) he seeks to unveil what he believes are the nefarious aims of Catholic inculturation. I cite him here as a representative if more strident voice in contemporary India. Pace Īśvar Prasād, the aims of inculturation are not to demonstrate a pan-Indian commonality between Christians and Hindus, nor to bring Christians to an appreciation of Hinduism, nor to “share Christ.” Rather,

---

<sup>31</sup> Anti-conversion laws currently exist in the states of Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan, adopted between 1968 and 2008.

<sup>32</sup> For a subtle treatment of conversion in India, see Chad M. Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868-1947* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008).

inculturation serves only the goal of Hinduism and, by extension, Indian culture's destruction:

What is the way out [of Christian missionary failure in India]? It is, say the mission strategists. Christianity has to drop its alien attire and get clothed in Hindu cultural forms. In short, Christianity has to be presented as an indigenous faith. Christian theology has to be conveyed in the manner and with materials of Hindu pūjā; Christian sacraments have to sound like Hindu saṁskaras; Christian churches have to copy the architecture of Hindu temples; Christian hymns have to be set to Hindu music; Christian themes and personalities have to be presented in styles of Hindu painting; Christian missionaries have to dress and live like Hindu sannyāsins; Christian mission stations have to look like Hindu ashramas [sic]. And so on. . . . The fulfillment will be when converts to Christianity proclaim with complete confidence they are Hindu Christians.<sup>33</sup>

Īsvar Prasād would agree with many points. But there are significant disagreements. First, fundamentally, what they disagree with rests on one's view of the Christian message. For Goel it is inherently destructive; for the IMS priest it is desirable, and actually within the DNA of Christianity to adapt to—to become incarnate within—local cultures. Moreover, Īsvar Prasād understands his project as involving the removal of unnecessary barriers. For Goel, however, the priest and his ilk are charlatans trying to trick Hindus into thinking Christianity and Hinduism are basically the same thing.

Īsvar Prasād is not unaware of this loud critique.

SIP: This criticism is—well, there are very many Hindus that have that feeling. We are usurping. For example, sisters put on the sari. They say it is bluffing.

KSC: Because of the sari?

SIP: Because of the sari and also the color. So sometimes the sisters go to the market in saris to buy meat. So I told the sisters, “Don't be surprised if one day you are beaten up in the street because you are carrying meat. If you want to go and buy meat put on your old dress and go and buy.”

KSC: Like a habit?

---

<sup>33</sup> Sita Ram Goel, *Catholic Ashrams Sannaysis or Swindlers* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 2009[1988]), 6.



IP: Put it on, no problem. But don't abuse this one. It is a matter of respect. When you take to anything on, you must also understand the thinking behind it. The thinking must be accepted in you. And then alone it will be really meaningful. Otherwise, we are playing fools about it. They're playing fools. And many of these inculturating people are that.

KSC: "They're playing fools." You would say that?

SIP: I would say that they are externally showing off. Internally they prefer to be Romans or Germans.

KSC: So they like to wear the clothes, right, but the inside is the same.

SIP: the same

KSC: Inside they are like Pope Benedict. [Laughing] Outward they look like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, but inside they look like Pope Benedict. Like that.

SIP: Yes, yes, yes. [Laughing]

KSC: A lot of what you're talking about. You go into the chapel and you say "Om Jagdīs, Om Jagdīs. . . ." Āre, āp kṛṣṇa log nahin. To yeh "om jagdīs"—kyā drāmā hai? ("Om Jagdīs, Om Jagdīs. . . . You're not Kṛṣṇaites! So this "Om Jagdīs?" What farce!) You respond to them in Hindi and you say, Kyā? (What?) Kyā bātāyie? (What shall you say?) Āpkā javāb hai kyā? (What is your answer?)

SIP: My *javāb* (answer) is actually this: See, first of all, I am here not in a Christian place [Kurukṣetra, Haryana]. The only language they have is the language through signs and symbols. The signs and symbols I use should be meaningful to the people who are participating in it. So if I do the *ārtī* with a *thurible* [he waves his hand like one with the sensor associated with Christianity] coming and going like that [swinging his arms]. Instead of doing that, do what everybody does. As a sign of adoration use that. Now when you go into the chapel, when you kneel down. Kneeling has no meaning in India. Kneeling is a sign of punishment; it's not a sign of prayer. If it is to be prayer, you must make a *pañchāṅga pranām*—touch the ground with your forehead and all that, or the

*ṣhaṣṭhāṅgha pranām*.<sup>34</sup> So these signs should be valuable-meaningful to the people. So we take such things that are meaningful to the people. Even the Christians when they take to it, they can after sometimes get used to it, and they begin to put values into it.

KSC: So to the Christians themselves, it speaks to them as well.

SIP: Oh, yeah. Very much. Because we fundamentally remain Hindus in culture.

KSC: So you see this word Hindu as a cultural category more than a religious category?

SIP: It is very much a cultural category.

You see, Hinduism is not a religion in that sense. Actually, Hinduism is a way of life. They have no difficulty if you are a communist, if you are an atheist, if you are this or that—if you go to take bath in the Ganges. If you don't visit the temple, no problem. But the marriage you conduct should be according to the customs of the people. And the ceremonies, the *saṁskāras*, should be done. It should be done as the people do that—the *janeū* ceremony and all that. That is the practical, cultural sense of belonging to the group, that is more important than any other things that have a deeper religious significance. I'm convinced about that.

His response reveals certain things. First, that indeed, for many priests involved in inculturation, it is indeed a mere evangelizing strategy devoid of respect for Hinduism. Second, Īsvar Prasād's determination that the external should match an internal change argues against a reading of his vision of inculturation as callow. Over the last six decades he has immersed himself in Brahmanical Hinduism. He will quote the *Gītā* in conversation, teach forms of meditation, and lead prayers originating in the *Upanishads*. Indeed, for Indian Catholic critics of inculturation, this is precisely the problem. The Hinduism being adopted fails to account for the diversity of Hinduisms, particularly of that practiced by no and low-castes. Which points to something the discriminating reader will have noticed: a tendency to equate Indian-ness with Hindu-ness, even

---

<sup>34</sup> A full prostration wherein “five parts,” or *pañchāṅga* touch the ground in salutation or “*pranām*.” These parts include the knees, chest, chin, temple, and forehead. Similarly, the *ṣhaṣṭhāṅgha pranām* involves “six parts,” the toes, knees, hands, chin, nose and temple.

despite acknowledgment of Hindu diversity. Only for this priest, “Hindu” is primarily a cultural category and “Hinduism” an awkward fit with Western notions of “religion.” It is an oft-encountered modern saying that “Hinduism is a way of life.”<sup>35</sup> If he seems disingenuous about his own religious identity, or when it seems that he is speaking with a forked tongue—understanding himself as a Christian *saṁnyāsī* who doesn’t want to be charged with fooling people while simultaneously considering himself a Hindu—it must be recalled that for him Christianity is a religious category and Hinduism is a cultural one. To be a Hindu Christian is an impossibility for Sita Ram Goel, a charade; for Īśvar Prasād it is, in fact, the goal. One senses that perhaps, as is so often the case in Hindu-Christian interactions, two people are talking past each other. But it might be more than that, for at the end of the day, Īśvar Prasād has never moved from his desire to “share Christ.” And for Sita Ram Goel and others, that remains a dangerous anathema.

It does seem as though these inculturating Catholic religious find themselves in a real Catch-22: Because of past colonial missionary activity, the tradition has become a synecdoche of the West in its imperialism and hegemonic tendencies. Nonetheless when Catholics don more familiar “Indian clothing” (essentialized as Hindu) they are labeled as “swindlers” praying on the expectations of unsuspecting Hindus bedazzled by Hindu monikers, saffron robes, and a Sanskrit register of speech. Here is where identity, recognized in the singular and marked by dress as essentially one thing, becomes an iron cage. And underlying this problem are notions of solid, monochromatic religious identities that occlude others. The message is not only that “you are x,” but that “you can only ever be x.” Īśvar Prasād wants to identify pan-Indian symbols. Many Hindus see them not as pan-Indian, but Hindu and only Hindu in a narrow sense. For while Hinduism is notoriously capacious it is not so plastic to allow for Hindu Christians, at least as currently reified by law and policed by hard-bitten adherents on both sides.

The crux of the matter is that for all the use of Hindu symbols, the core commitments of Catholicism remain. And the central commitment of the faith is the sole divinity of Jesus Christ, to the exclusion of all other deities. Until that changes (and if history presages the future, that is unlikely), Hindu distrust of Christian activities shall continue, especially when the essential mark of Hinduism is being cast as religiously tolerant, and when Christianity’s relation to other religions is determined by the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20: 2-3). I see no way to square this circle. These are two irreconcilable theological systems, at least as they are presently understood. For

---

<sup>35</sup> In fact, this cliché is often employed as a strategy against the imposition of Western categories for means of control. I have heard this statement in American Christian settings as well, further evidence of dissatisfaction by adherents with a secular order that seeks to domesticate religion. It is not a little ironic that the concept religion, born in the West, born within Christianity, is now being rejected by Christians themselves.

the most part Catholic inculturation occurs on the ground in India animated by theological exclusivity or at least for people like Īsvar Prasād, theological inclusivity,<sup>36</sup> and much evangelistic work is ordered by this core stance. Perhaps more importantly, theological exclusivity actually creates and orders epistemological categories, whereby earlier missionaries—one thinks of Roberto deNobili in India and Mateo Ricci in China—were forced to differentiate between “things” called “culture,” “religion,” “Christianity” and “Hinduism” because of genuine concern over right worship and right practice. One will misunderstand the perceived threat of Christian inculturation by non-Christians if one fails to consider the colonial heritage of Christian missionary activity, and the insight, perceived by Goel and less strident and more even-handed critics, that Christians do indeed worship a jealous god, as the Christian tradition itself concedes. Thus, verses from which Christians take comfort, when understood from another perspective, become rather ominous: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Finally, space allows us only to briefly note that Īsvar Prasād holds to a certain view of symbols wherein meanings are largely uniform, and so the work of priests is to teach, disseminate, and model Hindu symbolism. Recent work in semiotics contradicts this understanding. Instead, following Sperber,<sup>37</sup> it is now commonly argued that symbols are associated with multiple meanings and exist within larger conceptual universes. In other words, two people can bring two very different associations in their understanding of any one symbol. Rather than a uniform code to be cracked, symbols are part of an elaborate web of concepts that can vary from one person to the next. This would mean that simply because a Christian begins to appreciate various symbols does not mean that they will bear Hindu associations. So rather than creating shared symbolic space where Christians and Hindus can meet, the result could actually be a changing of associations. The divide could remain, to say nothing of Christian religio-cultural appropriation.

---

<sup>36</sup> Whereas theological exclusivity holds that Christ and Christian truth are the sole means of salvation, theological inclusivity is more capacious in that it holds that salvation in Christ might come through other “non-Christian” sources. A Christian end might be arrived at by non-Christian means, if unwittingly. Of course, Hinduism has its own form of theological inclusivity.

<sup>37</sup> Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974). To understand the interplay between symbol systems among Christians and Hindus in northern India, see Mathew Schmalz, *A Space for Redemption: Dalit Catholic Tactics in Hindu North India*, (Ph.D. diss. University of Chicago, 1998).

## Indeterminate Conclusion

Inculturation has fallen on hard times. Popes come and go, some more enthusiastic than others. Benedict XVI, the pope during the time of our meeting, was un-enthusiastic, more inclined toward re-creating a “defensive church,” according to the priest who has lived through seven full pontificates. Īsvar Prasād is critical but unperturbed, reflecting an equanimity that comes from the strength of his convictions and the sense of perspective that comes with age:

SIP: The present pope came. He’s afraid. He’s not in favor of this. He would prefer to bring back all the old things. Directly or indirectly he is trying to bring back Trent. ...Now the church in India being such a dependent church of Rome...[and that has] not necessarily anything to do with the gospel and Christian values. The pope is dressing in a particular way, so everyone else should wear in that particular way and all that. They cannot stop it [inculturation]. But leaders are a little bit afraid to go forward strongly. And especially careless people who don’t bother about their future, but in the church today they all look for a career, important posts and everything...They have become very cautious, practically losing their initiatives in order to please. So that kind of discouragement has gotten into today’s policy. So nobody speaks very much of inculturation.

KSC: How does that make you feel after so many decades of work?

SIP: I’ve come to this one: You live your conviction. You don’t aspire for anything. Don’t desire to become a bishop. Don’t desire to become a leader in your own community [religious order]. If you have your conviction, live that conviction. That’s all. So today my attitude is that I don’t bother very much that the people appreciate my ideas or reject my ideas. I am thoroughly convinced about the stand I had taken. I go ahead with that.

And to those Indian Catholic religious and laypeople who critique inculturation<sup>38</sup> he has some hard words even as he mostly accepts the critique:

The inculturation as it started here, that was Brahmanization. It is the customs of upper caste people we have been bringing in. And the lower castes, many who hated this as signs of the dominating Brahmins, they are disliking that. Then new studies, new theologies, and new sociologies had come out. Subaltern cultures of the lower caste people have also a value in themselves and that is not to be compared with the upper caste Hindu culture. Slowly resistance started coming. But our answer to that was the solution

---

<sup>38</sup> See Schmalz (2001).

was not—when you say Indian culture, Indian *samskriti*, it is an upper caste *samskriti* which is considered all over the world as really Indian. But the lower thing has got no status. It is not well formulated and well articulated.

So my reply was this: You must begin from somewhere. First step you have to make. If you don't take that step you will not do anything. So at least begin with that—what is an accepted thing all over India. If you say Mass, for example, [do] some of this inculturated thing, the people feel more at home with that. Lower caste people they don't have a *pūjā*, they don't have a *yagñā* (sacrifice), so if you conduct a *yagñā* it has to be done according to the cultural traditions. So we begin with that...I also ask, “Are you now standing for subaltern culture? But what are you doing? Are you studying that?” Now according to my principle of inculturation, even today, if I am transferred to Ranchi area, the *adivāsīs*<sup>39</sup> are there. My first thing would be to go deeper into their culture—the natural culture of the place—bring out the values which can go along with Christianity, bring them into our lifestyle and our worship, and through that try to communicate. “But you are not doing anything at all. Your solution is that doesn't work, and therefore you take the Italian culture or the German culture. ..”

Today my attitude is this: If you are in a particular place with a different culture and the people are belonging to this group of people, then you must try to inculturate into that particular culture so you are accepted as their own. There is no point to bringing Kerala things when I'm working in the north. I must die to Kerala things, I must be born again to the place where I am. That is actually the particular thing inculturation brings on a missionary. Inculturation, genuine inculturation, is high spirituality. I'm fully convinced about it. In your dress, in your travels, in your food, in your speech, everything—language. You must study the language of the people. Now these big people speak about subaltern cultures and all that, but when they come together they speak only English.

Īśvar Prasād continues his work at the āśram in Kurukshetra. His life has spanned the British colonial period, through Independence, through the Second Vatican Council, through India's shift from socialism to economic liberalization in the early 1990s, up to the ascent of Hindu nationalism in the new century.

---

<sup>39</sup> *Adivāsī* is the name for India's aboriginal peoples. Traditionally, they remained outside caste Hindu society.

When we spoke in 2011, the Congress Party was leading a coalition government in the person of Manmohan Singh. We spent time discussing the religious identity of Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born de facto leader of the Congress Party. (But that is a conversation for another essay.) Now the Hindu nationalist BJP through Prime Minister Narendra Modi leads India, a fact that has only furthered the unease of India's religious minorities. And, of course, since our meeting, the charismatic Pope Francis has assumed the pontificate. One doubts that the priest has fundamentally altered his views over the last five years. I still remember the scorn with which he spoke about those who rejected inculturation in the name of the social justice as though his was merely an elite exercise carried on by those engaged in the cottage industry of formal, air-conditioned inter-religious dialogue. That had not been his story—and he smacked at the seeming hypocrisy of those speaking for subalterns in the language of the former colonizer. “But what are they doing?” he pleaded, suggesting that for all the talk, they had relinquished their responsibility of bearing Christ in India. His was the activist's disdain for the comfortable, for the mere theorizer.

Prophecy is dangerous business. One wonders what the future holds for inculturation as a movement in India. The Spirit, like the wind, blows wherever it pleases; movements come and go. What seems clear is that, in many ways, it is out of the hands of the official theologians and missionaries, be they supporters of Catholicism in a Sanskritic register or aimed at social justice. (Perhaps such binaries should be resisted.) The future, rather, is in the hands of those millions of Indian Catholics with their own pressing concerns, who will address them in ways quite natural—that is, quite cultural—to them and their unique contexts. And after more than sixty years in north India, with commitments to inculturation understood as a “high spirituality” and to nonattachment to the fruits of one's labors as taught by the *Gītā*, my guess is that Svāmī Īśvar Prasād may take some comfort in the fact that the future is not ultimately in his hands. His very name—“the grace of God”—is a potent reminder of that fact.

VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY  
KERRY.SANCHIRICO@VILLANOVA.EDU

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- Bauman, Chad M. *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868-1947*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008.
- Gravend-Tirole, Xavier. "From Christian Ashrams to Dalit Theology—or Beyond: An Examination of the Indigenisation/Inculturation Trend within the Indian Catholic Church." In *Constructing Indian Christianities: Culture, Conversion and Caste*, edited by Chad M. Bauman and Richard Fox Young, 110-137. New Delhi: Routledge, 2014.
- Goel, Sita Ram. *Catholic Ashrams Sannaysis or Swindlers*. New Delhi: Voice of India, 2009[1988].
- Greenfeld, Liah. *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Indian Missionary Society, *Constitutions of the Indian Missionary Society*. Christ Nagar, Uttar Pradesh, 1999.
- Nedungatt, George, ed. *The Synod of Diamper Revisited*. Rome: Kanonika 9, 1999.
- Robinson, Rowena and Marianus Kujur, Joseph, eds. *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*. New Delhi: Sage, 2010.
- Schmalz, Mathew N. *A Space for Redemption: Dalit Catholic Tactics in Hindu North India*. Ph. D. diss., University of Chicago, 1998.
- . "Ad Experimentum: Theology, Anthropology and the Paradoxes of Indian Catholic Inculturation." In *Theology and the Social Sciences*, edited by Michael Barnes, 161-180. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001. Available: [http://crossworks.holycross.edu/rel\\_faculty\\_pub/9/](http://crossworks.holycross.edu/rel_faculty_pub/9/)
- . "Dalit Catholic Tactics of Marginality at a North Indian Mission." *History of Religions* 44 (February 2005): 216-251.
- Singer, Milton. "The Cultural Pattern of Indian Civilization: A Preliminary Report of a Methodological Field Study." *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15:1 (November 1955): 23-36.
- Sperber, Dan. *Rethinking Symbolism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974.
- Van der Veer, Peter. *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Vilsan, Kottapali. *The Twice Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians*. Ann Arbor: Booklinks, University of Michigan, 1982.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.