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Ad Experimentum: The Paradoxes of Indian Catholic Inculturation

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The Paradoxes of Inculturation

In the past two years, Catholicism in India has been the focus of international attention to the degree that it has never before received. Reports of violence against Catholic Christians in the Indian states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh were highlighted in *The New York Times* and in U.S. State Department reports on religious freedom.[1] Protests against the recent papal visit to India also seemed to underscore a rise in anti-Christian feeling, which the Western press has associated with resurgent Hindu nationalism.[2] The Indian press, for its part, has often viewed the Catholic Church with suspicion. During John Paul II's first visit to India in 1986, the Hindi periodical *Dinman* ran a story under the title "Is the Catholic Church Really a Time Bomb?"[3] *Dinman*'s answer to this question was "yes": the Catholic Church is a time bomb ticking away in Indian society since the Catholic Church's work with Untouchables and Tribals raises the specter of further unrest within an India still trying to define its nationhood.[4] The paradox of such attitudes is, of course, that Christianity has a long history on the Indian sub-continent. Christian communities identify their origins with the apostle Thomas and his legendary journey to India.[5] Historians would point to communities of Syrian Christians, with connections to the Nestorian Assyrian Church of the East, which had been established in South India from at least the year 600 C.E.[6] To describe Christianity as completely alien to South Asia thus ignores an indigenous Indian Christian tradition that extends over fourteen hundred years.

The suspicion and sporadic violence specifically surrounding Ca-

tholicism in India appears even more ironic given Catholic efforts to adapt to Indian culture. This process of "inculturation," begun in earnest after the Second Vatican Council, has sought to integrate various Indian cultural and religious symbols into the liturgical life of Indian Catholicism. Writing in 1981, the Indian scholar of Christianity K. N. Sahay predicted that Catholic inculturation would "gradually soften the attitude of Indian masses towards Christianity and in course of time Christianity will be treated by non-Christians on par with Hinduism."[7] The recent violence against Catholic Christians, however, emphasizes the failure of inculturation to achieve this rapprochement with Hinduism and Indian culture. But what is perhaps even more surprising is that inculturation has been resisted by Indian Catholics themselves. The paradox of Indian Catholic inculturation is that this effort to become more Indian has only elicited greater suspicion within Indian society as a whole.

While Indian Catholic architects of inculturation expected resistance, their theologies did not account for its depth. This inability to anticipate adverse reactions to inculturation was perhaps due to Indian Catholic theology's refusal to reach beyond its own boundaries to engage other disciplines that address the social and cultural components of religious expression. But anthropology, as the social science with the most dynamic tradition of cultural study, could make an oblique and revealing entry into the discourse surrounding inculturation, not only by suggesting an explanatory framework for understanding Catholicism's relationship to Indian culture, but also by charting a trajectory for dialogue between theology and the social sciences as both seek to probe the relationship between religion and culture. Accordingly, this essay will address the apparent paradox of Indian Catholic inculturation by examining its theology of liturgical adaptation within anthropological understandings of symbol and culture. Initially focusing upon the dialogical religious vision of D. S. Amalorpavadass, the leading proponent of Indian Catholic inculturation, we will see how the inculturation movement developed and later provoked controversy surrounding its use of symbols and its appropriation of Hindu religiosity. Turning then to contemporary anthropological discourse, we will consider how challenges to conventional understandings of symbol and Hinduism illuminate the tensions that have so shaped responses to Catholic adaptation to Indian culture. But anthropology does not simply provide an analytical apparatus for probing the social

context of theological discourse. Instead, I will demonstrate that both theology and the social science of anthropology can find a common ground of concern underlying their seemingly conflicting reflections on symbolism and culture.

Ad Experimentum

Within South Asia, inculturation now refers to self-consciously theological efforts to integrate Indian forms of expression into the life of the Catholic Church. But before we discuss such attempts, it is important to realize that Christianity has long been "inculturated" within certain parts of Indian society. In South India, where the Apostle Thomas is reputed to have set ashore, Syrian Christians enjoyed the protection of local kings and practiced many customs that could also be said to characterize "Hindu" religiosity, such as the observance of Untouchability, the casting of horoscopes, and the ritual shaving of the head after important rites of passage.[8] But explicitly Catholic efforts to adapt to Indian culture were not as concerned with accommodating such practices as they were with appropriating them to articulate the message of the gospel. These efforts together form a narrative that extends from the work of Roberto de Nobili in the seventeenth century to the theology of D. S. Amalorpavadass following the Second Vatican Council. As we will see, the story of Indian Catholic inculturation is characterized by individual and institutional creativity as well as by bitter controversy.

From De Nobili to Amalorpavadass

Within the West, initial Catholic efforts at inculturation in India are usually associated with Roberto de Nobili, a Jesuit who founded a mission in the South Indian holy city of Madurai in 1606. De Nobili immersed himself in South Indian culture, studying both Sanskrit and Tamil. He wore the ochre robe of the renouncer or *samnyasi* and proclaimed the Bible as the completion of the four Vedas considered by many Hindus to be revealed texts central to their ritual practice.[9] De Nobili directed his efforts toward Brahmins, members of the highest caste within Indian society, and consecrated their sacred threads, the traditional emblems of Brahminical status, to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This cultural accommodation went as far as the establishment

of separate churches for high and low caste converts—a distinction that persists in parts of South India to this day. De Nobili argued that these practices were social customs with either coextensive or secondary religious meanings and thus were necessary adaptations if the truth of the gospel were ever to be fully proclaimed within Indian culture. While the forced Latinization of Christian communities by the Portuguese in the seventeenth century eradicated much of de Nobili's work, what emerged was a Catholic community in Southern India that developed its own distinct culture by blending both European and Indian elements.

De Nobili's seminal influence notwithstanding, perhaps the most creative Catholic proponent of inculturation was the Bengali nationalist Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. After his conversion to Catholicism in 1891, Upadhyay proclaimed himself a "Hindu Catholic." Writing in a dense literary Bengali, Upadhyay probed the relationship between Thomistic and Indian philosophical systems and maintained that the superstructure of Catholicism could be built upon a Hindu foundation.[10] In holding to this position, Upadhyay argued that Hinduism constitutes a complex of social practices in contrast to Catholicism's status as a preeminently supernatural construct concerning ultimate truth and salvation. Towards the end of his life, Upadhyay became vehemently anti-British and argued for a reassertion of traditional Hindu practices to protect India's purity. While still holding fast to his Catholic identity, Upadhyay advocated the veneration of Krishna as a moral exemplar and cultural symbol.[11] He also drew upon the Hindu text *The Laws of Manu* to assert the necessity of caste to preserve Indian society from the influence of half-breed Tribals and foreigners.[12] Upadhyay believed that this strengthening of Hindu identity meant the strengthening of Indian identity and would finally pave the way for Indian acceptance of a Christ and a Catholicism purged of its associations with colonial domination.

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay died in 1907 after being arrested by the British for sedition. Some sixty years later, the vision of a fully Indian Catholicism forcefully reemerged in the work and writings of D. S. Amalorpavadass. Born in Pondicherry in 1932 and ordained into the priesthood in 1959, Amalorpavadass pursued his doctoral studies at the Institut Catholique de Paris, completing his doctorate in 1964.[13] His dissertation, *Destinée de l'Église dans l'Inde d'aujourd'hui*, exerted a catalytic influence on Indian Catholicism well before its offi-

cial publication in 1967. In his discussion of Indian Catholicism, Amalorpavadass diagrams an Indian society aching under the stresses of its relatively new nationhood and the concomitant pressures of modernization and Westernization.[14] This social crisis of identity then paved the way for Christ, who alone can fulfill the collective longings of humanity. But in order for this transformation to occur, Christ must come clothed in the garb of Indian culture. Given its general similarity to Upadhyay's own vision, it is curious that Amalorpavadass never mentions him or any other Indian Catholic theologian in his discussion of Catholicism's destiny on the Indian sub-continent. Instead, Amalorpavadass argues that the Catholic Church in India remains constricted by its Western customs and modes of worship. If India is ever to accept Christ, then Catholicism must first accept India and open itself to the wisdom of the Hindu tradition. Much of the story of inculturation in India over the last thirty years may be traced back to D. S. Amalorpavadass and his clarion call for a fully inculturated Indian Catholicism.

Indian Catholic Inculturation and Vatican II

The period immediately following the Second Vatican Council produced an intense environment of liturgical innovation in Indian Catholicism. At the direction of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, D. S. Amalorpavadass was appointed secretary of a new National Liturgical Center in the South Indian city of Bangalore that was to spearhead liturgical reforms. Empowered by a series of indults *ad experimentum*, the Center first sought to produce vernacular translations of the mass for the Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, and Latin rites. Under Amalorpavadass's supervision, the Center held conferences and conducted surveys that addressed the issue of liturgical reform throughout the various regions of India. Some of the proposed changes reached a high degree of specificity, such as the rather trenchant suggestion that traditional penitential language if translated into the vernacular would needlessly frighten small children.[15] But beyond such liturgical minutiae, a consensus began to emerge at the Center that there should perhaps be a new rite for the entirety of India that would complement vernacular Eucharistic liturgies celebrated in the three rites of Indian Catholicism.

To this end of developing "A New Order of the Mass for India,"

the National Liturgical Center, with the approval of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, developed "12 Points of Adaptation" to be used as a framework for more extensive adaptation of Catholic liturgical life to Indian culture.[16] The "12 points of Adaptation" concerned what was called "indigenization in worship" and largely involved the adoption of characteristically Indian or Hindu postures during the Mass. These adaptations were approved by Rome in 1969 but were seen by Amalorpavadass and his colleagues as only an initial stage in liturgical renewal and inculturation. The second phase of reform proposed the development of an Indian Eucharistic prayer or anaphora while the third phase envisioned the use of non-Christian scriptures in worship.[17] Experimentation along these lines continued apace until 1975 when Cardinal Knox, the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, wrote to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India to prohibit the use of the Indian anaphora and readings from non-biblical scriptures in the liturgy.[18] With this letter, the most radical forms of experimentation in the Eucharistic liturgy came to an end.

The legacy of the "12 Points of Adaptation" continues in the form of an experimental order of the Mass that is celebrated in what are called Christian ashrams—places of worship and meditation that are often described as Hindu monasteries. The Mass is held in a chapel that ideally is patterned after a Hindu temple. The priest dresses in an ochre-colored robe that within the Hindu tradition is associated with renunciation. Participants first remove their footwear, circumambulate the chapel, and then are welcomed by the priest who applies sandalwood paste to their foreheads. An oil lamp and sticks of incense are lit and rotated in a clockwise direction first toward the altar and then toward the participants. Often the lamp is moved in such a way that it traces the outlines of the sacred syllable *Om*, which in some Hindu theologies is considered to be the very embodiment of all that is real. Eight flowers are placed on the altar before the consecration and at the elevation of the Host all participants prostrate themselves before the altar. The Mass is usually in the vernacular of the particular location of the ashram although Sanskrit is employed in the form of litanies of praise such as "Hail Christ, Giver of Salvation" (*Jai Yesu Khrist Muktidata*) or "Hail Christ, Lord of the Universe" (*Jai Yesu Khrist Vishvanath*). The use of such phrases thus links Christian conceptions of Christ to well-known qualities that Hindus attribute to the Divine. The structure of this experimental Mass completely parallels

the Latin Rite with the prohibited Indian Eucharistic prayer included in the accompanying missalette, its silent presence a reminder of the ever contentious debate over the extent and manner of Catholic adaptation to Indian culture.[19]

For D. S. Amalorpavadass, the experimental Indian Rite Mass was an exercise in both adaptation and dialogue. In his introductory remarks directed to the priests who would celebrate the Mass, he explains that:

> The project of adaptation might be briefly described as the expression of the same meaning in terms of new symbols belonging to a different cultural tradition. It can be compared to the project of translating a text from one language to another. To do a good translation, a capacity to rethink in another language is more necessary than a good dictionary.[20]

In order to facilitate this process of "rethinking," participants in the Mass often attend a retreat called the "Indian Christian Spiritual Experience," which includes an explication of the meanings of the symbols used in the experimental Mass.[21] Thus, *arati*, or the rotation of the oil lamp, is a sign of honor and is used to welcome participants as well as to acknowledge the presence of Christ in the host, or the Bible as the Word of God. Incense represents prayers rising toward heaven while the offering of eight flowers represents the submission to Christ of the four cardinal directions of the universe and the intermediate spaces between them. The various postures that participants assume during the Mass, such as the "bow of the five-limbs" (*panchanga pranam*) are glossed as signs of submission. These are all characteristic symbolic elements found in the diverse expressions of Hindu worship, but are not linked to any theological propositions that would challenge Catholic doctrinal claims. By integrating such symbols into the Mass, Amalorpavadass envisioned a reciprocal dialogue in which Hindus who witnessed the Mass would be able to understand Catholic religious expression, while Catholics who participated in it would be able not only to appreciate the aesthetics of Hindu religiosity but also to consider Hinduism itself a valid form of spiritual practice. Liturgy was then to be an initial meeting point for Hindus and Catholics, not as representatives of different religious traditions but as Indians who share a common spiritual and cultural heritage.

Theologies of Symbol and Culture

Amalorpavadass's writings on inculturation are voluminous and number well over one hundred books, pamphlets, and articles. Throughout his work, Amalorpavadass consistently places a Christian vision of creation and incarnation at the center of the process of inculturation. In *Gospel and Culture*, Amalorpavadass observes that just as Christ became incarnate within the specificity of human life, so too must Christianity assume the form of the culture of which it is a part. While the world still bears the imprint of sin, God's creation has become good again through Christ's work of reconciliation.[22] The Logos, however, has also been present in the whole of human history and has been revealed to all people under different external forms.[23] The enfleshment of God's self-gift in Christ is thus mirrored in the various manifestations of human community. Inculturation then is not a choice but an essential aspect of the church's mission to draw all to Christ:

> The Gospel lived by the Church in a living culture with all the transformations and realities it entails is what is called inculturation. . . . Hence there is no preaching of the Gospel without inculturation. There is no Church without being localised [and] concretised. . . . There is no salvation without the incarnation of the Word of God! [*sic*][24]

If culture is one of the primary forms of God's own self-expression, it also exists as an organic whole. The totality of Indian culture is suffused with an "ineffable Indianness" that, for Amalorpavadass, has continued to draw life from three thousand years of Hindu history. In his writings, however, Amalorpavadass focuses upon a very particular form of Hindu philosophy known as non-dualism or Advaita Vedanta.[25] Advaita Vedanta posits Brahman as the only source of reality, with the signs and symbols of the phenomenal world interpreted either as manifestations of Brahman or as Maya, illusion. In privileging this form of Hinduism, Amalorpavadass is able to understand specific forms of religious practice as symbols of a deeper reality, with Brahman seen as equivalent to Christian conceptions of Christ as Logos. What this does, of course, is to remove the problem of the worship of other gods in Catholic adaptations to Hindu culture. Indeed, the Hindu texts that Amalorpavadass argued should be integrated into the religious life of

Catholicism are not the mythological texts which Hindus so revere, but abstract philosophical works such as the Upanishads, which place Brahman at the center of their metaphysics. But in integrating non-Christian elements into the life of the church, Indian Christians are really not borrowing or appropriating anything. Amalorpavadass claims, citing the document *Ad Gentes*:

> "Particular traditions, together with the individual patrimony of each family, and of nations can be illuminated by the light of the Gospel, and then be taken up into Catholic unity." But in fact there is no borrowing, all that she appears to borrow is in fact what already belongs to Christ by creation and by resurrection and hence what the Church should claim and gather as her own. . . . As Indians we can claim all that is Hindu and Indian as our own; as Christians we can state that whatever belongs to Christ belongs to us. So we borrow nothing.[26]

Controversies

For many Hindu observers and cultural critics, this last statement by Amalorpavadass reveals a profoundly disturbing attitude toward Hinduism and Indian culture. For example, the radical Hindu critic Sita Ram Goel calls inculturation a swindle, designed to ape Hindu tradition in the hopes of winning converts.[27] Of course, what is at issue in much of what has been called anti-Christian violence revolves around charges of the forced conversion of Untouchables and Tribals to Catholicism. Inculturation then is seen as but another missionary tactic that illegitimately appropriates Hindu symbols with malign intent toward Indian society.

Many Indian Catholics were also suspicious of the changes proposed and enacted by the National Liturgical Center. Some even took Amalorpavadass to court in order to emphasize their resistance to new forms of the liturgy.[28] And for many Indian Catholics, the reforms envisioned by Amalorpavadass and the National Liturgical Center compromised Catholic truth claims by subordinating them either to Hinduism or to the secular goals of Indian nationalism.[29] Moreover, many Indian Catholics argued that inculturation failed to recognize that the distinctive identity of Indian Catholics was precious, and that while it was not Hindu, it had always been Indian. At issue then in

discussions of inculturation are questions concerning the translation of symbols and how Hinduism itself is defined. We will now move to examine these issues through the lens of anthropological understandings of symbol and culture.

Understanding Symbols, Understanding Hinduism

One striking aspect of Amalorpavadass's writings, and indeed of nearly all Indian Catholic writings on inculturation, is the consistent refusal to engage any discipline beyond the confines of theology. The absence of any mention of anthropology is particularly surprising, since anthropology is one discipline that has a long tradition of probing the nature of symbolism and culture. While anthropologists initially envisioned a veritable science of culture, in recent decades anthropology as a whole has become less aggressively positivist and more concerned with the hermeneutics of cultural study. In its present interpretative and ever-contentious incarnation, anthropological theory would unpack the paradox of Indian Catholic inculturation precisely by challenging the assumptions that ground Amalorpavadass's belief in the communicative power of symbolism and his understanding of Hinduism as a coherent whole.

Of Symbols and Hinduism

As we have seen, Amalorpavadass relates inculturation to the process of translation. Indian or Hindu symbols are translated into a Christian context and held in place by the semantic whole of ritual. From this perspective, symbols become the crucial constitutive elements of culture itself. Although Amalorpavadass never mentions anthropology specifically, his view of symbolism would find support in the work of anthropological theorists such as Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, who have likened culture to a fabric woven with symbolic threads that join together the disparate elements of human experience.[30] Within these perspectives, symbolism is "the semiotic minus the language" since the meaning of symbolism resides in the connection between explicit symbolic "signifiers" and "tacit signifieds" much in the way sound and meaning are joined in language.[31]

In his influential work *Rethinking Symbolism*, the anthropologist Dan Sperber observes that understanding symbolism as akin to lan-

guage should come as no surprise since the study of symbolism has often been conflated with semiotics, the study of signs. To counter this theoretical confusion, Sperber catalogues the variety of ways that symbols differ from words in a language by demonstrating not only that symbolic meanings are radically underdetermined but also that symbols themselves, unlike words in a language, can neither be paraphrased nor confined to a single grammar.[32] Most crucially, culture in and of itself does not provide a coherent framework for interpreting symbolic materials. Accordingly, any attempt to decode symbols ignores the often fluid and shifting context that gives rise to symbolism in the first place. Yet Sperber is no cultural relativist since he diagrams a cognitive theory of symbolic processing that posits a "symbolic mechanism" as part of "the innate mental equipment that makes experience possible."[33] Within this framework, Sperber would have us understand symbols as evocative, providing access to the memory of words and things. Symbols are symbols precisely because they constitute data that do not conform to the conceptual categories available to us when we confront them. Our interpretations of them are not meanings but representations derived from the evocative field of memory that continue the symbolic process until conceptual conditions finally become satisfied.

Sperber's discussion of symbolism is complex and not well suited to concise explication. In contrast to many other philosophically inclined social scientists, Sperber looks not to Ludwig Wittgenstein but to Gottlob Frege and W. V. O. Quine for his theoretical bearings. Critics have challenged him not only for this reliance upon extensional semantics and its narrow conception of meaning but also for his dependence upon an apparently Cartesian division between conceptual and symbolic knowledge.[34] Yet even Sperber's sharpest critics would admit the compelling power of his argument against semiotic views of symbolism.[35] Sperber's crucial point is that in a strictly philosophical sense symbols do not mean. When we speak of the meaning of symbols, we are not talking about something that inheres in the symbol itself but are instead acknowledging the power of symbols to access memories of words and things. This distinction is crucial for understanding why the Indian Rite Mass and Catholic inculturation efforts have been interpreted in a manner wholly unintended by Catholic theologians such as D. S. Amalorpavadass. The Indian Rite Mass, as a signifying and meaningful whole, was intended to delimit or contain

the symbols that it appropriated. Moreover, the inculturated symbols themselves were often understood to have a cultural and not religious meaning—largely so that the tender doctrinal sensibilities of the Catholic hierarchy would not be disturbed. But what Amalorpavadass did not envision was that the experimental Mass itself would become a symbol: not something that means, but instead something that would be interpreted fluidly and idiosyncratically by drawing upon the evocative field of memory.

Following Sperber's analysis of symbolic processing, any attempt to characterize the Indian field of memory would focus upon the mental imprints made by Christianity's colonial history and its exclusive claims to truth. To cite a recent example, the noted Indian journalist Arun Shourie argues that conversion to Christianity threatens the existence of the Indian nation.[36] In a public forum with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Shourie pointed to the role of Baptist missionaries in promoting unrest in Northeast India as evidence of the political nature of supposedly religious activity.[37] Shourie has continued his attacks in a new book that details the flow of monies coming from abroad to fund missionary activities in violation of Indian law.[38] Within the field of Indian memory, Catholicism and Protestantism are often conflated and the apparent economic power of Catholicism is often seen as a pernicious source of influence. Within Indian society as a whole, the associations with Christianity derive from the experience and memory of British and Portuguese colonialism and the often aggressive denunciations of Hindu religiosity. While the hope behind Catholic inculturation was to counter such suspicions and associations, Sperber would remind us that there is no way to contain the evocative power of symbols because symbols, as symbols, can never be exclusively paired with a particular exegesis. From this theoretical perspective, it becomes clear why the Indian Rite Mass and other aspects of Catholic inculturation could never communicate the meanings necessary to serve the dialogical purpose for which they were intended.

Beyond questions concerning the nature of symbolism, the crucial issue within the controversy surrounding Indian Catholic inculturation remains how Hinduism is defined. As we have seen, Amalorpavadass often associates Hinduism with the non-dualist philosophical school called Advaita Vedanta. Nonetheless, he discerns three traditions within Hinduism as a whole—Vedic, Tantric, and Agamic. Without going into detail about what constitutes each tradition, Amalorpavadass ar-

gues that Hinduism has an overall coherence for it provides the very ground of Indian culture. Yet similar claims for a unified Hinduism have come under close scholarly scrutiny. Following Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism*, scholars such as Ronald Inden and Richard King have observed that the Western world has understood Hinduism either as something mystically primal or as something very much like Christianity with a textual basis in the Vedas and Advaita Vedanta as its preeminent philosophical system.[39] In both cases, such interpretations of Hinduism have been designed to construct "an Other" that the West could control and dominate. While Amalorpavadass attempts to revalue the traditional dichotomy between East and West, his vision nonetheless has strong Orientalist resonances. The term "Hinduism" actually came into use in India with the writings of missionaries and colonial administrators.[40] Later, Indian leaders such as Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda adopted the term in order to reimagine Indian identity.[41] The development of Indian self-understandings of Hinduism thus arose as a response to colonial rule and Christian evangelization. The bold move within Catholic inculturation to define Hinduism then necessarily becomes seen as another political intervention within the contested domain of national identity.

The Resonances of the Indian Rite Mass

The fundamental point about defining Hinduism that anthropologists and historians wish to make is that what is called Hinduism is so heterogeneous that it defies description under the Western rubric of religion. The category "religion" emerges from the Western experience and as such often emphasizes qualities that are associated with Christianity, such as a discrete set of central texts, emphasis upon public worship, and overall doctrinal coherence.[42] While a definition of religion may indeed be a necessary element in any specifically Christian theology of inculturation, religion is not necessarily helpful as a cross-cultural descriptive category. In the case of Hinduism, there has been what Romila Thapar has described as a progressive process of classificatory "syndication" in which "Hinduism's" obvious lack of ecclesiastic structure and doctrinal orthodoxy have been ignored in order to assert that Hinduism is a textually based and unified religion.[43] But those like D. S. Amalorpavadass, who see the essence of Hinduism reflected in the texts of the Vedas, Upanishads, or the philosophical

works of Advaita Vedanta, often fail to acknowledge that Brahmins were the custodians of these texts. There are, of course, other textual and non-textual "Hindu" traditions that vary according to caste, class and linguistic group. What is conventionally called "Hinduism" is actually a diverse assemblage of traditions and practices, not all of which are doctrinally compatible or easily confined to a single descriptive rubric. The positing of an "essence" to Hinduism as a religion thus immediately elicits the rather vexing issue of which part of "Hinduism" is being privileged.

The issue of how "Hinduism" is defined and used within Catholic inculturation returns us to the question of anti-Christian violence that introduced our discussion. The primary targets of recent violence against Christians have been Untouchables, members of the lowest rung of the Hindu hierarchy who have converted to Catholicism. Untouchables are literally not to be touched by caste Hindus since they are considered to be inherently impure. The suspicion surrounding Catholicism stems from the fear that the adaptations of inculturation will be used for converting Untouchables, who would supposedly readily succumb to promises of economic and political power made even more pleasing in their suitably Indian disguise. But when we turn to how Catholic Untouchables understand inculturation, we find yet another paradox associated with the already perplexing question of Catholicism's adaptation to Indian culture.

On a morning in 1996, I was standing outside a chapel at a Christian ashram where the Indian Rite Mass was about to be celebrated. My companion was John Masih, a Catholic Untouchable who was working at the ashram. Before the Indian Rite Mass, the participants, who happened to be postulants for a women's religious order in South India, began to pray in Sanskrit and their voices echoed through the ashram: *Om Bhurbhurva Swah/Tat Savitur Varenyam/Bhargo Devasya Dhimahi/Dhiyo Yo Nah/Prachodayat.* This was a hymn from the Rig Veda that translated into English reads: "Om, may we meditate on the splendour of the vivifier divine, may he himself illumine our minds."[44] This is the *mantra*, or sacred phrase, that Brahmins are to repeat at key points in the day. Before the *mantra* was recited, the priest had admonished participants not to speak it aloud outside the ashram since Brahmins would surely understand it as an affront to their religious sensibilities.

When John Masih heard Sanskrit *mantras* issuing from the chapel,

he was not concerned with the sensibilities of Brahmins. John Masih had been discouraged by the ashram's priest from participating because the priest feared that John Masih would be scandalized by the presence of such seemingly "Hindu" practices. In any case, the "Indian Christian Spiritual Experience" that preceded the Mass was entirely in English, a language that John Masih and most other converts from Untouchability do not know. John Masih was scandalized by the Mass but his reaction was more complex than the priest suspected. John Masih saw inculturation as an adaptation to Brahmin religiosity, something that he believed had oppressed his caste fellows for generations. Indeed, he converted to Catholicism precisely to resist caste distinctions and their legitimating Brahminical ideology. In John Masih's view, the recitation of Brahmin *mantras* in a Catholic church not only compromised Christian truth claims but also showed a callous disregard for the sensibilities of Untouchable converts. As a North Indian, John Masih would certainly not resist all forms of inculturation because for him the songs of the poet Kabir and the Untouchable Saint Ravidas have a deep and affecting resonance in their denial of caste and hierarchy.[45] But as a Catholic Untouchable, it was a bitter irony indeed to be excluded from a Mass because Catholics who knew no Hindi wished to lay claim to the religious practices of Brahmins.

The experience of John Masih adds to the litany of paradoxes and ironies of Indian Catholic inculturation: what is presented as Indian is resisted by Indians themselves; what is portrayed as a dialogical opening to Hinduism is seen as plot to undermine it; and what is perceived to be a tool of conversion has failed to win any converts at all. Amalorpavadass and others who extolled the virtues of inculturation claimed they were borrowing nothing because all belongs to Christ and there are no other Gods before Him. But within the contested religious landscape of India, what Catholic inculturation emphasizes most clearly is that appearances can easily deceive.

Theology and Anthropology

The application of anthropology to the paradox of Indian inculturation initially reveals the potential for using social scientific reflection on symbol and culture as an analytical tool. While Sperber and other theorists we have discussed would resist the label "postmodern," their work is part of an intellectual movement in anthropol-

ogy to reclaim the heterogeneity of human experience from broadly romantic or colonialist generalizations about culture and static understandings of the nature of symbolism. While understanding human culture as fissured and human identity as fluid might seem a fragile basis for theological reflection, such indeterminacy lies at the heart of the paradox of Indian Catholic inculturation. Following theorists who would question any coherence to Hinduism as a religion, one might envision an Indian Catholic inculturation that turns its gaze more sensitively to the concerns of Untouchable converts such as John Masih who desire an inculturation that embraces indigenous traditions explicitly opposed to dominant cultural forms. Following Dan Sperber, one might envision a theology of the symbol that focuses not upon symbols themselves but instead upon the conditions under which symbols become symbols. Such an epistemological turn to the subject, certainly not unknown to Catholic theology, might even allow for understanding inculturation as part of symbolic processing itself. To say that Hinduism is not a religion is not to dismiss Indian traditions but to refuse to impose categories from the Western experience upon them. To question whether symbols mean, is not to deny any possibility of meaning but is instead to recognize that concepts such as "communication" or "dialogue" cannot fully account for the idiosyncratic interplay that characterizes cultural symbolism. It is perhaps precisely by raising such challenges that anthropology can contribute most to theological reflection.

The idea that anthropology could contribute to theology is, of course, hardly novel. Recently, both Kathryn Tanner and Michael Barnes have probed the different ways anthropology can inform the work of theologians.[46] Within liturgical theology in particular, there has been great interest in how anthropological understandings of ritual can deepen pastoral and constructive theological reflection on worship.[47] Rarely, however, has anthropology reciprocally turned to theology as a source for reflection upon itself. In his last major address before his sudden death in 1990, D. S. Amalorpavadass remarked that one's view of inculturation would depend upon the theological questions one asks.[48] For anthropologists, perhaps, what might be most valuable is reflection on the very fact that theologians ask provocatively broad questions that concern the relationship among culture, religion, and practice.

When one looks at the expanse of contemporary anthropological

theorizing about culture, one finds incessant questioning concerning the ultimate horizon of value for cultural research. In his introductory chapter for the collection of essays aptly titled *In Near Ruins*, Nicholas Dirks reflects upon the agony of contemporary anthropology and cultural theory struggling to come to terms with their own past within an academic context rent by post-modern suspicions.[49] Indeed, the most recent joining of cultural studies to cultural politics is informed by a desire to redeem a discipline that too often has used the pretense of social scientific objectivity to conceal its complicity in the project of Western colonialism.[50] Theologians of inculturation, like D. S. Amalorpavadass, have encountered similar issues in their effort to articulate a renewed Christianity that is fully at home in the cultures of which it is a part. But in doing so, theologians of inculturation have dared to presume that the context for such an encounter lies not only within but beyond the confines of human society and culture. Perhaps the final paradox of inculturation is that it continues to raise questions of ultimate meaning in the face of social scientific doubt and suspicion.

Notes

[1]Celia W. Dugger, "Attacks on Christians Unsettle Rural India," *New York Times* (January 23, 1999); "47 Suspected Militants in India Charged with Missionary's Death," *New York Times* (January 25, 1999); and "India's Christians: A Double Standard," *New York Times* (February 19, 1999). Also U.S. State Department, *U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: India* (http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/irf_rpt/199/irf_india99.html).

[2]Robert Marquand, "In India, a Pattern of Attacks on Christians," *Christian Science Monitor* (June 29, 2000).

[3]Ramesvak Srivastav, "Kya Katholik Charch Sachmooch Ek Taim Bam Hai" [Is the Catholic Church Really a Time Bomb?] *Dinman* (February 2-8, 1986).

[4]Untouchables are members of endogamous groups, often sharing the same occupation, called castes; within traditional forms of Hinduism, they are considered to be so impure that touching them would bring defilement. Within Indian society, Untouchables are often considered to be prime targets of Christian conversion efforts and Untouchables who do convert are denied affirmative action benefits entitled to lower castes under Indian law. Tribals are considered to be the indigenous inhabitants of India and are defined by Tribal social organization and their non-Indo-European languages. Christian groups have recorded their greatest gains in conversion among Tribal communities in northeast India.

[5]This tale can be found in the *Acts of Thomas*; see M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), 364.

[6]F. E. Keay, *A History of the Syrian Church in India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1960), 19.

[7]K. N. Sahay, "Indigenization of Christianity in India," *Man in India* 61 (1981): 3.

[8]Leslie Brown, *The Syrian Christians of St. Thomas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 168-169.

[9]For a discussion of de Nobili along with translations of his writings see Roberto De Nobili, S.J., *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises*, trans. and ed. Anand Amaladass and Francis X. Clooney (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000)

[10]Julius Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 111-118, 191-196.

[11]Ibid., 330.

[12]Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, *Samaj* [Society] (Calcutta: Birman Publishing House, n.d.), 32.

[13]For a biography of D. S. Amalorpavadass, see John Berchmans Barla, *Christian Theological Understanding of Other Religions According to D. S. Amalorpavadass* (Roma: Editrice Pontifica Universita Gregoriana, 1999), 25-28.

[14]D. S. Amalorpavadass, *Destinée de l'Église dans l'Inde d'aujourd'hui* [The Destiny of the Church in Contemporary India] (Paris: Fayard-Mame, 1967), 33-92. See also Amalorpavadass's master's thesis, *L'Inde à la recontre du Seigneur* (Paris: Éd. Spes, 1964).

[15]D. S. Amalorpavadass, ed., *Post-Vatican Liturgical Renewal in India* (Bangalore: National Catechetical and Liturgical Center, 1968), 9.

[16]D. S. Amalorpavadass, *Towards Indigenisation in the Liturgy: Theological Reflection, Policy, Programme, and Texts* (Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, n.d.), 31-32.

[17]Ibid., 26-53.

[18]The text of Cardinal Knox's letter may be found in the Indian lay periodical, *The Laity* (January 1976): 12-14.

[19]Matri Dham Ashram, *Prarthana Manjari* (Varanasi: Divine Printers, 1993), 28.

[20]D. S. Amalorpavadass, *New Orders of the Mass for India* (Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1974), 11.

[21]The following is based upon my participation in the Indian Christian Spiritual Experience at Matri Dham Ashram in Varanasi, India, in February, 1996.

[22]D. S. Amalorpavadass, *Gospel and Culture: Evangelisation, Inculturation, and "Hinduisation"* (Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1978), 17.

[23]Ibid., 18.

[24]Ibid., 20.

[25]Amalorpavadass's use of non-dualist philosophical terms and concepts is especially evident in his address to the Societas Liturgica in York, England, in 1989. See D. S. Amalorpavadass, "Theological Reflections on Inculturation," *Studia*

Liturgica 20 (1990): 116-29.

[26]Amalorpavadass, *Gospel and Culture*, 40-41.

[27]Sita Ram Goel, *Catholic Ashrams* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1988).

[28]Barla, *Christian Theological Understanding of Other Religions*, 425.

[29]Paul Hacker, *Theological Foundations of Evangelization* (Cologne: Steyler Verlag, 1980), 93-94.

[30]See Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967) and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

[31]Here I am drawing explicitly on the characterization of such views of symbolism in Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), xi.

[32]Ibid., 1-16, 85-114.

[33]Ibid., xii.

[34]In extensional semantics, meaning and truth are understood as functions of the relationship between words or linguistic terms and "their extensions" or, more simply, what they contain or denote. Extensionalists often limit the properties of extensions to include existent objects or entities and emphasize the importance of substitution or paraphrasibility in determining whether or not a particular linguistic context is extensional. Although influential in analytic philosophy, extensionalism has been challenged for excluding imaginary entities from its theoretical framework, as Sperber has done in arguing that symbolism does not mean.

[35]For such a critique, see E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 68-77.

[36]Arun Shourie, *Christian Missionaries* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1994).

[37]Ibid., 234-35.

[38]Arun Shourie, *Harvesting Our Souls—Missionaries, Their Designs, Their Claims* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 2000).

[39]Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) and Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"* (London: Routledge Press, 1999).

[40]King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 98-101.

[41]Paul Hacker, "Aspects of Neo-Hinduism as Contrasted with Surviving Traditional Hinduism," in *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta*, ed. Wilhelm Halbfass (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 229-56.

[42]For a helpful recent discussion of the genealogy of the term "religion" and its relationship to theology and religious studies, see Paul J. Griffiths, "The Very Idea of Religion," *First Things* 103 (May 2000): 30-35.

[43]Romila Thapar, "Syndicated Moksha," *Seminar* 313 (1985): 21; King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 104-8.

[44]Matri Dham Ashram, *Prarthana Manjari*, 31.

[45]For a discussion of this aspect of Catholic Untouchable religiosity, as well as for more on John Masih, see Mathew N. Schmalz, "Images of the Body in the Life

and Death of a North Indian Catholic Catechist," *History of Religions* 39 (1999): 178-201.

[46]Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), and Michael Horace Barnes, "Universalist Pluralism and the New Histories," in *Theology and the New Histories*, ed. Gary Macy (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

[47]See Theodore Jennings, "Ritual Studies and Liturgical Theology: An Invitation to Dialogue," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 1 (1987): 35-56; John D. Witvliet, "For Our Own Purposes: The Appropriation of the Social Sciences in Liturgical Studies," *Liturgy Digest* 2 (1995): 6-35; Nathan D. Mitchel, *Liturgy and the Social Sciences* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

[48]Amalorpavadass, "Theological Reflections on Inculturation," 36. D. S. Amalorpavadass died in a car accident in South India.

[49]Nicholas B. Dirks, "In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century," in *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1-18.

[50]For an excellent discussion of this connection, see Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 209-48.