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Authority, Representation, and Offense: Dalit Catholics, Foot Washing, and the Study of Global Catholicism

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Cover Page Footnote

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MATHEW N. SCHMALZ

Authority, Representation, and Offense: Dalit Catholics, Foot Washing, and the Study of Global Catholicism

If you're focusing on foot washing, you're not going to understand anything about India. This is what Christian missionaries always did. I felt humiliated sitting here, forced to look at that picture. Whenever anyone washed my feet in a village I visited, it didn't have anything to do with what you're talking about.¹

Introduction

The respondent to my paper on Dalit Catholics and foot washing confronted me forthrightly—interjecting his comment, recorded above, right after my talk ended and following up with slightly extended remarks after the other presenters had finished. He wanted me to know, first and foremost, that I was traveling down an ill-advised path of inquiry, following a trajectory that would lead me away from Indian culture rather than toward it. But while my efforts may have been misguided, the respondent called attention to how I was nonetheless tracing a well-trod path: Christian missionaries who came to India had used the same kind of tropes and images in their preaching and proselytism. Indeed, the respondent to my paper asserted, what I had done was objectionable and not just because I seemed to implicitly ridicule Indian culture but also because I had offended him personally. As respondent, he had to deliver his remarks against the backdrop of a picture of a Dalit woman washing the feet of a priest: the image was projected onto a screen, which was being used by me and the other presenters to share PowerPoint slides and images related to our research.

¹ Respondent to Mathew N. Schmalz, "Lived Catholicism and the Problem of Culture," (Paper Presented for Indian Cultures, Catholic Cultures: A Workshop on Rites, Religiosity, and Cultural Diversity in Indian Catholicism, Dharmaram Vidhya Kshetram, Bangalore January 12, 2015). I have chosen not to reveal the name of the respondent.

As the subaltern historian Saurabh Dube pithily remarked when reflecting on the contentious field of South Asian studies, “There are many outrages in the air today.”² These outrages have most often concerned construals of Hinduism: the dispute between Jeffrey Kripal and the Ramakrishna Mission over portrayals of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa; arguments about the applicability of Freudian interpretations of Sri Gaṇeśa, his trunk, and his hunger for sweets; James Laine’s referencing of a joke concerning the Maratha hero Shivājī; the continuing criticism and defense of the work of Wendy Doniger, in which outrage seems to be the only sentiment that both sides share.³

When my presentation received such a stinging rebuke, I thought that the criticism could be best understood as yet another iteration of the outrages that are evoked by the study of South Asia by Western scholars or by those who deploy methods that seemingly reflect Western needs and sensibilities. Of course, the marker “Western” can be deceptive and tricky—for example, disciplines like ethnography and sociology, which are conventionally associated with “Western” epistemologies, have rich histories in and among Indian universities and scholars. In any case, I delivered my presentation in India and I found that I had a good number of defenders. Some in the audience argued that real issue was discomfort with the persistence of caste. Others suggested—gently—that perhaps the respondent felt a little guilty, or certainly sheepish, that he had had his own feet washed many times in a manner not dissimilar to what was being represented on-screen. Still others argued that the emotive language of personal “offense” was inappropriate since I hadn’t intended to insult anyone. As discussion went back and forth, a representative from the university whispered in my ear and suggested that a high-level administrator could deliver a formal apology to me in front of the respondent and the assembled audience.

While I made it clear that I certainly didn’t need an apology, I did feel vindicated. After all, I was talking about difficult issues; it was comforting and affirming to learn that I had allies among Indian scholars and activists who evidently found something valuable in my approach to Dalit Catholic religiosity and associated issues. When the conference concluded and I flew back to

² Saurabh Dube, “Scandals, Scholars, Subjects,” in *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances*, eds. Mathew N. Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 207.

³ For a responses by Jeffrey Kripal to criticism of his work, see Jeffrey Kripal, “*Kālī’s Child: From the Heart*” (available: <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kalischi/>); for a discussion of the controversy surrounding Freud and Sri Gaṇeśa, see Paul Courtright, “Climbing through Paradigms,” in *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances*, eds. Mathew N. Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 191-206; for commentary on the “Laine affair,” see James Laine, “Resisting my Defenders, Resisting my Attackers: Representing the Shivaji Narratives,” in *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances*, eds. Mathew N. Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 153-172; for recent overview of the Doniger debate, see Brian K. Pennington, C. S. Addock, Rupa Vishwanath, Wendy Doniger, and Anatanand Rambachan, “Roundtable on Outrage, Scholarship, and the Law in India,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84: 2 (June 2016): 323-372.

Massachusetts, I carried with me the feeling that the academic turbulence had dissipated more quickly than I expected and in a way that would smooth the course of my future research.

Several months passed. Slowly, and somewhat reluctantly, I began to reconsider not only the content of the respondent's criticism but my rather blithe self-satisfaction. The respondent was a retired officer of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and had a long and distinguished career dedicated to addressing the very issues of caste, gender, and hierarchy that I was raising. He was also a Catholic Christian, baptized in the Syro-Malabar rite. At the very least, the dynamics between us as presenter and respondent did not isomorphically replicate the collisions of method and identity that have generated so much controversy in South Asian studies. Indeed, there were—just under the surface--Catholic concerns and sensibilities that made the exchange complex, but also productive to think through more carefully than I was inclined at the time.⁴

In this essay, I wish to revisit the exchange between myself and the respondent to my presentation about Dalit Catholics and the practice of foot washing as I observed it in a North Indian village. I will first recapitulate my remarks, with some alterations suitable to the narrative style of this essay. I will then move to unpack, in a more sympathetic and considered way, the criticism my paper received. Specifically, I will consider how the feeling or experience of offense evoked by my presentation relates to deeper issues concerning authority and representation. While I will initially address how these issues of authority, representation, and offense resonate within a South Asian context that includes Christianity, I will conclude by reflecting more broadly on their relevance for the study of global Catholicism, and especially for scholars who seek to move between and within different cultural and institutional contexts.

Foot Washing in a North Indian Village

Veronica lives with her husband, Louis, in a small village abutting a diocesan Catholic mission in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, near the Ganges river that divides Uttar Pradesh from Bihar. Veronica was baptized Catholic when her father converted to Catholicism—he later became a catechist for Capuchin missionaries who came to the district in the late 1940s. Veronica and her husband both work at the mission's Hindi medium school. Veronica remains best known for her bold, though ultimately unsuccessful, candidacy for Block Pramukh (chief) back in the 1990s.⁵ During that campaign, her identity as a Catholic Christian became a contentious issue: Veronica

⁴ In a different context, I have reflected on how Catholic identity intersected with my research in North India with a Catholic charismatic healer who attempted to persuade me that I had the gift of healing and prophecy, see Mathew N. Schmalz, "American Catholic, Indian Catholics: Reflections on Religious Identity, Ethnography and the History of Religions," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 13(January 2001): 91-97.

⁵ See Mathew N. Schmalz, "Veronica's Candidacy," *Dalit International Newsletter* 9 (June 2005): 6-9.

is a Dalit, an Untouchable, a member of a scheduled caste.⁶ But as a Christian, Veronica is denied reserved positions and other legal remedies available to other scheduled castes.⁷ For this reason, Veronica, her husband, and many other Dalit Catholics in the area maintain a dual identity: they are Dalit in the eyes of the law and Catholic Christians in the eyes of the Church.

This dual identity gives Dalit Catholics tactical mobility when it comes to dealing with the surrounding society and culture.⁸ On one hand, they reject traditional occupations such as tanning and midwifery, which marked them as belonging to a scheduled caste.⁹ On the other hand, divination and exorcism, referred to under the collective rubric of *ojāitī* or “sorcery,” are practiced quite frequently to supplement the allopathic therapies offered by the mission’s medical dispensary.

Foot washing is one traditional practice that has been retained. Usually, when a priest—or other honored male guest—arrives at a house, the wife of the family brings out a jug of water and a stainless steel plate. The guest takes off his sandals or slippers and the woman pours water over his feet, cleans the dirt away, and then massages the guest’s lower leg before discarding the water outside of the living compound.

This practice is glossed, or interpreted, in a number of ways, depending on not only on who explains it but also on who asks about it in the first place. I remember when my feet were washed for the first time. I was a young graduate student in the 1990s and I felt that it was inappropriate for me to present myself, or be treated, in a way that seemingly emphasized high status. But when Veronica washed my feet, she simply assured me, “You’re tired and have come a long way.”

While I think I smiled and gave a rather nervous laugh, I surmised that Veronica’s initial explanation did not exhaust what the practice meant or could mean. But in some ways, Veronica’s words reflected her effort to bridge a cultural

⁶ Dalit literally means “oppressed” or “crushed” and is a term that has been adopted by groups who have historically been considered “untouchable.” “Scheduled Caste” is an official term, used in the Indian Constitution, to refer to such disadvantaged groups. “Scheduled Castes” and “Scheduled Tribes” are “listed” or are on “the schedule” for particular compensatory benefits. On the multiple resonances and valences of the term “Dalit” among Catholics in Veronica’s area, see Mathew N. Schmalz, “The Faith and Rationality of Dalit Christian Experience,” *Asian Horizons* 5.1 (2011): 24-35, available: http://crossworks.holycross.edu/rel_faculty_pub/8/.

⁷ For somewhat dated but still very valuable discussion of the question of governmental benefits for Dalit Christians, see Andrew K. J. Wyatt, “Dalit Christians and Identity Politics,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 30:4 (1998): 16-23. For a discussion of more contemporary issues related to Christians in India and social status, see Chad M Bauman and Tamara Leech, “Political Competition, Relative Deprivation, and Perceived Threat: A Research Note on Anti-Christian Violence in India,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35:12 (2012): 2195-2216.

⁸ On Dalit Catholic “tactical mobility,” see Mathew N. Schmalz, “Dalit Catholic Tactics of Marginality at a North Indian Mission,” *History of Religions* 44: 3 (2005): 216-251.

⁹ It is a hotly debated question whether tanning, associated particularly with the Chamar caste to which Veronica belongs, was actually something “traditional” or was imposed as a colonial construct. For a groundbreaking discussion of this question, see Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011).

divide with me. She was talking in terms of what she understood to be universal human needs for refreshment. In this sense, she was emphasizing how our own physicality is something that unites us as human beings: culture is built upon basic human material needs and while those necessities might vary from location to location, there remain irreducible needs that everyone shares by virtue of being human.

When I visited Veronica's home in spring 2013, I was accompanied by the mission's head priest. Veronica washed both our feet, and the priest came first. Afterwards, when we were offered tea and jaggery, I asked him why Dalit Catholics practiced foot washing and he gave me an interpretation different from what Veronica had offered to me two decades earlier. In the priest's view, foot washing was an act that established the Christian identity of this relatively young Catholic community. After all, foot washing is one act that Christ did for his apostles as he admonished them, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14). The priest's portrayal of foot washing implicitly assumes that culture has a particular spiritual quality as the locus of certain values. Hence, there is a "Hindu culture," a "Muslim culture," and a "Christian culture," with "culture" as an overarching concept becoming essentially a theological construct that is synonymous with the spirit of a particular people or religious group.

But there are other ways to understand the act of foot washing--ways that rely more upon anthropological understandings of human expression. After telling his disciples to wash one another's feet, Jesus goes on to say, "Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him" (John 13: 16). And so if we consider foot washing a little more deeply, we can also discern an expression of hierarchy, or even servitude, that points to an understanding of culture as a network of power relations. Most Dalit Catholics in Veronica's village have always been landless laborers. When the landowners would come to inspect the fields, they would expect their feet to be washed. Now this practice has been transferred to a Catholic context that is itself structured by a number of hierarchical relations.

These hierarchical relations are not difficult to identify. The first hierarchical relation emerges in the distinction between priests and laity. The second hierarchical relation concerns gender divisions and rankings. In both cases, what is revealed is how the Catholic church has inserted itself into a particular cultural context by displacing the original patron—the landowners—and introducing a patronage system of its own. The mission provides employment for Catholics and it also intervenes with local political leaders. In times past, the mission also distributed food and clothes. Given this background, we could say that foot washing points to and reaffirms an asymmetrical relationship of support and subordination. The symbolic language of foot washing draws upon a particularly Indian idiom, which can be seen as fundamentally transactional with water

mediating an exchange of substances: Dalits not just notionally, but actively, take the pollution of the priests on themselves.¹⁰ In articulating, or provisionally accepting, their dependent status in and through the act of foot washing, Dalit Catholics receive protection and material support. Pursuing this line of interpretation would lead to the corollary that culture is power: cultural expressions are best understood as functioning to produce or replicate social distinctions and categories.

This is the problem of culture when it comes to lived Catholicism: what understanding of culture is operative and what does it mean to say that Indian Catholicism is “Indian?” The difficulty defining a particularly Indian component of Indian culture is compounded by the implicit valuations of certain kinds of cultural expressions. For example, Dalit Catholics in this part of Uttar Pradesh attend the mission’s Hindi medium school. The diocese does maintain English medium schools, but only the wealthy in cities have access to them. Dalit Catholic children are trained in North Indian classical dance. The whole impetus behind this seems to be to “inculturate” Dalit Catholics in a very specific way: to make them “good North Indians,” in other words.¹¹ There thus is an implicit valuation of what existing Dalit culture is like, not to mention what Dalits are--and are not--capable of learning.

When culture becomes equated with civilization, or with some sort of essential spirit, we run the risk of overlooking the lived reality of those whose lives we seek to understand.¹² When it comes to foot washing, romantic Christian notions of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples come up against the hard realities that give shape and texture to Dalit Christian life: Catholicism does not somehow hover above the rough and tumble of daily life. Instead, Catholicism exists as something that can be contextually deployed on a variety of different registers. For example, it makes sense that Dalit Catholics give multiple explanations for foot washing, after all they themselves are trapped within an exceedingly complex network of relationships that they must negotiate: their relationship with me was one such relationship; their relationship with priests is another such relationship; and their relationship with the landowners is yet another relationship. Given these complexities, it would perhaps be more analytically helpful to move away from conceptions of culture broadly understood, and instead consider particular expressions of agency within material contexts. Culture is something that is created

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of the “transactional” nature of exchanges within Indian culture, see McKim Marriott ed., *India through Hindu Categories* (New Delhi/Newbury Park/London: Sage Publications, 1990).

¹¹ “Inculturate” or “inculturation” is a neologism used by the Catholic Church to refer to efforts to adapt to Indian culture, see Mathew N. Schmalz, “The Indian Church: Catholicism and Indian Nationhood,” in *The Catholic Church and the Nation State: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Paul Christopher Manuel, Lawrence C. Reardon, and Clyde Wilcox, 209-225 (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006).

¹² For a discussion of “culture’s” association with “civilization” and a strong argument that the entire concept should be abandoned, see Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists’ Account* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

in and through human effort. Talking about culture in terms of abstract, essentialized characterizations--such as Indian or Catholic--often does a kind of violence to the collective work of actual human beings, like Veronica, who take an act full of cultural symbolism and make it work according to different scales of value and power.

Authority, Representation, and Offense

Unlike when I first presented the foregoing analysis, I have not included a photograph of Veronica washing the feet of a priest: its omission is intended to raise the issue of whether it's actually necessary for the discussion. But it was the picture of Veronica that was the flashpoint the respondent's heated comments and the sometimes equally incendiary comments from members of the audience.

In one sense, if foot washing was a relatively anodyne expression that carried with it little social import, it is difficult to understand why depicting it would provoke outrage. But maybe looking at matters from a different perspective might be helpful; after all, why didn't I turn off the projector after my comments were finished? While I do like using visual backdrops when I lecture, in this case, I wanted to intensify discussion, to draw attention to the act of foot washing and its complex and contentious resonances. What I did not see clearly, or was not able to admit, was that I was claiming authority not just for my analysis but for myself.

"Authority," as Bruce Lincoln argues in a deceptively simple formulation, is "an effect."¹³ That is to say, authority proceeds not from some sort of intrinsic constellation of qualities, but from articulations—verbal, physical, or visual--that create an impact: the extent to which that impact succeeds is one way of measuring the authority carried by a particular discourse or person. Of course, Lincoln unpacks his initial observation in quite complex ways that allow us to understand not only how authority is asserted but also how it is corroded. But in effectively forcing both the respondent and the audience "to confront" the image of Veronica washing the priest's feet, I was still setting the context for discussion—long after the allotted time for my presentation. If my argument was that Veronica was effectively being "humiliated" in the act of foot washing since she had little choice given the context, it is not inappropriate to echo that interpretation--and turn it around—by saying that my use of the image was "humiliating" precisely because it gave the respondent little room to develop a different line of argument or interpretation. Simply put, I was producing an effect that functioned to assert authority for my own scholarly perspective.

If notions of authority were implicated in how I was setting the visual context for discussion, they were also most certainly involved in how the respondent and I explicitly framed our comments. I referenced my thirty years of association with Veronica's village, my knowledge of Hindi and Bhojpuri, and my

¹³ Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 10.

fluency in and with academic theories of culture. Within an academic environment, such specific qualifications are necessary for claiming and maintaining authority. By contrast, the respondent could assert authority by virtue of his position in the Indian Administrative Service—a civil service that has a far more competitive selection process than the most rigorous Ph.D. program.¹⁴ Added to his professional accreditation and status, were the respondent’s years of experience working in rural India and his familiarity with a wide range of administrative, social, and cultural issues that confront implementation of Indian government policy and development programs. The difficulty was that the academic context allowed little purchase for a competing claim to authority that would have buttressed salient points of disagreement with my analysis. When two very different frames of reference engage each other at close range, the friction generated is usually intense.

Authority gives shape and texture to representation, and at issue between me and the respondent was how best to portray Veronica’s act of foot washing. In my view, the multiple interpretations of foot washing were emblematic of the difficulties in locating culture writ large: following my line of thinking, it would be more productive to see foot washing and its meaning and significance, as well as the meaning and significance of culture as a conceptual construct, as a product of human agency, morphing and changing depending on the context and the shifting positions of audience and performer, observer and observed, scholar and informant. The respondent’s point was that I was attributing far too much meaning to a simple act. Given that most basic point, the comment about acting like a Christian missionary seemed like an awkward and polemical add-on.

I certainly did not think of myself as acting like a “Christian missionary,” and it did seem strange that a pejorative reference to Christian missionaries would be made in a context that predominately included Indian Christians. Christians in India, whether they be Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox, labor under prejudicial perceptions of being foreigners in their own country and the trope of the “Christian missionary” is usually associated with conversion—an incendiary issue in Indian society that sometimes manages to light flash fires on American social media and blogging sites.¹⁵ Yet, here again, it appeared to me that there was something more interesting and substantive going on than polemical over-reach.

¹⁴ For a recent overview of the IAS, its history and contemporary challenges, see Milan Vaishnav and Saksham Khosla, “The Indian Administrative Service Meets Big Data,” *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (Sept. 1, 2016), available: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/09/01/indian-administrative-service-meets-big-data-pub-64457>.

¹⁵ On conversion and perceptions of Christianity in Indian society, see Chad Bauman and Richard Fox Young eds., *Constructing Indian Christianities: Culture, Conversion, Caste* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2014); see also Mathew N. Schmalz, “The Indian Church: Catholicism and Indian Nationhood” (2006). For an example of India’s conversion debate spilling over into an American context, see the respectful, but quite hard hitting, response to one of my op-eds by Suhag Shukla, Esq., Co-founder/Executive Director of The Hindu American Foundation: Mathew N. Schmalz, “Conversion, Murder, and India’s Supreme Court,” *On Faith* (Jan. 28, 2011) available: <https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2011/01/28/conversion-and-indias-supreme-court/509> and Suhag A.

Catholicism in India is not a seamless whole. There are three Catholic rites or churches in India that affirm full communion with Rome but nonetheless have their own distinct practices and cultures: the Latin rite, whose liturgy would be quite familiar to European and North American Catholics, and the eastern Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara communities. I happened to be speaking to an audience composed of clergy and scholars who were most familiar with Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara rites, and their respective cultures and historical experiences. It would be over-reach on my part to make assumptions about what this largely Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Catholic context meant to individual presenters and audience members—including, and especially, to the respondent criticizing my presentation. But the issue of caste and Christianity is a fault line that often divides Indian Catholic churches. Of course, whether--and to what extent--Indian Catholic communities reproduce caste is a vexing scholarly question.¹⁶ C. J. Fuller, for example, does argue that Christians in Kerala are indeed “castes:” the three major Christian groupings--Syrian, Latin, and “New Christian” communities that converted in the nineteenth century—are consistently ranked in relation to each other and other Hindu castes.¹⁷ Beyond such anthropological analyses, conventional perceptions in South India associate the Syro-Malabar church with a pre-colonial and largely “high caste identity”; the Latin rite, by contrast, has historically been connected to lower caste fishing communities that converted during the Portuguese incursions and colonization on the Malabar coast in the 16th century.¹⁸ While I was speaking about the replication of caste hierarchy and practices within Latin rite Catholicism in North India, I had tripped the wire connecting caste and Catholicism.

The respondent knew that I had not simply blundered into a discursive minefield. He understood my remarks not as a “representation” in the conventional sense of matter-of-factly reporting about “facts on the ground.” Instead, he correctly perceived my presentation as an intervention into the contested domain of Catholic, caste, and Indian national identity. Moreover, I was claiming my allegiance: for all my abstract considerations of culture and agency, I was siding with Dalit Catholics, representing them by “re-presenting” the context of their lives to implicitly counter triumphalist narratives of Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, as offering a

Shukla Esq., “The Question of Evangelism in India,” *The Huffington Post* (Feb. 5, 2011) available: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/suhag-a-shukla-esq/harvesting-souls-yields-c_b_817793.html

¹⁶ For a survey of anthropological approaches to the question of caste and Christianity, see Mathew N. Schmalz, “Christianity: Culture, Identity, and Agency,” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of India*, ed. Elizabeth Clark-Deces (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), 277-294.

¹⁷ C. J. Fuller, “Kerala Christians and the Caste System,” *Man* 11:1 (1976): 53-76.

¹⁸ Corinne G. Dempsey, *Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7; on Portuguese colonialism and how its impact still reverberates culturally, politically, and religiously in India, see Mathew N. Schmalz, “A Special Place: Imagining Goa from the Estado da Índia to Indian Independence, in *Religion and Politics in a Global Society: Comparative Perspectives from the Portuguese World*, eds. Paul Christopher Manuel, Alyssa Lyon, and Clyde Wilcox (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012), 163-184.

new and liberating identity beyond the influence of indigenous Indian hierarchies.¹⁹ Of course, missionaries are known for trumpeting triumphalist declarations about Christianity, not sounding discordant notes of dissent. But Christian missionaries are understood in the Indian popular imagination as outsiders who come and criticize India and Indians. The tenor of my remarks, if not their explicit tone, neatly fit that perception. Sometimes outrage is evoked by misunderstanding conceptual or disciplinary languages; and sometimes outrage is a “set-up,” a trap armed by an adamant refusal to do the work to appreciate what someone else is saying; but, other times, outrage comes from understanding all-too-well the implications and subtext of what is actually being said.

Who has the authority to speak about a particular phenomenon and interpret it? When does re-representation become an unwelcome intervention? These are questions that have long troubled anthropologists and are now pressing issues in the study of India culture, society, and religion. What I would draw attention to here is how there is also an Catholic element reflected in the engagement and collision between myself and the respondent to my paper. One of the appeals—at least for me—of studying global Catholicism is that it seemingly provides a way to elide boundaries of cultural difference: Indian Catholics and American Catholics might very well have very different cultural sensibilities and historical memories, but they still share something in their Catholicity. In addition to providing firmer ground for cross-cultural dialogue and engagement, this sharing or intersection of identities might also give greater purchase for comparative academic work, especially when it comes to questions such as what makes Indian culture “Indian?” or what makes Catholicism “Catholic?” The difficulty, of course, is that Catholicism relates to, and competes with, other identities and commitments: privileging the Catholic—or assuming that Catholic identity is monolithic and necessarily creates a shared space—is an act that relies upon both authority and representation in destabilizing ways that may not always produce new meanings or creative possibilities for personal and scholarly connection.

Conclusion

During my formal remarks, and through the back and forth between me, the respondent, and the audience, I tried to be self-referential. I not only mentioned that my feet had been washed by Veronica, I returned to it to admit, or confess, that I was part of the very power dynamics I was describing. As the time allotted for conversation was approaching its limit, I rather plaintively asked, “What I should I do? Should I consent to having my feet washed or should I refuse?”

“You should wash Veronica’s feet,” was the response that came from an elderly priest dressed in a white cassock. Many in the audience nodded and I fell silent as I thought about what that would mean. Some months later, as I remember

¹⁹ An associated point is that Catholicism brings with it its own hierarchies, see Schmalz, “Christianity: Culture, Identity, and Agency” (2011).

things, I returned to the priest's suggestion and played out in my mind how it might work, but I soon became overwhelmed by all the variables: if I asked for the plate and jug for foot washing what if Veronica didn't want to give them to me? Should I simply take them? What about Veronica's husband, Louis? Should I wash his feet too and would he expect to go first? What might the priest think? Would he be pleased or shamed? Would I unintentionally give insult by treating Veronica like a guest when she was in her own home? What about the very act of touching Veronica—even it was just her feet? After all, a North Indian village is a context in which gender and spousal roles can sometimes be very rigidly defined and enforced. Thinking more broadly, I wondered whether there was any effective way to make Veronica more of an agent in this whole discussion about foot washing as opposed to talking about her at a scholarly distance and in a context that did allow her to fully contribute or participate. These questions did not lend themselves to easy answers, and when it came to the specific possibility of me washing Veronica's feet, I thought that might very well produce backlash or confusion in a way that would make the reaction of the respondent to my paper seem mild and measured by comparison.

But the priest's suggestion—as bold and risky as it was—certainly made the discussion less abstract and shifted the focus towards ways of acting and doing. And it very well may be that thinking through issues of authority and representation inevitably leads to outrage, if for the only reason that everyone seems implicated in some sort of power dynamic or asymmetric alignment of identity. There simply does not seem to be some sort of perspective or vantage point—provided by Catholicism or any other identity or affiliation—that would allow for scholarly communication, dialogue, and investigation on the basis of reciprocity and solidarity. What remains then is a willingness to consider and revise one's own perspective and stance in a way that is honest and transparent—and appropriately sensitive to the complexities of context.

After the discussion period for my paper concluded, the respondent left his seat and walked out of the room. I mingled for a time with other presenters and participants until I saw that the respondent had returned and was walking toward me, quickly and deliberately. “Mathew, no hard feelings,” he said and then extended his hand, which I gladly clasped. I don't think either of us was ready to wash the other's feet, but by meeting each other face to face, and shaking hands, we were doing our best to negotiate issues of authority and representation in a way that did remove the need for outrage.

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